

LANNY MORGAN

Stan Woolley talks to a musician who has abandoned his big band roots for small group freedom.

Like West Coast saxophone giants Bob Cooper and Bud Shank from a previous era, altoist Lanny Morgan wasn't born in California but gravitated to the Golden State during the course of his career. However, unlike Cooper and Shank, Morgan never played with the Stan Kenton Orchestra but did grace the saxophone sections of just about every other big band in the Los Angeles area at one time or another.

Harold Lansford (Lanny) Morgan was born in Des Moines, Iowa on March 30, 1934. His father was a professional musician who played clarinet and alto saxophone and led the houseband at the same local radio station where Ronald Reagan worked as a sportscaster.

Although Morgan was brought up in what might be described as a musical environment, his mother wasn't sure that the life of a professional musician was what she wanted for her son. Respecting her wishes, Morgan, Sr never brought his instruments home nor did he practise in the house in order to avoid influencing his son unduly in this regard.

All that was to change, however, as the young Morgan progressed through the education system, as he recalls: 'When I went into first grade in the grammar school I came home one day with a violin. I can't remember how it came about but I guess one of the teachers asked me to pick out an instrument and I chose a violin, and that's how it all started.'

Morgan played the violin for 16 years in all and achieved a level of proficiency which enabled him to play in all the city and state youth orchestras at one time or another. In addition to violin, he began studying the clarinet when he went into junior high school and switched to alto saxophone, an old Lyon & Healy provided by his father, during his final school years.

The saxophonist's introduction to jazz came via the radio from an unlikely sounding programme called the Yeastvite Show. 'Gene Norman was the disc-jockey on the show and he played a lot of the new things from the West Coast, recordings by Shorty Rogers's Giants with Art Pepper, who was one of my early heroes.

'Gene Norman also played things from the East Coast, records by Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie which made a big impression on me. After listening to Bird and Diz I found myself whistling *Groovin' High* as I walked to my violin lessons, so the violin didn't last much longer after that.'

In the late 1940s the family moved to Los Angeles. 'My mother and I moved out first so she could be with her mother but

my dad stayed in Iowa for another year-and-a-half then came out. I didn't want to move and was really heartbroken leaving

all my friends. Iowa is a beautiful place for a child to grow up in but I don't regret it now as the music opportunities would have been very limited in Iowa compared to Los Angeles.'

Morgan's determination to become a saxophone player came about while he was still heavily involved with the violin, as he explains: 'I was playing violin in the Los Angeles City College Orchestra and we used to rehearse in the same hall as the College's Stage Band. On one occasion the Stage Band's saxophone section had been kept over for a little extra rehearsal and I was just knocked out by what I heard.

'I was playing clarinet by then but not saxophone and it really fed my desire to be a saxophone player. So I enrolled there and then for the Stage Band but as I didn't know anything about the saxophone I never actually made the band and dropped out in the middle of the first semester.



by Stan Woolley
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'After I left college, I took a job in a department store and got in the woodshed and really worked on how to play the alto. The following year I went back to college and joined the Stage Band again and that really was the start of my career as a saxophonist.

'This was in the early 1950s and there were still a lot of big bands around then, including Stan Kenton, Woody Herman and the Dorseys. A lot of the bands would come to City College to pick up replacement personnel like they used to do at North Texas State College which had a reputation for turning out good musicians.

'As it happened, I had a friend who got into Charlie Barnet's band and he mentioned that the fourth tenor chair (more often called 'second tenor' but same music) was vacant and if I was interested he would speak to Charlie about me. I hated playing fourth tenor but I said I would take anything just to get out there and make some money.

'Well, it was a short West Coast tour which, I think, lasted three weeks. We played up and down the Coast and as far in as Wyoming and Montana and then Charlie went off and most of the band, including myself, went up to Lake Tahoe with a piano player named Ike Carpenter and we stayed there for the whole summer. We played as the house band and backed artists like Nat Cole and Mel Torme.

'Counting the time with Charlie, it was four months' work which came at a good time. I liked Charlie very much and although I didn't get to know him all that well he was very relaxed and easy going—and quite a drinker! I thought he was a really good saxophone player with a kind of simple style but he had enough technique to do what he wanted to do.

