

Victor Lewis

by Anders Griffen



Photo courtesy of Joanne Klein

Victor Lewis is well known for his drumming alongside Woody Shaw, Dexter Gordon, Stan Getz, Chet Baker, Art Farmer, J.J. Johnson, George Cables, Kenny Barron, Stanley Cowell, Charles Tolliver, Eddie Harris, Bobby Watson, David Sanborn, Earl Klugh, Carla Bley and Abbey Lincoln, among many others. Originally from Omaha, Nebraska, he first performed at the age of 14, went on to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln big band and did significant professional work in Nebraska and in Minneapolis before finally coming to New York and dedicating himself to jazz.

The New York City Jazz Record: It's probably always been challenging to make a living as a musician, but some folks say it's harder than ever now.

Victor Lewis: I really do think it's true. One reason why is, over the last 20 years especially, there's been a lot larger contingent of desirable, young jazz musicians breaking into the workforce. When I got to New York in '74, there were a lot of cats who wanted to do it, but now there's more competition.

TNYCJR: Coming here, you didn't have anything lined up, you had to come and make it happen.

VL: No, I didn't have anything lined up, I just met a few cats who came through Nebraska to play. Herbie Hancock came through with his septet and I met Buster Williams and Billy Hart. Clark Terry came to the University of Nebraska a couple of times. And I met Charli Persip when he came through with Ella Fitzgerald. So, I just looked these cats up and followed them around. I made it a mission. One problem was if it was a club, I couldn't get in because I was a minor. Bill Evans came with Eddie Gomez and Marty Morell. They were playing in a club, I was 17 and they carded me and barred me. I said, "Man, can you believe it? Bill Evans and his trio is on the other side of this wall and I can't get to it." During Christmas vacation of my sophomore, junior and senior year, I came to New York for about three days. Back then the legal age was 18 and I could get into all the clubs. I was in heaven. I didn't go see the Empire State Building or the Statue of Liberty. I just went to a different club every night.

TNYCJR: How much of your success was dependent on luck and how much on the way you imposed yourself?

VL: That's a great question. When I look back, I got opportunity because I guess they felt I was so hungry to be a participant and therefore willing to get put through the ropes. In the early days these cats didn't pull any punches. They were pulling my coat to this and that, "Victor, this is what you've got to do", etc. So, the part about luck was stumbling into these opportunities and the other part was about me trying to utilize these opportunities to grow and come up to the level. I indeed say I got lucky and the reason I succeeded was effort.

TNYCJR: Most listeners know you best for your work with jazz bands, but I understand you've done commercial work, including jingles, the *Bob Hope Show* and even the circus, isn't that right?

VL: Yup and I say to my students, "if you think you can only become a hip jazz player only within the hip jazz situation, you're quite mistaken." The stuff that I learned, the experience that I got, that I brought to the table on the so-called "jazz scene", I got from all kinds of stuff: working with belly dancers; I did a lot of polka gigs in Nebraska; I worked with the circus. Having to follow the clown and the tightrope, you have to play the waltz with the band but then watch the clown because you have to make the percussive effects when he screws up doing something. You have to respond to that and then get back to the waltz. That gave me a lot of experience in responding to the dialogue and getting back to the groove.

TNYCJR: Did you do most of the commercial work before you came to New York?

VL: The bulk of it I did in Nebraska and I did some jingles in New York and then worked with folks like David Sanborn and Phyllis Hyman, but after about '78 I was lucky enough to really be busy and focus on the reason I came to New York. I love all the genres, but my first mission was to play swing with the cats. In 1978 Woody Shaw signed with CBS Records and they gave him tour support and stuff, you know, and that was when I left David Sanborn's band and turned down a tour with Cat Stevens and started going on the road with Woody Shaw.

TNYCJR: Some say Woody Shaw was the last great jazz innovator. Do you think that's true?

VL: Yes, indeed. For my two cents, Woody is the last innovator on jazz trumpet by a landslide. Not to take anything away from all the great young players today, but in terms of the evolution of the trumpet, the execution and the expression of it, Woody was indeed, for my money, the last innovator on trumpet. He was another case of someone tragically dying too young.

TNYCJR: Following up on your coming to New York, how important was it for you to lead your own band?

