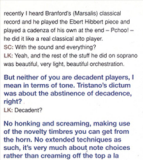


"Charlie Parker borrowed my horn once at Birdland and I'm sitting there listening to him playing thinking "Where did all that come from?" He didn't leave any of it in the horn when he gave it back!"

– Lee Konitz

SC: Well I go back and forth on this issue because there's certain things I'm trying to do. At the same time the players that are able to do that have certain sensibilities and many times it's too loud or bombastic for me. But when I find more sensitive players they are able to do other things. I don't look at things from a purely musical point of view. There are things I'm trying to express and I'm trying to do it through music. I look at music as a language. If I was looking at it from a purely sound aspect then I would probably make different choices because I enjoy the same things Lee says he enjoys.

LK: Bey, we could sit here all afternoon.

SC: Because after you got through with your questions, I'd start asking you questions.

LK: You don't want to talk about how chords are good for anything but soloing?

I touched on that with Steve earlier and he didn't want to go there.

LK: What do you want to talk about? I want to go there?

Well it was 'Look man, if I tell you anything, you'll misprint it and you don't know jack anyway!'

SC: No, no! See, sensitive guy, that's not the way I put it! Lee, I read an article of yours about improvisation.

LK: The 10 step process? That was many years ago.

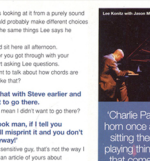
SC: Do you feel it's obsolete?

LK: No, but I felt the examples I gave were much too complicated.

SC: No I thought it was great.

LK: Thank you but I was really trying to make a point about playing in the context of rather than chord structure, to begin with at least.

SC: I agreed with everything you said because I teach that melody thing too. People are



"Charlie Parker borrowed my horn once at Birdland and I'm sitting there listening to him playing thinking "Where did all that come from?" He didn't leave any of it in the horn when he gave it back!"

– Lee Konitz

LK: The plastic horn? Charlie Parker borrowed my horn once at Birdland and I'm sitting there listening to him playing thinking "Where did all that come from?" He didn't leave any of it in the horn when he gave it back! Ha ha!

SC: Did you hear the story about him grabbing Ben Webster's tenor? Ben's wife up was this really hard reed and really wide mouthpiece opening and nobody could play it. So Bird came in looking all ragged and said: 'Ben, let me get your horn I'm late and Ben was like 'Sure' laughing to himself. So Bird gets on stage 'Here Monk – what's this?' then 'OK, Cherokee' and just kills the thing, leaving Webster at the bar, stark naked.

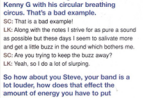
LK: I heard Benny Golson in a club in Paris and someone told me he was using a six and a half reed. I'd never heard such a thing.

Steve, we were talking earlier about Adolphe Sax and what a genius he was. Do you still practice or do everything on this computer age, where laptops are the hippest thing to have in the band, where cars the saxophone's new reed?

SC: You know about that guy in Belgium who made that Aloichimos. He has this new development of the sax, an evolved version. It's based on the double-bodied ancient Greek instrument, the aiolos, though the aiolos is not actually a Greek instrument, because I've seen it on pamphlets in Egypt and it goes back.

LK: Luigi – yeah I heard the thing in person.

Steve Coleman with Jonathan Finlayson



Independence

Michael Jackson also met Lee Konitz, who separately to catch up with their recent activity

Did you get sufficient lead time to pull together two simultaneous projects together for Montreal's Invitation Series?

Lee Konitz: Well I've done the Nonet before and toured with the Strings Quartet and I know two of the pianists, Kenny and Paul (from the duos set). I met Jason (Moran) in Rio de Janeiro and he seemed eager to do it. I've recorded and worked some festivals with Francisco Trebbergo, so really it was a nice feeling of knowing what I was doing. I kinda wing it so much of the time. I think that's the reason I haven't been at more festivals over the years – they don't know how to use me; and here I was with a chamber music and then a six-piece band and felt real professional for a change.

