

## CHOPS

➔ **Overdue Ovation:** Scott Robinson



**Robinson with his '24 Conn**

## Married to His Saxophone

On his new album, multi-reedist Scott Robinson quits his straying ways and commits to tenor **BY ALLEN MORRISON**

**H**as Scott Robinson's tenor saxophone ever forgiven him for the time when, exhausted after a late gig, he absentmindedly left it on a New Jersey Transit bus?

"I sometimes feel my horn is rebuking me," Robinson, 60, told me recently

by phone, referring to the silver 1924 Conn that has been his partner since he bought it from an antiques dealer in 1975 when he was 16. In the liner notes for his new album, *Tenormore* (Arbors), Robinson writes, "This old tenor has been around the world with me many

times, and we've been through a lot of scrapes and jams together." He does all his own repairs, "soldering this, reinforcing that, replacing pads, patching the metal where it's nearly worn through, even making my own parts when needed." (Significant work of this kind was required after that unfortunate NJ Transit incident.)

Despite their long relationship—"like an old married couple," he says—Robinson is a tenor player who has been famously promiscuous in his pursuit of other wind instruments. He's probably most famous for his work with the Maria Schneider Orchestra, in which he has played baritone sax for over 25 years, although he's also contributed to more than 250 recordings with such greats as Frank Wess, Joe Lovano, Ron Carter, and Roscoe Mitchell. And he curates an epic collection of rare and exotic instruments (sarrusophone, anyone?) as part of his passion project, ScienSonic Laboratories, a membership society and record label for his more experimental projects that he runs out of a converted garage in the back of his Teaneck, N.J., home.

On *Tenormore*, however, Robinson atones for neglecting his beloved Conn.

The album, which includes his stellar quartet of pianist Helen Sung, bassist Martin Wind, and drummer Dennis Mackrel, is, surprisingly, his first as a leader playing only tenor. With a mix of playful, absorbing originals and innovative interpretations of standards, it's a showcase for his imagination and range on the instrument.

### JT: Why did you make *Tenormore*?

**SCOTT ROBINSON:** I felt like it was time to make a statement on the tenor.

BUD GLICK

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A few years ago, I emerged from a period of being thought of as a baritone player, which had certain advantages. I was getting a lot of attention for it. I love the instrument. But there's something funny about the baritone—it has a way of taking over your life. Once people find out you're good at that, they don't want to know about anything

tunes. I spent several months listening, practicing, and preparing for [pianist Frank Kimbrough's] mammoth Thelonious Monk recording project, *Monk's Dreams*, which spans 70 of his known compositions over six CDs. I play a lot of tenor with the Mingus Big Band, so I've spent a lot of time with Mingus tunes. And right now,

me today?" [Laughs] I don't have to be that critical, because she's the one that's critical, and I just take that home and say, "Okay, I need to work on this so I'm not as much of an idiot next time."

## "Life teamed me up with this horn. We're closer today than ever."

else. I stopped getting calls for tenor, and people kinda forgot I was a tenor player. Of course, I'm grateful to be highly regarded at anything. But I was starting to lose my relationship with the tenor. And I was hearing people say things like, "Wow, you sound great on tenor—I didn't even know you played that," which gave me chills. So I thought, I've gotta fix this.

I've worked hard to re-establish myself as a tenor player. I've been practicing more and really making the effort to get my voice back on the instrument. I've turned down baritone work in order to make room for that. And it's worked out. Now I'm playing almost exclusively tenor. And when I do pick up the baritone, it's fun because it's something different.

I'm trying to learn standards, bebop heads—tunes that I sort of know, but there's little bits of them where I know I'm not quite accurate. I'm just trying to step up my game, all across the spectrum.

## Are you your own worst critic?

The ultimate critic is the music. I always feel like she's looking down on me, skeptically. But when I get something right, and I get a little smile out of her face, that makes me happier than any poll. She's always going, "C'mon, that's it? That's all you got for

## What's the significance of the relationship between musicians and their instruments?

Well, it's like people, isn't it? Things have personality too. And probably no other objects that people make have as much personality as instruments—they're really sculptures. They're like people. As I said [about my tenor] in the liner notes, we kinda roll our eyes and forgive each other.

Life teamed me up with this horn. We're closer today than ever. There are many imperfections with this instrument, just as with the guy who plays it. At the end of the day, when I blow into it, it just feels like she's saying, "Okay, let's go." It's her personality. She seems to want to play. I don't have to force the sound to come out. I've strayed, I've dallied, I've played another instrument for a few months. But at this point it's probably too late for us to call it off. **JT**

## What was your practice routine for getting up to speed on tenor?

I'm never up to speed. You can easily get frozen by the thought of all the things that need to be worked on. Right now, I'm biting off different chunks of material. I spent about a year practicing out of the famous Arban trumpet method but doing it on the tenor sax, trying to do most of it in the written octave, then in the sounding octave of the tenor, which puts it up quite high. That was more than a year of work, with the abridged version of the book.

Recently, I've been working on