

6 The Art of Improvisation

Konitz is one of the most astute and eloquent commentators on the art of improvisation. In this chapter he states his artistic credo, offering one of the most extended accounts of the practice of improvisation by a jazz musician. Konitz is totally committed to “really improvising,” as he puts it, a commitment that he believes few jazz players share. In his daily routine of practicing, he prepares himself “to not be prepared.” His distinction between “real improvisers” and what he calls “prepared playing” may come from Tristano, who commented that “I can count on one hand the great improvisers. . . . This kind of improvising you always hear about almost never happens.”¹ Konitz contrasts his own intuitive approach with the more prepared playing or “professional performance” of Oscar Peterson or James Moody, who have a routine that wows the audience. He also describes a third approach between prepared playing and intuitive improvisation, the “compositional” approach of Charlie Parker or John Coltrane, which has a more specific vocabulary. Using “compose” in a different sense, he explains how he intends to “really compose, and not just try to perfect what I know,” by which he means that he hopes to create an improvisation that stands up to analysis as a piece of music.

Konitz is not denying that Parker and Coltrane are improvising. He is just saying that they adopt a different approach to improvising; with Moody and Peterson he would be more severe. I believe that Konitz’s approach, in avoiding licks and focusing on melody, is more purely or more “really” improvisational. These claims must not be overstated, however. The crucial musical issue is not so much whether or not something is composed or invented in the moment, but that it sounds fresh,

spontaneous, and natural. Why else would people continue to play classical pieces? This issue is also discussed here.

The present chapter also brings out Konitz's concern with authentic emotional expression and exploration of the music. His stage presentation is resolutely untheatrical, and he rejects "showboating" and emotional display. His improvising practice is in some ways quite austere. In one interview he comments, "As soon as I hear myself playing a familiar melody I take the mouthpiece out of my mouth. I let some measures go by. Improvising means coming in with a completely clean slate from the first note. . . . The most important thing is to get away from fixed functions."² In what follows here he is perhaps less severe in rejecting such phrases. He is also concerned to disguise the simple repeating twelve- or thirty-two-bar chorus-structure of the blues or standard song in order to create a unified improvised statement. In an early interview in 1948, Barry Ulanov quotes him as arguing: "Let's say we change the punctuation of the 32-bar structure, like carrying the second eight bars over into the bridge, making our breaks sometime within the second eight and in the middle of the bridge instead of at the conventional points. We re-paragraph the chorus . . . that leads to the next logical point, to continuity and development . . . so that you get not four choruses, but a four-chorus statement." This may be what Konitz does, but he now says, "I've read this three times and it is not making sense to me! I don't think I said that."³

In our conversations we approach these difficult issues from various angles, trying to tease out what is distinctive about "real improvisation," the art of "theme and variations," as Konitz calls it. Konitz then discusses composition and the contrast with classical music, how to teach jazz, and the importance of singing for improvisers.

You've said that you thought Charlie Parker was really a "composer." You mean he had a vocabulary of phrases that he'd adapt?

What is a "composer"? One who puts good phrases together. When I came to New York with Claude Thornhill in '48, I went right to Fifty-second Street and listened to Charlie Parker. He sounded great, but very familiar to me, and I was wondering why that was at first. Then I realized he was playing vocabulary that I'd already heard on the records—but it was fantastically played and realized. As a "composer," he conceived of these great phrases, and fit them together in the most logical way, and played them until they came alive—and then decided to depend on what really communicated with his audience.

That approach doesn't appeal to you?

Of course we have to function with a vocabulary in order to speak musically. But because I've had so much experience playing, and had my confidence reinforced and encouraged through doing it, I realized that it's possible to really improvise. And that means going into it with a so-called clean slate. That appeals to me very much. Not to deny the importance of a speaking vocabulary, but having one that's flexible enough so it can be used to reinvent constantly.

Keith Jarrett stated it pretty eloquently on his new record, *Always Let Me Go*.⁴ He explained how he had to really withdraw from following through with something that he already knew could work. That's a very important point.

Both Bird and Coltrane had a very prolific vocabulary. It becomes licks and clichés when there's no feeling behind the phrase any more. But you have to have things to play. I have what I think of as a more flexible vocabulary. When I practice and come up with a good combination of notes, I work with it through the keys; different tonalities, rhythmic changes, etc. Then, when I play, that idea inevitably pops up in a most unexpected place.

Bird's phrases were very specific, and it was hard to alter them, for him or [followers such as] Jackie McLean or Sonny Stitt. Mine, and Warne Marsh's, phrases are more like filler material—rhythmic phrases that could be played in many different contexts, connecting one to the other.

I want to try and understand what you're saying here. What exactly is "filler material"?

For example, odd rhythmic phrases—in 5/8, "da-ba-ba-da-ba, da-ba-ba-da-ba," that kind of a feeling, you could play it against any chord at any point. Charlie Parker would play [sings Parker phrase]—that phrase he only did in that key, on that progression. I think Tristano had some specific things that he played against certain chords—I do too, you can't help but find a way of navigating most accessibly through a certain terrain. But as Keith Jarrett suggests, don't look for that security!

Filler material differs from specific material because it can go in any context.

Yes. It's very necessary to connect one phrase to the next.

Charlie Parker did adapt his phrases to different keys and different contexts to some extent, though.

Yes. But the very familiar, great blues phrases that he played, I guess he could play them in F and maybe B-flat also—but I don't think he played them in A or F-sharp. I'm sure he could if he tried, but that means the rhythm section has to do it too!

Red Rodney said that—strange to say—playing with Charlie Parker got a bit predictable. He tried to persuade Parker to play different songs, and in different keys.⁵

[Laughs.] That's like me, I want to do different keys, but I still want to do the tunes that I know. But I opened up the fake book today, trying to find other material to play.

Filler material is an integral part of the line. I'm just thinking of how flexible it can be, compared to a certain phrase that starts at the beginning of a bridge, or progression. I think of my phrases as something that can be used in any place, in any harmonic context. I have no two-bar phrases—I don't have one that I can call on, that will take me through an A minor–D7 into G major.

Conrad Cork said to me that a book of Konitz's cadence phrases would be very short!

Cork is right!

[We listen to Tristano's improvisation on "All The Things You Are," from *Lennie Tristano* (Atlantic)]

Fillers are motifs, in the traditional sense, that you can use as flexibly as this, and develop in different kinds of ways. I'm hearing familiar things here, but he's playing them in a new way. The groups of four eighth notes is one of the traditional ones that Coltrane and everybody's doing—"de-dah-dah-dah"—A-flat, B-flat, C, E-flat; B, C-sharp, D-sharp, F-sharp; E, F-sharp, G-sharp, B; G, A, B, D—and so on.

But Tristano's motifs would fit into more contexts than Parker's.

They're more like a filler than a specific lick—he was more flexible in his use of four eighth notes.

Calling them fillers sounds rather derogatory.

It just means that they're used as part of the development of a line—inserted at any point in a string of notes. At best they're parts of melodic phrases.

It's a matter of connecting one substantial idea with another. In terms of playing a continuous long line, it's not just one major idea, you're going through little patterns that could be called filler material.

You felt that Charlie Parker's motifs would be plugged into very specific places, whereas Tristano's are not so harmonically specific—they fit over many different harmonies, so they can be used more freely.

Yes, that's part of it. I think Lennie was, ultimately, more intuitive than Bird.

Your improvisations also are often based on motifs—so if you're playing a song with a melody that has three quarter notes ascending, you might begin your solo with those notes, then develop it by transposing the motif

to fit other chord changes, changing the rhythm to eighth notes or stretching the melody but retaining its shape, and so on. Are you conscious of that as your main improvising technique?

Yes. I'm very much aware of the developmental possibilities of the notes I choose at the moment. It's what I think of as a note-to-note procedure, rather than a phrase-by-phrase procedure. It's fundamental. It's very essential to me the more I do this.

Do you hear yourself using a phrase you've used before?

Of course! But instead of ignoring it, I try to develop it, maybe, in a different way from last time. Familiar phrases that can be used one way or another are still vital, I think. I've heard very good versions of patterns of licks by some musicians. I try to avoid that myself. But sometimes a sequence is in order.

It's not possible to really improvise when you're playing very fast.

Not for me. The idea of having to "burn," and having to swing hard, and all of those concepts, I'm too old for that—but I was really too old for that when I was twenty, I guess! I tried to play as hard as I could, but obviously I couldn't get up to where the really hard players were. And you know, that's like a contest in some way, to be able to swing as strongly as possible. One of the reasons I wasn't able to do that, is that I didn't know what I was going to play, like they do. You can play as strongly as you want, when you're not thinking about what note to select.

But then who needs to play "strong" all the time? There are many dynamics possible besides strong.

You're very insistent that people shouldn't be playing mechanically. You said that when you started out you were more mechanical, and your ideal has been to eliminate that. Does that mean you should be surprised by what you're playing?

You should be surprised! That's what I love about improvising, that it's full of surprises. Jack Zeigler, the cartoonist, said that "I find that when I'm doodling I am most interested in what surprises me, and that's what I end up using." No surprises, back to the drawing board!

But shouldn't you be hearing in your head what you're going to play—and so not surprised?

When I'm playing, the only thing I hear in my head is the note that I just played; there's no room to hear anything else. I never know what people are talking about, "playing what you hear" as you play. Although in a moment of pause in the play, something can occur—a note, a phrase—to suggest direction.

And yet as you say, you're making a logical construction.

Yes, as a result of all the thinking, and singing, and practicing that I do. And I feel confident to go out and make up a new melody—that, simply put, is my goal. I'm not looking for new rhythms, or world music expressions, which everything seems to be going in the direction of. I'm not looking to be original; just to play as sincerely as possible in the discipline I inherited. I'm still fascinated with this basic discipline of theme and variations.

