

Brief Biography of Lee Konitz

Lee Konitz is one of the most original and distinctive alto saxophonists in the history of jazz. With Sonny Rollins, Max Roach, and a few others, he is one of the surviving master improvisers of the bebop generation. But his apprenticeship to bebop was indirect, and he has carved out an uncompromising solo career guided by a singular artistic vision. He seeks out challenging situations and strives for perfection in the momentary art of improvisation. He is unerringly self-critical and always stretches himself to do the best work possible. Though Konitz is a highly reflective musician, what he plays is intuitive, the product of an intensely emotional sensibility. It's striking how ingenious Konitz has been in creating novel contexts for the traditional approach of "theme and variations" that he follows. In albums such as *Peacemeal* or *Duets* from the 1960s, the solo album *Lone-Lee* from the 1970s, right up to the recent duo album with drummer Matt Wilson, *Gong With Wind*, the saxophonist has been concerned to develop new formats for improvisation.

Konitz was born on October 13, 1927, in Chicago, of Austrian/Russian Jewish parents. At the age of eleven he picked up his first instrument, the clarinet, on which he received classical lessons before switching to tenor and then alto saxophone. In 1943 he met the decisive personal and musical influence of his life, the blind 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 went on to join. It is the latter association for which he remains best known, and he is generally regarded, with Tristano and Miles Davis, as one of the architects of the "cool" style in modern jazz.

Konitz's greatest influence was his still-neglected teacher Lennie Tristano, but he also thoroughly assimilated the heritage of saxophonists Charlie Parker and Lester Young. Konitz's partnerships with Tristano, and with his fellow pupil, the totally individual tenor saxophonist Warne Marsh, were the defining ones of his career. But although Lennie Tristano was a formative influence on Konitz, one shouldn't assume that he was working on a tabula rasa. Although immature by his later standards, Konitz's earliest

commercially recorded solos, with the Thornhill Orchestra in 1947, illustrate that he was already developing a unique jazz style, characterized by a highly original tone with a purity unusual in jazz.

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, but the education also included experiments in free jazz. As 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. A period in Stan Kenton's band, 1952–53, extended his experience and range of playing contexts, and periodically he has returned to larger ensembles. But his most original and challenging work has been in smaller groups where improvisational freedom can be given full rein. Konitz is the spontaneous improviser par excellence, constantly finding inspiration in the Tin Pan Alley songs, later known as "standards," that since the 1920s have continued to attract jazz musicians. Throughout his career Konitz has composed, often but not always on the chords of standards.

Konitz's career was at its lowest ebb commercially—though not artistically—in the early 1960s, when he lived in California. In 1961, however, he recorded *Motion*, with John Coltrane's drummer Elvin Jones—one of his finest albums. After his spell in California he returned to New York in 1964 to appear at the Half Note with Tristano. At a memorial concert to Charlie Parker in Carnegie Hall in 1965 he performed a remarkable solo tribute, "Blues For Bird." In 1967 he recorded his *Duets* album, a series of duos with Joe Henderson, Richie Kamuca, Jim Hall, Ray Nance, Elvin Jones, and others, a format that later became a speciality. Later duos were with Sal Mosca (1971), Red Mitchell, Hal Galper (1974–75), Jimmy Giuffre, Martial Solal (1978, 1980), Karl Berger (1979), Michel Petrucciani (1982), and Harold Danko (1984). In the 1970s Konitz was sometimes reunited with Warne Marsh, and in 1975 he returned to the nonet format, which was compared, somewhat inaccurately, with the Birth of the Cool band.

For much of the time since the mid-1960s, Konitz has lived and worked in Europe; he also became popular in Japan. He recorded in Germany with Attila Zoller and Albert Mangelsdorff (1968), and in Italy with Martial Solal (1968) and Enrico Rava (1968). 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 an album to the tenor (1977), played with Paul Bley, and appeared in Europe with Shelly Manne. He rejoined Charles Mingus, with whom he had worked

in the 1950s, in 1978, and played in a duo with Gil Evans in 1980, eventually releasing two albums, *Heroes* and *Anti-Heroes*. In recent years he has again played more in the United States, and achieved further recognition there. Konitz keeps an apartment in New York, but in 1997 he married a native of Cologne, and since then he has lived there most of the time, in a flat near the city center. As he moves into his later seventies, Konitz is working with much younger players such as Matt Wilson, Joey Baron, and Greg Cohen, as well as many European players. In his artistic Indian summer, Konitz's achievement is becoming more widely recognized.