

Lester Young: The Sax Giant in the Studio

COLIN FLEMING | 3 MIN READ



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Along with unidentified others, American jazz musician Lester Young (seated center) plays tenor saxophone during a 'Jazz at the Philharmonic' concert in New York, mid-1940s.

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The tenor saxophone has always been seen as jazz's muscle instrument. It so often provides the brawn of any ensemble's attack. Were we to contextualize this particular make of horn in sports terms, it would be the home run, the slam dunk, the slap shot.

Which is probably why we have that idea in our heads of the big, stomping tenorman who just blew in from, say, Texas, hopped

on a bandstand, and blew 20 straight choruses to serve notice to his fellow musicians that a new stud was in town. There is machismo in the instrument's lore, but too much, really, especially if you wish to consider Lester Young, as a recently released [Mosaic set of studio sessions](#) does.



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If you were going to study just one set in the history of the tenor saxophone, it should be this one. Young rose to prominence with Count Basie's big band, which must have held a note of irony for him, as that unit was loud, molten, fiery, brash, with large rhythms at bracing volumes. You could make a reasonable case that rock 'n' roll started here, but if you don't want to buy that argument, it's tough to dismiss the notion that the rhythm and blues jump jivers who certainly factored into rock's ascendancy heard much to learn from with the Basie unit.

They had one of those quintessential machismo tenors in Herschel Evans, who would become Young's great rival, their resistance toward each other's styles of playing creating a brilliant symbiosis. Evans brought the fire, Young brought the cool. In fact, he coined the term, so think of that next time you trot out that adjective to describe something superlative.

Young's tone was breathy, like it channeled a vernal breeze wending through a cedar grove after winter had finally broken. Never did a man play a horn quite like him; you could feel him thinking as he went along. Those mental fingerprints are all over this eight-disc collection, like on the hard-to-come-by alternate take of "Oh, Lady Be Good." Written by the Gershwins, the song came to signify the musical admiration—and non-musical affection—between Young and Billie Holiday. Talk to swing-jazz fans about musical arks of the covenant and what they'd most like to hear that they haven't yet, and this alternate would be high on any list.

Even at the end of his life, with his lung capacity diminished, Young could still deliver—check out, for instance, his series of D.C. club dates from 1956—but here in his late 1930s prime, a Young alternate take was likely to have a solo that must have all but killed an engineer to leave in the can.





We hear Young excel in both Basie's big band—where his ideas, as they are meted from his horn, cause everyone else to listen differently, to play differently—and in smaller combos. Herschel Evans had remarked that Young lacked power; Young countered by saying that some guys like Evans were all belly, whereas he had it where it counted, up in the brain department.

That's become a popular anecdote, but we mustn't let it diminish just how technically good Young was. His playing had physicality to it, surely. A late addition to the set—on account of its recent discovery—was the Basie band's first-ever recording, a frantic charge through Fats Waller's "Honeysuckle Rose." Up until this point, swing tended to be elegant, crisp. This is earthier, and Young has no problem coming up with veritable fistfuls of loam in his front-line attack.

I've gone back and forth on whether it seems like Young preferred to work within the larger unit or else more intimate settings, but I think that speaks to how adaptable he was. Were he around in the 1960s, he probably would have made an album for unaccompanied tenor and it would have signaled a new direction in the avant-garde movement. But when you listen to the chamber jazz settings with Young working with the likes of Teddy Wilson and Benny Goodman, it's not hard to hear what Charlie Parker discovered in the man.

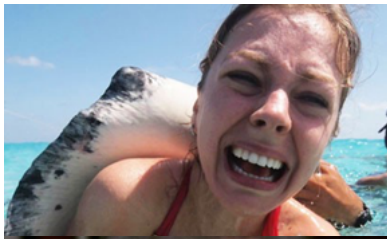
Parker, of course, was an altoist, but more than any tenor player, Young's approach to music traversed the normal boundaries between instruments and obliterated the wall between can't-do and can-do. There are all kinds of power in music, but once Lester Young's power—exemplified in this collection—meets with your ears, the back of your neck, the top of your spine, it never leaves.

Colin Fleming is the author of [The Anglerfish Comedy Troupe: Stories from the Abyss](#).

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