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Saxophone Journal

Dan Wilensky

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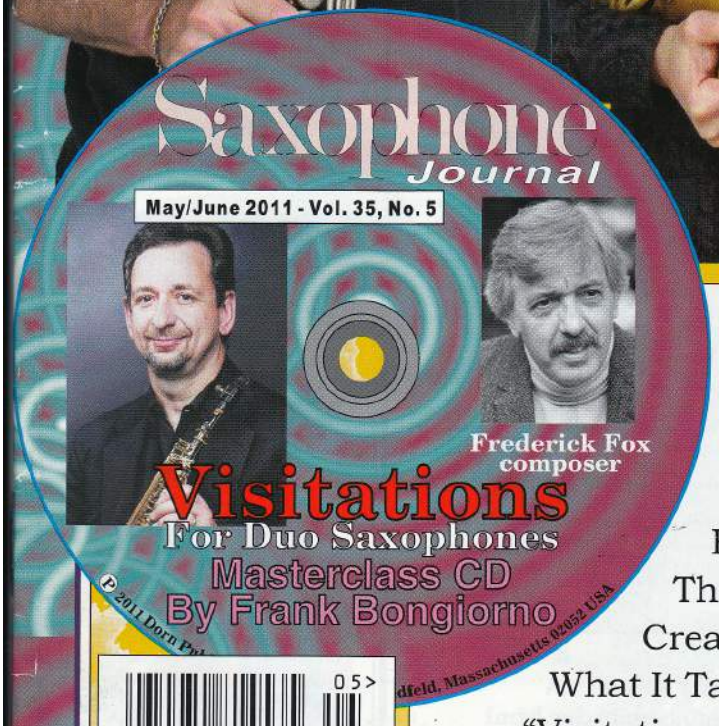

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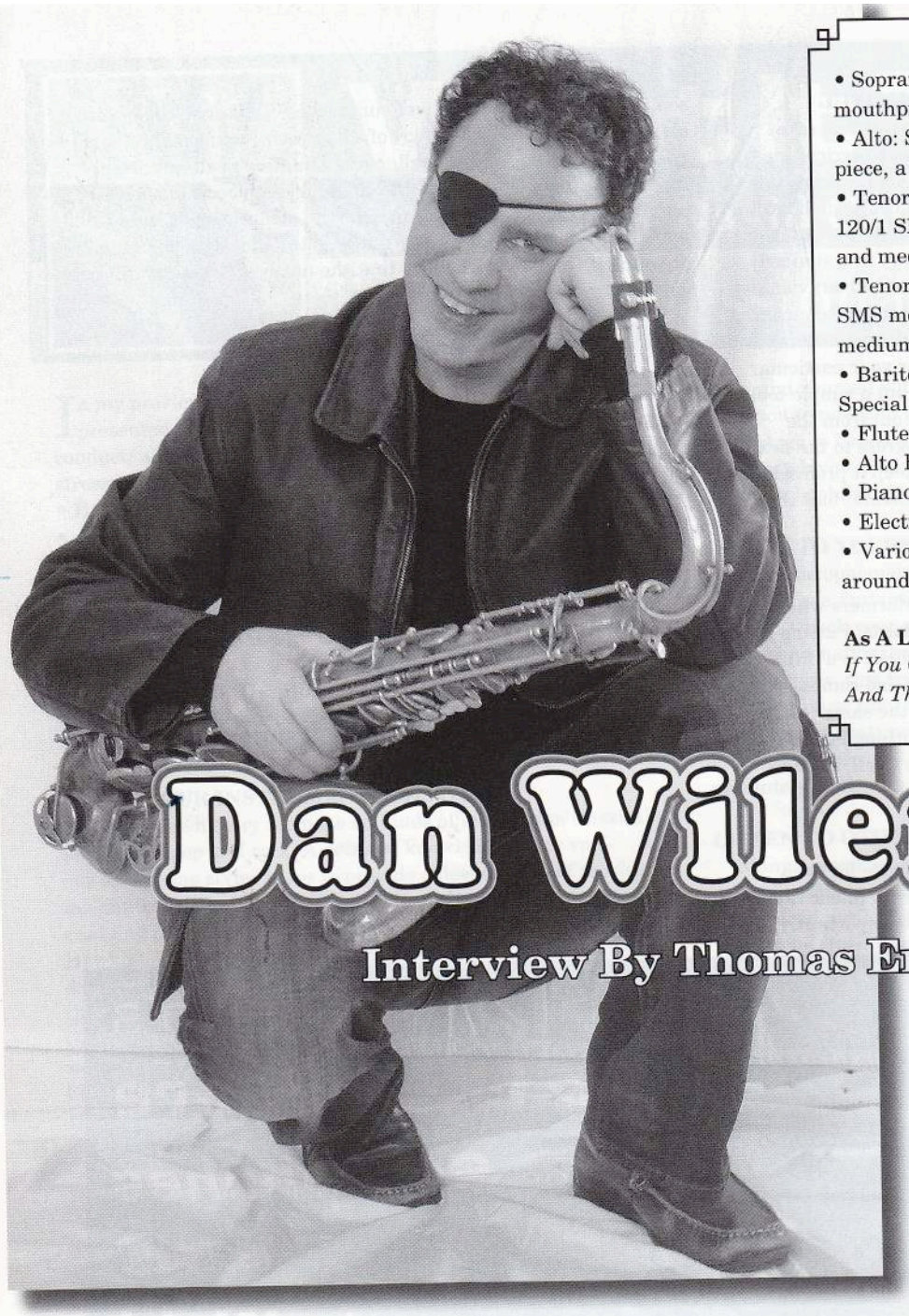

