

Jazzin' Together

Mark Lewis



When you access an artist's body of work, you can appreciate the growth and evolution from early days to their current work and get a sense of that creative flow. I suspect the creative juices began flowing not long after Mark Lewis was born in Tacoma continued during his farm life in Gig Harbor. I, myself, remember creating stories and songs as a kid on our Puyallup raspberry farm. I made a pretty good Batman in the outfit my grandmother sewed when she was not playing Scott Joplin on the piano. Lewis had music in his genetics, a grandmother who was a concert pianist and a grandfather who played a C-melody saxophone. That horn was the beginning point for Lewis at age nine. Back in those days, we all had a Hi-Fi system which helped with Lewis's early exposure to Count Basie, Lester Young, Duke Ellington, Art Tatum. It's amazing what parents can pass on (like my mom's Blue Note 12-inch 78s and Ash 10-inch 78s). Lewis had very serious visual impairments as a youngster, that continue today, so the sounds of music were probably a major focus. At age ten, Lewis was given his grandfather's horn, and he began his musical training. Quickly he was in school jazz and concert ensembles. At South Kitsap High, he played lead alto in the stage band and also sang in concert and jazz choirs along with other musical activities, and he got experience putting a band together for dances and other events. In college, Lewis had a double major in physics and music and found the time required was

daunting. His mother asked, "Can you leave the saxophone in the closet?" No! And Mark Lewis the musician was on his way.

Lewis had working bands while studying music at Western Washington University and Cornish, and even took advanced music theory from the late Gary Peacock. He had moved to Seattle with its thriving music scene in concerts and jazz clubs. Lewis was hanging out with super veteran musicians like Candy Finch, Art Foxall, Bea Smith, Dee Daniels, and Buddy Cattlett, and became a regular at Norm Bobrow's "Jazz a the Cirque." At this same time in 1976, Victory Music was at the Other Side of the Tracks in Auburn, and a number of Cornish musicians and singers began putting groups together that we would book, the likes of Joni Metcalf, Al Hood, Randy Halberstadt, Dean Johnson, Maria Miller, Denny Goodhew, Lonnie Johnson, Phil Smith, Marc Seales, Chuck Deardorf, Dave Peterson, and dozens more. They would sometimes cross-book with players from our early 70s shows in Tacoma like Barney McClure, Jorgan Kruse, Maria Miller, Ray Downey, Obrador, Jan and Chuck Stentz, Bill Ramsay, and Phil Person. And it was a big mixed pie, let's just throw something together. I would book one person, and they would get a band together, and many creative partnerships developed.

In late 1977 Lewis came in with and backed the jazz singer and Hit Parade recording artist Vonne Griffin. In January of 1978 he brought his own quartet that included Randy Halberstadt and, I believe, did mostly original material. Lewis wasn't just jamming with some talented friends, he had a band and was developing a sound and playing his material in a professional and focused way. The band really stood out in my eyes. Soon he was off to Rotterdam, and luckily there met Irene, one of the grand dames of jazz, who had many American jazz friends like Max Roach, and Christine, who was the gal friend of Noah Howard. Howard took Lewis on tour with him in Paris and Rome playing free jazz. Lewis also met and worked with Archie Schepp and Frank Foster in Irene's Club.

He met Billy Higgins and Johnny Griffin who got him his first gig in Holland at the B-14 under his own name. Soon after, he had three groups for three different styles of music. Lewis created his own record label, Auddio Daddio, recording in Rotterdam and Seattle, including recording four jazz artists who had played at the our Other Side of the Tracks: Vonne Griffin, Al Hood, Art Lande, and David Friesen. "I traveled back and forth between Europe and the US recording and promoting the albums, and also arranged European tours for American musicians like Art Foxall, Dee Daniels, Al Hood and Steve Clover."

Lewis also kept busy playing world jazz festivals, hosting his own festival, was a first-call studio musician, and he taught. Talk about active.

"I grew up in Holland, and the Dutch taught me my musical and artistic sensibilities. They also taught me a way of life that I find very humane and developed. I owe a lot to the people of

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Holland for taking the time for my musical development and artistic direction. My values as an adult were heavily influenced by Dutch society. It has made me the musician I am today."