“Hearing internally” is another way of saying that you're fully conscious of what you're playing, that it's not mechanical. You must at least be *able* to play what you hear. This is a really important training, to be able to hear lines in your head, and play them.

This is important as a meditation technique. You can meditate on a word, and you can meditate on a note, or a series of notes.

But practically, if you're going to be a good improviser, you've got to be able to hear or sing a phrase, and then go to the piano or horn and play it. Right—but as a practice thing. That's very important I think.

Because another way of playing is to play what's in the fingers, in the muscular memory.

That's when it's mechanical. As Bob Brookmeyer says, there are familiar areas in every instrument that are so much fun you can't stop yourself from using them, but that's a far cry from real improvising.

🦋 Interview with Bob Brookmeyer

BOB BROOKMEYER, born Kansas City in 1929, began his career as a pianist, but specialized in valve trombone and replaced Chet Baker in Gerry Mulligan's piano-less quartet. He worked with Jimmy Giuffre, appearing with him on Jazz on a Summer's Day playing “The Train And The River.” He is one of jazz's most highly regarded composers and arrangers, notably for the Thad Jones–Mel Lewis Orchestra, and for his own orchestras.

Lee is one of the finest improvisers I have ever had the joy of hearing and knowing. He is not exactly an extrovert, personally, but it doesn't show in his playing. He is aggressive, passionate, and swinging. His early period should not be the golden mean—listen to him now. The awful label of “cool jazz” has haunted many of us since the fifties. If you played with intelligence, sensitivity, and courage, the label often stuck to you,

sometimes accompanied by “West Coast.” Lee is a “hot” player now, and has been for most of his life. All emotional jazz *has* to be deeply felt and close to orgasmic. It is one of the bodily thrills that we have in the world.

Improvisation is a mutilated word, since Charlie Parker brought us a codified system of playing. No one could escape Parker, but Tristano’s group certainly made a very large dent in accepted wisdom. If one has the talent and desire to speak honestly, the art of improvisation becomes a reality. There are these “vanilla fudge” areas in every instrument that give instant gratification from their historical reference, but some of us try to avoid such cheap thrills in search of some meaning in our work. Lee has his own way, and things like that are a gift from the Music God.⁶ 🦋

Singing will put you more immediately in touch with what you’re hearing. It’s harder to sing mechanically—at least for a nonsinger.

I think so. But hearing in your inner ear is the first step.⁷ Something is popping around inside, and you start humming or singing. Chet Baker sang, or played, what he could hear, and so he sounds like himself in both cases. Singing is the main instrument, there’s nowhere to hide.

And when someone else plays a phrase, you’ve got to be able to play that very phrase, or answer it.

Right. That’s an ear-training process. When I played with Brad Mehldau, soon enough he was anticipating what I was playing. He was right there—as I was to him—and sometimes too soon.

How far ahead do you think when you’re playing a solo?

Just, ideally, on the note that I’m playing. I know, on some level, where I’m headed in the tune, but it’s most important for me to play each note as clearly as I can. I’ve heard a number of people describe how they think ahead, and kind of aim for a certain note, or a certain place. Hal Galper wrote in his book about looking forward to how you develop the phrase, and how it’s going to end. I don’t know how that’s possible, if you’re improvising. But it’s different for each player, I’m sure.

What kind of state of mind are you in when you’re improvising?

Just trying to be “there,” basically, and be interested in what’s going on around me, besides my own obligation to play. I want to hear the other players as clearly as possible. It’s an almost selfish need—besides the satisfaction of hearing them play, even if it isn’t first-rate. If I hear what they’re doing, I never run out of things to play, because they’ll always feed me something. It’s really not possible to run out of something to play if you tune in to the bass drum, the sock cymbal, or the bass notes, or the piano chord. But if 100

percent of my attention is on thinking, “What’s the next note?” it’s hard to listen to anything else.

How do you get beyond playing things that are in the “muscular memory”—phrases that have been learned and are then unconsciously repeated?

By believing that it’s possible to do it, first of all, and wanting to do it. I have complete faith in the spontaneous process. I think most people think that can be very naive, and that you do your improvising at home, and when you go out, you play prepared material, so the paying customers don’t get short-changed. It’s the picture I’ve seen all of my life. And very talented people can do it effectively—the rest sound like hacks, to me.

I need to talk about these things, to clarify whatever’s not fully clarified yet.

Obviously, playing mechanically suggests a lack of real connection to what you are doing at the moment. We learn to play through things that feel good at the time of discovery. They go into the “muscular memory” and are recalled as a matter of habit. If I know a pattern on a [chord] progression that feels good at the time of discovery, every time I come to that place I could play that pattern, knowing it works, rather than making a fresh try. Up to a point this is the choice you make with a working vocabulary—how much you want to flex those ideas.

[The saxophonist] James Moody is a very good example of this prepared playing—playing what he knows. I never really enjoyed listening to him that much, though last time I heard him, at a Charlie Parker concert in New York, I was very impressed that this seventy-five-year-old man was playing so well. But what he played is basically very set, it’s like he’s actually playing exercises sometimes, it’s so obvious. He was playing the same things that I’ve heard him play over and over again. But he does it very well, and with a sense of humor in between; everything is very enjoyable to listen to. He even told a great joke that he’s been telling for forty years! That is a true professional performance—not easy, but that’s what it is. I’m just trying to clarify the difference between him and Charlie Parker. Charlie had a truly dynamic feeling for the music, and these great phrases that he put together ingeniously. A very special kind of expression only known to a major player.

I don’t put that down [what Moody does], I just try to put it in its place. Sonny Stitt was more musical, I think. James Moody tried to get more chromatic in his playing, and he worked out phrases and things, and they always sounded worked out and stuck in, and that’s not the point, to me. Sonny managed to integrate all those Charlie Parker phrases, or Lester Young or

Dexter Gordon or whoever he was emulating, and make a musical statement. It's some kind of an art form, but not the work of a true adventurous, chance-taking spirit.

James Moody is a hard practicer and he learns his things. And he knows how to deliver his punch when he's out there. This isn't meant to be a criticism of *him*, because I respect him for doing what he can do very well. I'm not saying he should be doing something else, I'm just trying to make a point that there is something else to be done, and then you make your choice whether you want to do it. I can't play the way Moody does, playing a finished product, as good as you can come up with, for the paying audience.

Whereas with Charlie Parker, the phrases were similar—the same phrases would recur, but they make a different mosaic each time.

I think the indication of that is on some of the second and third takes on some of the early records. I heard the second take of one of Fats Navarro's solos, and it was pretty much the same.

There are a few versions of "I Remember You" on my *Motion* record with the second drummer, Nick Stabulas. And it sounds entirely different each take.

Is it quite a small number that play the way you do?

I think most people who play professionally want to do a good job, and prepare as much as possible to do that. I do in my way, but that's my way of preparation—to not be prepared. And that takes a lot of preparation!

We talk about learning every change that existed, every inversion, every lick. And then when you play you forget about what you practiced and try to really invent something for the moment, according to what the rhythm's playing, according to the acoustics, the audience, how you feel at the moment, and so on. And certainly I don't do that all the time. When I get in trouble, for acoustic reasons, or because it's the wrong band for me, or whatever, I have to rely on what I know more. And that's less satisfying, but necessary, certainly.

I wish, at times, that I could have a readily available vocabulary to use on less inspiring occasions; but it would be too easy to rely on that.

[Drummer] Shelly Manne once joked about someone that "The guy was so hip he never played the same solo once"!

You think that a lot of players are missing out on something, when they go in for prepared playing.

Yes—though they're having a different experience that I'm missing.

No jazz player would say this, but what do you say to someone who asks, "What's the advantage of being spontaneous in the performance, with all

the risks that involves. Why not plan it out in advance?”

I think there’s a very obvious energy, let’s say, for the players, and the listeners who are tuned in to that kind of thing, that doesn’t exist in a prepared delivery. There’s something maybe more tentative about it, maybe less strong or whatever, that makes it sound like someone is really reacting to the moment. I presume you know what I’m talking about. It’s hard to catch what it really is, but I feel that way is very apparent to people who are doing it, and the people in the audience who can appreciate it.

I recorded with Phil Woods and Enrico Rava at the Umbria Jazz Festival in 2003. Both Phil and Enrico are very fine players. They were playing strong, and definite—which is a result of “knowing” what they are going to play.

So, here comes me—and as soon as I play the first note the whole intensity comes down from a spirited swing to a thoughtful, respectful volume and listening intensity. It’s very difficult to start from scratch after all that pizzazz! It’s a very welcome dynamic, but a psychological problem for me. **But as you say, if you’re coming out with a prepared statement, however energetic it is, there’s a definite limit to how far you can react to the moment.**

I think so. And that also means that the second time you hear that person, it’s not going to be too different from the first time. When you hear Phil Woods, you hear familiar phrases. And Stan Getz was kind of the same. They had a style, very musically worked out, and they found success with that and stuck with it. I think that defines “style” in a way. Doing something that catches on, and repeating it every time, as long as it is effective.

I was surprised when you said that on some classic recordings, you felt the ideas weren’t coming.

That can happen at any time, still. That possibility continues to make the process real, in a way, and a never-ending problem in another way that I don’t care for. I haven’t solved that problem. I’m thankful I can get a good average out of it. It’s a matter of slowing down the process with enough space to stay relaxed. Not getting tense and breathing in a relaxed way are the keys to the good ideas department.

As improvising instrumentalists, composing as we press the keys, we have the desire and obligation to play as logical, well-structured, great-sounding, rhythmically loose, accurate, and meaningful stream of notes as possible, that add up to a valid creation. But I commit many errors along the way, and thankfully, jazz is not a perfect art! As has been said, “An improviser needs the anxiety of imminent failure.”

