

Sax Section Evolution: Leading The New Pack

Size matters. Or does it? There was a time during my development as a lead alto saxophonist when I was obsessed with my own volume. Whether it was competing with a Stan Kenton-sized brass section, a bombastic rhythm section, or just staying on top of the other saxes, the answer always seemed to be “play louder.” There was definitely a time when this was in vogue, perhaps a leftover sentiment from the Buddy Rich and Maynard Ferguson schools. But the scene has changed quite a bit and so have the rules. It’s not all about volume and pyrotechnical chops anymore.

In my world as a saxophonist and woodwinds specialist in New York City, “size matters” doesn’t carry the usual innuendo. Rather, the clever play on words points to an ongoing concert series at the Tea Lounge in Brooklyn, the brainchild of trombonist/composer JC Sanford. Monday nights have traditionally been “rehearsal big band night” in the city, but Sanford curates a completely different evening of large ensemble music every week. Bandleaders and composers have been coming out of the woodwork with their own individual takes on what the new modern big band sound should be. Despite the abysmal state of the industry, large ensemble jazz is thriving, and there is more interest than ever in writing in this format. What is also apparent is that the sound has changed and so has the need for a different kind of musician, particularly in the role of a lead saxophone player.

There is nothing like the experience of being in the midst of a great swirling, swinging, grooving mass of sound, everyone giving their all to combine into a sum greater than its parts. But think about what you have to give up: The big band is *not* a democracy. It is an autocracy, or perhaps a dictatorship. There is a chain of command and, as a saxophonist, you are pretty much on the bottom rung of that ladder. Your choices on how to phrase a line are limited to what is being dictated by the lead trumpet or trombone. As the leader of a saxophone section, you need to set the example: impeccable intonation; accurate sight reading and rhythm; being able to listen, understand and follow the hierarchy of drums to lead trumpet to lead trombone; knowing when to blend instead of being on top; producing a clear, classical tone on all your doubles; phrasing intelligently and doing it consistently and correctly each time.

There is definitely a tradition of leading a saxophone section, and many of the principles remain the same to this day. Right out of Eastman College, I spent a year touring with the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra under the direction of Buddy Morrow. It was a crucial part of my education, for the band was a direct connection to

the big band era, and I learned a great deal about phrasing, swing feel and tonal concept from the guys who were actually there. I played tenor, but I learned a lot about how to lead a section from our lead alto saxophonist, Tracy Knoop. This was very traditional big band writing from the '40s and '50s—many arrangements by Billy Byers, Nelson Riddle, Neal Hefti, Bill Finegan—where you played in a sax *section* that almost always took its cue from the lead alto, and you had to be aware of how you fit within the group: how to feel the time; exactly on what part of the beat to cut off a note; when and when not to use vibrato; inflections; volume. These are the things a lead player must always make decisions about and do *exactly the same way each time*.

After leaving the Dorsey band I went to the University of North Texas to get a master’s in woodwinds, and while there I played lead alto in the One O’Clock Lab Band. Talk about a completely different experience! Suddenly I found myself sight-reading all the time. There was just so much material; we would literally be sight-reading new charts during concerts. It could be frustrating not getting to “settle in” with the music at times, but it truly prepared you for the New York scene where rehearsal time is at such a premium. Coming from mostly a tenor saxophone background, I spent many hours listening to, transcribing and playing along with some essential recordings from the Count Basie, Thad Jones/Mel Lewis and Stan Kenton orchestras and trying to get the sound and phrasing right. Since much of what we were playing in school came from these libraries, it was important to notice the different approaches: the lush vibrato of Marshal Royal with Basie, the dry and austere tone of Lee Konitz with Kenton and Gil Evans, and the pungent, penetrating, almost tenor-like approach of Dick Oatts at the Vanguard. I spent the next four years after UNT honing my lead alto skills with the U.S. Army Jazz Ambassadors. It was a good time to practice woodwind doubling, build chops and write music, but by the end of my hitch I was ready for a move to New York and to work on my career as a solo artist.

Of course all those skills came in handy for the New York big bands scene. I arrived in the city at a time when Maria Schneider’s orchestra was starting to attract a lot of attention with her new sound, informed more by the orchestral colors of Gil Evans and Bob Brookmeyer than the hard swing of Basie and Thad. At the time, the BMI Jazz Composers Workshop Orchestra needed a saxophonist; the lead tenor was required to play English horn, so I subbed in that chair and eventually moved over to the second alto spot, where I still play. After years of play-