DAN WILENSKY'S EQUIPMENT

- Soprano - Selmer Mark VI with Bari 70 and Dukoff D7 mouthpieces, a Rovner ligature and Bari soft reeds.
- Alto: Selmer Balanced Action with a Dukoff D6 mouthpiece, a Rovner ligature and Bari soft reeds.
- Tenor 1 - Selmer Balanced Action with a Berg Larsen 120/1 SMS mouthpiece, a Rovner ligature and Bari soft and medium plastic reeds.
- Tenor 2 - Selmer Reference 36 with a Berg Larsen 120/1 SMS mouthpiece, a Rovner ligature and Bari soft and medium plastic reeds.
- Baritone - Yamaha YBS 62 Low A with a Lawton 9 Star Special mouthpiece (ligature attached) and Bari soft reeds.
- Flute - Sankyo Artist
- Alto Flute - Armstrong Silver
- Piano - Yamaha Grand C7
- Electric Piano - Yamaha P-250
- Various wood flutes, ocarinas, and percussion from around the world.

DAN WILENSKY'S DISCOGRAPHY

As A Leader

If You Only Knew (Speechless, 2010)

And Then Some (Speechless, 1998).

Dan Wilensky

Interview By Thomas Erdmann

Long gone are the days when the musicians backing up the rock and rollers, the soul music legends, the country music stars and the pop icons were just run-of-the-mill hacks. The competition for these highly lucrative gigs, which can run to over $30,000 a week plus per diem with artists like Madonna, are so greatly prized they only go to the most highly skilled, musically flexible and sensitive, and personally nice musicians available. After all, when you're on the road in close quarters for a long time nobody wants a fame hog or snobbishly stuck-up bandmate to be along for the ride. *Saxophone Journal* has chronicled some of the world's best in this arena, from Najee and Candy Dulpher for their work with Prince, to Tim Ries with The Rolling Stones and Plas Johnson to his work with everyone. Add to this list Dan Wilensky.

Born into a musical family in Ann Arbor, Michigan, reedman, composer, arranger and author Wilensky was raised in Berkeley, California. In the legendary Berkeley high school music program he played in various groups with future jazz stars Steve Bernstein, Benny Green and Craig Handy, performed at the Monterey Jazz Festival three years in a row, and in 1979 was invited to Philadelphia by the NAJE to solo with Woody Herman. Studies with Joe Henderson helped lead to a scholarship to the Eastman School of Music, which the 18 year-old initially declined when he was offered the lead alto chair in Ray Charles' band. Though Wilensky attended Eastman after he left Charles' band, the youngster didn't stay long when he was offered the saxophone chair with Little Queenie and the Percolators, and subsequently with Brother Jack McDuff, which led to the inevitable move to New York City.