Have you ever heard something that you thought was really spontaneous

and improvised, and then found out that it was worked out beforehand? Or could you always really tell?⁸

Sometimes I'm not sure, actually. When it's done as ingeniously as Warne [Marsh] did it, sometimes, it sounds like he wrote it out—amazing.⁹ He had access to his material in a most spontaneous way.

So you mean, when you heard him, you thought, "How could someone do that spontaneously?"

Yes, really. It's just so intricate, so well taken care of in the detail. Warne was a true musician, to the core. A rare bird!

Phrase and Rhythm

Clare Fischer sent me a transcription of a solo I played with Gerry Mulligan on "Lover Man" in the fifties, and it looked like the most complicated thing, with groups of 9's and groups of 11's and 7's and all kinds of odd things that I hadn't intended to play.¹⁰ I was just playing a little bit behind the beat, and he was hearing it as precisely, in relation to the beat, as possible. Usually they just put a sign that says, "Lay back a little bit." That simplifies it.

It was a very literal transcription. I was very impressed by that, and a little intimidated by it, that he was so technically aware.

It sounds like a transcription that would enable a classical musician to play the solo—making explicit what a jazz player would do intuitively.

Well, I think he thought I was really trying to do those things. Because that was one of the things that Tristano was trying to convey to us—employing odd groupings to enrich the rhythms of the line. But I wasn't too precise with those ideas.

Was Clare Fischer taught by Tristano?

Not personally, I think, but through the records he was very much influenced by him.

He's a very interesting player, and a marvelous writer. I worked with him once in the sixties, at Shelly's Manne-Hole. We didn't relate too well, so we didn't play together again. He's a fantastic musician, writer, and pianist who basically does commercial work for Prince and pop people, and makes money. But when he does a musical project it's good. I have a great love for a lot of the things he's done. In the early days he was playing alto, a bit influenced by me, I'm told.

But to return to rhythmic structure—Safford Chamberlain's biography quotes a pianist who worked with Marsh in the 50s saying that "Warne tried his whole life to demolish bar lines."

He succeeded very well. He had a great feeling for starting and finishing a phrase anywhere in the bar. Definitely a development after Bird.

That was part of the fun of playing around in the structure like that—to be able to start and stop where you want, without being inhibited by the basic structure.

It means things like starting a phrase on 2, or 3½?

If this is the beat—“1, 2, 3, 4”—and you go “do de dah do de . . . ,” that 5/8 rhythm can occur in different places in the bar, five eighth notes imposed over 4/4 time. That’s one way of saying it. These are the kinds of rhythmic exercises that you can do to free up the bar lines.

Warne kept developing in that direction. I’ve gone backwards, in a way, to simplify. I have been preoccupied with making my playing—notes, rhythms, sound, etc.—as clear, to me, as possible, which is very, very demanding. Simplifying can help that process. Warne got amazingly complicated. It was right on, swinging, and it had all those ingredients.

Do you feel when you’re playing a solo, you want to try and avoid the idea of “This is thirty-two bars being repeated”—you want to disguise the chorus structure as well, to avoid the impression of a repeating set of chords? That’s the name of the game, I think. To use this very obvious structure, and make it less obvious in some way—just in terms of an ongoing composition that is more or less seamless, so that you’re not pointing out the A section and the B section so specifically. I think that would be one ideal. Yet someone who listens to the music should be aware of the structure.

This is part of a reply to the classical critics who object to the simple structures of the music.

Well, it’s always a challenge to revisit those same simple structures, and complicate them a bit.

I’m sitting by an open window as I think about these questions, and the sun is coming in. I’m enjoying the breeze and the antiwar demonstrators [in Cologne] and everything, just waiting for some philosophical revelations.

Well, when we were talking about being cerebral and intuitive, that was philosophical.

I’m talking about life philosophy.

I just read, on my wife’s recommendation, a chapter by Schopenhauer, and he talks about the different arts. The section on music is *very* interesting—very complicated, and I have to read it a second time today. I don’t know if he was a musician, but he sounds like he was; it’s really very profound. Wasn’t his philosophy very negative?

Yes, he was a pessimist. He believed that there was a lot of agony in the

world, and that the amount of it always remained constant—it just got distributed differently. [Konitz laughs.] He really elevated music above all the arts.

You also showed me something from Heraclitus.

I love this quote: “Everything flows. . . . When I step into the river the second time, neither I nor the river are the same.” I wonder if he played an instrument!¹¹

But I have to have some misgivings about my lack of philosophical awareness. I hear some of these people—Keith Jarrett and Brad Mehldau—talking about some heavy kind of stuff.

Well, everyone I’ve shown this manuscript to has recognized that you’re a deep thinker yourself.

I imagine most of those people are just happy that I finally talked in public a little bit!

I was with a piano player that I work with in Germany, Frank Wunsch. We played a gig and afterwards we were talking, and he said, “You’re the only musician I know that wants to talk about the music!”

But you must have mixed feelings about talking about your work.

I do. I don’t like to do that before I play, I ask if we could do it after the concert. If it helps a young person to get an insight, it’s good.

Talking about your playing is exposing you in a way.

But if I say that I don’t know anything about what I’m doing, that’s as exposing as you can get! And I do know *something* about what I’m doing. I wish that Lester Young had talked more, and Bird when we hung out on that Stan Kenton tour. We did not talk about music much—very strange.

🦁 Interview with Rufus Reid

RUFUS REID is a bassist, composer, and educator, author of *The Evolving Bassist* (1974), which has become the standard text. Born 1944 in Atlanta, Georgia, he began playing trumpet, and switched to bass while in the U.S. Air Force. He studied music in Seattle and Chicago, and worked with Sonny Stitt, James Moody, Dizzy Gillespie, and Kenny Dorham. In the 1970s he toured with Bobby Hutcherson, Harold Land, and Freddie Hubbard, and after moving to New York, worked with Thad Jones and Mel Lewis, and J. J. Johnson. His recordings with Konitz include *Figure and Spirit* and *Ideal Scene*.

I worked with Lee at least once a year at the Jazz Showcase in Chicago, before I moved to New York in 1976. He's been one of my regular "clients" as a freelance musician. In 1985, Harold Danko, Al Harewood, and I went to Japan in a group with Lee, and worked on a lot of new material. But the Japanese just wanted him to play the things he'd made popular. At that time—I don't know about now—the Japanese were the second-largest producers and consumers of the music. But there was never enough work to really establish that group, and I was disappointed about that, because on that trip we were really excited about the music—it was strong, it was new music, and yet it was still "Lee."

I played with him last year, and I'm going to play with him next month, here in New York. It's very gratifying, and a challenge at the same time. I call Lee a "melody maker"—it just flows, he really understands the sounds of these songs. As a bass player you're not relegated to the "basement" with him. We get our material from one another, and that's what real jazz is—what you hear is what's happening right now. In many situations, you can almost "phone in" your part, but not with Lee.

When I work with James Moody, he isn't an "automatic pilot" prepared player. Maybe at one time he had been, I don't really know, though because of his wealth of experience he's got a core that you've heard before at one time or another. It depends on the surroundings, of course. If you're playing with people that really don't get out of the box, you can't get out of it either. But Lee is consciously more in the moment. He has his "Lee-isms," which is where he gets his voice, but he really keeps the clichés at bay. He's been very adamant about not playing "verbatim."¹² ♪

The Focus on Melody

You said in your interview with David Kastin on learning to improvise [see below] 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."

Getting a good melody to swing loosely with a beautiful sound is no easy thing to do. Then, you slowly add and subtract to keep it loose and beautiful. It's a very gradual process. I tried to break it down into small steps, so that people could measure their progress. The novice should be trying, in some way, to create original melodies; but they have to ease into this disci-

pline, of playing a theme and variations in the traditional way, and play on a level in which they can get all the moving parts into sync. It's hard as hell to do that in reality. I'm trying to find out how you can work at that at home, to build up the belief that it really is possible to improvise. Tristano suggested knowing the song as thoroughly as possible, but he never went into those details, that I can recall. He encouraged his students to play in all keys, and so on, but never talked about this step-by-step development.

But the specific examples in that article [of mine] are much too complicated.¹³

When you learn a new song, do you start out by sticking fairly close to the melody at first, as you advise students to do, and then gradually make more variations?

The first improvising step as I understand it is stretching the rhythm, and the expression of the melody notes. So before adding anything, I play the song. If I can't play that melody as if I just made it up, I need to work on it until I can. Change the key, or the tempo, and make it sound like real music, and not just some way to get into the variations too soon. Unless the basic groundwork—melody—is strong, the variations certainly will not be convincing.

There are infinite possibilities, rhythmically, on these melodies, and that's improvising already. Not adding a note. Then I suggest adding a grace note, or something to dress up the melody little by little before making a new melody.

I came to harmony later in my life—I was just interested in melody, because of my single-note instrument. I realized the significance, harmonically, of every note, but I can't hear a chord in my head as I play, unless someone else plays the chord. So I'm certainly more concerned with moving from note to note, and interval to interval.¹⁴

But too often the melody is thrown away, in order to get into the serious business of pattern-playing.

Those sound like my words! [Laughs.] By now, though, I don't really love to play the melody of "All The Things." I have to find a new way to make it real.

You composed "Thingin'," on the chords of "All The Things You Are," and you play the melody of that.

Sometimes.

When did you write that piece?

Who knows! In the last ten years, I would say. It modifies the chord structure, though, and I like playing on that new chord structure more than the

standard one. I've not written anything else on "All the Things," but Warne wrote a great line on it, "Dixie's Dilemma."

Most jazz improvisers improvise on the harmonies, and the melody is almost inconsequential.

A few weeks ago [in 2005] I played in a small town near Munich, in a duo with a fine pianist, Walter Lang, and I took my soprano. And because of my need to be very careful with the pitch on the soprano, I was playing very softly, and very much around the melody. It was such a nice feeling, and I felt that communication with the audience was very special as a result. Usually I start out playing embellishments on a melody that's very familiar to me, but unfortunately a lot of people don't pick up what I'm playing on.

