

DEC 1976

THE JAZZ MAGAZINE

Goofa

ONE DOLLAR

TheMotionDevotion.com

October 26, 1927 -
December 18, 1987

click [HERE](#) for rare video from CHICAGO's Jazz Scene

WARNE MARSH
BILL DIXON
BIRTHRIGHT

"He is one of the most individual players around, and it's funny nobody knows that. I wonder what people use for ears these days." - Lee Konitz

"Warne had and has the fantastic ability to thrill me the way Pres or Roy, Christian or Bird, maybe a few others had." - Lennie Tristano

"We finally meet" were Warne's welcome words when he opened his hotel door for me. After listening to his music for about 25 years, some correspondence and a few telephone calls - this was my first meeting with Warne. The date was November 25, 1975 and after having dined we sat down for a couple of hours during which we did this interview.

My first chance to hear Warne's playing in person came later in the evening when he played four sets at Jazzhus Tagskaegget in Aarhus, Denmark. Accompanied by Bent Eriksen's trio Warne gave the listeners a lesson in what improvisation and musical creativity is all about - using compositions like You Stepped Out Of A Dream, Walkin', Like Someone In Love and Moonlight In Vermont as vehicles for his art of improvising.

It was a memorable musical experience and luckily there came other chances to hear Warne as he played both Montmartre in Copenhagen and returned to Tagskaegget. At the end of his first European tour - which had come about thanks to Jazz Exchange, a Danish non-profit organization - Warne was teamed with his old partner Lee Konitz.

The results of this congenial meeting were recorded by the Danish Storyville label and may be available when you read this. Thanks to Warne for his cooperation with this interview and for his musical taste and perseverance.

- Roland Baggenaes

P.S.: In the interview Warne mentions an album with the best example of his playing on record. The album is Revelation 22: "The Art of Improvising".

Warne: As a child in Los Angeles I played with kid bands. I started about the age of 13 playing saxophone. We had a band called the Hollywood Canteen Kids and during World War II we played at the Hollywood Canteen and I suppose that was my introduction to jazz. I used to love Ben Webster and tried to play like him. Those stock arrangements we played had chords, so that was my introduction to what improvising is - when one is given a chord progression to follow. But I can't say that really decided me to be a musician. What decided me was... at 18 I was drafted into the army and posted right outside of New York City. Charlie Parker was playing every night on 52nd Street, I had met Lennie and started studying with him and New York City was just alive with music, a marvelous, stimulating place to be. The whole east coast of America was much more culture con-

scious than the west coast, much more music conscious, so it's fair to say that turned me on. Because that was the time when I decided once and for all that I was going to improvise music.

Roland: You mentioned Ben Webster before, did you hear him in person on the west coast?

Warne: No, I heard Corky Corcoran who admired Ben Webster a lot too. I took a few lessons with Corky in fact, but I only knew Ben from his records with Duke Ellington at that time.

Roland: Tex Beneke has been named as one of your influences too....

Warne: Well, it's true because we played a lot of Glenn Miller arrangements and I was listening to the original Glenn Miller records and of course it was Tex playing on them. I was 14 or 15 and he impressed me.

Roland: Did you play any other instruments then?

Warne: I played the bass clarinet and clarinet and I had previously studied piano, but I was a saxophone player from when I was 15 when I bought a tenor. Now I've learned flute and I play clarinet because I teach these instruments but I consider them minor studies. Actually, any of the woodwinds is worth a lifetime career and flute and clarinet are major instruments. I don't think you have enough time in your life to do all three of them well, so I play tenor and consider the other instruments as necessary evils.

Roland: Did you know Lennie Tristano before you came to New York and how did you meet him?

Warne: I didn't know Lennie before I was sent to New York. I met him through a student of his, Don Ferrara, who was stationed at the same camp I was. My introduction to Lennie was through the correspondence he was having with Don who was already studying with him. I was that impressed by how efficiently he made his points that I decided to get to study. The primary study is how to use one's ears, but that has of course been the truth in music since Bach's time. In Europe you call it solfeggio and a good education starts with two years of solfeggio, and that's all ear training. Before you're even allowed to touch an instrument you must learn to think music and basically I think that's Lennie's approach. A student is required to learn the rudiments of music in a manner which permits him to perform them without having to read music, you see, which an improviser needs. So there's no written music in Lennie's method. One must learn, for example, Charlie Parker's and Lester Young's solos by ear from the records and learn, first of all, to hear them in one's head, then learn to sing them and finally learn to play them on one's own instrument. So it's... the major part of the study is to learn to think the language of music without having to read it. And then beyond that there are the meter studies, the rhythm studies, harmony

studies and complex harmony studies.

