

LEE KONITZ ARCHIVE

LEE KONITZ BIOGRAPHY

“When things are well-centered for me as a player, I can play as many notes as I wish to, or do whatever I want to, and it all fits. The rest of the time, I feel like it’s more honest of me to play just one note instead of 100- if that note is a good one, and a real one. There are certain areas that will inevitably come out again, but when I feel that happening, I try to reshape it, stretch it, push it together, or something. ... It’s a new process every time.”

Lee Konitz

October 13, 1927- April 15, 2015



Spontaneity and finding the truth of the moment!

Lee Konitz was one of the most original and distinctive alto saxophonists in the history of jazz. He became a master improviser as part of the second generation of bebop practitioners that emerged in the late 1940s and early 50s, along with Sonny Rollins, Jackie McLean, Sonny Stitt, Fats Navarro, Kenny Dorham, John Lewis, Milt Jackson and Serge Chaloff. His apprenticeship to bebop, though, was indirect, and he carved out an uncompromising solo career guided by a singular artistic vision. He sought challenging situations, trying to perfect the elusive instantaneous art of improvisation. He was unerringly self-critical and always challenged himself to do the best work possible. Though Konitz was a highly reflective musician, what he played was intuitive, the product of an intensely emotional sensibility. It’s striking how ingenious Konitz had been in creating novel contexts for the traditional approach of “theme and variations” which he followed throughout his career. In albums such as *Peacemeal* or *Duets* from the 1960s, the solo album *Lone-Lee* from the 70s, and his exploratory duets with pianist Dan Tepfer or as the featured soloist on his last studio recording for Ohad Talmor’s nonet-sized arrangements, *Old Songs New*, Konitz was always searching for new formats on which to improvise.



Konitz was born on Oct. 13, 1927, in Chicago. At the age of 11 he picked up his first instrument, the clarinet – Benny Goodman was his muse at the time. He received classical lessons before switching to tenor and then ultimately alto saxophone. In 1943, he met the decisive personal and musical influence of his life, the teacher and pianist Lennie Tristano. He joined Claude Thornhill’s orchestra (1947–48), and made his first recordings with them. The band, which employed Gil Evans as arranger, was an important precursor of Miles Davis’s Nonet, later known as the Birth of the Cool band (1948–50), which Konitz joined at its inception. It was the latter association for which he remains best known, and is generally regarded as one of the architects of the “cool” style in modern jazz, with Tristano, Miles Davis, Gerry Mulligan and Chet Baker.



Although Tristano was one of Konitz’s greatest influences in terms of approach to improvisation and ear training, Lee also thoroughly assimilated the heritage of saxophonists Charlie Parker and Lester Young, and secondarily, trumpeters Louis Armstrong and Roy Eldridge. Konitz’s partnership with Tristano, and with his fellow pupil, the totally individual tenor saxophonist Warne Marsh, became the defining collaborations of his career. But while Tristano was a formative influence on Konitz, one shouldn’t assume that

he was working on a blank slate. At age twenty, Konitz's earliest commercially recorded solos with the Thornhill Orchestra in 1947 had shown how developed his unique style of improvising was, compared to the other leading soloists of his era. Essential to this approach was a highly original tone, which has a purity unusual in jazz circles.*

An excellent example of Konitz's early style is the solo on the 1949 recording of Subconscious-Lee with Tristano – an original Konitz line on the chord-changes to What Is This Thing Called Love. Tristano often had his students write original lines over standards – the results are known as contrafacts. The lessons also included transcribing and learning solos from the jazz masters, vocal exercises and singing or scatting out loud melodies, and early experiments in free blowing concepts. As a leader, Konitz recorded with Warne Marsh (1949), and he worked with the Lennie Tristano Quartet (1954-55), recording at the Sing Song Room of the Confucius Restaurant in New York City. He became one of the regulars at the Half Note Jazz Club in the late 50s and early 60s. A relatively short stint with the Stan Kenton Orchestra (1952-4) extended his experience and range of playing within the context of a saxophone section (as he did earlier with Thornhill), and he periodically returned to larger ensembles, including on Miles Ahead, the first of three Miles Davis-Gil Evans collaborations. But his most original and challenging work had been in smaller groups where improvisational freedom was given full rein. Konitz was a spontaneous improviser par excellence.



He constantly found inspiration from the Tin Pan Alley songs he grew up on, later known as “standards”, which since the 1920s have continued to attract jazz musicians of all persuasions. Throughout his career Konitz composed often, with many of his classic compositions (or lines) based on the chords of well-known standards such as the aforementioned Subconscious-Lee, Kary's Trance (Play, Fiddle Play) or Thingin' (All the Things You Are). But he also wrote several songs built on original chord changes like She's As Wild As Springtime, Chick Came Around, Fourth Dimension, and Hymn.

