Lee Konitz, Alto Saxophonist Who Exemplified Jazz's Imperative to Make It New, Is Dead at 92

By DAVID R. ADLER • APR 15, 2020

Twitter
Facebook
Google+
Email

Lee Konitz at the BIMHUIS in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, July 13, 1981.

FRANS SCHELLEKENS/REDFERNS / GETTY IMAGES

Lee Konitz, an exemplar of modern jazz improvisation, and arguably the most influential alto saxophone soloist after bebop progenitor Charlie Parker, died on Wednesday at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York. He was 92.

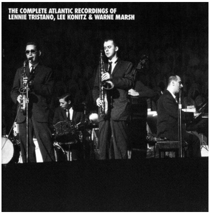
His son, Josh Konitz, said the cause was pneumonia, related to COVID-19.

Konitz was one of the last jazz musicians of his era still in active circulation: his career has hummed along, apparently impervious to popular trends or external pressure, for the last 75 years. A sound as individual as his can't be reduced to a buzzword, but he was commonly associated with the "cool" school in jazz. He embodied the idea, as he once put it, that "it's possible to get the maximum intensity in your playing and still relax."

NJARTS.NET
ALL ARTS, ALL JERSEY

His first major exposure came in 1947, in an impressionistic big band led by Claude Thornhill; he can be heard soloing with striking promise and originality on Gil Evans' arrangements of "Yardbird Suite" and other Charlie Parker themes. Through his association with Evans, he was part of the coterie involved in Miles Davis' historic *Birth of the Cool* sessions in 1949. His playing on the eerie coda of "Moon Dreams" remains one of that album's most unconventional moments.

But Konitz's pivotal association, from 1943 intermittently until 1964, was with the blind pianist and teacher Lennie Tristano, creator of an enigmatic, almost cult-like offshoot of bebop known as the Tristano School.


THE COMPLETE ATLANTIC RECORDINGS OF
LENNIE TRISTANO, LEE KONITZ & WARNE MARSH

Doggedly advocating a theory of improvisation that eschewed all predetermined licks and patterns, Tristano taught his disciples — Konitz and tenor saxophonist Warne Marsh chief among them — to focus on intuitive melodic shapes and rhythmic displacement within the steady 4/4 beat. Though the Tristano school ultimately proved too insular and constricting for Konitz, he remained devoted to many aspects of Tristano's philosophy throughout his career.

Tristano did not approve of Konitz playing with a range of musicians in ever-changing settings, but for the alto saxophonist, this became a central mission. His hunger for musical conversation led him to amass one of the largest discographies in all of jazz (very much unlike Tristano).

But save for a few short periods, and despite remaining prolific well into old age, Konitz didn't lead a steady working group. He simply played with everyone. Remarking on a younger musician he admired, one with a well-rehearsed band and an ever-growing book of music, Konitz once said: "Bravo. I don't seem to need that in my life."

Lee Konitz with Dan Tepfer at The Jazz Gallery in New York, 2017.

CREDIT JONATHAN CHIMENE / WBGO

He often played in duos or trios, or alone: on *Lone-Lee* (1974), probably the most intimate document of his sound that exists, he plays "The Song Is You" unaccompanied for nearly 40 minutes, and then "Cherokee" for nearly 20. He sought meaning and human connection from every encounter; ego was not a factor. "A good solo doesn't care who plays it," he once said.

His ethic as a wanderer and committed listener had a major impact on the younger musicians he sought out. "I always think of Lee as a Zen master," Dan Tepfer, a pianist and frequent Konitz duo partner, said in a 2012 interview. "There's nothing keeping [him] from responding to what's actually going on in the moment."

Tenor saxophonist Mark Turner once referred to Konitz's "jarring rhythmic sense," in an interview with Ted Panken for *DownBeat*. "Phrases are never in groups of two or four or eight beats or notes," Turner added, "but in sevens or nines or fives or sixes. His lines are also very involved, long, connected, extremely lyrical."

Lee Konitz performing at the 2014 Newport Jazz Festival.

CREDIT JONATHAN CHIMENE / WBGO

Particularly in his later years, Konitz preferred to play standards — and well-worn ones at that, such as “Stella By Starlight” and “I’ll Remember April.” In the liner notes to his 1957 Atlantic release *The Real Lee Konitz*, he wrote: “I feel that in improvisation, the tune should serve as a vehicle for musical variations…. For this reason I have never been concerned with finding new tunes to play. I often feel that I could play and record the same tunes over and over and still come up with fresh variations.”

Still, he addressed a wide body of original music over the years. *An Image: Lee Konitz with Strings* (1958) finds him playing ambitious, Third Stream-type compositions by Bill Russo. Other examples include a deliciously odd 1977 trio encounter with pianist Paul Bley and guitarist Bill Connors called *Pyramid*; trumpeter Kenny Wheeler’s 1997 album *Angel Song*; and a series of refined collaborations with saxophonist and composer Ohad Talmor from the mid-2000s on, the most recent of which, *Old Songs New*, was released last fall.