Roland: You also played with Tristano and Lee Konitz during that period....

Warne: Yeah, we had a band between 1949 and 1953 but during those years we were offered relatively little work, not really enough to keep a band together.

Let's see.... I think Billy Bauer was the first one who had to leave to keep working. He already had a family, and then Lee went with Stan Kenton in 1952. Again because he simply had no choice, he had five children by that time I think and it was necessary to work.

It wasn't until 1965 that we were offered enough work to keep the band busy and we put the band back together then. We worked about nine months on the east coast, but Lee felt that he wanted to be on his own so we didn't stay together although there was enough work. We were offered enough jobs but we split up again and I went back to L.A. where my people are. I had just been married myself and we moved back to L.A. and now here we are ten years after and things are coming together again.

Roland: Why do you think it was so hard to get enough work during the first period around 1950 - was the music too difficult?

Warne: Let me put it this way. Bebop was in full swing and the main thrust of jazz was bebop. We were regarded somewhat obliquely, let me say, we were first of all considered as being cool and even with the inference that we were intellectual musicians - which we really were. We were students of music, we were not interested in copying Charlie Parker and try to play bebop. We were interested in being competent and well-trained musicians as a starting point and then proceed from there. That first band really was largely Lennie's work. The written material, the written part of it was entirely done by Lennie. It was his band, it's fair to say.

Roland: Also, at that time there was a revived interest in some of the older forms of jazz....

Warne: Yes, but that remains current in America. It's always there I think. As a matter of fact, except for bebop I sincerely think that some of the best jazz is Dixieland. It's uncomplicated, it's honest, it's vigorous, stimulating music. And they play together, that's the big thing about it. There's not the kind of competition between the musicians you can hear in a lot of bebop and more recently in all of the different styles of jazz that have emerged from bebop. Jazz now... it seems that it has gone in 20 different directions since Charlie Parker's time. Jazz doesn't have just one meaning like it used to have. When I grew up it just had one meaning to me because Charlie Parker epitomized good jazz. But jazz was either bebop or it was traditional Dixieland and that's all there was to it. You liked one or the other, you patronized one or the other. And now you have

WARNE MARSH interview by Roland Baggenaes

20 different styles to choose from and to my ears none of them are so substantial as either good bebop or good Dixieland - and of course the work Lennie did then, and I think his music is as live today as it was then.

Roland: Around the time when Charlie Parker was playing you and Lennie Tristano worked together. Were the two schools of jazz very separate?

Warne: No, in reality there was a blend between the two. Parker recorded with Lennie on a couple of occasions. They liked and enjoyed each other. I myself worked with Charlie Parker. Lee worked with Miles Davis in that first nonet band - and very successfully, I love the way Lee played then. It was a period when everything was happening and a thousand or so musicians in New York were really trying to do their best. It was simply a

musical experience of that time, a growth in American music and the emphasis was not being put on money and making success the way it is now.

Roland: So you don't like the present situation?

Warne: I don't even think there is a situation. I don't think there is what you could call a musical community in America. In the 40s there was a community, in the 30s there was a community in Kansas City. Kansas City was a marvelous place for music, their clubs stayed open 24 hours a day, Charlie Parker and Lester Young grew up there. In the 40s there was a centre or a musical community in New York City complete with an excellent audience. I think one of the best audiences in the world lives in New York City. Now, that doesn't exist. There is no centre, L.A. is just as act-

ive as New York is. I think there are more good performers, musicians, in L.A. than in New York. What I'm saying is that L.A. which has never had a music of its own or produced major musicians or music - is now beginning to.

Roland: In the 50s there was a style or direction called West Coast jazz... played by people like Art Pepper, Bud Shank....

Warne: Art Pepper is an exception because he's a real musician but I think what's called West Coast jazz usually impresses me as just a sort of watered down version of good New York jazz, a reflection of what was going on in New York. Certainly all of the musicians were congregating in New York during these years, it's just recently the trend is reversed and they are coming back to L.A.

Roland: About your own work now, you're playing with Supersax....

Warne: Well, Supersax.... for about three years that's been keeping me pretty busy and since it's an effort to recreate Charlie Parker's music that means a great deal to me of course. That band will probably be active for another year or two and they expect to come to Europe and to go back to Japan.

