

# *The Flute in Jazz: An Historical Overview*

*by Jim Walker*

The history of flute playing and flutists would be incomplete without significant mention of those flutists who have made their musical and professional marks in the field of jazz.

With a very few exceptions, the flute was virtually discriminated against in jazz circles until the 1950's when players such as Bud Shank, Frank Wess, Sam Most, and Herbie Mann began recording with jazz combos and big bands. Prior to that time only a few isolated examples of "jazz flute" can be found. Before we proceed, perhaps a definition of the term "jazz" (as it relates to this article) is in order. When the term "jazz flutist" is used it will be implied that the individual was playing in the rhythmic and harmonic style that traditionally defines jazz, and that improvisation is a significant part of the musical package.

The peculiar fact that the flute is missing from the early days of jazz deserves some explanation. Many astute writers have dealt with this curious situation and the consensus seems to be that the flute (and also the violin)—both instruments of relatively soft volume and lack of a pronounced articulation—were considered to be unsuitable to acoustically match the offerings of trombones, trumpets, saxophones and drums. In addition, the relatively high tessitura of both instruments may have run counter to the rather lower range of the early blues and jazz offerings.

The roots of flute jazz are clearly African and Afro-American although in South America and Cuba there were artists who featured the flute in their popular compositions. One outstanding flutist/composer was the Brazilian, Pixinguinha (1897-1973) whose music continues to flourish today. The Creole and Negro marching bands in the New Orleans area were precursors of the early jazz bands and often featured piccolo. However this precedent did not carry over into the formation of jazz bands of the 1920's which featured trumpet, trombone, clarinet, tuba and drums. During that period Paul Whiteman's popular orchestra (which premiered Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue") used the flute in a rather traditional orchestral fashion (no improvising please).

In America the first practitioners (1920's) of the flute in jazz were Alberto Socarras, a Cuban-born musician in the Clarence Williams band and Wayman Carver, a classically trained flutist who recorded with the Chick Webb band. The Sauter-Finnegan band of the 1930's & 40's carried one or two flutists, however they were playing written parts and were not called upon to improvise. There is a 1947 recording of the Charlie Mingus band with Bobby Plater filling in on flute. In a recording of singer Ella Fitzgerald from that period there is some impressive flute work by Harry Klee.

The birth of the jazz flute seems to have been bi-coastal; from the West Coast came Bud Shank, an alto saxophone player in the Stan Kenton Band, and from the East Coast came Frank Wess, a tenor saxophonist in the Count Basie Band.

Some fine recordings of their adventures can still be tracked down with some serious sleuthing. In the 1950's the emergence of the flute in jazz was propelled by New Yorker Herbie Mann and in California, by the likes of Sam Most, Buddy Collette and Paul Horn. One of the most popular records of the decade (1958) featured the jazz flute of Canadian Moe Koffman who improvised his way into the spotlight on "The Swinging Shepherd Blues."

Almost without exception the jazz flutists of the 50's were woodwind doublers who were able to transfer their improvising skills to the flute. Most of these artists played with a sound that was often diffused (sometimes intentionally) when compared to the traditional classical orchestral sound. Their improvisations can be described as a mixture of post-Swing (from the 40's) and Be-bop (saxophonist Charlie Parker's innovative concept). A partial list of major early exponents includes: Paul Horn, Sam Most, Buddy Collette, and Jerome Richardson. In the late 50's two jazz flutists, Eric Dolphy and James Moody (primarily sax players) demonstrated that it was possible to make big, open, dark orchestral type sounds in their jazz excursions. Their improvisations were quite different, Moody (Dizzy Gillespie's band) playing in the traditional post-Swing/Be-bop style and Dolphy (often paired with John Coltrane) playing in a sometimes wild, harmonically adventurous manner.

In the late 1950's flutist/composer Henry Mancini presented the jazz flute in a new light. In the soundtrack to the TV show "Peter Gunn" he often employed four unison bass flutes playing "cool jazz" phrases. Elmer Bernstein also saw fit to include the voice of jazzy flutes. Ted Nash, Ronny Lang, Harry Klee, and Sheridan Stokes were generally the flutists heard on these sessions. Also West Coast, drummer/composer Chico Hamilton formed a chamber jazz quartet that featured flute, cello, guitar and drums (light brushes only). Many flutists briefly held the flute chair and went on to successful commercial careers, but the signature flutist of the group was Charles Lloyd.

Rahsaan Roland Kirk represented one of the most unique flute voices in jazz until his premature death. He played tenor saxophone but added several non-jazz instruments to his arsenal including the Manzello and the Strich, often playing the three instruments simultaneously. He made sounds and achieved effects that had never before been heard in the traditional jazz circuits. It is not surprising that he is responsible for developing one of the most expressive modern sounds, that of unison vocalizing of the improvised lines he played on the flute. This technique has been used by countless jazz and rock flutists. Contemporary composers, as well, choose this as an important tool of expression. The recordings of Ray Pizzi provide a vivid echo of Mr. Kirk in his spirited outings on flute, jazz bassoon and tenor saxophone.

Notable is the inclusion of occasional flute improvisations in the pop/jazz field of the early 60's. "Canned Heat," "The Mama's & Papa's," Carol King, Elton John, Neal Sedaka, and Sonny & Cher all saw fit to use sax/flutist Jim Horn when flute sounds were needed. In the mid to late 60's two pop/jazz crossover groups, "Blood, Sweat and Tears" and "Chicago" often featured jazzy flute and continued to popularize the sound of non-classical flute utterings.

