

COVID-19 kills jazz saxophone master Lee Konitz

John Andrews
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The superlative saxophonist Lee Konitz, one of the last surviving greats rooted in the bebop era, the jazz golden age of the mid-1940s through the early 1950s, died in New York City of pneumonia secondary to COVID-19, his family announced Wednesday. He was 92.

Konitz is a tragic addition to the growing list of jazz musicians who have died recently from COVID-19, a disease that spread unnecessarily due to the deliberate indifference of capitalist politicians, both Democrats and Republicans, more interested in protecting profits than people.

Other victims include saxophonist Manu Dibango, pianists Mike Longo and Ellis Marsalis, guitarist Bucky Pizzarelli and trumpeter Wallace Roney.

While this obituary was in the course of being prepared, Henry Grimes, the outstanding Juilliard School-trained bassist who performed with Konitz, among many other jazz superstars, passed away from COVID-19 Saturday at age 84.

Konitz remained active until the coronavirus pandemic struck. His most recent album, *Old Songs New*, featuring a nine-piece band was released on November 22. There is a moving duet performance at his 92nd birthday celebration last October posted on YouTube.

Although personally introverted and never a household name, Konitz maintained a stellar reputation among jazz musicians and knowledgeable fans for his purity of approach and restrained intensity during improvisations. Konitz' legacy includes thousands of live and studio recordings, including solo saxophone, duets, trios, small combos, big bands, string orchestras and vocals.

Konitz' sound and approach to melody were unique and changed little over the course of his 75-year career, although this writer is among those who believe that Konitz realized an aesthetic peak during the 1950s from which he descended somewhat in later years, as his tone became increasingly acerbic and his melodic lines less focused and lyrical.

Konitz based his style directly on tenor saxophonist Lester Young (1909-1959), particularly Young's late 1930s recordings with the Count Basie Orchestra and Billie Holiday. Although Konitz greatly admired and played the same instrument as Charlie Parker (1920-1955), the dominant bebop saxophonist, Konitz was recognized to be the first major bebop

alto player who did not play like Parker. "I knew and loved Charlie Parker and copied his bebop solos like everyone else," Konitz said in a 2013 interview, "But I didn't want to sound like him. So I used almost no vibrato and played mostly in the higher register. That's the heart of my sound."

At its best, Konitz' sound was airy and light. His lines, invariably played over 4/4 time, were deliberately polyrhythmic, and seemed to float over the rhythm section, while at the same time emphasizing the pulse, generating an ethereal sense of swing. Konitz almost always improvised to harmonies derived from standards found in the great American songbook, but often at a faster tempo, bracketed by original angular, serpentine contrafact melodies musicians refer to as "heads." Konitz played long solos with passages of virtuoso speed and execution. He was famous for eschewing clichés, known to jazz musicians as "licks," in favor of spontaneous improvisation through which he strove to connect with listeners on a deep emotional level.

"My playing was about making a personal statement—getting audiences to pay attention to what I was saying musically rather than giving them what they wanted to hear, which is entertainment," Konitz explained in an interview. "I wanted to play original music."

Born in 1927 to Jewish immigrants from Austria and Russia who ran a laundry in Chicago, Konitz began with the clarinet, enamored, like many youth, with the swing-era superstar Benny Goodman, a fellow Chicagoan, before switching to saxophone. At age 15, Konitz met the iconoclastic pianist and teacher Lennie Tristano (1919-1978), also a Chicago native, whose powerful personality guided Konitz artistically from that time forward.

Tristano was born while his mother was infected by the Spanish Flu, resulting in severe visual impairment. Perhaps because of this disability, Tristano buried himself in the piano, starting at age three, and continuing with a focus on Bach and Beethoven after losing his remaining eyesight due to a childhood bout with measles. While in his late teens at the American Conservatory of Music, Tristano crossed over from classical music to jazz.

Over the ensuing years, Tristano worked out a comprehensive pedagogical system based on the intense study of musical

rudiments, breaking down rhythm, scales and harmony, coupled with ear training and the memorization of recorded solos, to reproduce in the highly disciplined manner characteristic of classical musicians the improvisations of jazz players he admired, such as pianists Art Tatum (1909-1956) and Bud Powell (1924-1966), trumpeters Louis Armstrong (1901-1971), Roy Eldridge (1911-1989) and Fats Navarro (1923-1950), along with saxophonists Young and Parker.