But if someone can play the melody—they've learned it and can play it without any mistakes—what more do they need to do to internalize it?

Well, I'm talking about note-to-note responsibility. Every time I play one of these melodies, I'm trying to tune in to every note—how it feels in itself, and how it connects with the next note, whether I'm tonguing it or legato-ing it or vibrating it. It's a constant challenge, and the more meaningfully it's played, the more meaningful the second chorus of embellishments is.

And you feel that often the melody is not played very meaningfully.

That's the way it feels. It's either done mechanically—it feels like that's the way they always play it, it's what I call a "throw-away"—just to get to the variations, which also sound mechanical . . .

Or it's distorted from the start in an effort to "update" it.

Updating is valid, distortion is not, for me. I think that, no matter how old the tune is, the first step is always to play the melody, "improvising it" so to speak—improvising rhythmically, or timbrally, so it's not mechanical. All the details have to be reviewed.

My approach, when I'm talking to a player who's beginning, is that they shouldn't even think of the chord progressions—just play on the melody for a while, and then add the chord progressions.

If somebody just gives you a set of chord progressions without a melody, could you improvise on this?

I can, but it doesn't really thrill me to see all those fucking chords. It's not the same. It would tend to be up and down more than across.

You've said that "practicing solos is the way to learn, those are our études"—that is, the solos of the great players that you can now often find transcribed.

Practicing solos is an essential step in this process of developing a real conception. I have suggested that to learn a solo from a record you should lis-

ten, sing it, play it, write it down, and analyze it. The same should be done for your own solos, so you can confront what you play, study it, and enjoy the process.

🦋 Interview with Conrad Cork

CONRAD CORK, born Birmingham, England, during an air raid in 1940, is an alto saxophonist, bassist, and former Director of Jazz Studies at the Performing Arts Department, De Montfort University, Leicester. He is author of *Harmony with LEGO Bricks*, a guide to jazz improvisation that shows how standard songs are constructed from common components, and so explains how they can be learned in all keys without effort.

In 1987, Derek Bailey persuaded Lee to play at Company Week. I think Lee must have found it odd, because Derek has this radar in his system which means that every time he feels a jazz phrase coming on, he plays something else. At the end of the week, Lee had a free night, so Derek called Gavin Bryars in Leicester, and asked, “Any chance of a gig? Lee’s happy to play with a local rhythm section.” Gavin replied that inasmuch as there’s a local rhythm section any more, it consists of bass, drums, and alto sax, but Derek thought Lee would be cool with that. Our trio came under the name Nardis. Gavin was already a famous composer—he’d done *Medea* with Robert Wilson, and he was Professor of Music at the then Leicester Polytechnic. Earlier, of course, he’d been in the trio with Derek Bailey and Tony Oxley that helped to launch free improvisation in the UK.

And so Lee came up to Leicester. He gave a master class at the Poly, then came over to The Cooler. He had a one-minute run-through with Gavin and John Runcie [the drummer], and told John straightaway, “You’re too loud—play softer.” After playing the first number, “Stella By Starlight,” with just bass and drums, he beckoned me onstage. I was nervous as hell. About halfway through the first set, he called out, “You—play a ballad!” I’d been very taken with late Art Pepper versions of “Over The Rainbow,” where he did a bluesy a cappella introduction, and I did that. As the piece developed, Lee played the most beautiful soprano behind me—it was transcendently gorgeous. And as the gig continued, Lee’s brusqueness disappeared as he became more relaxed with us.

Playing with Lee was the ultimate challenge, and though I knew I was not really up to it, I decided not to have anything preplanned, nor to have any sheet music with me. I got away with it, sort of—my only problem

was my fingers not obeying my brain so that a few times, on the tape we made, it sounds like I don't know the heads.

The organizers of the gig had a complete sellout, and because Nardis didn't take a fee, they paid Lee and had five-pound profit—the first profit they'd ever made. In the curry house afterwards, Lee said to me, “If you want some advice, cut out them Art Pepper licks!” The next day I took him to the station, and we had a long talk about learning to improvise. On the platform before the train came in, he told me “The jury is in—studying solos is the best way to learn.” In *LEGO Bricks* I'd presented an alternative to the mechanical approach of deriving the improvised line from the harmony rather than the melody of the song—an alternative which Lee had always followed. People would say to me, “Would you really improvise any differently if it was ‘Ornithology’ rather than ‘How High The Moon?’ or ‘Donna Lee’ rather than ‘Indiana?’”—which are on the same chords. I'd say, “Listen to what Lee does.” If you're any good you play them differently. Lee puts harmony in its place, second to the melody. Learning the common harmonic building-bricks of songs makes the harmony so familiar you don't need to think about it.¹⁵ 🐦

The Group Situation

As a peripatetic improviser, Konitz has played with pickup rhythm sections rather than leading a band, though he has his regular collaborators. But he gains vital inspiration and sustenance from those in the group around him. Here he discusses the process of negotiation and interaction in that situation, and in particular the rhythmic attunement with bass and drums in his favored trio format.

I had a group in the fifties with Ronnie Ball, Peter Ind, and Dick Scott or Jeff Morton. We had some gigs and recordings, George Wein managed me.¹⁶ I worked in his club in Boston, Storyville, a couple of times a year at least. Then he got me something in California and left me there—one gig!

I had a nonet which worked every week in the late seventies. And around 1986 I had a quartet with Harold Danko, and Rufus Reid on bass, and Al Harewood, a fine drummer. We played at Nice, and I thought that was going to open the door to bringing a group in every year. But George Wein, the man in charge, never hired me again after that! It was a fine band, though I guess it didn't impress *him*. But that was really fun, I really felt like a band-leader for a while.

I have thought of myself as a sideman, although I usually stood up front of the rhythm section, and my name was bigger than the others, usually.

Thinking about bass players, do you prefer a bassist like Charlie Haden, with “the sound of the earth” that keeps you anchored, or one like Scott LaFaro who is creating melodies all the time?

It depends. I never played with Scott. I love a variety of players, from Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen to much freer kinds of players. Charlie Haden is beautiful to work with. He was not in the best of health when we played with Brad Mehldau; his back was in bad shape. When I listen to him playing with Ornette Coleman and then playing with me it’s like night and day. When I was with Charlie and Paul Bley, very rarely did he play in four. The music didn’t call for that. But when Charlie would finally open up, it was very nice to hear and feel.

Why is it like night and day?

Because Ornette was playing very fast tempos and a free kind of music—these young guys came on the scene and really made an effect, playing hard. A different music, different age. I was just thrilled when [Charlie] decided to go into four for a couple of choruses, but I don’t insist on anything because he always has a nice feeling. On the records with Brad Mehldau, he’s even playing in two for Brad, then Brad really burns it up and he comes into four, reluctantly almost.

I love the bass to be as melodic as possible, and I try to get the bassist not to feel obliged to play quarter notes all the time. Gary Peacock is great at that—playing time, and just playing melodically. And so is Marc Johnson. **Because you feel that everyone should be hearing the beat anyway, so it doesn’t have to be stated all the time.**

To keep the music interesting, you can’t just keep plodding away, trying to swing. You must have good melodies and good counterpoint. I prefer going in and out of the swing.

Do you have a problem with bassists who play a lot in the upper register, competing with you?

I don’t enjoy competitive music, period! I just have a problem with bassists who are trying to tell me where the quarter note is. This is tempo I’m speaking of, and the intensity with which the tempo is expressed also. They start to play time like they’re saying to me, “This is where it is, you gotta play it here.” And I say, “Now wait a minute, maybe it’s where I’m at, you play it with me.” Then it’s competitive.

Is that a case of a bassist who doesn’t really listen to what you’re doing?

He might listen, but he’s more concerned with my listening to him as the timekeeper, which he is in the traditional function of the rhythm section.

There's a tendency for the bassist to think that his tempo is indisputable. I could do without that stipulation.

It's a matter of negotiation.

Exactly. How do you put that negotiation into music, is the eternal question.

Though I think it's pretty well agreed, in this context, that if the bassist starts the tune, that's where we've got to play it.

Is it an ego thing?

In a way it is, yes. The bassist's job, at its best, is to listen—to interpret what is going on around him, and play as musically and strong as necessary for the given situation. There's a difference between a session with Phil Woods and one with me, for instance—between a more intense time-feeling and one that's more laid-back.

Because bassists are not generally solo instruments, this is how they get their status.

Exactly. That's why I like the bass function loosening up, and playing more melodically, and less quarter notes. Then the tempo is more implied, and I exercise my concept more freely.

But you've also talked about the virtues of a traditional rhythm section [in chapter 3].

I love a rhythm section that's relaxed. Playing with Marc Johnson and Joey Baron is a delight.

But when you talked about Brad Mehldau and Peter Bernstein playing with two other young players, what I took you to mean by a traditional rhythm section was one that did state the beat.

Very definitely, but the solo line takes the lead in determining the rhythmic impetus.

Maybe you'd say that stating the quarter note or not, as Scott La Faro did not feel obliged to, is immaterial provided the players are really listening to each other.

From the few times that I played with Niels-Henning [Ørsted Pedersen], I just had the feeling that he loved to play those quarter notes, and played them as strong as hell, and so musically that they were never offensive to me. I think that's a large part of it—how the feeling of that assertiveness is. You've got to be assertive to be a rhythm section player, by definition, but Niels-Henning listened to the rest of the guys. I'm very sad that he passed away recently.

What other bassists do you like working with?

Steve Swallow I just know as an electric bass player, though he did do some acoustic records. You have to enjoy the sound the man is making—he's a

great electric bassist. I made a nice CD with him and Paul Motian.¹⁷ I do miss the sound and the feeling of the upright bass—there’s something lacking, in terms of the groundwork of a bass-violin. But he does it as good as you can do it, I think, with that instrument. And there is an advantage, sonically, to the electric bass. I can hear the notes more immediately, and clearer, and I really appreciate that very much. Plus he plays solos in the upper register sometimes that sound like a guitar. Steve pretty much plays what he’s familiar with, but he fits into the spirit of what’s playing, and he plays very well.

