

SAX LOVERS' CELEBRATION

Steve Wilson

By Eric Nemeyer

Steve Wilson, a native of Hampton, Virginia, attended Virginia Commonwealth University and has performed with Chick Corea, Dave Holland, Mulgrew Miller, Mingus Big Band and numerous other artists, in addition to leading his own group. He is on the faculty of several New York area college jazz programs. This summer Steve will be teaching at the Samba Meets Jazz Workshop, where students, educators, musicians and adult hobbyists can get up close and personal instruction from him.

JJ: Talk about your association with Bruce Barth, with whom you recorded your most recent album, a duo recording.

SW: Bruce and I have done a few duo gigs here and there, though we had never really sat down and planned a project. We were invited out to play a duo concert by Jon Poses, who has an jazz organization that stages concerts. He said that as long as we were performing, why don't we also record it? The recording came out beyond our expectations. We have a great time playing together. It was actually a house concert, rather than in a concert hall. So the setting was very casual and intimate with 60 or 70 people. We always talk about feeling like you're playing in a living room, and this time we did. [laughs] So,

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along with the vibe of the people, the intimacy of the setting, our long standing relationship of playing together that Bruce and I have worked so that all of the elements just came together for that day.

JJ: Could you talk about one or more of the influential artists with whom you've played who have provided you with guidance or advice that has significantly influenced you?

SW: I've been fortunate because there have been many. One of those is someone who may not be known to many—my teacher, Doug Richards of Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. He was the one who really opened my eyes to the full history. Legacy and greatness of this music, and prepared me for being a professional. He turned me on to a lot of the early jazz, the Duke Ellington, Jelly Roll Morton, Benny Carter. After that, I worked with Lionel Hampton and learned about giving it all up for the audience. When you hit the stage, just be ready to play all the time. He loved the showmanship. After that, Buster Williams—who really taught me how to listen. I was recommended to him by

Billy Drummond, who is a dear friend of mine, who was working with him. Buster called me and said: "I don't like to audition people but Billy recommended you and I would love for you to come in and make a rehearsal." Whether it was at a rehearsal or at one of the gigs, he would always say, "Listen. Listen. Listen for the sound. Listen for the beat." He really taught me about listening for melody. He is one of the best melody writers of all time, in my opinion. And, his music commands you to listen. One of the things I tell my students is that playing is 50% listening. Another mentor is Dave Holland, whose band I joined in 1996 or 97. Dave helped me hear the different possibilities of the music—playing in odd meters, playing with unusual song forms, and the whole thing about being spontaneous and in the moment. Dave is just so strong and so fast, that you could play something and he would challenge you to come up with something new every night. Dave didn't say a lot, but the way he played commanded that you had to think very fast. You couldn't rely on what you knew. You had to be totally in the moment. After Dave, Chick Corea. He was more specific about what he wanted out

of the music—in terms of dynamics, color—but not in a controlling way. He wanted you to bring your personality. What I learned from Dave and Chick and Buster was that they didn't rest on any laurels—and to play every night like it's your first night. Chick would not allow you to get into a comfort zone. He challenged you. He would challenge you from his playing, from his instrument. He's pushing you to go past what you know and what you've been doing. He's a bottomless well of imagination, who never repeated himself from night to night—in his improvisation. I'm talking about my years with the [Chick Corea] Origin Band. By the way, talking about that [box set, multi-disc] recording at the Blue Note, we knew he was recording every night. He told us before. It was only afterwards that he came to us and said we're going to release the whole week. We were like, "What?" [laughs] It took us by surprise. We were really flying by the seat of our pants. A lot of that music was new, and it was only our second gig. The band started at a gig in Schenectady a few months before. Chick called that gig an experiment. He never said, "Hey, I'm putting a band together, I want you guys to be in it." He

just said, "I'm trying this experiment with this new music I'm writing. Would you like to participate?" Right after that he said, "This is the new band, we're going to book it." At the end of the week, when he announced he was going to release the whole thing, we said, "Are you sure?" We thought at the time it was kind of a second rehearsal. But, a lot of people have heard it and we still get a lot of compliments on it, and that's a testament to his writing and the collective of the group. Two other mentors were James Williams and Mulgrew Miller. And, the biggest thing I got from them is integrity and soul

JJ: What was it like when you first came to New York?

