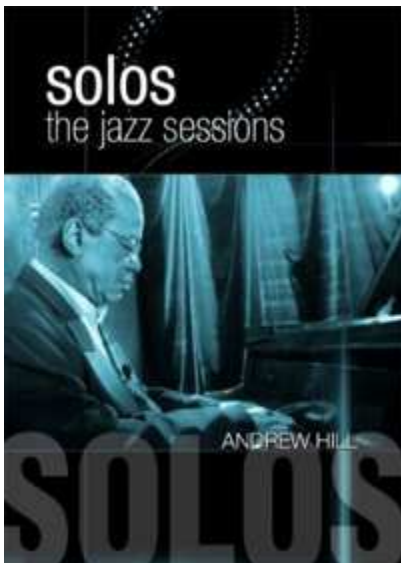


<http://www.popmatters.com/pm/review/123547-andrew-hill-gonzalo-rubalcaba-lee-konitz-solos-the-jazz-sessions/>



Andrew Hill



Solos, the Jazz Sessions – Andrew Hill

(MVD; US DVD: 23 Mar 2010)

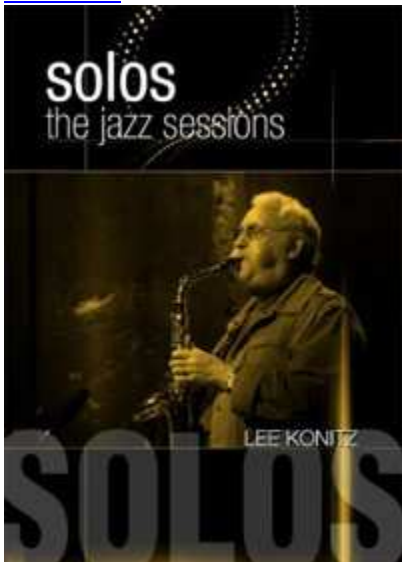
[Amazon](#)



Solos, the Jazz Sessions – Gonzalo Rubalcaba

(MVD; US DVD: 23 Mar 2010)

[Amazon](#)



Solos, the Jazz Sessions – Lee Konitz

(MVD; US DVD: 23 Mar 2010)

**Solos, the Jazz Sessions - Andrew Hill /
Gonzalo Rubalcaba / Lee Konitz**

By [Will Layman](#) 16 April 2010

Here are a series of high-definition video recordings of solo jazz performances: sharp, patient, and full of imagination. These 50-minute volumes cover a huge swath of modern players, with the first three dedicated to pianist Andrew Hill, pianist Gonzalo Rubalcaba, and alto saxophonist Lee Konitz. Consisting primarily of carefully filmed performances, dramatically lit and with no audience, these discs are gems for jazz fans. The little bits of interviews are largely beside the point. These DVDs, filmed by documentary filmmaker Daniel K. Berman, are front row seats for very fine and unusual jazz performances.

There are to be 39 of these discs in total, and the range of performers is exciting. Well-known modern jazz players such as Brad Meldau and Bill Frisell are here, but so are idiosyncratic players such as cellist Eric Friedlander and slide-trumpeter Steve Bernstein. Free jazz veteran Roscoe Mitchell is represented, and new-school players like Reid Anderson and Ethan Iverson (from The Bad Plus) also get their own volumes. The little-known blues player Kelly Joe Phelps is here, and so are a group of young Canadian players such as Montreal pianists Lorraine Desmarais and Marilyn Lerner.

The bottom line is this: jazz is rarely given this kind of classy treatment on film, and jazz musicians almost never get to record music this pure and un-prettied up. These “concerts” catch jazz musicians doing something oddly rare—just playing alone with no edits for a recording. This direct communication is what jazz is, of course, all about, yet so much jazz these days comes out sounding just a bit like a pop record.

