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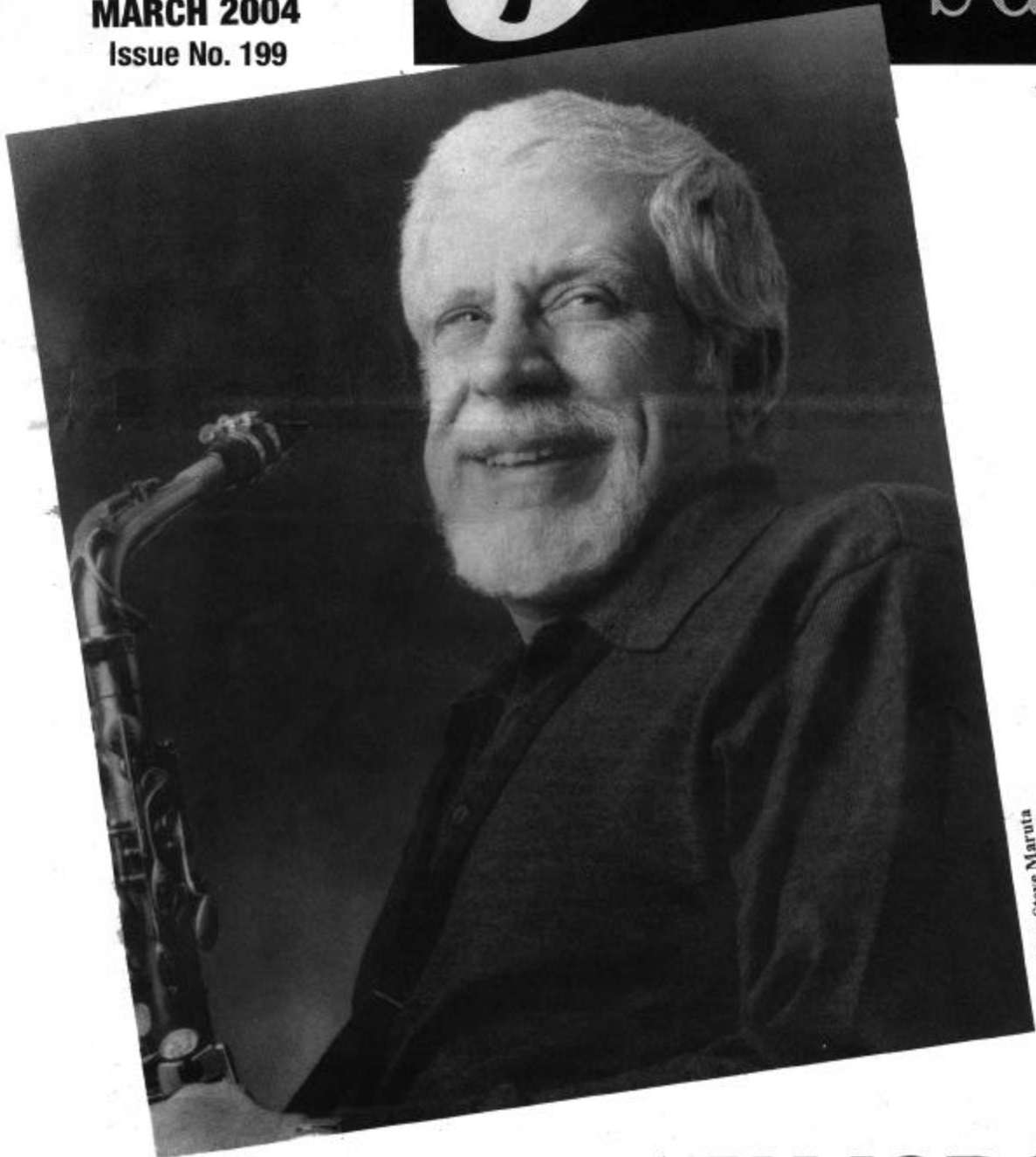


Photo by Steve Maruta

LANNY MORGAN

LANNY MORGAN

LIFE IS SWEET



L-R MUSICIAN UNKNOWN, LANNY MORGAN, LEO WRIGHT, MERLE ELLIS, DICK VAN CLEVE 7th U.S. ARMY JAZZ SHOW, 1958

By Myrna Daniels

There are musicians, here in L.A. who are special. They show up to their gigs dressed in slacks, tie and jacket. They are calm and collected, unfailingly polite with everyone around them. When it's time to work, they deliver, every time. They play like demons, making every note, every nuance count. They do the work with clarity and enthusiasm, no, with a deep passion and love of the music. They have a serenity about them that is enviable. I call them the gentlemen of jazz and I can name some of them: Earl Palmer, John Pisano, Bob Maize, Paul Kreibich, Michael Stephans, Ernie Andrews, Art Hillary and many others.

