

Lester Young

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Lester Young

Lewis Porter

Revised Edition

*With a New Preface and an
Expanded Discography by the Author*

The University of Michigan Press
Ann Arbor

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The University of Michigan Press
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2008 2007 2006 2005 4 3 2 1

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data applied for.

ISBN 0-472-08922-6

This revised edition is dedicated to my wonderful children,
Matthew and Rachel, and to my devoted mother, Carol.

About the Author

Lewis Porter (Ph.D., Brandeis, 1983) is professor of music at Rutgers University in Newark and founder (in 1997) and director of the master's program in jazz history and research there. He is the author of five books and numerous articles on jazz, an assisting author of the definitive Coltrane discography, and a consultant to record producers, publishers, and producers of jazz radio shows and films. Thomas Owens has called him "a shining light in recent jazz scholarship," and Dizzy Gillespie called his first book, *Lester Young*, "a monumental work!" The second book was *A Lester Young Reader*. *Down Beat* said of *Jazz: From Its Origins to the Present* (Porter and Ullman, with Hazell, Prentice-Hall, 1992), "This is the one to buy." His recent books are an anthology of rare historical articles and his own new essays (*Jazz: A Century of Change*, Schirmer Books, 1997) and a study of Coltrane presenting four hundred pages of all new research on his life and music (University of Michigan Press, 1998), which won the 1999 Jazz Research Award from the Association of Recorded Sound Collections. He is currently one of five authors assembling a comprehensive Coltrane reference work (Routledge, 2007). Porter was one of five people nominated for a Grammy in 1996 (under Best Historical Reissue) for their role in producing the boxed set of Coltrane's Atlantic Recordings. He has performed, primarily as a pianist, with Yoron Israel, Alan Dawson, Jimmy Lyons, Don Friedman, Harvie S, Tom Varner, Hank Roberts, and others. In June 2000 he recorded a CD of his music featuring Dan Faulk, Ken Wessel, Harvie S, Porter, Marcus Baylor, and guest Dave Liebman. Entitled *Second Voyage*, the CD was issued on the Swiss label Altrisuoni (www.altrisuoni.com) in March 2002.

Preface to the Revised Edition

I began in jazz as a passionate self-taught pianist and record collector at around the age of twelve (after about three years of classical violin). My first Lester Young purchase was the double LP memorial set on Epic (Basie recordings from 1936 and 1939–40), recommended by John S. Wilson in the *New York Times*. When Wilson put together a list of the top 100 jazz recordings (from King Oliver right through Albert Ayler), I trusted him enough to begin collecting them, and got to the Young set toward the end of my college career. Something about Young's solos grabbed me immediately—and never let go! By 1977, I was learning Young's solos on saxophone and transcribing them for my own benefit, and my mentor, composer T. J. Anderson (then chair of the music department at Tufts University, where I'd just begun teaching jazz history part-time), saw in this a potential master's thesis, which eventually, much changed, became this, my first book. It was also T.J.'s inspiration to pair me with another Tufts faculty member, George Stalker, to undertake the computer analysis of Young's solos. I still remember the long hours I spent in the Tufts computer lab entering a numerical code for every note.

Since the book went out of print in 1992, I have consistently received requests for it. As one ages one seems to know less and less, and I am no longer as certain as I was about such things as the definition of jazz. However, I am happy to fulfill the demand for the book's reappearance. I would like to thank the people at the University of Michigan Press, especially music editor Chris Hebert, for their assistance in bringing it back to life, as well as Dan Morgenstern, director of the Institute of Jazz Studies at my campus, and his assistant Esther Smith for their generous help in assembling the photo section from their holdings. Frank Büchmann-Møller and Loren Schoenberg graciously helped me to date some of the photos.

In addition to the new photo section, for this reprint I have made slight revisions throughout the text and placed a short Addendum at the back, in or-

der to correct a few errors and to bring the book in line with the latest research. In particular, the Chronology has been revised, and an Addendum updates parts of the text accordingly. The discography (Catalog of Recorded Works) and LP listing have been replaced by a selective annotated CD listing, because discographies date rather quickly. In 1985 the catalog was by far the most complete listing of Young's recordings available, but in 2004 it no longer makes sense to include it.

