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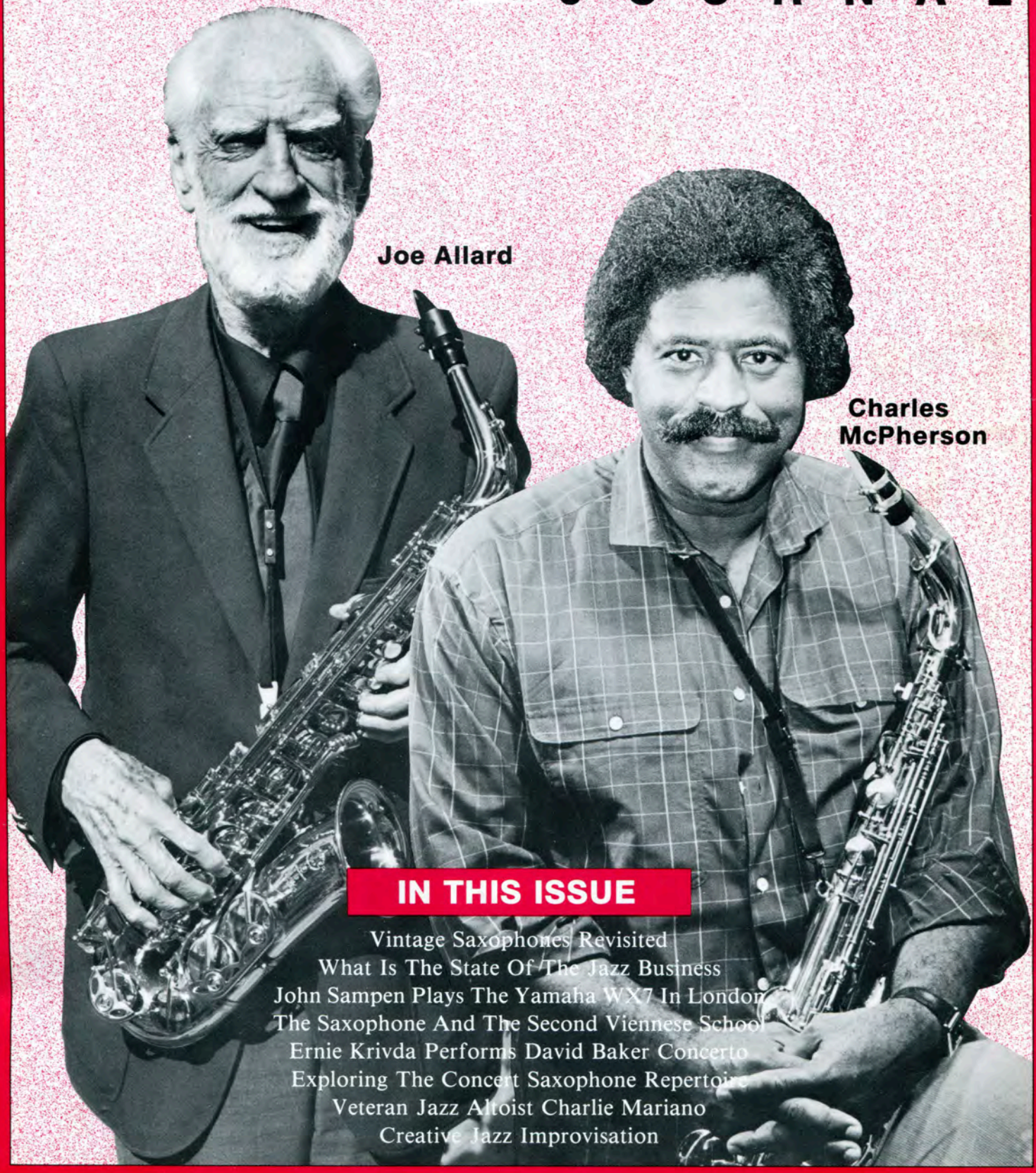