Konitz studied with Tristano in Chicago for three years while beginning his professional career with dance orchestras, which employed teenagers in place of older musicians drafted into military service for World War II. By 1947, Konitz had worked his way to the popular—and elegant—Claude Thornhill Orchestra. Gil Evans (1912-1988), Thornhill's principal arranger, was a devoted modernist who created cooler, but complex aural pastels by adding orchestral instruments while fusing modern jazz harmonies and rhythms with parallel developments in classical music. Konitz' first recorded solos, which appear on Evans' arrangements of bebop classics associated with Charlie Parker, including "Donna Lee," and "Yardbird Suite," showcase his early ultramodern style.

Konitz reunited with Tristano in New York City, the epicenter of bebop, where the pianist-teacher had established himself as a leading performer and theoretician of the new music, a personal favorite of Charlie Parker. Over the ensuing decades, Tristano appeared in public sporadically, retreating into his studio on 32nd Street in Manhattan, where he instructed hundreds of musicians with his unique methods before passing away from complications of alcoholism at age 59.

Konitz was one of Tristano's two most successful pupils—the other being tenor saxophonist Warne Marsh (1927-1987), who began his study with Tristano in 1948. The two saxophonists continued to perform and record together through the 1970s.

In 1948, trumpeter Miles Davis (1926-1991), then only 22 years old but already having played three years with Parker, formed a short-lived orchestra with Konitz and baritone saxophonist Gerry Mulligan (1927-1996), flavoring a standard jazz combo with a tuba and French horn. The nonet played modern jazz compositions in a style similar to the Thornhill orchestra, with arrangements by Gil Evans and others. Although not successful commercially, the band's 78 rpm recordings for Capitol Records, replete with excellent solos by Davis, Mulligan and Konitz, hold up today as aesthetic milestones that pointed to a new direction that many jazz musicians would follow. "Move" is an excellent example.

When Capitol reissued the Miles Davis Nonet on a long-playing record a decade later, the sides were dubbed "The Birth of the Cool" in recognition of their extraordinary influence among musicians who adopted their more restrained, but still intense, approach to bebop.

In 1949, the Lennie Tristano Sextet, featuring Konitz, Marsh and guitarist Billy Bauer (1915-2005), released its own historic recordings for Capitol Records, intricate, lightning-fast unison

lines played by the saxophones with mesmerizing virtuosity and Tristano-style solos, exemplified by "Wow." Capitol also released two free-form improvisations, "Digression" and "Intuition," that foreshadowed the jazz avant-garde of a decade later.

Despite its uncompromising anti-commercialism, the music struck a chord with the public. Tristano, Konitz and Marsh appeared on a jazz program at Carnegie Hall and played opening night at Birdland, the club named for Parker, on December 16, 1949, along with their idols Parker and Lester Young.

During the 1950s Konitz performed and recorded prolifically with Tristano and various pupils, as well as a variety of jazz superstars, including Davis, bassists Charles Mingus (1922-1979) and Oscar Pettiford (1922-1960), and drummers Kenny Clarke (1914-1985) and Elvin Jones (1927-2004). His playing throughout the decade was at an extremely high level, one occupied by only a handful of other musicians over the century of recorded jazz music.

At the zenith of his powers in 1952, Konitz changed direction, joining the popular Stan Kenton Orchestra, which mixed cutting edge jazz arrangements with more commercial fare. Konitz remained a principal soloist for two years. There are many highlights, including his featured performances on the ballad "Lover Man" and "In a Lighter Vein," the latter composed and arranged specifically for Konitz by Bill Holman (1927-).

In early 1954, Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, the founders of bebop, joined Kenton on a tour billed as "The Festival of Modern Jazz." Gillespie is reputed to have chided Parker, who was ailing due to the cumulative effects of substance abuse, that Konitz was outplaying him. Recordings of the tour made in Portland, Oregon, and at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles demonstrate that to be the case. Parker and Konitz became close, however, practicing together on Lester Young solos they had memorized.

By the 1960s, jazz audiences began to dwindle, and a certain demoralization seemed to set in. Konitz, who was married three times and had five children, had to struggle to make ends meet. Nevertheless, Konitz remained true to his musical principles until his death last week, and the planet is a better place because of it.



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