The Andrew Hill performances are idiosyncratic and delicious. Hill is one of the great jazz pianists from the great '60s-era of Blue Note Records, where he led bands that dramatically rode the edge between the tail-end of bebop and the thrills of free jazz. Hill's tunes are harmonically daring without catapulting into chaos, and his solo piano style has an off-kilter drunkenness. His rhythms evoke Thelonious Monk, but in so doing Hill is perhaps our most modern refraction of Duke Ellington and stride piano.

The wonderfully titled “Bent Forward” is ruminative and lyrical, with the flow of harmonies seeming to follow the melody rather than driving it. Hill stops in various places or even seems to stall out, then he moves forward in small repeated sections. “Unsmooth” is more conventionally beautiful, but even on this ballad, Hill introduces dissonances and sour counterpoint lines that continually challenge the ear. A complaint might be that the performances here are too similar in tempo and general feeling, but the content is intriguing enough to hold the attention of any Hill fan. Highly recommended.

Gonzalo Rubalcaba's set is more conventional, harmonically and formally. Originally from Cuba, Rubalcaba is a virtuoso pianist but also a sensitive melodist. He takes advantage of the solo setting to play with a great deal of space in his music. His mastery of bop harmony and Latin rhythms, however, give this set plenty of straight-ahead appeal. His version of Dizzy Gillespie's “Con Alma” is taken with great patience and gentility, and he outlines each harmonic change precisely but with specificity.



Photo of Gonzalo Rubalcaba (partial) by ©Dragan Tasic

When Rubalcaba spins an improvised line, it is typically very clean and precise—articulated with the clarity of a classical pianist playing Bach. In some settings this comes off as cold or robotic, but in this solo recital, the pianist feels warm and gracious. His playing never becomes show-offy, and the surges of speed or volume that he achieves are clearly bursts of fire. Even his “Bésame Mucho” in this setting is measured and drenched in feeling. “Supernova” is a showcase for Rubalcaba’s strong left hand and ease with tricky, winding single-note lines, but even here there is plenty of air in the performance. A more mature Gonzalo Rubalcaba wisely tempers his own virtuosity to create drama and emotional power in his playing.

The Lee Konitz edition is the most intriguing of this batch. Konitz famously made his debut in the late ‘40s, playing on Miles Davis’s *Birth of the Cool* record, and then becoming associated with a variety of musicians and styles, stretching into free solo improvisation as he got older. Through it all, however, Konitz has retained an airy sound that is utterly his own. Hearing him play without accompaniment is not unheard of, but the generous dose here is marvelous.

While these solos sound very free (rather than consisting of written melodies with patterns that are then “blown” on), Konitz is sufficiently grounded in tonal music that his improvising never breaks free of what seems to be conventional harmony and articulation. His lines outline chords and normal scales, and he builds these solo statements like a bricklayer: one phrase at a time, with logical connections between them. It’s fun to watch him think.



Lee Konitz

On “Carrie’s Trance”, he alternates vocal lines with lines played on this alto, and somehow this helps you to hear just *how* he thinks through the architecture of his playing. Listening carefully, you can also hear the ways in which Konitz strays subtly from straight playing, with partially bent notes, jagged grace notes, and rhythmic use of the pads of his horn. On “Rebirth of the Cool”, he combines all his forces into a piece that delights with dramatic dynamic shifts and surprise.

“Cherokee” and “What’s New” would seem to be jazz standards, but Konitz doesn’t give you much chance to discover the known melody. He simply invents on the spot, making quick allusions to the melodies (or, sometimes, just to the harmonic flow of the tune). It’s all great fun, and the man’s puckish sense of himself comes through in the brief interview segments.

On the technical side, it’s worth noting that I could not get these discs to play on my MacBook Pro or two of the three DVD players in the house. My best DVD player got them to load up, but even here the concerts sometimes stuttered in playback. A little buyer-beware is in order, at least if your equipment is as low-fi as mine apparently is.

That said, these discs make a gorgeous record of music that is far from popular and extremely deserving of being captured lovingly. Berman, with his circling hi-def cameras, colored lighting, and dramatic angles, has given some great jazz the royal treatment. Bravo... if you can access it.

Rating: 