

MARK LEWIS

Biography

Mark Lewis is a well-traveled alto saxophonist and flutist who has created a vast and intensely stimulating body of music over the past four decades, and enlivened jazz scenes from Seattle and San Francisco to Rotterdam and Paris. Partnering with a superlative Gotham rhythm section on his gorgeous new album ***The New York Session***, Lewis delivers a tour de force that is helping to redefine his former under-the-radar reputation. The new album, on the Audio Daddio label, features piano legend **George Cables**, veteran bassist **Essiet Essiet**, and the supremely swinging drummer **Victor Lewis**. It's the work of an artist clearly reveling in the company of fellow masters making the most of his tasty compositions.

Boasting a multifaceted career stretching back to the mid-1970s, Lewis has also thrived as a producer, engineer, educator, and entrepreneur. But ***The New York Session*** showcases his command as a player and his abiding gift for crafting memorable tunes that beg for improvisational extrapolation. From the opening track "**Koan**," an ethereal melody for flute influenced by Lewis's experience playing Japanese end-blown bamboo shakuhachi, the album offers a succession of settings designed to unleash his collaborators' abiding lyricism. In Lewis's hands, less really is more. "There's nothing wrong with a simple melody," he says. "They're hard to write, and can often lead to some of the best playing."

The brisk and bright "**Child's Play**" invites investigation with its surging sing-song contours, coaxing a lithe solo from Cables that perfectly illustrates why alto legend Art Pepper dubbed him Mr. Beautiful. In Lewis, Cables has found another altoist who combines distilled passion, a fluid and forceful sense of swing, and a tone warm and rounded in every register. He's also at home in the blues, playing with relaxed soul on the strolling, minor key "**DL Blues**," a tune dedicated to Rhode Island bassist Dick Lupino.

Many of the pieces are tributes to friends and colleagues, like "**Connie**," a gracefully funky waltz written for the late owner of a local music venue that served as an outpost for Puget Sound players. Lewis draws on his deep love of African music for several pieces, most obviously on the lilting "**Sierra Leone**," and the boisterous 12/8 closer "**Roll 'Em Joe**," a tune that begs for choreography.

Whether he's inviting his listeners to a carnival on "**Boberto's Magical World**" or waxing philosophical on the introspective "**Not As Beautiful As You**," Lewis displays an utterly personal mix of authority, playfulness, and interactive immediacy. Legally blind, Lewis hasn't let his disability slow him down, traveling the world and establishing deep creative bonds wherever he's landed. But not being able to assess a colleague's immediate reaction to his music may shape his approach to recording.

"I don't see well enough to see facial expressions," Lewis says. "I used simple compositions because I didn't want to clutter the purity of the sound we were trying to get. I think pieces of music are like places or rooms. You play in those spaces as a musician, in those settings, and they'll make you into slightly different people doing different things, which I think is good."

When it comes to his collaborators, Lewis couldn't be in better hands. Cables, Essiet, and Lewis have performed internationally as a trio and rhythm section over the past decade and recently recorded several acclaimed albums as a unit, including Cables's *My Muse* and *In Good Company* (both on HighNote). The Nigerian-American Essiet first gained notice with South African pianist/composer Abdullah Ibrahim in the early 1980s, and went on to do significant stints with Art Blakey, Bobby Watson, and later Danilo Perez, while freelancing with an array of jazz masters. Between them, Cables and Lewis have played with just about every jazz giant active in the past four decades, including some shared time backing tenor titan Dexter Gordon.

Born in Tacoma (in 1958) and raised on a farm outside of nearby Gig Harbor, **Mark Lewis** absorbed music from both sides of his family. His paternal grandmother was a concert pianist, and his maternal grandfather

played saxophone (a C melody horn that Lewis started playing at age nine). Despite profound visual impairment, he had free run of the family hi-fi system and soaked up Count Basie, Duke Ellington, and Art Tatum while investigating his parents' record collection.

A standout player in middle school, he formed his first band at 14 to play at local dances and sports events. By high school, Lewis's waking hours were filled with music as he played lead alto in the stage band, sang in concert and jazz choirs, played clarinet in the concert band, and performed music for school plays. Leading several bands around the region, he supported himself while studying composition, flute, electronic music, and piano at Western Washington University and the Cornish Institute of Allied Arts.

Settling in Seattle, Lewis started performing regularly at Norm Bobrow's Jazz at the Cirque showcase, and quickly found invaluable colleagues and mentors amongst resident masters like **Art Foxall**, **Bea Smith**, **Dee Daniels**, and **Buddy Catlett**. Drum master **Otis "Candy" Finch**, who moved to Seattle after a sterling New York career recording with heavyweights like Stanley Turrentine and Shirley Scott, Bobby Hutcherson and Al Grey, Blue Mitchell, Herbie Hancock, and Dizzy Gillespie, recognized Lewis's budding talent and took him under his wing. He also encouraged him to get out of town, and in 1978 the 20-year-old saxophonist flew to Europe with a one-way ticket and his alto sax, \$500 in his pocket, and virtually no contacts.

He ended up making Rotterdam his homebase for the next 14 years, and established himself as a vital force on the international jazz scene as a player, label owner, and producer. Building an extensive network of musical peers amongst Dutch players and American ex-pats ("Johnny Griffin got me my first gig in Europe," Lewis recalls), he maintained three working Dutch groups, including an organ trio with **Carlo de Wijs**; an experimental-minded quartet with **Willem Kühne**, **James Long**, and **Frans van Grinsve**; and a world-jazz quintet featuring musicians from India, Holland, West Africa, and South America.

"I only played original music, and I thought it was a good idea to play everywhere," Lewis says. "Gigs helped promote the sales of albums. No one wanted to play in Sweden in the winter, the off season. I didn't mind. I'd play anywhere."

His record company **Audio Daddio** became one of the era's essential outlets, releasing recordings by **Art Foxall**, **Vonne Griffin**, **Al Hood**, **Art Lande**, and **David Friesen**. The label's last European recording **The Rotterdam Session** features tenor saxophonist **Clifford Jordan**, who brought his ambitious "Presidential Suite" to the studio, and legendary jazz drummer **Philly Joe Jones**, in one of his last recordings. Lewis also maintained a strong presence back in the States, spending several long stints in the Bay Area in the 1980s. He gained a considerable following with a quartet featuring drum maestro **Eddie Moore**, pianist **Mark Levine**, and a brilliant young bassist named **Larry Grenadier** (the group featured on most of his critically hailed 1988 album **In the Spirit**).

Championed by pianist and jazz scholar **Ted Gioia**, who produced **In the Spirit** and wrote the liner notes for **The New York Session**, Lewis became a vital part of the Bay Area scene, subbing frequently for sax stars **Stan Getz** and **John Handy**, and working with heavyweights like **Bobby Hutcherson** and **Randy Brecker**.

Now based in Bremerton, a small city west of Seattle on the Puget Sound where he returned to be close to his family, Lewis maintains a busy schedule that includes teaching private students and college clinics. He continues to expand his daunting book of compositions, which number over 1,700. Though he's recorded more than 20 albums, only a fraction of his compositions have been documented on record, another reason why **The New York Session** is a particularly important release. The discovery of a master improviser is always thrilling, but finding a player/composer at the peak of his powers is a rare occurrence indeed. Though fully aware of his accomplishments, Lewis sees himself as part of a modern jazz continuum. "I try to approach each composition, each performance, with knowledge and technique from studying the masters who came before and also the innocence of a child," he says. "I hope it keeps the music authentic and genuine."