

Lee Konitz



Lee Konitz

Conversations on the Improviser's Art

Andy Hamilton

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[Frontispiece] "Listen" picture, London, 1987 (Courtesy of Caroline
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To the memory of Lennie Tristano (1919–1978)

*That's my way of preparation—to not be prepared.
And that takes a lot of preparation!*

—Lee Konitz

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Author's Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Acknowledgments

I have had outstanding support from the University of Michigan Press. Series editor Lewis Porter deserves a special panegyric for his assistance from the outset on practical as well as scholarly matters. He has helped to make this a much more accurate book, freer of critical clichés; it would have been far inferior without his frequent input and guidance, and invaluable comments and corrections on the penultimate draft. Chris Hebert was a patient and efficient editor who helped to keep the process of production as painless as possible. My thanks also go to the many others who have read the manuscript or offered comments or helped in other ways: Conrad Cork, whose introduction to jazz improvisation *Harmony With LEGO Bricks* first introduced me to Konitz's method; composer and writer Philip Clark; Safford Chamberlain, whose biography of Warne Marsh, *An Unsung Cat*, is inspirational; James Clarke for his translation of Frank Wunsch's words from German; Connie Crothers, for information about Tristano; Richard Cook, for his support as editor of *Jazz Review* and prudent advice on jazz publishing; Jason Gaiger, for his knowledge of the publishing world; Jack Goodwin, a tireless scholar of the Cool School who has answered many detailed questions; Tony Herrington and Rob Young of *The Wire* for suggesting and running my first interview with Lee; writers Bill Kirchner, Marcello Piras, and Brian Priestley for their lengthy scholarly comments on the manuscript under pressure of time; Mark Levinson, for his photo of Konitz with Tristano; writer Brian Marley, for his stylistic advice and very bad title suggestions; Dan Morgenstern and Tad Hershorn of the Rutgers Institute of Jazz Studies, for photographs and information; Evan Parker, for his comments and encouragement; Enrico Pieranunzi, for insisting that I organize the material more clearly; Ros Rigby of the Sage Gateshead, and Paul Bream,

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Finally, I am greatly indebted for discussions about Konitz's music with musicians who have worked with him, and above all, to Joe Lovano for his foreword. I apologize to those musicians who have worked with Konitz but whom I was unable to contact for a contribution—either because I did not know how to get in touch, or due to pressure of time and space. I could have assembled a further cast as articulate and informative as the one assembled here. In particular, I am sorry that I could not conduct or—for space reasons—include interviews with Geri Allen, Derek Bailey, Chick Corea, Connie Crothers, Don Ferrara, Charlie Haden, Bengt Hallberg, Jim Hall, Peter Ind, Charles Lloyd, Jackie McLean, Brad Mehldau, Bob Mover, Billy Taylor, Clark Terry, and Mark Turner. Last but not least, of course, I must thank Lee Konitz for his patient responses to my incessant questioning, his interest and commitment in pursuing philosophical questions about his art, his

hard work in checking the various drafts of the manuscript, and of course his musical inspiration. I am grateful to the editors of *The Wire* and *Jazz Review* for their permission to quote extensively from material that has appeared in their publications. While every attempt has been made to contact relevant copyright-holders, any omissions are regretted and anyone affected is invited to contact the University of Michigan Press.

—Andy Hamilton

Foreword

Andy Hamilton and Lee Konitz have put together an extraordinary retrospective with interviews and commentary on the life of one of jazz music's most beloved and individual voices. Lee Konitz has contributed to the development of this music's life cycles from his emergence onto the scene in the 1940s to the explorations of today. Lee has always tried to be the most creative and spontaneous of improvisers, and has influenced all of us in the most positive way with his passionate and free-flowing approach to standard songs as well as more exploratory forms. In this collection of conversations, Lee gives insightful accounts and critiques of mentors and colleagues. He discusses his early family life growing up in Chicago, meeting, studying, and playing with Lennie Tristano, moving to New York, working with Miles Davis and contributing to the influential recording *Birth of the Cool* with Gil Evans, John Lewis, and Gerry Mulligan, joining Stan Kenton, as well as his associations with Lester Young, Charlie Parker, Warne Marsh, Charles Mingus, and other major musicians.

We come to discover why he plays the way he does, and what has driven him through the years in the world of music. Lee has led a full life as an innovative improviser in the international spotlight, and he is well-respected and revered around the world by musicians and fans. He has taught generations of musicians he's worked with through the years, just being himself and giving all he can with generosity and love. As an alto saxophonist he's developed his own sound and approach, different from Charlie Parker's. I am truly honored to know him and feel blessed to have him as a teacher, mentor, and friend. After my early listening to his records, I've had the great fortune to experience at first hand—or should I say first ear—his sound, feeling, and ideas on many occasions since the mid-1970s, when I moved to New York City. To be in a room with his sound is an inspiration, but to follow his lines on the tune he's exploring taught me so much about how to try and put it all together for myself. Your playing develops from everything you embrace, and Lee's clarity and subtleties, which come through on every phrase, gave me some beautiful things to reach for.

In 1991, Lee joined Charlie Haden, Bill Frisell, Paul Motian, and myself for a quintet session entitled *Paul Motian on Broadway, Volume III* (JMT

Records). This was the first time Lee and I actually played together, sharing melodies and improvising collectively throughout the recording. It is one of the most creative sessions of standard songs I've been a part of, and I am very proud of its success. Some years later, in the mid-1990s, the group did a three-week European festival tour with Marc Johnson on bass instead of Charlie. It was great to travel and play with Paul and Lee on this tour, given their long crazy history together that went back to the Lennie Tristano days in the 1950s—I think it was the first time they toured together. It was fun and challenging to play with these different personalities night after night, at such a high level of musicianship. The magic in jazz is all about communication and sharing ideas spontaneously within an ensemble—when it's happening, there's nothing like it in music! We had some incredible moments during that tour, and I learned a lot about who I am and what I'm trying to do in music and on my horn. Lee's love and dedication have driven his career, and given all of us who know him the confidence to create our own space in this amazing world of music we live in.