The reader interested in discographical details is directed to two more recent works. *You Got to Be Original, Man! The Music of Lester Young*, by Frank Büchmann-Møller (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1990; cloth, 544 pp.), consists of detailed reviews of every recording session, whether issued to the public or not, including a description of every single saxophone solo by Young and numerous transcribed music examples. For each session, the author researched the dates and personnel and provides the most recent LP issue where possible. He also offers indexes of names, songs, and music examples.

Lestorian Notes: A Discography and Bibliography of Lester Young, by Piet Koster and Harm Mobach (Amsterdam: Micrography, 1998; paper, 509 pp.), is a comprehensive, unannotated listing of every known recording, issued or not, and every 78 rpm, LP, and CD issue. The book includes useful indexes to musicians, tunes, bands, CDs by label and number, and so on, a guide to published transcriptions of Young's solos, and an extensive bibliography. A useful online discography is at http://www.welwyn11.freerve.co.uk/LY_notes.htm.

There are a few Young recordings that were only discovered after the above books were published, among them the following.

Verve outtakes listed as unissued in Koster and Mobach are now issued in the complete Young CD set on Verve (see CD listing).

Four formerly unissued Young recordings from 1946 were issued in *The Complete Jazz at the Philharmonic on Verve, 1944–1949*.

Young appeared on Dave Garroway's half-hour NBC radio program on March 6, 1949. Young does not speak, but plays *These Foolish Things*. The band comes in for the final note, which may distinguish this from other known versions.

There are unissued audience tapes in very good binaural sound of the Basie band's sets with Young and Joe Williams in Chicago in 1955, 1956, and 1957.

Young was filmed in 1938 (short silent clips with Basie at Randall's Island, off Manhattan), 1944 (the short film *Jammin' the Blues*) and 1957 (the live tel-

evision program “The Sound of Jazz”). A video documentary about his life, including most of this footage as well as interviews with Young’s colleagues, is entitled *Song of the Spirit: The Story of Lester Young* (1988; directed by Bruce Fredericksen). In recent years a few more films of Young have surfaced.

An armed forces film from 1944 contains a few seconds of the Basie band with Young. Young does not solo but is clearly visible in the saxophone section.

Footage from a film of the 1950 JATP stars, including Young, Charlie Parker, and Coleman Hawkins, has been reissued in several places, for example, on *Great Jazz Performances* and *The Greatest Jazz Films Ever* (DVDs).

A segment from Art Ford’s 1958 jazz television series with Young and Hawkins trading fours on a blues has been released on *Hawkins: The Centennial Collection*, but more footage exists of each artist separately. Young also appeared in another Art Ford show that year with Rex Stewart and others, but only the audio has been issued.

There is also a television film by John Jeremy of England about a “Pres opera,” and there are documentaries that partly deal with Young, such as Bruce Ricker’s *Last of the Blue Devils*. Young has made his way into fictional films, such as the cable TV film of the play *The Resurrection of Lady Lester* by OyamO [*sic*]; Dexter Gordon’s character in the feature film *Round Midnight* (1986) is largely based on Young.

There are two full-length biographies of Young. *You Just Fight for Your Life*, by Frank Büchmann-Møller (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1990; 301 pp.), draws upon a vast range of sources to document Young’s movements year by year. The biography is followed by an exhaustively researched chronology listing all of Young’s known engagements, as well as notes and indexes. *Lester Leaps In: The Life and Times of Lester “Pres” Young* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002; 530 pages), the result of twenty years of research by historian Douglas Henry Daniels, contains a great deal of new family history from censuses, newspapers, and oral histories as well as extensive notes and a nice photo section that includes a few previously unpublished items. Both of these biographies supersede Luc Dellanoy’s *Pres: The Story of Lester Young* (Paris: Editions Denoël, 1987; English translation, Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1993), which nevertheless has some unique details about Young’s visits to Paris in the 1950s. Chris Sheridan’s monumental *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1986; 1388 pp.) is a very important source for Young’s Basie years.

