Lennie Tristano

Memories of a Jazz Master

As I started to formulate the idea of staging a Lennie Tristano retrospective concert, I began to do some research and found that there was a profound lack of information, especially about Lennie's place in the history of Jazz in the late 1940's and into the '50's. So I decided to ask those who knew him best to answer a series of questions about Lennie as a performer, teacher and friend.

This booklet will accompany the concert and serve as a resource to examine Lennie's music, his teaching and, in turn, the music created by his students and colleagues. It will examine his place in history and how he is perceived today.

As you read through each person's memories, you will find a deep love and admiration for the man and musician that goes back decades. I would like to thank my teacher, mentor and friend Joe Solomon for talking this project through with me and being the first to answer my questions. Joe introduced me to Lennie's music and taught me using the concepts he had learned from him, as well as those concepts developed further by the great pianist, Sal Mosca, a devout student of Lennie's. I would also like to thank everyone who contributed their time to this booklet, especially Paul Keegan.

Bill Stevens, NYC 2016

Ted Brown
Jonathon Easton
Peter Ind
Sheila Jordan
Joe Solomon

NOTES ON LENNIE TRISTANO – Peter Ind

In evaluating an artist it is essential that we learn to understand the society in which that person lived – and nowhere is this truer than for Lennie Tristano. I was fortunate to be a part of that very dynamic period of jazz in New York – I even had a loft which I used as a recording studio and knew most of the musicians involved.

In the nineteen fifties, jazz was not a mere sideshow it formed part of the bedrock of musical entertainment. It involved not musicians alone, but agents, media and media publicity, which made considerable inroads on who was considered influential as part of the jazz scene. Ironically, today jazz does not receive such a high profile. And it was at that time that Lennie was so highly recognized.

In 1950 Lennie Tristano was voted No. 1 Jazz Artist, No,1 Small Band leader and had a huge reputation as a teacher. Hard to believe when you realize how jazz history has neglected him. We are mainly left with journalistic writings, which do not necessarily reflect what really happened in those days almost sixty years ago (You need to ask yourself why). Added to that is the fact that most who were involved have since died. But I think that it is only if you were there and involved in the jazz scene during the late 40s and 50s that you can fully understand.

Lennie's views (and methods for) teaching jazz did not sit well with everyone. There was a strong grass roots view that jazz could not be taught. A musician either had a talent for jazz or not. Such opinionating overlooked the many hours that jazz musicians spent to develop their abilities. He also acknowledged classical music, especially Bach – again this was not necessarily appreciated by jazz musicians. Although that earlier group of jazz musicians – from Charlie Parker, Dizzy, Fats Waller and Mingus – certainly did acknowledge it and, in fact were very acknowledging of all sorts of influences. It was only with later generations that things seemed to close down.

But it was not only that Lennie taught, he was a premiere performer. Two of the most noted in those days were the black saxophonist Charlie Parker and the blind white pianist Lennie Tristano. They did play together – there are photos – and I was astounded when a radio interviewer in New York in the 90's suggested to me that there was no contact between black and white musicians.

Black musicians in those days still suffered from the endemic racial stigma of America and until the nineteen fifties were (despite incredible talent) often featured not as bandleaders but as sidemen. We ought to remember that racial prejudice was extreme even in those days of bebop, though this was seldom reflected amongst the musicians themselves.

For example when travelling with a group of mixed race musicians one had to acknowledge that certain areas, sometimes even statewide, were taboo. In the late nineteen fifties whilst travelling with the Roy Eldridge/Coleman Hawkins band our car was pulled over by Pennsylvania Police, as being suspicious – why was that white guy in the vehicle? (I was the only white member of the band.)

Lennie was one of the relatively few musicians not racially prejudiced in any way. He was arguably the first to come out in print disavowing the kind of prejudice that viewed black musicians as second class. Such honesty would be openly accepted today, but was not so in the fifties and sixties.

With the passing of time blacks have established a secure reputation commensurate with their talents. To me it seems a travesty that Lennie (one of the relatively few white musicians who always gave due respect to black musicians) should have suffered such misunderstanding and in today's world failed to retain the respect and appreciation given at the time and today he is a relatively iconic figure. I think it was partly the times, partly those in the media, especially reviewers who tried to manipulate the jazz scene into particular images according to their definition. Some of it was Lennie's own character– he was about playing, not compromising on that and very careful about recordings. He certainly did not pander to the media.

