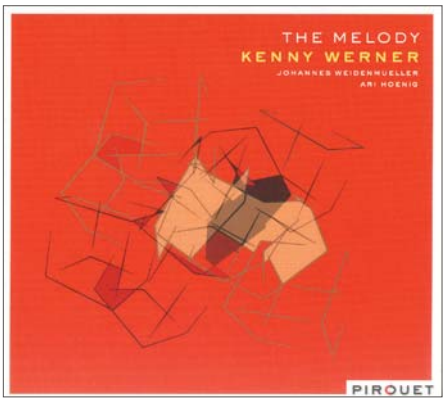


Kenny Werner
The Melody
PIROUET 3083
★★★★

Pianist Kenny Werner has always struck me as a sophisticated soul, his compositions and performances consistently swinging, but also jewel-like and urbane. His latest album, *The Melody*, cements that image of a cosmopolitan musician in the lineage of Oscar Peterson and Bill Evans.

I could spend an evening listening to Werner, Fred Hersch and the aforementioned masters and never want for more. From the delicate show tune classic "Try To Remember," to the closing original composition, "Beauty Secrets," Werner proves to be a sensitive stylist on a perpetually upward path.

Not that he doesn't take chances; if anything, he delights in them. His choice of drummer Ari Hoenig and acoustic bassist Johannes Weidenmueller finds the veteran musician drawing on a young blood/young gun rhythm section that pushes and prods, sends directions left and detours right. Hoenig, one of the wittiest drummers on the block, is perfectly paired with the deeply resonant and empathetic Weidenmueller.

The zigzagging "26-2" is a highlight, the trio playing jagged unison lines, exploring every cranny and crevice in a lovely lesson of swinging as if a windblown leaf. "Voncify The Emulyans" recalls Bill Evans' classic trio with Paul Motian, its slow-mo pulse as heated as the Gobi desert.

The trio totally upends "In Your Own Sweet Way," injecting mischievous rhythmic disturbances and comedic one-liners. "Beauty Secrets" closes the set like a midnight exploration, hushed tones leading to the most muscular, powerful and dynamic performance of this very satisfying album.

—Ken Micallef

Personnel: Kenny Werner, piano; Johannes Weidenmueller, bass; Ari Hoenig, drums.

The Melody: Try To Remember; Who?; Balloons; 26-2; Voncify The Emulyans; In Your Own Sweet Way; Beauty Secrets. (56:48)

Ordering info: pirouet.com

Jeff Denson Trio featuring Lee Konitz
Jeff Denson Trio + Lee Konitz
RIDGEWAY 001
★★★

Bassist Jeff Denson has collaborated with alto saxophonist Lee Konitz for nearly a decade, cajoling the reedist into some of his best playing of the current century on a series of recordings made with the Brooklyn trio Minsarah (where the bassist was joined by drummer Ziv Ravitz and pianist Florian Weber). These days, Denson is based in California, and his current trio features a pair of Bay Area musicians: pianist Dan Zemelman and drummer Jon Arkin.

Although the repertoire on this new studio effort plays up Konitz's crucial ties to Lennie Tristano—including several obscurities from the pianist and a reading of "Background Music" by fellow traveler Warne Marsh—what ultimately distinguishes this effort from the reedist's voluminous discography of one-off collaborations is the use of voice. Denson carries on a recent practice of singing along with his own playing, bringing a polished pop sensibility to his jacked-up version of "Blue Skies," but what sets this recording apart is that it documents Konitz's scat singing, something he's done in performance in recent years, but never on disc to this extent.

On a spontaneous ditty called "Duet," Denson and Konitz open up with a delightful bebop slalom, intertwining lines with preternatural grace and rhythmic sophistication, but toward the end they engage in a chorus of wordless vocals, improvising with the same kind of harmonic acuity they demonstrate with their primary instruments. On Tristano's "East Thirty-Second," the trio plays the theme for a couple of minutes before Konitz joins in, not on alto, but with his wobbly voice, shaping the same sort of peerless phrasing he masterfully produces with his horn. Ultimately, the curious distinction of this recording doesn't do much to enhance an already brilliant reputation—one better cemented by the alto playing.

