

LEW TABACKIN

STILL SEARCHING

BY THOMAS STAUDTER



An abiding desire to improve his playing drives Lew Tabackin forward, he admits—even now, with a professional musical career that spans more than 60 years, during which time he’s been widely recognized as a preeminent jazz flutist, as well as a supremely expressive tenor saxophonist. While his renown as a protean instrumentalist and improviser with a “dual nature” (rather than being merely a “doubler”), gained in small groups and big bands, should allow him, now at 86, to ease into a lighter performance schedule, it is unlikely to happen soon. Case in point: two weeks after a mid-August surgical procedure that would cause most mortals to lay up some, Tabackin was packing for a month-long tour of Japan, where he led a trio with bassist Motoi Kanamori and drummer Shinnosuke Takahashi on twenty dates, then performed an additional five dates with flutist (and former student) Yuka Sasaki. Characteristically, preparations for the last month’s tour also included a rehearsal in his Manhattan residence with his working New York City trio mates, bassist Boris Kozlov and drummer Jason Tiemann.

The soon-to-be 97-year-old Toshiko Akiyoshi says she did not try to persuade Tabackin, her husband and musical soulmate for nearly 57 years, to postpone the tour and rest up instead. “Lew is very independent and determined,” says the pianist, composer and bandleader. “I knew he really looked forward to this annual tour and would do everything to honor his commitments. And Lew would be ready, too; he’s always practicing—and trying to get me to practice more! In fact, what I admire more than anything is his dedication. Lew has never stopped trying to be a better musician.” Indeed, Tabackin’s full calendar of rehearsals, gigs and tours, as well as daily practice sessions on flute and tenor saxophone, all end up subservient to his larger, never-ending quest for excellence as a musical artist. The twenty-five shows in Japan, another monthly residence trio date this month at Manhattan’s Michiko Studios, followed by a “Tenor Legacy” performance with a quartet at Dizzy’s Club, then a November tour of Europe—it all is meant to add up to something.

“If I come off a tour playing twenty percent better than when I left—well, that’s the idea of playing, and it has to be done,” says Tabackin. “Shit, I don’t have to be doing this anymore, but I have to see if I can get better. That’s the concept, that’s the process in becoming a musician—perfecting what you know and what you can do. For me, it’s not a matter of creating anything new; it’s more about continuing to refine my ideas and seeing how I can express them better. I always feel this work is worth my time, that chasing the carrot is a big part of my reality, a way to reach another level of playing or epiphany.”

The jazz gods surely have smiled on Tabackin and Akiyoshi, blessing them with longevity and the ability to persevere and share their musical artistry with audiences around the world. They first met in 1967 when Akiyoshi subbed for Don Friedman in a rehearsal of the Clark Terry All-Star Band. As she recalls, her back was to the band, and she says, “We were playing a blues in B flat, and after the first chorus of the tenor sax solo I turned around to see who was playing, figuring he would be about 50 years old, his sound was so developed.” After Tabackin was asked but unable to play in her big band Town Hall concert later that year, the two eventually played together in some small group projects, then married in 1969. Fast forward to the first of last month: Tabackin flew out to commence his tour, as Akiyoshi was returning on a flight to NYC from Japan (where she had performed a triumphant concert at the Tokyo Metropolitan Theatre Concert Hall)—a remarkable, combined feat considering their

advanced ages. Not quite *Guinness Book of World Records* material, but on the button for a legendary jazz couple who helped keep the spirit of the big band alive during the ascendancy of rock and disco. Together, they earned ten GRAMMY Award nominations and numerous *DownBeat* poll citations between 1976-1994 under the rubric of the Toshiko Akiyoshi-Lew Tabackin Big Band (so named until 1982, while based in LA) and then the Toshiko Akiyoshi Jazz Orchestra Featuring Lew Tabackin (after a move back to NYC). The ensemble was disbanded officially in 2003, but has since been revived for special occasions, including a 2010 concert in Shanghai that was released the following year on CD and DVD. All told, the band made over two dozen recordings. “It was an evolution from the start, and not always that easy to pull off,” says Tabackin. “But we made our contributions.” Of his wife’s formidable efforts as the band’s composer, arranger, conductor and pianist, a level of creative industry that was Ellingtonian in scope and style, he adds, “Someday there will be a bigger and proper appreciation for Toshiko’s greatness.” Meanwhile, Akiyoshi pointed out that she didn’t actually write a lot of music just for her husband, but that every jazz big band needs a top soloist, “and I had Lew,” she says. “He was a great asset for me and my writing.”

