

Saxophonist finally returns to his own music

BY ANDREW GILBERT
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THROUGHOUT HIS long career, alto saxophonist Lanny Morgan has devoted himself to making other people sound good. Highly regarded by his musical peers for the hurtling momentum of his lines and his quicksilver tone, Morgan has played in top big bands, the Hollywood studios and most recently as featured soloist with Natalie Cole.

But after seven years of contributing his soulful, bop-inflected horn work to Cole's live performances, the 65-year-old saxophonist is once again on his own, and he's reveling in the opportunity to play his own music.

"It's kind of a mixed thing emotionally," Morgan says from his home in the San Fernando Valley. "I miss some of the paychecks, but I won't miss having to cancel a lot of work. I used to go to England every year and play with a British rhythm section for a month and really get my chops up. But the last seven years, I've booked those gigs and then had to cancel them when Natalie lined up some work. Now I'm booking things on my own again, and I'm looking at everything with renewed vigor."

Combination of influences

Morgan, who plays the Garden City on Sunday with pianist Smith Dobson, bassist Glenn Richmond and drummer Colin Bailey, is one of those players whose mastery never has brought him corresponding attention. While his style is based on the rhythmic and harmonic bebop tropes pioneered by Charlie Parker, his sound evokes the cool fire of iconoclastic altoists such as Art Pepper and Paul Desmond. The combination of influences and the high-velocity runs executed with serene, unflappable authority make Morgan one of the most pleasing mainstream alto players on the scene. The fact that he's not better known is due to happenstance, temperament and geography.

Except for the '60s, when he held down the lead alto spot in Maynard Ferguson's powerful big band, Morgan has spent the bulk of his career in Los Angeles, a city better known for nurturing jazz talent than for promoting it. Morgan also has an extremely limited discography for an improviser of his stature, with only four recordings as a leader. After a demo he made for Atlantic Records in the mid-'60s was rejected, Morgan was deeply discouraged and concentrated, instead, on making a living. He didn't get back in the studio to record his own album until 1982.

"He's been ignored for so long," says Herb Wong, who produced Morgan's debut recording "It's About Time" for the Palo Alto label. "I think he's the most eloquent spokesman of Charlie Parker-ism in the western U.S. You can hear Art Pepper's impact in the way Lanny plays with that drive, when he hesitates for a moment or two, then unleashes a stream of ideas like a wound-up watch spring."

Found jazz on L.A. radio

Though he was born and raised in Des Moines, Iowa, Morgan came of age musically in Los Angeles listening to Parker, Pepper and other leading modern-jazz figures on the radio. His father, who led a swing big band in Iowa, brought the family to L.A. hoping to take advantage of the war-time entertainment boom but was never able to establish himself in the crowded Southern California music scene. Morgan's first instrument was violin, but the jazz bug bit him hard during his senior year in high school.

"I was serious about the fiddle and thinking about a career in an orchestra or maybe even as a concert violinist," Morgan says. "Then I heard bebop. I heard Charlie Parker and those guys on the radio, and that turned everything



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When Morgan returned to L.A. in 1968, he worked in a number of the most creative West Coast ensembles, including Bob Florence's big band and Terry Gibbs' Dream Band. A call from Maynard Ferguson sent him to New York.

Morgan spent most of the '60s with Ferguson and then moved back to L.A. in 1969 to toil in the studios. For a while, the steady and lucrative studio work sidetracked his jazz playing. But in the mid-'70s he joined Supersax, a formidable five-saxophone band founded by Med Flory and Buddy Clark, which performed Charlie Parker solos note for note with astonishing precision.

Mercenary zeal

"We used to say that studio work subsidized our jazz playing," Morgan says, "because in my drinking days the money from a nightclub gig almost paid my bar tab. I never really wanted to be a studio musician. A lot of time, you wouldn't even know who you were doing stuff for. They would often be sweetening dates, where you'd just put on the earphones and play to this rhythm track, and you'd find out later that it was the 5th Dimension or somebody."

In recent years, Morgan has eased out of the studio scene and put more time into his jazz playing. His excellent 1997 recording for Contemporary, "Pacific Standard Time," helped spread the word about his re-emergence. His latest album, "A Suite for Yardbird" on Fresh Sound, is a sparkling quartet session covering seldom-played tunes by Charlie Parker. Morgan knows the albums aren't going to bring fame or fortune, but they will help alert jazz fans to this immensely talented and often overlooked alto saxophonist.

"When I was coming up, I always thought that you learn how to play as well as you can, and when you're a good player — of course, this is a fairy tale — (producer) Norman Granz is going to come knocking on your door."

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Lanny Morgan