Lanny Morgan belongs to that league of gentlemen. He has been such a stalwart, so dependable, so reliable, year after year, that his talents and abilities might easily be taken for granted. When seen in a big band, he is a part of the ensemble, part of the cohesive whole and aside from his own solos, he will not stand out. It is in a smaller setting, as leader of his own groups that his genius can truly be appreciated. As an alto saxophonist, he's in a select circle, as there's no doubt that many saxophonists prefer the huskier tenor sax as their mode of expression.

A lot of jazz people, fans and practitioners alike, think that there

was only one alto sax player of any consequence—Charlie Parker. Everyone else has just followed his lead, and nothing new has been done since he died. Bird Lives, indeed.

Morgan is so confident in his vision that he released an all Parker project, *A Suite For Yardbird*, on Fresh Sounds Records. It is not simply a homage but his own reinterpretation of Parker's well known and more obscure tunes. As jazz writer Scott Yanow stated about Morgan, "A brilliant Bebop alto soloist often overlooked because he lives in Los Angeles rather than New York, Lanny Morgan is one of the underrated greats; few can rip through "Cherokee" with his flow of ideas."

Many critics, over the years, have agreed; Don Heckman wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*, when reviewing the album, "He rips through a program of Parker pieces ranging from "Yardbird Suite" and "Bird Feathers" to "Marmaduke" and the difficult "Ko Ko" (played at rampaging tempo) with consistent imagination, easily demonstrating the life that remains in the bop style when it is employed by a player with first-rate skills." His long and varied career is testament to Morgan's drive, energy, dedication and talent.

Lanny Morgan was born on March 30, 1934 in Des Moines, Iowa, to

Harold L. Morgan, who was a working musician and his wife, Ruth Morgan, who sang in the church choir all her life. By age 6 he was learning to play the violin. At 13, his father was teaching him to play the clarinet. Morgan began playing the alto saxophone in the 12th grade.

Morgan attended Los Angeles High School and began L.A. City College in 1952. He made his first recording when the LACC Band's won a national contest and recorded four sides at Capitol Records. Bob Florence was in the band at the time and they became lifelong friends, with Morgan joining Florence's fledgling band.

The early '50s were productive for Morgan as he traveled with Charlie

Band and Warren Covington's Band. Morgan also played in clubs and concerts with his own smaller groups.

A good musician is nothing, if not versatile, so Morgan taught private students for three years, did recording dates, jingles and did several tours with Motown acts—the Supremes, Four Tops and The Temptations.

In March, 1969 Morgan returned to L.A. and found a lot of work; studio work, record dates, jingles, film, TV, live TV show bands. He also worked with Bob Florence again, the newly formed Bill Holman Band ('71) Bill Berry Band ('72) and joined Supersax as a regular member in 1975. Morgan also taught at the Dick Grove School of Music and the L.A. Jazz Workshop, as well as at Bud Shank's Workshop in Port Townsend, WA, among other clinics and concerts throughout the years.

There are so many singers and bands that Morgan worked with and recorded with over the years. It is an amazingly varied group: Vikki Carr, Frank Sinatra, Chris Conner, Carmen McRae, Steely Dan, Diane Schuur, Shirley Horn, Grover Mitchell Band, Don Rader Quintet, Mel Torme, Shorty Rogers, Lionel Hampton, Dinah Shore, Sonny & Cher, Manhattan Transfer, Merv Griffin, Bobby Darin, Julie Andrews and many, many more. He traveled all over the world with Natalie Cole as lead alto and first woodwind player from August '92 till 1999. The movie soundtracks and recording sessions would fill pages. Morgan has been a guest artist/clinician at colleges all around the country. Now, one of his favorite overseas gigs is a regular trip to England, where he works with British rhythm sections.

Today Morgan can look back on an interesting and eventful career. He is one of the most respected players in L.A. and certainly one of the best organized, thanks to his wife, Marty Morgan, who helps him manage his career. I had a few questions for Morgan to answer:

L.A. JAZZ SCENE: You were able to play music while in the Army. Would you recommend that to young players today as a smart career move? What was good or beneficial about that experience for you?

