

Lee Konitz: Back to Basics

BY DAVID KASTIN

In Japan, where tradition is revered, and where a great potter or shakuhachi master is designated a "National Living Treasure," Lee Konitz would certainly be a prime candidate for such an honor. Konitz is a master of the art of jazz improvisation. The alto saxophonist on Miles Davis' historic Birth Of The Cool sessions, both sideman and leader in an extraordinarily wide range of contexts, Konitz is a musician of unshakable integrity who has continued to develop and refine his craft. he has also (for the last 40 years) been teaching jazz keeping alive a tradition that for Lee began during his own studies with the legendary pianist, saxophonist, composer, and theoretician Lennie Tristano.

For Konitz, music is more than a series of tones set in time, it is nothing less than "a life force." Yet, as both performer and teacher, Konitz has chosen to counter the rather mystical and potentially frightening challenges of improvisation with a set of organically derived back-to-basic techniques that are a direct outgrowth of his own very profound experience.

At first Lee is reluctant to talk freely about his ideas and experiences as a teacher His reservations seem to stem from a combination of the musicians natural wariness of words, Lee's innate reticence about self-promotion, and some understandable defensiveness, I think, about both the questionable status of the working jazz musician and our society's undisguised contempt for teaching. But once he gets started, Lee Konitz talks a lot like he plays quiet, fluid, thoughtful, yet intense.

I studied with Lennie Tristano in Chicago when I was in my late teens. I'd met him and was immediately impressed by him. He was a blind man, and the communication was unusual in that sense; but he always talked very straight with me. He was a musician/philosopher. He always had interesting insights when we got together for a lesson or a rehearsal. I didn't know, as yet, anything about the music as an art form. But he felt and communicated that the music was a serious matter. It wasn't a game or just a means for making a living; it was a life force. He got through to me because suddenly I was taking music seriously.

He was the first one to present a method for improvised jazz playing. Almost everyone at some point or other came to study with him to find out what he was talking about. I respect what he was doing as an artist, and I'm trying to keep that alive. I'm trying to be true to product at all times.

The well-educated musician must have the information from the music first of all, and then find out what it all means the names and the rules and axiom is. All that adds up to a well-balanced musical education. We start out playing by ear, learning everything we can, and finally ending up playing by ear again. You just absorb it, and it becomes part of your ability to perceive from then on.

In order to play, you need a very solid view of the most basic information: the tune and the harmony (about 10 7th chords); that's all the harmony we're dealing with in the traditional kind of tune playing. I have tried to find a more organic way of developing and using this information so that people don't overshoot the mark when in their enthusiasm they attempt to create new melodies.

The goal of having to unfold a completely new melody on the spot and appraise it as you go the closer you look at it, can be frightening! So I think that first and foremost you have to adhere to the song for a much, much longer period of time. You have to find out the meaning of embellishment before going on to try to create new melodies. I believe that the security of the song itself can relieve much of the anxiety of jumping into the unknown.

I suggest the kinds of compositional devices that are available: a trill, a passing tone, an appoggiatura that can bridge one melody note to another. The point is, you're still playing the melody, but you're doing something to it now. And there are many levels of this process before you get anywhere near creating new melody material.

Starting out as a performer, I had never explored these ideas enough. There I was, just a kid really, playing with all these people [Miles, Tristano, Mulligan]. It was as a result of that experience that I went back to analyze what made me feel off-balance sometimes, like I was overextending myself in some way. Certainly with the proper stimulus you can function for a while, and my spirituality carried me through in many situations. But then: I started backtracking, and it was in my own backtracking that it occurred to me that there might be a way of possibly taking some of the mystery out of the process with more knowingness.

I also base my ideas about practice on the playing of tunes and working with embellishment. So if one is given a two hour period of time to practice, I feel that a student can play tunes for two hours and end up knowing those tunes better and faster than if he warmed-up on scales and arpeggios for an hour-and-half and played tunes for half-an-hour. I think, though, that in a daily practice routine there should be a little section called "go for it!" Even if it's way beyond what you're dealing with just go for it, anytime you feel like it, and then get back and finish the practice.

I try to address playing the instrument properly, knowing as many of the principles as possible and still being flexible. A player can choose what kind of embouchure is most natural to him, which feels best and helps him produce the sound he wants. But there are some right and wrong ways to do things. For example, there's a right way of touching the reed to produce what is called an "attack;" a large variety of ways from the so called "brush," a light brush of the reed, to staccato, the hardest kind of hit, and all the degrees in between that can be experienced and then brought to the music in a personal way.

Then to play a tune like All The Things You Are, what you need aside from the basic information I've outlined is an example of someone you admire playing a version of it, and, overall, an intimate familiarity with the great soloists, and an understanding of what a great solo consists of. It's the most logical and sensible thing to do if you want to learn how to hear Charlie Parker's music, duplicate his solos. Listening that closely, you can experience every detail. It's a matter of being able to hear it, duplicate it on your instrument, write it out, experience it and draw your own conclusions.

I function as a trouble-shooter of sorts when I teach. I can see what's going on from the perspective of a performer. I can bring that kind of reality to the subject right from the active area of my music-making. So it's got to be more vital than any kind of codified information or theoretical fact from one who's not able to demonstrate. I have students on all levels and considering my definition of learning from analyzing recordings, I realize that's what a lot of the players have done to my music over the years. So, I'd have to consider those people my students, in a way. Recently I joined the staff at Temple University in Philadelphia. I do what's called a master class and coach a group of students and play music with them. I got the position on the basis of my being a performer first and that I have to be free to do my tours. It's just what we hope for as players. Often we either have to take the security of a job like this and stop playing (as some people do) or else find a way to do both. And if a school is really hip enough to know that, you can bring them something special that way then it's ideal.

Lee Konitz has developed an approach to improvisation based on a 10-level system. The first, and most important, level is the song itself. It then progresses incrementally through more sophisticated stages of embellishment, gradually displacing the original theme with new ones. The process culminates in the creation of an entirely new melodic structure. Konitz calls this final level "an act of pure inspiration." - D.K.