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Charles McPherson

In May of 1986, I had the pleasure of bringing Charles McPherson to San Francisco to perform with *Bebop and Beyond* for a project funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. The musical results were very fruitful, as was the personal rapport that developed between the two of us. The normal scheme of an interview rapidly turned into a two-way conversation about every aspect of the jazz life, and in particular, saxology. I found Charles to be a warm, and open individual who has a wealth of background and information to share. His tenure with various Charles Mingus groups, as well as his work as a leader and sideman on many fine recordings, rank him as one of the top post-bop altoists. So it is with great pleasure that I would like you to meet my good friend and "worthy constituent," Charles McPherson. □

Would you run down your background for us?

I was born in Joplin, Missouri and grew up in Detroit from the age of nine. I went to school there and started playing fluegelhorn, as they didn't have any saxophones available. Then the next semester, my mother bought me an alto. I was about thirteen. I studied briefly at the Larry Teal School of Music. One of the guys there was Don Sinta. I think Don is a little older than I am, but at that time, he was the best of the younger classical saxophonists in town. A lot of the guys studied at the Teal School. I studied with a guy named Robert Anderson.

Did you ever study with Larry Teal himself?

I wished that I could have, but he was more like an administrator and was older at that time, but his teachers all used his methods. One method of dealing with vibrato was two wa-wa's to a quarter note (demonstrates vocally). I was told that you didn't think this when you played, but that it was an exercise to average out the vibrato so it wouldn't be too "nanny-goatish" or too wide like Bert Lahr as the cowardly lion in *The Wizard of Oz.* I didn't study that long, less than a year. I used to come up with some great excuses for not studying. For example, I am sick from the fumes of the bus.

It must have spoiled you for the big bands! Did you ever study clarinet?

I wished I had! I bought one a couple of years ago and I'm trying to play it. It really shows you some things about playing the saxophone. It's really about how you use your fingers. You have to fully cover each hole or you lose air, so you have to be very exact in the fingering of the instrument.

Plus, the throat register is so thin compared to anything with any power that you have to use special fingerings to make it

Mel Martin

sound stronger. I started on clarinet, then dropped it for a long time, but I'm playing it more lately.

It sounds great playing bebop. Bebop clarinet is wonderful. I once heard a guy in San Diego play some real funky, commercial music on the clarinet. The band was doing Grover Washington, Jr. music, even funkier, and it fit right in, just like a soprano.

Have you ever played much tenor?

I bought a tenor but I haven't dedicated the time to it, plus I haven't found a mouthpiece that I like as of yet. I've been doing a lot of mouthpiece searching for the alto in the last few years and now that that's cooled out maybe I can begin the search for a tenor mouthpiece. After doing it for the alto, I just haven't felt like looking for any more mouthpieces. You play both, right?

I'm playing both more now. I play all of them. (saxophones)

But don't you play tenor more than the others?

I practice tenor more than the others because I usually play tenor and soprano on my jazz gigs. But I've been playing alto a couple of nights a week on other gigs.

Do you find that playing the alto has a lot to do with finding the right mouthpiece?

I already have the right mouthpiece (Rico Royal C-7) but what I needed was an alto that played more like a tenor, and has a nice open sound. Most of my problems with the alto stem from the fact that it generally sounds constricted to me.

Do you play a Selmer Mark VI?

No, I play an old SML (Strasser, Marigeaux and LeMaire) that has a big warm tone. The laquer is mostly worn off. It plays great.

It's not "tubby?"

No, no! It's well centered. I had the neck fitted for optimum potential (resonance transfer). It's warmer than a Selmer.

It really depends on what you want. You want warmth. David Sanborn might not want that and could be dealing with high volume electric instruments and needs to cut through all that.

So he goes to a brighter, small chamber mouthpiece. I prefer a large chamber, about a 7 or a 7★ tip. I use about the same setup on tenor, an Arbex 7★, it's a pretty straight ahead mouthpiece for jazz which works well with my 1930 model Selmer "cigar cutter" tenor.

