



STEVE LACY. SOPRANO SAXOPHONIST **[1934- 2004]**

Legendary soprano saxophonist Steve Lacy died in Boston of liver cancer on June 4, 2004. Born in New York, Steve Lacy was originally inspired by the great **Sidney Bechet**, and played in the New Orleans – Dixieland tradition. In the early- mid fifties he played with the traditional groups of Max Kaminsky, Jimmy McParland, Rex Stewart, Buck Clayton, Charlie Shavers, Zooty Singleton and Hot Lips Page among others.

This was till he met avant - garde pianist **Cecil Taylor**. He gave up all his earlier work to study, practice and play with the Cecil Taylor quartet in 1956 - 57. After Taylor he fell under the influence of another piano giant, **Thelonious Monk**, and spent some twelve years concentrating on the Monk repertoire.

Jazz historian James Lincoln Collier in his book 'The Making of Jazz' explains Lacy's subsequent influence over **John Coltrane's** taking up the soprano saxophone in addition to the tenor saxophone he was already playing : "**My Favourite Things**" represented Coltrane's recording debut on the soprano saxophone. Coltrane had been listening to Sidney Bechet, and through his association with Monk he had become aware of the work of Steve Lacy, who had played soprano with Monk. In 1959 Coltrane acquired a soprano saxophone and began practising on it, mainly, he said, because he kept hearing higher notes than he could get on the tenor. The rest is history.

In 1965, Lacy went to Europe, and had been based in **Paris** since 1970. He explains in the following interview what caused him to move to Europe. For the last ten years or so, Lacy had consistently been placed number one in the **Downbeat International Critics' Poll** in the soprano saxophone category. In 2002, finding gradual acceptance of his music in America, he moved back to New York, and ultimately settled in Boston where he was a New England Conservatory faculty member.

In early - 1980, Lacy toured South Asia as a member of the multinational **Globe Unity Orchestra**, under the leadership of German Alexander Schippelbach. On the night of their performance in Calcutta on the lawns of St. Paul's Cathedral, prior to the main programme, a jam session was held with some local Indian Classical musicians on stage. Among the participants from the Globe Unity Orchestra were German trombonist **Albert Mangelsdorff**, British soprano saxophonist **Evan Parker**, and Lacy.

The following interview was conducted over breakfast with Lacy next morning on **28th February, 1980** at Hotel Hindustan International, Calcutta. Ajoy Ray, an avid jazz lover, and Arthur Gracias, professional guitarist, conversed with him.

The Steve Lacy Interview

Arthur: *How did you feel when you played with Indian Musicians like the thavil player.....*

Lacy: **It was a great honour. A pleasure and an honour, but a challenge too, because it was not easy to do as their methods were completely different. In other words, they have their methods of rhythm and way of counting, and their musical values are really different than mine, and so, it was not easy to arrive at an accord. I could not possibly play their stuff and they couldn't play my stuff, so we had to arrive at a sort of a juxtaposition and a sort of a point where the two heads are embracing and yet they are themselves together. We did it in 3 days, but if we had 3 weeks or 3 months or 3 years, we would have got further. But as it was, it a was a great experience for me. Fantastic! I'll never forget it. Beautiful!**

Ajoy: *Could you tell us about your early life?*

Lacy: **Early life Well.....**

Ajoy: *In music.....*

Lacy: **Ah, in music! I was about to be a baby again (laughter). Well, growing up in New York there's a lot of music everywhere. There's a lot of jazz, there always was and still is. And when I was a kid, I was always into piano, classical music, and I didn't like it very much. When I was a teenager, I heard some Jazz and I started to get very interested in that. And then I heard the piano player Art Tatum and I gave up the piano because I realised I'd never be able to play like that. I didn't even have the hands - my hands are too small.**

Ajoy: *When was that?*

Lacy: **Late 40s. In 1950, I got a soprano sax because I'd heard Sydney Bechet and I thought, "Wow! That's it!" and without even knowing what it was, I got one. I worked in a factory and got the money and I bought a sax. I didn't even now how to pay it, how to hold it. That's where it all began.**