—Peter Margasak

Jeff Denson Trio + Lee Konitz: Baby; Duet; Blue Skies; East Thirty-Second; Subconscious-Lee; Body And Soul; Background Music; Kary's Trance; Skylark; 317 East 32nd Street; Subconscious-Lee (Solo). (54:49)

Personnel: Jeff Denson, double bass, voice; Lee Konitz, alto saxophone, voice; Dan Zemelman, piano; Jon Arkin, drums.

Ordering info: ridgewayrecords.net

Steve Davis
Say When
SMOKE SESSIONS 1505
★★★★½

This deeply felt set is steeped in a history that's reflected in both the repertoire and the players in the studio. As detailed in the liner notes, *Say When* is Davis' tribute to the late trombone giant J.J. Johnson that's been 20 years in the making.

It features six Johnson originals plus a few standards, a Crescent City classic, one John Coltrane piece that Johnson recorded and a dedication tune by Harold Mabern, who also plays piano on the album. It's a nice overview of Johnson's songbook, illuminating both his instrumental innovations and his vast influence.

As a whole, the musicians assembled for this crisp session are a respected but perhaps underappreciated group. The interconnectivity heard here only strengthens their cases for wider recognition.

Davis met trumpeter Eddie Henderson while a teenage undergraduate at the University of Hartford. Their longtime rapport can be heard on the heads of the opening cut, "Pinnacles," and "Kenya." Tenor saxophonist Eric Alexander has known Davis for two decades and is a muscular sounding standout on Coltrane's "Village Blues."

Mabern gigged and recorded with Johnson in the mid-'60s, and his spirited "Mr. Johnson" is the setting for a particularly combustible Davis solo. A bandmate of Davis' in Jackie McLean's sextet, bassist Nat Reeves is nimble yet authoritative throughout. Davis and drummer Joe Farnsworth's history also stretches back through the years, and the drummer gets a nice showcase on "What Is This Thing Called Love?"

Interestingly, Davis approaches *Say When*'s two ballads, "Lament" and "There Will Never Be Another You," in quartet settings, giving his warm legato tones some time in the spotlight.

A modern version of "When The Saints Go Marching In," inspired by a Johnson arrangement, ends *Say When* with comfortable aplomb. Farnsworth is given one final solo in which to channel the spirit of a second line before the horns wistfully fade out.

—Yoshi Kato

Say When: Pinnacles; What Is This Thing Called Love?; Shortcake; Mr. Johnson; Lament; Say When; Kenya; Shutterbug; Village Blues; There Will Never Be Another You; When The Saints Marching In. (68:04)

Personnel: Steve Davis, trombone; Eddie Henderson, trumpet (1–4, 6–9, 11); Eric Alexander, tenor saxophone (1–4, 6–9, 11); Harold Mabern, piano; Nat Reeves, bass; Joe Farnsworth, drums.

Ordering info: smokesessionsrecords.com

63rd ANNUAL CRITICS POLL

HALL OF FAME

LEE KONITZ

MELODIC INVENTION

BY TED PANKEN • PHOTO BY JIMMY KATZ

On the afternoon of May 4, when Lee Konitz was informed of his induction into the DownBeat Hall Of Fame, he was not at his Manhattan apartment, or his house in rural Poland or the apartment he keeps in Cologne, Germany.

Instead, the 87-year-old alto and soprano saxophonist was in a London hotel room, preparing to play a few hours hence at Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club in a quintet with trumpeter Dave Douglas, guitarist Jakob Bro, bassist Linda Oh and drummer Jordi Rossy. The band would play Douglas' arrangements of tunes by Konitz and pianist Lennie Tristano, interpreting, among others, "Subconscious Lee" (a contrafact of "All The Things You Are") and "Kary's Trance" according to *tabula rasa* improvising principles similar to those Konitz and Tristano followed when they collaborated frequently between 1949 and 1952, at periodic intervals between 1955 and 1959, and a final time in 1964.

