

Finding *The Sound* – An Exploration of The Life of Stan Getz

By Hal Flynn

When even the most monumental jazz saxophonists of the 20th Century talk about him, they express envy in the way of John Coltrane who said, “We would all play like Stan Getz, if we could”(Lowy). Stan Getz created the standard of jazz saxophone sound, and also made numerous contributions to the jazz world through his groundbreaking, innovative recordings. The accomplishments of Stan Getz in his recordings, and the sound of his saxophone will never permit him to be forgotten in history, jazz or otherwise.

In the year of 1927, Stan Getz drew the first breath of what would be a monumental life. On February 2, Stanley Gayetsky was born into “a family originally from Russia” in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (“Stan Getz @ The Jazz Files”). Getz spent a brief period of his early life in Philadelphia before the family relocated to the Bronx in New York.

As a teenager, he discovered his musical ability in band class at school. His father bought him his first saxophone at the age of 13, causing him to fall in love with music to the extent of taking lessons and also exploring other types of saxophones until deciding that “tenor saxophone, with its rich sound, was his favorite” (“Stan Getz – The Sound”). In his first two years of playing, he would practice eight hours a day. Living in a New York tenement with his parents, he played in the bathroom to help develop his sound. Eventually, neighbors would yell, “shut that kid up,” to which his mother would say, “Play louder, Stanley” (Martin).

By the middle of his teenage years, Getz had reached a high level of confidence in his playing ability. So confident was he at this point that he struck out and began playing as a professional musician. He landed his first professional job in New York “when he was only fifteen” (Lemos). During this time, with the country embroiled in the Second World War, the draft of men eligible for military service had created an opening in the Big Band of trombonist Jack Teagarden. Upon applying for the job, Getz was hired at the age of sixteen.

The first known recording of Stan Getz playing is with Teagarden's band on August 18, 1943 (The Jazz Discography Project). Getz played with Teagarden's band until 1944, when he next began playing with Stan Kenton's big band. His tenure there lasted only into the next year. 1945 brought Getz into Jimmy Dorsey's big band. Within the same year, he would end up in the Benny Goodman big band.

It was during these first few jobs that he would encounter his influences. In an interview with Mel Martin, Getz described being influenced by the great instrumental sounds of Jack Teagarden and Benny Goodman (Martin). It was also during this period that he first discovered the playing of Lester Young. The recordings of Getz through the end of the decade hint at this influence.

1946 was the year that was to become the start of something big for Getz. In this year Getz would play solos in recordings of Goodman albums, according to Yanow (Yanow “Stan Getz Biography”). Also in this same year, Getz would musically strike out on his own for the first time. In the summer, he would make his debut as a leader with four recordings. He would also go through another change of jobs. In his employment

with Goodman, as with that of previous bands, his tenure would be short-lived. Getz would leave Goodman's band in 1946.

As though destiny had tired of waiting, the following year found Getz taking his inevitable appointment with it. The year of 1947 changed the career of Getz dramatically after he joined a newly forming group. The group he would join he would spend the next two years with, would gain him the attention of the public, and would build him a fan base. But more importantly, it would be the catalyst to launching his career down its inevitable path.

In 1939, Woody Herman picked up the remnants of the Isham Jones Orchestra to form his own group. The group, which later became known as "The Herd," became quite successful. However, in 1946 Herman experienced "family troubles," which forced him to disband the group while "at the height of success" ("Woody Herman. Clarinet and Saxophone Player: Talented Bandleader"). In 1947, Herman returned to the music scene to form a new band. Plans for "The Second Herd" band personnel included a full saxophone section. When these plans matured, one of the new musicians hired was Stan Getz.

When Getz joined Herman's new band, he found himself in the company of established players Zoot Sims, Serge Chaloff, and Herbie Stewart. Together, these four would become known as the "Four Brothers." As a member of this saxophone section, he played on the recording of "Early Autumn," on which "his ballad improvisation" would build his fame as a musician (PBS.org). He would continue to be a member of this group after various personnel changes through 1949. It is unclear whether the departure of Getz from the Herman band was a result of personal decision or the disbanding of the group that year.

Whether the departure of Getz was because of the disintegration of Herman's band, or because it was destiny guiding Getz to where he belonged in jazz, his exit from the band would renew his interest in leading his own groups in 1950. And from this year forward, leading would remain the norm of his career, as indicated by Yanow (Yanow "Stan Getz Biography"). A later exception to tour with "Jazz at the Philharmonic" would be the only point this changed for any period, albeit brief.

The career of Stan Getz began to mature in the 1950s. In the early 1950s, his Lester Young-inspired style had begun to show its wear, and he started redeveloping his style. It was his work on his style during this time that brought him into an entirely new and fresh style of jazz. In his collaboration with the Charlie Parker rhythm section, and also in the forming his own new style and his own group, he took steps that changed his position in jazz from a notable band sideman to one of the leaders of a movement in jazz.

