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# the straight horn of steve lacy



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DESIGN - PHOTOGRAPHY - FRANK GALUSHA

# the straight horn of steve lacy

**STEVE LACY,** soprano saxophone
**CHARLES DAVIS,** baritone saxophone
**JOHN ORE,** bass
**ROY HAYNES,** drums

The soprano saxophone is like a fractious but increasingly alluring mistress—challenging and unpredictable, but capable of unique satisfactions. Because of the difficulty involved in mastering its problems of pitch, very few jazzmen have concentrated on the instrument. Until the past few years, the two major tamers of the soprano were Sidney Bechet and Johnny Hodges. Bechet also doubled on clarinet, and the soprano was never more than a secondary instrument for Hodges. In modern jazz, John Coltrane and Steve Lacy have wrestled with the instrument, but only Lacy has devoted all of his time to the soprano.

In an article, **My Favorite Thing,** in **Metronome,** Lacy has explained the fascination of the soprano: "This instrument can fulfill an extremely valuable function in today's jazz. Like all saxophones, its range, with practice, can be increased beyond the normal limits to four full octaves. It is the only treble instrument able to be played percussively enough and with enough power and brilliance to fit into the stylistic demands of contemporary jazz. The lowest part of the soprano's range, which is right in the heart of the tenor saxaphone range and quite similar to it in sound, can be played with extreme intensity. If the range of the horn is extended upwards to its extreme limit, the top notes are remarkable like those which Cat Anderson can produce. Between those two extremes, a great diversity of colors is available, thereby making this instrument potentially one of extreme expressive power."

More than in any of his previous sessions, Steve Lacy demonstrated on this date how penetratingly expressive the soprano saxophone can indeed be. For an analysis of this album in the context of Lacy's career, I asked Martin Williams to supply the following observations. **—Nat Hentoff**

"A jazz musician," said Steve Lacy once "is a combination orator, dialectician, mathematician, athlete, entertainer, poet, singer, dancer, diplomat, educator, student, comedian, artist, seducer, public masturbator, and general all-round good fellow." He added, "Jazz is a very young art and not too much is known about it yet. You have to trust yourself and go your own way." Those are sentences whose frankness, honesty, and implicit perception have stayed with me a long time. And they come from a young player who has virtually worked his way through the history of jazz: on his first job, a promoter billed him as

"Bechet of today" and a few years later he was working with the Cecil Taylor quartet, a group decidedly in the advance guard. The progress was perhaps not slow, but the fact that in the interim, Lacy worked with Max Kaminsky, Pee Wee Russell, Dick Sutton, Rex Stewart, Hot Lips Page, and Buck Clayton may speak for its sureness. Even his teachers encompass jazz history; they include Cecil Scott (who was an important jazz man and leader by 1927), Lee Konitz, and Cecil Taylor. Lacy's is also the kind of mind that cuts across jazz history to draw a strong comparison between Thelonious Monk (with whom he began working in 1960) and Louis Armstrong, each of whom he says is a "master of rhyme." (The other such masters he mentions are Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Art Blakey, and Cecil Taylor—which probably reinforces his point as well as any discussion would.)

To put all this in more conventional order, Steve Lacy was born in New York City in 1934. Besides study with the jazzmen mentioned above, he has attended the Manhattan School of Music in New York (as have such jazzmen as John Lewis, Max Roach, and Dick Katz) and the Schillinger School in Boston. His first public appearances came about because he tagged along with Cecil Scott after lessons to the latter's gigs. Later he was leading his own dixieland group. An appearance was arranged on a "Talent Scouts" broadcast, and Gil Evans happened to hear him. Evans was taken by Lacy, particularly by the **sound** of his soprano saxophone, even then.

By late 1956, Lacy was a member of Cecil Taylor's quartet and a little over a year later he was player and featured soloist with Gil Evans' orchestra. There was a return to Taylor for a Brooklyn job, in the fall of 1959 (Lacy worked a day job **and** played every night during that one). Several months later, he was in the very unusual quartet that Jimmy Giuffre was leading at the Five Spot in New York. It had an instrumentation rather like this one: the leader's tenor and clarinet, Lacy's soprano, bass, and drums. That group played a lot of Thelonious Monk's pieces (chiefly at Lacy's suggestion), Monk heard them, and when Monk decided to expand his own group, Lacy was asked to join Charlie Rouse's tenor in the front line.