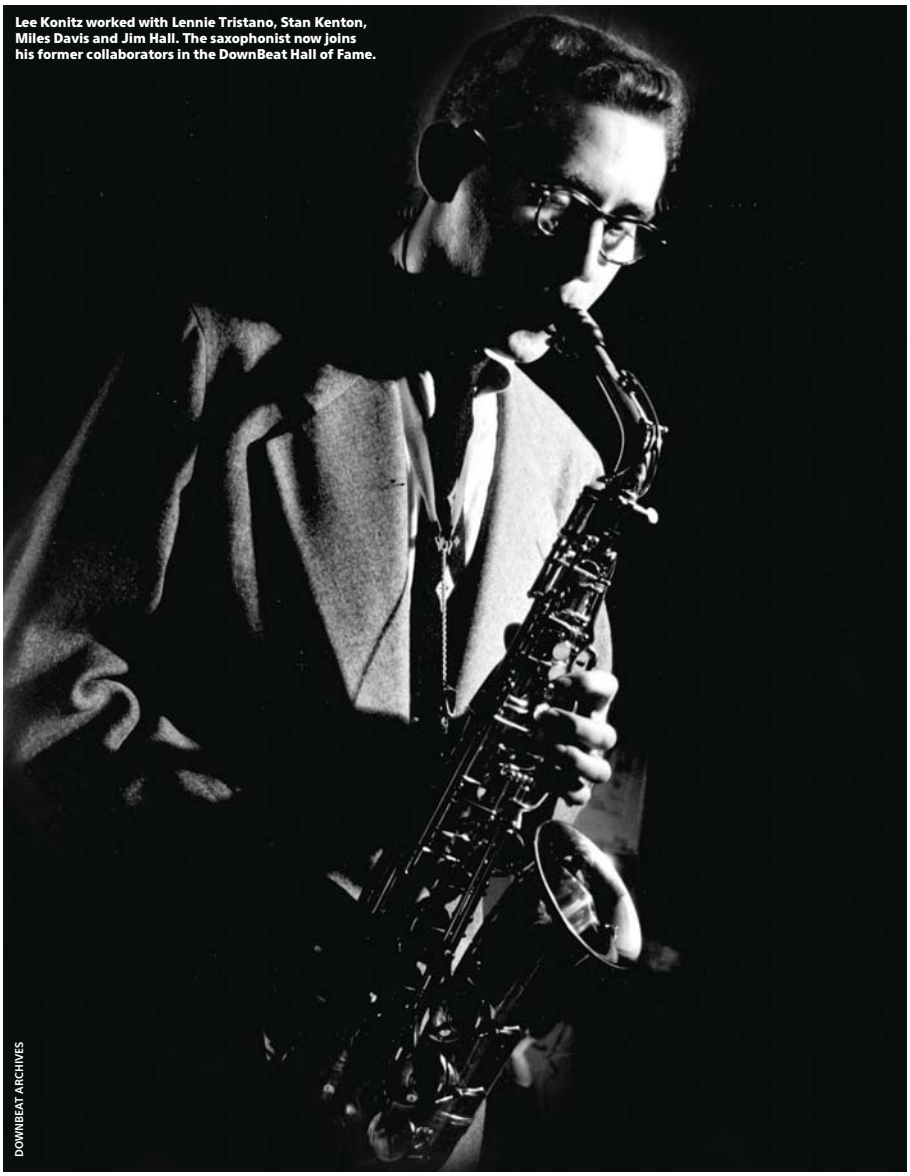
On the next day, Konitz and Bro, who had played three gigs in three days with Douglas, would depart for an eight-day, six-concert tour with guitarist Bill Frisell and bassist Thomas Morgan in Iceland, Denmark, the Faroe Islands, Norway and Greenland, during which they would apply similar aesthetics to navigating Bro's beyond-category 21st century songs, as they did on the Loveland albums *Balladeering* (2008), *Time* (2011) and *December Songs* (2013).