SW: When I was in Richmond, I was working a lot. I was doing studio work and all sorts of gigs, and Ellis Marsalis was there, so I was working with him. When I came to New York, I went from working all the time to having no work. [laughs] But there were a lot of different scenes and a lot going on here. I would sit in with David Murray, Jon Faddis' quartet that would play at the Vanguard. I was introduced to Dick Oatts, who got me into the sub rotation with the Vanguard Orchestra. I did get to play with Mel Lewis quite a few times, and he was a great mentor who told me some great stories and the importance of time and feel. It was priceless. I also got to play along side of another mentor, Jerry Dodgion, in the last year of the American Jazz Orchestra, led by John Lewis. I was doing kind of the opposite of what other guys my age were doing at the time. It was the height of the Young Lions period, and everyone was going after record deals. I wasn't focusing on being a leader or a recording star. I was just trying to find my way and learn, to explore a lot of different kinds of music, and to get next to the elders. That's really why I came to New York. It widened my relationships across different generations of musicians and it provide me with a lot of different working and playing opportunities—which carries me to this day, because I didn't get pigeonholed.

JJ: The creative side of jazz—composing music, playing, improvising—will be strong as long as



there are people who want to create, which is why we're all here. I see the industry figures cross my desk everyday. The business side of the jazz world is a contracting market. There are fewer venues (outside of New York). There is a bigger gap between the top paying gigs, that is those at festivals and for more well-known artists compared to the one-nighters, or one-offs for most musicians, playing for \$50 to \$100 to even just the door. With few record labels, artists have both the challenge and responsibility and the opportunities to create their own successes. There are fewer radio stations. 50 to 100 radio spins nationally in a week will get you into the top 20 for airplay. Airplay doesn't help to generate sales of recordings now, and so on. All of this is combined with the fact that, as always, there are an array of predatory (and sometimes not very competent) business creatures in jazz who camouflage themselves well, in their self-swerving efforts to take advantage of artists' emotional connection to the music. So artists have the added challenges of trying to distinguish the honest record executives, managers, publicists, promoters and others, from the wolves in sheep's clothing and those who want to lord over the . With the shrinking market, there is a palpable and pervasive anxiety over fewer gigs for artists who have committed their lives to this, and so on. What are your views on how the business side is intersecting with the creative side and what are the prospects for the future.

SW: You know that's a loaded question. First of all, it's a great observation—and I totally agree with it. It's anybody's guess now. On one hand, with most of the major record companies getting out of the jazz business, I think it's positive. It puts the music back into the hands of the musicians. You don't have record companies determining the pecking order so to speak. The music traditionally has always determined that. When you look at the history of this music, there has always been an apprenticeship system in place until 15 or 20 years ago. Then they started to elevate younger musicians over some of the more mature musicians. There is always going to be great young talent around. To me it got turned around by default. The record companies promoted a lot of younger musicians who weren't necessarily ready to be leaders. In so doing, they dismantled the apprenticeship system. That changed the music in a profound way.

JJ: Someone commented to me that the concept used to be about established musicians, for example Coltrane, "What is John Coltrane going to do next?" as opposed to the media and business hype constantly and every few weeks or months focusing on "Who is going to be the next John Coltrane?"

SW: Exactly. Exactly. That's exactly right. We're now seeing the effects of this on the music, and culturally also. What I see with a lot of the new music now—a lot of which I enjoy—is that the foundations of swing and blues getting left behind. That is also palpable and is a real concern—because when you think culturally and esthetically about the foundation of what we call jazz, it is blues and swing. When that gets left behind, and we take these key ingredients out of the music—is it still jazz, just because it has some improvisation? I don't know. I see that

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there is a push to play in odd meters and to see how intellectual, how tricky and complex it can get. Okay. That has its merits. But, when we're talking about this music—whose foundation is blues, swing, and spirituality, and being about communication, and a folk music—and you remove those ingredients, it makes it something else. What that means is that a lot of young people are not going to get the kinds of experiences we're talking about—such as going into clubs and communicating with an audience, who are there to be moved and to hear and feel the music. Most audiences don't care if you're playing a flat 6ths over a Major chord. They couldn't care

less. I couldn't really care less either when I go to hear music. I don't go to hear music to discover how much they're calculating, I go to be moved and enlightened and stimulated. If they do that with simple Major triads, beautiful. If they do it with something more complex, beautiful. But the whole idea, is that music at its best reflects humanity, humility, spirituality and communication, and has those at its core. What is going to stay with you as a listener, a day from now, a week from now, years from now? The formulas? How intellectual, complex or tricky the music is? Or, the feeling you experienced?

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