Lee Morgan: Completing the Lighthouse

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By David R. Adler

ALBUM: **Lee Morgan, *The Complete Live at the Lighthouse* (Blue Note)**

The Lighthouse Cafe in Hermosa Beach, California, still in existence, practically rivals New York's Village Vanguard in terms of historic live jazz albums to have issued from its bandstand. Elton Jones, Gene Green, Cannonball Adderley, Joe Henderson, the Modern Jazz Quartet and Art Blakey & The Jazz Messengers (Bertram Zadi, featuring Keith Jarrett) have put a few of the artists who the Lighthouse booking in their discographies. Now that legacy has deepened with the release of *The Complete Live at the Lighthouse*, a live concert by **Lee Morgan** with Bobby Hutcherson on vibraphone and a rhythm section of John Coltrane and Bill Evans at the Vanguard, or Miles Davis at the Blackhawk and the Plugged Nickel.

The original Lee Morgan entry was a very double LP called *Live at the Lighthouse*, which Blue Note released in 1970 with a couple of tracks left off and released that long-awaited "complete" version of the *Lighthouse* halfsome to eight CDs or a LP, with numerous previously unreleased performances from Mr. Morgan's quintet featuring trusty **Bennie Maupin** (his sole surviving band member), pianist Harold Mabern, bassist Jamie Merritt and drummer Mickey Roker. Jack DeJohnette, then drummer with Miles Davis' electric band, sits in on Mr. Morgan's "Speedball" — a bogie blues, usually a short theme to end the set, but here lasting nearly 17 minutes and including a firecracker round of trading fours. (That night happened to be Mr. Morgan's 37th birthday.)

Veteran producer Michael Cuscuna, one of many contributors to the new 10-page booklet, observes that *Live at the Lighthouse* was Mr. Morgan's first release since "The Sidewinder" (Blue Note, 1963) to feature a single short bit, co-edited in Kurtis Collins' cover documentary *I Called Him Morgan*. In the film we learn that the two-week Lighthouse stint, right on the heels of two weeks in San Francisco, was a respite for Mr. Morgan and a creative luxury, a chance to practice by day, unleash it all at night and still have time to relax with his kin in the California sand. The music reflects that energy. It is the visceral and freewheeling sound of a band with full permission to stretch out: the original double LP included only four songs, with tracks ranging from 6 to 32 minutes each. On the complete set there are more performances of comparable length. Thankfully the engineer Dino Lappas (who died in 2019) was there to capture the entirety of the lunch-hour three nights (July 1971, 1972, 1973). Mr. Morgan died not so long after, on February 19, 1972, at age 33.

There are continuities worth noting between this live material and Mr. Morgan's studio work of the time, at least with the personnel. Maupin, succeeding George Coleman, played on Mr. Morgan's mid-tempo *Caramba!* and on *Zara*, recorded several months earlier but shelved until later. On *The Last Session*, recorded in September 1971 and released months after Mr. Morgan's death, Mabern and Roker appear in a larger ensemble context with four horns. *The Complete Live at the Lighthouse* provides a closer look at the working relationships of these players, bonding as they did for four sets per night, never letting up.

As Lee Morgan biographer Jeffrey S. McMillan writes in the booklet, the quintet's repertoire was a mélange of material recent and rebadged (earlier Blue Note hits, some of Mr. Morgan's tunes and a few standards, including "The Sidewinder," which appears only once in the set, instead). Mr. Morgan looked to compositions by Mabern ("The Beehive," "Run," "I Remember Britt"), Merritt ("Deceptacon" and "Nomos," the latter a 18 workout previously heard on Max Roach's *Drum Conversation*) and especially Maupin ("Something Like This," "#16 East 10th Street," "Neophilia," "Tuesday," the Wayne Shorter-repeat "Pyramid").

...The Complete Live at the Lighthouse pays suitably hefty homage to one of jazz's greatest figures, by showing how much information he can still impart.

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There tones offered Mr. Morgan fresh, less familiar structures for extended improvisation. Maupin broadened his tone palette with bass clarinet ("Neophilia") and flute ("I Remember Britt") as well as tenor saxophone. Mabern, Merritt and Roker supported Coltrane or Pharoah Sanders. Mr. Morgan switched flugelhorn alongside trumpet. Merritt played an Ampeg electric upright bass, in one photo he's seen sitting down, shaping the instrument to the talk-about like a bass guitar.

Lee Edward Morgan in performance at Concertgebouw Amsterdam with Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers (1959) – Herbert Behrens / Anefo – National Archief

Just months before these recordings were made, Miles Davis released *Bitches Brew*, featuring Maupin among many others. After the Lighthouse Maupin left Mr. Morgan and, taking the freelist name Merle, joined Herbie Hancock's Fender Rhodes-heavy *Mwandishi* sextet. Mr. Morgan, meanwhile, continued to explore jazz-rock instrumentation from up to some extent in Mr. Morgan's Lighthouse repertoire. Mabern plays acoustic piano, however, with a strongly Tower-esque tenor. Merritt and Roker, Mr. Morgan's Philadelphia compatriots, invest the rhythm section with a feeling of solid straightahead swing, bellowing the jazz prodigious of their great city.

Whether he's playing through changes or pecking upon brooding modal vamps and slow simmering grooves, Mr. Morgan shines with his customary lyrical brilliance and rhythmic acuity. Listeners can jump around or follow the narrative straight through, discovering little things like the trompette's fondness for quoting "Element Right" in various contexts. It's bittersweet, of course, listening to his spoken notes on the microphone. "Are we gettin' in the bomb?" Mr. Morgan asks the audience, referring to the Lighthouse's liquor-by-the-glass policy. Yes, he's gettin' in pretty. Now we can listen back in full, as we send appreciation from trumpeters Nicholas Payton, Dave Douglas, Eddie Henderson, James Branch, Charles Tolliver, David Weiss (the set's coproducer) and the late Wallace Roney (not to mention interviews with Merritt and Maupin).

Mr. Adler

David R. Adler wrote this Jazz Artistry New REVIEW article. He also work's regularly for Jazz Times, The Wall Street Journal, Downbeat, Jazz Times, Jazz Times, Record, The Philadelphia Inquirer, Philadelphia Weekly, DownBeat, Texas Chat New York City, New Yorker, The New York Times, The New Republic, Slate, The Forward, The Southern Review, Fairmount Magazine (Canada) L.a. Propaccord Odisseo, GEO (Germany), New Music Box, All Music Guide, Global Rhythm, Signal to Noise, Coda, Jewish Currents and more. He is happy to be a contributor to Jazz Artistry Now (JAN).

At Bimbo's & The Jazz Messengers, Blue Note, Cannonball Adderley, David R. Adler, Elton Jones, Grant Green, Joe Henderson, Lee Morgan, The Complete Live at the Lighthouse from trumpeter Lee Morgan, the Modern Jazz Quartet

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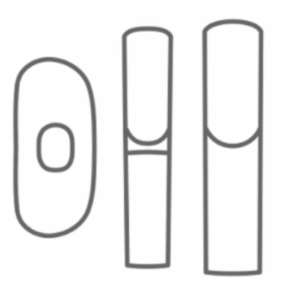

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