

Volume 59 No. 8

# Jazz Journal

International

AUGUST 2006 £3.75, U.S. \$6.40

**THE WORLD'S GREATEST JAZZ MAGAZINE**

**BOBBY MILITELLO ~ talks to Gordon Jack**

**JAZZ ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND ~**

**by Peter Vacher**

**JAZZ INFORMATION**

ISSN 0140-2285



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**59th YEAR OF PUBLICATION**

**It is a well-kept secret that Bobby Militello is one of the most exciting and inventive alto soloists in jazz today. His stimulating approach has been an important ingredient in the continuing success of the Dave Brubeck Quartet since 1982. We met in the summer of 2004 to discuss his career, which included four years as a (very) reluctant baritone player with Maynard Ferguson's big band.**

'I was born in Buffalo, New York on March 25, 1950 and in some respects it was thanks to my mother that I became a musician. She was a big jazz fan and had bought the first record that we had in our house - Maynard Ferguson's *Message From Newport* (CDP7 937272-2). She would often telephone from jazz clubs when I was growing up and hold the 'phone off the hook so I could hear Getz, 'Trane or Cannonball blowing in the background. Buffalo was a haven for jazz in those days with clubs everywhere all featuring nationally known players. We went to see The Benny Goodman Story when I was about ten years old, which is when I decided that I just had to learn the clarinet. Eventually in my freshman year of high school I started studying the saxophone with John Sedola who had been with Paul Whiteman and had taught Don Menza among others. He was an excellent old-school teacher who expected you to practice at least six hours every day. He taught classical techniques and was very insistent that nobody can teach you how to play jazz. It has to come from within so that you can develop a style and reel that is completely yours. Some people though just want to sound like Eric Marienthal for instance, which is fine for them.



'Over the years, Maynard had some great sax players such as Lanny Morgan and Jimmy Ford that I liked to listen to and I also started memorizing a lot of Paul Desmond and Stan Gate solos. For instance, I learnt most of Stan's Jazz Samba album (Verve CD831368-2) by playing the record over and over until I could scat all the lines which I then played on my horn.'

(One of the many Desmond solos he learnt came from the Dave Brubeck quartet's 1954 recording of *Audrey* which was dedicated to Miss Hepburn (Columbia CK 65724). At her death in 1993 there was a ceremony at the UN headquarters in New York to celebrate her international work with children. In Doug Ramsey's immensely well researched biography of Paul Desmond [Take Five], he points out that her husband specifically requested the Brubeck quartet to play *Audrey* for the occasion - a number which she called 'My Song'. Ramsey says, Brubeck's new alto saxophonist, Bobby Militello, played Desmond's solo note for note, inflection for inflection. He had memorized it when he was a boy: For those who would like to play along to the original recording, this memorable solo has been transcribed and analyzed by Gary Foster in Ramsey's book. Just as an aside, the actress apparently played it every night before retiring. Desmond was unaware of this, which is a pity because as Lola Brubeck told Ramsey, 'Paul was so in love with Audrey'.)

The first name band I played with was Maynard Ferguson's on baritone. Maynard had heard me on alto in the early 1970s with a Buffalo band by the name of New Wave. We had two horns and a singer and we did a lot of material from the Cannonball Adderley album with Nancy Wilson (Capitol CDP0777) as well as Horace Silver originals such as *Sophisticated Hippie*. We also did a lot of hip, fusion things and I remember was nuts about Bob Berg at the time. I had pretty good chops and like any youngster with tons of testosterone, I made all the changes and the audience would freak out because I could play so many notes - wisdom just didn't come into it! You don't realize at the time, that one note can say it better than all of them to certain circumstances. I learnt later that a substitute

change can work over the three you might have used, which simplifies things.

'It was in 1975 that Mike Migliore who was playing lead alto with Maynard called to say that Bruce Johnstone was leaving, so they needed a replacement on baritone. Now I wasn't a baritone player and I didn't really like the instrument too much but I needed a gig and I had always wanted to play with Maynard. Not having a baritone. I went to Manny's music store in New York where they had two Selmers - one with the low A and one without but I didn't like the model with the low A at all. The balance felt all wrong so I went for the other horn which cost me \$850.00 and four years later after I left the band, I sold it for \$3000.00. I probably would have stayed with Maynard even longer but he didn't want me to switch to tenor or alto. If I am really honest I would have to say that I was never in love with the baritone so I didn't practice it too much but as my teacher said. "It's just a saxophone, don't worry

'Of course there are baritone soloists I liked such as Gerry Mulligan who had a unique approach and Nick Brignola, who was the epitome of how to play Bebop baritone, Bruce Johnstone is another one of my favorites. He has an amazing sound rather like a tenor from his middle G on up. Ronnie Cuber too is just phenomenal - I love that Cookbook album he did with George Benson: (Columbia CK 52977. A Ronnie Cube, album that is long overdue for reissue on CD is Cuber Libre on the Xanadu label - 135.)