At the time that I wrote my original preface, I hadn't had a chance to read British journalist and saxophonist Dave Gelly's *Lester Young* (Tunbridge Wells, England: Spellmount Ltd.; New York: Hippocrene Books, 1984; 94 pp.), and I feel I gave it short shrift. His was the first book on Young in English, and though he couldn't benefit from the recent biographical research, Gelly writes with polish and insight about Young's music.

At the suggestion of the late Martin Williams, another mentor, I followed up my first book with another volume, *A Lester Young Reader* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992, out of print), a collection of many significant articles on Young (including those by Gottlieb, Heckman, and Hentoff mentioned in my original preface) as well as all of his known interviews, where possible transcribed anew from the original tapes. But this earlier book still fills a gap because it is the only one to present so much musical analysis of Young's style. I concentrated on the music because I respected Young's feeling that "[my life] was all music; that's all there was" (*Down Beat*, 1949).

Lewis Porter
Rutgers University, Newark campus
October 2004

Preface to the Original Edition

All jazz fans know that Lester Young, the black American tenor saxophonist known as “Pres” (or “Prez”), was one of the greatest artists in jazz. This book will give the reader a fuller sense of exactly what was so great about him. It is hoped that it will inspire the reader to listen to more of his recordings and thus will foster better appreciation. If my book serves to heighten the general interest in the music of Lester Young, I will feel very gratified. Young’s music has been poorly served by other authors, and too few people recognize its depth, beauty, and brilliance. The English critic Benny Green put it well: “Lester is every bit as great as fashion today decrees but it is not commonly known why” (from the collection *Just Jazz*, 1959).

The musicians and critics who heard “Pres” at his peak knew best. Thousands of jazz performers have attested to Young’s influence in words and, of course, in their music. As another brilliant saxophonist, Dexter Gordon, described it to writer Russ Russell in the article “Bebop” (reprinted in *The Art of Jazz*), ‘Hawk [Coleman Hawkins] was the master of the horn, a musician who did everything possible with it, the right way. But when Pres appeared, we all started listening to him alone. Pres had an entirely new sound, one that we seemed to be waiting for.’ Charlie Parker, universally recognized as one of the geniuses of jazz, said, as quoted in *Hear Me Talkin’ to Ya*, “I was crazy about Lester. He played so clean and beautiful.” Alto saxophonist Lee Konitz heard Parker warming up by playing one of Young’s famous solos by heart—and very fast. Young was among the five names voted the most important in the history of jazz by ten leading critics in March 1955, and 100 leading jazz musicians voted him “Greatest Tenor Saxophonist Ever” (reported in *The Encyclopedia of Jazz*). Konitz summed up the feelings of many musicians about Young when he said, in *Hear Me Talkin’ to Ya*, “How many people he’s influenced, how many lives! Because he is definitely the basis of everything that’s happened.”

Since Young’s death in 1959, however, the younger generations of musicians and listeners display none of the adulation that their predecessors had toward Young. If they have heard his music at all, they typically describe it in

such mildly positive terms as “mellow and real swinging.” The decline of Young’s reputation contrasts greatly with that of his successor, Charlie Parker. The mention of Parker’s name still elicits awestruck responses to this day.

Part of the problem with Young is his inconsistency. Every solo he recorded from 1936, his debut year, through 1941 is a gem, but younger listeners, musicians or not, may have little empathy with the dated fidelity of those recordings, or with the Swing Era style employed by Young’s colleagues. On later recordings, Young played in a somewhat different style that remains controversial to this day. And during his last years, in the 1950s, Young was sometimes in poor health, resulting in a few deficient recordings, which, unfortunately, were widely available. No wonder that the younger audience remains unimpressed!

The evaluation of Young’s work after 1941, and particularly after 1945, remains one of the major problems of jazz criticism. Many writers have maintained that there is little of interest in this large body of work, that only the earliest works are of value, and that the later style is a corruption of the early one. A growing minority believes, with this author, that the later works have their own value, independent of the early works. Obviously, those few recordings that display Young under physical duress are not the best ones with which to assess his later achievements. There is no question that he was not as consistent in later years as before, but he was still capable of marvelous things. One of the major concerns of this book will be the delineation and detailed analysis of the components of Young’s style at different times. In the last chapter I review the critical opinions at length and weigh them against the results of my analysis. I leave the final evaluation of Young’s work to each reader, feeling content that the reader will now have the information needed to make that evaluation.