Konitz himself composed relatively little, and what he did write, following the practice of Parker and Tristano, were mostly contrafacts — melodies based on existing chord changes. His best-known piece, “Subconscious-Lee,” was based on Cole Porter’s “What Is This Thing Called Love.” (Here is televised footage of Konitz and Marsh performing the song in 1958, with partners including Billy Taylor on piano and Mundell Lowe on guitar.)

Subconscious-Lee - Warne Marsh and ...
Watch later
Share

Another Konitz standard, “Thingin’,” is based on “All the Things You Are.” “Dream Stepper” was a line on “You Stepped Out of a Dream.” “No Splice” came from “You’d Be So Nice to Come Home To.” And “Palo Alto” was derived from the Gershwins’ “Strike Up the Band.”

The many song and album titles that pun on Konitz’s name (“Sound-Lee,” “Knowinglee,” “Lovelee,” “Unleemited,” “Ice Cream Konitz,” Warne Marsh’s “Bop Goes the Leesel”) suggest a whimsical character. And indeed Konitz’s had a pronounced comic side. But he could also be sharply critical, a curmudgeon.

“His total honesty and integrity goes with high critical standards, and he is not interested in a mollifying niceness,” wrote Andy Hamilton in his 2007 book *Lee Konitz: Conversations on the Improviser’s Art*. And yet he was, Hamilton adds, “a warm, gentle, and artistically vulnerable soul.”

Leon Lee Konitz was born to Jewish immigrant parents in Chicago on October 13, 1927. He was the youngest of three brothers. His father, Abraham, from Austria, ran a laundromat (the family lived in the back). His mother, Anna, was from Russia. His parents spoke Yiddish at home and were not religiously strict, nor musically aware, though they were supportive when Lee picked up a clarinet at 11, after hearing Benny Goodman. (He soon came to prefer Artie Shaw.)

After a period of classical training with Lou Honig (who also taught saxophonists Johnny Griffin and Eddie Harris), Konitz switched to tenor saxophone at 12 and studied with Santy Runyon. He took up the alto for a gig, and discovered that it reflected his true voice. Still, his tenor playing graced numerous recordings, most significantly the stunning *Tenorlee* (1978), with pianist Jimmy Rowles and bassist Michael Moore. His elegant and personal soprano saxophone voice is abundantly documented as well.

Konitz was a great admirer, but never an imitator, of Parker. His influences reached farther back. He fell in love with and memorized Lester Young's solos from Count Basie's Old Testament period of the late 1930s. His enduring love for that music, and its role in shaping his aesthetic, was the focus of an interview with pianist Ethan Iverson in 2009.

Konitz also absorbed Johnny Hodges, Roy Eldridge, Willie Smith, Scoops Carry and more. He deeply appreciated Louis Armstrong: "Struttin' with Some Barbecue" from Armstrong's Hot Fives was long in his repertoire, with the trumpet solo played note-for-note on alto. Konitz also cited Benny Carter's 1940 solo on "I Can't Believe that You're in Love with Me" (with the Chocolate Dandies) as a major influence. (He plays the song on *Konitz Meets Mulligan*, from 1953; the same chords underlie Tristano's "Two Not One," which appears on the 1955 classic *Lee Konitz with Warne Marsh*.)

Beginning in 1945, Konitz got his first serious gigs with Jerry Wald, Lloyd Lifton and Teddy Powell. He became immersed in his studies with Tristano; left home at 20 to play with Thornhill; and was soon in the thick of *Birth of the Cool* in New York. He headed west in 1952 to play with bandleader Stan Kenton, on *New Concepts of Artistry in Rhythm* and other releases. He expressed particular pride in his solo on the up-tempo Bill Holman composition "In Lighter Vein."

Konitz began to flourish as a leader in the mid '50s, with albums like *In Harvard Square*, *Inside Hi-Fi*, *Very Cool* and *Tranquility*. His 1959 outing *Lee Konitz Meets Jimmy Giuffre*, and the follow-up *You and Lee*, prefigured the expanded ensemble sound he would pursue with his '70s nonet, which recorded four fine albums including *Yes, Yes Nonet* (1979).

The 1961 trio release *Motion*, with bassist Sonny Dallas and drummer Elvin Jones, remains a touchstone, mapping the road forward for his oblique approach to standard tunes. He had an avant-garde side as well: having joined Tristano's 1949 group in venturing what are considered the first two free improvisations on record, "Intuition" and "Digression," he went on to work with the likes of guitarist Derek Bailey, pianist Andrew Hill and vibraphonist Karl Berger. Konitz did not erect boundaries, and was comfortable in a number of experimental settings.