There's been quite a revolution in American music with the very young generation which is tired of rock & roll. They find it is a poor medium for learning music - which it is - and Lennie and I and I believe Lee too are doing all the teaching we can handle. There's that much interest in finding out what really happened in the 40s. Good teachers in America are finding their hands full and a good education is best available through private teachers. At colleges and schools there are courses for jazz but it hasn't reached the level there that it can be taught privately - and this is jazz I'm talking about. Myself, I have as many students as I can handle right now, good students, good musicians. I teach them almost exactly what I was taught by Lennie. What you give a student really is an education that includes the disciplines of classical music. It's worthless to just give them ideas without giving them training. The student doesn't learn his music just because he's coming and taking his lesson. He learns his music because he practices the way classical musicians practice. But the student teaches himself, that's the point, the teacher is the guide.

So the classic studies in music, the rudiments of harmony, of meter and of rhythm can be taught pretty much as they are in classical music. And beyond that, when the student wants the contemporary knowledge of what's happening when you play jazz, which is to say what happens when four people get together and improvise. You see, improvisation is not new to music. Improvisation was popular in Bach's time. Bach was a master improviser, Beethoven and Mozart were improvisers. A well-trained musician in baroque music was an improviser, but they did not establish a form of improvisation which had four musicians improvising together, which you could call



ensemble improvisation.

It was the American negro that did that and the American negro is entirely responsible for creating jazz. I give him full credit for bringing improvisation back to music. And I think it's the spontaneous playing of music which has revolutionized the world of music - it really has. The individual is once again given a voice in creating music. It's not all one composer and a whole symphony of musicians with none of the musicians creating music but recreating one man's thinking. Now we have again the situation where four men are thinking and hopefully playing valid music, improvising it together.

Roland: Speaking of improvisation, when you improvise on a tune do you play on the chord changes or do you have the melody in the back of your head? I think Lee Konitz was quoted once for saying that when he was improvising he always had the melody in the back of his head.

Warne: Well, again it's easy to draw a parallel with classical music. There's a form of classical music called thematic improvisation and that exactly defines what we're doing in jazz. There's a theme and it is understood, it's the first chorus and from there on that theme is improvised. There is a structure in other words, as opposed to what is called free form nowadays where the structure itself is supposed to be improvised. That's what's so hard about it, to be valid music there still must be structure. Without any structure it's random and it simply doesn't qualify as valid music. Unless you like impressionism, I don't like it. What's called free form sounds accidental when it's good, to me it sounds like a random attempt to play music. By accident you may hear good music, but I don't depend on that.... In the 40s Lennie, Lee and I experimented with playing free music and I think our first attempts were the most successful. In order to play that way we felt that the musicianship had to be OK and the results had to be valid music. But we stopped playing free music, the more we played, the more difficult it seemed to be - and today we don't take chances like that when we play.

Roland: We spoke of Lester Young before. Do you agree with his often quoted statement about the importance of knowing the lyrics to the tune one does play?

Warne: Lester was an entirely lyrical person and I know exactly what he meant. In fact, I think Sonny Rollins has made that same statement. Yes I agree because that's part of what's being played. Improvisation is not music out of thin air. It's improvisation of a theme and that theme...if it's All The Things You Are does have lyrics to it. I think the improviser profits by being aware of the words as well as the melody. It's a minor point to me because words don't mean that much to me in music. I'm just an instrumentalist and I hear the melodies....

Roland: In your own improvisations and those of Lee Konitz you have moved far away from the original theme....

Warne: We've extended it to a point where it may bear very little relation to the original. Nevertheless it's been logical stages. For example, Lennie's composition Wow is taken from a standard tune, You Can Depend On Me, I think. Charlie Parker wrote Donna Lee, that's taken from Indiana, so call it an improvisation of an improvisation. I haven't gotten to the point where I deny the theme, the theme is still there.

Roland: You mentioned the many directions or styles of today. Which bands of today have moved you or impressed you?

Warne: In all honesty I have to say none. The good music played in the last 20 years has been by isolated individuals and not by groups. And naming some.... My most vivid recent musical experience is having heard and performed with Connie Crothers in concert in New York City last October. She is 34 and has studied with Lennie twelve years and she is a fascinating musician. She's one of the three or four musicians I've played with who can evoke a better performance out of me than I could give were I playing alone. Niels-Henning is another one. Kenny Clarke has had that effect on me. Also I have to mention Ronnie Ball and Sal Mosca. On the local scene in Los Angeles I enjoy listening to Pete Christlieb, a marvelous tenor player whose father plays bassoon with the L.A. Philharmonic. There are three or four gifted piano players, Roger Kellaway, Terry Trotter, Mike Wofford and Mike Lang.

