Charles McPherson

Throughout his more than sixty-five-year career as an alto saxophonist, composer, and educator, Charles McPherson has cemented his legacy as an unrivaled force in jazz history. Through his artistic ingenuity, prolific writing, and service to future generations, McPherson has not merely remained true to his bebop origins but has expanded on them. NEA Jazz Master Stanley Crouch writes in *The New York Times,* "[McPherson] is a singular voice who has never sacrificed the fluidity of his melody making and is held in high esteem by musicians both long seasoned and young." Wynton Marsalis, a longtime admirer says, "Charles is the very definition of excellence in our music. He's the definitive master on this instrument. He plays with exceptional harmonic accuracy and sophistication. He performs free-flowing, melodic, and thematically developed solos with unbelievable fire and an unparalleled depth of soul." Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra saxophonist Sherman Irby writes, "The bebop master is a true alto saxophonist. He plays the instrument with fire, passion, and precision. He can pull your heartstrings with one note, and dazzle you with virtuosity and imagination. There is only one Bird, one Stitt, one Cannonball—and one Charles McPherson."

Born in Joplin, Missouri, in 1939, McPherson moved to Detroit at nine years old and began playing saxophone in his middle school band at thirteen years old. The thriving Detroit jazz scene of the 1940s and '50s sparked McPherson's early interest in bebop. After hearing renowned pianist and soon-to-be master educator Barry Harris play at The Bluebird, McPherson began going to the young musician's home after school for lessons. He became one of the first of many pupils to learn from Harris, who taught McPherson about harmonies, chord progression, rhythm, and improvisation. At nineteen years old, McPherson began playing professionally, and at twenty, he moved to New York City, the heart of the 1960s jazz scene. Less than a year later, McPherson joined bassist Charles Mingus's band, and he continued to play with the group until 1972. During his twelve years working with Mingus, McPherson collaborated frequently with Harris, Lonnie Hillyer, George Coleman, and many other jazz greats.

McPherson has performed at concerts and festivals around the world with an array of musical groups, including quartets, quintets, and full orchestras. He has toured North America, South America, Europe, Asia, and Africa as the leader of his own band and as a guest artist with many legendary musicians, including Harris, Billy Eckstine, Lionel Hampton, Nat Adderly, Jay McShann, Phil Woods, Wynton Marsalis, Tom Harrell, Randy Brecker, James Moody, Paul Chambers, Billy Higgins, Sonny Stitt, and Dizzy Gillespie. In 2000, McPherson was featured at Lincoln Center in a showcase of his original compositions. In celebration of his eightieth birthday in 2019, McPherson once again headlined Lincoln Center alongside Marsalis and his Jazz Orchestra. The evening's performance included new arrangements of seven of McPherson's iconic original compositions.

McPherson has recorded as a guest artist with Mingus, Harris, Art Farmer, Kenny Drew, Toshiko Akiyoshi, the Carnegie Hall Jazz Orchestra, and the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra. He is currently signed with Smoke Sessions and has recorded as a leader on record labels including Prestige, Fantasy, Mainstream, Discovery, Xanadu, Arabesque, Capri, and several small labels in Europe and Japan. McPherson was the featured alto saxophonist in Clint Eastwood's *Bird*, a

biopic about Charlie Parker. His latest project, *Torch Bearers,* a recording that serves as a tribute to McPherson's influence on jazz music, is a collaboration with GRAMMY winners Samara Joy and Brian Lynch.

McPherson is the recipient of numerous awards and honors, including the Don Redman Lifetime Achievement Award, the Jazz Journalist Association's Alto Saxophonist of the Year Award, the Jazz Foundation of America's Jazz Legacy Fellowship (in partnership with the Mellon Foundation), an Honorary Doctor of Fine Arts from California State University San Marcos, and an Honorary Lifetime Membership of the North American Saxophone Alliance (NASA).

Widely recognized as a prolific writer, McPherson was Resident Composer for the San Diego Ballet from 2015 to 2022, creating three original suites plus two chamber music arrangements. McPherson's works for the ballet company were recorded in his 2020 *Jazz Dance Suites*, which *DownBeat Magazine* recognized as one of the best jazz recordings of the year. The album also won first place in *DownBeat Magazine's* reader's poll and fourth place in the *JazzTimes* reader's poll, the latter of which recognized McPherson as Artist of the Year.

The opportunity to write for ballet expanded McPherson's style, and his compositional prowess has not gone unnoticed by his peers. Bobby Watson calls *Jazz Dance Suites* "a masterpiece," while John Beasley and Don Sickler have each commented on the excellence of McPherson's writing. McPherson's most recent live quintet recording, *Reverence* (a tribute to Harris), is another highly regarded jazz album. NEA Jazz Master Todd Barkan remarks that The Charles McPherson Quintet (including trumpetist Terell Stafford, pianist Jeb Patton, bassist David Wong, and percussionist Billy Drummond) is "one of the best working bands on the scene today." McPherson's fellow bandmates are also quick to recognize the enduring preeminence of his work. Wong writes, "Every time I get to play with [McPherson], I think there is no one on this planet that can do what he can."

Even the COVID-19 pandemic didn't slow McPherson down. During quarantine, he was prolifically active online, participating in programs, concerts, and festivals all over the world; collaborating with organizations such as the Global Music Foundation and the Detroit Symphony Orchestra; and performing as a featured soloist in Beasley's GRAMMY-winning recording *Bird Lives*. He was also an online Artists in Residence at Michigan State University and Arizona State University.

McPherson is a frequent guest at high schools and colleges all over the world and teaches privately both in-person and online. His students have been accepted into universities including The Juilliard School, the University of Michigan, the University of Colorado Boulder, and the State University of New York College at Purchase, often earning National Jazz Student Awards and full-ride scholarships. Many of his former students have gone on to have careers of their own, some even landing positions as jazz department heads of major college programs.

In 2015, McPherson had the honor of being the doctoral dissertation subject of then-PhD candidate Donnie Norton, "The Jazz Saxophone Style of Charles McPherson: An Analysis through Biographical Examination and Solo Transcription." McPherson is currently being

interviewed extensively by Dr. Michael Caldwell for a memoir about McPherson's life and philosophies, *Let's Stop Saying Goodbye: The Wit and Wisdom of Charles McPherson.*