



LAJOS DUDAS

THE CLARINET'S FREE SPIRIT

BY ANNA STEEGMANN

Turning 85 is a milestone for anyone, but especially for a musician like Lajos Dudas, a prominent figure on the European scene, though unfortunately not as well-known stateside. Nonetheless, he has spent over six decades redefining the boundaries of the clarinet and still carries the astonishment of an eight-year-old boy in Budapest who stumbled upon his destiny via the family radio. Dudas recalls that although the household had a piano, he lacked enthusiasm for playing music until he heard the music from one of jazz' greatest clarinetists, Artie Shaw. That moment sparked an immediate desire to master the clarinet and pursue a life of musical fame, an obsession that quickly took root as one year later Dudas was admitted to the Béla Bartók Conservatory. He later received a rigorous classical foundation at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music, but his instincts were inherently subversive: he was constantly improvising, a rarity in the strict conservatory environment. When he floated the idea of formal jazz studies, he found his professor baffled by the very idea that jazz was something to be studied.

As the saxophone dominated the mid-century jazz world, Dudas remained loyal to the "black stick." After a brief flirtation with the saxophone, he concluded that mastering the clarinet made the saxophone seem effortless by comparison. However, heeding bebop trumpeter icon Dizzy Gillespie's warning that a lifetime is not enough to master a single instrument, he decided to push the clarinet "as far as humanly possible." With a restlessness for improvisational freedom, Dudas eventually found himself in Bulgaria, where he met his wife, a ballet dancer. For a decade, they lived a "vagabond life" as touring artists throughout Europe. That journey led to Germany, where Dudas paid his dues in cover bands entertaining US troops. The gigs were grueling, requiring him to wade through the Great American Songbook, Tijuana Brass and James Brown. He admits that playing "Yakety Yak" six times a night was a test of his stamina.

The birth of his daughter marked a turning point. Faced with an ultimatum from his wife to end the endless touring, in 1973 Dudas accepted a

teaching position in Neuss, near Düsseldorf. This stability became his creative foundation. Splitting his time between teaching and performing, he made his first major artistic statement by rearranging J.S. Bach's solo violin sonatas for a jazz trio. When the project was broadcast on WDR in Cologne, the host challenged him to go beyond technical mastery and find his own identity. "He was right," Dudas recalls. "I didn't want to sound like anybody else." He began a period of deep experimentation, dissecting the works of Stravinsky, Cage and Bartók, infusing avant garde structures with "dirty jazz phrasing and groove." Out of this friction between the academic and the visceral emerged a distinctive sound that he likes to call "free bebop." His breakthrough came in 1980 with *Detour*, an album that caused a sensation in Europe. Renowned jazz critic Joachim-Ernst Berendt named it a "Jazz Record of the Month," and legendary German trombonist Albert Mangelsdorff (who guested on a track from Dudas' *Jubilee Edition* with Radio Jazzgroup Frankfurt) wondered aloud on the air who this kid was who played so differently from everyone else. Throughout the '80s, Dudas topped the international *Jazz Forum* poll every year. The success of *Detour* ushered in a golden era: his 12-bar atonal piece, "Urban Blues", won first prize at the 1982 International Jazz Composition Competition in Monaco. He often jokes that the ten-thousand-franc prize worked out to "about \$200 a bar—the best paid bars of my life." In *The Great Jazz Book*, Berendt noted: "Dudas is a stylist highly regarded in Europe for the tenderness and lightness of his free tonal playing... and he can also play the good old American blues."

Based in Neuss, Dudas thus enjoyed the luxury of being a leading voice with the financial freedom to experiment. After a free-tonal phase in the '80s that produced albums including *Monte Carlo* (with guitarist and frequent collaborator Attila Zoller) and *CL4 Alte und Neue Wege* (with clarinetist Theo Jörgensmann, who passed away last October), he returned to melodic jazz without losing his distinctive style. His collaborators grew to include woodwinds player Gerd Dudek, trumpeter Charles Tolliver, bassist Leonard Jones and drummer-vibraphonist Tommy Vig. A major milestone came when Selmer/Paris invited him to record with international artists using their newest instruments; the resulting session with multi-instrumentalist Howard Johnson, *Juxoli* (Pannon Jazz, 1995), was hailed as the pinnacle of '90s ethno-jazz. Dudas also developed a legendary rapport with vibraphonists (including Vig and Tom van der Geld), believing that there was no better sonic combination

for the clarinet. Of his partnership with vibraphonist-pianist Karl Berger, he notes: "We complemented each other intuitively—no superfluous notes, just a floating, singing, highly musical sound." For almost 30 years Dudas has also worked with guitarist Philipp van Endert, whom he describes as an agile, attentive and tasteful partner.

