

Author's Introduction

The interview form is common in jazz journalism, but a whole book of interviews with a single musician is rare.¹ Lee Konitz is one of the few jazz players who could sustain the reader's interest over so many pages. In conversation Konitz is thoughtful, combative, reflective, and opinionated—a true thinker with gravitas. Unlike many jazz musicians, he is eager to debate the principles of his art, and isn't afraid to pass frank comments on other musicians, including those he has played with. His total honesty and integrity goes with high critical standards, and he is not interested in a mollifying niceness. He has strong opinions on such issues as intuitive improvisation versus “prepared playing,” the demands of the group situation, the need for accurate pitch, his inspiration from bebop and Charlie Parker's “compositional” approach. But he also reveals a characteristic ambivalence on many of the deepest questions—such as his Jewish identity, the place of the blues in jazz, and jazz's status as an African-American art form—and also concerning such leading figures in the music as Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, and Wayne Shorter.

Lee Konitz should be heard in his own words, and in contrast to Quincy Troupe's co-written autobiography of Miles Davis and similar efforts, these really are the artist's own words, not an artistic reconstruction. They appear with little editing, though the material has been considerably rearranged to avoid repetition and to produce a more coherent narrative. The interviews were conducted over several years at Konitz's apartment in Cologne, at festivals and gigs in Hull, Coventry, London, Tuscany, and Paris, and by telephone. Extracts have appeared previously in *The Wire* and *Jazz Review*. The project began when Tony Herrington and Rob Young of *The Wire* suggested I subject Lee to an Invisible Jukebox—a kind of “blindfold test” where the artist responds to recordings before they are identified—before his set at the Hull Jazz Festival in 1999. At that first meeting he provided excellent copy, conforming to the stereotypes of grumpy old man and difficult artist. The first disc I played was Anthony Braxton's “April,” from a tribute to Konitz's teacher Lennie Tristano, and the diatribe that followed—beginning, “It's the worst solo I've ever heard in my life, I think”—took me completely aback. This was a man with opinions—only later did I appreciate that he is also a

warm, gentle, and artistically vulnerable soul. After that experience, I persuaded Richard Cook, my original journalistic mentor who got me into jazz writing when he was editor of *The Wire*, to run two very long Konitz interviews in *Jazz Review*. By this time I was getting to know Lee better, and when I turned up to interview him at his apartment in Cologne, he apologized for not having any coffee but did offer me a whole orange. Eventually he became more relaxed, and we got to bantering conversation.

It's fair to say that Lee has found collaborating on this book challenging and indeed stressful. It exposes him as an artist, and somehow he couldn't—and I think still can't—believe my assurances that readers would be interested in his opinions and reminiscences at book length. A book, with its promise of permanence, was more threatening to him than the magazine interviews that he's mostly been happy to do, and it took a long time to win him over to the idea. My initial plan was for a co-written autobiography, but on reading the first results, Lee vetoed the project, complaining that it was inauthentic. He was onto something important about that overpopular genre; with interviewer's questions removed, it's hard to see what motivates the subject's remarks. Honesty and candor are lost when the conversation is obscured in this way. The Miles Davis case—it turns out that without comment Troupe added material that was not from his interviews—emphasized how problematic the traditional autobiography is. Even the best-intentioned author has to add material where the interviewer's questions have been cut, and usually does much more—it is a literary form where a persona is constructed. As an alternative, Lee and I settled on the question-and-answer format, with interpolations—though Lee continued to have grave doubts of the kind I've just described.

These conversations discuss Konitz's life chronologically, broken up by thematic chapters on improvisation, the instrument, and the material. They inevitably bring out Konitz's ideas from the interviewer's perspective, and in particular reflect my long-standing interest in the process of improvisation, and the perennial question of how genuinely spontaneous it can be—which is really the question, "What exactly is improvisation?" It's evident that the very same question has long preoccupied Lee Konitz.

Some musicians will have a hidden agenda—in the case of Miles Davis, Konitz's sometime colleague, almost always. From the 1960s onwards Davis incorporated the ideas of many musicians that he publicly condemned, in his own way of course, but not wishing to acknowledge the fact. In Konitz's case I do not believe that there is any hidden agenda—these conversations are frank, and any "agenda" is explicit. Konitz rightly believes that the Tristano school, and especially its originator, has not got its due with the jazz

public, even if it might have from historians of the music, and that it has been much misunderstood. He wants to correct that situation—as also will a new book on Tristano by Eunmi Shim in the present series. Konitz also believes that what he calls “prepared” playing, and a focus on harmonic as opposed to melodic considerations, dominate jazz improvisation, and he would like to see that imbalance corrected. Do I—the interviewer—have an agenda? Not that I’m aware of. It’s possible that Lee has picked up some of my ideas, but the influence has mostly been the other way round.