How was it duetting with the three fertile minds of Moran, Werner and Bley in the same evening?

LK: That was a ball.

How would you sum them up individually?

LK: Jason was a complete novelty to me, full of bombast and surprises. Firstly, I think of all these as orchestrations. I am familiar with Paul and I know he gets a little restless and apt to go in another direction if he's not sympathetic with what's happening. However, he turns out to be the most sympathetic guy, even though he likes to squirm around and go into another key or whatever, so I have to be very interested, which I am up to a point. Sometimes it sounds a bit ornery but it's something I've come to know through various experiences we've had and it's always a nice challenge to play with him.

Satie as Tristano?

LK: Oh no, I mean I love their music, especially Debussy but the challenge for me was to improvise over the top of Chad Talbert's arrangements. We recorded this stuff with another quartet and played the Knitting Factory before the session. A friend called me the next day and said 'I liked it very much but wished you'd improvised.' I said 'Thank you. That's what I wanted to sound like.'

What was that sponge thing you stuck in the bell of the alto, some kind of mute?

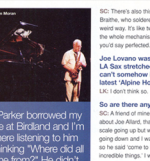
LK: It's a real sure mute somewhere in there. I saw some edge of the sound and occasionally I enjoy that. When I take the mute out – POHOO!– the sound is kind of flat.

Postscript: Elvis Costello attended one of Konitz' concerts in Montreal. The artistic coordinators suggested Costello to record Konitz' Nonet album. I received a promo e-mail advertising that Lee's birthday tribute at Iridium in NYC would feature the megastar singer alongside the artist's quartet including Bill Frisell, Gary Peacock and Matt Wilson. When I spoke to Lee on the phone to Cologne in December, he described the much-vaunted party as 'a bit of a scandal'. Apparently Peacock was blissfully ignorant of the Costello phenomenon and his giant appearance, was decidedly miffed about the arrangement and announced that he 'didn't play for rock and roll singers.' Without Peacock on bass, Konitz elected to play totally free which he interpreted further alienated Costello from any attendance. Apparently a $400 birthday cake was supposed to be presented but the idea was shelved. The mahtre d' at Iridium consoled Konitz saying he'd given some cake and love it for him but later, when Lee inquired about the exclusive slice, the head waiter confessed 'I ate it.'

Kenny seems to have ESP, when you were playing 'Round Midnight', it was as though he was anticipating precisely what you were going to play next.

LK: He knows exactly what I do. It's like a translator at the French radio station here. I was still speaking and he was already translating. Kenny can get a little glib but at rehearsal he had a fantastic version of that piece, my god, he went into stride and the whole thing.

What about the evening with the String Quartet. Would you say you are as influenced by Debussy and



"Charlie Parker borrowed my horn once at Birdland and I'm sitting there listening to him playing thinking "Where did all that come from?" He didn't leave any of it in the horn when he gave it back!"

– Lee Konitz

SC: There's also this guy in NY named George Brathe, who soldered two horns together in this weird way. It's like two sopranos but not that simple, the whole mechanism he's devised, I don't know if you'd stay perfected.

Joe Lovano was endorsing those goofy LA Sax stretched models for a while but can't somehow imagine Lee wielding the latest 'Alpine Horn Alto' at this point.

LK: I don't think so.

So are there any new techniques left?

SC: A friend of mine told me something very strange about Joe Maini the saxophone player. Fingering is scale going up but what you heard was something going down and it was like a reverse-engineered sax so he said 'come to the lesson with me, he can do incredible things.' I went and I had my mouth open all the time!

LK: I took a few lessons with him and I couldn't wait to get out, forcing my tools in his mouth and examine his tongue! He knew all the principles but then I heard him play and I said 'Wait a minute, you don't want to play like that!'

SC: These guys we're talking about now understand the horn to an extreme level. There's people you talk to about music and people who understand about the physics of the instrument. I read about Adolphe Sax and I wish I could know more about clarinets before he invented the saxophone.

