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Sal Mosca Take Five

Lee Konitz - With Warne Marsh (Atlantic), recorded in 1955, has long been one of my Desert Island discs. It features the leading students of Lennie Tristano – jazz pianist, teacher and founder of the Cool School (see Take Five, July/August 2014). Konitz and Marsh are the School's stars – but the main pianist on the date, the lesser-known Sal Mosca, had a genius equal to theirs.

Mosca's obscurity was partly the result of choice. Like his mentor Tristano, he rejected jazz's commercial imperatives, turning down major label deals, and releasing only a handful of small label recordings in his lifetime. Like Tristano, he preferred to work and teach in his own studio. There he imparted to students his self-sufficient artistic vision of total dedication, absolute musical purity and integrity.

Born in Mount Vernon, New York, in 1927, he studied classical music at New York University, and New York College of Music, under the GI Bill. He then studied with Lennie Tristano. When I interviewed him in 2005, he recalled first meeting Tristano in 1947: "I studied [with him] till 1955 – eight years...We used to have jam sessions, and I met Lee [Konitz] at one of those. Tristano influenced me in many ways. First of all he was very sincere, and very honest. He was very deep. When I was with him, I felt I could go deeper myself. He helped me tremendously...harmonically, melodically, rhythmically, with ear-training – [listening to] records with Bird and Pres" – Charlie Parker and Lester Young, the models for the Tristano players.

From 1949 to 1965, Mosca worked with Lee Konitz, and recorded as a leader himself in the late 1950s. In 1971 he released an inspirational, largely duo album with Konitz, *Spirits*. As well as giving solo concerts, in the late 70s and 80s he led groups with Warne Marsh. After recovery from major illness, his career underwent a renaissance in the new millennium, featuring mostly solo concerts, and he became active as a teacher again. Mosca died in 2007, at the age of 80.

His earlier work is heard to advantage on recordings under Konitz's leadership. He appears on the album *Inside Hi-Fi* (1957), where he is given plenty of solo space, as well as being a forceful accompanist. Here, the influence of Tristano is, understandably, very apparent. But Mosca was no Tristano epigone. His style developed independently, and became quite divergent in his later years. His work is not easily available on record. Some of his finest later playing is found on *Warne Marsh/Sal Mosca Quartet*, available in two volumes on Zinnia (1981) – notably a sparkling interpretation of "Dick's Favourite", an original composition on the chords of "Cherokee".

A superlative recording that is easily available is the posthumous release *The Talk Of The Town*, live from Amsterdam's Bimhuis in 1992 – two hours of beautifully-relaxed interpretations of standards. Here the influence of Art Tatum is apparent, but Mosca transcends it. Mosca avoids the latter's Bach-like "divine sewing-machine" by breaking up feel and tempo – while still, as Tatum did, keeping the melody centre-stage. The album begins with a beautiful ballad played fairly straight, *Ghost Of A Chance*. Mosca takes time to gather his strength, but with *Sweet Georgia Brown*, he's all over the keyboard,

disrupting the time. Stella's Blues is in Tristano's spirit, but has an exuberance and abandon not associated with his precursor. I'm reminded of a comment Mosca made to me: "I'm white, sure, but I've got a lot of blues to sing".

On these sides, a peerless pianist communes with material he's devoted a lifetime to exploring – the standards repertoire or Great American Songbook, comprising Tin Pan Alley songs of the 20s to the 50s. When I interviewed him in 2005, he explained that "They're the best songs...they speak of the people, and they speak of Broadway, and they speak of love and they're by some of the greatest composers – Gershwin, Kern...it's much more pleasant to be singing a beautiful song inside yourself while you're improvising, than some senseless ditty." Like Tristano's biggest influence, tenor-saxophonist Lester Young, he knew the lyrics to all the songs: "I've taught many singers, so I hear the lyrics a lot, and they're important to me."

New York bassist Don Messina worked with Mosca during the Indian summer of his career, and believes that he was one of the greatest improvisers of jazz: "Yet none of that mattered to him. He practised everything that he taught, his musical integrity and purity came naturally. His playing was beautiful and melodic – it could be a tour de force, yet always done tastefully, gracefully and elegantly". As Messina comments, he furthered and deepened the tradition of Art Tatum, Bud Powell and Lennie Tristano, as well as that of his contemporaries Warne Marsh and Lee Konitz. "Sal never tired of listening to his students – he listened attentively, lovingly, and encouragingly to all...To play with Sal you had to give your all and I was into it! He was inspirational."

[Information about Mosca's work is found at www.salmosca.com.

Recordings are available from orders@cadencebuilding.com]

TAKE FIVE: SAL MOSCA

1. All of Me, from Lee Konitz, Inside Hi-Fi (Atlantic)
2. Background Music, from Lee Konitz/Sal Mosca, Spirits (Original Jazz Classics)
3. Cherokee from Warne Marsh/Sal Mosca Quartet - Vol. 1 (Zinnia)
4. There Will Never Be Another You, from For You (Choice)
5. Stella's Blues, from The Talk Of The Town (Sunnyside)

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