Arthur: *How old were you then?*

Lacy: **16**

Ajoy: *We believe the soprano sax is a very difficult instrument to play.*

Lacy: **I didn't know that at that time! (laughter)**

Ajoy: *You are one of the first musicians besides (Sydney) Bechet who has taken up the soprano sax as a solo instrument. Generally, people double on it. Do you have anything to say on it? Why didn't you take up any other horns?*

Lacy: **Because I found out how hard it was and therefore, I needed all my time to devote to that, do what I wanted to do, and I didn't have the time to do it. It's like having two wives, or 3 wives or 4 wives: couldn't do it, couldn't handle 'em.**

Ajoy: *What was the first gig you played and who with?*

Lacy: **Of course it was with some amateurs, like in between a Dixieland band and a small dance group, just paying old tunes, like teenagers, like jazz standards, old songs, "Honeysuckle Rose", and "Ain't Misbehaving"... stuff like that. With kids, for kids, you know. That would have been the first. But I can't remember too well.**

Ajoy: *After that did you go into music professionally?*

Lacy: **Well I went in pretty quick because I started when I was 16, and by the time I was about 18, I was already performing. I didn't know what I was doing, but I didn't know I didn't know.**

Arthur: *Steve, did you find Coltrane as any sort of an influence on your playing?*

Lacy: **Very big, but that came later, because in the early 50s, I was really concentrating on New Orleans style, all the ancient stuff, Bechet and Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and all that, Jelly Roll Morton, Bessie Smith. I was really very deep into the history of jazz, reading all the books, listening to all records.**

Ajoy: *Where were you situated?*

Lacy: **In New York. And I was studying with an old clarinet player, Cecil Scott, who died a long time ago. And he showed me a lot of stuff. And I used to sit in with his band. Then I started playing with the other guys, mostly old guys. These were people 60 years old, old pioneers who were still active in New York, like Red Allen, Hot Lips Page, Buck Clayton, Jimmy Rushing, Zutty Singleton, Pops Foster, the older cats. And I was just a kid, just 19 years old. And they were 65, but they were beautiful. They really encouraged me and showed me a lot of things.**

Ajoy: *So you start off in the New Orleans vein. After that....?*

Lacy: **Well, I went through all the different schools, the Chicago style, the St. Louis style, the New York - still in history really. I'm just dabbling in the history and copying the different ways of doing, and sort of improvising. And then, in the middle of all that, I met Cecil Taylor and he just plucked me right out of all that and put me in the fire! Put me right into the deep waters you know! And I didn't know how deep the water was! So I swum across there for about 6 years with him. From '53 to '59. That was where I learnt a lot of stuff, playing with him.**

Ajoy: *Wasn't it a big switch; from the New Orleans style to C. Taylor? From one extreme to another?*

Lacy: **Yeah, again I didn't know how big a switch it was! Didn't seem so big to me. And it still doesn't, in a way, because Jazz is much the same really. Surface characteristics and all that, it still contains the same spirit. Not so far really.**

Ajoy: *What about the bebop movement?*

Lacy: **Well I got there a little too late. Yeah very profound! I studied that music a lot. Charlie Parker was one of my masters. Dizzy Gillespie and Bud Powell and Kenny Clarke and Max Roach and Thelonious Monk. I think I was too young, too late for bebop. I started in 1950, and the height of bebop was '46, '47, '48, '49. By the '50s, it had already done it's thing. It was going into a kind of repetition, the cool phase**

and what they call hard bop. I studied it the best I could and I tried to play it, but I was in the next generation, you know what I mean? I was in the generation after that. I tried to play the best I could, but I was too late really.