He does play it with quite a light touch.

Yes, and it’s beautifully done.

I loved Paul Chambers—a great sound and deep into the time, very loose. But I asked him to do a record date, and he didn’t bother to show up—Henry Grimes, fortunately, was available.

Rufus Reid is a delight, Derek Oles is special too, also Dave Holland.

You played quite a lot with Peter Ind in the fifties.

He was a student of Tristano and so I felt an affinity. He is an accomplished recording engineer and he brought his recording equipment to the Half Note, to do the album with Warne and Bill Evans. He also brought it to Pittsburgh to record a session we did at a club there. And he recorded a quartet with himself, Al Levitt, Warne, and myself at Ronnie Scott’s for his label Wave, which was very nice. Peter was a fine player. We had many special musical times together.

I don’t wonder that I never became a rhythm section player. I can’t imagine being as assertive as some of these good drummers and bassists are. I don’t have the weight in my horn that a drum and a bass and a piano have. They far outweigh me and I can feel trapped by them. So it becomes a period of adjustment.

It’s your style as well. Someone like Michael Brecker can take on a rhythm section.

Yes, exactly. It takes that kind of power to do it. It takes a different sensitivity to do it with my way of playing, I think. Michael Brecker is a great saxophone player. He is very well prepared, but I heard him play an unaccompanied ballad, “Naima,” at Carnegie Hall, and it was great, it got a standing ovation—I stood up too. I’d like to get that record—oh man, there’s so much to listen to!

Who are your favorite drummers?

Paul Motian is fun to play with always. Great time, and very much a listener. Sometimes he would get a little hokey, and start to make a little noise. But I think that was just a need to show off for a minute. He’s a character, but

really a beautiful guy, very loving. He's in his seventies now and he looks like a young man—he is a young man!

You have that negotiation of tempo and intensity with the drummer as well as the bassist.

Yes of course. It's even more offensive when the drummer's not right, because he can make so much noise.

Matt Wilson didn't make one sound that went under the heading of noise, to me. Hitting the snare drum in the wrong place—or the bass drum—can sound so loud and unmusical sometimes.

This is not something that's talked about enough—the touch or the tone that a drummer has. Listeners don't think of the drums as a melody instrument.

Yes. The touch or tone can get unmelodic, but Matt Wilson is just melodic from the first beat on. Paul Motian usually is also, and Joey Baron and Jeff Williams. The great players are playing melodies in their solos—Elvin, Max Roach, Roy Haynes, Shelly Manne . . .

🦋 Interview with George Schuller

Drummer GEORGE SCHULLER, born 1958, is the son of composer and writer Gunther Schuller, and brother of bassist Ed. He studied at New England Conservatory in Boston, working with Jaki Byard, George Garzone, Jerry Bergonzi, and Ran Blake. In 1994 he moved to New York City, where he worked with Joe Lovano, Mose Allison, Fred Hersch, and Dave Douglas, and with his own bands including Orange Then Blue and Schulldogs.

I first played with Lee in a trio in 1992, in the Boston area. He loves the freedom of a small group with bass and drums, and for the past year or so my brother Ed and I have been playing with him. We've done two European tours, and four nights at Birdland, New York, in February [2005]. Lee is very particular about how the bass sounds—acoustic versus amplified—so there was a need to compromise, as Eddie is used to plugging into an amp. There was one amazing gig in Switzerland where there was no amp, so Eddie played acoustically and it was great.

Lee is a really good example of someone who plays in front of and behind the changes without losing the form or time—Joe Lovano is another. Lee and I would often end up performing “The Way You Look Tonight” as a duo, and he would be spot on [in keeping to the thirty-two-

bar structure]. While there would be this sense of dancing around the changes, he would always stick to the form. He has this uncanny ability to displace the beat, and in part the harmony, during these long twisting phrases—which makes it sound like he’s stretching the form, a trait probably due to his association with the Tristano school.

When we first got together, Lee said, “You know, I’d like to play free.” So Eddie and I literally played free—but then we figured out that Lee wasn’t so comfortable with that concept. Perhaps especially when he’s accompanied by drums, I think he feels that he still has to play some kind of a swinging pulse when—usually alone—he begins a tune. When we first started to play with him we would really try to go against that and float freely behind him as if we were David Izenzon and Charles Moffett [with Ornette Coleman]. At one gig in Paris where Eddie and I played “Cherokee” in an extremely fast double-time loose feel, and Lee played in half time over us, it was one of those rare epiphanies. The changes going by at double speed while Lee played in this slow-motion effect really gave the performance a wild, yet cohesive logic. However, Lee was still searching for the comfort zone, so we collectively went back to a steady, more traditional, but loose time feel for the rest of the tour. Maybe he was trying to find his own “threshold of freedom” while staying true to the form and harmony of those standard tunes he loves to play.¹⁸ 🎷

I remember playing with Dave Holland and Ed Blackwell, at Karl Berger’s Woodstock school, and I had the feeling that they were so on top of the beat, that they were pushing me past where I could really relax. So I could never settle in and be comfortable with them. I’ve played with Dave with a different drummer, but those particular two guys gave me that feeling. That’s the way they like to play, and I had to get with them. There wasn’t time for them to adjust to me.

When you say “on top of the beat,” you mean pushing the beat.

Yes. That keeps it very lively, but not easy for me to play with.

So the group could speed up.

That’s the tendency a rhythm section has when they’re trying to swing. It’s been described as a false syncopation, to get the beat way up on the top, to give that kind of friction. Ron Carter and Tony Williams and Herbie Hancock did that a lot with Wayne Shorter, and it’s very effective.

But you like to play behind the beat?

Well, just by definition, for the most part I’m putting the notes together in as spontaneous way as possible, and it’s very hard to do that in sync with that beat. When I play a longer phrase, and get down to the bottom, it’ll slow

down a little bit. That would be okay if I try to land back into the pocket. But sometimes I just hang on by the shirttails for a while. My intention is to play around the middle of the beat.

So an inexperienced rhythm section might slow down.

That would be their way of going with me. And then they would debate it during the intermission, and say, “Wait a minute, that’s not the thing to do.” I don’t care about the tempo slowing down, if it’s still vital in some way. But if the feeling is lost, if it’s like a resignation, then that’s a problem.

It’s not likely to be good, though, if the tempo is slowing down.

It depends. It would generally lose some energy and spirit.

I always respected [bassist] Ray Brown’s kind of solid beat. I was scheduled to play with him in Vicenza, Italy, in 2001. But I just had a feeling he wouldn’t be sympathetic to my playing—I’d never played with Oscar Peterson, for instance, because I felt that he didn’t like me. But still I was looking forward to finally playing with Ray. Unfortunately it didn’t work out well.

He likes “hot” players.

Yes, I’m sure.

You’ve done a lot of duos with pianists. Is that a format you particularly enjoy?

I do enjoy playing in a duet situation. But a bass and drums trio is the best situation for me, because I don’t feel like I have to share the solo space so much, and I can stretch more. It’s difficult hearing the chords while in motion, sometimes.

Again, I’ll try to visualize the situation on stage, with piano, bass, and drums. I’m usually standing with my back to them, which I don’t like. And, since I don’t use a microphone and monitor most of the time, they can’t hear me face to face. Now, I start to play—without a count-off, frequently—and, one by one, they join me . . . such a nice feeling to hear another sympathetic voice—nothing can compare to this process for me.

So, I hear the bass notes, then the piano plays a chord, and I say—in some part of me—“Wow, what was that?” Not enough time to really put a label on it, so I do the best I can to match that sound. Then the drums enter—great to hear! So now I am listening to myself in relation to three other sounds. “What’s the pianist doing now? Interesting, but what can I do to correspond to that nice progression . . . No, that didn’t really work—and what’s that chord? Ah, that was nice! What is the bass doing now, with the drums? How nice—how can I fit that sound?” And it continues in a most fascinating way, sometimes not really adding up to a “complete, well-structured composition”—but the special feeling of doing it as an ensemble, in front of listeners, makes it an extraordinary undertaking, I think.

I don't know the answer to being able, within the standard song format, to function spontaneously with others. In the so-called free format you are more compelled to hear each other and react, and in some ways it's easier. But the same end-product of a good composition is at stake.

If you're playing alone, 100 percent attention is on your creating process, hopefully—when you're in a duo, it's only 50 percent, and 50 percent on the other person, especially if it's a chordal instrument that's so complicated. And my equation goes down to 33.3 percent for a trio, and 25 percent for a quartet. But to get more than a superficial feeling for what the other player is doing, a specific tune-in to the quality of the sounds that he's playing—how do you do it, I ask myself and you? It's almost impossible in motion, and you're supposed to not only hear it, but figure out what the hell it is, and play something that fits it—that's asking an awful lot! That's one of the reasons that I prefer to play without a chordal instrument, but when I do play with it, and the guy is really responding to me, it's an experience that I love. It takes some of the pressure off you, that you could feel in having to deliver a great solo. You're just there in the moment, enjoying.

Last night [in Paris] the piano player was like a Jamey Aebersold record, he was just comping, keeping time—it had little to do with what I was doing. So a couple of times I signaled for him to lay out. I just wanted to play with the bass player because he was listening to me.

So making music in a group is a compromise between focusing on your own line, and hearing what the others are doing.

It's as much a compromise as trying to have a conversation with another person. It's a test of your ability to communicate. In a situation like last night, where the sounds were so unpleasant sometimes, you just want to not even try any more. But it's a gig, and you're obliged to make the best of it. When the guitarist was playing chords, I never had any sensation of them—I couldn't hear them, I wasn't affected by them at all. But in most situations it's possible to speak and be understood to some extent.