In 1961, Konitz recorded one of his most renowned albums, Motion with drummer Elvin Jones and bassist Sonny Dallas. In 1964, he appeared at the Half Note with the Lennie Tristano Quintet that also featured Marsh, Dallas and drummer Nick Stabulas. A small portion of that engagement was filmed for



the CBS program Look Up and Live, and this turned out to be the last time Konitz performed with Tristano. The following year, at a memorial concert to Charlie Parker in Carnegie Hall (to commemorate ten years after his passing), Konitz performed a signature solo tribute, Blues for Bird. In 1967 he recorded his Duets album, a series of duos with Joe Henderson, Richie Kamuca, Marshall Brown, Dick Katz, Jim Hall, Ray Nance, Elvin Jones and others — a format which later became one of his favorite settings. Later duo projects included recordings with Sal Mosca, Red Mitchell, Hal Galper, Jimmy Giuffre, Martial Solal, Karl Berger, Michel Petrucciani, Albert Mangelsdorff, Harold Danko and Steve Lacy. In

the 70s Konitz was sometimes reunited with Warne Marsh, and by 1975, he returned to the nonet format, recording several critically acclaimed albums. This format was compared — not totally accurately — with the Birth of the Cool band.

From the mid-1960s, Konitz traveled, lived and worked in Europe half the year; he also became popular as far as Japan and Australia. He recorded in Germany with Attila Zoller and Albert Mangelsdorff (1968), and in Italy with Enrico Rava (1968). He was also revered and often feted in Scandinavia by musicians such as saxophonist Lars Gullin, and toured with Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen. He can be heard on Mingus at Town Hall (1972). He recorded with Dave Brubeck and Anthony Braxton, with Andrew Hill, and with Warne Marsh and Bill Evans (1977). He devoted a whole album to the solo tenor saxophone (1977), toured with Paul Bley and Charlie Haden, and appeared in Europe separately with Art Farmer, Shelly Manne, Kenny Wheeler, and on one of Paul Motian's early 90s bands performing Broadway show tunes. He rejoined Charles Mingus in 1978, with whom he had worked with in the 50s, and toured with Gil Evans in 1980, in yet another duo format, eventually releasing two albums, Heroes and Anti-Heroes.

In later years, Konitz worked with younger players such as Joe Lovano, Bill Frisell, Kenny Werner, Jeff Williams, Peggy Stern, Mark Turner, Brad Mehldau, Matt Wilson, Joey Baron, Ohad Talmor, Grace Kelly,

Dave Douglas, Greg Cohen and Thomas Morgan, as well as many top European players like Enrico Pieranunzi, Frank Wunsch, François Théberge, and Jakob Bro. Actively playing into his 90th year, Konitz continued to tour and perform with many different ensembles along with a revolving door of rhythm sections, mostly occupied by pianists Dan Tepfer and Florian Weber, drummers George Schuller and Ziv Ravitz, and bassists Jeremy Stratton and Jeff Denson.

During his final decade, Lee Konitz was notable for being one of the last links to an heroic era of modern jazz that emerged back in the 40s. His loss to history is immeasurable. Yet with over seventy years of performing and touring and over 300 recordings as leader, sideman, and special guest, his musical legacy is now available to jazz audiences all over the world. His recordings, compositions and instruments are now on display at the William Paterson Living Jazz Archive (Wayne, NJ) for the world to study, explore and enjoy.

*The purity of Konitz's tone is described by Miles Davis in a rare interview conducted by George Avakian following one of the *Miles Ahead* recording sessions (May 1957):

Miles: "You know how I was telling somebody about that sound today...about saxophones you can't get that straight sound...you know, when you're recording with saxophones in a big band...doesn't sound right...unless you get the right guys like Lee Konitz."

Avakian: "I noticed there's a lot of stuff that Gil Evans wrote which has two bass clarinets and flute with Lee's alto."

Miles: "Well, Lee sounds [almost] like an alto flute. That's why he [Gil Evans] uses him."

Record Labels

Lee Konitz recordings have appeared on major and independent jazz labels for Capitol, Prestige, Atlantic, Milestone, Chiaroscuro, Enja, Soul Note, Steeplechase, RCA, ECM, Blue Note, Impulse, Sunnyside, Verve and hundreds of other smaller labels (see discography below).

— *Biography prepared by Andy Hamilton and George Schuller - Sept 2024*