

ENCORE



JUHANI AALTONEN

OPEN AND FREE

BY KEN WAXMAN

December 12 is a red-letter day in Finnish jazz since that's when Juhani Aaltonen, one of the country's major improvisers, was born and will celebrate his 90th birthday. Anything but retired, the tenor saxophonist and flute player was fêted during a two-hour gala concert in Helsinki's Savoy Theatre last month, alongside associates from his almost 70-year professional career. "In music you have to maintain the feeling of first love," says Aaltonen, who lives in Vantaa, about 10 kilometers (6 miles) from Finland's capital. "Every style of music has its own atmosphere. You have to be able to sense that," he says. "You have to break through the shield that isolates you from the audience with communication that's open and free."

Communication has been a shibboleth for him since he was first exposed to American jazz in his southeast interior village Inkeroinen. Films such as *Young Man with a Horn* (1950)—starring Kirk Douglas as the trumpet-playing protagonist—drew him to jazz' improvisational side, so he purchased a saxophone and taught himself to play. Tough times in post-World War II Finland led to non-musical jobs in Sweden, and it wasn't until he returned home in the late '50s that he began to play seriously. That intensified after 1961 when he moved to Helsinki to study flute at the Jean Sibelius Academy, which lasted only a year, then spent one semester at Boston's Berklee College of Music (then known as Berklee School of Music). By then he felt he had worked out a personal, musical style. "I remember my Berklee teacher asked me to play something and his comment was simply: 'That's it!'"

Another reason for his shortened educational tenure was the fact that Aaltonen had already established himself on the Helsinki music scene, as he had an innate ability to integrate himself into many forms of music then flourishing in his country. In a recent interview, Aaltonen noted that "if you want to make a living in Finland playing music, you have to be all-round. It was natural to adapt to different musical settings." Some experts even claim that

Aaltonen may have played on more recordings than any other Finnish musician. "Being asked to play different styles was a huge learning experience for me. Going to a studio gig to play the melody of a French waltz, for instance, you have to grasp what's needed to convey a feeling of that particular style." Aaltonen even spent 1969-70 in Tasavallan Presidentti, a Finnish fusion band. "They wanted an improvising musician," he reports. "I never tried to be a progressive rock musician. I simply adapted to the environment." He doesn't regret not having the musical background many players possess. "The lack of formal training forced me to find my own way of solving musical problems. I think of music in a visual way. The words of songs are very important. When I play 'Nature Boy', the words guide how I phrase, what intervals, what sound I create. The words direct me towards a deeper understanding of what can be said."

Tenor saxophone avatars such as Sonny Rollins, Dexter Gordon, Archie Shepp and Ben Webster were important to his sound evolution. But seeing John Coltrane in concert was a huge influence he acknowledges: "Coltrane made me realize that there should be a message in the playing." Another who impressed Aaltonen with his energy was German saxophonist Peter Brötzmann. During a joint 1973 tour, the two collaborated (*Hot Lotta*) as a result of Aaltonen's affiliation with drummer Edward Vesala (1945-1999), arguably Finland's best-known free jazz improviser and bandleader. "I met Vesala in a jam-session in 1967," Aaltonen recounts. "And we had a deep collaboration between 1967-1985." Recorded collaborations from those years include *Prana* (1981) with Reggie Workman (sideline: Aaltonen's last NYC performance was with the bassist, plus drummer Andrew Cyrille, at Saint Peter's Church in December 2006) and *Springbird* (1979). The latter included other Finnish players including keyboardist-harpist (and former wife to Vesala) Iro Haarla, with whom Aaltonen has reconnected in recent years and who also just reissued the late '70s gem of an album on her Willa Silva label. "Working with Juhani is very inspiring," Haarla says fondly. "I love his soulful tenor saxophone sound and the way he interprets my melodies. I composed 'Agape Love' for him, which means in Christian life, 'God's unselfish love'. Juhani is a humble person and his strong spiritual attitude towards life is heard in his interpretations."

Aaltonen also worked with groups such as the New Musical Orchestra, as well as Norwegian bassist Arild Andersen's quartet. His secular affiliations stopped in

1986 though, when Aaltonen had what he describes as "a spiritual awakening." From that time until the early 2000s he concentrated solely on church music, though he insists "I never stopped improvising even though I didn't play jazz." Still when Finnish bassist Ulf Krokfors contacted him to play in a trio, a rehearsal convinced Aaltonen to return to jazz. "Call it destiny," says Krokfors. "Juhani himself had come to the place where he wanted to continue where he left off. In that sense asking him to form a trio came at the right moment." Their first album was 2001's *Mother Tongue*. "That's what it's all about: talking the same musical language," the bassist adds. "We see music-making the same way, so we always had the same vision of the music. Juhani has influenced me in so many ways, not only musically but also spiritually." Besides that trio, during this century Aaltonen has worked with many fellow countrymen, thanks in no small part to the Helsinki-based TUM Records, on which Aaltonen has been well-documented since 2003: from appearing on the label's inaugural first three releases to ten more since (nine total as leader). His associations have included near-contemporaries such as pianist Heikki Sarmanto and the late bassist Teppo Hauta-aho to those of whom are decades younger: woodwinds specialist Mikko Innanen, trumpeter Verner Pohjola, guitarist Raoul Björkenheim and drummers Klaus Suonsaari and Olavi Louhivuori.