Konitz first visited Scandinavia in November 1951, as documented on spirited location broadcasts with local musicians that include "Sax Of A Kind," "Sound-Lee" and "All The Things You Are." Seven months before, he had played those and the 11 other tracks that constitute last year's release *Lennie Tristano: Chicago, April 1951* (Uptown) alongside tenor saxophonist Warne Marsh in Tristano's sextet at the city's Blue Note Jazz Club.

Proprietor Frank Holzfeind, who taped the proceedings, only booked top-shelf national acts, a category to which Chicago natives Tristano and Konitz had ascended after several critically acclaimed recordings during the two previous years—Tristano's for Prestige and Capitol and Konitz's for New Jazz. Before a friendly, not-too-loud audience, the sextet executes vertiginous unisons, stretching out soloistically and contrapuntally on the aforementioned, along with Konitz's "Palo Alto" and "Tautology," Marsh's "Background Music" and Tristano's "No Figs."

They also tackled the standards "I'll Remember April" and "Pennies From Heaven," which would spawn now-canonic variants like Tristano's "April" and "Lennie's Pennies," and Konitz's "Hi-Beck," which he had recorded a month before with a sextet that included Miles Davis, who had brought Konitz's *sui generis* alto voice to the *Birth Of The Cool* sessions for Capitol in 1949 and 1950.

That Konitz continues to seek and find new pathways through this core repertoire is evident from Douglas' reports of the British engagements and a new CD titled *Jeff Denson Trio + Lee Konitz* (Ridgeway), on which, accompanied by partners the age of his grandchildren, Konitz uncorks stunning alto saxophone solos on "Background Music" and Tristano's "317 East 32nd Street."



Lee Konitz worked with Lennie Tristano, Stan Kenton, Miles Davis and Jim Hall. The saxophonist now joins his former collaborators in the DownBeat Hall of Fame.

DOWNBEAT ARCHIVES

A few days after returning from England, Douglas recalled his surprise at Konitz's "radical approach to form" during rehearsals for the group's March debut at Manhattan's Jazz Standard. "The language itself adheres to the rules of Charlie Parker and Lennie Tristano—and Lee Konitz," Douglas said. "But everything starts as an improvisation, and the themes emerge from an unpredictable group improvisation. Everybody comes and goes. The song gets played in pieces. The full group is constantly involved in the elaboration of the form and the unfolding of the piece.

"Lee gave very specific directions. He said: 'When one person plays a line and the other person enters, they should start on the note that the other person ended on, and use a bit of the phraseology that the person was in—this is the way I used to play with Warne Marsh.' An intense ear-training thing. I think there's a parallel between Lee's ideas about how form and musical structure operate and the way Wayne Shorter works with his quartet."

Unlike Shorter, Konitz does not use metaphoric koans to describe the process that he follows as assiduously today as he did in 1949. The son of Jewish immigrants who ran a laundry and cleaning establishment in Chicago's Rogers Park neighborhood during the Great Depression, he explains his own no-safety-net improvisational intentions with pragmatic, nuts-and-bolts terminology.

"When I play, I'm not thinking of expressing sadness, or some picture-idea, or some way to make an emotional effect," he told collaborator Andy Hamilton in his authoritative autobiography, *Lee Konitz: Conversations On The Improviser's Art*. "I'm thinking of playing a melodic succession of notes, with as accurate a time-feeling as possible. I don't *feel* very poetic. I hear of people seeing colors, or images, or some spiritual motivation. I'm just playing the music clear, warm and positive—that's really my motivation."

Konitz's 2015 explanation to DownBeat was even more to the point. "I start from the first note, and trust something will happen if I give it a chance," he said. "It has to do with taking the time to let whatever note I'm playing resolve in some way, so I'm not just playing finger technique, one note after another non-stop, take a quick breath when you get out of breath. This is literally note by note."

