

FROM BEBOP TO BALLET

Alto Saxophonist Charles McPherson: A True Giant of Jazz

By Sanford Josephson

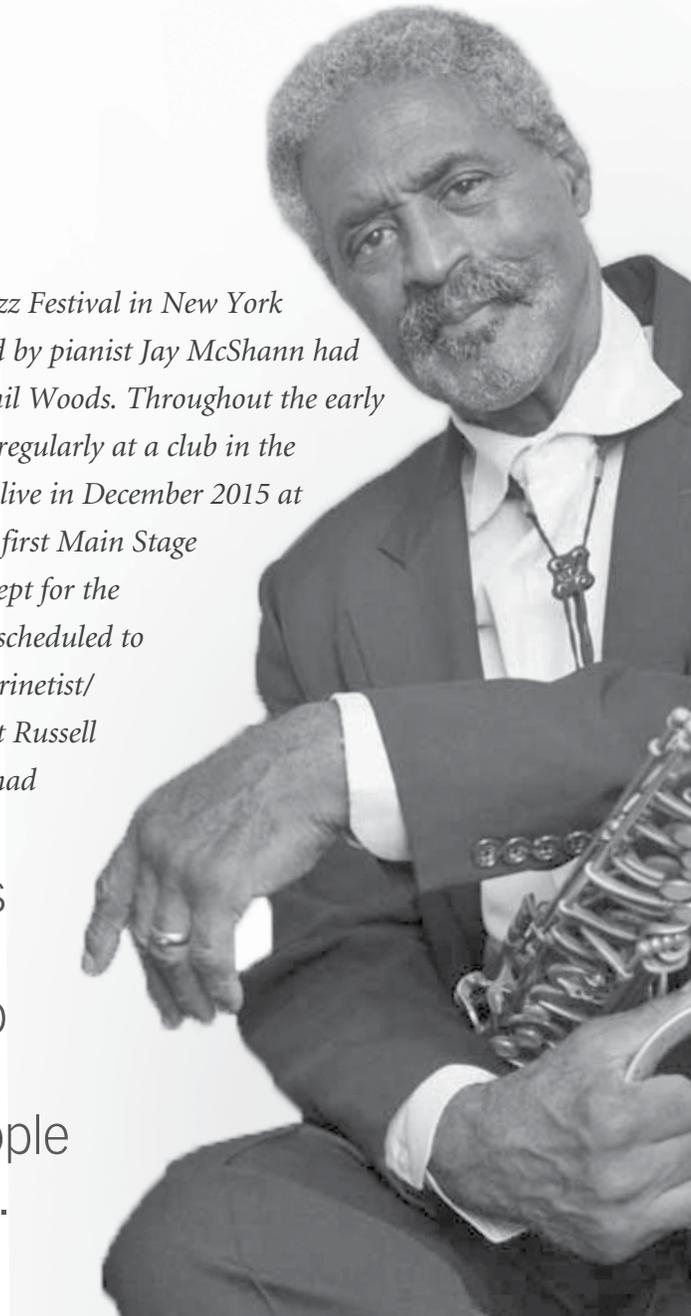
I first saw Charles McPherson perform in June 1974 at a Newport Jazz Festival in New York concert entitled, "The Musical Life of Charlie Parker". A big band led by pianist Jay McShann had a saxophone section with three altos: McPherson, Sonny Stitt, and Phil Woods. Throughout the early and mid-'70s, I would see McPherson and trumpeter Lonnie Hillyer regularly at a club in the Village called Boomers on Blecker Street. I last saw McPherson play live in December 2015 at William Paterson University and was hoping to see him again at the first Main Stage Concert of this year's Sarasota Jazz Festival, which was canceled (except for the previous night's Pub Crawl) due to the coronavirus. McPherson was scheduled to appear on March 12 with NEA Jazz Master pianist Dick Hyman, clarinetist/saxophonist Ken Peplowski, the festival's music director, and guitarist Russell Malone. Fortunately, in anticipation of the Sarasota performance, I had interviewed him by phone on March 6.

In 1948, when Charles McPherson was nine years old, his family moved from Joplin, MO, to Detroit. "It was better up north," he told me. "It was a big city. It was booming. Blue collar, working people were very healthy. Money was flowing. The jazz clubs were successful, and there was a great musical scene."

McPherson's family lived on a street that was about a block away from the Blue Bird, "the hippest jazz club in Detroit." Pianist Barry Harris lived around the corner from the McPhersons, and the future trumpeter, Lonnie Hillyer, lived on the same street. But, before McPherson knew all this, he noticed something special about his neighborhood. "I can remember playing in my front yard," he said. "I would see throngs of people. Now, I know they were walking to the club, the Blue Bird, but I didn't know it then. I did know there was something different about these people walking in this direction. They were black and white, interracial. A little kid like me noticed something unusual about that. Something different. A different look coming out of those faces. A certain worldliness. I knew this was a different group of people than those I saw when I went to the grocery store or the post office."

By the time he reached junior high school, McPherson started playing trumpet, eventually switching to saxophone. An older saxophone player told him about Charlie Parker. "I remembered that name, and I saw Charlie Parker's name on a jukebox. There were songs like 'Tico Tico', 'Blue Suede Shoes', 'In the Still of the Night'. They resonated with me. I said, 'This is it. This is how you should play.' There were these long lines that connect like sentences, what I would now call linear -- a bunch of notes being played, and they were all making sense. All these notes fit like a glove. I understood it. Then, I discovered a whole slew of musicians who played like this." (In 1988, McPherson was the alto saxophone voice of Charlie Parker in several scenes of Clint Eastwood's movie, *Bird*)

"Now I understood where these people were going," he continued. "The club down the street, the Blue Bird, was a place where they played that kind of music. So, I started to go down and stand outside and listen to the music, to people like Elvin Jones, Barry Harris, Thad Jones, Pepper Adams, Paul Chambers. I would just stand outside and listen. One day, the club owner said I could come inside with my parents. At



this time, Miles Davis was playing there. I came in with my parents, and I couldn't believe it."