What of his music and of his teaching? If I want to sum up his approach, it is that of thoroughness. In jazz – especially during the bebop days there was an almost inevitable striving to play fast licks. It was virtually an edict with Lennie that if you wanted to play fast you first learned to play it slowly. Seems obvious doesn't it – but most wanted to demonstrate a prowess that maybe they hadn't yet mastered. Again thoroughness was the core. With Lennie a first essential was learning to play scales, not simply as an exercise but to develop a clear knowledge and ability in all keys. I remember during my first lesson with him he asked me to play a scale. I immediately ripped one off at full speed. "Now play it as music" was his response. That one comment of his taught me so much. In music the art is not of demonstrating but of conveying the emotion of beauty. Even professional musicians sometimes overlook this basic reality, and get carried away with flashy exhibitions. Essentially it is all to do with honesty!

Lennie also realized the great value of studying and learning great recorded solos. Bird also realized this and it shows in his playing. (In fact Lennie would often recommend students to study Bird's recorded solos) In his teaching Lennie had a particular approach to this. Firstly, learning to sing along with the recorded solo. Gradually it becomes part of one's memory and when this is achieved then to learn to play it. There is no short cut to this. It helps develop the ability to improvise. Much of this kind of approach is now included in college teaching, though seldom is it realized that Lennie was the original source. Again thoroughness is the core leading to success.

Returning to scales: Learning these thoroughly was so crucial for any of us studying with Lennie. It is the precursor to building harmony upon them. Firstly playing scales, then adding thirds to each degree of the scale; when this has been achieved in all keys, then build triads on each degree of the scale, followed by sevenths and eventually ninths. This way one becomes totally fluid in music. It was a hard and tough way to learn but meant you had such a deep understanding of the music and musicality. Then we turn to playing inversions on the patterns we have built up. Clearly to do this is easier on some instruments. Today all this appears obvious, yet it was due to Lennie's teaching that this became generally known. It is that kind of total familiarity that helps a musician to improvise jazz with confidence – and that shows in the music.

Finally, as jazz improvisation is initially a key to the ability to play jazz, these basic approaches can open our musical minds and help us develop our individuality. That certainly was what Lennie taught me.
I strongly believe it is time for a reappraisal!

In other fields of learning particularly in science, we often take the originator for granted; it is not always acknowledged or credit is sometimes attributed to the wrong person. I have tried in my writing over the years to point this out and illustrate it. It is not always welcomed (or believed – but why would I not set out what I experienced, even if it is inconvenient with media coverage). Even now, at 87, I am trying to do that in my new book, Science and Jazz improvisation, which focuses on this! If Lennie taught me one thing it is to believe in yourself no matter what.

When did you first become aware of Lennie Tristano? What prompted you to seek him out? How different was he to other teachers/performers you had interactions with? What are the most important things you learned from him?

When asked these questions, Sheila Jordan, Ted Brown and Joe Solomon said they were each referred to Lennie Tristano from musicians who were already studying with Lennie. Ms. Jordan states that she "became aware of Lennie through Bird and then Max Roach and Charles Mingus." For Ted Brown, while stationed in the Army in 1946-47, he had "heard some discussion of Lennie from a couple of guys who had studied with him: trumpeter Don Ferrara and clarinetist Bob Stacy". Joe Solomon had heard Lennie's name from being a high school Jazz fan, but "only had a vague knowledge of his music".

Lennie according to Ted Brown, was only interested in teaching students who made a commitment to study weekly for at least a year. After being invited to a private session with Lennie, Lee Konitz and Warne Marsh he made an appointment for an interview at his apartment in Flushing, Queens and once he started studying in 1948, he continued for the next seven years. Joe Solomon states that he studied with Lennie for eight years.

When asked about what it was like to study with Lennie and how different it was from other teachers they studied with, Joe Solomon states quite emphatically, "First, Lennie was really into teaching and second, he had thought it out and was very systematic". Adding, "There was nothing unique about what he taught as far as the basics of music, but he presented it in an organized way, leaving no stone unturned, and made sure his students had absorbed what they were working on to a certain level before moving on".

