

Lester Young, Grand Daddy of Cool

by Con Chapman

When an anthropologist of twentieth century attitudes finally gets around to tracing the concept of “cool” to its source, he will find the figure of Lester Young standing there waiting for him, his tenor sax tilted to one side.



Lester Young

Young is credited with the first use of “cool” as an expression of approval, and he embodied the concept in his life and in his playing. His only problem was he was born too soon, in 1909; neither America nor its popular music were ready for him when he came along, and players born a generation later—Miles Davis, Stan Getz and Chet Baker, to name a few—were the beneficiaries of the spade work he did in jazz and the culture at large.

Born into a musical family in Woodville, Mississippi, Young was a drummer first but gave up that instrument for the saxophone once

he discovered that all the pretty girls would be taken by the other members of the band by the time he'd packed up his drum kit at the end of a gig.

Bus of the Rabbit Foot Minstrels

Lester's father Billy formed the family and other musicians into The New Orleans Strutters, a traveling side show of black musicians that performed with circuses and carnivals during the mild seasons of the year, then in theatres under the management of the Theater Owners' Booking Association, an organization whose initials were jokingly translated as "Tough on Black Asses" by those who worked for it. The music such groups played wasn't bluesy, at least not at first; rather, they performed popular songs in a lively style characteristic of minstrelsy; "Yes Sir, That's My Baby," "Ja-Da" and other chestnuts more often associated with vaudeville than black musical styles, although it is safe to assume that the typical minstrel show performed them with touches we now consider characteristically African-American; syncopation, accents on the "off" beats, and improvisation on melody lines.



Lester Young with Count Basie

With the recording of the first blues songs in the 1920's two tributaries of American music joined to form a wider river. Young came of age hearing and playing both American popular songs and the blues, and the style he forged for himself was a mixture of the two.

Frankie Trumbauer

Young is one of the few black jazz musicians whose first and most important influence was a white man—Frankie Trumbauer. Trumbauer, best known for his collaborations with cornetist Bix Beiderbecke, played the C melody saxophone, a model of the instrument whose size is smaller than a tenor but bigger than an alto. In his efforts to imitate Trumbauer Young played the higher register on his tenor, producing the lighter tone he came to be known for.

Young's first big break came when Coleman Hawkins, the most influential tenor of his time, accepted an offer to join a British band, thereby opening up a chair in Fletcher Henderson's orchestra, at the time the hottest band around, white or black. Young was then a member of Count Basie's band, not as renowned as it is today and very much subordinate to Henderson's in terms of fame and financial success at that point.



Coleman Hawkins

Young and Hawkins had tangled before in an epic all-night cutting session that changed the course of jazz. One night Hawkins, the sax player who was the water the other fish swam in, passed through Kansas City and dropped into the Cherry Blossom on Vine Street where Basie's band held court. In short order Ben Webster, Herschel Evans and Young showed up to blow. Hawkins didn't realize that the jazz scene in Kansas City, wide open under the corrupt administration of Mayor Tom Pendergast, was competitive with that of any other city in America. He found himself bested by the protean musical imagination of Young, the man who came to be known as "Pres" for President, the most powerful man in America.

Henderson had his eye on Young, and cabled him with an offer after Hawkins had given his notice. Young wasn't sure he could make it in Henderson's band, which he understood was full of cliques. He nonetheless accepted Henderson's invitation, in large part because it meant a raise from \$14 to \$75 a week. Young's premonition turned out to be correct, however. The whole sax section hated his sound, which was weak tea compared to the big sound that Hawkins produced. Most irritating of all was Henderson's wife Leora, who undertook to turn the shy, retiring Young into the man he had replaced; she woke him up with the sound of Hawkins'

records and took him shopping for reeds and mouthpieces that would give him a bigger sound, all to no avail.

Young lasted four months, then headed back to Kansas City to join Andy Kirk's Clouds of Joy. He stayed with Kirk, who led a swinging outfit that included Mary Lou Williams, for two months, then returned to Minneapolis where he had spent much of his childhood. Six months later he re-joined Basie's band after catching them playing on a late-night radio broadcast and, in an uncharacteristically importunate move, asking his former boss to take him back to replace his current tenor.

Andy Kirk and His Clouds of Joy, Mary Lou Williams, pianist.

Basie brought Young back into the fold in February of 1936, and in November of that year the band made the recordings that still sound fresh three-quarters of a century later. Young's sound is revolutionary, honed by years on the road and at all-night cutting sessions. He often begins a solo sounding like any other tenor honker, then takes off like a Woody Woodpecker laugh; angular, cantilevered out over the underlying melody of a Tin Pan Alley tune such as "All of Me."

It was about this time that Young met the (platonic) love of his life, Billie Holiday (*nee* Eleanora Fagan). They were an odd couple: Lester, the diffident, withdrawn hipster, Holiday the troubled daughter of a jazz musician who'd grown up on the streets after being thrown out of her parents' home for getting pregnant at the age of 19. She was drawn to domineering men, he was shy and unassertive. The suggestion has been made that Young was homosexual because of his dandified appearance and precious manner, but he was married three times. He was fey, not gay.

In 1944 Young was at the peak of his powers when he was drafted. Jazz musicians were moving targets and were often able to avoid military service, but Young had settled into a three-month gig in Watts when the Selective Service caught up with him. An apparent fan in a zoot suit showed up and started buying drinks for Young, Jo Jones and Harry "Sweets" Edison; at the end of the night

he pulled a badge out and told the three musicians to show up for induction the next day or face jail for five years.



Harry "Sweets" Edison

No man could have been less suited for the Army than Young, and he was eventually court-martialed for "possession of habit-forming drugs (marijuana) without a valid prescription." He was convicted and sentenced to serve a year in military detention at Camp Gordon, Georgia. The war ended in August of 1945 and he was released in December of that year with two months' time still to be served on his sentence.

Young emerged from confinement a bitter and suspicious man, and although his playing would show sparks of his former brilliance from time to time, his best days were behind him. He had given birth to a legion of imitators, most prominent among them Getz, who received two separate benedictions from Pres before he died and went on to something approaching stardom, or as near the heavens as jazz musicians can reach in a popular musical firmament dominated by flash and spectacle.



Ben Webster

In his last days, knowing he was about to die, Lester moved out of the home he kept with his third wife and daughter, back into a hotel overlooking Birdland. He would drink steadily, eat little, and watch the musicians come and go below. He sat and listened to records by singers he admired, all of them white except for Billie Holiday. He, like Ben Webster, had always felt it important to know the words of the songs he played in order to get the phrasing right.

In 1959 Young agreed to make what turned out to be a valedictory tour of France; the money was good, and the invitation represented international recognition for a musician who was considered a genius by his peers but who had not enjoyed financial or popular success.

The strain of the trip was too much for a man who had never taken care of himself, was a heavy drinker and possibly suffered from syphilis. He began to experience severe stomach pain as soon as his flight home took off, and began to vomit blood from varicose veins in his esophagus that had ruptured. He made it back to New York alive, but died in his hotel room the morning after his arrival.

