



Lee Konitz Biography

Lee Konitz has moved in and out of public view and popular acclaim over the course of more than 50 years as a professional musician. He came of age in an era dominated by jazz great Charlie Parker. However, unlike most of his contemporaries, Konitz eschewed Parker's style, determined to forge his own. He gained early popularity playing with pianist Lennie Tristano and later as a member of Miles Davis' famous Birth of the Cool nonet. After virtually giving up performing in the 1960s, Konitz re-emerged with a burst of recording and concert activity in the 1970s. He has remained a sought-after headliner and sideman.

Born on October 13, 1927, in Chicago, Illinois, Konitz grew up listening to big bands on the radio. Early on he was taken with the music of Benny Goodman, and when he was eleven years old, Konitz asked his parents to buy him a clarinet. Realizing that he would be able to find more opportunities to play if he knew the saxophone, a year later he persuaded his parents to give him a tenor saxophone. Konitz made fast strides on the instrument. By 1944, the United States was deeply involved in World War II. With most able-bodied men in the armed services, dance bands looked high and low for capable musicians. When he was 16 years old, Konitz received an offer to play in the Chicago-based Jerry Wald Orchestra. All Konitz had to do was switch from tenor to alto saxophone. He did, and stayed with the instrument for most of his performing life.

An encounter that would significantly influence Konitz's musical development took place just before he joined the Wald band. Konitz was playing in a Chicago club, and another member of the band took him across the street where a rumba band was playing. "I could hear all these fantastic locked-hands chords over the music," Konitz later told Whitney Balliett of *American Musicians*, describing a piano player who turned out to be Tristano. Konitz got his saxophone, sat in with Tristano's group, and afterwards asked Tristano if he would become his teacher. The older man agreed and Konitz became Tristano's most celebrated pupil, and until the early 1950s, a regular sideman. What did Konitz learn from Tristano? "There was an extraordinary impetus to be very dedicated to this premise, this subject [playing jazz], and that's probably the biggest thing," Konitz told *WE* magazine. In 1996, Konitz admitted that he had not yet attained Tristano's level of discipline.

In 1947, Konitz joined the Claude Thornhill Orchestra. "I joined Thornhill in Chicago, and I stayed with him ten months," Konitz told Balliett. "It was my first big-time situation. I was nervous and impetuous, and I had wise-guy tendencies, like wearing brown suede shoes, yellow socks and a tuxedo." The band's charts at the time were being written by legendary arranger Gil Evans. One night, overwhelmed by the lush sound of Evans' arrangement, Konitz took his stripped down soloing style to its logical extreme: he walked to the microphone to solo, stood there and listened to the Thornhill rhythm section play a chorus, then returned to his seat without blowing a single note.

Konitz stayed with Thornhill for ten months, long enough to get to New York City where Tristano had moved. There he hooked up with the pianist once again and began performing with him. In 1949 and 1950, he took part in the Miles Davis Birth of the Cool sessions, with young luminaries-to-be such as Davis, Gerry Mulligan, Max Roach, J.J. Johnson, John Lewis, Kai Winding, Kenny Clarke, and John Carisi. The group and the album that resulted are now part of jazz legend. Years later Konitz said the nonet was under-rehearsed and sounded sloppy, even on its one studio recording.



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"But because there was such substance to the music and the musicians, it still was ... a significant record," Konitz told WE.

In 1980, after Konitz formed his own Lee Konitz Nonet, he was asked by the Smithsonian Institutes to recreate the Birth of the Cool charts. When Miles Davis displayed a complete lack of interest in the project, Konitz realized he needed to transcribe all the pieces from the recordings. After hours and hours of laborious transcription work, aided by Mulligan, Lewis, and Carisi, Konitz phoned Miles again. "So I said, 'Miles, remember my asking you for the arrangements to the Cool sessions? Well, we've transcribed them and rewritten them and put them together again.'" Konitz recalled for Balliett. "He said, 'Man, you should have asked me. Those motherf***ers are all in my basement.'"

