

ALONE TOGETHER

Two great Chicago players come together in an interview for the first time, and talk to Michael Jackson. They couldn't be more different: **Lee Konitz** from the north side, the 'cool' school formulator and **Steve Coleman** the donnish brains behind M-BASE. They talk saxophones, Charlie Parker and just how Sonny Stitt's breath smelt first thing in the morning. And not content with this, Jackson also has detailed one-to-ones with the pair and chooses gems from their back catalogue

An extended stay at the Montreal Jazz Festival last summer, gave me the privilege and opportunity to joke together two of the most uncompromising saxophone stylists for an unmeasured little a little. Oftentimes, international festivals are a 'ships-in-the-night' experience for musicians. They arrive in time for a privileged weekend, check in at the press office, check their gig and then check out the following morning. There's rarely time to audit fellow performers let alone catch up sleep. Montreal is a massive event with something for everyone from the fashionable to the faded, but the week-long Invitation Series in particular focuses on the talents of obscure individuals and forces them to throw down in a host of different settings.

Last year Lee Konitz was honorary invitee for the second leg of the fest and the diversity promised by the four night residency was a piece of cake for the unflappable journeyman. He Lee-ased with Québécois tenorist François Théberge and his sonnet playing the 'Music of Konitz', then countered with a sequence of magnificent improvised duos with Jason Moran, Kenny Werner and Paul Blej. The third night offered interpretations of the music of French impressionists Ravel and Debussy in the company of the Spring String Quartet, then Konitz capped the run Saturday night with a reprisal of the Nonet format abetted by arranger Chad Tilmor and Matt Wilson.

Almost clashing with Konitz' final set were Steve Coleman and Five Elements at Sales de Gesi. Nevertheless Lee made it along to catch the other show. Coleman's rare appearance received a ragorous welcome and the group, featuring trumpet duo Jonathan Finlayson delivered, under the leader's watchful eye and ear, his trademark concoction of relentless cubist funk, M-Base precision and more recent Afro-Cuban influences.

Beyond a mutual love affair with the alto saxophone, Konitz and Coleman might seem like chalk and cheese. But from a bi-polar standpoint, and despite their 30-year disparity in age, there are interesting parallels in their remarkable careers. Both raised in Chicago, Konitz on the Northside and Coleman on the South, they hooked up with formative influences in the Windy City, Coleman meeting Von Freeman and Bunky Green and Konitz joining Lennie Tristano in the mid 40s. Konitz would go on to become a progenitor of the so-called 'cool school' emphasising the analytical acuity of the jazzman over overt protestations and the craning of fads, whereas Coleman would build on Freeman's rapid fire articulation, Green's in-suit systematics and his early interest in Macao and Charlie Parker. This would eventually coalesce a whole scene around him under the banner of M-Base, an acronym that reflects his interest in ancient to modern codification

and semantics.

I met with Konitz and Coleman separately prior to my matchmaking and they each displayed quite different intensities. Konitz is patient, pithy and all ears, with a knowledge of his worth coupled to a bubble-bursting sense of humour, after all he did mock his 'cool' image with a composition called 'Ice Cream Konitz' back in the day. Coleman on the other hand, is more garrulous and tenacious in conversation, agenda-driven though sporadically prone to bursts of generous, involuntary laughter. Conference the geni together and let the journalist take the minutes and the camaraderie will fly.

So what's new?

Lee Konitz: Just enjoying a nice week here, so used to coming and leaving like most of us do. Now I'm back to the old country to see my lady friend in Cologne.



"I look at music as a language"
— Steve Coleman

Do you ever bump into fellow ex-Kentonite Charlie Mariano there?

LK: He's three blocks from me but I never see him. (after a pause, to Steve) My, you sure do play fast. You played really fast last night.

Steve Coleman: Who, me? I was sleepwalking!
You managed to catch Steve Coleman's concert, Lee?

LK: Your trumpet player is very interesting.

SC: Yeah, he's a young guy. His plane was late so he just arrived before the concert, so he was kinda pissed off. 'Man, where's the hotel?' I started working with him when he was in high school in California. I did a clinic and asked if anyone wanted to come up and play, thinking that... yknow... then this guy came up and played and 'Whoa'!

LK: Like 'I didn't mean that'!

I'm interested that you both focused on the alto and both have quite soft sounds, even though your band is playing hard Steve, you've got a mellifluous approach that isn't so far from Lee really. What do you make of each other's styles? Is yours antithetical to Lee's in your perception?
SC: I don't see it that way. A couple of times people said my playing style reminded them of Lee but mainly in situations where I'm playing standards or something. People draw comparisons according to what they know, it's an internal comparison thing. If a guy has been into Eric Kloss all his life he'll say 'you sound like Eric Kloss', I'm like 'C'mon man?' but that's what it is for that person, you can't argue with it.

OK, but have you checked some of Lee's stuff out?

SC: When I was listening to Charlie Parker a lot, I checked out a lot of things that were happening at that time including Lennie Tristano's music and even what's happening now that was from then, even though I don't think what Lee is doing now is the same as what was happening then. When I first got to New York I heard you, Sal Mosca, Walter March. The first thing I noticed about these guys that I liked, was that they didn't play clichés. That was a pet peeve of mine when I was younger—guys who just repeated things they heard for what I thought was no reason. My simplistic viewpoint at the time was that these people were thinking about what they were doing rather than playing Sonny Rollins licks or whatever.

LK: I worked at the Jazz Bakery in LA recently for six nights with Joe Lallabaras and a fine Polish bass player, Derek Dies and on the sixth night I thought 'Gee, I played five nights now and I haven't run out of ideas'. Then I realised I didn't have any ideas to begin with.

Lee has parlayed in the classical realm during his tenure in Montreal, have you ever dabbled in that idiom Steve?

SC: I don't like to say 'I'm self-taught' because I've listened to so many older players who I consider my teachers even if I didn't take a formal lesson with them. But I've never had a lot of exposure to the classical saxophone repertoire, it's not that big to begin with. I've been doing what I've been doing so long I wouldn't know how to approach it. Once in a while someone will say 'have you heard the Giazouli' or something. Someone gave me a sax quartet recording with Marcel Mule and it was great. When I listened to European Art Music, or whatever you want to call it, I listen to the composition as to how it's being played, that's how I'm wired I guess.

LK: I never liked the sound of the classical alto but