Roland: You talked about improvisation and the American negro bringing it back to music. A lot of us feel that jazz is not regarded as it should be in the States. Do you think that the fact that it was the black American who created jazz is the reason for this?

Warne: Yes, oh yes. He's been regarded as a second-class citizen straight through. Charlie Parker was conscious of it and he made a comment somewhere in one of the books...Bird Lives, I think. If Charlie Parker, Bud Powell and Max Roach had been given full range to what they were doing, and if they had stayed together for five years it would once and for all have established jazz as fine art. But it never achieved the stature of fine art in America. And yet it is. The saying went around when Bird died...well, Charlie Parker is dead now and we'll get on doing our own little thing - and they forgot about him. Now there's a re-emergence of interest in what was played in the 40s, an interest in what led up to bebop. And what led up to bebop was 50 or 60 years of honest music by the American black. His day is yet to come as a musician. The musicians in America know what's going on but the people at large still regard jazz as folk music, that's a good way to put it. It's not art, it's folk music. That's what they think, and it's stupid.

Unfortunately, I don't see the contemporary blacks in America doing much about it. There's certainly a lot of white musicians who have gotten the message and are taking their music just as seri-

ously as Bird took his, and so we have a generation now of mixed white and black musicians - doing a lot of different things, I have to say. The real achievement in American music was what led up to and included Charlie Parker, Bud Powell, Max Roach, Tommy Potter...there are some other piano players too from that period, Kenny Drew and Duke Jordan. It's still the best music the country has produced and it's still not given the understanding it merits - although there are younger people now that are beginning to study it and are taking their music seriously if they're not sidetracked by rock and roll which is becoming passe. Young students don't wanna hear about rock & roll, they want to find out what led up to it, they wanna see through to the other side of it. They sense that rock & roll is relatively superficial music and it does not have the substance that bebop had.

By the time of bebop the small group, the quartet, quintet and sextet, had emerged as the forerunner of American jazz. That was the best context in which to improvise. The big band traditionally offered soloists like Lester Young and Roy Eldridge a chance to play sometimes but the music wasn't really built around improvisation. It was still highly arranged, almost completely arranged with a few solos here and there. What emerged was the quartet. But Bird, Bud Powell and Max Roach didn't work together long - they went out and got their own bands.

Roland: Big bands....

Warne: A big band today, to be a logical extension of good small group improvising would have to build around the ideas of small group playing. In other words, the music would have to be very highly improvised. It sounds very difficult to put 15 musicians together and get the same spontaneity you can get with four. It's a dream more than anything else, conceivably it can happen...I think Woody Herman's big bands are the closest to being good jazz bands and the early ones are the best ones. That's about as close I think a big band has come to express the feeling that goes with small group improvising.

Roland: Woody Herman had some famous tenor players, Zoot Sims, Stan Getz, Al Cohn....

Warne: My buddies...well, they all played with one of the first Herds and it was an attempt to express the same feeling of a small unit. But Zoot and Stan and Al play small group jazz now and I do and Lee Konitz does so we're back to where we were 25 years ago really.

Roland: Duke Ellington's band?

Warne: The Duke Ellington band is a contemporary phenomenon, that band could only have happened in America during the 20s and the 30s. When I was in my teens I loved the band but just like all the big bands they ceased to have the importance to me that small groups do when I began to feel that I wanted to work in a small context. It offered more individual freedom.

Roland: During the 50s and 60s your public appearances have at times been

very few. Has that fact affected your playing?

Warne: No, not at all. I'll be a student of music my whole life. I miss performing though, I think it's the most demanding form of the art. Not only to improvise, but to do it in front of a live audience. That's what jazz is all about: improvising. Well, let's put it this way: you're going to create the music, you're going to perform it and you're going to do all that in front of a live audience. That puts as much demand as I can think of on a musician - that's a challenge. Record dates I can live without. I did a studio recording recently and it was not an acoustic recording, it was a mechanical recording. And when you divide musicians, when you put them 20 feet apart and try to record them through engineering the musicians are not getting a blend in the first place. And there's no way in the world an engineer is going to fabricate good music from music that is not performed well...and yet they seem to think they can do it. The whole philosophy is wrong, it's a product of our hi-fi psychology. They have sophisticated equipment, they have everything but good acoustics, you see, but string quartets, for example, have not grouped in tight little circles for 300 years for no reason. They know what they're doing, they sit close together so that they can feel each other and they get the best out of themselves as a result.