Playing small and large gigs alike in the city, Wilensky quickly found himself working with artists like Cornell Dupree, Steve Gadd, Will Lee and Richard Tee in the band Who It Is, with Ray Anderson and Mark Helias in the band Slickaphonics, playing rodeos at Nassau Coliseum, playing in the streets, at funerals in Greenwich Village, in Broadway shows, on commercial jingles, film soundtracks and television theme songs. He toured with Steve Winwood, was with Rick Derringer in the TV house band for Joy Behar's *Way Off Broadway* show, and routinely gigged with artists like Cab Calloway, The Four Tops, Aretha Franklin, Ben E. King, Carole King, Darlene Love, and The Temptations, to list only a few. He even toured as pianist with Joan Baez and is in several videos with David Bowie. Continually busy, Wilensky still found time to play jazz gigs as a leader and in 1986 won a National Endowment for the Arts award for jazz performance and

composition.

All of the above has led to a discography of over 250 recordings including hits by James Brown, Linda Eder, Faith No More, Hall & Oates, Freddie Jackson, R. Kelly, Madonna, Melissa Manchester, Mark Murphy, Santana, Frank Sinatra, and BeBe & CeCe Winans, to list just a few. As a backing musician and member of bands he's performed on *The Tonight Show*, *Late Night With David Letterman*, *The Rosie O'Donnell Show*, *The View*, and guested with artists like Laura Brannigan, Sheena Easton, The Fabulous Thunderbirds, and Meatloaf, to again list just a few. You've heard his playing on countless television themes including *ABC College Football*, *Ebert At The Movies, ESPN Sports Center, King Of The Hill, The Martha Stewart Show, The Muppet Show, The Nanny, The Rickie Lake Show*, and *Montel Williams*. You've also heard him on many movie soundtracks including *The Bodyguard*, *A Chorus Line*, and *The Smartest Guys In The Room*.

Today, when not on the road, in the studio, or leading his own straight-ahead jazz group (he's released two CDs as a leader, *And Then Some* and *If You Only Knew*, with two more scheduled for release in 2011), Wilensky's featured in the music for the Emmy winning PBS children's show *Between The Lions*. As if this isn't enough, he's the author of an incredibly difficult yet exceptionally hip book of jazz saxophone patterns and etudes, *Advanced Sax*, and is also the author of one of the most essential books for anyone who is thinking about making money in the music business, *Musician! A Practical Guide for Students, Music Lovers, Amateurs, Professionals, Superstars, Wannabees and Has-Beens*. Even with all of this success it hasn't gone to his head. Unerringly humble, Wilensky's use of humor is coy and laugh-out-loud funny at the same time.

You attended a very famous public high school in Berkeley with a music department that was founded by the legendary Dr. Herb Wong who hired two jazz musician band directors, Phil Hardymon and Dick Whittington, to teach jazz in the elementary schools. What was there about this school district's program and the music going on there that created so many famous and great musicians like yourself, Joshua Redman, Peter Apfelbaum, and others mentioned in this article's introduction?

That was a planned accident, to be sure. In fourth grade we went on a field trip to the community theatre at Berkeley High to hear Duke Ellington play. I got to sit close to the band and I remember looking up and seeing five beautiful saxophones. I liked the fact you could press a key and something would move on another part of the horn. The sound was, obviously, overwhelming, and even Duke's voice was magical. That was it for me, I was gone.

The next day at school they came around and asked us to check off three instruments we'd like to play. I wrote, "saxophone, saxophone, and saxophone." The day after that the school gave me an alto. I didn't know, at that time, I was being groomed to be part of what turned out to be a spectacularly successful experiment.

Herb Wong was a force of nature, a Renaissance man, who searched for other teachers to jump start the program. He found Phil Hardymon, a trumpet player in New York who had tragically lost the use of one lung in an accident. Hardymon moved to Berkeley partly to come to grips with losing his playing career, but also in hopes of starting a teaching career. He gave us everything he had. He would sit us hot shots down and talk to us about what it would take to survive a playing career in New York. We were just 12 years-old. He'd give me tapes of Count Basie, Art Pepper and Hampton Hawes and asked me to listen to how they swung. These little things were huge. He took us seriously and

we responded by playing our hearts out.