I enjoy warmth, richness and darkness too. If I could have my "druthers," I would like 60% brightness and 40% darkness.

I heard you in the mid-sixties playing that old Conn with the tuner on the neck and you had the warmest, silkiest sound on the alto that I ever heard!

That's the way those horns sound due to the bore size. It still has enough projection to be defined and not get muddy.

There's two ways to project; one is projecting "edge" or "cut" as you call it. The other is to project the "body" or resonance of the sound. The best way is to project a combination of both. I like the way you sound on your Selmer. It has more sparkle, or overtones.

I'm using an older Mark VI with a Meyer 5★ mouthpiece. I've also been playing a silver King alto lately. It has a different timbre.

How do you feel the King differs from the Selmer?

It has a warmer sound, but not like an old Conn. The metal seems thinner. I don't know what the composition of the metal is, but it seems lighter. It's like a belltone where you hear a "ding" and then you hear the "wa-wa-wa" afterwards. The ding would be the front of the attack and then the sound decays. With the Selmer you hear more of the ding and less of the decay. The King rings more and speaks faster. Cannonball would play his King like that. He'd "explode the note". A Selmer note seems heavier.

So you wouldn't use a reed and mouthpiece with as much resistance on a Selmer.

Yeah! That's probably true.

I've found that the speed of the note is somewhat dependant on the resistance of the mouthpiece. That seems to define response time more than anything.

It can be like an illusion that the keys are higher. You feel it at the fingers.

Yeah! It slows your fingers down. If you put all your energy into blowing the horn, your fingers won't work as well.

It gets to be too cumbersome. But if you put on a softer reed your fingers will be flying.

It shows that the note responds in direct relationship to the resistance of the mouthpiece/reed combination. Let's switch our conversation and discuss your early Jazz background.

I met the pianist Barry Harris when I was about fifteen. He would show me changes, which I had no idea existed. I knew about scales, but I didn't think about chords. I was fortunate in that he lived right around the corner so I'd be at his house almost every day and he showed me about playing melodies over chords. After about three years, I could play some gigs. I worked with drummer Roy Brooks and other guys my age at that time, like trumpeter Lonnie Hillyer. Some of the older guys were Paul Chambers, Doug Watkins and Louis Hayes.

Did you know Joe Henderson?

He was a couple of years older, but you know, at that age a couple of years is a lot! If you're nineteen, you don't hang out with a guy that's only seventeen!

There was a club called The Bluebird near where I lived and in the band was Elvin Jones, Pepper Adams, Barry Harris, and sometimes Donald Byrd. There was a guy named "Beans" on bass. Yusef Lateef would work there too. During the summer they would leave the doors open, due to the heat, and the band would just be burning! I'd hang out and ask dumb questions. One time I walked up to Pepper Adams and said, "you sound good man, like Gerry Mulligan." He knew I was an idiot and just said, "thank-you". Then Elvin comes up to me and says "you're not supposed to say that. He's Pepper!" Pepper was really playing the baritone like an alto.

Around 1959-60 I moved to New York, and my first gig was with Charles Mingus. At that time Eric Dolphy and Ted Curson were with him and wanted to leave. But you couldn't just quit Mingus, you might have to fight him to get out of the band. His music was so difficult that it took as long as six months to break in someone new.

No charts, right?

Even when there were charts, it would be terrible, like chicken scratches!

Didn't he teach musicians by rote?

Both ways. If a cat could read well and get it faster that way, he would do that. If a cat had good ears, he would relay it that way. But there was written music for all of it. It also depended on how much time he had. He liked to teach without written music because he felt they would retain the music better, which I agree with. Anything I've learned in that manner I've tended to retain.

You own it!

Yeah! That way it's coded. When you use charts you don't approach the music with the same mentality.