I guess the occasions when it doesn't feel like a compromise are when it's inspired.

Yes. That's what we all live for. And it happens more than you'd think.

Do you ever get lost in the changes?

Frequently—especially without a chordal instrument, or if the bass player's really improvising, and not just playing tonics and fifths and whatever. At those times, when I'm cool, I just stop playing, and let him play, and some place he'll give me a clue and I'll come back in. Or else I'll play some and he'll come up to me. I remember playing with a very fine guitar player Ben Monder, and Matt Wilson. I don't know if we decided on tunes ahead of

time, or just went into tunes spontaneously, but when we talked about it afterwards, we discovered that very frequently we were playing two different tunes together—and it felt great! Which underlines my feeling that two good strong lines form a counterpoint. It doesn't matter about the key or the chord progression or whatever, especially if the lines are being affected each by each.

Do you prefer playing with a guitarist to a pianist?

Well it depends who it is. But the guitar sound is a little softer, somehow, kind of easier to relate to. The piano would tend to get more complicated, and if the feeling isn't right, it gets in the way. I played a few years ago at a high school in Cologne with [pianist] Frank Wunsch. [The composer] George Crumb was being celebrated at the school, and we were asked to play a couple of pieces at the concert as a duo. Frank started being very busy, and I said, "Give me some space!" He got angry and put his hands on his lap, and after sixteen bars or so I said, "Not so much space!" And they heard me out in the audience and laughed.

Frank is a fine pianist, and we've had some inspired concerts together. He's famous for the waltzes he composes. I call him "the second Johann Strauss"!¹⁹

There are marvelous pianists out there—Brad Mehldau, Enrico Pieranunzi, Franco D'Andrea, Martial Solal, Barry Harris—and many others that I've enjoyed playing with, especially in a duo format.

Martial Solal is totally unique in his accompanying, always reacting. There's nothing more inspiring to me than to hear someone react to something I just did, and to tell me that he's interested. Maybe he doesn't love it, but he's interested. I will respond *immediately*. Whatever I had in mind, I will go in that direction immediately, because he's talking to me.

The independent kind of comping, I hate that! I can do that with Jamey Aebersold records.

This has a bearing on what you were saying about thinking ahead. If you're responding to another player, the amount of thinking ahead has to be limited.

I'm talking about my playing a phrase, and hearing a chord [from the pianist] in the middle of the phrase, or before the phrase even starts, telling me that this is the sound I have to function on. And I say, "Now wait a minute, let me play the phrase, and react to me now. We take turns. I'll be happy to try to react to your little cluster or whatever, but let me play one now. Or, if you don't like what I'm playing, or don't hear what I'm doing, just cool it for a minute." We say "stroll" when we ask the guy to lay out for a little bit. The same for me, ideally: "Nothing to say, don't play!"

🐉 Interview with Harold Danko

*Pianist HAROLD DANKO worked with Lee Konitz in many varied formats throughout the late 1970s and 1980s. Born in 1947, he graduated from Youngstown State University and performed with the U.S. Army band, then joined Woody Herman. He worked with Chet Baker, Gerry Mulligan, and the Thad Jones–Mel Lewis Orchestra and led his own groups, recording for SteepleChase and Sunnyside labels. The quartet albums he recorded with Konitz, *Ideal Scene* and *The New York Album*, are two of the finest from the saxophonist's later career. He also recorded two duo albums with Konitz, *Wild as Springtime* and *Once upon a Line*. Harold Danko is chair of the Jazz and Contemporary Media Department at Eastman School of Music, Rochester, New York.*

I'd convinced the army that they should release me early, so I could become an apprentice to a woodwind repair man in New York City. That's where I first met Lee, in 1972. I met him again about a year later, when I was working with Chet Baker at Stryker's Pub. Chet had a Tuesday gig, Lee had a Wednesday, and my electric piano was already there, so Lee invited me to play with him. Over time we became a partnership, in a way, touring as a duo, and with pickup rhythm sections. In a duo, I saw my role as supporting and orchestrating Lee's lines, acting as a catalyst, and leaving some space that he could create something with.

Lee used to tape the gig pretty much every night. On the UK tour we did in 1984, we were starting off on a train ride for five hours or so, and Lee was listening to the tape, and quite soon he hands me the earphones and says, "What did you think of your playing last night?" I thought, "Jesus, I have to deal with this on my five-hour train ride!" But it was an honest question, and I knew it had been one of those situations where I was trying to create some heat with a pickup band. Lee explained to me, "I think you were trying to play at an inspirational level of seven, whereas what could have worked with this band was maybe two or three." That was a really wonderful way of analyzing it. The other players were probably sight-reading the music, and possibly felt intimidated by playing with Lee.

When we hooked up with Dave Green and Trevor Tomkins later, that was a nice band. In those situations I was like a musical director. One night I got the drummer to do some accents [in line with the rhythm of] the theme of "Subconscious-Lee," and Lee loved it. He'd never thought of that, because the Tristano thing was that the rhythm section kept time. I

told him that his tunes are wonderful rhythmic vehicles, and to hear Trevor Tomkins and these people join in, I think created a more “contemporary” take, and allowed other compositional aspects to come out.

On those train rides, Lee would talk about how he’d never had a band, and I thought, “This is where I come in!” We evolved a lineup that included Rufus Reid or Lisle Atkinson on bass, and sometimes Marc Johnson, with Al Harewood on drums. The advantage of having a working band is a wider repertoire, and of knowing stuff so you feel, “Now we can really get loose.” I always wanted to hear Lee playing jazz compositions other than standards—the tunes from the sixties by the writers who were emerging, such as Wayne Shorter. Lee loved to look at these tunes in rehearsals, but we’d get to the gig and he’d say he was more comfortable doing “Stella” in a key I didn’t know! It was also my idea to arrange some of his old tunes in new ways, such as “Subconscious-Lee” and “Hi Beck.”

Lee’s wife Tavia was working hard on booking the gigs, but the band stopped eventually because there wasn’t a real three-months-ahead schedule, like there was with Gerry Mulligan or Thad Jones. Other than the New York gigs, there was hardly anything in America. But I’m very proud of what we accomplished. *Ideal Scene* and *New York Album* capture the spirit of that period.²⁰ 🎷

Solo Playing

I don’t do solo concerts too much, but I frequently start a set at a concert with a solo piece. With single-note instruments, we’re supposed to do the whole thing by ourselves before we get together with somebody else. So I am used to that independence.

Do you feel you’re a pioneer of solo saxophone playing? I can only think of Coleman Hawkins, Sonny Rollins, and Eric Dolphy before you—Braxton’s *For Alto* was later, in 1968.

I don’t know about “pioneer,” but I am one of the many people who have tried it in public. If I were a pianist I think I’d enjoy playing solo recitals.

Playing solo must be particularly demanding.

Well it is, actually, when I think about it. But I do not think about it too much—that’s the way I play most of the time when at home.

What made you decide to play a solo blues at the Charlie Parker Memorial Concert in 1965?

That was a tribute to Charlie Parker, and the blues was Bird’s world. There

were many musicians there, and they were coming on and playing short pieces. I had the choice of a good rhythm section, which I would probably spend my five minutes adjusting to, so I thought I'd just enjoy playing at Carnegie Hall all by myself. I remember walking out and looking up at the top balcony, and resolving to direct my sound to it. It was a very exciting experience for me.

Alone, I could stretch the parameters. I love the challenge of playing a twelve-bar blues. But since I can't identify with the original birth of the blues, it is just a twelve-bar form to play something meaningful on.²¹

The Voice

It's very important to me to sing first and then play with the feeling I get from singing. I think it's strange that musicians don't sing!

Your singing is something that's not been much revealed.

That's a pretty private thing! Every once in a while I burst out.

When I was with Claude Thornhill, I asked John LaPorta to write an arrangement for me singing "Don't Worry About That Mule."

You were *singing* with Claude Thornhill?

I tried it and it didn't work! It didn't fit anything, and I wasn't going to be the novelty singer with the band. He had two singers already, legitimate singers. I don't know what I had in mind. It was a strange occurrence—but everything that happened with that band was very strange!

So when you started out in the forties with these dance bands, you sang the occasional vocal?

Yes, I sang some blues—when I was with Jimmy Dale, I sang "Round The Clock Blues" at the Pershing Ballroom. And I also sang a Billie Eckstine number, with that *basso profundo* sound, more or less!

So you thought you might become a crooner.

Well, I liked the idea, and then I realized that I wasn't that special, and it was distracting from my playing.

When someone's learning to improvise, getting them to sing a line is a way of getting them to avoid doing licks or patterns that fall under the fingers.

Being able to sing what's in your heart is the opportunity to use your natural instrument, before translating to another instrument outside of yourself. Singing can be a nonanalytic process of just enjoying producing a musical sound. Then we choose an instrument to make our sound, because, I guess, we admit that we aren't great singers!

Who are your favorite singers?

Billie Holiday was one of the main ones, of course. I like this description by Cassandra Wilson that I found recently: “She would find the center of the note and weave a small tight circle around it, and shape it like no one else could . . . and weave patterns that give rise to colors and overtones and to a clear emotional message.”

I loved Ella [Fitzgerald]. Frank Sinatra was very important to me. He gave a clear reading of the lyrics with a nice swing and a great feeling for the notes and pitch—and he always had a good band playing good arrangements. I’ve read many things about Frank, and hardly any of them spoke about his musical training. All I got really is that he had perfect pitch—he was a natural! I enjoy Jon Hendricks, and Ray Charles, and Sting. I love to hear great opera singers as well—Renée Fleming, Pavarotti, Domingo, Callas.

Do you have a preference for singers who are really improvising? It seems to me there are those who interpret a lyric, like Billie Holiday, which imposes constraints, and there are the real improvisers, like Betty Carter or Ella Fitzgerald.

