



# 10 Favorite Jazz Duo Recordings

By Paul Haar

As I write this column the preseason college football poll is out. For some reason Nebraska is not in the top ten and this must be an oversight. Anyhow, this seemed like the perfect backdrop for discussing my favorite saxophone combination, the duo.

I love jazz saxophone recordings, but something extra special seems to happen when you pair two talented musicians and put them in the moment. Somehow the constraints of the recording process (choosing songs, marketing, packaging concerns, etc.) go by the wayside and the true natural of creativity and perhaps, competition come to the fore.

Born in the backroom jam sessions on the 1930s and 40s the saxophone duo was often presented in the form of a saxophone battle. Legend has it that the great Coleman Hawkins used to travel from town to town asserting his superiority in the jam sessions that he used to frequent. That is until he came to Kansas City, where the tenor players were honed to a razor edge, ready to cut down anyone who came into their path.

The Count Basie Band's famous tenor battles (duos) were a staple in his band because he had two of the greatest saxophone pairs (historically) in Lester Young and Hershel Evans. Another great duo, like Sonny Stitt and Gene Ammons, made dozens of albums together while others met for a single, remarkable moment in the studio. One thing is for certain, all of these recordings are guaranteed to move you once you listen to them.

With one exception, I first heard all the recordings in my top ten list on Long Playing (LP) 33 1/3 rpm recordings (in some instances, 78 rpm).

Today many of these recordings exist under different titles and even on different labels who purchased the rights to the old origin recordings for re-release purposes. Many of these new releases of vintage LP cuts include tunes from multiple recording sessions, which is a benefit of being able to put more tunes on a digital CD (up to around 80 minutes max). The original 33, 1/3<sup>rd</sup> rpm LP could hold 30 minutes of music, while the earlier 78 rpm disks only held 3.5 minutes of music. And the 33, 1/3<sup>rd</sup> LPs are often referred to as simple 33's.

Now, let's begin our countdown, 10 to 1.

## 10

*Phil and Quill with Prestige* (Original Jazz Classics)

Recorded in 1957, this session features alto saxophonist Phil Woods and Gene Quill in a roaring bebop excursion that sounds more like a jam session than a record date. In this new CD release the entire original recording session is reunited with bonus tracks *Airegin* and *Solar*. When one hears these bonus tracks you gain a sense of just how difficult it must have been to cut tunes to fit the time constraints of the 33 1/3<sup>rd</sup> rpm format, or even the older 78 rpm format.

The musicians featured on this recording are Teddy Kotick

(bass), Nick Stabluas (drums) and George Syran (piano). If for no other reason you should by this CD recording for the tracks *Black Cherry Fritters* and *Cream De Funk*. These two tunes burn with a freshness that is more meaningful today than when they were first recorded. I highly recommend this recording for young alto players who need direction in regards to sound.

## 9

*Conversation With Warne* (Criss Cross Jazz)

Many younger people are not aware of this duo, let alone Warne Marsh. If they have heard this pair it is usually in the form of their Warner Brothers album titled *Apogee*, which as produced by the Steely Dan pair of Donald Fagen and Walter Becker. As good as that album (LP) was, I feel this re-released CD, *Conversations With Warne*, is even better. Featuring Jim Hughart (bass) and Nick Ceroli (drums), who were on the original *Apogee* recording this session, this digitally re-issued two CD set truly shows the freshness that exists when you pair two natural improvisers. Perhaps what I enjoy the most is the absence of the piano and indeed Marsh preferred the piano-less setting, which allowed him more improvisatory freedom. He used to joke, "Lenny Tristano was my piano player, and if I can't get him, I would just as soon work alone." Most, if not all of the pieces on this two CD set, were based on standard chord changes with new melodies added. Be sure to check out *Woody And You*, 'tis smokin'!

## 8

*The Wardell Gray-Dexter Gordon Quintet: a.k.a. The Chase* (Dial, Steeplechase)

This album (recording) first appeared on Dial records as a 78, later finding its way into the Steeplechase catalog as a 33 1/3<sup>rd</sup> LP. When I purchased my original copy, at a garage sale, it had no label and only a hand written list of tunes. It wasn't until later that I discovered I had a classic 78 Dial recording.

Dexter Gordon was known to pair with many a tenor player, including Gene Ammons and Teddy Edwards. But it was his work with Wardell Gray that left its mark on many listeners. Wardell's gift for weaving a melodic line, paired with Dexter's legendary sound and melodic concept, makes this CD re-release worth having. It is a hard recording to find. Currently it exists as a Japanese import CD under the label of *Jazz Classic Recordings*. Included on this session are Jimmy Bunn (piano), Chuck Thompson (drums), and Red Callender (bass).

## 7

*Boss Tenors: Straight Ahead From Chicago 1961* (Prestige)

This is an all out tenor battle at its finest. Just like a classic heavyweight fight, this recording leaves the listener wondering who is going to come out on top (I have my favorite)! Joined by

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*Gerry Mulligan Meets The Saxophonists* (Verve)

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*George Garzone: Four's And Two's* (NYC Records)

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*Coleman Hawkins Encounters Ben Webster* (Verve)

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*Phil Woods and Lew Tabackin* (Evidence)

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*Lee Konitz With Warne Marsh* (Koch Jazz)

1

*Cannonball and Coltrane* (EmArcy)

John Houston (piano), Buster Williams (bass), and George Brown (drums), Gene Ammons (affectionately known as "Jugs") and Sonny Stitt battle through blues, standards, and bebop tunes. I love how Ammons captivates the listener with one note on *One Before This*, as much as I love Stitt's alto work on *There Is No Greater Love*.