VL: I'll put it like this, back in the day, more important than leading my own band was me as a composer. I was lucky enough to get my tunes recorded in whatever band I was playing with. Woody recorded several of my tunes, David Sanborn recorded several, Stan Getz, Kenny Barron, Bobby Watson ... I wasn't in a hurry to go through the hustle to do my own band. Also, the focus of the industry at that time kind of skipped over my generation in terms of the focus of the genre du jour. The fusion era came in and the interim participants

of the jazz scene kind of got overlooked. After they got tired of the fusion era and decided to embrace what was going on in acoustic jazz again, then the Young Lion era came along and those cats were younger than my generation. So, I guess you could say a lot of cats from my generation weren't really sought after as leaders to try and promote. There was an article that *Newsweek*, I think it was, did years ago. Me and Bobby Watson and Ray Drummond, we're on the cover and they actually addressed us and called us the forgotten generation of jazz. Just to keep my attitude cool I said, okay, I'm getting my tunes played and recorded and trying to deal with the flow of the focus of the industry. And then later on down the line I started doing my own band and my own records and stuff.

TNYCJR: As a bandleader, or as a member of a band, how do you make group interplay a priority?

VL: My motto is it's all about team ball, on and off the bandstand. The way I like to look at it is that there are beats and notes, licks and chords all floating around in the cosmos as public domain, so to speak. What makes music is how the artist pulls them down from the cosmos in some kind of order and makes music out of it and tells a story. Otherwise, they're just beats and licks that mean nothing. Lining them up in a wonderful artistic way is what makes music magical. In a group this transpires on a higher level when everybody is trying to come under the spell of the cauldron, the unity, the telepathy, the synchronization of the team. There has to be a unity and a real effort to connect. That makes a band get to the next level and do magical things within improvisation. I'll never forget when Miles Davis came to play in Omaha, Nebraska.

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(INTERVIEW CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6)

Everybody in the band was a fantastic musician, but the thing that got me was how they played together and the magic that happened, the things that aren't on the music chart, the unpredictable things. This is a big part of what jazz is and these are dealing in things you cannot see, the magic of the unity of the band. You know, when the band is really hot. And you have to try and call that spirit every gig, every day. Those magical moments that make jazz what it is, not a detached, mundane effort. It's an effort as a team to call the spirit of the unity of the whole band and that's when fantastic, wonderful things happen.

TNYCJR: Have any of your bandleaders, or have you as a bandleader, ever called anyone out for not apparently tuning in or calling on the spirit?

VL: Oh, yeah. My early days, Woody called me on it. I had some kind of mishap during the day and I was kind of discombobulated and I come skidding in late to rehearsal and I'm just kind of playing and Woody stops the band and says, "Victor, don't come up in this motherfucker all detached and shit." Boom! That was one of the most profound statements that anyone could say. Don't come up in here and your mind somewhere else. We're down here, serious music, calling the spirit and you can't be the missing link, we need all the links.

TNYCJR: And you knew he was right.

VL: I knew he was right before he even said it, I just hadn't decided that it was really important to transcend it. That hesitation on making that decision got expedited by Woody. It was an affirmation not to do that again.

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TNYCJR: That could have really taken you aback. He didn't exactly put it gently, but that's where your dedication comes in too, right?

VL: Exactly! He didn't candy-coat it. It was Boom! Seriously and cold-blooded and nobody else ever had to tell me that again.

TNYCJR: There are various ways the business has changed over the years. What is one of the biggest changes that jumps out?

VL: The one that really jumps out in neon signs is the Internet and the inefficiency of artists receiving compensation for their visibility on the Internet. You know, you can watch all the stuff on YouTube and people are downloading stuff, but the cats aren't really getting paid. So, we have to find a way to use the Internet to our advantage. I'm kind of surprised at this point. I'm a musician, but there are people that handle other aspects of the business. The publishers that would collect royalties for tunes of ours that were recorded, BMI, ASCAP, etc., the Internet is yet to have that kind of monitoring and I'm surprised someone hasn't figured out a way.

TNYCJR: What advice can you give and what hopes do you have to support new generations of the music and musicians?