One important style change Getz made during this time was further refining his sound. In the 1986 interview with Martin, Getz talked of how he "always tried to get as much of the reed out of the sound as possible" (Martin). In the interview, he mentioned his appreciation for contemporaries Ben Webster and Coleman Hawkins, but stated that he did not like their saxophone sound. It was his change in sound and style of playing that in the fifties would make him a contemporary of artists such as Paul Desmond, Gerry Mulligan, and Chet Baker.

Another style change he made was his use of cool jazz in his new projects. In his early-1950s quartets, Getz would become one of the most prominent faces in what was

being called in the press the “West Coast Style.” This style would come to be known as cool jazz, and a member of the Getz quartet during this time would play in this new style before going on to become prominent in the related style of hard bop. In 1950, Getz introduced the jazz scene to piano player Horace Silver. Silver would play with Getz for a short period before moving on to a prolific career of his own with groups such as The Jazz Messengers. Getz would also make several cool jazz recordings during this period with his peers in the cool jazz genre, including artists such as Gerry Mulligan and Paul Desmond.

The 1950s brought Getz to the height of popularity in the jazz world. But while the career of Getz could not be going better, the life of Stan Getz was quite the opposite. The first sign of this was that his substance abuse had become a problem, and “... he was incarcerated for using drugs ...” in 1954 (“Stan Getz – The Sound”). In his continuing struggle with substance abuse over the next few years, he seemed to lose ground to the problem. Finally, reaching the stage of needing to put distance between himself and his problems, in 1958 he “emigrated (sic) from the United States and ... lived in semi-retirement in Denmark” (Lowy “Biography”). He would remain there until 1961, when he returned to the United States to record the an album backed by string orchestra titled “Focus.”

The arrangement of the “Focus” album by Eddie Sauter was an adventurous, if not ambitious, experiment. Getz would come to regard his work on this album as some of his favorite. The adventure of the experience seemed to have a lasting effect on Getz, as this type of experimentation would begin to shape future projects.

The following year, Getz recorded the album “Jazz Samba.” This album was one of the catalysts for the fusion of Brazilian bossa nova with jazz, and started the bossa nova jazz stint of Getz's career. With Charlie Byrd also participating in the album, “... their rendition of 'Desafinado' was a big hit” (Yanow “Stan Getz Biography”).

In 1963, Getz embarked on a new project with two native Brazilian artists. In February, Getz began recording tracks with artists João Gilberto and Antonio Carlos Jobim on what would become one of the best-selling recordings of his career. Joined by João's wife Astrud, the group recorded the album Getz/Gilberto, with the track “The Girl From Ipanema.” The song went on to become a smash hit. As a result, “... her recording career quickly took off” (Gilberto). The song also became one of the definitive songs of Getz's repertoire.

Rather than continuing to focus on bossa nova jazz, Getz would instead begin to experiment in different areas through the rest of his career. He broke away from bossa nova in the 1960s and “acknowledged modal post-bop” (Yanow “Stan Getz Biography”). Until leaving the country at the end of the 60s, he recorded with some of the biggest artists in jazz. New projects included such artists as Gary Burton, Chick Corea, Bill Evans, Herbie Hancock, and Elvin Jones.

In 1969, Getz would again reach a point where his career and personal life were going in diametrically opposed directions. He was “... struggling with drugs and the law ...”, and left the United States, as well as jazz, for a break (“Stan Getz – The Sound”). He returned to music in 1971, and in 1972 recorded “Captain Marvel.” Over the next twenty years, he would record extensively. He “acknowledged ... fusion in the early 1970s” (Yanow “Stan Getz Biography”). In the 1980s, he “... taught at the Stanford

University Jazz Program in Palo Alto, California” (Down Beat.com). “Dophin” and “Spring is Here” are two of his more prominent recordings during this time. He continued to create new recordings the early months of 1991.

Three months after his recording session in the early months of 1991, Stan Getz succumbed to cancer. On June 6, 1991, Getz died in Malibu, California at the age of sixty-four. His final breath brought to a close the life of “... one of the most esteemed jazz figures among musicians, critics, and general listeners” (“Stan Getz”).

The “... highly personal manner ...” of his playing and his “... elegance and easy virtuosity ...” made Getz an influence on countless musicians throughout his entire career and around the World (PBS.org). These traits, combined with his sound, will enable him to influence countless more musicians long after his death. His melodic improvisational skills set him apart from his peers, prompting jazz great Dizzy Gillespie to say upon his death, “He was sheer genius. And there's one thing about this man, he was the most melodic player on the jazz scene” (Churchill). Getz was truly jazz royalty.

The career of Stan Getz was a stellar event in the history of the music of America. In spite of the shadows of his personal life, his accomplishments in recording and his sound have made him the source of admiration for generations of saxophone players. His sound, which earned him the nickname “The Sound,” will forever guarantee the same influence after death that Stan Getz had on it in life.

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