Roland: Is that the reason, you think, that so little jazz of today impresses you?

Warne: Recorded jazz doesn't impress me at all. The best performances are still going to be live performances when the band happens to be set up well and the club has some acoustics. No, it's a problem, and like all problems in music the only people that are going to solve them are the musicians themselves. By simply not allowing those kinds of recordings to be made where they're done track on track. They're manufactured music, they're not good musical performances. To my ears they are not, they don't move me.

When we were recording in the 40s and the beginning of the 50s it was a little more spontaneous. First of all, there was a 3-minute time limit because we were working on 78s. Beyond that...we'll limit it to Capitol Records in New York...the recordings were done in a fairly decent studio, I don't even remember the mechanics of it. I don't remember if each musician had a microphone or they recorded the room sound. They got a pretty good recording out of the music. However, recordings are always no more than second-best, there's no way to get the complete impact of live music on records, hi-fi or not, it's just not there. So, recording's incidental to me, it's a way of offering the music to a larger audience but I never like to think of it as an end in itself. You notice that Lennie Tristano records very rarely.

I do not listen to records very much at home. Occasionally I get out my Bartok and Bach and that's really about it. Nowadays, that's what I'm listening to.

I'm concerned with performing now, I wanna get out and play in front of a live audience, that's what means something.

In Los Angeles there are two clubs where I do perform, Donte's and The Times and I work with my own quartet three or four days a month and Supersax plays two or three week-ends a month at Donte's. That's really as many personal appearances as any musician in L.A. is making. Los Angeles never did have enough of an audience to support live jazz - New York did. But jazz musicians do not make their livings in night clubs any more. It's a period in jazz where everything is dormant and I would even find it hard to say where it's going to re-emerge. Right at the moment it seems to be more active in Japan and in Europe than it is in America.

Roland: Although you said you don't care for recorded jazz - can you name one or two records you feel would give a good example of your playing?

Warne: The recent Revelation record which is my solos edited from an appearance at the Half Note in 1959. I think it's the best picture of my playing on record. And that's a live performance. That's the only record I can honestly say I think I've played my best on.

Roland: One tenor player we haven't talked about is John Coltrane. To many young musicians he is as important as Charlie Parker is to others.

Warne: Your education would be complete if after you listened to John Coltrane you went back to Charlie Parker and really listened. Parker provided John with his start, listen to his earlier recordings. Well, let me say this for John: he not only loved Charlie Parker, but you can hear that he captured some of the willingness to improvise, to innovate, he really sounded like he was searching in his earlier recordings. He's a good, honest improviser, I enjoy him a little less than I do Charlie Parker. I think Charlie Parker is a master and John could have been. I feel John's best playing is his earlier playing and I feel the same about Sonny Rollins. I enjoy John's ballads, the way he plays a ballad.

Roland: Coleman Hawkins....

Warne: Yes, I heard him after I heard Ben Webster and I love him just as much.

My own playing is quite different from both Ben and Coleman because when I heard Lester Young I said to myself that's it. Lester never wastes a motion, he's the most economical player I know - and that's art, that's artistic playing. Ben and Hawk are a little more emotional. The balance between emotion and substance is tipped towards emotion with both Ben and Hawk, but with Lester it's a perfect balance between emotion or feeling and the substance of his melodies, he simply never wastes a motion. We all know that his playing changed around 1945 in terms of efficiency or economy. He sounded healthy in the 30s and not the same later and I can hear the same thing in Billie Holiday. They both performed perfectly for some years and then something happened and their performances lacked the impact to me that the earlier ones did.

Roland: What does jazz mean to you?

Warne: Well, it means improvisation. To me, the best quality of our black music that we call jazz is its spontaneity, its willingness to improvise. As far as defining jazz in terms of style I'm not particularly impressed by styles. Charlie Parker certainly had style but that was a result of his abandoning himself to music, that's character. So if you take jazz as meaning American black music then I don't care whether I'm regarded a jazz musician as such or not, but if you take it to mean improvised music... that's what's important to me.

Roland: A final question, what do you devote your time to off the bandstand?

Warne: I have as many students as I can stand, I have 32 students a week and that's really a full load of teaching to me. And that's becoming a second career by now. I didn't take it seriously five years ago but I do now. And I feel that I've had one of the best educations available through Lennie - and essentially all I do is turn around and pass that on to my students. It's a fascinating career, really, teaching. To be given the responsibility for training a musician to express himself, not the old classical kind of teaching where you train a musician how to play Mozart.... But in order to teach him to express himself he has to be taught how to think the language of music....