I just love Billie Holiday for what she was able to do, in terms of improvising the very melody. But it felt like it was pretty fixed with her; she had an interpretation and did it that way. Ella was capable of singing without the words, and did it well. But I have a problem with that usually, because often the melodies the singers choose aren’t as good as the ones played on an instrument. And the choice of scat syllables sometimes sounds kind of cutesy. Betty Carter had a very fine ability, but sometimes she lost me. I never knew exactly what she was doing, making vocalized sounds. Sarah Vaughan could sing like an angel—she should have had a special opera written for her. Sometimes her classical-inspired ability to vibrate, like Billy Eckstine’s, was a bit much, and when she did her “shoobie-doobie”’s it was a drag for me.

Sheila Jordan is a singer who’s a real improviser. She also studied with Tristano, I believe.

Sheila Jordan is a sweetheart. She’s graced us with her thoughtful voice for many years. I know for sure that she and I had Lennie Tristano’s blessings. She can make you cry, and then swing like a swinger. She’s also dedicated to teaching new swingers to swing better!

Over the years we did some things occasionally. She recorded one tune with me and bassist Harvie Swartz, “You Don’t Know What Love Is,” on a record with a whole bunch of other people—she told me later that that was one of her favorite recordings of hers.²² She’s been doing some very creative singing, all through these years. She loves the music, though sometimes she gets a little bit schmaltzy for me.

You've got zero tolerance for schmaltz! You said that listening to Johnny Hodges recently, you found him schmaltzy. You even find your own playing schmaltzy at times!

Something like that, yeah! I detect it first of all in myself.

She wants to use her voice as instrument. You can do that and interpret the lyrics, but it's not easy.

I think she's trying to do both. But she is an improviser, and I admire that very much.

It's very hard for jazz singers, though. You're either trapped by the words in some way, or you scat, which has its own problems.

You're "trapped" if you don't love the message. I've really been thinking a lot about that. The lyrics have to mean something in themselves, and to you. "All The Things You Are" has some great poetry, I think, though many of the fine melodies are trapped in mediocre poetry. But Billie Holiday could sing anything with that sound, and it would still be very expressive.

Have you ever taken singing lessons?

A couple along the way. I just enjoy singing with my records of singers, or Jamey Aebersold records, it's nice to get the music warmed up that way.

You've worked with quite a few singers.

Not really. I worked with Chris Connor, Sheila Jordan, Judy Niemack, and Helen Merrill, and with the Italian singer Tiziana Ghiglioni. One of the nicest situations was when I worked with Barbara Casini. She stretches the time the way the great Brazilians can do. Talk about over the bar line—she was all over the place, and it was swinging!

What did you feel about the singers with Stan Kenton when you worked with him?

I was there when Chris Connor was the singer. She never really pulled my heartstrings. She was good though, with an Anita O'Day kind of hipness. A couple of years ago I heard her and she was very soulful. Aging can help!

One night when I was playing with Kenton at the Blue Note in Chicago, I noticed that Rosemary Clooney was sitting in front of the band, and I thought she looked just great. When I looked at her, she smiled. This happened a couple of times and I started to feel good. Then I turned and realized she was actually smiling at Richie Kamuca, who was sitting next to me! They hung out for some time.

What did you make of June Christy?

I did one tour with her. But somehow these singers never were my favorites. Anita O'Day was never really a great favorite of mine, but she was the start of that whole group of big-band jazz singers, with a feeling to swing.

🦋 Interview with Sheila Jordan

Born in Detroit in 1928, SHEILA JORDAN became a fan of Charlie Parker while at high school, where she got to know Tommy Flanagan, Kenny Burrell, and Barry Harris. She made her way to New York in pursuit of Parker's music, and eventually sat in with him, and married his piano player, Duke Jordan. She studied with Lennie Tristano. As a vocalist, most of her influences have been instrumentalists rather than singers. She was the first singer to release an album for Blue Note (Portrait of Sheila, 1962), and was featured on George Russell's The Outer View, on a ten-minute version of "You Are My Sunshine." By the late 1970s her uncompromising vocal style had become more recognized, and she recorded albums with pianist Steve Kuhn. After working in a duo with Kuhn's bassist, Harvie Swartz, she now works with bassist Cameron Brown. She has taught vocal classes at City College in New York since 1975.

After I record something, I get it ready for production—and then I never want to hear it back again! The track I did with Lee is the only one I've ever recorded where I can listen back and say, "You know, that's not so bad."²³

Bird was my idol. He and Lennie Tristano both told me, "Be yourself." I studied with Lennie for several years—Charlie Mingus took me to him, this was in 1951 or '52, and Max Roach had also told me about him. Mingus admired Tristano very much, but he [Mingus] would get mad at people because of his illness—you never knew whether he was going to love someone or hate them. It just depended on where his head was at that moment. There was just one other singer having lessons from Tristano when I was there. At my first lesson, he asked me to learn this Bird line and I said, "I already know it!" I sang it, so then he said, "How about a Lester Young solo?" I didn't know any, so I had to learn some. It was great for me to find out that what I had been doing from instinct, was the way Lennie started you out. He looked at the structure of the songs and the harmony with the pianists and horn players, but since I didn't play the piano I didn't get into that. Lennie was beautiful with me. I got along with him fine.

On Friday and Saturday nights Lennie used to have sessions in his loft. That's where I first heard Lee. I was just enthralled at the way Lee and Warne Marsh were playing. Lee was so original. He came up when Bird was on the scene, but he never sounded like Bird. He's totally Lee! I hated

that expression *cool player*. I don't find Lee "cool." It makes it sound like he has no emotion, and that's bullshit. The Tristano players were right to resent that because they had their own sound and their own feeling. Lee was a very emotional and fiery player. He was hotter than hell—man, this cat's playing his heart out! And Lennie was the first free player I heard, way before Cecil Taylor.

Lennie and his group were so ahead of their time. That's why Bird loved them so much, but they weren't accepted so readily. A lot of times I wondered, "Are they not accepting them because they're white?" I don't mean the black musicians, but the white audiences. The 1960s and 1970s were the worst time for Lee, as they were for me. Now it's happening for Lee, at this age—he's been waiting a long time. We have to do the music whether the people listen to us or not. You work in these little clubs—I used them as a rehearsal spot. But if you keep doing it, eventually people hear it, I think. It's your dedication to the music.²⁴ ♪

Composition and Improvisation

Although barriers have been coming down, there's still some mutual incomprehension between composers and improvisers. Many classical composers have been critical of the possibilities of improvisation, objecting, for instance, to the way that jazz musicians work on simple structures. Although many jazz players, from Jelly Roll Morton to Anthony Braxton, have used larger structures, Konitz is typical of most improvisers in rarely addressing such possibilities. Here he responds to these criticisms, and expresses his feelings about composition and Western concert music. His own original compositions are discussed in chapter 10, "The Material."

Even classical composers who appreciate jazz, Mark-Anthony Turnage for instance, are still bothered that most jazz players repeat the same simple structure.

I think they're right, it is simple. Paul Bley has been talking about that, repeatedly playing the same AABA progression. I agree. But I haven't come up with a better idea. And I still find it satisfying doing this. Mark [-Anthony Turnage] is doing very interesting things with his music, no question. But I can only assume that what he likes in jazz is a result of its limited, repetitive structure. Thirty-two bars, sixteen bars, twelve bars—classic forms that offer continuing challenges.

In improvising, there's a virtue in having a simple form: you get more freedom that way.

I'm just amazed that these simple forms can lend themselves to such complex music. But all you have to do is listen to Art Tatum, Lennie Tristano, Charlie Parker, Lester Young, John Coltrane . . .

Like you said, or didn't say, to Barry Ulanov in 1948, you need "not four choruses, but a four-chorus statement." A solo can, maybe ought to be, a through-composed, yet improvised, statement that only happens to have a certain number of choruses.

I probably didn't say it in those words, but I agree. Whatever way the process is verbalized, our intention is to end up with a composition.

The criticism from classical people is based on a misunderstanding.

I don't know that it's a misunderstanding. But what does it mean that they criticize the music intellectually? Let them go out and play one chorus on "All The Things You Are" and then they can talk about it. I would love to have heard Beethoven's variations on that song! They're right, it's a simple form compared to a Beethoven symphony, though Ludwig would have appreciated Jerome Kern, I'm pretty sure. But that's the way we function here.

Sometimes jazz players have been frustrated by this. Charlie Parker wanted lessons from avant-garde composer Edgard Varèse. He said, "I only play one line, I want to be taught to compose." But you've found constant sustenance from this material.

I have. I'm also frustrated that I can't play more than one line, and that I can't orchestrate. But I haven't taken the steps to change that, nor did Charlie Parker. Some people are able to divide their interests, and do a lot of different things in the music. Bird, and Warne and me, and many others spend most of their musical time mastering the instrument they play—it's not easy!

In Montepulciano, Italy, I saw how hard these classical people were working at doing the *same* thing over and over again, playing George Crumb's very complicated compositions—he's very special, and makes unbelievably original-looking scores. The performance was very worthwhile. But I could go in my room, with a beautiful view out of the window, up in the mountains, no straight lines in view, fields of different colors and textures slanting this way and that way, and just improvise. I thought, "Wait a minute, this seems kind of naive after listening to that complicated music of George Crumb." But in my later reflection I realized how grateful I am for the geniuses who compose this wonderful orchestral music. I somehow add that new experience to what is real for me and shouldn't compare our

mutual efforts. I felt good that I'd chosen to spend my time improvising, rather than rehearsing some kind of an overture over and over again. But the rule is that since I take those liberties, I have to go as far as I can with it and really compose, and not just try to perfect what I know—an improvisation that really stands up to analysis as a good piece of music.

Classical performances should be spontaneous too.