Every time the school board tried to cut the performing arts budget, as always happens now, the public went nuts. Hundreds of people would show up at the meetings screaming and yelling, and somehow the funds materialized. You can tell it was a great program by all of the BHS grads who are out there tearing it up. Add Steve Elson, Lenny Pickett, and Michael Wolf who were there ten years before us. I studied with Steve, who gave me a real foundation.

You won a competition that sent you, while still in high school, to Philadelphia be a guest soloist with Woody Herman's band. What was that experience like?

Surreal. Frank Tiberi was checking me out, and that was a little intimidating. But I played a tune I'd always loved, *I Want To Talk About You*, a Billy Eckstine ballad. They had a beautiful arrangement of that. They also gave me $1,000 to do what I want with so I bought the alto I still use today. It was an amazing honor, and just one of the many incredible things that happened at Berkeley High that gave us all a serious head start.

You studied with Joe Henderson. I had the opportunity to interview trumpeter Rebecca Coupe Franks, who also studied with Joe. She said, of the many things she learned from him, there were two big things that really helped her, the first was he provided a strong influence to her on learning to play the piano with regard to changes and knowing your way around the keyboard to help with jazz. The second was that he would often assign her something to learn on her instrument, then leave the room for an hour or so giving her time to learn it, before coming back to check on her progress.

Oh yeah, that's right. Sometimes he'd leave so you could practice for awhile.

What was your experience with Joe like?

Joe had a really tall white house built into a hill in San Francisco he bought after doing a brief tour with Blood, Sweat & Tears. The first thing I had to do was master the Bay Area transportation system to get there. At the first lesson we talked about non-music things for a little while. Then he asked me to sit at the piano and play something I wrote; he knew I was doing some writing. After I played it he asked me how I'd arrange that melody for three horns. We worked on that for a while, then he sat at the piano and played a few notes asking me to repeat on my horn note for note what he played.

He taught me the first 16 bars to John Coltrane's solo on *Countdown* that way. I still remember that better than anything I ever memorized. Next we went downstairs and worked on classical saxophone pieces. The first lesson lasted about three hours.

After a while I was spending all day at his house. He'd sit me down to listen to some big band demos he had recorded years before. That band included Blue Mitchell, Chick Corea and others, the best; it sounded amazing. Then we'd talk about the arrangements and what he was going to do with them (some of the arrangements were eventually released on Verve in 1996). Our conversations were about everything and were extremely stimulating. He was an intellectual who spoke five or six languages, knew a lot about history, philosophy, art, and was really well traveled. I felt like a deity had taken the time to show me the way.

What's it like to be an 18 year-old kid and being out on the road playing lead alto with Ray Charles?

Another surreal experience. I have to go back. Right after I graduated I got a call from my friend Buddy Gordon, a trumpeter I had met at a high school band competition. I was taking care of the house while my mom was taking care of my grandmother in Massachusetts. He was out on the road with Ray Charles and asked me if he could crash at my house for a few days. I was only supposed to be watering the plants. He mentioned the lead alto player had just quit and I should go with him to The Keystone in Palo Alto that night to meet the band.

When we showed up they asked me to get my horn out and come to the back. Ray's saxophone section was waiting for me. Five music stands were set up with these huge books of music on them; Ray's repertoire was vast. Clifford Solomon, the legendary saxophonist, played second alto and was Ray's band leader. He pulled a chart out and counted it off. I guess I did okay because the next thing I know they handed me a suit that was five sizes too big and said, "Put this on."

Five minutes later I was on stage scrambling to find my charts. Some of them were ripped, others had coffee or blood stains on them, and some of the charts were missing. We played a couple of instrumentals and I survived. When Ray was introduced my mouth went bone dry and I started sweating. Clifford gave me little nudges and instructions at just the right time during the evening to help me out.

Ray sounded beautiful. They asked me to play with the band the next two nights in Berkeley, and then they asked me to join the tour. I called my brother and asked him to come take care of the house. I called my parents who both thought I should go to school instead, and I split.

Were there any old timers in the band who took you under their wing?

Absolutely. It was one of the last of Ray's bands that had the old guard aboard. After that it became a little college-y with twenty-somethings making up the bulk of the membership, but during my time greenhorns were the minority.