LANNY MORGAN: No. The U.S. was not at war, but I was drafted and it was a seri-

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Barnet, Ike Carpenter, Tommy Alexander, Luis Arcarez and Frankie Carle, while still playing in the LACC Band as often as possible. He also made his first association with Maynard Ferguson, playing in his 13-piece band for two nights at the Peacock Lane. In 1957 he was asked to join Stan Kenton's band but was drafted instead.

Morgan spent '57 to '58 in the U.S. Army, the majority of the time in Germany. He toured U.S. bases in Germany with two Broadway-style shows and an 18-piece jazz band. Some of the players in the band included Leo Wright-alto, Eddie Harris-tenor, Don Ellis-trumpet and Cedar Walton-piano.

After his discharge from the Army in 1959 Morgan returned to L.A. to pick up where he left off. He kept busy recording and playing with Rey DeMichele Band, Si Zentner and the Bob Florence Band, and backing singer Jimmy Witherspoon. Terry Gibbs formed a new band and Morgan was a substitute. On March 29, 1960 Morgan moved to New York City to join Maynard Ferguson's band. On March 30, 1960 he was called to join Stan Kenton's band, but he stayed with Ferguson's group. Morgan stayed on in New York and played in big jazz bands led by Sal Salvador, Billy Mitchell, Howard McGhee, while working some weekends with Billy May's

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ous interruption to my music career. My unit (4th Armored Div) was moved to Germany, and I immediately made my way to Stuttgart and auditioned for the 7th Army Symphony and Soldier Show Company. I passed the audition and toured army bases with a show called "Ain't Misbehavin'." This was followed by six months with a very good big band called Jazz 3. Also in this band were: Don Ellis, Eddie Harris, Leo Wright and Dave Sanchez—all draftees and all not wanting to be in the Army.

After the jazz show, I spent my last four months with the symphony, playing on the Gershwin pieces "American in Paris" and "Rhapsody in Blue." I was very fortunate to be able to play many hours a day during this army time; it kept my chops up during the two years that I was "away."

I think many young people today would benefit from doing "army time," but serious young musicians should pursue their careers as civilians and not consider military bands. The 7th Army Symphony and Soldier Show Co. was disbanded years ago, and as far as I know, has not been replaced.

L.A. JAZZ SCENE: The music business has changed so much over the past few years, I wonder if anyone could have such a varied career, like you did in the '60s, '70s, '80s and '90s. How do young players get the experiences that they need to be a well-rounded performer?

MORGAN: It's difficult. For one thing, the road bands have all but disappeared along with the ballrooms that they used to play. The lesser bands were sort of like farm teams, where you could gain experience, meet new players and begin to build a reputation that would eventually help you to get on the better bands and/or go out on your own. My "career" started there and went on to include almost every kind of work except club dates in New York. Probably over 50% of the work I've done has not been enjoyable, but has been done strictly to make a living and support myself and my family. We've all had to do it.

When I worked at the Copa in N.Y. (a hard, strictly money job), Jimmy Cleveland, Aaron Sachs, Gene Allen, Quentin Jackson (Butter), Richie Kamuca and many others of that caliber were on the band. I also worked a few strip clubs (tame by today's standards). While very enjoyable in some ways, they were hard gigs but provided more experience, and I learned "Harlem Nocturne" and "Night Train" backward and forward. "Night Train" is better backward. These bands consisted of piano, drums and tenor. So I had to play tenor, which I have about as much affinity for as driving a big rig.

So while some of the training grounds have vanished, more young players come to the forefront every day, and most of them are wonderful. I think they gain experience in a multitude of rehearsal bands, in colleges and at summer band jazz camps, and just by listening to how it's done and then doing it.

Anyway, I don't see a shortage of good young players. I'm talking about well-rounded players, capable of playing



L-R JAY MIGLIORI, RAY REED, MED FLORY, LANNY MORGAN, JACK NIMITZ AT CARMELO'S, IN THE 1980'S

almost everything. If you are more specific and include only jazz players, then the number diminishes because more good players surface than really good jazz players. But that's the way it's always been.

L.A. JAZZ SCENE: Young people today seem to have a strong interest in and understanding of the technologies available today, but I think that they are missing some essential quality in music. I think that technology distances the performer and the listener in many ways, from the music. What do you think? (I also understand that I know nothing about the technology, just that a lot of music "feels" cold to me.)