Sheila Jordan concurs by adding, "He was very generous and giving at his lessons, but you better be prepared though". It was clear to her that you had to love the music as much as he did and "I always felt we carried on a very loving and caring musical conversation".

Ted Brown went on to describe what the lessons consisted of, "He described the very basic material he expected students to work on – major and minor scales in all keys, ear training – being able to sing and identify intervals and chords. Learning the melody and chord progressions from standard tunes. Working on rhythmic figures, as well as singing and playing with recordings of great Jazz solos by Lester Young and Charlie Parker". One of the first assignments Mr. Brown received was to pick a tune that he was comfortable with and try to write out a solo you would play if you could. He explains, "He wanted me to find my own voice. "I chose the tune 'S Wonderful and did manage to write a solo".

What do you feel were the most important things you took away from your lessons? Sheila Jordan said that "I was sure and learned the original melody of the tune first and not to try and copy anyone else's version". "He taught me to be true to my sound. Sing what you feel not what you think people want to hear. That was his motto".

Ted Brown goes on to say that, "when I went back the following week, he asked me to play what I had written while he played the piano along with me. That really helped me to hear how my melody fit with the chord progression".

Another aspect of Lennie's teaching was that, "he really stressed practicing at very slow tempos, so you could play what you heard and felt and not some "licks" that might be popular" according to Ted Brown.

Finally, Joe Solomon truly sums up Lennie's philosophy by stating, "I guess the most important thing I got from Lennie was the understanding that anyone, even me, who was willing to put in the work could become a Jazz musician with something unique to contribute".

He taught me to be true to my sound. Sing what you feel not what you think people want to hear. That was his motto.

- Sheila Jordan

What is it about his music that stands out? Do you think his music is better understood today, than in the 1940's and 1950's? Was Lennie aware of his impact on Jazz? Do you believe that Lennie was of his time, ahead of it or beyond such temporal categorizations? Was there anything you wish Lennie had done differently during his lifetime?

So, what stands out about Lennie's playing? According to Sheila Jordan, it was, "his originality and knowing his sound. He was already into his own sound and message." Ted Brown adds, "What stands out to me is his ability to improvise such great melodic lines and to generate such a strong rhythmic feeling at the same time". He goes on to say that "Lennie was influenced by Art Tatum, Bud Powell, but also by Roy Eldridge, Lester Young and Charlie Parker, but he created his own system". Joe Solomon adds, "the most inspiring thing to me personally was his unrelenting commitment to spontaneous, in the moment, from the heart improvising. There was never a note Lennie played whether at lessons or on his greatest recordings that was not deeply felt and completely new".

When examining how and if Lennie Tristano's music is better understood today than during the 1940's and 50's Ted Brown tells us, "His music made the biggest impression in 1949 – 1950 with recordings of 'Wow', 'Crosscurrent' and 'Sax of a Kind'. His band was also working on 52nd Street and Birdland and his studio was active until the end of 1955. There was also a revival band at the Half Note from 1958 – 1964, but after that, his music was kept alive by his students". Mr. Brown continues, interestingly, to break the students into two distinct camps stating, "there are those who are mostly playing or have recorded the original material and concept led by – Warne Marsh, Sal Mosca, Joe Solomon and Jon Easton, while a few others have gone more to the 'free form' concept that Lennie also started in 1949 such as – Lee Konitz, Connie Crothers, Kazrie Jackson and others."

Ms. Jordan responded, "I am sure Lennie's music is better understood today then back then. It is not easy being an original, which Lennie was. It takes time to be recognized and accepted. Lennie hung in there. Fame and fortune wasn't important to him. It was finding a new path for the music, which Lennie had dedicated his life to do. He lived through his music". Joe Solomon expanded on what Shiela Jordan stated, " First of all, I don't think Lennie ever set out to be 'understood'. He of course ventured forth into, and indeed pioneered many of the more experimental approaches to improvising – 'free' improvisation, overdubbing, etc…"

As to how Lennie was and is understood is further captured in this statement by Joe Solomon, "Anyone who really knew the tunes and was willing to listen seriously was able to understand Lennie's music, his vocabulary was entirely original and far from the mainstream which many casual listeners who wanted to hear something they were already familiar with found him off-putting". Joe continues by saying, "my impression is that approximately the same percentage of Jazz listeners are willing to take the time to listen seriously enough to his recordings to get what he's doing today than was true when they were first recorded. In addition, approximately the same number of Jazz fans today (although for very different reasons) feel obliged to exhibit some knowledge of Lennie's playing".

