

The Wire

JAZZ,
IMPROVISED MUSIC
AND

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The man who liberated the soprano sax talks about the spark, the gap – and the leap. Brian Case watches the road.

'Music has a mind of its own, and at the time you have to just watch the road. Something like that . . .

'The spark . . . the gap . . . the leap. Robert Musil talks about that for three big books. (*The Man Without Qualities*). Zen literature, too. What we're talking about is magic. That's what's interesting in any kind of art – or athletes, or cooks.

'When I used to work with Monk, he used to say, "Let's lift the bandstand". That's magic, man, when the bandstand levitates. I didn't know how to do it – but I knew what he was talking about. Old dreams but they're still valid.'

Any artist sharing Steve Lacy's above-stated belief in the near-priestly function of art is in for a thin time in our society. Touring England with Company, Steve has been occasionally depressed by sparse audiences.

'In the kind of music we do together, the whole thing is – is it interesting? Is it alive? There's nothing else to say. All the other criteria fall by the wayside.

'England is rough because of the quantity of rock'n' roll going on, the proportions. It's hard to cope with all that. I used to love Hendrix, Stevie Wonder, the Beatles, Otis Redding, but the ordinary bulk just makes me sick. I can't stomach it at all.

'Last night, I was walking by the university here, and I heard some ordinary rock they had coming out of a party there – just some typical stuff – and *loud*, you could hear it for three blocks!

'Me, personally, I got sick to my stomach. I couldn't stand it. It's just like everything I do is against what this is. And that was current normal stuff with loads of people having a good time to it, no problem – except I was walking down the street and I was suffering, and I was the only one who was.

'It's hard to deal with a phenomenon like that. You have to consider that you're a specialist, you're a freak – and you have to live with it.

'The only thing important in music, as in anything else, is life and death. Any kind of style, any kind of way is valid, if it's alive. Life and interest are two things I

STEVE

equate. Once a thing is sufficiently interesting, it becomes alive. I don't care whether it's Dixieland, Flixieland, Pixieland, or a private or public joke or no joke at all – if it's alive, I'm for it.

'In my own case, I don't want to be put to sleep, so I don't want to put others to sleep.'

You can sometimes judge a man by the company he keeps. In the case of Steve Lacy, it is possible to infer a high seriousness and heft from his title dedications. A man of vast cultural grasp, tributes to writers like Elias Canetti, Kafka and Dostoyevsky and painters like Paul Klee appear alongside the more expected jazz masters in his personal pantheon.

What they all have in common goes a long way towards explaining why the pioneer of the modern soprano saxophone, whose original inspiration was the Bechet of 'The Mooche', should have deserted steady gigs with the likes of Pee Wee Russell, George Wettling, Miff Mole, Henry Red Allen, Max Kaminski and Lips Page for the financial void of the

undiscovered Cecil Taylor.

Canetti's *Auto Da Fe*, a novel of nightmarish intensity which foresaw the rise of Nazi Germany, started our trace.

'He was beyond even what he knew himself,' said Steve. 'The power of observation, the burning inspiration, the prophecy. I've read everything I can get my hands on in English, which is not much. My wife reads German, so she was able to tell me about the journals and other stuff.'

'To me, writing has to get to a certain level, a certain heat, before it interests me really. The greatest writers and the greatest players are the ones who write or play beyond themselves – above and beyond the rational. For example, Gombrovitch said that after he'd read something he'd written, he became that – but before writing it, he didn't know what that was.'

And Klee?

'I studied his lecture notes and works like *The Thinking Eye* and I think I learned as much from him as I did from many musicians. He's all about rhythm and

ensuring variety, wetness, a kinda fertility. I can do it in addition to what I normally do, but I can't only do that. The thing is to change up – play on a theme, off a theme. I like a variety of approaches in conjunction with each other.'

Few musicians have Steve Lacy's iron determination. He worked with Thelonious Monk for four months, and spent the next 12 years working out the possibilities of Monk's compositions. He and Roswell Rudd, an ex-Dixielander trombonist, concentrated exclusively on the Monk repertoire from 1962-65, and Lacy has recently returned to it again.

'It became like a kind of Dixieland, yeah. Part of learning that stuff is to fool with it, and to arbitrarily change certain aspects of it so as to see what will happen. It's a way of orientation, and I do that with my own material too. I try and play it in different tempos and see why it won't work.'

'I don't worry about the Monk stuff like I used to. I try and get the theme right, but once that's over, I don't have to take it too seriously. I used to try to get each measure correct, but now it's sort

'To me, he was the vanguard of the vanguard – the freest edge of the free thing they had going then. We got to be fast friends and sort of brothers, and we spent a lot of time playing together in my house in New York.'

'He'd say, "Well – let's play", and I'd say "OK – what do you want to play?" – and he'd say, "No, let's just play". This was revolutionary to me at the time because I was into Monk tunes, and thought you had to have a tune, a structure and chord changes, the whole thing. He didn't have any problem that way. He'd just play, and when he played it was really alive.'

'This started me thinking a lot, and it took me over five years before I reached that point myself, and a lot of hard work and struggle to break the shackles. His way of going into the beyond and just taking off – to not worry about where you were coming from, but just to go – I wanted to be able to do that myself. It had something to do with my concepts of life and death and music.'

The late Fifties found Lacy playing in the Gil Evans Orchestra, sharing a shortlived quartet with Jimmy Giuffrè, inspiring Coltrane to take up the soprano, playing with Rollins on the Williamburg Bridge.

the batteries. Born to Russian emigrant parents, he feels his nationality strongly.

'It's in the blood. Very strong. I feel it in my appetites, in the way I seek out certain kinds of music, certain kinds of books, in the way that I respond. In my music there's a certain lyric thrust. I think the Russians have a power in their language and a rhythmic vitality. Negative aspects: there's a sloppiness, too. I've got to watch it! There's some sticky stuff, too – a treacly quality.'