Well, in April 2005 I played at the Glenn Gould Hall in Toronto. As I listened to a copy of the concert on CD, I was very pleased that it met the standards, pretty well, that he functioned by. Of course Glenn Gould was not a fan of improvised music. But he didn't believe in competitive playing—focusing on the audience and trying to arouse them—or repetitiveness. Every time was supposed to be different, if you can compare a “new” version of a Bach Prelude to a good, fresh variation on a standard pop tune like “Cherokee.”

I believe you did study composition, with Hall Overton.

Briefly, yes. Privately, and then he invited me to audit his classes at Juilliard. I ended up going to all four years of his Literature and Material course. It was very interesting to see how he analyzed scores and talked about the music. Sometimes if he had a hard night before, he would do the same lecture for the first year, second year, third year, fourth year, so I got a good review! But that still didn't get me to orchestrate.

You thought it might get you to compose.

I was hoping that it would stimulate that. I mean, I write every day, but just lines, and little harmonies, not orchestration per se. As much as I'm fascinated listening to classical music—I just got another version of Alban Berg's *Kammerkonzert*—I know how much time it takes to sit down and write. I admire the guys that can do that, certainly. But the horn is my way of being able to communicate.

Hall Overton is known in jazz for his Monk orchestrations.

He was really fond of Monk and did some nice things with Monk's tunes. I think Monk enjoyed hanging with Hall and talking about writing. I thought it great that Hall loved the music and helped a lot of players. He used to have a loft in midtown Manhattan where we went to play. Many of the jazz sessions there have been recorded. He also enjoyed improvising—he was a pianist. But he was especially a very fine classical composer, who left us too early.

Like so many talented people who cannot make a living at their chosen activity, he had to teach to add to the week's wages, and he was a great teacher. Jim Hall and Jimmy Raney studied with Hall, and Stan Getz wanted to.

What are your feelings about so-called Third Stream, which mixed classical and jazz procedures?

The idea was fine, but most of the time Third Stream didn't really work for me. I just spent some time with Gunther Schuller [who advocated that approach], in Cologne. He did a beautiful concert of some small-group pieces that he had written over the years.

It was through the Birth of the Cool that you met him.

Yes, and I learned quickly that this was a very well schooled musician, and a brilliant guy. In the later years I heard some of his music, but I never had done any projects with him. I said once, "Listen, Gunther, if you have a few minutes maybe you could write me a little concerto." And he did this [makes gesture signifying "money"].

He was very attracted to the Tristano context, and very much connected with the so-called avant-garde players, such as Ornette Coleman, encouraging that situation. He was very close to Eric Dolphy. And Miles was asking for technical advice—Gunther was a great French horn player.

I did a piece with the Dutch Metropole Orchestra that Bill Holman wrote for me—that might be called Third Stream of the most effective kind, to me, because he was able seamlessly to move in and out of traditional big-band jazz into Bartók, or whatever.

Are there particular things you've got out of listening to classical composers?

Just contact with beautiful expression. When I heard Bartók in 1949 it thrilled me immediately, because of his logic, and the profound feeling of the music. I'm not very analytic in my listening habits. I was introduced to Bartók's music by a friend who played with Lennie; he gave me a tape of the string quartets, and they're very inspiring. Of all the classical music I've listened to over the years Bartók remains a favorite, but there are many composers that I love. I could make a long list starting with Bach up to Lutoslawski, Dutilleux, John Adams, Mark-Anthony Turnage, Thomas Adès.

You played some Bartók pieces on the album *Peacemeal*.

Marshall Brown, the trombone player, was a very clever guy who wrote some pop hits in the early years, but he was basically playing in Dixieland situations—he had a group with Pee Wee Russell. We got together and planned a recording—I suggested the possibility of doing some of these Bartók pieces that I was noodling on the piano with. And he actually went to [Bartók's son] Peter, who was living on West Fifty-second Street at the time, and asked him if he would approve of that—and there was no question about it. Marshall made some clever arrangements of the pieces, and I had

transcribed one of my favorite Roy Eldridge solos on “Body And Soul,” that he had done with Chu Berry in the early years, and we played that. Dick Katz wrote something nice, and Eddie Gomez and Jack DeJohnette [on bass and drums] were probably asking, “Qu’est-ce que c’est?”

I don’t analyze scores too much. I bought a book on Messiaen a few years back because I’ve been listening a lot to him. I love some of his music very much—his orchestral and organ works are beautiful—but I saw analyses of his rhythms, and I almost closed the book! It was almost bizarrely complicated. Bartók is complicated in a way that I was interested to get into to a degree. I have his scores and I have looked at them, but I haven’t really studied them too much.

I’m just happy that I can listen to that music in a nonintellectual, nonanalytic way. I really listen to most music that way. In terms of jazz solos, analysis is hearing as accurately as possible what’s being played, and being able to reproduce it. I don’t need to look at it and say, “This is a 4th, followed by a 3rd, by a 10th or whatever.” In a regular study situation, a student can make a line to show the shape of the solo—that could be very interesting. But I don’t seem to need to know any more about that.

I just enjoy, very much, being immersed in the sound and activity of a great orchestra playing brilliantly conceived material. I listen to classical music much more than to jazz. I get much more out of listening than I do visually. Looking at great pictures is a special treat, but for me not as meaningful as the great music.

Konitz the Teacher

Konitz has long had an interest in teaching improvisation, and he developed a step-by-step method for learning to improvise, based on embellishing the melody as opposed to creating new lines on the chord changes from the outset. This approach is closely connected with his melodic as opposed to harmonic conception of improvisation.

Teaching is not my main goal—I hope I can teach through my playing. But I do like teaching very much. I still do some workshops on the road—that’s the extent of it and that’s the way I like it. I’m not about to dedicate my life to teaching, unless I’m not able to play anymore. But when I needed to make a living, for a time I tried teaching. I was never really interested in teaching the techniques of the saxophone, instead mostly talking about, and trying, musical ideas—to develop a conception for an improviser. Many accom-

plished players stopped by for a meeting or two, and I tried to point them in what I felt was the right direction.

On the Zen principle of not really stating the secrets, I was not a great teacher, I felt. I wanted to give them all the secrets, and somehow that didn't sit right with me. But I have had some people say that they appreciated the few lessons they took. I feel that my main job is to play well, in person and on recordings. Go directly to the music you love and be inspired by it.

You joined the staff at Temple University, Philadelphia, quite briefly.

I was there not very long, some weeks, maybe a semester—sometime in the eighties. The situation was not right for me, or I for it, apparently. But I was able to communicate with some people. I think I can say that I'm not equipped for a school setting—I prefer being in charge.

Bob Wilber, the clarinetist and saxophonist, was an early student of yours.

He just came by a couple of times; he studied with Lennie also. He was very interested in what we were doing. Obviously he made the decision to stay in the past [playing in a traditional/mainstream style], but he's a marvelous player and writer. That is great music from that period, but quite stylized by now.

The British alto player Bruce Turner was a student too.

He would come over on the *Queen Mary*. I saw him a few times—he was a talented man. I tried to update him a little bit. He was really dedicated business-wise to older music, but he was interested in newer techniques. A nice man—I miss him. That was his identification, as a Dixieland/swing player, and I think he did that music pretty well.

Look at Woody Allen, that's the strangest one. He exercises the freedom that he does making his movies, then goes back to New Orleans music on the clarinet. He can do it, and he's pretty serious about it.

Konitz's step-by-step method begins with the song itself, and progresses incrementally through more sophisticated stages of embellishment, gradually displacing the original theme with an entirely new melodic structure. The emphasis is on melody throughout, as opposed to the traditional concern with harmony, in line with the discussion earlier in this chapter. A good statement of Konitz's method is found in an interview with David Kastin in *Down Beat* (December 1985), from which the following is extracted:²⁵

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.

A Short Lesson from Lee

[At Konitz’s apartment in Cologne, AH sings and plays piano on “There Will Never Be Another You”]

It would be very difficult to follow or develop what you’re doing at that level, starting out at that very high intensity, for ten choruses or whatever you would do.

I do usually try and start it quite simple, with some simple motif. But too often the faster passages are quite mechanical.

Well, it sounds very mechanical. It sounds like you’ve really worked out something to make an effect, and it’s not going to go anyplace. If you want it to go someplace, you have to really simplify quite a bit, I think.

[AH tries again.]

The tempo you’re doing it, it sounds like it’s prearranged. At a slower tempo you have a better chance to really concentrate on the notes.

I would play with the right hand on its own, because you’re setting up an arrangement immediately with the left hand, and that’s I think going to suggest playing what you’re most familiar with.

I guess I’ve played it too often as an arrangement.

You have to approach it like a horn player, as a single line, and then add the left hand in as nonarranged a way as possible.

If you don’t play the left-hand chords, you’ve really got to know the harmony. Probably I’m going to get lost if I don’t play them.

That would determine what level you’re going to improvise at. You have to play simply enough, close enough to the melody to ensure you don’t get lost.

To get intimately aware of the melody is really the first thing.

Very much so, it’s all based on that. The harmony is after the fact. When I’m

working regularly with someone, I deal with the harmony much later in the process—because I'm not that harmonically astute.²⁶ I do it the way I think about it myself, as more a horizontal phenomenon—even on piano. But the fact that you're singing is great; that's our first instrument.

I guess you'd find the singing was mechanical as well.

Yes—it sounds like you've set up a little arrangement, to perform at your bar or wherever.

It was very dangerous, the amount of anticipation of the beat you did. You were playing a chord, and singing a phrase that was on a different chord progression—it was on the verge of being wrong. Though it is effective the way João Gilberto does it.

To sing in as straightforward a way as possible first of all would be desirable. All the variations and embellishments should come after a strong straight-ahead reading of this material. Swinging, but the very literal material has to be very clearly expressed, I think.

The whole secret to me is just the daily investment in going through those routines, hopefully not mechanical ones—so you build faith in the act of inventing new melodies as you caress the keys.