Suggested Listening

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- Duke Ellington, “Jeep’s Blues,”
Ellington At Newport 1956 (Columbia)
-
- Count Basie, “Jessica’s Day,”
The Complete Roulette Studio Recordings Of Count Basie (Mosaic)
-
- Miles Davis/Gil Evans, “Move,”
Birth Of The Cool (Blue Note)
-
- Thad Jones/Mel Lewis, “Tiptoe,”
Consummation (Blue Note)
-
- Thad Jones/Mel Lewis, “Little Pixie,”
The Definitive Thad Jones: Live From The Village Vanguard, Vol. 1 (Nimbus)
-
- Maria Schneider, “Dissolution,”
Allegresse (Enja)
-
- John Hollenbeck, “The Cloud,”
Eternal Interlude (Sunnyside)
-
- John Hollenbeck, “A Blessing,”
A Blessing (OmniTone)
-
- Darcy James Argue, “Zeno,”
Inferral Machines (New Amsterdam)
-
- Ed Palermo, “What’s New In Baltimore,”
Eddie Loves Frank (Cuneiform)
-
- Ben Kono Group, “Castles And Daffodils,”
Crossing (Nineteen-Eight)

ing lead alto, it was a great education to play second to Mike Migliori and, often, Gerry Niewood. I tell students the best way to learn lead is to play second—you learn by shadowing the lead and playing inside their sound. The majority of the bandleaders I play for in New York all went through the BMI program at one point, so it was a great launching pad for me. It was here that I met composers Sanford, Darcy James Argue and Joe Phillips, and reconnected with a classmate from Eastman, John Hollenbeck. The workshop requires all participants to work within the big band instrumentation, but beyond that the sky is the limit. Strong reading skills are a must to navigate most modern charts, and sometimes math skills are a plus. I would say that rhythmic complexity is the most distinguishing factor separating the newer breed of writers from the old. In Argue's band *Secret Society*, we are often playing in several time-feels layered at once. Hollenbeck had once written a piece for us based on the transcribed rhythm of raindrops falling on a roof—probably the most rhythmically complex thing I've ever read.

Hollenbeck's large ensemble writing spotlights another departure from tradition. In the reed section the baritone sax is replaced by contra-alto and bass clarinet; one of the saxophone chairs is almost entirely clarinet; one of the tenors doubles on English horn; and the lead alto plays primarily flute and soprano saxophone. The addition of vibes and Theo Bleckmann's voice round out a sound that is very orchestral in color. In fact, the instrumentation and his writing for it grow largely out of the musical relationships Hollenbeck has with his musicians; he's writing for the performer's unique voice, not necessarily the instrument. This seems like a return to Duke Ellington's concept of writing for a particular group of players and using their particular personalities to mold the music. Another parallel to Ellington's approach is how Hollenbeck often doubles instruments across sections. Your focus of attention gets moved around the band in interesting ways and doesn't reside within a section for very long.

Other favorites of mine in this regard include Joe Phillips' *Numinous*, which started out with the BMI big band instrumentation and quickly morphed into a much more orchestral instrumentation with strings, voices and mallet percussion replacing much of the brass and woodwind roles; the reed players themselves would be doubling on five or six woodwinds. It's a thrill to improvise over such a rich tapestry of sound, and the rhythms and harmonies owe more to modern classical genres than jazz. Sanford's own band, *Sound Assembly*, has gradually taken on a more chamber music vibe, eschewing the typ-

ical sax section in favor of double reeds, flutes and clarinets. Then there is Argue, who retains the traditional instrumentation but uses the horns in unusual ways. Again, it's pretty heavy on the woodwind doubles; the lead book has some features on alto flute and often calls for advanced techniques like flutter-tonguing and growling.

Being proficient on multiple woodwinds and saxophones has been absolutely central to my success in this arena. I actually detest the term "doubling," because the great doublers in New York are at the top of their game on every instrument. I prefer "woodwind specialist." The way composers are writing for large ensembles is more demanding than ever and assumes the reed player has a fairly wide arsenal of woodwinds to bring to the music. If you have a special skill, you might want to advertise it.

One of my favorite bands to play with is led by Ed Palermo, who has been arranging and performing the music of Frank Zappa for more than 15 years. In his band I play tenor, flute and oboe and will probably never play alto. What sets this band apart is the stylistic thing you need to bring to the gig—straight-up hard rock and funk. What I love is that a song like "King Kong," which has basically two chords, can become such a great solo vehicle when it's opened up and stretched way out in creative ways. It's changed the way I like to improvise.

Some of the new bands can get quite "out there." In the BMI class there is always somebody trying to reinvent the wheel. What I like to hear is some kind of connection to the lineage of the big band, writing that displays a sense of the history and tradition while still pushing the boundaries of the new and unfamiliar. Just as the jazz improviser's unique voice grows out of what has been handed down, so does the tradition of writing, and the composer almost always has some sonic picture of what the saxophone section should sound like. You just can't play this music right without having at least checked out Johnny Hodges, or Marshal Royal, or Art Pepper and Lee Konitz, or Jerome Richardson and Dick Oatts. And now the big band has changed again, and it is lead players like Tim Ries, Charles Pillow and Steve Wilson who are setting the standard with strong woodwind doubling and instantly recognizable solo voices.

I am happy to say, after so much large ensemble participation, I am finally releasing my own debut recording, *Crossing*, on Nineteen-Eight Records. Interestingly enough, many of the tunes have long, complicated forms, complex rhythms, dense textures and lots of woodwind orchestrations. You can take the player out of the big band, but just try it the other way around—the big bands have come back to haunt me! **DB**



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