McPherson and his friend, trumpeter Lonnie Hillyer, would occasionally try to sit in at the Blue Bird. "We could play the melody," McPherson recalled, "but we couldn't improvise worth a damn. Barry Harris heard us and said, 'If you want, come by the house, and I'll show you some things.' That was the beginning of me learning about harmony and chord changes. I was over at his house every day. He was always teaching. People like Sonny Rollins and John Coltrane -- when they came to Detroit, they would go to his house and hang out. I would be over after school, and I would watch them. They'd be talking about Bertram Russell, Jack Kerouac, the existentialists. They were very intelligent people talking about things that had nothing to do with music. I began to realize that to play this music, you've got to become a thinker. You gotta understand how art is connected to other things."

McPherson moved from Detroit to New York City in the late 1950s and in 1959 he and Hillyer joined Charles Mingus' band where he would remain for 12 years. "Eric Dolphy and Ted Curson were still in the band," McPherson recalled, "but they were forming their own groups. Mingus was livid. I got referred to the gig by Yusef Lateef. He knew Lonnie and I were in New York looking for gigs, and he told Mingus, 'There's an alto player and trumpet player from Detroit I've heard'. Mingus hired us that night."

Although McPherson took a short break to work for the Internal Revenue Service, he believes he was the second longest Mingus sideman to drummer Danny Richmond. "I can hear, by way of osmosis, things I remember about Mingus," he said. "I was always enamored by Mingus' ballad writing. His ballads were kind of haunting with an interesting, unusual quality." Every night with Mingus, McPherson said, "was a story. He got a reputation for being a tough guy, but here's a story that shows another side of him. We played a benefit for the writer, Kenneth Patchen (who had been disabled since the late '50s due to a spinal injury). He was a personal friend of Mingus, who did a benefit for him at a coffee house in Mill Valley, CA. It was Danny Richmond, Lonnie, and me. There was a jar for money, and Mingus just gave each of us \$5 for playing. Everyone took the money, but I said, 'Just put it in the tip jar.' His eyes watered up, and he just said, 'Thank you, Charles.' I was 21 years old, and from that point on, he never bothered me. I could be late, it didn't matter. He teased up, and I could tell he thought of me a little differently. Once he pigeonholed you into a

certain category, that's what you were forever."

In 1978, McPherson moved to San Diego "to get away from New York and also to see my mom who was living there. She was 69 or 70, and I'm thinking, 'that's old as hell'. I ended up staying, and she lived to be 94. I started a new life in San Diego." He met his wife, Lynn, there, and his youngest daughter, 27-year-old Camile, is a dancer with the San Diego Ballet. She introduced him to choreographer Javier Belasco, and, as a result, in 2015, his large-scale work, "Sweet Synergy Suite" was premiered by the company. It blends bebop and Afro-Latin music with ballet and modern dance styles.

McPherson became the ballet company's Resident Composer in 2016. "In the last four or five years," he said, "I have written several ballet suites." His "Song of Songs", eight tunes for jazz quintet and voice, was recorded last year at the Rudy Van Gelder Studios in Englewood, NJ, and is due to be released this year. "It was taken from the Old Testament story," he said. "It deals with a young woman and man in love, a story of unrequited love. The young woman sings some of the words in Hebrew."

Now 80 years old, McPherson was recently described by *The Santa Fe New Mexican's* Richard Sheinin as "an authentic bebopper who keeps his eye on the melody." That definition, he said, "is true. Any improviser needs a point of reference, other than it sounds good. When you improvise, you don't just want to ramble. The real art in improvising is when you take a theme and explore it several different ways but make it a cohesive solo with an awareness of the melody. That's the difference between a player who knows his craft and one who doesn't. You need to be adhering in some way to the vibe of the melody even though you're free to play it a million different ways. It's like playing ping pong. You can't play without a table. The real art is: Can you hit the ball a million different ways and still go over the net?"

Boomers: A Charles McPherson Hangout in the Late '60s and Early '70s

In an August 2016 article reminiscing about the jazz clubs in Lower Manhattan and Greenwich Village in the 1960s and early '70s, *Westview News* writer Mel Watkins mentioned that "many of the era's most fondly remembered clubs have been celebrated," but "Boomers, one of the era's most colorful and unusual jazz spots, has been overlooked."

Opened in 1969, Watkins wrote, "the club's reputation swelled when piano legend Bobby Timmons began appearing regularly . . . and *New York Times* restaurant critic Raymond Sokolov gave the new soul food menu a rave review. By the early 1970s, Boomers had emerged as one of the most popular jazz clubs and eateries in Greenwich Village."

The article mentioned Charles McPherson as one of the regular jazz performers along with such other jazz luminaries as pianists Roland Hanna, Cedar Walton, and Junior Mance; saxophonists George Coleman and David Sanborn; and vocalists Betty Carter and Etta Jones. WRVR's Les Davis broadcast live concerts from there, Watkins wrote, adding that the owners of the Village Vanguard and Village Gate "stopped in to evaluate and recruit artists for their own venues . . . According to saxophonist Dave Schnitter, after [Art] Blakey sat in with him during a session at Boomers, the legendary drummer asked Schnitter to join the Jazz Messengers." The room was also frequented by "aspiring young politicians as well as celebrities ranging from literary figures to sports stars such as Earl 'The Pearl' Monroe or Walt Frazier to members of the Negro Ensemble Company."

