

The Saxophone: New Jazz King?

By DON HECKMAN

THE first instrument to send the clarion call of jazz out to the world was the trumpet—its powerful, brassy persuasiveness a dominant voice from the time of the legendary Buddy Bolden in the 1890's to the twenties' solo flights of Louis Armstrong. More recently, the saxophones, of all shapes and sizes, have moved to the cutting edge of the jazz adventure. Lacking a history, lacking a "legitimate" reference point, lacking, in short, any genuine identification with European music, they are perhaps the perfect instruments for the genuinely personal talents of jazz players, since they can be so readily shaped to the goals of individual invention.

Consider the list of saxophonists that runs from Johnny Hodges, Coleman Hawkins and Lester Young to Charlie Parker, Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman and the young players of the sixties and seventies. Not only does it represent many of the major names of four decades, but it also chronicles—with obvious exceptions such as Thelonious Monk, Miles Davis, etc.—the stylistic trend-setters for the period.

The bebop and post-bebop styles have had a particularly persistent impact. In a group of jazz recordings released in the last month or so that feature saxophonists, the most noticeable element is the presence of the shade of Charlie Parker. Sonny Stitt, a Parker contemporary, has played both alto and tenor saxophones with an uncanny resemblance to Parker for some 30 years now. Stitt has suggested that he arrived at his style independent of any knowledge of Parker. So be it, if that's what the man says, and the style is rich enough, in any case, to easily sustain the work of both musicians.

In a new recording, Sonny Stitt: *Tune-Up!* (Cobblestone 9013), Stitt slashes his way through a collection of pieces strongly identified with Parker and the bebop era. Given a lesser skill, Stitt might have foundered on the shores of memory, but backed by a superb rhythm section that includes the much underrated Barry Harris on piano, Sam Jones on bass and Alan Dawson on drums, old warrior Stitt revives not just the spirit of bebop but its energetic vitality as well. He sounds a bit better on tenor these days than he does on alto, and his improvisations on "Tune-Up" and "I Got Rhythm," in particular, are virtual models of what superb bop tenor playing was—and is.

Blues singer Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson has been better known for his firm, tradition-rich vocals than his

saxophone playing, but he too, despite a certain modesty in his technical prowess, follows the Parker line with considerable authenticity. A recording made at last year's Montreux Jazz Festival, *You Can't Make Love Alone* (Mega M31-1012), provides a rare opportunity to hear Vinson in action. The most unusual track is a rhythm & blues version of Thelonious Monk's driving blues "Straight, No Chaser." Vinson's improvisation has little to do with Monk's disjunct melodic accents but it is pleasantly appealing, nonetheless, and filled with little references to classic Charlie Parker licks. Ironically, Vinson's vocals are relatively pedestrian. He sings his now-familiar "Cleanhead Blues" and "I Had A Dream," but the real energy comes from the instrumental passages and the stunning guitar backing of

Larry Coryell and Cornell Dupree. It's also worth noting, by the way, that the album is rather short, with only about 12 minutes on each side.

Two bop-styled tenor saxophonists also have new albums: Jimmy Heath, *The Gap Sealer* (Cobblestone 9012) and *Breakthrough!*, *The Cedar Walton/Hank Mobley Quintet* (Cobblestone 9011). Heath, one of three well-known jazz-playing brothers, has been active for more than 20 years, with more than 50 of his pieces recorded by various prominent jazz men. His style has modified in recent years, with an obvious John Coltrane influence creeping in; and, diversifying his arsenal, he has added soprano saxophone and flute to his battery of instruments. "The Gap Sealer" is the sort of jazz album that is too often overlooked. It has no pretensions of grandeur, no high-powered gimmickry or special effects—just crisply played, finely honed jazz improvisations.

Mobley's credits range from the groups of Max Roach, Horace Silver and Art Blakey to those of Miles Davis and Dizzy Gillespie. A strong, aggressive player when his music is together, Mobley sounds strangely subdued—even struggling—on this outing. Cedar Walton's no-nonsense piano playing holds the program together, but the disk is a disappointing representation of the work of a musician who has the chops to play much better.