A key component of Tristano's pedagogy was for students to sing the solos of Lester Young and Charlie Parker—to internalize them so deeply that they could then create their own composed variations and improvise upon them. That this remains fundamental to Konitz's aesthetics is illustrated in a two-and-a-half-minute vignette in the documentary *All The Things You Are*, where Konitz and pianist Dan Tepfer, en route to a duo concert in France in November 2010, scat Lester Young's heroic declamations on "Lady Be Good" and "Shoe Shine Boy." In recent months, Konitz said, he has begun to bring this heretofore private activity into performance.

"I enjoy making the singing feeling dictate the playing feeling, not the finger technique, which I tried to develop for many years, like most people," Konitz said. "I'm a shy person to some extent, and I never had confidence to just yodel, as I refer to my scat singing. One day with Dan, I played a phrase and needed to clear my throat, so I finished the phrase, *bi-doin-deedin-doden*, or whatever, and then a few bars later Dan did something like that, so I said, 'Oh, good—I'm in now; I can do this.' I don't get up to the microphone. I don't gesticulate. I just sit in a chair, and whenever I feel like it, at the beginning of a solo or in the middle or whenever, I warble a few syllables. I've been warbling ever since, and feel great about the whole process."

As a teenager in Chicago, Konitz—then an acolyte of Swing Era avatar altoists Johnny Hodges and Benny Carter—played lead alto and sang the blues at the South Side's Pershing Ballroom in an orchestra led by Harold Fox, the tailor for Jimmie Lunceford and Earl "Fatha" Hines. Seventy years later, he scatted with Douglas in England and with Bro in Scandinavia. Just three months earlier, he scatted several complete solos on the sessions that generated the new recording with bassist Denson, following three albums on Enja with the collective trio Minsarah: *Standards Live–At The Village Vanguard* (2014), *Lee Konitz New Quartet: Live At The Village Vanguard* (2009) and *Deep Lee* (2007). Denson recalled that when he and his Minsarah partners, pianist Florian Weber and drummer Ziv Ravitz, first visited Konitz in Cologne, he immediately suggested they sing together.

"After several minutes, Lee said, 'Sounds like a band,'" Denson recalled. "For years traveling on the bus, we'd sing and trade and improvise, but never on stage until last October, when we were touring California. We went to extended phrases, then to collective improvising. We decided to record it, so I booked a show at Yoshi's in February, and went into the studio.

"His vocal solos are beautiful. Lee told me that over the years he's worked to edit his playing to pure melody. If you listen to the young Lee, it's virtuoso, total genius solos. Now it's still genius but a very different mode—all about finding these beautiful melodies. That sense of melody continues to capture me. So does Lee's risk-taking, his desire not to plan some 'hip' line that he knows will work, but to take something from his surroundings so that the music is pure and truly improvised in the moment."

On June 9, 2011, during soundcheck for a concert with Tepfer's trio and guitarist Kurt


Warne Marsh (left) and Konitz share the bandstand.

JØRGEN BO/DOWNBEAT ARCHIVES

Rosenwinkel in Melbourne, Australia, Konitz suffered a subdural hematoma and was hospitalized for several weeks. "He made an unbelievably miraculous recovery, and when we started playing again something had changed," said Tepfer, whose recorded encounters with Konitz include *Duos With Lee* (Sunnyside) and *First Meeting: Live In London, Volume 1* (Whirlwind), a four-way meeting in 2010 with bassist Michael Janisch and drummer Jeff Williams. "When I first played with him, Lee was open to pretty out-there experimentation. I realized he was no longer interested in anything that resembled noise. He was very interested in harmony and playing together harmoniously. That's a real shift in his priorities, and it took me a while to get used to it. But we've done a lot of touring in the last six months, and the playing together feels powerful. We're playing standards and some of Lee's lines, which are based on standard chord changes. Lee is entirely comfortable with any harmonic substitution or orchestration idea as long as it's clear and musical and heartfelt. There is tremendous freedom in that restricting of parameters."