MORGAN: Many people use this technology in a tasteful and musical way to enhance the final "product," and in so doing, it becomes a very valuable part of the music. We've all heard it the other way too, when in less capable and tasteful hands the end result can be cold and gimmicky and a complete boor. I'm probably the wrong person to answer this question. I have a Casio keyboard, a Wurflitzer electric piano and a Fender Rhodes that I use for my own benefit. I'm really just an acoustic kind of guy—great song title, don't you think?—and am still trying to figure out the Echoplex.

L.A. JAZZ SCENE: You spent a lot of time with Supersax, and I'm wondering why that group didn't become a worldwide touring group. It had the capacity to become a hugely popular band all over the world. I could see them as goodwill ambassadors for jazz; why didn't that happen?

MORGAN: I became a regular member of Supersax in 1975. They had won the Grammy for "Supersax Plays Bird" in 1973, and they probably should have hit the road to support the record at that time and just kept on going. I wasn't involved, so I don't really know why they didn't. We did travel quite a bit during the 25+ years that I was with the band and it was active, to France, Germany, Belgium, Holland and several trips to Japan. When I travel by myself, I still get asked about Supersax. Why didn't

the band become hugely popular? I don't know.

L.A. JAZZ SCENE: If money and time were no object, who would you hire for a dream band, and what material would you choose?

MORGAN: I can't answer this one. I've had the privilege of playing with so many wonderful players over the years, I'm afraid my dream band would have about 500 players and maybe 20 arrangers and would be very difficult to book.

L.A. JAZZ SCENE: Since you spend so much time in jazz clubs, describe a perfect jazz club.

MORGAN: There have been several jazz clubs that I thought were near perfect—Donte's, Carmelo's, The Lighthouse, the old Jazz City, The Vanguard in NYC and The London House in Chicago.

But the one that comes closest to perfection is the old Birdland in NYC. The location was perfect at 52nd & Broadway in midtown Manhattan. It was downstairs, with the ticket booth 3/4ths of the way down. At the bottom of the stairs, the bandstand was straight ahead (as was most of the music during that time). The bar was way over to the left against the wall, and the mixer noise didn't interfere with the music. There was a peanut gallery, seating about 25 people between the bar and the bandstand, where for the price of a ticket, they could just sit and listen without having to buy a drink. The rest of the room consisted of tables and booths against the wall. The acoustics and sound system were great, as was the ambience, most of the time. I still miss it.

L.A. JAZZ SCENE: The reality of life in 2004 is that the schools are not going to do a lot to educate and train young kids in music (as performers or listeners). So what's the most important thing that parents can do to give their kids some basis for understanding and appreciating music?

MORGAN: Many parents of kids that are becoming old enough to appreciate and/or play good music were raised on junk music and are musically illiterate. The smartest thing parents can do is to

get music back in the schools.

When I went to elementary school (in Iowa), we had music appreciation starting in first grade—one hour of just listening to good music. We were also given the opportunity to rent a musical instrument of our choice and take lessons at a reduced rate—through the school. At L.A. High, we had an orchestra, a concert band, mixed choir and boys' & girls' glee clubs and a drama department. There were many concerts given, some using the orchestra, choir and drama department together—such as musical comedy, etc. It was a great experience. There was no jazz in the curriculum, but there were students forming small "unauthorized" jazz groups, and they were not discouraged by the faculty.

The young people who have a burning desire to hear and play good music will always find a way. It's the rest of them we should be concerned about. Educate them and we perpetuate the audience for good music. Even though I am a big sports fan, I think it's time to take some funding back from the athletic programs and restart the arts programs in the schools.

L.A. JAZZ SCENE: What's on your agenda for 2004? Are you currently working on anything, a new CD or what?

MORGAN: My immediate future is Feb. 28, a "Bird Lives" concert with string players from the Pasadena Symphony—at McKinley Auditorium. It's part of Black History Month, and I'm thrilled to be doing it, first, and second—to be working with John Campbell, Tony Dumas and Ralph Penland—and of course, with the strings.

I plan on making at least one trip to the U.K. this year. I usually go there twice a year for three or four weeks at a time. I'm on the faculty at the Idyllwild Jazz Camp for two weeks in July. I do this almost every year. I have a trip to Japan in the planning stages, and possibly one to Europe. There are a few clinic/concerts at colleges in the works, too, and some of the usual clubs around town.

L.A. JAZZ SCENE: You worked for a time on the East Coast but came and finally settled in California. Any regrets about that? Do you think you would have had a more powerful career, had you been based in New York?

MORGAN: I was raised in L.A. and went to New York to join Maynard in 1960. I returned to L.A. in 1969. I really loved the East Coast and many times have wished that I'd stayed. But New York in 1969 was not in good shape. Many jazz clubs were closing (Jazz Gallery, Five Spot, the Cork & Bib on Long Island, the Metropole) and Birdland had closed in 1963.