If you can develop visual memory like Bird had, it's a different thing. Anyway, Mingus knew that Eric wanted to quit and Yusef Lateef told him that there were a couple of young guys from Detroit who would probably be able to play his music. So he advised Mingus to come and hear us and then we were hired. The first night there was Lonnie and me, plus Ted and Eric. Eric was showing me the parts and how things went together. Now Mingus was weighing about three hundred pounds at that time. Here's what went down on my first night with Charlie Mingus!

For some reason, the club owner didn't have the money at the end of the night. So Mingus proceeded to tear the piano up by pulling the strings out with his hands! There must be hundreds of pounds of pressure and for a guy to just go up and physically tear the piano apart was astonishing. I'm like twenty years old, and was so happy about working in New York with the great Charlie Mingus, and all I could say was, "Damn, this is who I work for and I'm supposed to be happy about this?" Now, the guys that ran this club were gangsters!

You got out of there as soon as possible, right?

No! We're still in the club and Eric wanted to give his notice. He was the sweetest cat, no cursing, no temper, smiled all the time. But Mingus was peeved so he said to Eric "all right, I'm going to cut you! Were going to fight.!" So Mingus goes for his knife and Eric says, "Mingus, come on! I don't have a knife." Mingus says "you don't? Stay here. I'm going across the street to get you one." (Laughter) Of course none of that happened, but this was my first gig with him. I worked off and on with him for twelve years and I've seen all kinds of things happen. I wouldn't stand next to him on the bandstand because I was afraid somebody was going to shoot him or something!

I've seen him stop the band in the middle of a performance and make a guy play his part alone if he wasn't getting it right!

Or stop in the middle of a tune and put the mic in front of a talkative customer. One time we were playing in British Columbia and all of a sudden he stops and says "wait a minute!" He puts down his bass and I'm thinking "here it comes." He goes into the bathroom and comes out with a toilet plunger and goes over to a table of four big dudes. I can't hear what they're saying but all of a sudden one of these guys stands up and takes a swing at Mingus and just barely misses him. Mingus was really lucky, because he deflected this guy's swing somehow and landed him clear across the room. The guy just sat there and laughed! The whole scene was ludicrous. The next day we found out from the newspaper that these guys were part of the Canadian pro football team!

So that was your introduction to the professional jazz world.

One time we were playing a benefit in San Francisco for the poet Kenneth Patchen, and at the end of the gig there was only about five dollars a man so I told Mingus to give my money to the poet. Well, he thought that was a fine, magnanimous thing to do and from that time on, he had me pegged as a humanitarian. I could be late, act the fool, whatever and he would leave me alone.

Could you talk about your saxophone influences? You've been compared to Charlie Parker but you're actually from a younger generation.

When I first started playing, I knew about Johnny Hodges, and then I was turned on to Bird. Barry Harris loved Charlie Parker. So, I would take the records home and study some of his licks but I would never learn a whole solo. He was a real influence for a while, but as I got older, other influences crept in; Lester Young, Art Tatum and Bud Powell; Lester Young quite a bit, actually. Then I started buying classical records. In fact, I probably own more classical albums than jazz. So, if I wasn't listening to the

jazz masters, I might listen to Stravinsky or Honneger. Now I just try to be a "sponge" and just take things from everywhere. I used to be more strict and narrow about what I'd listen to, but I'm not like that at all now.

Another thing; a lot of alto players got "saddled" with comparisons to Charlie Parker because they're playing the same instrument. That's why a lot of alto players switched to tenor.

Bird dominated that era!

After a certain period of time, that which has become a language is the language.

And Bird was one of the inventors of the language.

Right! You can't say that counterpoint belongs only to Bach. It doesn't! After a certain passage of time, it became incorporated into the overall language of music. Just because someone would use counter point, didn't mean he was copying Bach.

You could study Bach, but try to extend that to your own musical vision. You would be an ignorant musician if you didn't pay attention to what's gone before.

To me, that's how a musical style evolves. Absolutely! It's an impossibility unless you grew up on an island by yourself.