From the start, Tabackin would have to be considered an unlikely success story. He was born and raised in a rough, working-class South Philadelphia neighborhood rife with racism and antisemitism; his grandparents had fled the pogroms that swept through Belarusian villages of the Russian Empire in the early 1900s and arrived in the US in 1911. Tabackin’s father applied gold leaf at a local greeting card company, while his mother managed the home, raising Lew and his younger sister. Although his parents were not musical, his mother enjoyed listening to opera on the radio and would also take her son to hear different jazz big bands at the nearby Earle Theatre. Philly had a lively jazz culture back then—“it was part of everyday life,” he notes; and a luncheonette he frequented in his youth had an amazing jukebox; he remembered being particularly enamored by Miles Davis’ “Walkin’” with tenor saxophonist Lucky Thompson and trombonist J.J. Johnson. At 12, wanting to learn how to play clarinet, he was given a flute at school instead. Tabackin advanced quickly, took lessons at the Settlement Music School, and was admitted eventually to the Philadelphia Conservatory of Music. All along he took lessons with the area’s top flute players, including James Pellerite (co-founder of the National Flute Association) and Murray Panitz (principal flutist for the Philadelphia Orchestra). He also started playing tenor saxophone at 15, inspired after hearing Al Cohn. “Once I got into music, I locked myself away and concentrated,” Tabackin says. He spent years voraciously listening to records and practicing continuously.

In the American tradition of the working stiff, Tabackin brought a “get it done” attitude to his musical development—he’d be unobtrusive, someone who knew the score, so speak, but didn’t expect to score himself. Nonetheless, his talent was noticeable. Trumpeter Randy Brecker, five years younger than Tabackin, remembers meeting him at rehearsal bands in Philly, and then played with him in the All-City Orchestra. In 1965, after two years of service in the US Army, Tabackin moved to NYC, as did Brecker. They found steady work every weekend in the Larry Elgart Big Band, and soon people were associating the two musicians together, says Brecker; they ended up playing in large ensembles led by pianist Duke Pearson (who led their first recording date) and trumpeter Clark Terry. “You heard the history of the tenor in Lew’s playing,

from Coleman Hawkins and Don Byas through Sonny Rollins,” says Brecker. “The way he managed the vibrato to gain a certain sound, all his ideas, the way he played off the melody—it was special. And his flute playing! There was none better. We always blended together and never had any problems with intonation. Playing with him was like playing with my brother Michael—we didn’t have to talk about what we were going to do.”

Tabackin worked in small groups led by greats such as Elvin Jones, Donald Byrd and Roland Hanna during the ’60s, but his bread and butter, by far, was earned in big bands—first with the Elgart brothers (Larry and Les), then with Pearson, Terry, Cab Calloway (“a great experience—it’s where I learned how to communicate within a saxophone section”), Maynard Ferguson, Thad Jones and Mel Lewis, Michael Mantler’s Jazz Composer’s Orchestra, and then with Doc Severinsen on *The Tonight Show* and later on *The Dick Cavett Show*. It was an apprenticeship that reconciled him to never quite getting the billing he deserved, his sporadic intrusions into the foreground not allowing him to express himself fully. All that changed in the big bands with Akiyoshi and also with smaller groups under his own name. The latter include recordings with Akiyoshi (of course), Shelly Manne, Phil Woods, John Lewis (“I was 40 years old and stupidly playing over the top, but on our duet album I had to control myself, which was a great and lasting lesson for me”), Randy Brecker, Dave Holland, Hank Jones and Warne Marsh. That’s where Tabackin became an integral part of jazz history, his work no longer needing the endorsement of critics or retrieval of anthologists. “Lew is part of that generation of jazz musicians who could shine in any kind of situation, large or small groups and everything in between,” says drummer Bill Goodwin, who first played with Tabackin at a jam session in Atlantic City in 1963 and later accompanied the big band with Akiyoshi to Japan in 1974.

The impact Tabackin has had on other musicians cannot be overlooked. Saxophonist Melissa Aldana met Tabackin in 2014, and they have since become friends. She says, “From the very beginning, Lew was interested in my sound. Not just the saxophone sound itself, but what the sound was saying...What do you actually sound like? Who are you when you play one note? Lew made me think about that in a much deeper way. I also learned from him that developing your sound is not something you accomplish and then move on from. It is something you live with your whole life...You keep searching, listening, questioning, and trying to get closer to something that you may not be able to fully explain. What inspires me most is that Lew still has that curiosity. After so many years of playing and so much knowledge and experience, he is still listening and still searching.”

For more info visit lewtabackin.com. Tabackin’s *Dual Nature Trio* is at Michiko’s Studios Oct. 11. “*Tenor Legacy with Lew Tabackin*” is at Dizzy’s Club Oct. 14. Tabackin is also at *The Falcon* (Marlboro, NY) Oct. 25. See *Calendar* and *100 Miles Out*.

Recommended Listening:

- Toshiko Akiyoshi/Lew Tabackin Big Band—*Road Time* (RCA, 1976)
- Lew Tabackin Trio—*Black and Tan Fantasy* (Ascent, 1979)
- John Lewis/Lew Tabackin—*Duo* (Eastworld, 1981)
- Lew Tabackin Quartet—*Desert Lady* (Concord, 1989)
- Toshiko Akiyoshi Jazz Orchestra (featuring Lew Tabackin)—*Desert Lady/Fantasy* (Columbia, 1993)
- Lew Tabackin Trio—*Live in Paris* (s/r, 2007)