

## 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.

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