On *The Lee Konitz Duets* (1968), with tenor saxophonist Joe Henderson, guitarist Jim Hall and an array of others, Konitz took to what would become perhaps his favorite format of all. He went on to make duo albums with many partners, including Tepfer and other pianists of high distinction, like Martial Solal, Michel Petrucciani, Kenny Werner and Gary Versace. And his two-volume 1980 duo outing with Gil Evans, *Heroes* and *Anti-Heroes*, is worth seeking out for the Mingus interpretations alone.

Lee Konitz with Brad Mehldau at Town Hall, on a memorial service for Charlie Haden in 2015.

CREDIT JONATHAN CHIMENE / WBGO

Konitz's many other notable performances on record include a pair of trio dates at the Jazz Bakery in the mid-1990s, with bassist Charlie Haden and pianist Brad Mehldau; they appear on Konitz's only albums for Blue Note, *Alone Together* and *Another Shade of Blue.* Konitz, Haden and Meldau reunited, adding drummer Paul Motian, for *Live at Birdland*, recorded in 2009 and released on ECM the following year.

Along with his son Josh, Konitz is survived by another son, Paul; three daughters, Rebecca, Stephanie and Karen; three nephews and a great-niece; three grandchildren; and one great-grandchild.

The National Endowment for the Arts named Konitz an NEA Jazz Master in 2009. Just over a decade later, he performed at the induction ceremony with Tepfer — playing an old standby, "All the Things You Are," and interspersing his alto saxophone with a scat improvisation, as he had been known to do in recent years.

ARTS
Lee Konitz Performs at the 2017 NEA J...
Watch later
Share
Watch on YouTube

In a 1985 article in *DownBeat*, Konitz outlined a system of 10 layers, or "gradients," of improvised melodic development that one could attempt on a standard tune. The last three of these were:

8) Still a subtle reference to the original song

9) Totally new theme

10) An act of pure inspiration

The gradients now reach to infinity. The act of pure inspiration was Konitz's life itself, never to be repeated or forgotten.

Additional reporting by Nate Chinen, with thanks to Dan Tepfer

TAGS: LEE KONITZ RIP CORONAVIRUS

Twitter Facebook Google+ Email

4 Comments WBGO Disqus' Privacy Policy 1 Login

Recommend 7 Tweet Share Sort by Best

Join the discussion…

LOG IN WITH

OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS ?

Name

Want more like this?

Subscribe to WBGO's Jazz-E-News and get the latest from WBGO right to your inbox: unique content, exclusive events, member discounts and more. Emails arrive every other Wednesday.

Enter email address Subscribe Hide this message

greg · 8 months ago · edited

It's possible to write a mediocre essay about a great subject or a great essay about a mediocre subject, but David R. Adler's memorial tribute to the life and artistry of saxophonist Lee Konitz achieved something rare: A great essay about a great subject. Bravo.

7 ^ | ˅ · Reply · Share ›

rca_VICTOR · 8 months ago

Excellent summation, of one of the last of the last of that monstrous, defining era. Mr. Konitz had a life thoroughly lived, unlike many others. Incredible jazz legacy, that most Americans need to know more about it. RIP Mr. Konitz.
Thank you WBGO for maintaining this flame that is jazz.

4 ^ | ˅ · Reply · Share ›

paul blartenblerger · 8 months ago · edited

rest in peace to an incredible player.

4 ^ | ˅ · Reply · Share ›

Hana Dolgin · 8 months ago

I am so sad, I took lessons with Lee in the early 90s and became friendly with him. He was a very unique person, and the article describes him well, his sensitivity and at times, his harsh criticism. He had a most amazingly beautiful sound and being close to him when he played it was an experience I can't forget.

3 ^ | ˅ · Reply · Share ›

Subscribe Add Disqus to your site Do Not Sell My Data DISQUS

RELATED CONTENT

In Praise of Lee Konitz's Ageless Search: A Conversation About 'Frascalalto,' From 2017

By NATE CHINEN • FEB 7, 2017

JOHN ABBOTT

In honor of alto saxophonist Lee Konitz, who died this week at 92, here is an article from 2017, when he was releasing a new album with an all-star rhythm team.

____

"The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes." Marcel Proust couldn't have been thinking about the chord changes to "Cherokee" when he first articulated this idea, writing in France a century ago.

But his point feels perfectly suited to the example of alto saxophonist Lee Konitz, who at 89 is still extracting fresh insight from familiar places, as he proves on an effervescent new album, *Frescalalto*.

The album — out in digital formats on Impulse! — features Konitz with a sterling rhythm section spearheaded by his fellow NEA Jazz Master, pianist Kenny Barron. On bass and drums respectively are Peter Washington and Kenny Washington, best known for their service in the longstanding Bill Charlap Trio. And to say that Konitz sounds right at home with this band is both an understatement and a bit off the mark. He sounds more like someone getting comfortable behind the wheel of a luxury sedan, along a winding but familiar country road.

Take Five: New Music by Lee Konitz and Dan Tepfer, and the Jazz Beat Behind Mister

Rogers

By NATE CHINEN • JUL 8, 2018

JOSH GOLEMAN

© 2020 WBGO