Sloppy is the last thing one associates with Lacy. The steadiness of his musical advance and the single-mindedness of his compositional output indicates a methodical mind.

Example: why do you use an off-station radio on 'Stations'?

Answer. 'It had several aspects to it. One was a desire to get into the now, to keep the music absolutely now, and have nothing to do with then. When you turn the radio on, it's really now. Whatever you catch, you have to deal with. Next, the element of inspiration from John Cage. Thirdly, it was dedicated to Monk, and the structure, harmony and rhythm that I superimposed upon the radio is very Monkish. So that's what that was all about.'

That species of QED makes it

LACY

proportion and structure, thicknesses and thinnesses of lines, the effect of one thing on another, visually.

'I've translated this into my own musical terms. Klee is trying to seize something and fix it and put it down. His work covers a vast area of human dealings and endeavours, and he's found ways of dealing with all these phenomena in plastic terms. That's what a musician does too, so it's very close.'

Continual practice and periods of totally free playing armour him for his role as a vehicle for the music.

'It's good to have something in the bank, as it were, before you make that leap. It's good to be steeped in the technical aspects, because otherwise you're going to break your neck. Free playing is a kinda research for me, a kinda pushing. You extend the language and you come up with a few things, but I find it hard.'

'The danger is dryness, the drying up, a tendency towards aridity. For me, these are a way of

of behind me, and I can relax with it more. I think I do a better job now.'

Two major influences in the emancipation of Steve Lacy were Cecil Taylor and Don Cherry. The period with Taylor from 1958-59 was seminal but both men have since developed apart.

'That influence isn't apparent now in what I'm doing – if it was, there'd be something wrong – but it is chemically related. Some of the stuff that he was writing back in the Fifties that we used to rehearse has disappeared, and he never went back to it. On the contrary, for me, it formed an integral part of what I did, and was the basis of some of my own writing.'

'Those pieces on a record like *Into The Hot*, they gave me a key. That was kind of a gift to me. I really got into that kind of composition, whereas he got out of it, and went beyond that. Even the titles, "Bulbs", "Mixed", they're kinda like my titles, too.'

Cherry's arrival in New York with Ornette in 1959 bowled him over.

'One day, Rollins said, "I have a good place to play – why don't you come out to practise?" I didn't know where he was going to take me. It was out on the bridge, you know – and that was it.'

'During that period, we practised two or three times a week. It was very fruitful for me, and he said he learned something from it, too, because he needed stimulation from other people at that time.'

'It was then that I realized that it was hard to get a sound outside, but if you persist at it, you can – and then when you go indoors, it's easy. I still find that valuable. When I first started as a kid, I played in a tiled bathroom and it sounded great – then when I got in a normal dead room, it sounded terrible. This is the opposite.'

In 1965 he left America for Europe, and has been settled in Paris since 1970. He prefers the depth of experience in the Old World, though occasionally returns to New York to recharge

difficult to relate to Lacy's leap beyond logic.

'It's a progressive appetite for wanting to take the leap, because unless you do, you're not really alive. If you're not secure enough to take the plunge, then you're really in trouble, and you'd better go back and practice until you are secure enough to drop the security. It isn't random at all.'

But the concept of the leap conjures up associations of a bracing of the muscles, of strain. Don't most musicians report that, during the creative act, their minds are a blank?

'Not exactly a blank – more like a blink. You try and stay out of the way. You try and not lose touch with the music, and let the thing happen. It's not you that does it – it's *IT* that wants to be done. You get yourself in good shape and be in tune and on your toes, have good chops – and not mess it up. It can only go one way, and it's not you who decides, it's *IT*.'



Jak Kilby

STEVE LACY

DISCOGRAPHY

- Soprano Sax – Prestige 7125
 The Straight Horn – Candid S9007-M-007
 School Days – QED 997
 Epistrophy – BYG 529.126
 Moon – BYG 529.352/Affinity 23
 Wordless – Futura 22
 Estilhacos (Chips): Live in Lisbon – Guilda da Musica 11403001
 The Gap – America 6125
 Flakes – RCA Vista TPL 1-1097
 Lumps – ICP 016
 Stabs – FMP SAJ 05
 Stalks – Denon YQ 7507
 At Mandara – Alm 5
 Torments – Morgue 01
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 Distant Voices – Nippon Columbia YX 7085
 Axiame Vol 1 – Red VPA 120
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 Saxophone Special – Emanem 3310
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Fri 29 BIRMINGHAM, B'ham & Midland Institute

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Tue 2 LEICESTER, Phoenix Arts

Thu 4 LLANTWIT MAJOR, St Donat's Arts Centre

STEVE LACY SEXTET

Steve Lacy (*soprano*) Steve Potts (*alto*) Irene Aebi (*violin, voice, cello*)
Jean-Jacques Avenel (*bass*) Bobby Few (*piano*) Oliver Johnson (*drums*)

& KEITH TIPPETT

solo piano

November

Sun 7 LONDON, Round House

Thu 11 LEICESTER, Phoenix Arts

Fri 12 LLANTWIT MAJOR, St Donat's Arts Centre

Sat 13 BRISTOL, Arnolfini Gallery

Sun 14 SHEFFIELD, Crucible Theatre

Tue 16 NEWCASTLE, Corner House Hotel, Heaton

Wed 17 DARLINGTON, Arts Centre

Thu 18 MANCHESTER, Band on the Wall

Fri 19 LEEDS, Playhouse

Sat 20 KENDAL, Brewery Arts Centre

Sun 21 BIRMINGHAM, Strathallan Hotel

Mon 22 COVENTRY, Warwick University Arts Centre

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