Enjoy meeting Lee Konitz in this book on a personal level, as honest and alive as his music.

Sounds and feelings,
Joe Lovano

Prologue

I'm writing this after a trip to Vienna, and while I was there I had the opportunity to hear an Austrian tenor player, fifteen years old, who really played the instrument very well, and wowed the audience with his expertise. And a few days ago I heard an Italian alto player of the same age who was really unbelievably accomplished, instrumentally and musically—and he really got the audience shouting approval. When I was fifteen years old I was playing, but no one had really inspired me like these two guys have obviously been inspired. These two talented people were not aware, as yet, of a true musical statement, without the sensationalism—something they will learn, we hope.

I got my inspiration from Lennie Tristano, and also Lester Young and Charlie Parker. Tristano demonstrated for me a way to play that went deeper than virtuoso musicality—as John Updike wrote, “Virtuosity can seem a distraction—as when you find that you are thinking about how great the musician is instead of listening to the music.” I never wowed an audience in my whole life like those two young players did, so I can't help but feel I missed something. But in a more modest way I've been able to continue playing, in private and in public, with occasional comments from people after a concert telling me they like the way I played through the years. So I am grateful to find a place in the improvising neighborhood, and can only wish those two virtuosos a good and real musical life.

Mike Zwerin, who writes a column for the *Herald Tribune* every couple of weeks, just wrote a great piece headlined “Murdering the silence with bad music”—a quote from Joseph Conrad. While in Vienna, I went to the cemetery and saw Beethoven's tomb, next to Schubert's, next to Brahms's, in a small area. They replaced the silence with beautiful music. Jazz is often too concerned with exhibitionism and emoting nonstop, but there have been many beautiful players. Coleman Hawkins's “Body and Soul”; Lester Young's “Lady Be Good” with Basie; Charlie Parker's “Don't Blame Me”; Warne Marsh with Paul Chambers and Paul Motian, four beautiful trio tunes on Atlantic Records; Wayne Shorter at the Plugged Nickel with Miles—and many others . . . Keith Jarrett, Brad Mehldau, Chick Corea, Bill

Evans, Lennie Tristano, and so on. That's the tradition and the intention that hopefully will get to these young players.

I would like to say how much I appreciate working on this project with Andy Hamilton. Left to my own efforts, I would not have written it down, or up! Andy, with great interest and patience, was willing to meet with me a number of times with lists of questions. For instance, we spent a few days together as adjudicators at a big band contest for arrangers in Barga in Italy, and had a few opportunities for discussion.

I also want to thank all my musical colleagues for their great words, in the short interviews Andy did.

Gradually over many months and years, Andy organized the material. I read it, and changed many things, and added much. The last step, after reading, and deleting, and adding; and rereading, and redeleting and re-adding (a few more times) is to get the book published and released. I welcome the opportunity to go public with this musical part of my life, for the people who like my playing. I hope they appreciate the music a little more after getting a look behind the scene—we hope that there are a few insightful moments ahead!

With appreciation for your support,
Lee Konitz

Brief Biography of Lee Konitz

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

Konitz was born on October 13, 1927, in Chicago, of Austrian/Russian Jewish parents. At the age of eleven he picked up his first instrument, the clarinet, on which he received classical lessons before switching to tenor and then alto saxophone. In 1943 he met the decisive personal and musical influence of his life, the blind teacher and pianist Lennie Tristano. He joined Claude Thornhill's orchestra (1947–48) and made his first recordings with them. The band, which employed Gil Evans as arranger, was an important precursor of Miles Davis's Nonet, later known as the Birth of the Cool band (1948–50), which Konitz went on to join. It is the latter association for which he remains best known, and he is generally regarded, with Tristano and Miles Davis, as one of the architects of the "cool" style in modern jazz.

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

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

An excellent example of Konitz's early style is the solo on the 1949 recording of "Subconscious-Lee" with Tristano—an original Konitz line on the chord changes to "What Is This Thing Called Love?" Tristano often had his students write original lines over standards, but the education also included experiments in free jazz. As leader, Konitz recorded with Warne Marsh (1949), and he worked with the Lennie Tristano quartet (1954–55), recording at the Sing Song Room of the Confucius Restaurant in New York. A period in Stan Kenton's band, 1952–53, extended his experience and range of playing contexts, and periodically he has returned to larger ensembles. But his most original and challenging work has been in smaller groups where improvisational freedom can be given full rein. Konitz is the spontaneous improviser par excellence, constantly finding inspiration in the Tin Pan Alley songs, later known as "standards," that since the 1920s have continued to attract jazz musicians. Throughout his career Konitz has composed, often but not always on the chords of standards.

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

For much of the time since the mid-1960s, Konitz has lived and worked in Europe; he also became popular in Japan. He recorded in Germany with Attila Zoller and Albert Mangelsdorff (1968), and in Italy with Martial Solal (1968) and Enrico Rava (1968). He can be heard on *Mingus at Town Hall* (1972). He recorded with Dave Brubeck and Anthony Braxton, with Andrew Hill, and with Warne Marsh and Bill Evans (1977). He devoted an album to the tenor (1977), played with Paul Bley, and appeared in Europe with Shelly Manne. He rejoined Charles Mingus, with whom he had worked

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