You can hear Charlie Parker's licks on television commercials, dance and show bands, Frank Sinatra's arrangements; his music has permeated the culture.

It really has. When you think about how a style becomes accepted, it starts out as "an idea whose time has come." It might not be a single individual, but the idea seems to spring from a universal source and pops up in different places. The knowledge is there; we're like radio receivers.

There were many giants walking the earth at that time.

If you listen to some of the Kansas City alto players, you wouldn't hear that much difference from Bird's early style.

Photo by Carey Martin

Left to right - George Cables, Mel Martin, Charles McPherson, Eddie Marshall, Warren Gale, and Frank Tuga.

That's who Bird learned from, and Prez too, and if you double the speed of a Coleman Hawkins solo, it sounds just like Bird.

So he was really playing what he heard around him, but doing it in an individual way. But the thing that starts a movement or a school is other people who say "hey, I like that, too!" Then you have two, then four, then a movement. but it starts out as one person playing what he or she hears in their time. But as others came to pick up on what Bird did, it became a movement "en mass." It's like a tree with all the branches.

But it's the alto players more than anyone else who are saddled with comparisons to Parker. If I had a computer that would ring a bell every time someone played a Bird lick, the bell would be ringing all day long and not just for the alto players! If you're playing another instrument with a different timbre such as the tenor, it can lead you in other directions.

That's an interesting point. One of the things I've learned about soloing on the various saxes is that tenor players tend to start up high on the horn and alto players tend to start lower. If you generally adhere to that, you can make more out of your solos.

I never thought of that but you're more of a doubler.

My natural inclination as a tenor player is to go for the mid to high register, and I would find myself doing the same on the alto. But, I found that this would leave me with nowhere to go in terms of register. So now I'll tend to start lower on the alto. The same thing applies to the soprano, although it's better suited to high register playing.

I see! You wouldn't want to start out at a "fever pitch" and the high register of the alto is "fever pitch." Plus, you would need that extra projection of the high register to make the tenor heard.

The low register of the tenor tends to get lost.

I've always been an alto player and I would never think of starting a solo in the high register, always from the middle or below.

The most resonant notes on the horn are in the middle.

For color, I might go lower or higher. The upper register is for the peak of the solo. But the tenor's high register is the same as the alto's middle.

It's also the middle of the piano. The tenor's high B is actually A = 440. I was soloing on the alto one night and was trying to start out in the high register and later on the tenor player said to me "you know, alto players tend to start out in the lower register more so than tenor players" and a little light clicked on!

The same thing that happened to alto players from Bird's generation happened to tenor players from Coltrane's generation. He was my "Bird." He was really blossoming during the sixties and influenced so many of us, profoundly. To this day, I'll find myself going for certain things, even though I don't sound that way as much as I have in the past. I can't restrict my own background!

As long as you don't become stuck and can remain flexible. You know, even this late in my career, I have gone back to trying to develop my melodic concepts based on major chords. What happens is that your statements on a major chord tend to become automatic. So what I'll do is to play a major seventh on the piano, hold down the sustain pedal and play the sound on my horn. I try to approach the major seventh like it was some kind of new, exotic chord so you can build your own melodic statements on a major chord. I don't care what happens, that's where it ends up.

You don't necessarily start there, but you always end up there!

You can use the dominant and its many alterations, but the major chord sums up the cadence. So if you have a lot of resources to rely on for the major chord; that becomes melodicism, having a lot to say on major chords. It's like becoming more objective, like when you were a little kid.

That's the method I use with students who have at least learned the melody to a song. From there I advise them to go back and attempt to make some kind of melodic statement on each sound; then try to connect all that in time.

Right! If you want to know how to be melodic, you have to hear each interval in relation to the root. "Melodic" is a sense of what notes to match. The minute you've played two notes, that's it! Three for sure!

The next step would be once you've got somebody playing the basic sounds, you can show them how to extend the chords through the upper intervals.