There were two stellar tenor players, Rudy Johnson and Don Wilkerson, who couldn't have been more different. Rudy managed to practice five or six hours a day on the road and admired George Coleman's ability to play anything in any key. He would do yoga on the tarmac. Rudy gave advice by example; living the life. Hearing him every night was incredible. Don was born in Louisiana but had a Texas tenor meets Chu Berry thing going on. He had worked with Cannonball and Grant Green and made several records for Blue Note. He was one of many unsung jazz heroes and shared many philosophical nuggets with me like, "There's only two scales you got to know: C and C-sharp. That covers all the notes." Johnny Coles was also aboard, and that was a pleasure. Every night he did the most moving rendition of *Am I Blue*; he sounded gorgeous.

Needless to say, Ray was amazing; a true improviser who never did the songs the same way twice. It was not like a lounge act like so many longtime performers become. He sang and played every note like it would be his last. There were about 300 arrangements in the book, we rehearsed on the road and added new charts all the time; that keeps a band vibrant. There were talented arrangers in the band, like the great trumpeter Tim Ouimette. I was inspired to write my first big band arrangements by all the goings on. At the end of the tour Ray recorded an instrumental album, which he often did at the end of tours, and bought one of my compositions to record. That recording is still in the vaults and I'm crossing my fingers it gets released one day.

When you left you went to Eastman. I know you left there to play with New Orleans rocker and singer Leigh Harris and her band, Little Queenie and the Percolators. How did that whole progression occur?

I left more because I had been out with Ray and had seen what I thought was the real deal. It turned out, of course, that the experience with Ray was only one of the real deals. At Eastman there was a ton to love. They had one of the best music libraries in the world, and I spent a lot of time there. George Eastman had been tone deaf, but he left all his money to start the music school. He loved the "atmosphere" of chamber music and used to invite professional musicians to play at his mansion. The school is still buying stuff with the money he left.

Ray Wright was the main guy there at the time, and he and Bill Dobbins allowed me to sit in on graduate classes. They kind of knew I wasn't going to stay. I just put together groups and wrote music for people. I started a band with Lee Musiker, Dave Fink, and Dave Ratajczak.

I went to high school with Dave Ratajczak. He was a really nice guy who was an amazing musician and far beyond us even back then.

Then you know the quality of the musicians who were coming out of all the cracks at Eastman. The school had a state of the art recording studio and if I have any regrets it's that I didn't spend more time learning the technical stuff because I could have gotten a jump on my studio chops. It's a very underrated school. Basically I dropped out of all of the classes I was supposed to take, and split with Little Queenie. It was a little ugly, but they understood.

How did that gig come about?

Dave Ratajczak put a note in my box saying I should give the band a call because this great band needed somebody for a few gigs. I called and we did some gigs and parties in the Rochester area; I had a blast. They asked me to go to New York with them and we opened up a club called The 80s on the upper East Side. It was 1980. I thought I had found my next gig. They said they'd send for me. I was still in New York, so I went back to Rochester, packed up my stuff and shipped it off to New Orleans in a box. The band went back to New Orleans and a few weeks later I got a message saying their saxophone player thought he was a little too old for the cold and that was why he didn't go up to New York with the band, but now that they're back in New Orleans they wouldn't be needing me. That was, "Hello, this is your life. So what if you played with Ray Charles. Welcome to reality son." My stuff arrived back in New York three months later. I ended up crashing on the floor of a trumpet player who had been on Ray's band, Greg Ruvolo. Baptism by fire for sure.

How did you hook up with Brother Jack McDuff? Were you living in New York at this point?

Not officially. I was living in Nyack because I couldn't find an apartment in the city during the few weeks I was at Greg's. I shared an apartment with a friend and practiced my butt off. I played in some bands up there, played Wednesday nights at a jazz club call The Office, and I went down to the city to play in the streets, sit in at clubs, and jam in the loft scene. I met a lot of superb musicians, and I started getting some gigs in and around the city. I was playing with guitarist up in Nyack named Danny Pietro, who got the gig with McDuff. Danny introduced me to McDuff and we hit it off. I went out on the road with him for six months.

Is there anything, good or bad, you learned during your time with him and that band that you carry with you today?

The same thing I learned from Ray Charles; play every note as if it's your last, put everything into it, totally become the music, become the song, the song rules, you have a role to play, do it. There was no bull. Every once in a while if I wasn't giving my all he would shout out, "Play." That's all he would say, and I knew what he meant. Our repertoire was all over the place. We did standards, McDuff originals, and some funk. He had a hit record out at that time, and I was on it. It was my first real record. It was called *Kisses*. It got a lot of radio play on what became the WRVR format, but back then they included more traditional jazz.