What is it like playing with younger musicians? "Since I'm 90, everyone else is younger than me!" Aaltonen jokes. "Playing with younger people keeps me in motion musically. Again there's the adaptability thing. I listen and try to find my own way in (the) music." He says he's more confident than ever before. "I used to play with an [imaginary] knife to my throat," he admits. "But I don't feel like that anymore. Communication has to be open and free, you can't hide behind your instrument."

For more info visit tumrecords.com/021-juhani-aaltonen

Recommended Listening:

- Edward Vesala Trio—*Nana* (Blue Master-Svart, 1970)
- Juhani Aaltonen—*Etiquette* (Love, 1974)
- Juhani Aaltonen—*Springbird* (Leo-Willa Silva, 1978)
- Juhani Aaltonen, Reggie Workman, Andrew Cyrille—*Reflections* (TUM, 2002)
- Juhani Aaltonen/Heikki Sarmanto—*Conversations* (TUM, 2010)
- Juhani Aaltonen/Raoul Björkenheim—*Awakening* (Eclipse Music, 2016)

LEST WE FORGET



BARRY HARRIS

THE EPITOME OF JAZZ

BY JIM MOTAVALLI

Barry Harris, who left us in 2021 at the age of 91, was a Detroit guy through and through. The pianist, bandleader, composer, arranger and educator (b. December 15, 1929 – d. December 8, 2021) passed away due to complications from COVID-19, but not before releasing at least 26 albums as leader, and recording extensively with Dexter Gordon (seven albums) as well as fellow Detroiters Pepper Adams, Roy Brooks, Donald Byrd, Louis Hayes, Thad Jones, Yusef Lateef, Charles McPherson, Sonny Red and many others.

Harris' musical journey began at age four, taking lessons from his mother, a church pianist. Becoming enamored with jazz, the family home became a popular spot for jam sessions, attracting young jazz musicians

such as Red, Byrd and pianists Roland Hanna and Harold McKinney. Coming up, Harris learned bebop largely by ear, influenced by Thelonious Monk and Bud Powell, whom he considered the "epitome" of jazz. (Harris' live performances, particularly in his final decades, would famously include a selection by either, if not both, Powell and Monk.)

With this abundant activity in his hometown, Harris showed little interest in catching the jazz train to NYC, staying in Detroit through the '50s. While in the Motor City he worked with Thad and Elvin Jones, two thirds of the local family of jazz giants that also included pianist Hank. Harris had no trouble finding work at Detroit clubs such as the Blue Bird Inn and Baker's Keyboard Lounge. It was a piano player's town then—from Jones, Harris and Hanna to Tommy Flanagan, Alice (McLeod) Coltrane, Johnny O'Neal, Hugh Lawson and Kirk Lightsey. He also began giving lessons. Alto saxophonist Charles McPherson (10 years Harris' junior) first ascended Harris' Detroit stairs for lessons when he was 14, and later in the early '60s, they would begin to work together extensively, including in Harris' band with tenor saxophonist George Coleman and trumpeter Lonnie Hillyer (*Newer Than New* on Riverside). "Barry

was a very down-to-earth person, very natural, and very, very smart and intuitive," McPherson says. "He didn't like the electronics, even though they were popular then. He said he could do without the money, as long as he could play the music his way." Yet, he could also be prickly; saxophonist Allen Lowe says Harris grumbled when he saw a group he was in billed as "Sonny Stitt and the All-Stars." Harris said: "My name ain't 'Mr. All-Star'."

When Harris left Detroit in 1960 it was because he had a high-profile gig with alto saxophonist Cannonball Adderley that finally landed him in NYC for good. Soon after his arrival, he appeared on Lee Morgan's soul-jazz Blue Note classic *The Sidewinder*. The title cut reached an unexpected 81 on the *Billboard* Hot 100, perhaps giving some the impression that the album's pianist liked it funky. But Harris was the quintessential bebopper. Beside his primary influence in Powell, he really loved Charlie Parker (who'd also been active in Detroit), and who allowed the young pianist to sit in occasionally. "I'm a firm believer in Bird," Harris would say.

Always an educator, between 1982 and his death four

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