

For the person that has never heard of you, can you say who Sal Mosca is?

They would have to ask God! We spend our entire life trying to find out who we are: That's an eternal quest. I lived with my wife, Stella, for more than twenty years; I have three children, Michael, Kathy, and Steve; I lived within myself for 75 years: Do we really know who anyone is? That's why I say that only God knows.

If you were going to write your own entry into the Encyclopedia of Jazz what would you write?

I'm constantly seeking perfection, although, I might never achieve it.

When you began as a jazz pianist which jazz musician(s) had the biggest impact on you? Why and do they still?

Art Tatum, Errol Garner, Lester Young, Nat King Cole, Teddy Wilson, and Roy Eldridge. Also, the big bands like Benny Goodman and Tommy Dorsey had something special to offer. They all played great and were very musical. They still sound great and I enjoy listening to them now.

Who were your first piano teachers?

I studied with Duke Jessup until I was 15. Duke was his nickname. Wilbur was his first name. Duke taught me scales and chords. He introduced me to Bix's Biderbeck's *In the Mist*. We also did stock orchestrations of standards.

Were you studying jazz?

It definitely was jazz. Duke was a Dixieland player.

At 16, I studied with Al Scolfield for two years until I was 18. Al taught me to play and transpose in all the keys. I worked on sight-reading with him and he got me into classics such as Debussy's *Claire de Lune*, an English composer named Cyril Scott, and Gershwin preludes. I stopped studying with him because I was drafted.

When did you start teaching?

At 15, Duke Jessup gave me 4 or 5 of his students. I was worried that I couldn't do it but Duke insisted that I would be fine. I've been teaching ever since - 61 years.

What were some of your musical activities prior to studying with Lennie Tristano?

Besides teaching, I was just doing club dates in the area.

In the Army, I played and performed in their 50th Ground Forces band. I wrote five arrangements for them. I was supposed to go to Germany as part of the occupational forces, but I found a job notice on the bulletin board for a pianist/arranger for the 50th AGF band. I never did any arranging before this, and again, everything turned out fine.

Did you have other formal musical training?

Yes. I studied classical music at New York College of Music from 1947 to 1950 as part of the GI Bill. I studied with Fritz Kurtzweill. I worked on Beethoven's sonatas, Bach's fugues, and the waltzes and etudes of Chopin. I also learned to play Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*.

At the same time I enrolled at New York University as part of the GI Bill to study Schillingers's system of composition. This was 1947 to 1950. Rudolf Schramm was the instructor. This course dealt with writing music for films and other things like that. Eubie Blake was in the same class. Eubie loved Italian food – so we would go out and eat often during those years.

Do you remember your reaction when you first heard Lester Young and Charlie Parker?

I liked Lester Young immediately! I loved his beautiful sound. I loved his beautiful notes, and his beautiful rhythm. I loved everything about his playing.

At first, I did not like Charlie Parker. Lennie Tristano had me sing a solo of Parker's. It was *Scrapple From the Apple*. It took me, one and ½ years to learn to sing it, and another six months to play it on the piano. When I was able to play it, I began to love Charlie Parker and my love of his playing grew and continued after that.

Did you ever meet or play with Parker?

I played once with Charlie Parker at Birdland. His pianist was late, so I was asked to fill in. What stands out most to me was that Bird's sound was so big and strong. Miles was in this band too. We played a blues and *Embraceable You*. We met, I think, two other times. One time was in Boston where I had a short conversation with him in the hallway of a radio station. Nat Hentoff had a radio show; Charlie and Lee were there to be interviewed. Charlie asked us (Lee Konitz and me) to come and sit it with him that evening. It was a blustery evening, snowing. We got there, which would have been the last set, but the weather prevented Bird and his band from showing up. The other time I spoke with him was at Birdland, where he was at a table with Lennie and Bud. They seemed to be enjoying themselves. I said only a few words to him. I was very shy in the presence of these great players. It wasn't easy for me to have conversations with them because I was in awe of them.

What is it about the playing of Lester and Charlie that separates them from all the rest?

They were individuals. Lester and Charlie were able to express more emotion through their instruments than most players. They both set a new path by their style of playing. They pushed the music to the limits in their own unique ways during their time.

Have classical pianists influenced your piano playing and improvising and if so, which ones?

Yes, the piano playing of Horowitz, Rubinstein, and Rachmaninoff. Also, the music made by Toscani.

What about Richter?

