



# PEGGY STERN

A RESPLENDENT LIFE OF JAZZ PERSISTENCE  
BY THOMAS STAUDTER

Peggy Stern is among the subset of select luminaries and ardent practitioners of America's great "musical idiom" (*à la* Duke Ellington) whose efforts in widening opportunities for other women jazz artists should be rightfully celebrated. The pianist, composer and bandleader has forged a long, laudatory career, recording 15 albums as a leader (two co-led with legendary alto saxophonist Lee Konitz), touring internationally and serving as an accompanist for notables such as Gerry Mulligan, Diane Schuur and David "Fathead" Newman. She's also founded two separate music festivals (actually one long-running festival with a shared concept, two different names) devoted to just women bandleaders. At age 77 she's vigorously continuing to perform and compose, recently leading her quintet through new songs in preparation for a recording at a concert in Georgetown, TX, just north of Austin, where she has lived since 2013. Hers is a resplendent life of jazz persistence, a pursuit of creative freedom entwined with the terms she sets—and her wise, nurturing presence remains a source of joy for musical colleagues and students alike.

In 2002, then living in Kingston, NY, Stern attended the nearby Saugerties Jazz Festival and was aghast to find the lineup did not include any women performers. "I thought," Stern recalls, "This is not good. And it was an issue that kept coming up: why weren't there any women leading their own bands at jazz festivals?" In response, in 2004 she inaugurated the Wall Street Jazz Festival in Kingston, "where women were in charge," with help from her friend John Bilotti. The free, outdoor festival took root immediately and for the next twelve years Stern and her festival volunteers welcomed the jazz world's top women artists leading their own bands (with leaders free to fill out their ensembles with men). This singular opportunity to bring a band and play your own music made the gathering incredibly popular among women jazz artists (the roster of participants is a veritable who's who)—and when Stern moved to

Austin in 2017, the festival moved with her, and was renamed LuluFest, debuting in 2023 in Lenox, MA (not far from her summer home in the Berkshires), swinging back to Austin last year.

Su Terry, a saxophonist and festival performer who has recorded two superb albums with Stern—*The Art of the Duo* (2010) and *Z Octet* (2015), both on the pianist's own Estrella Productions label—identifies Stern's all-women bandleader festival as "brilliant." Too often, she notes, festival promoters simply bring women artists together for an *ad hoc*, one-off bandstand meeting as a gesture toward gender inclusion. "What we need is more awareness of the many women who are out there leading groups and playing their original music," according to Terry, "and that's what Peggy accomplishes. Women bandleaders want to play with who we like to play with."

On the evidence of her recordings and online videos of her performances over the years, one could adduce that Stern's classical music training and a wide spectrum of stylistic experiences early in her career have left a profound influence on her. She was born in Philadelphia and raised in the northern suburb of Elkins Park, the third of four children; her parents were close friends with the parents of Michael and Randy Brecker, her contemporaries. A musical family, her mother played piano and filled the family home with classical music while her father championed Broadway musicals and show tunes. Stern began playing piano around age four, able to play back the lessons her older sister was taking. Entirely focused on classical music, she graduated with a bachelor's degree from the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, NY, and a master's degree from the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, MA, before moving to the San Francisco Bay Area in the early '70s. There, Stern played harpsichord in a local Renaissance-music orchestra and began to delve into improvisation through the study of figured bass charts; she also discovered Chick Corea's early ECM solo piano albums. Her musical growth widened during an impactful stint with SuperCombo, a popular Latin dance band, and then subsequent work with the Latin rock big band Azteca and Cat's Cradle, the R&B band she co-founded with vocalist Linda Tillery. Friendships with Paul Jackson and Mike Clark from Herbie Hancock's Headhunters helped her as she immersed herself into the Bay Area jazz scene, and soon she was working with additional Hancock associates Eddie Henderson and Julian Priester, as well

as others.

Stern lived in Seattle for eight years during the '80s, teaching at the Cornish College of the Arts and launching her recording career with her 1985 debut album, *City Hawk*. She moved to New York in 1990, taught in the SUNY Purchase music program, and began a three-year stretch of work with Konitz that included several tours of Italy and Japan. "Lee changed my approach to playing completely—and it was ripe for a change," Stern recalls. "He urged me to not play a role, to just play the piano. Use what I know. And that became a big part of my concept. He loosened up my playing."