Ajoy: *And after you left Cecil Taylor, about '59...*

Lacy: **'59. By that time I'd already played with quite a lot of other people, and I was working with Gil Evans' big band and I was very interested in the music of Thelonious Monk. Sort of gravitating toward him.**

Ajoy: *Did you play with him?*

Lacy: **In 1960, I worked with him.**

Ajoy: *Did you cut a record with him?*

Lacy: **No. Just a record with a big band. I didn't play any solos. But I played with him for 16 weeks, every night in a Quintet, in Festivals, in different things like that.**

Ajoy: *After that when did you leave for Europe?*

Lacy: **'65**

Ajoy: *Why did you leave for Europe?*

Lacy: **No work!**

Ajoy: *In New York, yeah, that was the time when music was*

Lacy: **Drying up. Terrifying.**

Ajoy: *Competition from rock?*

Lacy: **Oh, I just wasn't getting any work. And I came to Europe because it seemed like there was work there for me.**

Ajoy: *There were a lot of folks who left during that period, a lot of folks, from the late '50s and the late '60s.*

Arthur: *At that time I found even a lot of jazz guitarists started commercialising and playing a lot of pop, like (Wes) Montgomery, and Gabor Gzabo.....*

Lacy: **I had already been through the working days and sacrificing and all that for the music, and I had done that for years and I didn't want to do it anymore. I wanted to play and not do that anymore. In Europe, it seemed I wouldn't have to do that. I could get a little work there so I stayed.**

Ajoy: *How did Ornette (Coleman) hit you when he came on first?*

Lacy: **Oh that was a revelation for everybody in New York. That was like the Message, the Writing on the Wall. Nobody could ignore that really. Either you're against it or for it. I mean it was like a big flash. Everybody was talking about it. You either liked it or you didn't. I liked it right away. But I had already played with Cecil (Taylor) for 6 years by the time I heard that. So it was revolutionary all right. But I had been involved in another revolution, or may be the same revolution. So I felt right at home with that. We loved it.**

Ajoy: *What do you find is the difference between working in America and working in Europe?*

Lacy: **Well, in a way, the Europeans are more comfortable, just listening to music. It's an older culture, so it's more natural for them. Art is a more natural thing for Europeans because it's older, more established. Whereas America's a young country, only a few 100 years old. Art is a sort of a strange thing. Everything is young.**

Ajoy: *So you are more appreciated as an artist in Europe?*

Lacy: **Yeah, in Europe it's more acceptable, the whole thing, the whole notion. America's still thrashing about trying to find out what's happening.**

Ajoy: *How about commercially?*

Lacy: **In America, the commercial pressures are terrible. That's another reason why I really left, because I could have stayed there and worked with some stupid music I didn't want to do. But the commercial pressures are very very developed. May be a young country, but commercially they are very well developed, you know. The record Companies, the Agents, the Managers, the Critics and all that. It's no joke. It's really a lot of pressure on you too, to give up what you wanted to do. They're trying to destroy you really.**

Ajoy: *Did you attempt fusing free jazz with Western Classical music?*

Lacy: **Well, jazz.....music will contain anything. You can just put anything you want in music if you really feel it, if you really believe in it. So we make music out of all kinds of things really. I can write a song out of a menu. I can take a box top and write a song out of it. In the same way, you can take anything and adapt it and use it, if you really want to. But I never made any conscious attempts to fuse anything. But everything I like is in what I do naturally. And that's why I showed you, those that I like are dedicated and paid back to certain people. We have 100s of pieces that I wrote and each one contains some aspect of somebody's style, somebody's way of playing, somebody's way of phrasing. So these elements are incorporated, but it's not a fusion. It's just a containment. It's like if you live in a certain country you pick up the way they speak, and it becomes a natural part of the way you speak. It just gets in, the accent. So you don't have to fuse it. It just happens.**

Ajoy: *You've been living in Paris since '65?*

Lacy: **No, for ten years. Since '70. Before that, I was traveling around. A little bit of Rome, and (then) went back to New York for a year (it was worse than ever!), went down to South America, went all round.**