What I fancy about this pair is that you can hear the mutual respect each player has for the other, just as much as you can hear them try to beat each other up! This recording is one of many great sessions featuring these two tenormen, but *Boss Tenors: Straight Ahead From Chicago 1961* ranks as one of the best recordings ever in this genre.

6

*Gerry Mulligan Meets The Saxophonists* (Verve)

This CD compilation I included in the countdown because it is how I first became aware of all the wonderful albums that make up its contents. Taken from the sessions *Stan Getz Meets Gerry Mulligan*, *Gerry Mulligan Meets Johnny Hodges*, and *Gerry Mulligan Meets Ben Webster*, this CD is a wonderful representation of how Gerry Mulligan could meld with a variety of his saxophone brethren. Also, it is a great example of how a collection can lead the listener to other wonderful recordings. As soon as I finished listening to this CD I proceeded to find and purchase the original 33 1/3<sup>rd</sup> rpm recordings.

What is most striking to me on this CD re-release is how Verve pairs the different artist combinations gleaned from all three original recordings. No matter the track, or the paring, this is a great CD.

5

*George Garzone: Four's And Two's* (NYC Records)

Perhaps the goal wasn't to create a great saxophone duo recording, but this is what George Garzone got when he went into the studio to record *Four's And Two's*. Garzone is joined by modern tenor legend Joe Lovano, along with Joey Calderazzo (piano), Bill Stewart (drums), and John Lockwood (bass). This is one of the most inventive and interactive two-tenor albums I have heard in a long time. From the opening tune *One Time* to the inventive treatment of *Have You Met Miss Jones* and *In A Sentimental Mood* (which is performed only by the two tenor players), you are in for a wonderful listening experience.

4

*Coleman Hawkins Encounters Ben Webster* (Verve)

What else do I have to write about? I was fortunate enough to buy the original 33 1/3<sup>rd</sup> rpm LP recording, *Coleman Hawkins Encounters Ben Webster*, in a used record shop in Hastings, Nebraska. It was my first jazz recording. I remembered paying \$3 for the old LP and I chose it over another recording because it had a tenor saxophone on the cover. Little did I know that when I got it home I'd get a lesson in the funda-

mentals of jazz tenor playing. I remember driving my mother nuts moving the needle back to the beginning of the opening track, *Blues for Yolanda*. Today I still wince in ecstasy when Colman Hawkins digs in with muscular tenor sound. Ben Webster is the perfect foil with his sweet tenor treatment. If you don't own this re-released CD recording put this article down and buy it!

3

*Phil Woods and Lew Tabackin* (Evidence)

What do you get when you put together two of the most energetic and exciting saxophonists in jazz? This is an recording that sounds more like a jam session than a recording date. With the

exception of one other version (which we will talk about soon) their version of *Limehouse Blues* is the best I have ever heard. You can almost hear Lew Tabackin jumping around the recording studio playing those acrobatic licks. Woods, ever the bebop surgeon, is always in control and often in command. With one of the coolest covers in jazz, this recording is just a tour de force for the listener. I love the melodic line on *Lew Blue*. Each player is a master technician and play off one another in such a way as to invoke dizziness. Joining the saxophone pair are Jimmy Rowles, Michael Moore, and Bill Goodwin.

2

*Lee Konitz With Warne Marsh* (Koch Jazz)

I first learned about this amazing saxophone duo when in college. My jazz history teacher, Dick Wright, knowing that I was in the jazz band, leaned over to me and said, "I think you are going to like this one kiddo." Then he played the Lennie Tristano group performing *Wow*. My jaw dropped and I was hooked. When I approached him after class and asked where I could find the recording, he handed me a tape of *Lee Konitz With Warne Marsh*. His only word of advice was to remember that this was before overdubbing, and he said, "You will never hear two players so in sync spiritually with one another." Dick was right. If you ever want to get to be absolutely silent with listening pleasure play this CD. It is like being in the presence of a monumental work of art overwhelming to the senses.

1

*Cannonball and Coltrane* (EmArcy)

You knew this was coming. What is there to say about this recording? Well, it has the finest rendition of *Limehouse Blues*, EVER! This was the original recording that every saxophone player in college was able to sing note for note. The alto players all knew the Cannonball solos and the tenor players were too dumbfounded to do anything but just listen to Trane. However, this recording is not just about shock and awe, it is about beauty, identity, and purpose. This was Miles Davis' famed 1956 sextet featuring Paul Chambers, Jimmy Cobb, and Wynton minus the leader, Davis. Just as you recover from *Limehouse*

*Blues* you get hit with the beauty of *Stars Fell On Alabama*. This CD re-release has it all, technical prowess, beautiful ballads, and an all-star rhythm section. In my mind this is one of the best overall jazz saxophone recordings to ever be recorded and must CD for every saxophonist.

Well that is my top-ten favorite jazz duo recordings. I would love to learn about your favorite jazz recordings. Please let me know what you like to listen to by emailing me at paul@paul-