'While I was with the Ferguson band I wanted to make some extra money, so I became the road manager. It meant a tot of heavy lifting from the bus to the stage and back again as well as looking after all the music, but I could supplement my basic \$225.00 a week as a sideman, with an extra \$150.00 as a member of the crew.

'Maynard was living on the west coast but we usually met in Chicago or New York to begin a tour. Most of the charts were from the older band but then Jay Chattaway introduced some newer fusion things which Maynard really liked. He was keen on the idea of switching styles although some people gave him a hard time about it. On *Primal Scream* (Col PC33953) the producer Bob James hardly used any of the regular band at all. He had a formula so he wanted to use his usual studio guys like Erie Gale. David Sanborn, Joe Farrell, Steve Gadd and Marvin Stamm. All those cats knew exactly what to do because Bob didn't write everything out - some charts just "happened". I was there because of my solo abilities on baritone and flute which





created some problems with the rest of the Ferguson band who had to miss the date. On *Soar Like An Eagle* for instance he told me to copy on the flute exactly what he played on the piano even though there was no flute part (CBS 81839). We did another album for him where Mark Colby played beautifully on *Over The Rainbow*. After he left the studio, Maynard asked me to blow a flute solo on the same tune. I went into the booth and did a "one-taker" which was eventually used on the record instead of Mark's solo and I had to live with that! As a musician, you have no control over those things. For instance, some critic

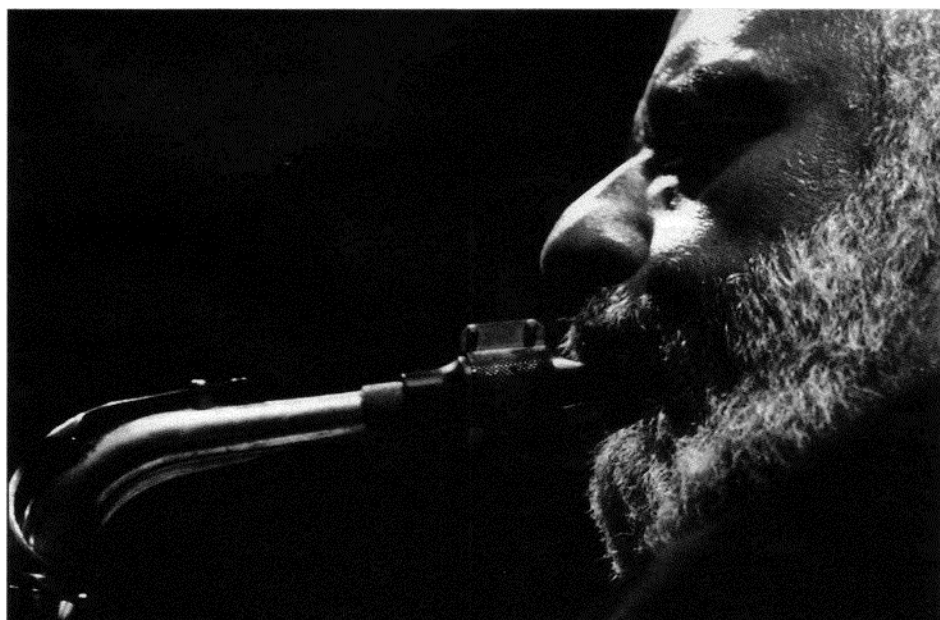
you. You had nothing to do with it but you have to live with the ramifications.

'In 1982, I had a call from Dave Brubeck asking me to come to New York for an audition. He had heard me years earlier with Maynard at the Sugar Bush Jazz Festival in Vermont playing a flute solo. It was quite a production because the band stopped while I did harmonies, singing and playing at the same time. Rather like Sam Most had done way back when, although most people think that approach started with Roland Kirk. Lola had written my name down in her little book and when Jerry Bergonzi was leaving they needed

instruments if you need them. I walked in with my alto, tenor and flute and felt completely intimidated. Joe Morrello, Gene Wright, Chris Brubeck, Randy Jones and Dave were all there and the hardest thing for me was not asking for everybody's autograph! But you can't blow your cool - you have to act like you belong there.

'They had already sent me about ten charts including *Tritonis*, *Blue Rondo* and *Take Five* which I had committed to memory. I had them "down" with a good working knowledge of what to do with them so I was ready to go. When we finished those we started fooling around because I knew a lot of standards. Everything Dave played I knew, in any key he wanted. After about two hours, he hired me and I got the gig.

'By this time I had decided to relocate to LA because I wanted to continue growing as a player and it didn't matter to Dave whether he flew me from Buffalo or California. Of course I was only with the group on a part-time basis as Bill Smith was still doing most of the work. I started doing a lot of weddings and parties in LA - what we call *casuals* because you can't just jump straight into the jazz scene. Don Menza helped me get a gig with the Dee



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# Bobby Militello

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among musicians and he is very busy in the studios. It is very expensive to take him on the road because he makes a lot of money in LA just by staying home and not having to travel.' (Pete Christlieb is indeed a giant and an excellent example of his work is on Apogee with Warren Marsh on Warner Bros. 8122-73723-2.)