Ajoy: *What about the situation in Paris from the jazz point of view?*

Lacy: **Well, I've been living there ten years now and the first five years were murder! But the last five years have been great. It started to get better and now it's getting better and better. Well, we don't stay too much in Paris. We work out of Paris. It's just like the centre of Europe, so we can get to Belgium and Holland, and Italy and Germany and sometimes Paris, but not all the time.**

Ajoy: *Paris, I felt, had it's peak period in jazz in the late'50s - early'60s. A lot of Americans went over....*

Lacy **In the late '50s, '58-'59 there was a big movement there....**

Ajoy: *That's when the Kenny Clarke-Fancy Boland Big Band....*

Lacy **Yeah. There were a lot of gangsters there making records too. Pirates and gangsters. They were exploiting everybody and they were recording everything. So I moved there because I thought, "Wow, there's a boom" and there are lots of musicians. I was living in Rome and there was nothing happening there. And so, we moved to Paris, and as soon as we moved there, the boom was over and then we went through some struggling years. And now since about '74-'75 it's been getting very good.**

Ajoy: *Which country in Europe do you find your music the most acceptable?*

Lacy **I think Italy is No. 1 for us now. And France too.**

Ajoy: *Germany?*

Lacy: **We get less of a chance to play in Germany. Usually when I go to Germany, I either do solos or I collaborate with some German musicians or work with Mal Waldron. But I haven't had much of a chance to take my group there. Just once in a while. But Germany is very fantastic. There's a big public there, some good musicians, but it's not so easy to take a whole group there. So I do a lot of solos and duos there, and work with Mal Waldron. You know Mal Waldron? The pianist.**

Ajoy: *Yes. He played with Mingus.*

Lacy **Yeah. And with Billie Holiday too.**

Ajoy : *Did you learn anything new from this trip in India?*

Lacy **(Whistles) Yeah, I'll have to think about it for a few years but I definitely did. I think it's an overwhelming experience for me. First of all, just to be in this Country, see what's happening, meet all the people, and finally to play even a little bit with the musicians like that. It was a great experience, really profound, because I've been listening to Indian music on records, and a few concerts, for about 25 years, I think. In New York, we heard Shankar, Ravi Shankar. Actually the one who showed me about Indian music was Gil Evans back in the 50s. He gave me a record of Ravi Shankar back in '57, and I started to get interested in that. Got some other records and a lot of us were really deeply into those records you know. But then, a few years later we stopped, but then we started again. And now, having come here and seen the stuff in person – well, I've always been interested in the music, but now I'm a little closer to it than before.**

Arthur: *Could you say that you were manly interested in the rhythmic cycles rather than.....*

Lacy: **No! It's the scales, the melodies, the moods, the whole thing, and the spirit! The whole thing, it's not just the rhythm at all. Because I don't think you can separate an element from music and just be interested in one. I mean if a music is interesting, it's the whole thing really. The thing that struck me here is, for example, Bismillah Khan. I heard him in Paris. These people, what they play outside of India is one thing and what they play inside India for their own public is another**

story completely. So that was a revelation for me because I saw how much the rapport between the public and the music, how clear it is, how intimate the people are with the music. And this is beautiful, this is what we want to achieve with jazz also but it's a dream. It used to be like that with jazz. A small public but the people knew the music, and it was all very direct. There were no cultural problems. It was no trying to figure out "What do they mean by that, what do they mean by that?". It was just like somebody hungry eating food, simple like that, and that's what we're trying to do in jazz. To get to that point where the people and the music are one. So maybe it'll happen sometime.

Ajoy: *Anything you'd like to say as an ending to this little chat?*

Lacy: **Well, to me, this tour was amazing. This six-week tour we covered Malaysia, India, Indonesia, Japan, Hongkong, Korea. But I think the most important of all in the whole trip were the three places we've been in India. To me, it was one of the most important experiences of my life. It isn't about doing anything but just being here and seeing all that's happening and it's been incredible! And I hope we get a chance to come back and I hope we do. It's been amazing and I hope I'll be able to put it into music. I'll pay you back musically!**