That's where the "goodies" are!

It's kind of a logical building process to learn how to play melodically over complex harmony.

It's about learning to search out the most powerful, significant notes! There's something almost mystical about the best note for the moment in a given tonal center. What makes it the best, I don't know. Maybe it has to do with rhythmic phrasing, "when" the note happens (rhythm), not "what" the note is (harmony).

We horn players, when soloing, try to play the significant notes as we hear them, but many times our accompanists aren't tuned into our general flow or logic and can detract from what we're trying to do.

That's why it's important to find the right combination of people for yourself. It doesn't necessarily mean that one player is better or worse than others. You can have five excellent musicians, but they may not have the chemistry to play together and compliment you. They may never really gel as a unit.

CHARLES MCPHERSON
SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

AS A LEADER

☐**Charles McPherson**
Bebop Revisited
Prestige 7359

☐**Charles McPherson**
Con Alma
Prestige 7427

☐**Charles McPherson**
The Quintet Live
Prestige 7480

☐**Charles McPherson**
From This Moment On
Prestige 7559

☐**Charles McPherson**
Horizons
Prestige 7603

☐**Charles McPherson**
McPherson's Mood
Prestige 7743

☐**Charles McPherson**
Charles McPherson
Mainstream MRL329

☐**Charles McPherson**
Siku ya bibi
Mainstream MRL365

☐**Charles McPherson**
Today's Man
Mainstream MRL395

☐**Charles McPherson**
Live in Tokyo
Xanadu 131

☐**Charles McPherson**
New Horizons
Xanadu 149

☐**Charles McPherson**
Beautiful
Xanadu 115

☐**Charles McPherson**
Free Bop
Xanadu 170

AS A SIDEMAN

☐**Barry Harris**
New Than New
Riverside RLP413

☐**Barry Harris**
Bull's Eye
Prestige 7600

☐**Charles Mingus**
My Favorite Quintet
Mingus JWS005

☐**Charles Mingus**
Mingus at Monterey
Mingus JWS001/002

☐**Charles Mingus**
Town Hall Concert
Solid State SS18024

☐**Charles Mingus**
Reincarnation of a Lovebird
Prestige P24028

☐**Charles Mingus**
Mingus & Friends in Concert
Columbia CG31614

☐**Charles Mingus**
Let My Children Hear Music

☐**Sam Jones**
Cello Again
Xanadu 129

☐**Ted Harris**
Introducing Ted Harris
H & D 628

☐**Bobby Jones**
The Arrival of B. Jones
Cobblestone CST9022

Economically, it becomes difficult because inevitably, the most sympathetic accompanists will get hired for the most money and you can't keep the same unit together. This is where esthetics meets economics!

After you left Mingus, what happened?

I stayed in New York and worked a lot with Barry Harris playing some real bebop. After 1970, I did more things as a leader, like recording, and I took a band to Europe a couple of times. In 1978 I moved out to San Diego.

What prompted you to leave what is universally recognized as the "Jazz Mecca?"

At that time, I was tired of the New York "rat race" and I hadn't spent time with my mother for twenty years, so I moved to La Jolla. I still travel back and forth between there and New York and Europe, but not as much as when I lived in the East. Without a doubt, I think it's better for a straight ahead acoustic jazz player to live in New York or the East coast. There's more music business people and media people there, from all over the world, so you'll be seen and heard more.

What are your plans for the future?

I'll continue touring and playing what I play. I still love music and the saxophone. I still want to learn. Plus, music has a different meaning for me now than when I was younger. I think of it more as taking part in creating, manipulating sounds through nature and you must take responsibility for your creations. How you think about how music affects the outcome. Your "ego position" has a lot to do with how it comes out on the breath. You can play with an oversized ego, but it just won't be the pure thing, the "goosepimple" stuff. There's so many different levels of playing well. There's playing well and then there's playing that is "other worldly!" Which one would you want? ■