About 80% of Dudas' work is jazz-oriented, the rest classical and crossover. Key jazz albums include *Urban Blues* (1993), *Talk of the Town* (2000) and *The Lake and the Music* (2000), while *Lajos Dudas Plays Bach* (1994) is a highlight of his classical music side. He continues to explore the Third Stream—the bridge between classical form and jazz—most recently on *On The Third Stream Path* (2021). Asked about his experiences in the US, he says that in the early '70s he hung out in NYC with Zoller and Weather Report keyboardist Joe Zawinul and, in 1982, visited Vig in California, jamming and taking in shows by Dexter Gordon and Woody Herman. He returned in the early 2000s for the Rhein/Mississippi Fest in Minneapolis, playing a double bill with the Ira Sullivan Quartet.

Dudas' influence resonates with his peers. Harry Skoler, woodwinds professor at Berklee College of Music, notes: "Lajos Dudas is the clarinetist's clarinetist. With an approach all his own, Lajos plays with a spirit that gives the listener an imaginative sixth sense...he stands tall among the greatest jazz improvisers in history." In NYC, Downtown Music Gallery's Bruce Gallanter adds: "He continues to surprise me with each of his records." Today, with nearly 70 recordings to his credit, Dudas remains a fearless and unwavering voice. What began with a boy and a radio in Budapest has evolved into a lifetime of mastery. Yet his core conviction remains as grounded as a walking bass line: "You can combine jazz with anything, but if you take the rhythm out, it's not jazz; if you take the melody out, it's not music. Simply put, if I can't tap my foot to it—it's not 'jazz.' "

For more info visit wikipedia.org/wiki/Lajos_Dudas

Recommended Listening:

- Lajos Dudas—*Contrasts* (Rillophon, 1978)
- Lajos Dudas—*Monte Carlo* (Rayna, 1981)
- Lajos Dudas—*On The Third-Stream Path* (JazzSick, 1986-2013)
- Lajos Dudas—*From Bach to Atonality* (Mudoks/Gramofon, 1990-2022)
- Lajos Dudas—*Talk of the Town* (Doublemoon/Challenge, 2000)
- Lajos Dudas—*Brückenschlag* (JazzSick, 2005)

LEST WE FORGET



CHARLES KYNARD

EVOLUTION OF A SOUL JAZZ ORGANIST

BY RICHARD J. SKELLY

Thinking of the great Hammond B-3 players that are no longer in this realm there's clearly Jimmy Smith, Jimmy McGriff, Richard "Groove" Holmes, Dr. Lonnie Smith, Charles Earland, Larry Young and Jack McDuff. But what about Charles Kynard whose relatively short career makes a case for him as being the most unheralded of jazz and soul-jazz organists? Says Gregory "Organ Monk" Lewis of Kynard, "Like Chester Thompson, he was a bad cat with that funky stuff. These cats didn't get the fame

while they were around. Like many, he slipped through the cracks."

Born Feb. 20, 1933 in St. Louis, MO, Kynard suddenly died while playing organ at age 46 on Jul. 8, 1979, at home in Los Angeles. He played piano before transitioning to the organ, and established his early career in Kansas City, where he led a trio featuring saxophonist Tex Johnson and drummer Leroy Anderson. He'd been educated in KC schools, received undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of Kansas at Lawrence and did post-graduate work at UCLA-Long Beach, as well as at KC's Avila University, the Ford Free University and the Hochschule für Musik in Berlin. Kynard also served in the US Army (1956-57), then began a career that included an appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, the Kansas City Philharmonic and as a guest organist for the Kansas City Athletics baseball games.

Moving to Los Angeles in 1963, Kynard found work in studio orchestras for Columbia Pictures

and Warner Brothers. He also worked with studio musicians in and around Hollywood, recorded for record labels such as Pacific Jazz and Mainstream, as well as East Coast work with Prestige. New Jersey-based drummer, arranger and producer Bernard "Pretty" Purdie remembers many recording sessions with Kynard for Prestige. Now 84, Purdie recalls Kynard as reliable and focused, which is why he found steady work with the organist. "I considered him my friend for many years," he says.

Kynard's discography traces the evolution of soul-jazz. His early work included *Where It's At!* (Pacific Jazz, 1963), more a traditional jazz outing, before a pivot toward a heavier, funk-influenced sound. "I remember checking him out in college and my first impression was 'he isn't playing the bass lines,' like Jimmy Smith, Charles Earland or Larry Young," Greg Lewis says. "When I started getting

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