Perhaps as a result of the lack of unanimity regarding Young’s legacy, only three short books were written about him, none over 100 pages, only one in English, all mainly biographical and based on unreliable sources (Burkhardt and Gerth; Franchini; and Dave Gelly, published too late for my Bibliography). Some fine articles exist—among them Lawrence Gushee’s wide-ranging treatment of *Shoe Shine Boy* (1981), Louis Gottlieb’s analysis of the early music entitled “Why So Sad, Pres?” (1959), Don Heckman’s comparison of Young with Coleman Hawkins (from *Down Beat*, 1963), and thorough and provocative articles on Young’s life story by Nat Hentoff (1957) and John McDonough (1980). But most of the jazz history books devote a page or so to Young, as compared with whole chapters on Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Charlie Parker.

This book is a step toward rectifying the situation of Lester Young in jazz scholarship. I concentrate on the music because I respect Lester's feeling that "[my life] was all music; that's all there was" (from *Down Beat*, 1949). But I have also included a substantial biographical chapter and a comprehensive listing of Young's recorded titles, both of which contain material never before published. The biography presents portions of Young's last known interview, in Paris about one month before his death. This interview has appeared many times in print, but only in edited form or incorrectly transcribed. I also draw upon other Young interviews, interviews with his family and colleagues, and new research, with thanks to my fellow researchers. Through the generosity of other discographers, the record listing mentions unissued and alternate takes and broadcasts only recently discovered and clarifies some confusion with regard to dates. The Selected Bibliography and the Catalog incorporate information received through November 1984.

The meat of the text, chapters 2 through 6, consists of analysis of Young's music. Basically the reader will grow to understand Young's style and its development through a close examination of its facets—melody, rhythm, and so forth. Perhaps most important, an overall picture emerges from this analysis. Young modified certain aspects of his style considerably during his career, especially his tone quality and the ways that he tied his ideas together. In fact, his style changed enough that we may discern three distinct style periods—an early period, from the first recordings of 1936 through 1942; a middle period, from 1943 through about 1950; and a late period, covering 1950 through 1959. Obviously Young gradually modified his style during each period, not all at once. But the changes are most drastic between 1942 and 1943 and around 1950.

Of equal importance to our awareness of Young's style periods is the realization that certain musical concerns never changed. His constant preoccupations were with structural unification, openness of tone, relaxed swing, and singing melodies, and these made Lester who he was despite the different methods he used to achieve these goals during each period. These are the four omnipresent areas in which his genius shone brightest. In preparing my analysis, I examined all of Young's recorded solos, including all bootleg issues and some unissued private tapes. I then selected a sample of thirty-four solos to examine more closely and subjected them to an array of analytical procedures, including computer analysis. A list of the thirty-four solos follows this preface; I refer to solos from this list quite often.


In order to help the reader follow the analytical portions, conclusions are presented two ways—chronologically for each style element (e.g., development of tone or rhythm through the years) and horizontally for each style

period (e.g., a summary of tone, rhythm, and so forth, as they appear during one particular period). Furthermore, chapter 5 consists of analyses of three complete solos, one from each period. By the end of the book the reader will be able not only to hear aspects of Young's style as they changed over the years, but also to pick any particular year and summarize what qualities characterized Young's music at that time.

Since Lester Young was a jazz musician, it is important for us to have a common understanding about what jazz is. Jazz is a form of art music developed by black Americans around 1900 that draws upon a variety of sources from Africa, Europe, and America. Jazz has borrowed from black folk music, and all kinds of popular music have borrowed from jazz, but these types of music remain distinct and should not be confused with one another.