You're someone who has been successful in moving to New York, though I'm sure you've seen your percentage of musicians who come to the city, including very fine players, who wash out and don't make it. What advice do you have for those who are contemplating moving to New York City in order to give them the best chance for success?

That's a hard question. There are so many things. I'd have to say, if you have to ask, don't do it. If you have to think about moving to New York, then don't do it. You know when you're ready; when you just have to try it, when you just can't stand it anymore and you have to go, then go. The goal is to find what you're good at and accept your limitations while working to eliminate them.

I've fallen on my face many times, especially when I first moved to New York. But the question is do you wake up the next morning and wallow in your misery or do you use the experience as a catalyst to learn what you don't know? Just keep doing it. Somebody will like you, somebody will hire you.

Ultimately your music is a reflection of who you are as a person. Have you lived enough in order to have something to say? Are you in touch with the moment and able to recognize opportunities? Are you flexible? Do you know what has come before you? Did you do your research? It's a never ending process. When you

perform or record it's only a moment in time. You're only as good as your last performance, but get up and keep moving on. If you move to New York you have to know that will be happening every single day.
Jan Garbarek, one of my favorite saxophonists, said, "It's about choosing the appropriate sound for each moment." You have to focus on what you're doing and pay attention. If you keep your ears open, know you're there to make music, and don't limit yourself to one genre, unless you're the baddest dude in one thing, you'll be okay. Keep your eye on the prize and continue to find yourself. Or maybe not, maybe you're just a journeyman, or a journeyman for a while and then start making records as a leader. That sort of describes me. I've spent most of my life as a sideman and am now beginning to figure out what I want to do for the rest of my life.

Your two CDs as a leader are different kinds of recordings. Your first one, And Then Some, is more of a contemporary jazz release with you playing a lot of different instruments, including saxophones, flute, keyboards and drum programming. It is a very hip disc. Each of the tunes has their own kind of different vibe. "Now I Know" makes me think of a Steely Dan while "Fait Accompli" reminds me of something you might hear Will Downing sing. You are so good in so many different styles that I was wondering if your first disc was like what Bob James has said he wanted to do with his first release as a leader, to make it a kind of demo of a number of different styles he had fluency in?

No, it was pure schizophrenia. Yeah, I recorded the entire kitchen sink. I originally recorded 23 tunes and threw out six, putting 17 on the disc. It was all over the map. That was what probably killed that CD. People liked it a lot, but it was difficult to get on the radio. It got mined for other uses though. A couple jingles came from that, a movie thing, and it got me other work. I did some live dates around it, and it went pretty well for a while. It was really a "here's what I've learned up till now" disc. In the ensuing years, however, I've been focusing on acoustic music.

For your second release as a leader,"If You Only Knew," you went the straight-ahead jazz route. One of the things I really admire about the new disc is that you and your fellow musicians aren't trying to mystify listeners with tons of technique. Instead you've made a very thoughtful, and if I can use this horribly overused term, deep, recording. All of the solos are incredibly well crafted and very attentive to what is going on around you at the time. Why the change from the first disc?

Thank you for the kind words. In many ways I feel this disc is my opening salvo, and I can't wait to get into the studio again. I went the straight-ahead route partly because I've played a ton of jazz gigs as a sideman, but as a leader, I had never released anything in that genre. Expressing yourself in that vein is a tremendous challenge: the nuance, the technical requirements, the harmonic awareness, knowledge and instantaneous improvisation. You can do some of that in other genres, but I'm finding this very attractive right now.

I have to say I wish I could give a copy of your book," Musician," to a ton of people I've worked with in the past, both at big gigs and small ones, because they could have really used it. I was wondering if the impetus for writing this book came from the same place as my initial reaction, which was that you came into contact with a number of bad experiences you had while at gigs?

It was definitely inspired by my own experiences, the good, the bad, and the ugly. It is the book I wish I owned when I was coming up. That's the truth. I've read a lot of books on music and the music business, but a lot of them don't come from the rank and file musicians' perspective; what gigs are really like. *Musician!* tells the real story of musicianhood, from being a little kid in a school band, to street playing, to playing in Madison Square Garden, to teaching that little kid in the school band.