There's no doubt about it, Richter's great. My own personal preference is Horowitz. Lennie really dug Richter and tried to get me to listen more to him; I prefer Horowitz. He is more romantic. He's the closest to jazz of all the classical pianists. I heard a recording of Horowitz playing Mozart, it sounded like stride piano. Did you know that he went often to hear Tatum?

How about classical and modern composers?

I like most of the classical composers up to the 1950s, after that I don't particularly like the modern composers - those composers that came after Samuel Barber and Stravinsky.

Do you have a favorite rhythm section?

Yes. My favorite rhythm section is Oscar Pettiford and Kenny Clarke, though, I only played with them a few times. I played with Oscar where he played the cello too. The last time I played with Kenny was in Berlin where we did a concert with Warne Marsh and Eddie Gomez. This concert was video taped and released on CD.

That's my favorite rhythm section too, especially adding you to it. It is one of my main reasons why I love that recording – Lee Konitz with Warne Marsh – [Atlantic Records]. Besides the music, I love the sound of it!

I was partially responsible for the sound. It was in an old church. We were set up to record on different platforms, far away from one another. After we played one tune, I told Lee that we had to move everything closer together – like when we are playing at home or at a gig. The sound wasn't right. It took the engineers some time to move all the wires, mikes, and rearrange the platforms, but after that, everything was fine.

Do you have a favorite Sal Mosca recording and what is your reaction when you listen to yourself.

No. I like them all. I'm always trying to do my best. When I listen to my own recordings I don't feel that it's me playing; rather, it's a life force at work. I don't say, "Wow, that's Sal Mosca playing." I can separate myself from it and really enjoy the music. I hear a whole lot of piano playing.

What players, either now or earlier in your career, do you feel have been overlooked by other jazz musicians or critics?

Trumpeter Don Josephs, tenor saxophonist's Ray Turner, and Dave Schildkraut – alto sax. They were all overlooked. They sat in a lot at the clubs on 52nd Street. Schildkraut could play Bird's music very well. I remember Ray Turner sitting in with Lee and me. He played a chorus on "These Foolish Things" that was so beautiful, Lee couldn't take a solo afterward.

This might be a good place to ask you about the music scene today: Are there players out there performing or recording quality jazz?

Jimmy Halperin and Larry Bluth are; and there are others, but they are not known. Jimmy and Larry both have a few CDs out – so they are better known than the others.

Lennie Tristano wrote the following about you:

"Sal Mosca is a great improvising pianist.

Sal Mosca is a legend in his own time.

Sal Mosca doesn't have to be dedicated, he doesn't have to be sincere, he doesn't need integrity.

Sal Mosca is completely natural and has been into his music for at least 30 years (as far as I know) without anyone talking about it. I have been acquainted with and associated with, in one way or another, all the great people in jazz since the 1940's. Sal Mosca is one of the greatest."

What is the first thing that comes to your mind when Lennie Tristano's name is mentioned? Can you a few things about his teaching?

The first thing that comes to my mind is: What a great person Lennie Tristano was! What a great player Lennie Tristano was! What a great teacher Lennie Tristano was! And especially, what a great friend he became! We remained very close friends. Lennie presented me at Carnegie Recital Hall, all out of his own expense and he planned to have me perform again, but this time it was at Alice Tully Hall. He wasn't alive for this but Connie Cruthers did it in 1979. He was a great friend.

As a teacher, Lennie was very careful with all the details, and he was very consistent – he was always there. Everything that he taught was potent and very clear. Nothing was wasted – everything – the conversations, the talks, were just great! Lennie was very strong on listening to the great players, Lester Young, Louis Armstrong, Roy Eldridge, he loved Roy, Charlie Parker, Bud Powell, he loved Bud – he loved all the great players. We did ear training from two-note intervals to 13th chords.

Lennie was also one of the first ones to promote Bird's music. He had a 4-page pamphlet made exclaiming the virtues of Charlie's music. I used to have a copy; but it was lost in a fire at my other studio. He said that Charlie Parker should take all the players that copied him to court, and sue them for plagiarism. Also keep in mind, that Lennie kept Lester Young and Charlie Parker names' alive in New York, as well as other great players. He always talked about how great they were to people and to his students. Lennie was way ahead of everyone when it came to all of that. He was very innovative, and it took most of us a little time to catch up to him.

Did Lennie and you ever play together?

Once. We did a duet at his home. I played an upright in the kitchen and Lennie played the Baldwin Grand that was nearby.

When did you study with Lennie Tristano? Who were some of the other players that were studying with Lennie then?

