Episode Four -- An Improviser's Improviser

The recent death of Lee Konitz (1927 - 2020) prompted me to listen to his music, much of it for the first time. Although he had the bad luck to be esteemed "a musician's musician" (always a sign that the public, and financial success, have eluded the performer) I had managed to ignore Konitz's prodigious output on record. I quickly realized how much I had been missing, and so I am happy to be able to point you to some tracks of great jazz that are as new to me as they may be to you.

Lee Konitz and I shared a notable link, though many years apart -- both of us had studied with the eccentric and fabled jazz teacher, Lennie Tristano (1919 - 1978). My six months of brief jazz lessons with Tristano came with great effort on my part. When I was a graduate student at Brown University in Providence, I would drive my MGB-GT to Queens, New York once a week to take a 20-minute lesson with Tristano, after which I would make the 3-plus hour drive back to Providence or stay at my brother's on Long Island, where he was a student at Adelphi University. At each lesson, Tristano gave me enough work to keep me busy for several weeks, but I would make the round-trip to Queens and back again the very next week to add more to the pile of things I could not keep up with. (The lessons themselves are a story for another time.) Some years earlier, Konitz had also studied with Tristano but with much different results. Konitz went on to perform with Lennie (and with dozens of prominent musicians – for example, Bill Evans, Gerry Mulligan in the 1950s and into the 1990s with Charlie Haden and Brad Meldhau). How I managed to avoid listening to Konitz's many recordings is still a mystery, but I'll hazard a guess further on in this episode.

As a teenager, Konitz began studying clarinet, emulating the stars of the day like Benny Goodman and Artie Shaw. When alto saxophonist Charlie Parker became a beacon to jazz players on every instrument, leading them into the modern jazz future, Konitz took up the alto too, and fell under Parker's influence as did almost everyone. But Lee Konitz soon became known for his originality, and for being one of the few saxophonists who did not follow the leader. He also developed a unique sound on the alto horn, playing without vibrato and mostly in the upper register of his instrument, producing a dry and light sound.

Many jazz fans have heard that sound on alto sax, but not from Konitz himself; rather from another alto player he profoundly influenced, Paul Desmond of the Dave Brubeck Quartet. (Many of you receiving this email have expressed interest in a class on Brubeck, and I am considering developing one for online.) Konitz made improvisation itself a cornerstone of his performing and once said that he could probably limit his repertoire to four or five of his favorite tunes and play them on every gig and every recording, but play them differently each time. Konitz got a big boost from the first band he formed with tenor saxophonist Warne Marsh (1927 - 1987), another Tristano protege. I will point you to a link to their music at the end of these notes. Early in his career, in 1948, Konitz was part of the famous Miles Davis nonet that produced *The Birth of the Cool* sessions that established an orchestrated, thought-out sound, and a balance between ensemble and soloing, antithetical to the intense soloing of bebop.

Konitz's style has been criticized as "cerebral" and lacking in passion — which was also a common criticism of his teacher, Tristano -- and perhaps that is what deterred me from listening to him. But now that the several laudatory obituaries I have read persuaded me to investigate Konitz's music, I disagree with that point of view. (Cerebral and lacking in passion, however, could fairly be applied to the better known (but far less accomplished) alto sax player he influenced strongly, Paul Desmond made famous for being part of the Dave Brubeck Quartet and writing the popular "Take Five.") While some of Konitz's music could be described as exploratory, which does have an intellectual dimension to it, the rhythmic drive and lyrical melodic lines of his natural groove have a spontaneity and urgency to them that feels passionate to me.

You can decide for yourself after listening to the tracks below. For those who want to know more about the background and life of Lee Konitz, I refer you to two obituaries to start you off.

From an NPR affiliate, WBGO -- a prominent all-Jazz station in Newark, NJ,

https://www.wbgo.org/post/lee-konitz-alto-saxophonist-who-exemplified-jazzs-imperative-make-it-new-dead-92

From the *New York Times*

https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/16/arts/music/lee-konitz-dead-coronavirus.html

Here are the links to some exciting highlights in Lee Konitz's discography:

1. 1954: Lee Konitz in Harvard Square, 00 - 3:27
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gpb-gh5-Dqs

   The song is "No Splice" and uptempo tune feautiring the very long lines that were favored by Tristano. This is Lee's composition, and it is a fast-moving melody based on the harmonic changes to "You'd Be So Nice to Come Home To." (Throughout the 1940s it was common for jazz players to compose new melodies to familiar chord progressions used in popular songs . The whole album is available at this link,

2. 1958. Rare video: Lee Konitz with one of his favorite partners, Warne Marsh (2:27). Konitz's composition, "Subconscious-Lee", based on the hormonic progression of "What Is This Thing Called Love?"

   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QQMSPEi6WPc

Both students of Tristano's, they are stylistically in sync. Using a medium tempo bebop rhythm, they nevertheless played in a relaxed groove that came to be known as "cool"

jazz. (The version of it that developed in LA and San Francisco was labeled “west coast” jazz, but west coast and cool spring from the same roots.) Later on, Konitz partnered with many West Coast stylistic soloists, such as baritone player Gerry Mulligan and the ill-fated trumpet star and vocalist Chet Baker. You can hear an entire album with Warne Marsh, very relaxed and swinging at :
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xiJeLM7TUBA&list=PL0q2VleZJVElzRYrZXCCXz-GPztWg4Rl_&index=2

3. 1965: Concert video with Bill Evans on piano. “How Deep Is the Ocean” (11:20)

   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TOUHKk73KgY

   From a video recording of a live concert in Denmark, we are treated to Bill Evans playing the tune through with a trio, that include Niels Henning Orstead Pederson (who was later Oscar Peterson’s bass player) and the Boston-based drummer Alan Dawson. After this tune, Evans plays “Beautiful Love” with the trio, a bonus video.

4. 1974 . Duo album with Red Mitchell on bass. “I Concentrate on You -- A Tribute to Cole Porter.” (approx. 45 minutes to hear the whole album)

   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQtBE_e5Jio

   An adventurous format, especially for the 1970s, only a few horn soloists would have the courage or ability to play an album without a harmony instrument (piano or guitar). Konitz is able to “sketch” the harmony with his improvisational line. Other saxophone players who have recorded albums without a harmony instrument are Ornette Coleman, Anthony Braxton, Sonny Rollins, and in modern times, Josh Redman (and probably others I can’t think of at the moment). Lee Konitz’s imagination and willingness to take chances was legendary and never left him, even as he played well into his 80s.

5. 1978. “Lone-lee” Unaccompanied alto sax for an entire album. (38:00).

   https://youtu.be/HU5kVD9NAlw

   The first tune is “The Song Is You.” He begins to play the melody as written only after two minutes and thirty seconds of improvising. I would admit that this is an example of intellectual music, an artistic exploration of implying rhythm and harmony with an invented melodic line. True, not intense or passionate, but with elements of beauty. Listening to this recording is like watching a painter work on a canvas.