Lewis ended his fourteen-year stay and returned to the Northwest. He toured and played up and down the west coast until he was asked to audition for a record deal in San Francisco and later found out he was playing for the legendary tenor saxophone player Stan Getz, who loved his playing. Lewis's first album with this record label, "In The Spirit," went to top 40 on the jazz charts and sold over 900,000 copies. The time spent in the Bay Area produced many opportunities to perform and record with the likes of Mark Levine, Ted Gioia, Bobby Hutcherson, Randy Brecker, and Eddie Moore, and Lewis even opened in my old hometown Palo Alto for Carmen McCrae. He got back to Seattle for a gig at Jazz Alley, and lived for over a year in Victoria. Mark then returned to the Northwest and is currently in Bremerton. I saw his name a few times at various venues, then a few years back his name was with another Other Side of the Tracks alumnus, John Stowell, as a duo just a few miles away in Auburn at a wine bar. That was one of the finest music experiences in my life. These two genius musicians explored original music and standards with total freedom, complete understanding of each other and the music. Since then, I have also seen Lewis a couple times in Bremerton, where had a weekly gig until the pandemic hit. But he will be back.

Musicians always have "The Book," a collection of all the standards and jazz songs, with the chords and heads, that has a gazillion songs in it. Well, try the Mark Lewis "Book." He has written over 1700 original songs. His well received CD a few years back, "The New York Sessions," earned Lewis #2 for Alto Sax and #3 for flute on that album in the 39th Annual Jazz Station Awards out of Los Angeles. Another recording by this group is in the works. While you wait out the pandemic to see Lewis in person, he has a host of YouTube shots. I have written a lot about his originals in concerts and CDs, where Lewis reaches a personal and musical connection with both the musician's musical and personal sensibilities, but he is a master of interpreting others' tunes. I refer you to a YouTube video January 25, 2013, shot at his birthday party in Bremerton playing the standard "What's New" with Barney McClure on piano, Mike McKinley on drums, and Steve Luceno on bass. Lewis brings a world of creativity to the lines of this nine-minute ballad rendition taking as many as a dozen approaches to the melody.

In addition to hearing his later original work, Lewis just released work from 1990 in the CD "Naked Animals" (reviewed elsewhere). The Mark Lewis Quartet will be performing on Livestream this March 7th at 4pm Pacific Standard Time, and you can get tickets and get on to the livestream from his Website or Facebook Page. When jazz gets back in the clubs, Lewis will be back, and we will have those dates listed in our calendar. *Can't wait!* (Chris Lunn)



Mark Lewis Quartet: Mark Lewis (sax), Bill Majkut (bass), Bob Merrihew (drums), Randy Halberstadt (piano)

(by Mark Lewis:)

Anyone living in the Pacific Northwest around 1977 who was interested in jazz, blues, or folk played by local musicians was familiar with The Other Side of the Tracks in Auburn. When you have something good, people will come from miles around once word spreads, and it did, and so they did as well.

When I was going to school in Bellingham, my friend Tom Rohan and I made the journey many a cold and wet winter's night. The musicians who played there, some like me getting their start in the area, were encouraged to play the music that defined them, THEIR music, not what an owner thought would sell more product. Many times, jazz and folk or blues musicians played all together, transcending style and what defined them. How refreshing! Audey Bridgewater and Mr. B's Review, Al Hood and Frog News, David Friesen, John Stowell, and Maria Miller were a few acts I saw playing there.

The first time I performed there was with my "musical mama," as I used to call Vonne Griffin, with Barney McClure on piano. I met Vonne Griffin when I was attending Western Washington State College. This was my first contact with a professional, someone "in the business," and she was very nice to me. She mentioned she was playing at OST and told me I could "sit in" with her and Barney there.

OST was one of the most unique and inspiring venues I've had the pleasure to perform in. As we said at the time, just follow the train tracks, you can't miss it!

**AUTHOR'S NOTE: I write these words to acknowledge my great appreciation for the work, energy, and hours it takes to maintain Ancient Victorys. Please know that your efforts in nurturing and sustaining The Music in our region and the integrity in validity, accuracy, and modest material use with maximum effect don't go unnoticed. Thank you. (Mark Lewis)*