

## Sal Mosca

**By Michel Rolland** Dec. 1999  
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If at times when speaking of the pianist Lennie Tristano we refer to his school (that group of musicians who have either studied, performed and or were influenced by him such as Warne Marsh, Lee Konitz, Ronnie Ball and Billy Bauer, and others), we are in the habit of forgetting one of his most accomplished students who ended up dedicating himself a continuer of Lennie's teachings. It's the case of Sal Mosca, retired due to health problems, who has been scarcely documented, although his last album was in 1997, and is a living example that the Tristano concepts are still in force.

In the previous issue of this magazine, there appeared a brief presentation of the work achieved by Zinnia Records (Nov. 1999), distributing works of a handful of faithful Tristianians (Warne Marsh, Jimmy Halperin, Larry Bluth, Don Messina, Bill Chatten, Mark DiOrio, Bob Arthur, Jon Easton, Joe Solomon, Peter Prisco, Skip Scott, Billy Lester, Charles Sibirsky and of course Sal Mosca.) Sal has been tied precisely to this group of musicians in past years, fundamentally serving as the principal transmitter of Tristano's and his own concepts.

Precisely and because of this educational work, Mosca has remained scarcely documented as leader of his own projects, and only in Zinnia's catalog have there appeared various recordings projects with Sal performing with other musicians in recent years. Sal's arrangement and understanding of the work of saxophonist's Jimmy Halperin CD entitled Psalm (Zinnia Records 110CD) in an uninterrupted 49 minute duet, and most memorably, in the case of two volumes recorded live with Warne Marsh, in 1981 from New York's VILLAGE VANGUARD. These two CDs with Warne Marsh are moreover the last live recording available of the saxophonist with Sal Mosca and the album with Halperin, could be Mosca's last, considering the health problems he's currently encountering, which have kept him from his playing as well as his teaching.

In some form or another, there are artists that are destined to live in the shadow. Sal Mosca is probably one of these cases, as much because of his style and as for the character that identifies him--tranquil, modest,

never having interest in standing out for his merits--and finally, for having been the hand executor of the musical legacy of Tristano. Lennie himself was very conscious of this disadvantage and on the liner notes to the album "Mosca Music" (1977) he presented in these terms his accomplished musician/friend:

- "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."

Salvatore Joseph Mosca was born on April 27, 1927 in Mt. Vernon, New York, in which he fulfilled his musical studies, at New York College of Music, from which he graduated and something even more important: he knew Lennie Tristano. During these several years, coinciding with the end of WWII and military service, he was part of a military band, and he had every type of "nourishing" work, which little by little was integrating him more into the New York Jazz environment. Between these jobs were others as an auto school instructor and later as a teacher of music. The same road that would end up pushing Tristano to establish his own school, officially speaking.

In any case, it would not be until June 1949 that Mosca was to debut in a recording studio accompanying saxophonist Lee Konitz (with whom he initiated a productive relationship during the next decade), Warne Marsh on tenor saxophone, Arnold Fishkin on double bass, and drummers Jeff Morton and Denzil Best. In actuality, Mosca was the substitute of luxury, realizing some excellent recordings in January of that same year with Tristano, and continuing in April 1950. The entirety of the themes recorded by Tristano and Mosca adapted--rearranged-- the material from Konitz's album "Subconscious-Lee" (Prestige), an authentic stone in the foundation of the movement. A year later Tristano would open his own studio and with him a genuine center of jazz development and education. This is precisely the same year in which Mosca participated in the recording of "Ezz-thetic" (Prestige), once again with Lee Konitz, as well as Max Roach, Miles Davis, Billy Bauer and Arnold Fishkin. The record activity during those years is

going to be the most intense and unrepeatable of his career, as Mosca himself commented to us in a phone conversation from his house in New York:

"During those years, Lee was very active and I recorded with him, thanks to Konitz who had good recording agreements. After Lee changed recording companies I started to concentrate on recording solo piano only and on my teaching. But I believe that I never gave much importance to the fact of recording albums." The teaching dominated, effectively, his activity during the following two decades, in spite of the fact that he continued to give concerts when he was able and although it's not always easy to find appropriate musicians. Entering into the Tristano universe requires preparation.

"My career as an instructor has been very important and I believe that I've contributed greatly with my teaching. This is a very difficult music.", Mosca explained to us. "It's real jazz. It's music that comes from the work of people who have dedicated all their efforts and talent to do the best. Such as Charlie Parker did, only different."

It deals with a very precise style that, effectively, has fascinated various generations of musicians and has led many to give up due to the difficulty of its elaboration, comprehension and execution. Lennie dedicated much time to its diffusion through articles, radio broadcasts and interviews. But, it was always in the minority. This has generated without a doubt a circle of followers and supporters, similar to when it existed during the life of Tristano, with some players abandoning, such as the case of Konitz, exhausted by the eternal work of a music that was unpopular and yet exquisite [Translation ?]. . .

Mosca's most recent students declare quite openly the attraction and surrender in the presence of his teaching. It is the case of Larry Bluth and Don Messina, who together with Bill Chittin form part of a (piano/bass/drum) trio that is probably one of the few integrally Tristano influenced formations of the moment.

"Sal, as teacher, preached what he practiced," pianist Larry Bluth commented to us recently, "because he is such a great and distinctive pianist, his comments to me always carried great weight. Melody, harmony and rhythm were taught with rigor and god-like patience. He opened doors for me that have remained open for years. His evolution as a pianist is

there for anyone to hear. From 1949 into the 90s, his recordings reveal a consistent organic growth rarely found in any art much less jazz. If the future of jazz will remain an ESSENTIALLY improvised music, the future players would be very wise to listen to how much freedom Sal found in the traditional theme and variation format. So intelligent, so surprising, and so beautiful!"

Sometimes, Mosca was, nevertheless, able to find an occasion and an excuse to record his music. Precisely with Warne Marsh, one of his allies in the most active epoch of the Tristano pioneers, he made the excellent recordings in 1981 in the Village Vanguard, which weren't released by Zinnia Records until 1992. In Mosca's own words "some of the best music of this century. A marvelous way to keep Warne with us". Although one must listen to this double album with something less than euphoria, what's certain is that its quality is indisputable. With the exception of the recorded work with Jimmy Halperin, a duet with Mosca, probably the Vanguard Recordings are the best example of the pianist legacy in the shadow.

A goodness that, at the least, will have remained well transmitted to his pupils. "I've played with Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughn, Max Roach, Oscar Pettiford, Kenny Clarke, Miles Davis, Al Cohn, Zoot Sims. And I'm very happy with all my recordings." It's difficult to know if the legacy will continue. I haven't listened to a lot of music, but the pianists that I've listened to do not play in the same form. They play from various other influences but not in this form. Nevertheless, jazz will continue forward."