You're always reading Steve (during our chat he had 'The Trajectories of Hart' by Steve Moore and Ernst Levy's 'Theory of Harmony' close at hand) – but your bookmarks haven't moved much since yesterday.

SC: Not since last night, I just woke up!

So you still spot stuff to learn from those guys?

SC: I got stuff to learn period, from whatever direction I can. That's why I read Levy's articles. Ten Steps? OK, I could use Ten Steps. ■

with Paul Bley

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY \

Straight out of Chicago

Lee Konitz
Alone Together
Verve, 1959
An intimate, edited live date featuring Brad Mehldau and Charlie Haden at LA's Jazz Bakery. Half a dozen in-depth extrapolations of Konitz warhorses including 'Cherokee' and 'I Can't Get Started' – plus Mehldau almost overwhelms with marvellous solo flourishes on his own tune, the title track. Konitz' sound is full but fuzzy and vulnerable, lingering the drama and he is extra whimsical, interpolating several obtuse quotes and foraging sonetically in a higher register than normal for him.

Lee Konitz
Motion
Verve, 1961
One of Konitz' personal favorite recordings, now with the 2002 CD issue, it's still firmly re-branded as a classic. Long-limbed, hyper efficient alto lines dart and dance with the grace and sauce of Fred Astaire amid the bustling drums of Elvin Jones and Sonny Dallas' over-demonstrative but propulsive walking bass.

Lee Konitz
Going With the Wind Suite
Steeplechase 2002
Some of Konitz' finest collaborations inhabit the Steeplechase discography. This ridiculously or lightingly titled duet with first call drummer Matt Wilson continues the run. Maximum spontaneity, interplay sans hesitations with subtle, ego-less support from Wilson. Konitz is inventive, youthful and at home in this dandified context.

Steve Coleman
Transmigration
DIW/Columbia, 1991
Recorded live to-first date is under the banner of the Strata Institute which includes a cast of Coleman's favourite people, such as guitarist Dave Fiuczynski, drummer Gerald Cleaver, Jim Hall and Von Freeman, however there is little doubt who put the date together. Five of the tracks are Coleman's including the quintessentially asymmetrical 'S Against 7'. Some fine analysis as the redoubtable Freeman meets his two alter ecobies more than half way.

Steve Coleman
Tao Of That
DMG, 1993
Vintage M-Base, that sounds rudimentary and free sailing compared to later more semblance-overweight projects. On the acapella opening (as well as the closing cut) Coleman reveals his debt to Bobby McFerrin and shows that he has control of his own twitt tone allied to posed "Umumba." It's going to be years before anyone, any step, then Coleman segues into his compressed, ultra fleet mode and things get more compelling and refracted.

Steve Coleman and the Five Elements
On The Flexing of the 69 Paths
Label Bleu, 2002
Particularly strong session featuring young trumpeter Jonathan Finlayson, useful flautist and spiritual presence Mark Mellonpoint and both acoustic and electric bass. A compact, classy introduction to Coleman's current M-Base sound, with the revised concession of 'Dizzy Atmosphere' and, wait for it, much more open. I had had many years of self executives in the US that wanted me to record with TLC, Destiny's Child girl groups, they were trying to encourage me in that direction.

so hung up on chords, chords, chords nowadays because that's more or less how they're taught. I was talking to Von Freeman recently about similar stuff. So what you were saying… I think a lot of guys from Kent's era, Von was a contemporary of Charlie Parker, so he's from an older generation.

LK: But still going strong, Nick?

SC: Real strong, he's 81 this year.

LK: That's my inspiration.

I had a great conversation with Von once at the Tuesday jam sessions at the New Apartment Lounge (Chicago). Von is super generous and talked never say a bad word about anyone but he has his own thoughts. He was listening to all the born players hellbent on reinventing or doing their thing and he drew a diagram on a napkin for me about how they're making the product the sound, the way he bears down on the mouthpiece and channels the breath. Talking of decadent sounds, Von has a decadent sound, though he's not a decadent guy.