I studied with Lennie Tristano for eight years: from September of 1947 through 1955. When I was studying with Lennie, Warne Marsh was studying. Lee Konitz, Don Ferrara, and Peter Ind were also studying with Lennie. It was Don Ferrara who introduced me to Lennie's music. Don and I were working together on a club date and he was raving about Lennie and his teaching. (I know that I have told you this before, but I originally went to Lennie to learn how to play more like Art Tatum because Lennie could play that way.)

I feel Lennie Tristano's impact on jazz and on music is significant; however, there are so many misconceptions about his teaching and music, can you explain why you think these "negative" feelings exist?

I think the misconceptions first started with the earliest articles: the ones that were written in *Downbeat* that called his music weird. These articles also said that his teaching was weird. They claimed that he didn't play with feeling; but as time went on, their tone eventually changed and they wrote only about his music, not the other stuff. Lennie really had a different sound and you got to remember - they didn't really like Bird's music then either. Now, they still try to make Lennie mysterious or something of a "cult" figure. They still knock him, but they are usually

complimentary about his music. Look, Lennie was a great man. All of this stuff is really unwarranted. He was dedicated to two things: his teaching and his music. I think his influence will continue to grow over the decades.

I'm not sure that I even want to ask you this question; however, you could probably set people straight. There has been the suggestion or a criticism of Lennie (and those who studied with him) that the scope of his music is narrow. What do you say to that?

I find this to be the fault of the listener. If they knew how to listen, actually, to be more precise, if they knew how to feel with their soul and body, they would hear in Lennie, and some of his better students, the history of music.

When you hear Lennie or me play, you hear Art Tatum, Charlie Parker, Lester Young, Roy, Bach, Bud Powell, Louie, Chopin, and others. You hear wonderful, beautiful music. For some reason or somehow, these people refuse to listen and refuse to feel. If you cannot feel, you cannot hear Lennie. I think the "truth" lasts, and Lennie spoke and played the "truth."

Could you give us an idea what it is like during those years studying with Lennie and about the sessions at his East 32nd Street studio, or the sessions at Peter Ind?

It was a very exciting time. We played a lot together. We did gigs together and eventually we recorded together. We were just trying to get better all the time. We were not thinking about or trying to make "history" when we played. Like I said, it was a very exciting time. Lee and Warne usually worked with Lennie but when they didn't, I usually played with them. We used to rent a studio at Nola's and do sessions. We played at Birdland, Basin Street, and all the clubs.

Also, Lennie had sessions at his 32nd Street studio, every Saturday night. There would be other pianists playing too: Ronnie Ball, me, some others. There would be various bass players, usually Jeff Morton on drums, different horn players. It was beautiful. He would invite about 25 people to listen.

During those years, you could also go to 52nd street and hear all the great players. You had music coming in both sides of your ears.

How and why did you develop improvising two lines at once?

Of course I was intrigued with playing two lines through playing Bach's Inventions and Fugues. I decided to try to do that myself, but to improvise it, rather than compose it. It's because I'm *improvising*, that the two lines sound like two different people playing: its' improvised not composed.

What influenced your bass lines?

Bass players influenced my bass lines.

Which bass players?

Scott LaFaro, Oscar Pettiford, Jimmy Blanton, Bill Miller (Nat Cole's bass player), Eddie Safransky, and Israel Crosby.

The idea to do it came from Lennie Tristano.

I think bass players could learn much if they seriously studied your bass lines. What do you think?

Do I think that bass players could grow by listening to me? Well, I think they could get some ideas; however, they have to develop their own lines.

Playing a bass line to your piano playing is a challenging task; however, it is the ultimate challenge for a bassist and I think one of the most rewarding. Any suggestions for the bass player trying to mixed his line in with all of the music that you create?

To play with me, a bass player must stay true to his own line. He must have confidence that he is in the right place. I'm listening to him and reacting to what he is playing, so if he begins to go with me, he might get all screwed up; however, if he trusts himself and keeps the melody of the tune in his head, everything will work out fine.

Have you read Warne Marsh's biography [Warne Marsh: An Unsung Cat]? Do you think it is accurate? Would you like to say some things about Warne?

Yes I read Warne's biography. Is it accurate? Probably, but it could leave someone with the wrong impression of Warne. They might think that he thought only of himself and that he was a drug addict.

I loved Warne! I loved his playing. His playing was so stretched out and he was a magnificent saxophonist. His music is full of beauty. It was a great experience being associated with him all these years. I miss playing with him.

I know the music of many your students, such as Larry Bluth, Jon Easton, Jimmy Halperin, Rick Moore, Mark DiOrio, and Bob Arthurs. They all sound so different. What is it about your teaching that makes all of your student's sound original?