My last year in N.Y., I was working the house band at the Copa Cabana (seven nights a week), teaching about 30 students a week, working with a band for a catering house—doing two weddings and bah mitzvahs on Saturday and Sunday. There were some jazz gigs and also some jingles. I was making a pretty good living, but it was hard to maintain this pace. So, when an old friend who had become a successful contractor called me from L.A. and said if I was ever going to return, now was the time, as he could use me, I was really torn.

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I loved New York, but on the other hand, I could see a much easier way of life in California. After some weeks of decision-making, I drove to L.A., and my family followed three months later.

I was pretty heavily involved in "studio work" for about 20 years. Mostly live TV, but some of everything—record dates, film, etc. It was very lucrative, more money and less work than I was used to. It's a very comfortable and secure feeling to be making that kind of money, but it's also kind of a musical trap.

I usually started early and finished late, even on a lot of weekends, so I was either too tired or didn't have the time to go out and play at clubs at night. I did finally remember why I wanted to play the saxophone in the first place, and that realization along with the decline of live TV got me back in the mix.

I really don't know if my career would have been more powerful had I stayed in N.Y. I think it would have been more powerful had I been more aggressive in pursuing it and not been side-tracked for so long doing "studio work."

L.A. JAZZ SCENE: Tell me about working with Maynard Ferguson. Was it difficult? Fun?

MORGAN: Working with Maynard Ferguson was exciting. It was never dull. The band was good, sometimes great. We had great charts by Willie Maiden, Slide Hampton, Don Sebesky, Mike Abene, Bill Holman, Al Cohn, Oliver Nelson, Tom McIntosh, Don Merza, Don Rader and many others. There was always plenty of solo space and you could play until you weren't "saying anything," sometimes 10 choruses, or sometimes one.

Maynard was easy to get along with—more like a friend than a leader—until you asked for a raise. I learned to never ask for more money after Rufus Jones did, because the money would be all gone.

It was a very vital time for jazz in the '60s in NYC. I feel fortunate to have been there and to have been a small part of it and to have been so close to so much great music.

At Birdland, we always played opposite another group—Art Blakey, Horace Silver, Miles, Trane, Bill Evans, etc. We also played all the festivals in the East, sharing the bill with Al Cohn and Zoot Sims, the Basie Band, Brubeck, Roland Kirk, Lambert/Hendricks & Ross, and just about anybody else you can think of.

There is a downside of course, and that was financial. Starting salary at that time was \$125/week. This was the norm for the jazz bands. I made \$135 because I was a lead player. If we had made this every week, it would have been fine, but the salary was pro-rated, based on a 7-day work-week, and nobody was on retainer. When I joined the band, we worked Birdland for two weeks, and then after a day off, the Brooklyn Paramount for 10 days, followed by a week of college jazz concerts. I thought I was in heaven. Then we had a month off, with no pay, and the reality set in.


The band traveled in station wagons (many younger players think we traveled in covered wagons, but this was not the case). I drove one of the wagons and earned one cent per mile for doing so. I remember driving to Chicago many

times for one gig (1920 miles round trip from NYC) and making 1/7 of \$135, which is \$19.28. After taxes, hotel (about \$2 at the Croyden and another fifty cents if you wanted a black & white TV) and food, I had about \$10 to bring home. But I made \$19.20 for driving, which made it \$29.10 and really saved me. It was also difficult driving through the blizzards and weather back there. But mostly, it was a great experience playing with the band.

The day after I got to N.Y., Stan Kenton called and asked me to join the band, and as much as I had wanted to play with that band earlier, I'm glad I decided to stay in N.Y. with Maynard. Stan had called once before when Lennie Niehaus was going to leave the band. But Lennie decided to stay and I was drafted anyway. As the years go by, the difficult things just become funny experiences, and it all seems like it was fun.

Every musician needs a measure of luck to succeed in a tough, competitive business. Morgan has had that, but it's his own efforts, his own amazing talent that has kept him well employed for decades. He seems to have hit all the right notes.

Lanny Morgan will be appearing at Fitzgerald's (in the Hilton Hotel) in Woodland Hills on Friday, MARCH 12th at 8pm, accompanied by Steve Huffsteter, John Hammond, Jim Hughart and Ralph Penland. Full bar/fine dining, with no cover, no minimum and free valet parking. Go and hear them roar!



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