One of the appealing aspects of Gerry Mulligan's music has been its virtual timelessness. He is not quite a disciple of Parker's, not quite in the Lester Young bag, not even—as he has so often been described—a West Coast jazzier. I prefer to think of his music as good-time jazz, in the best sense

of that description, as alive and energetic and uncomplicated as the work of a rock group like, say, The Youngbloods. Mulligan's first recording on his own in more than seven years, *The Age of Steam* (A & M SP 3036), represents the return of a humor and joie de vivre that has been away for too long. Mulligan is aware enough of current trends to underpin some of his pieces with rock trimmings, but the essential melodiousness of his themes, the bouncing joyousness of his baritone saxophone improvisations and the tightly blended harmonies of his ensemble writing haven't changed all that much. It's that timeless element, that willingness to open mind and ears to whatever the muse wafts his way, that makes Mulligan's music so universal. The result is the kind of record that can touch almost everyone—from rock fan to Dixieland freak.

*

Charlie Mariano is, roughly, a contemporary of Mulligan's, and played with many of the same musicians on the West Coast in the early fifties. But for the last decade their musical paths have rarely crossed. Mariano's new recording, *Mirror* (Atlantic SD 1608), gives a good indication of how different his road has been. The music ranges from rock-tinged jazz, to one track—"Madras"—in which Mariano plays an Indian oboe-like instrument called the nagasuram, to upfront blues.

In that small group of white jazz musicians who manage to bring both authenticity and soul to blues playing, Mariano has to rank near the top. His alto saxophone playing in particular—listen to a brilliant, and appropriately titled, cadenza called "Shout"—has the vocal cry, the exhortative preacher's demand, that is at the heart of all good blues. Backed by good musicians, as he is here, Mariano plays with at least as much invention and spirituality as any-

one I can think of on the current jazz scene. His soprano saxophone playing and flute work are less appealing to me than his alto saxophone, and I could do without the excursions through Indian music, but with those minor reservations, Charlie Mariano's "Mirror" is, for my tastes, one of the best albums of the year.

Tenor saxophonist/composer Archie Shepp's influence upon his contemporaries has been peculiarly neglected. An early, and articulate advocate of black consciousness among jazz musicians, he was often criticized for what he said rather than what he played and composed. Time, of course, has proven the accuracy of his assertions, and it now should be possible to give credit to his work, too. A new recording, *Attica Blues* (Impulse!

AS-9222), portrays Shepp's music in broad, bold strokes. On several of the tracks a 30-odd piece ensemble, including strings, vocalists and fairly standard jazz band instrumentation, is on hand.

Shepp has structured the album with alternating instrumental and vocal sections, occasionally interrupted by brief narrations from attorney William Kunstler, and stopping briefly at one point for a spoken tribute to Charlie Parker by poet Bartholomew Gray called "Invocation to Mr. Parker." The compositions are unexpectedly romantic in some cases—"Steam" is reminiscent of the Tadd Dameron ballads of the forties—and buoyant with the urgency of gospel in a piece like "Attica Blues." Two pieces by a gifted, and sadly unrecognized, composer named Cal Massey are included on side #2.

Shepp should be pleased with this album, since it is the first real representation I've heard of the scope of his skills. The attention paid to small details—the fragmented textures behind some of the vocals, the emotional balancing between text and music, the many bits and snatches of solos that add color and contrast to the larger picture—is something that has been far more common in pop and rock production than in jazz recording. The album also removes the avant-garde stigma from Shepp's music; he always has been far more involved with jazz tradition that most listeners and critics have realized, and most of his music here should be as appealing to Coleman Hawkins fans as to those who seek the extramusical message that is always present in Archie Shepp's work.



Ornette Coleman Jr.

Saxophonist Ornette Coleman
"A stylistic trend-setter for the sixties"