From its beginnings, jazz has branched out into so many styles that it is difficult, and unnecessary, to find one description that fits them all. But a few generalizations can be made that apply to the vast majority of jazz performances since about 1930, including all of Young's performances:

1. Musicians create within the conventions of their chosen style, usually accompanied by the repeated framework of a popular song or original composition.
2. Instrumentalists emulate black American vocal styles.
3. Each performer tries to develop his or her own sound or tone color. (Lester certainly did!)
4. The rhythms are characterized by constant syncopation and create swing, a sensation of pull and momentum.

With regard to the last point, the reader will note that the transcribed examples in this book show a preponderance of eighth notes. On the recordings, these are "swung" so that they actually approximate triplets, . But it is a convention of jazz notation to write eighth notes as such. Triplets are used only when they are heard as distinct from "swung" eighth notes. I have attempted to indicate details of performances on my transcriptions by using a number of symbols, each of which is explained at its first occurrence. The symbols and their meanings are collected at the end of this preface.

Unless concert key is specified, all musical examples and text references are in the tenor saxophone key, that is, one whole step above concert key. Notes played on the tenor saxophone sound a major ninth lower than written.

The study of Young's music has continued relevance for anyone interested

in jazz. His early style marked the beginning of modern jazz and directly inspired Charlie Parker in the creation of bebop. John Coltrane, a great genius of the tenor saxophone who is the model for most of today's performers on the instrument, said that Young was, along with Johnny Hodges, his first major influence (*Jazz Review*, 1959). He was referring to Young's middle-period work of the 1940s. Another major saxophonist, Sonny Rollins, when asked to choose his favorite jazz records, included *Lester's Savoy Jump*, from Young's middle period (*Boston Real Paper*, 1976). Young's influence was so extensive that his formulas became commonplace among players of all instruments. Big band arrangements to this day employ melodies and riffs directly out of the Young tradition. It would be no exaggeration to say that the language of modern jazz developed out of the music of Lester Young.

Lewis Porter

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Acknowledgments

I began my research on Lester Young in 1978, and I owe many thanks to Dr. T. J. Anderson of Tufts University who supported this project from its inception, and to Professors Jane Bernstein and Jeff Titon, also of Tufts, who made many helpful suggestions. The format of the analysis was largely inspired by Dr. Titon's book *Early Down Home Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis* (University of Illinois Press, 1977). Dr. George Stalker designed computer programs that enabled me to perform portions of the analysis.

I acknowledge my great debt to Dan Morgenstern, director of the Rutgers Institute of Jazz Studies, for making the resources of the Institute available to me, for tracing requested recordings and articles, and for his support. During the early stages of my writing, jazz saxophonist Lee Konitz spent several hours sharing with me his thoughts and feelings about Young's music. Seth Rubin proofread my musical transcriptions.

Lester's brother Lee was a great help with the biographical chapter, as were the generous researchers John McDonough, John Chilton, and Dr. Douglas Henry Daniels, and musicians Norman Simmons, Jerry Potter, and Buzzy Drootin. Lester Young, Jr., also read this chapter, and Loren Schoenberg and Phil Schaap shared with me information about Young's life as well as his recorded works.

Collector-discographer Bill Miner, who graciously reviewed the Catalog of Recorded Works and made numerous comments on its content and presentation, receives my heartfelt gratitude. Valuable assistance with the discographical research also came from Tony Shoppee and Chris Sheridan (author of a Basie bio-discography: Greenwood Press, 1986), as well as Jan Evensmo, Norman Saks, Ralph Berton, Don Manning, Harry Schröder, Helmut Schwarzer, Bill Savory, Bill Potts, Rainer Lotz, Malcolm Walker, Jack Woker, Harry Swisher, Ira Berger, Lloyd Rauch, and Doug Dreishpoon. Record producers John Hammond, Jerry Valburn, Norman Granz, Bob Porter, Art Zim-

merman, Don Schlitten, and J. R. Rowland took time out from their busy schedules to respond to my queries. Fred Turco of Oak Lawn Jazz worked beyond the call of duty to locate obscure LPs and publications for me.

Finally I would like to thank four people behind the scenes who were essential to this book—my editor, John LaBine; my typist, Susan Wood; my music copyist, Armand Qualliotine, and my wife, Gail.