As a perfectionist, Stern continued to record albums with different bands, eventually establishing her own label. That freedom also empowered her to operate on her own terms. "She likes to keep moving from one project to another," says saxophonist Paul Ostermayer. "Being true to her own self and not imitating anyone—that's Peggy." The move to Austin was one motivated by her decision to be near her daughter, whom she raised as a single mother, and two grandchildren. Characteristically, Stern has helped invigorate the jazz scene there, while also coaching a high school jazz combo and leading a jazz choir. She has even come to terms with Western swing, writing and performing her own stylized, Texas-flavored songs on her 2017 album *Shine On*. "Peggy's music doesn't sound like anybody else's," says saxophonist and frequent collaborator Joey Colarusso. "Her music, which is gorgeous, harmonically complex and steeped in melody, keeps me challenged. That's part of her indomitable spirit. She's had to make her way in a man's world and show that she is not made of glass." Stern plans to host LuluFest in both Lenox this September and Austin in November—always looking ahead.

For more info visit [peggystern.com](http://peggystern.com) and [lulu-fest.com/home](http://lulu-fest.com/home)

#### Recommended Listening:

- Barbara Donald & Unity – *The Past And Tomorrows* (Cadence Jazz, 1982)
- Lee Konitz/Peggy Stern – *Lunasea* (Soul Note, 1992)
- Peggy Stern/Thomas Chapin Quartet – *The Fuchsia* (Koch Jazz, 1995)
- Peggy Stern – [Actual Size] (Koch Jazz, 1998)
- Peggy Stern/Su Terry – *The Art of the Duo* (Estrella Productions, 2010)
- Peggy Stern – *Z Octet* (Estrella Productions, 2015)

## LEST WE FORGET



# MELBA LISTON

ON WHOSE SHOULDERS THEY STAND  
BY MARILYN LESTER

The famous Chairman, Mao Zedong dictum, "women hold up half the sky," has certainly been a hard job for women in jazz. But some were "lucky": strength, fierce persistence and talent paid off. Such a one was Melba Doretta Liston (1926-1999), a "beyond category" trombonist, arranger and composer, who broke the jazz glass ceiling and whose centennial the jazz world celebrates this year. She was one of the first women trombonists to play in big bands during the '40s, '50s and '60s, and was particularly renowned for her innovative arrangements. Drummer, Dr. Sherrie Maricle, who's led the DIVA Jazz Orchestra since 1993, says "I've looked up to her my entire career and

I'm eternally grateful for her passion, perseverance and inspiration." Trombonist-educator Ryan Keberle considers how Liston shaped the sound of the music far more than history has acknowledged: "(She was) a towering force in jazz. Her writing combined deep swing, orchestral imagination and emotional clarity, leaving an indelible mark with artists like Randy Weston, Quincy Jones, Dizzy Gillespie, and so many others who benefited from her quiet brilliance."

Born in Kansas City, MO, on January 13, 1926, Liston was given a trombone at age seven and encouraged by her guitarist grandfather. Largely self-taught, she was performing solo on local radio at age eight. A family move to Los Angeles in 1936 serendipitously put her in the path of Dexter Gordon and Eric Dolphy. She studied with Alma Hightower, played in youth bands and at 16, joined Gerald Wilson's big band; when the orchestra disbanded in 1948, Dizzy Gillespie sought her out for his band, where as a player and arranger she performed alongside John Coltrane, John Lewis and others. A 1949 tour with Billie Holiday and Count Basie proved too much for the young player: the rigors of touring in the South and racial segregation brought her back to LA,

where she took a clerical job for three years. But by the mid '50s she was ready and returned to music, rejoining Gillespie for US State Department tours, recording with Art Blakey's Big Band, forming her own all-women quintet in 1958 and touring Europe with Quincy Jones' show *Free and Easy* in 1959 as music director.

This stunning impact has not been lost on today's female trombonists who realize upon whose shoulders they stand—from Natalie Cressman ("Her only release as a leader *Melba Liston and Her Bones*, I wore out listening to when I first discovered it. Discovering her work was such an inspiration: she provided an example of female greatness...in the 1940s and '50s, when there were hardly any female jazz instrumentalists playing in big bands at all"), to Jennifer Wharton ("You can't tell the story of women in jazz without Melba Liston, whose trombone playing, composing and arranging opened doors that had long been closed. She was initially met with open skepticism, including one Gillespie band member's remark, 'Why the hell did he send all the way to California for some bitch trombone player?' Once

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