Lee has been a close collaborator, reading successive drafts of the manuscript and making corrections and additions. I have mostly incorporated the corrections, but on some occasions, where he has had second thoughts about his criticisms of other musicians, I have persuaded him to retain them for the sake of candor. Occasionally the “censoring” has worked the other way round. This issue of criticism is a difficult one. Lee is known for his uncompromising artistic vision and exacting critical standards, both for himself and others. His outspoken comments on Anthony Braxton in the *Wire* interview, which he amplifies here, received particular attention at the time. (I approached Braxton, via an intermediary, to ask whether he would like to talk about Konitz, but, understandably perhaps, he declined.) The interviews with other musicians were an afterthought that burgeoned, and almost all were conducted as the book was nearing completion. In these interviews, the musicians showed a lot of warmth toward Lee, and their praise helped to give him confidence in the project. Many readers have made suggestions about the organization of the material, and pointed out errors and infelicities in the text, but final editing decisions have been between myself and Lee. The original tapes and minidisks exist—somewhere—if any archive is interested.

To return to the question of editing. It is difficult to transfer the feel of speech to the written page, and I have rearranged phrases within sentences and sometimes changed individual words to improve the flow. For example, Konitz said: “I’m not sure if this was the same tour or not, but George Shearing, Al Hibbler, and Lennie were standing by the bus before we got on to leave . . .” I changed this to: “I don’t remember if this was the same tour or not, but George Shearing, Al Hibbler and Lennie were standing by the bus one time, before we got on to leave . . .” And Konitz says, on playing blue notes: “I can’t get away from it. But I’m not exaggerating that feeling, I hope. So I do play [blue notes] occasionally, and hope that they fit into a musical phrase, and make some sense.” I have changed this to: “I can’t get away from it. But I’m not exaggerating that feeling, I hope. I hope that they [blue notes] fit into a musical phrase, and make some sense.” A number of my brief, fac-

tual questions have been transformed into Konitz's speech, so that "You joined Kenton in 1952" becomes "I joined Kenton in 1952." On Lee's insistence, "Yeah" mostly becomes "Yes"; on my insistence, "etc., etc." mostly becomes "and so on." Obviously there is much material that I have not included, especially when it repeats other remarks, or where Lee was struggling to express some difficult idea. His memory after all these years is not infallible, and I have done my best to check his reminiscences. Often he would tell me an anecdote, and then some variation on the following conversation would occur: "Can you tell me when that was?" "You know I hate that kind of question!" "Was it the fifties or the sixties?" "I'd say, probably the sixties." Sometimes I could check, but often I could not get a precise date.

I should state my background qualifications for writing this book. Lee Konitz has been one of my musical heroes almost from when, as a student, I first fell in love with jazz. *Lee Konitz with Warne Marsh*, the Atlantic recording from 1955, was one of the first jazz LPs I bought—probably at the record store in St Andrews in Fife, which later closed while I was on student vacation, unable to help sustain its meager cash-flow. It was a surprise to hear Lee, in these conversations, being so self-critical about that almost perfect small-group classic. Later I loved *Jazz à Juan*, *The New York Album*, and *Ideal Scene*. I heard him live with Harold Danko in the 1980s, and enjoyed their hilarious Keith Jarrett impersonation. I have for many years been a writer on jazz, improvised music, and modern composition, initially for *The Wire* and subsequently for *Classic CD*, *Jazz Review*, and other publications. I'm a jazz pianist of modest achievements, and it took a lesson with Lee Konitz, reinforced by comments from my friend David Udolf, to make me realize the importance of melody over harmony. This is also the message of Conrad Cork's *Harmony With LEGO Bricks*, an improvisation manual indebted to Konitz's approach, if only I'd had the ears to absorb it. It impressed me that independently these authorities said similar things about my playing—now that I've finished the book, I hope I can put their thinking into practice!

I am grateful to Peter Jones at Edinburgh University for suggesting I combine my day job as philosophy lecturer and my moonlighting as jazz writer into work on the aesthetics of jazz. That's how I got involved in the area of philosophy known as aesthetics or philosophy of art, which I now teach. Teasing out the nature of improvisation is a philosophical matter, so parts of these conversations make up a philosophical dialogue in some sense. At times, Lee commented that he was hoping for some more "philosophy," but

I think we achieve the kind of cautious but significant resolutions that one hopes for in philosophical debate.

Jazz, at the time Konitz was working with Lennie Tristano, was an art music played in nightclubs. For Konitz, it still is, to some extent, and unlike the superstars, he still plays in clubs. Jazz's artistic claims arise in large part from its status as an improvised music, I believe, and intuitive improvisation, of the kind that Konitz practices, is the highest form of improvisation. His career is one of the most consistent examples of commitment to that demanding art.

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—Andy Hamilton