Some of the material in chapters 3 and 4 appeared in different form in an article, “Lester Leaps In: The Early Style of Lester Young,” *Black Perspective in Music*, Spring 1981.

An award from the Faculty Research Fund of Tufts University partially supported the preparation of the manuscript. Last minute help came from Thierry Trombert, Robert Perlongo, Torbjørn Lidtveit, Karl Knudsen, Bob Redcross, Bruce Fredericksen (maker of a documentary about Young), and Beverly Young, Lester’s daughter.

Acknowledgments for musical examples

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Prez Returns (1/13/56), second improvisation, complete in B \flat key © Jatap Pub. Co. All rights reserved.

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List of Transcribed Solos

The following is a list of the thirty-four transcribed solos that were the focus of the analysis and are the sources of the musical examples in this book:















1. *[Oh] Lady Be Good* (11/9/36)
2. *Shoe Shine Boy* (11/9/36, Take 1)
3. *Shoe Shine Boy* (11/9/36, Take 2)
4. *Boogie Woogie* (11/9/36)
5. *Honeysuckle Rose* (1/21/37)
6. *One O'Clock Jump* (7/7/37)
7. *Honeysuckle Rose* (1/16/38, concert)
8. *Jumpin' at the Woodside* (8/22/38)
9. *Jive at Five* (2/4/39)
10. *Clap Hands, Here Comes Charlie* (8/4/39)
11. *Lester Leaps In* (9/5/39, Take 1)
12. *Lester Leaps In* (9/5/39, Take 2)
13. *Dickie's Dream* (9/5/39, Take 1)
14. *Dickie's Dream* (9/5/39, Take 2)
15. *Dickie's Dream* (9/5/39, Take 3)
16. *Tickle Toe* (3/19/40)
17. *Easy Does It* (3/20/40)
18. *Indiana* (7/15/42, 1st solo)
19. *I Can't Get Started* (7/15/42, 1st solo)
20. *I Got Rhythm* (12/21/43, 2nd solo, 3 choruses)
21. *Hello, Babe* (12/21/43, Master)

22. *Hello, Babe* (12/21/43, Alternate)
23. *After Theatre Jump* (3/22/44)
24. *These Foolish Things* (12/45)
25. *I Want to Be Happy* (3 or 4/46, 1st solo, 1st chorus)
26. *I Want to Be Happy* (3 or 4/46, 2d solo, 2d chorus)
27. *Jumpin' with Symphony Sid* (10/46, 1st solo)
28. *Jumpin' with Symphony Sid* (10/46, 2d solo)
29. *Destination Moon* (2/22/50)
30. *Just You, Just Me* (11/28/52)
31. *Neenah* (1/10/53, 1st four choruses)
32. *The Modern Set* (*Chris 'N Diz*, 9/17/55, concert, 3d chorus)
33. *Pres Returns* (1/13/56, 2d solo)
34. *Lester Leaps In* (11/9/56, private recording, 1st three choruses)

Since I refer to these solos often, I omit the date except in the case of *Lester Leaps In* (11/9/56), which must be distinguished from the 1939 versions. For example, I cite *Honeysuckle Rose* (concert) and *Shoe Shine Boy* (Take 2) in various places. I give the full date when referring to recordings not listed above. I always count measure numbers from the beginning of Young's solo chorus, not the beginning of the recording.

Note on the Music Examples

The following diacritical markings are employed to indicate details of performance:

-  Accent and hold less than full value
-  Barely audible, “ghosted” note
-  Pronounced vibrato—symbol placed approximately where vibrato occurs
-  Indefinite sound due to slip of fingers or tongue
-  Slide into pitch from below by adjusting embouchure, sometimes combined with a fingered grace note
-  Note ends in a downward glissando (falloff)
-  Note ends in an upward glissando (doit)
-  Notes connected by glissando, too fast for individual notes to be transcribed
-  Flat by less than one half step
-  Sharp by less than one half step
-  Delayed by less than one sixteenth note
-  Anticipated by less than one sixteenth note
-  “Honk”
-  Timbre changed by alternate fingering