'Within three weeks of arriving in LA I was making about \$1500.00 a week, and quite soon I was playing tenor in Bob Florence's band and second alto to Lanny Morgan with Bill Holman. I got a lot of calls to do rehearsal bands which I love doing and playing with Bill's band was like going to confession for a Catholic -every Thursday at 10 a.m. in room six at the Musicians' Union. Towards the end of my time with Bill, Joe Romano took over on lead as Lanny was touring with Natalie Cole. That was fine because Bill used to say that the lead alto sound he had in his mind when he wrote his charts was either Joe or Lanny. Joe had that Bird influence in his sound and his solos were great. Playing with those bands got me started with all the jazzers in town like Bob Cooper who was a beautiful player. If he had a double booking or wanted to slow down a little he would always give guys my name. With all the competition out there some people feel intimidated about giving you a gig in case you do too well and they don't get the call next time. Bob was different - just a perfect gentleman with no ego or arrogance. Of course I was also getting a lot of calls on baritone because there aren't too many around and everyone needs them. You can work like a son-of-a-bitch if you play ban but I didn't want a career on the instrument, so I took a brave decision and sold the sucker.

'When I first started playing with Bob Florence I would often question him

about my part, asking if this note or that note was right? Of course everything was fine but if there was a dissonant half-step I had to learn to place it harmonically and volume-wise inside the chord so that the balance was correct. Bob is one of the few guys who transposes as he writes and the math involved in keeping track of all those changes is extraordinary. By this time my reading had really improved because I was doing it all the time although I am not a great sight-reader like Christlieb for instance. I subbed in Supersax a couple of times and Med Flory was very nice to me but I couldn't keep up with some of those things. The inner voices are very difficult to play because of the way they are written but they work and you learn to skim the chart missing out some of the notes in between! It was intimidating but fun to be with cats like Nimitz and Med because they created something that was cool. If I wanted to do a Supersax thing now I would do it with Cannonball's solos.

'While all this was happening, I was getting calls from Dave to go on tour with the quartet somewhere. Flying back I would change in the parking lot of the airport and go and do a six hour casual, which started to get to me in the end. After nine years in LA I was getting more and more jazz calls but it had been a slow process because there are so many great players there. Studio work had slowly died since the union strike a few years earlier so the studio guys were reduced to doing weddings just to keep working. There were a lot of cliques too, so eventually I decided that it was time to go home to Buffalo. I had invested in a restaurant there with my brother and sister and soon after I got back, I made the first of three albums with organist Bobby Jones (Heart & Soul on PMD 78006-2). He is a wonderful player with fantastic co-ordination in his feet which means we can play the fastest tempo without a problem. He is one of those guys who should have a great reputation but he has always stayed close

to home, so not too many people know about him. We're probably going to go on the road as an organ trio soon - you can rent organs and we can pick up a drummer as we go. I also started working with Doc Severinson and the Tonight Show Band along with people like Ernie Watts, Conte Candoli, Snooky Young and Ed Shaughnessy. Doe took the band on the road after the Tonight Show had finished and it was like listening to jazz history hanging out with Conte and Snooky on the bus. After about a year Dave's schedule became so busy that I had to leave but I know I could go back tomorrow if I was free.

'As I mentioned earlier, Jerry Bergonzi had been with Dave before I joined and he is probably the most unpretentious and creative tenor player in the world and one of the few that Michael Brecker likes to listen to. Michael told me once that he is in awe of him. Jerry's playing is a great example of theory being developed and Pat LaBarbera is another one like that. All the thought process is in the practicing, so what you get in the performance is a combination of Bebop and inside/outside playing that builds a tension that is extraordinary.

On alto I have always liked Phil Woods and Paul Desmond of course was an early influence, but Cannonball is probably my all-time favorite. I was completely taken with his sound, soul and aggression. I listen to Hubert Laws on flute big time and Sam Most too was a major influence. James Galway and Jean-Pierre Rampal were also important because I wanted to get that pure legitimate flute sound so that I didn't sound like a "doubler". The challenge for me was to make the flute appear to be my principal instrument.

'I have been with Dave Brubeck now for almost 22 years, longer than Desmond and probably longer than anyone except Bill Smith. Dave is like Maynard because if you can play, he places no limitations on you at all. If you decide that tonight you are going to take it "out" - go ahead and do it. If tomorrow you want to play Bebop on the same tune - do it. If you want to experiment once in a while and play that extra four choruses that you normally wouldn't play, that's fine with Dave too. He isn't afraid of sharing the spotlight because he looks forward to you expressing yourself. In many of my other playing situations I am a still get the ultimate freedom of expression while he has all the responsibility. It's nice to just land at the hotel and have someone else take care of everything. You don't have to deal with all the issues the leader has like fronting the group, making announcements and worrying about who is late. In many ways being a sideman is one of the better things in life because your job each night is just to go to the gig and blow.

'I love playing with Dave and in case you're wondering, I never get tired of playing Take Five!'

(Photographs by Gordon Jack.)