When asked about Lennie Tristano's impact on Jazz, all three were clear that, "Lennie was a crusader for Jazz improvising as a real art form that shouldn't be beholden to the demands of commercial success to thrive" – Joe Solomon and Sheila Jordan, "He never impressed me as being on an ego trip or feeling extra special even though we who heard him knew damn well that he was special". She continues, "I think his main purpose was to play and teach what he felt and believed in. Music was his calling and he answered that with care and conviction".

Mr. Solomon continues where Ms. Jordan left off, "Lennie was very proud of his autonomy and guarded jealously the freedom to follow his own path wherever it led. He cared about his impact, but I don't imagine he ever gave it much thought to how he would be written about in Jazz history books". Ted Brown seems to concur, "Lennie was certainly aware of his impact on Jazz. He really loved Jazz and the idea of being able to be completely spontaneous in your playing. He cared about being completely honest and playing what you heard in that moment".

When asked if there was anything you wish Lennie had done differently, Joe Solomon states two specific areas, "First of all for very selfish reasons I wish Lennie had been more flexible about the conditions under which he would accept a gig or recording date. More importantly though, I wish Lennie had been more receptive to the advice of doctors in regard to his health. He intensely mistrusted doctors, wouldn't listen to them and basically thought he knew more than they did. As a result, when he got seriously ill, after an initial hospitalization he took it upon himself to avoid doctors and treat himself. I am convinced he would have lived much longer – much longer – with proper medical care".

For Ted Brown, he wished Lennie, "had been able to keep his studio going in Manhattan for more than the five years it existed. It was such a great place to learn and play". Like Joe, Ted also wished "he was able to perform in public more. But it was very difficult for him, especially in his later years".

And finally, Sheila Jordan simply states, "No, there is nothing I would have wanted him to do differently. Everything he did was different".

Do you see his music and teaching reflected in Jazz today?

When asked if his music and teaching are reflected in Jazz today, the answers were mixed. Sheila Jordan states emphatically, “Are you kidding? I can hear Lennie in lots of players. I always ask them at some point if they had heard or studies with Lennie and the answer is always a big fat YES”.

However, Ted Brown states, “His music is only reflected in teachings by his students, and students of students. Places like (retracted) don’t even discuss it. They are heavily into Miles Davis, John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman”.

Joe Solomon sums up both of their responses with his own, “A relative handful of players (more in Europe than in the United States) seem to be playing some of Lennie’s lines and have been fascinated with Lennie’s own improvisation as well as with that of some of his greatest students like Lee Konitz and Warne Marsh. But their vocabulary has certainly not found its way into the mainstream Jazz language as has Bird’s, Louis’ and Coltrane’s. Also his approach to teaching was so radically opposed to the academic classroom that dominates Jazz instruction today”.

Mr. Solomon continues, “But there are still some individual teachers, and I think myself as one of them, who carry on Lennie’s tradition of thorough step by step, one on one teaching which is not oriented towards earning a degree or preparing to become a ‘professional’ Jazz musician. Despite that, I think Lennie remains a presence on the scene today and this uncompromising singleness of purpose, almost 40 years after his death was then and still is totally rare and is personally inspiring to many who wish to pursue Jazz improvisation as a true art”.

Many people who haven’t heard a note of his music know about Lennie as a guy who was totally devoted to his own artistic development and to that of his students. That was all that mattered to him, not notoriety, commercial success or critical acclaim.

- Joe Solomon

As I started to receive the responses I found it enlightening and inspiring to hear first hand accounts on these people’s experiences with Lennie Tristano as a friend, teacher, mentor and performer. The unconditional love and respect each of them, and no doubt so many others, have for this man, even four decades after his death is a testament to the love of the music, of Jazz, of improvisation and of teaching he displayed throughout his life. His impact has affected these people in a deep and spiritual way that has allowed them to pursue the craft of improvisation at its highest levels and at the same time feel a calling to pass this knowledge to new generations of students. That is the legacy of Lennie Tristano. The legacy we celebrate this evening, 38 years after his death on November 18, 1978.