I try to get my students to express their life experiences in and through their playing. That's one of the reasons why they sound so different and original. Everyone's life experiences are different, so . . . I don't try to put any music into a student – I try to get the music to come out. We all have plenty of music in us already. We have all listened and stored away music in our minds – jazz, classical, ragtime, boogie-woogie, rap, and pop. I encourage my students to let the music pour out; I find ways to let the forces of nature take over, and this is exactly what I'm trying to show my students how to do.

Could you give a short description of what a student could expect to learn studying with you?

All the basics: improvising, ear training, scales and chords. They would learn the melody and chord to tunes. Another thing that I do in my teaching is to have the student learn and appreciate other instruments besides their own; eventually, they'll develop into being a unique, great player.

Are there essential musicians that students should listen to as examples of the art of improvising and as an aid to their own development?

Yes. Louis Armstrong, Lester Young, Charlie Parker, Lennie Tristano, etc.

I noticed that we haven't mentioned Bud Powell's name in our discussions. How does Bud fit into the over-all picture?

Bud's a great pianist. He's the best of the bebop players. He plays Bird's music on the piano better than anyone. Like Lennie used to say, "Bud, Bird's your papa."

Were there opportunities that you turned down?

I worked with Sarah Vaughn at the Apollo Theater for two sets. It was a six-piece band with some arrangements. She asked me to join her touring band but I was studying with Lennie and I was married.

Orrin Keepnews offered me a recording contract. I turned it down because I didn't think I was ready for my own record date. This was in 1960. Orrin used to come to hear Peter Ind and me at the Den when we opened for Lenny Bruce. I was used to being a sideman. It wasn't until 1976 that I made my first record as a leader. It was solo project, recorded at my studio for Interplay Records, "Sal Mosca Music."

Most of your own records are solo piano. Why?

I never really played solo piano before that date in 1976. There was no one to play with. Warne wasn't around, and I wasn't playing with Lee anymore, so because of that I developed my own way of playing the piano solo. I am constantly looking for ways to keep it interesting.

Your last recording was *Psalm* with Jimmy Halperin. Is there anything you want to say about making *Psalm*?

I love Jimmy's lines and Jimmy's playing. Jimmy was so loose and spontaneous on the recording. It is a pleasure to be associated with such a professional like Jimmy Halperin. I was very pleased with the outcome of this recording.

You have really developed a wonderful musical rapport with Jimmy. Is there anything you would like to say about his playing?

I think Jimmy is the "best." He is so spontaneous and he is always prepared. Jimmy plays my music better than anyone! He studied with me for over 12 years and Lennie for three; each week he came prepared with a wonderful lesson, no matter what it entailed: ear training, solos, material. I look forward to a lot more playing with Jimmy.

You have two new CDs coming out on Zinnia Records. Can you tell us something about the music on these records, where and when they were recorded?

A single CD is from Antwerp, Belgium. It was recorded in 1992. The other is a double CD recorded at the Westchester Community College in 1991.

I think these CDs are unusual for me, because at that time I wasn't doing a lot of playing, so I decided to play more melodies and keep that in the forefront. More melodies and improvise less. That is why the CD from 1992 recorded in Belgium is called *Trickle*. The other CD is titled *Recital in Valhalla*.

Is there a particular concert or club date where you were a participant that is memorable above all the rest?

All the dates at the Vanguard are memorable – especially the dates with Warne and the earlier dates when I played with Lee Konitz at the Vanguard. We were opposite Gerry Mulligan's 16-piece band. Max Gordon was great to work for. He was so cool, a wonderful person. I liked him very much. So working for Max was great.

Is there a particular concert or club date where you were in the audience that remains fresh in your memory?

When Horowitz came out of a ten-year retirement and performed at Carnegie Hall. That is still fresh in my memory. Listening to all the great players remains fresh in my memory. All the years being associated with Lennie Tristano remains fresh in my memory too.

Sal, can you explain what musical tools you use, and how you are able to “stretch out” in a manner that I think is deeper and different than anyone else in jazz? How do you do it? What path do you have to follow to develop this ability?

First of all I'm hearing the tune in my head all the time. It's always there.

There are two paths working simultaneously. First you need to learn the standards and the tin-pan alley songs. You have to use the right chord changes and know the melodies. I'm hearing the melody while I'm improvising. I'm always aware of it. It's woven into the improvisation. Under all that complex improvising, there is always the simple melody as your guide.