Chronology

- 1909** Lester Willis Young born in Woodville, Mississippi, August 27. Shortly after, the family moves to New Orleans.
- 1919–1927** Young moves to Memphis, then to Minneapolis. Plays drums, later alto saxophone in family band.
- 1928** Tours with Art Bronson’s Bostonians, adopts tenor saxophone.
- 1929** Returns to family band; probably plays with Eli Rice’s Cotton Pickers toward the end of the year.
- 1930** Plays with Walter Page’s Blue Devils, returns to Bronson’s Bostonians from June until November, then moves to Minneapolis.
- 1931** Plays at Nest Club in Minneapolis under Eddie Barefield, Frank Hines, and Leroy White. Works in Eugene Schuck’s Cotton Club Orchestra in summer, then returns to the Nest Club; also plays with Paul Cephas at South Side Club.
- 1932** Signs with “Thirteen Original Blue Devils” early in the year; plays with them in spring at Ritz Ballroom in Oklahoma City, then tours extensively.
- 1933** Blue Devils disband around May. Young tours with King Oliver around May to November, then plays around Kansas City with Clarence Love and the Bennie Moten–George E. Lee band. In December, plays with the visiting Fletcher Henderson Orchestra for one night, taking the place of Coleman Hawkins, and plays against Hawkins at a marathon “jam session.”
- 1934** Joins Count Basie early in the year. Transfers to Fletcher Henderson Orchestra in late March; leaves in July and plays with Andy Kirk in Kansas City, then with Rook Ganz and Boyd Atkins in Minnesota.

- 1935** Stays in Minneapolis except around March to May, when he freelances in Kansas City.
- 1936** Plays with Count Basie at the Reno Club in Kansas City. In September, visits sick father in Los Angeles. Makes first recordings in Chicago including *[Oh] Lady Be Good* and *Shoe Shine Boy*. John Hammond arranges contract for Basie with Music Corporation of America, which begins with an engagement in Chicago, November 6 to December 3; Buffalo, December 7; New York City debut, December 24.
- 1937** First recordings with full Basie band for Decca, New York City, January 21; first recordings with vocalist Billie Holiday, January 25—she dubs him “President” or “Pres.” Performs with Basie in and around New York City, also in Pittsburgh in February. At the Savoy (New York) in April and June, Ritz-Carlton of Boston in July, Meadowbrook (New Jersey) in November.
- 1938** Plays with Benny Goodman at Carnegie Hall concert, January 16. Performs with Basie at Famous Door, New York City, July through October, then on tour, Nashville, St. Louis, and elsewhere; at “From Spirituals to Swing” concert, Carnegie Hall, December 23.
- 1939** January, Geneva Armory, New York. Herschel Evans dies on February 16. Performs with Basie at Southland Café, Boston, between February and March; Hotel Sherman, Chicago, in June, with many broadcasts; Famous Door, New York City, in July and August. Records *Lester Leaps In*, September 5. Probably to California in October. Performs with Charlie Christian at second “From Spirituals to Swing” concert, Carnegie Hall, December 24.
- 1940** Basie band in New York City, January; in Boston, February 13 into March (mostly at Southland Café); in New York City, April to June; in Chicago in July; in California, August to October. Records informally with Benny Goodman and Charlie Christian, October 28 in New York. Leaves Basie band in December.
- 1941** Leads band at Kelly’s Stables in New York, February 27 through March 17. Moves to Los Angeles in May to join band of brother Lee; debuts at Billy Berg’s Club Capri.
- 1942** Lee and Lester Young at Capri from February 24; to Trouville Club in spring, then residence at Café Society Downtown, New York City, from September 1.
- 1943** Lee goes to Los Angeles after death of father on February 6; stepmother dies soon after and band is dissolved. Lester plays at Minton’s