Bill Stevens

Sal Mosca (April 27, 1927 – July 28, 2007) was an American jazz pianist who was a student of Lennie Tristano.

"What a great person Lennie Tristano was! What a great player Lennie Tristano was! What a great teacher Lennie Tristano was! And especially, what a great friend he became!"

- Sal Mosca,
Cadence Magazine
Vol. 29, No. 10
October 2003

No retrospective on Lennie Tristano can be complete without hearing form the great Sal Mosca. In October 2003, Sal Mosca did an interview for Cadence Magazine that was taken and transcribed by Don Messina (Vol. 29, No. 10). Below are excerpts on their conversation regarding Sal's memories of Lennie Tristano.

When Sal was asked "what is the first thing that comes to your mind when Lennie Tristano;s name is mentioned?" He responded in this way, "What a great person Lennie Tristano was! What a great player Lennie Tristano was! What a great teacher Lennie Tristano was! And especially, what a great friend he became!" He remembered Lennie as being a great teacher stating, "Lennie was very careful with all of the details."

Lennie was very strong on listening to the great players – Lester Young, Roy Eldridge, Bud Powell and especially Charlie Parker. Sal goes on to say, "Lennie was way ahead of everyone. He was very innovative and it took most of us a little time to catch up."

Sal studied with Lennie Tristano for eight years at a time when Warne Marsh, Lee Konitz, Don Ferrara and Peter Ind were also studying with Lennie.

When asked about the negative feelings that existed toward Lennie in the 1940' s and 1950's Sal goes on to say, "They claimed that he didn't play with any feeling, but as time went on, their tone eventually changed. Now they still try to make Lennie mysterious or something of a 'cult' figure. He was dedicated to two things: his teaching and his music. I think his influence will continue to grow over the decades."

Sal believed that Lennie's teaching and music covered the history of music and he continues, "When you hear Lennie play, you hear Art Tatum, Charlie Parker, Lester Young, Roy, Bach, Bud Powell, Louie, Chopin and others. If you cannot feel, you cannot hear Lennie. I think the 'truth' lasts and Lennie spoke and played the 'truth'."

Sal, near the end of the interview focusing on Lennie Tristano, interjected his memories of Lennie's East 32nd Street studio where they had lessons, jam sessions and recordings adding, "We were not thinking about trying to make 'history' when we played."

Some Final Thoughts by Jonathan Easton

At my first lesson with Lennie he asked me "so, what have you been listening to, Jon?" I told him I loved the music of a saxophonist "S." Lennie said, " that's great Jon! Let's get you REALLY INTO S!!" The assignment: slow down my favorite S solo to half speed, every day listen to it at half speed and then try to sing along with it at half speed, then listen to it at full speed and try to sing along with it at full speed. And to try really to feel my way into S's musical head. I did this constantly for the ensuing week, after which my world had been turned upside down. This solo, which had been so exciting, clearly had no value. Lennie had helped me discover what was actually there in that solo. Lennie said nothing to discourage my enthusiasm for that solo. His goal was to help me to discover for myself what was there in that music at the deeper levels. He did not try to substitute his ideas for mine. It is hard to imagine a more psychologically sophisticated method of teaching in any artistic discipline.

Lennie used this technique to help his students open their ears to what is there in music. Great music will always pass this test, and most music is not great music. Great music always sounds even more amazing slowed down, while lesser music always sounds worse slowed down. A Charlie Parker solo will pass this test for the very same reason a Bach fugue will pass. Each time it gets deeper. Lennie understood that people have to be helped to get there -- listening to and singing at half speed with a piece of music will get you there if you are open to getting there. Most people are not open to this. Not trying to play that solo on your instrument until you can sing it without the record. By then it is part of you. The music of the majority of alleged jazz "greats" will fail this test, as will the music of many classical "greats."

