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Lee Konitz: Always Stretching His Sax

by KEVIN WHITEHEAD



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Lee Konitz performs at the Village Vanguard.

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Lee Konitz loves revisiting the same tunes over and over, challenging himself to find new things to say, and avoiding even personal clichés. The young trio backing him up on *Live at the Village Vanguard* has a complementary way of giving old tunes a new twist, like the fresh rhythmic perspectives it brings to the jazz standard "Cherokee."

It's obvious why Konitz likes playing with the trio Minsarah, comprising bassist Jeff Denson, German pianist Florian Weber and Israeli drummer Ziv Ravitz: They keep changing the backdrops to stimulate his imagination, while giving him plenty of

room to move when he improvises, or to steer the action himself. Now that Konitz is in his early 80s, his tone is a little more acerbic or brittle, his pitch more prone to wander. I'd call his sound stark if he didn't still radiate the joy of making music in every note.

Lee Konitz has a couple of other new releases out, both recorded around five years ago. One is a DVD in the series *Solos: The Jazz Sessions*, from Toronto. Swooping cameras and frequent cross fades can set your head swimming, but the unaccompanied saxophonist radiates calm, crafting beautiful phrases on some of his same favorite tunes. Konitz ruminates in his own sweet time, never needing to raise his voice or conform to another musician's timing.

concerts

Lee Konitz Trio: Live At The Village Vanguard
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Konitz also appears on *Jugendstil II*, masterminded by bass player Stephane Furic Leibovici. Most of the album is for trio with Chris Cheek up on tenor sax. So Konitz gets to indulge two more passions: playing in an unconventional setting and intertwining with a compatible saxophonist in unhurried counterpoint. Leibovici keeps his bass in the background, maintaining order. He's the leader, but the focus is on the horns.

Listening to Konitz in each of these varied settings, you get a sense of how he's managed to sustain a 65-year career. He has his comfort zones, but he also keeps stretching himself, measuring his worth and his ideas whenever he puts the horn to his mouth.

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