I've been getting great feedback from both musicians and civilians. Bobby Shew sent a message to tell me how much he likes it. He called it, "A no b.s. book." Non-musicians appreciate the dedication and perseverance we take for granted; continually rekindling and reinventing our music and our careers. It's also relevant during hard-times. Musicians are used to the struggle. But the book comes from my real life experiences and the failures I've had, what I did wrong and what I did right.

There are a number of things that resonate with me within the book. There really isn't a single page that doesn't have words of gold on it. One is where you write, "Even if everything is A-OK, there's nothing like taking a lesson with a seasoned pro to spark your art." You see so many kids who say, "I have it all together," and nobody has it all together. Is that part of what has led to your success, in that you are continuing pushing forward in your playing? Is it that drive to be better that has led you to a very successful career which would be the envy of just about everybody?

Well, the grass is always greener. You know this is off your question, but I look at a cat like Dave Binney and say, "That's what I want to do." You say I've been successful, but I look at Dave and other saxophonists like Donny McCaslin, Steve Wilson, Chris Potter, Rudresh Mahanthrappa, Greg Osby, Bob Mintzer, and Joe Lovano. Now those are some bad dudes. But to answer your question, yes, I think so. For example, in a month I'll be going into the studio to record a new record that will be different from what I did on *If*. Some of the material will be through-composed. It will have a guitar instead of piano in order to open up the sound a little more. It will be freer, with more chances taken. I'm very excited that Tony Moreno will be on it. He is one of the most vibrant and urgent drummers on the scene today. He'll kick my butt. I've always listened to drummers more than anybody. I would say that's a big part of the whole process.

I've always hung out with drummers, singers, composers and producers more than horn players mainly because those are the people who are the guts of the music. There's much more to it than saxophonistics. That's the message, listen to everything. Getting outside of the country and checking out what is going on in India, Africa and Brazil, and elsewhere, are obvious ways to expand your horizon. You need to mix it up so you don't get too comfortable. I rarely work on the same thing two days in a row unless I'm working on a specific song I have to learn for a gig or a recording project. In those cases you have to stay there until you get it, but in general I like to keep it really lively: listen to a wide variety of things, work on a wide variety of things, play with all kinds of people. You can grow just by working with different instruments.

Let's talk about your saxophone tutorial, "Advanced Sax." That is a difficult book. What made you decide you wanted to write such a tutorial?

This is actually my second book. I did another book years ago titled *Saxophone Technique*. It was published by Music Sales and it did very well. Then they started to publish mainly guitar books, and they didn't do a reprint of my book. Since then I had been collecting ideas, things I was practicing. It got to the point where I had page after page of material. I realized that I was actually writing another book, and it just sort of happened by putting together all of these ideas and concepts from my own practice sessions. Whenever you're working on a book or a song you get to a point where you get a lot of energy to push on. You

have to go with that or it won't happen. I was also looking at a particular niche in the market. I noticed there is a ton of stuff to practice, but a lot of it is very similar to the rest of what's available. My idea was that you should not be comfortable when you're practicing. The closest thing to it is Slonimsky's Thesaurus. You shouldn't be practicing on the bandstand, but when you're practicing you should shake the tree. I think my book shakes the tree.

I think, for many musicians, they never really approach a pedagogical book of etude material in a manner that will allow them to make the most of the book. In your book you include eight ways to approach the book in order to get the most out of it. One of the ways you list really resonated with me, and that is, "There is enough in this book to get you out of your rut so your neighbors and bandmates won't get sick of you always practicing the same old licks." In your own teaching do you find students who are continually practicing the same things over and over and not moving forward?

I don't let my students do that. I apply the same philosophy to my students that I hold for myself, no matter what their age. We work on a variety of things.

I was wondering if you've ever had any pianists or trumpeters come to you and say they loved working out of the book because it reminds me, in many ways, of the books Oscar Peterson wrote that John Coltrane used to practice out of; there is great material in your book that is not just applicable to saxophonists, but other instrumentalists as well will surely find benefit in the material you present. Have other instrumentalists ever come to you to say your book helped them?