Lennie's message about improvisation was: only play the melody you are hearing in your head at that moment. It was Lennie's goal as a teacher to help students develop that ability. This is not what most jazz musicians are doing, nor are they even attempting to do so, Lennie understood. What they play has not been "heard" by them. But that is what the greats did, naturally (pre-1940 Lester Young, Charlie Parker, pre-1960s Warne Marsh, pre-1953 Bud Powell, Charlie Christian, for example, a handful of others). Musicians who are devoted to that goal, being honest about only playing what they hear, are the ones who might play music worth listening to. (There are other factors, of course). Sal Mosca's two records on Wave Records are an example of that. Lee Konitz's pre-1955 playing is another. Lennie understood that great art can only be organized unconsciously. Efforts consciously to direct artistic expressions result in inferior art. Musicians who use pre-conceived ideas are at best arrangers but not improvisers. Arrangers can produce beautiful sounds but in the end these are artistically superficial.

When I mentioned the pianist Bill Evans to Lennie he without putting him down described him as an arranger. He lamented that the arrangements for Bird with Strings were unsophisticated ones. But his goal as a teacher was to produce improvising musicians, not arrangers, and the ear training, keyboard harmony and polyrhythm studies he prescribed were to give musicians the tools they needed to become improvisers. The great improvisers did what Bach did -- note to note, from the soul. I suspect this message is being lost even amongst those who are disciples of Lennie Tristano. Another line of thought, inspired by Lennie: great art takes the entirety of human emotional experience and condenses it into a small space. Lesser art at best takes a small slice and does something repetitious with it.

Lennie used the word "centripetal" to describe the experience of the improviser. It is an inward-flowing experience of the expression of what Lennie called "feeling." He differentiated this experience from what he called a "centrifugal" approach of expressing "emotion," which Lennie regarded as an anti-artistic process where to goal is discharge/elimination. The centripetal experience of expressing feeling is an opening of a channel to deeper levels, and is a similar experience for the improviser and the listener. The improviser and listener can experience the same surprise and sense of "anything can happen" spontaneity. I will always be grateful to Lennie Tristano for what he communicated to me during my short time studying with him.

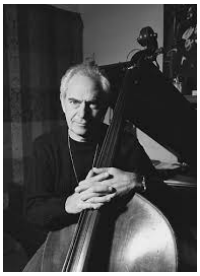
Jonathan Easton, 2016

In Memory of Connie Crothers (May 2, 1941 - August 13, 2016). On February 26, 2016 I emailed Connie Crothers to be a part of this "Memories of Lennie Tristano" project. She responded by saying, "Yes, send me the questions. I am always happy to contribute to a deeper understanding of Lennie Tristano". A few days later she wrote, "I could actually write a book from them, but I will confine myself to a few sentences (hopefully)". Her love for Lennie Tristano was evident to me and I was deeply saddened to hear of yet one more Jazz figure who has left us.
Let us keep the memory of Jazz pianist Connie Crothers in mind this evening and always.

Peter Ind (born July 20, 1928) is a British jazz double-bassist and record producer.

In 1949 he was a musician on the *Queen Mary*, which sailed to New York; there, Ind met pianist Lennie Tristano for the first time and listened to other leading jazz musicians in the city's clubs.

The ship returned to New York every two weeks, allowing Ind and others to have a fortnightly lesson with Tristano. After one 1950 lesson, the pianist invited Ind to join his trio at Birdland.



Joe Solomon has free-lanced in the jazz and classical fields in the New York area since the 1960s.

He has performed with Lee Konitz, Warne Marsh, Howard McGhee, Hazel Scott, the Brooklyn Philharmonic, The Staten Island Symphony, the St. Barts Chamber Players, the Philharmonic Symphony of Westchester, and the Village Singers Choral Society. This evening is dedicated to my friend, mentor and teacher – Joe Solomon.

Theodore (Ted) G. Brown, born December 1, 1927 in Rochester, New York, is a Jazz tenor saxophonist.

Brown has worked with Warne Marsh and Ronnie Ball, and recorded with Lennie Tristano, Art Pepper, Hod O'Brien and Lee Konitz, as well as leading his own groups.

Sheila Jordan (born November 18, 1928) is an American jazz singer and songwriter.

In 1951, Jordan moved to New York City and studied harmony and music theory taught by Lennie Tristano and Charles Mingus.

Jonathan Easton is a practicing Psychiatrist in New York City. He has studied piano with Lennie Tristano and continues to play in a Jazz quartet with Joe Solomon, Bob Arthurs and Dave Frank.