'We played all Charlie's hits, like *Skyliner*, *Pompton Turnpike*, *Cherokee* and *Redskin Rumba*. The things of Charlie's I really liked were the bop pieces, *Claude Reigns*, *Pan Americana*, *Charlie's Other Aunt* and that beautiful chart of *Over The Rainbow* which Tiny Kahn wrote for the band.

'I think we played a couple of those things but there was a writer over on the West Coast named Paul Villepique who was a great arranger but later committed suicide. He wrote some things for Charlie—*Eugipelliv* and *Lonely Street*—titles like those which we use to play.'

Although Morgan never actually played in the Stan Kenton Orchestra he was once invited to join it. This came about in 1956 when Lennie Niehaus was expected to leave. As it happened Niehaus decided not to go, so Morgan went on the road with Frankie Carle's band and was drafted into the Army while on tour.

'I was in the Army for two years and spent the whole time in the Seventh Army Jazz Band which was based in Stuttgart. Don Menza, Leo Wright, Eddie Harris, Cedar Walton and Don Ellis were all in the band at the same time and we played all over Western Europe in American bases until I got out on New Year's Eve, 1958.



Lanny Morgan leading the Bill Holman band at the Wigan Jazz Festival 1999

'I worked in and around Los Angeles during the whole of 1959 and recorded and did concerts with Si Zentner. Zentner was a studio trombonist who originally formed a band to record for Bel Canto Records. He used just four saxophones but opened the section up to five specially for me.

'I never travelled with the band but worked at the Hollywood Palladium with him and made two albums with the band for Liberty Records then I joined Bob Florence's band. I also played with Terry Gibbs's new band around this time and then Maynard Ferguson called me and I went back to New York and stayed with Maynard for six years.'

Morgan replaced altoist Jimmy Ford in the Ferguson band and regards it as one of the high points of his career. 'Maynard's band was one of the truly great jazz bands of that era. I think it was one of the best bands in the world. It always had good soloists and I don't think there was any other band that could touch it.'

The saxophonist was on several of the albums which the band made during the 1960s of which *Maynard '61* (Roulette CDP 7953342) and *Si! Si! MF* (Roulette CDP 7953342) are two.

After leaving Ferguson, Morgan worked as a studio musician in New York and in between led his own small groups. 'I worked up and down the East Coast with quartets or quintets but wasn't interested in big bands any more. Then the studio work in New York just kind of fell apart and all the live TV shows moved to the West Coast, so I went back to California.

'An old school friend of mine was a band contractor in Los Angeles and he got me a lot of studio work. I did maybe 50 or 60 film soundtracks but I couldn't even tell you which ones they were now. Live TV was the main thing I did and worked a lot on the Merv Griffin, Chuck Barris and Della Reese shows.'

In a jazz context, Morgan performed regularly with bands led by Bill Berry, Ed Shaughnessy, Bob Florence and Bill Holman and became a founder member of Supersax in 1975. He also played with his own quartet at such notable West Coast jazz spots as Donte's and Carmello's now, sadly, no longer in existence.

In fact, it was through trumpeter Bill Berry that Morgan first made an appearance in the UK, as he recalls: 'Bill travelled a lot as a single and he was the one who got me over to the UK in the first place. He came over with his wife and just kind of reconnoitred the situation and came across to the Bull's Head in Barnes.

'Bill did some gigs there and told them about me, so the next thing I knew was that I had a call to come over and play there. That was in April, 1985. I stayed for a month and worked the Pizza Express as well as the Bull's Head and a lot of different places around town.'

Although Morgan works regularly with his own quartet and has four albums to his credit, he is still in demand for work of a more commercial nature and for the past six-and-a-half years has toured with Natalie Cole which helps to pay the rent or fund another new quartet.

'I am only interested in playing jazz with my quartet—that's where my interest lies now. I've had enough of big bands. I don't have anything against them because there is nothing like playing in a big band but if you are a jazz player and you want to play, it really is restrictive.

'In a big band you are told when to stand up to take a solo and when to sit down. There was nothing like that in Maynard's band because he would open everything out and let you play until you had nothing more to say. Then you sat down. Big bands are not like that any more but you can still do it with a small group, so I'll stay with them from now on.'