SC: Decadent, that's a funny phrase. I must remember that. I'm gonna tell one of my band members you're sounding very decadent tonight.

LK: Sounds like a Von expression.

SC: Von grew up listening to Ben Webster, he's from that thick full sound school. I mean there weren't that many microphones and amplifiers, so they had a different perspective about sound.

Dewey Redman told me one time that he thought part of John Coltrane's secret was good mic technique. He wasn't that big of a player, didn't make that much noise but on all those recordings his sound is really good.

SC: I never heard Coltrane live but I imagine his sound changed over the years. When you listen to his tone on the later records, it doesn't sound like that in the late 50s, it went through a drastic change when his concept changed.

It's not about vintage Otto Link then?

SC: I don't think it's the mouthpiece, the concept changes the sound and he's known for Sonny Stitt's hotel when I was a student. LK: Or as Stitt says how many keys there are on the saxophone?

SC: All those famous Stitt questions like 'What's a whole note?'

What's the joke about the keys?

SC: It's wasn't a joke with him it was just where he lived.

LK: He gave me a number and I went home and counted the keys and he was wrong!

So what was with the whole notes?

You have to dig it for you

Steve, you are an elusive character. Lee Konitz is approximate 50% currently available in the bins at Chicago's Jazz Record Mart, whereas you have two. As Lee put it when I mentioned that 'Well maybe someone bought Steve's CDs!' SC: Records are hard work. It's like a marathon, developing ideas and live performances are really hard I'm into as a musician. I've also been travelling – Indonesia, India, Egypt and other places in Africa, like Senegal and Ghana, Cuba and Brazil, these are the main places.

Has this kept you from pursuing an affiliation with a major label?

SC: I don't like American labels in general, they do business in a very old way that's frankly a straight rip-off for the artist. The other thing they don't offer enough room for creativity. I am now with Label Bleu in Germany. I mean, they don't care what I do or have. No live CDs' written in the contract. An American label wouldn't have allowed me to put out multiple disc recordings like *Genesis and the Opening of the Way* or *Resistance is Futile*, though I originally left American labels because I wanted to do this project with Cubans, so it was a necessity. Label Bleu allowed me to do that with a 20-piece called Hot Brass in France and that was my first involvement with Bleu. France and they were much more open. I had had many years of self executives in the US that wanted me to record with TLC, Destiny's Child girl groups, they were trying to encourage me in that direction.

Your latest disc *On The Flaing of the 64 Paths* has a typically esoteric stance. *Despite Resistance* is a little, in some ways it seems you relish the path of most resistance.

SC: If you are going to create something from the core you have to deal with basic elements, you have to go back and deal with 'what is sound, what is vibration.' Otherwise you're going to adopt somebody else's system where they did that, not build up from scratch but emulate. A few musicians – Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, JS Bach, Bartok went deeper to create different forms from the basics, what Murial Richard Abrams calls 'universals.' It's going to be easier for most people, stuff they don't teach you in school, you have to do for yourselves.

Coleman writes out the Trigrams of the I-Ching on a piece of paper and tries to explain rather than justify his use of the ancient Chinese philosophical and oracle system, to somehow elucidate how it inspires the symbolism and methodology, even the mathematical divisions of his music. He mocks what people refer to as 'musical instruments' and thus natural music, insisting that musical instruments are in fact Xenoliths invented by the Russians and sold within specific, complex systems. Then he bemoans the inability to 'copyright rhythms' claiming he is from a culture where the rhythm essentially embodies the character of a song.

Coleman is not your archetypal character from Middle American, Midwest, his cell phone to fact check a few things for this article, it rang in Spanish. Brazil. He migrates there in the winter 'to do some research and practise in warm weather." He hooks up with Brazilian and Cuban musicians "no sambar or stuff' – and tries to start something. He has already taken Brazilian dancers on the road with him and has plans to tour Europe with Cuban musicians/artists from Bahia. He has finished a new project titled *Lucidarium* due for a spring release.