By 1950, Konitz was popular with a broad audience. That year he was voted Fans' Choice on alto saxophone in a poll held by the magazine *Metronome*, beating out Charlie Parker. Unlike most of his contemporaries, Konitz deliberately chose not to imitate Parker's playing, the dominant style of the day. Instead he worked at developing a style of his own, one that was sparse, melodious, and which came to be seen as an alternative to Parker. So single-mindedly did Konitz pursue his own way that for a long time he refused to listen to Parker's music. "I was avoiding some of the similar routes that other guys were taking by being influenced by so strong a force as Charlie Parker," he told *Downbeat*. Eventually, however he went back and studied Parker's solos carefully.

Konitz continued to work with Tristano during the early 1950s. However, his relationship with the pianist was irreparably damaged when, in Tristano's eyes, Konitz betrayed him by joining the Stan Kenton Orchestra in 1952. Konitz remained with Kenton for two years, but his increasingly complicated home life--Konitz had gotten married in 1947 and six years later he was the father of five--led him to leave the group in 1954 and settle in at his home on Long Island, New York. During the rest of the 1950s, he recorded for the Verve and Atlantic labels, played regular concerts, and taught students of his own.

The Sixties were a difficult time for Konitz, at least musically. "I wasn't hustling enough for myself," he told WE, "and they weren't tearing down the lines to get to me." He recorded little, supporting himself by teaching and different non-musical day jobs. In 1962 he moved out to California. When he returned to New York two years later, a completely different kind of avant garde jazz was in vogue, led by players like Ornette Coleman, Albert Ayler, John Coltrane, and the Association of Advanced Creative Musicians in Chicago. This blaring, emotive free music was far from the measured melodies created by Konitz. The shift in public taste, or at least critical taste, probably also contributed to the lean years Konitz experienced around this time.

Konitz kept playing, though, searching out available musicians and playing duets with them. "That started as a very pragmatic enterprise and had nothing to do with recording," he told *Downbeat*. "I just wanted to play with different people. I realized there were so many nice players that I never get to play with and never will. So I made myself available to come to their houses--'cause I know you can't get anybody to come to your house--and just picked whoever came into my mind." Those pieces later became an album for Konitz.



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Konitz's career took a turn for the better in the Seventies. He moved to a new apartment in Manhattan, directly across the street from the jazz club Strykers where he began playing twice a week. Another club, Gregory's, asked him to play and before long he was a regular there as well. "I realized it was possible to blow four nights a week in my home town, the first time that ever happened," he told Downbeat. "The word got around that I was out and working, and that made me a viable product." In the latter half of the 1970s, Konitz made more than 12 albums under his own name, nearly all of them for small labels.

In 1976, he got a call out of the blue from Ronnie Scott's, a club in London, England, asking if he could fill a three-week bill another artist had dropped out of. Three weeks became eight months and Konitz was playing gigs all over Britain and Europe. By the mid-1970s, he had rejoined Warne Marsh, who had also played with Tristano in the early 1950s, for a reunion tour that yielded a number of albums. By the mid-1980s, his career was running at full steam once again. In the 1990s, he was performing regularly with his quartet, his nonet, and with various duo partners, including Clark Terry, Charlie Haden, John Scofield, Marian McPartland, and Mark Feldman.

Konitz composed music of his own now and then, but essentially he built his career in jazz the old-fashioned way: he concentrated on a handful of standards, songs like "Body and Soul," "All The Things You Are," and "Cherokee," until he knew them inside out. "Basically my repertoire is a few dozen tunes," he told WE. "And if I'm not setting up a special set of material for a record, I will choose those songs I like best and try 'em again, without the melody, say, just using the structure of the song.... It doesn't matter what tunes you play. The process is the same, and if it works then it's like a new piece, you know. And it is a fact that the better you know the song the more chances you might dare take. And so that's why Bird [Parker] played a dozen tunes all his life, basically.... Similar to Monet painting the lily pond at all times of the day, catching the reflection of the light."

- Gerald E. Brennan, Musician Guide