Lacy's instrument is a difficult one in several respects. Not the least of them is that it is hard to get jobs if you play soprano saxophone and don't want to double on other reeds — and Lacy doesn't because he is an honest and dedicated enough jazzman to know he has found himself on this one.

"Steve Lacy," wrote Larry Gushee in **The Jazz Review,** "has turned the special position and difficulties of the soprano sax most successfully to his advantage . . . His tone . . . is fresh, unsentimental, detached, neither brassy nor reedy . . . It makes a brilliant and penetrating impression . . ." And he adds that "even when he was heard in the context of out-and-out or modified dixieland, it was clear that an original imagination was involved."

That originality has certainly been maintained, it seems to me, in Lacy's subsequent work. And you will not hear the protective gambits of currently hip cliches from Lacy. **Donna Lee,** Charlie Parker's melody on an harmonic frame with a long standing in jazz, is played often enough so that it must tempt anyone to trot out the bebop stockpile. But Lacy is clearly **working** on that track—and not working just to avoid the cliches. Notice also **Criss Cross;** both hornmen clearly know that with this, as with most of the Thelonious Monk's pieces, you had

better know the melody **and** the harmony and how they fit, if you really want to play something. After Lacy has stated his boldest variation he quite logically uses a paraphrase of the theme to close his solo. It is the kind of thing a musician of Monk's stature might do, and that Lacy does.

Of the six pieces here, three are by Monk. Besides **Criss Cross, Played Twice** and **Introspection** are his. Of Monk's "masculine authority," Lacy has said, "Monk's tunes are the ones I most enjoy playing. I like his use of melody, harmony, and especially his rhythm. Each one that I learned left me with something invaluable and permanent. Monk's music has profound humanity, disciplined economy, balanced virility, dramatic nobility, and innocently exuberant wit." **Played Twice,** by the way, is fairly recent Monk (if the title seems unduly mechanical to you, hear it and see how really incongruous the theme would be if it **were** played only once). **Criss Cross** is earlier Monk, and I think, one of the major pieces by the major composer in jazz after Duke Ellington.

One of Monk's functions in jazz has surely been a kind of consolidation – the kind that the arrival of a major composer like Monk or Ellington always represents. In turn, such consolidation is usually followed by change, and it seems to me that one of the first signs that major change is on its way was the arrival of Cecil Taylor. Here, **Air** and **Louise** are both Taylor's pieces. (You can hear Taylor's own, quite different version of **Air** on Candid 8006, Stereo 9006). I think that Lacy is especially imaginative on **Louise** and once one has heard out the compelling undulations and turns of that solo, its overall cohesion and flow will also occur to him. I would call it probably the best Lacy on record (and quickly acknowledge that it has a strong rival in his solo on **Ella Speed** with Gil Evans).

Lacy used no piano here because he was simply too used to hearing the unique sound of Thelonious Monk behind him. He picked Charles Davis's baritone as his other horn after hearing him sit in one night at the Five Spot. Davis had been a member of trumpeter Kenny Dorham's group since the fall of 1959.

The other two players were, at the time, fellow members of Monk's sextet. To say that a bassist is "dependable" is to say a great deal, especially since the mid-forties when the bass in jazz groups began to take the rhythmic-percussive lead. To say that bassist John Ore works with a rhythmic virtuoso like Monk, whose sense of time and tempo are the envy of everyone, is to say much more. And by all means hear his introduction on **Criss Cross.**

The final tribute should surely go to Roy Haynes whose playing here seems to me really superb. Perhaps he is the real heir to the achievements of Max Roach in the forties. He keeps the time and simultaneously provides an astonishingly full and imaginatively varied percussive texture behind the horns. Yet, he is not in anyone's way or merely calling attention to Roy Haynes. As an introduction to all this, listen to him behind Lacy on **Air.** He is really participating in the music being made here. It is a difficult role; Roy Haynes fulfills it with force and with grace.

**–Martin Williams**

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CD 9007 STEREO

# The straight horn of Steve Lacy

1. LOUISE Cecil Taylor; Jay Bee Music Corp., BMI 5:16
2. INTROSPECTION Thelonious Monk; Consolidated Music Publ. ASCAP 5:20
3. DONNA LEE Charlie Parker; Savoy Music Co. ASCAP 7:41
4. PLAYED TWICE Thelonious Monk; Bar-Thel Music Corp., BMI 5:44
5. AIR Cecil Taylor; Jay Bee Music Corp., BMI 6:27
6. CRISS CROSS Thelonious Monk; Bar-Thel Music Corp., BMI 5:37

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