On the phone from Aarhus, Denmark, after the second concert of his tour, Bro, 37, described the effect of Konitz's instrumental voice. "I've listened to all his different eras, and it seems the things he's describing with his sound are becoming stronger and stronger," he said. "When he plays a line, a phrase, it sounds clearer than ever. It has a lot of weight. I don't know any young players that have it. Lee moves me so much. He plays one note, and I'm like, 'How the hell did he do that?' The sounds become more than music, in a way."

Douglas recalled a moment in England when Konitz played "Lover Man," which he famously recorded with Stan Kenton in 1954. "It was a completely new conception, of course with a kinship to that great recording," Douglas said. "But what struck me most is how much his melodic invention is wrapped up in his warm, malleable tone that at times seems unhinged from notions of intonation or any sort of school sense of what music is supposed to be. It has a liquid quality, like the notes are dripping off the staff. Everyone was stunned that he pulled this out in the middle of the set."

What these young musical partners describe—and, indeed, Konitz's masterful 1954 invention on "Lover Man"—is the antithesis of "cool jazz." That's a term that critics attached to Konitz for the absence of what he calls "schmaltz" and "emoting on the sleeve" in his improvisations with Tristano, the *Birth Of The Cool* sessions, Gerry Mulligan's combos, and during his two years with Kenton, when he emerged as the only alto saxophonist of his generation to develop a tonal personality that fully addressed the innovations of Charlie Parker without mimicking his style.

"To me, Lee combines Lennie's rigorous, almost intellectual manufacturing of the line, with a huge heart and a desire to communicate," Tepfer said. "I clearly remember that what first struck me when I met him is that there was never any misunderstanding. If Lee doesn't understand you, he'll always ask you to repeat it. He often says, if you say something on the money, 'You ain't just beatin' your gums up and down.' What he stands for in music is very much that. I think there's nothing worse to Lee than people saying things just to say things, or playing things just to play some notes. There always has to be meaning, and intent to communicate that meaning to other people. What I described about his current passion for playing harmonious music, playing together with no semblance of noise or discordance, I think comes from an even more intense desire to communicate as he's getting older.

"There has to be a question of what improvisation is and why we would do it, and whether it's a meaningful thing or not. I think of all the people in the world, Lee stands as a beacon of truth in improvisation. There aren't many like him, where you listen and come away with, 'OK, that's why we do this.'"

Konitz allowed that playing with Tepfer, or with Brad Mehldau (most recently his partner with Charlie Haden and Paul Motian on the 2011 ECM date *Live At Birdland*) or with Frisell (their June 2011 encounter at Manhattan's Blue Note with Gary Peacock and Joey Baron constitutes *Enfants Terrible*, on Half Note), "or whomever I'm playing with who's really listening and pushing a little bit in some positive way," makes him "less inhibited to open up."

He was asked about overcoming that shyness when he came to New York in 1948, at 21, and plunged into direct engagement with the movers and shakers of modern jazz vocabulary. "Lennie's encouragement had a lot to do with the playing ability that I became more confident in," Konitz said. "I was always so self-critical; it was sometimes pretty difficult. But I was sometimes able to play. Marijuana had something to do with it, I confess. But at a certain point, I stopped it completely. I appreciated that, because whatever I played, it was more meaningful to me, and I felt totally responsible for it."

Sixty-seven years after arriving in New York, Konitz is finally a member of the DownBeat Hall of Fame. "It's the 'ain't over until it's over' syndrome, and I deeply appreciate it," he said. "I appreciate being around to say thank you. It's romantic and poetic, and I'm accepting it on that level, and for being honored for trying to play through the years."

Konitz keeps moving. He's focused on his itinerary immediately after he turns 88 on Oct. 13. "I've got a lineup of tours coming up, all over the U.S. the last part of October; all over Europe, day by day, in November," he said. "I'm pleased that I can do it." **DB**