- Playhouse and Village Vanguard in New York. Joins Al Sears band in spring for U.S.O. tour and other performances. Plays with Count Basie in October, then rejoins Basie in December at Lincoln Hotel.
- 1944** Performs with Basie on one-nighters in Northeast in January, February; New York in March, and at Hotel Lincoln, New York City, April and May; in Chicago June 12 to 22; Ohio, Kansas City, in July. Opens in Los Angeles on August 1. Appears in film *Jammin' the Blues* in August. Inducted into the army on September 30 and stationed at Fort McClellan, Alabama, on December 1. Wins first place in *Down Beat* poll at end of year.
- 1945** Court-martialed for possession of drugs, February 16. Sent to detention barracks, Fort Gordon, Georgia; discharged from army in December. Returns to Los Angeles. Wins *Esquire* Silver Award.
- 1946** Signs personal management contract with Norman Granz, appears at Granz-produced JATP concerts in Los Angeles, January and April, Chicago, May 14, and Carnegie Hall, New York City, on three Mondays beginning May 27. Back to Chicago, June 22. Records in Los Angeles in August; performs with own group in Chicago, October 3 through December 1, then in Manhattan, December 3 through 24.
- 1947** Records *Jumpin' with Symphony Sid*, February 18. On tour—one or two weeks each in St. Louis, Detroit, Washington, D.C., New York City (May 11 through 17 at the Savoy), Boston, and so on. Records in New York City at end of year. Wins *Esquire* Silver Award.
- 1948** January to February 16, Seattle; February 17 to March 1, San Francisco; March to November, tour of East Coast. Cleveland, November 11 through 17. Performs at Royal Roost, New York City, November 25 to December 8.
- 1949** On tour in January. Performs in Chicago, February 14 to March 13, then New York's Royal Roost, March 17 to mid-April. JATP tour begins with Carnegie Hall concert, September 17. Birdland (newly opened), from December 15.
- 1950** Continues at Birdland through January 25 and for most of March and the first half of May. JATP tour begins with Hartford concert, September 15.
- 1951** Performs at Birdland, New York City, throughout the year. Also at Carnegie Hall, February 21; Chicago, August 10 to 23; JATP tour begins with Hartford concert, September 14.

- 1952** First tour of Europe for Young and for JATP leaves March 26, returns April 21. Young then appears at Birdland through June; Washington, D.C., June 30 through July 5; Philadelphia, July 7 through 12. Back to Birdland, July 13 to August 25, including guest appearances with the Basie band. JATP American tour begins with Hartford concert, September 12.
- 1953** Performs at Birdland in January, with own groups and as guest of Count Basie band; JATP in Europe from mid-February, including concerts in London and Paris in March; back at Birdland in July; JATP tour begins with Hartford concert, September 11.
- 1954** Performs in San Francisco, March 9 to 29; at first festival in Newport, July 18. Makes guest appearances with Basie at Carnegie Hall, September 25, and at Birdland in December.
- 1955** Plays with Birdland All-Stars in February and at Charlie Parker Memorial Concert, April 2, Carnegie Hall. Performs with Billie Holiday at Carnegie Hall, May 6; at Birdland most of May; in Chicago from July 22 to August 11. JATP tour begins with Hartford concert, September 16. Hospitalized in winter.
- 1956** Reunites with Teddy Wilson at recording sessions, January 12 and 13; Chicago, April 20 to May 4; tours Europe with Birdland All-Stars in November. Plays in December in Washington, D.C., then at Café Bohemia, New York City.
- 1957** Hospitalized again. Birdland tour begins February 15 at Carnegie Hall, through March. Appears with Count Basie band at Newport Jazz Festival, July 7; Granz concerts include Hollywood Bowl, August 22, and JATP tour opening September 14, Carnegie Hall, ending in Los Angeles in October. Appears on television program "The Sound of Jazz" with Basie and Billie Holiday, December 8.
- 1958** Hospitalized again; moves to Alvin Hotel in Manhattan in spring. Has birthday tribute at Birdland, June 2; appears at Newport Jazz Festival, July 5. Then begins to perform more frequently, including two weeks at the Five Spot, New York City, in November, and a return there for most of December.
- 1959** Begins engagement at the Blue Note, Paris, on January 14; makes last commercial recordings, March 2. Returns to New York City, March 14, and dies at three a.m., March 15. Posthumously elected to *Down Beat* Hall of Fame.