VL: I know that this music is so strong that it's going to continue. The reason I know this is I was raised by the elder statesmen who, one could say, "Man, how come he's giving me welcome advice?" These greats would take time out to help groom the next generation. My elder statesmen, they were hooked on the music and I got hooked on the music and they saw I was hooked on the music and decided it's a good thing you're hooked, despite whatever trips the industry may try to put on us. They guided me and I guided the younger cats when I saw them getting the calling. The music is the draw and it's a strong draw and the rest, for better or for worse, is just reality and the life of this business, be it good or bad. I just really hope the industry will get a little purer in terms of their power. I forgot, there was a rock star that summed it up, "the music is spiritual, the music business is not." ❖

For more information, visit [facebook.com/victorlewisdrums](https://www.facebook.com/victorlewisdrums). Lewis is at Jazz at Kitano Aug. 2nd with Tony Hewitt, Somethin' Jazz Club Aug. 9th with Will Mac, Village Vanguard Aug. 19th-24th with George Cables and Birdland Aug. 26th-30th as part of a Charlie Parker tribute. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Woody Shaw – *The Moontrane* (Muse, 1974)
- Stan Getz – *Anniversary/Serenity* (EmArcy-Verve, 1987)
- Bobby Watson & Horizon – *Present Tense* (Columbia, 1991)
- Victor Lewis – *Know it Today, Know it Tomorrow* (Red, 1992)
- Jessica Williams – *This Side Up* (MAXJAZZ, 2001)
- Charles Tolliver Big Band – *With Love* (Blue Note, 2006)

(LABEL CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12)

music and musicians. That's enough for me to try to be as creative as I can and to feel the freedom that we need to make the music in which we believe."

Since around the mid-aughts, BMCR's freedom now also extends to non-Hungarians. "The appearance of international artists on our CDs was a natural progress," says Wallner. "The first US artist was Carl Fontana, in Hungary for some concerts, and László quickly arranged with Carl to go to the studio and

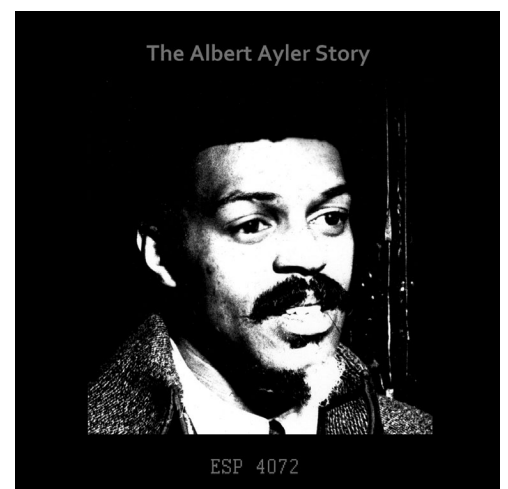
make a recording of standards. The next CDs with international artists were by Gadó, who lived in France and led an otherwise all-French band. Then there was the 2002 recording of the Dresch Quartet with Archie Shepp. The record was a key issue in the story of the label, as it contains all Dresch originals, sometimes rooted in Hungarian traditions, except Shepp's famous 'Steam'."

Meanwhile more out-of-country musicians begin appearing at Hungarian jazz festivals, friendships were formed and international projects were initiated. "Around 2004 we started to receive more requests to record from foreign artists," Wallner continues. "In the beginning we refused, but after a while we decided that we could also promote Hungary by having international stuff appear on our label instead of, let's say, ACT or ECM."

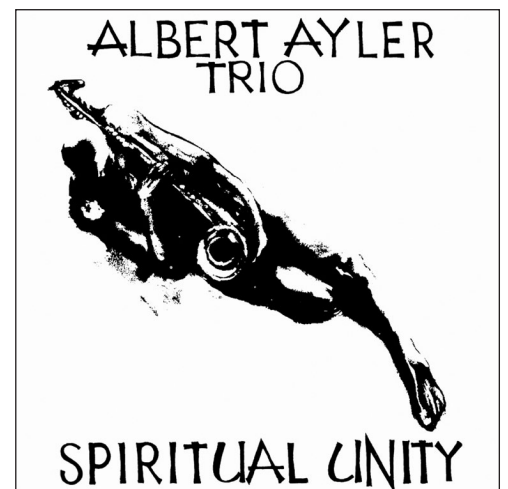
Now that the Opus Jazz Club exists and BMCR participates in the jazz programming of Budapest festivals, cost efficiencies are in place. "If there's a possibility to combine recording sessions, either in studio or live, with concerts, or have album debut concerts put into a festival program, then we use these opportunities," says Wallner. As for music dissemination, at least 80% of the catalogue is available for digital download, with some items including special audiophile files with higher resolution. New projects scheduled include CDs by Tóth; Lüdemann's trio; Bulgarian trombonist Georgi Kornazov with French musicians; plus a live recording of Szakcsi Lakatos with Tim Ries, Robert Hurst and Rudy Royston. As off-putting as the concept may be elsewhere, BMCR's experience shows that for creative music, integration can actually be a plus. ❖

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