The other path is the improvising - stretching out. To learn to “stretch out” you must listen to the players that “stretched out” in their time, such as Lester Young, Charlie Parker, Lennie Tristano, Louie Armstrong, Warne, and Dizzy. They pushed the limits in their time. And by listening to them and studying them you can learn how to push the limits in your time. You have to be willing to let it happen, to let the life force within each of us come out; and you must be listening in a very deep way to yourself and to what is happening around you.

I found out that the mind could do many things at once. So I'm hearing the melody as I'm improvising many different things with both hands at the same time. To see how many things the mind can do at once I did an experiment with my some of my students, three of them. I was playing the piano while I was conducting three different conversations at the same time. I was asking one fellow something and I replied to him; but I was also speaking to another student about something entirely different, and the same with third. All the while I'm playing the piano, not missing a note. So I was doing maybe four or five things at once. Look, that precisely what Bach did. Sometimes there are four or five parts going on at the same time.

Are there any players during your career that you wished you had the opportunity to play with that are either no longer playing or who have died?

No. I am very happy and satisfied with all the musicians that I have played and been associated with. Maybe Roy. One of my students, Johnny Morris, ended up being his pianist at Jimmy Ryans.

Who are some of your favorite players on each instrument?

Charlie Parker on alto, Lester Young, Warne Marsh, Ted Brown, and Jimmy Halperin on Tenor Sax; Charlie Christian and Django Reinhardt on guitar; Oscar Pettiford on bass; Art Tatum and Lennie on piano, Kenny Clarke on drums, Louie and Roy on Trumpet, Billie Holiday, and so on.

Who are some of the other players and/or entertainers that you have performed with? Any stories?

Peter Ind and I provided the musical portion of a show at the “Den” in the Hotel Duane for Lenny Bruce. We recorded two records from these gigs at the Den. This was Lenny’s first major New York appearance. It lasted 22 weeks. Lenny packed the club every night. All of New York’s intelligentsia were there: writers, musicians, actors and actresses, record producers, glitter, furs . . . Lenny Bruce was brilliant but I thought that he was ill, which later turned out to be true. He was very hyper. I know I told you this before, about when Lenny Bruce and I shared a cab, I had to get out after eight blocks. He was so alive!

I also worked with Elaine May. Besides the players that we already mentioned, I played with Zoot Sims and Al Cohn, Jackie Paris, bassists Red Mitchell, Sonny Dallas, Eddie Gomez, Ron Carter, Vinnie Burke, and Sam Jones; drummers like Max Roach, Shadow Wilson, Shelly Manne, Dick Scott, Jeff Morton, Denzil Best, Roy Haynes; with Miles Davis, Don Ferrara, Billy Bauer, and many more.

Billie Holiday sat in for a set with Lee Konitz and me. She was in the audience and Lee invited her up for some tunes. She was wonderful. I remember playing All of Me in D-flat.

Regarding your illness - Did you think that you would ever be so healthy again, and, willing and able to play?

No. I didn’t know what was going to happen. I spent three years not playing; I lost all feeling for listening or playing music; however, I was able to hear music in my head. I was improvising in my mind whenever I wanted to do that. I could hear tunes, take solos, but instead of doing all the things that I would do at the piano, I did them in my mind. Actually, I learn to do this from Lennie. Because Lennie was blind he had to visualize so many things in his mind. Lennie had me practice hearing and playing music away from the piano, just in my mind. I learn to experience all these things as if I was playing. So I was doing that all the time during my illness. At my old studio I used to go out onto the roof and do this all the time.

It’s so encouraging hearing you, at 75, continue to grow and to do things that I never heard done before. Simply put – it’s amazing. So, what’s next? What would you like the future to bring to Sal Mosca?

Well about being 75 and still growing - I think musicians age in a different way; we remain young because of the things that we are into - we’ll always stay young. The body might age, but the voice within you will remain eternal and timeless. Don’t worry about that.

My future: I have no plans. I never try to predict the future. Whatever the “forces” bring – that’s the same life force that is at work when I’m playing music.

What’s next? I really don’t know. I do know that Bob Arthurs has started writing my biography; I’m teaching again; and I’m sessioning with many of my students at my studio (Jimmy Halperin, Bob (Arthurs), Dave Frank and Bill Chattin have made it up here, yourself, and I’m hoping Ted Brown will join us soon. I’ve also done sessions at Joe Solomons with Dave and Bob. Jon Easton has played piano at some of these sessions too.

I would like to add that music is such a beautiful thing and I hope that people will be able to appreciate and get with it as time goes by, especially jazz.