Oh yeah, people playing different instruments bought it. Unfortunately, it's more or less out of print as well, but I have a bunch of copies people can get a hold of by contacting me. *Advanced Sax* is published by Mel Bay, and you can also download it from their website. But yes, over the years a number of people who play other instruments commented on that exact thing, that it was applicable to them. It was actually initially marketed as such.

For me the section I loved the best was the chromatic workout section. It reminded me of a book originally written for trumpeters that a lot of saxophonists work out of titled, "Robert Nagel's Speed Studies." The goal of that book is total fluency on the horn, and to do that it includes a whole bunch of difficult and unconventional chromatic scale patterns. Can you talk about your goals for this section of the book?

I don't want my fingers to fall into comfortable patterns. That section is more mathematical than anything. I wanted to include every possible combination without regard to the instrument and what fits. It's to force you out of a rut. And I wanted to focus on melodic and harmonic ideas without clouding the study of those ideas with rhythm, so there is no rhythm, just pure 16th notes. I'm big on focusing on one thing at a time. If you're studying tone then work on your sound. If you're working on articulation then work on articulation. One thing at a time. Rhythm would be a study all by itself, without dynamics and without tonal nuance; just rhythm. So in the chromatic section the student should just be trying to get around the horn.

When you're going to go work with another artist as a side-musician, how do you prepare yourself?

It's different every time. Most often it's happened very spontaneously. You end up getting a call and you have to go right away which means you don't have time to prepare. You go in and you have no idea what they're going to want. Most sessions are like that. Sometimes they play it for you with the tape running and you play, and other times they are very specific and you work on it for a while. Things used to be slower with more time to prepare, but the world is on hyper-drive now, and certainly with regard to studio work you have to be prepared to do anything, quickly. Live stuff usually offers the luxury of rehearsing. But you can also rehearse too much.

One of the beautiful things about New York is efficiency. There's an overqualified pool of musicians on every instrument. For instance, for my new CD we'll get together twice for a few hours each time, about a week apart, and we've never played as a band before. Then we'll go in and record for one day, and that's it. I'm attempting to follow the model my heroes followed, which is in-and-out; it's only a document of where you are at that moment. Go in and do the best you can. It keeps you on your toes, and gives it a live feel. The guys I'll be working with are stellar players. I like to be with musicians who are more experienced than me. Certainly Tony Moreno and Dean Johnson fit that bill. The guitarist I'm going to use, Dave Phelps, is not known by a lot of people. He's amazing – another unsung hero, and I'm hoping people check him out on this disc.

You've played behind vocalists in a lot of musical situations. What advice do you have for other saxophonists with regard to playing behind vocalists?

Listen hard. You're a cog in the wheel, no more, no less. You have a role to play. Don't get in the way of the singer. The song and the singer rule. As long as you keep that in mind you should be cool. I'm not going to say people are born with the ability to play behind singers, but it's hard to learn unless you have it to begin with or you spend a lot of time with singers. The more time you spend with singers the better you'll be, because they'll tell you if you're good or not. They'll tell you to stay out of their way. They'll tell you this in musical ways and they'll say it with four letter words. The more you do it, the more sensitive you will get with regard to when to play and when not to play. You will develop an acute awareness, but this also applies to everything and all the music you play; you should be listening carefully to everything. This is an underrated skill. Listening is really what we're doing here. This is easy to forget, especially with all of the things you have to deal with on the bandstand or in the studio and with all of the distractions that come with those situations, not to mention all of the stuff you might have going on at home or in the business of music, and then there can be the clinking of glasses that distracts you and for whatever reason you might not be getting along with someone. What you have to do is really listen and humble yourself to the song and the intent of the music. One of the best ways to learn this technique is to work with singers because they don't pull punches.

I love how you've noted, in another interview, how "almost all my big breaks in the studio came directly from live gigs." You even note how you got a jingle gig in the studio from playing live in the street on Madison Avenue. There really is no such thing as a toss off or wasted gig, is there?

No, and you should be learning something at every gig, even if you hate the music you better be learning something. You might simply learn what you don't like to do, but you must learn. Also keep every card and email address you get and check in with the people; hang out, sit in, never think you're too good to sit in. There is so much to figure out that the worst thing you can do is be exclusionary in your approach. Be open, be humble to the music, pay attention and you'll be cool. §