A different kind of flutist appeared in New York in the 1960's named Hubert Laws. He was classically trained and while making his mark in the jazz clubs of New York and on records for CTI and CBS, he managed to substitute in the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and the New York Philharmonic. His very personal sound was full of warmth and classical overtones and his dazzling technical improvisations set a new standard of jazz flute playing.

The tradition of having flutes played by saxophonists in a big band (5 doubling saxes, 4-5 trombones, 5 trumpets, piano, guitar, bass & drums) has become more and more popular as players have improved their doubling skills. Lew Tabackin and Gary Foster are wonderful sax/flute doublers who play brilliant and personal improvisations with strong classical sounds. Both of them have been featured in the Akiyoshi/Tabackin Band as well as their own small combos. Another famous big band of the 1970's and 80's, the Mel Lewis/Thad Jones Band, gave the flute a prominent role in many of their rollicking compositions.

The best selling recording for CBS Masterworks (now Sony Classical) featured a unique composition by the French pianist Claude Bolling. The "Suite for Flute and Jazz Trio" (1973) featured classical flutist Jean-Pierre Rampal flying above the Bolling trio in a most appealing marriage of the classical sound of the flute and the infectious rhythms and harmonies of a jazz trio. In the strictest sense this is not jazz in that the flutist does not improvise, but the trio improvises by using the guidelines of traditional jazz "charts" (which often provide only chord symbols). The label of "jazz" or "not jazz" is unimportant to the many thousands who have either purchased the recording, listened to or performed this charming piece.

One of the most popular magazines on the subject of jazz has been *Downbeat*. Annually a poll of readers determines the most popular performers on each instrument. When the category of "jazz flute" (as opposed to "miscellaneous instruments") was created, Herbie Mann was the first winner and held the position until Hubert Laws succeeded him. Laws held the first place for many years, until James Newton became the leading vote getter. Mr. Newton, a Californian, represents jazz flute in an ever expanding voice that includes elements of African, Classical, Blues, Contemporary and Be-bop. His innovations are well documented on many recordings which feature his compositions as well. His musical "personality" includes many contemporary techniques as well as a very full-bodied approach to sonority. His fresh improvisations have stretched the boundaries of the traditional jazz vocabulary.

Some of the most compelling sounds in jazz emanate from the Latin/South American bands which often feature flutists. During the mid-1960's there was tremendous interest in the music of Brazilian Antonio Carlos Jobim. Many of his recordings featured the flute work of Jerry Dodgion, Jerome Richardson, and Romeo Penque. Hubert Laws was discovered by the public when he was featured in the Mongo Santamaria Latin Band. Two flutists who have recently made very strong musical statements in the Latin tradition are Dave Valentin and Nestor Torres. Both of these gentlemen have developed remarkable techniques and styles that successfully merge the vocabularies of Puerto Rican/Latin, Be-bop and popular music. Venezuelan flutist Pedro Eustache, a practitioner of jazz flute and ethnic flutes, is often heard live and on recordings with the pianist/composer Yanni. Marco Granados also continues the proud tradition of the South American crossover flutist, bringing a wonderful spirit and technique to the music of his heritage.

The classical/jazz group "Free Flight" was founded in 1980 by Jim Walker (this writer), then Principal Flutist of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra. This combo features a mixture of classical adaptations, original compositions, and contemporary jazz improvisations. The improvisations, while reflecting an appreciation for bop traditions, are often rather classical and suggest the kind of musical interaction that might have occurred in the parlors of classical composers of the past. Jim's jazz flute and ethnic flutes are often heard in today's motion picture soundtracks.

A contemporary jazz flutist who composes as well as performs is Steve Kujala. He is responsible for developing a technique he has named “fretless flute.” This refers to the sliding/glissing sounds he makes in both his written and improvised melodies—a most provocative sound, achieved by masterfully sliding the fingers over the open holes of a French model flute while manipulating the embouchure to attain a type of “wah-wah, glissando, guitar” sound. He is another example of a classically trained musician who is equally at home in improvised venues. Steve has been tastefully featured with the jazz pianist/composer Chick Corea on recordings and in concert. Joe Farrell is another great jazz flutist/saxophonist who should be mentioned here. For much of the 1970’s his fiery recordings set very high standards of improvisation which Chick Corea saw fit to include in several recordings.

There are several contemporary brilliant improvisers who play both flute and piccolo, namely Nelson Rangell, Kent Jordan, Jill Allen, and Jamie Baum. Allen partners with pianist Skip Wilkens in fiery, thoughtful and provocative Bebop improvisations. Ms. Baum is active in the New York jazz scene and is often heard on recordings. Nelson Rangell also plays fantastic alto saxophone and epitomizes the contemporary musician who is able to switch instruments and styles flawlessly. This kind of doubling ability is now becoming the standard whereas forty years ago this expertise was very unusual. Jordan is a flutist who displays a remarkable technical facility as he flies through many of the challenging compositions of innovative tenor saxophonist John Coltrane.

Robert Dick and Matthias Ziegler deserve mention in this article even though they are generally not labeled “jazz flutists.” Robert Dick has always been a prolific improviser employing his extended techniques. In the mid-90’s he has incorporated more jazz-like improvisations on his concert outings. Mr. Ziegler was the flutist with jazz/new age harpist Andreas Vollenvider for many years. He has blazed new trails, employing electronic effects (digital delay, octave dividing, reverberation and amplification) and applying them to his family of contra-bass flutes. His performances feature his own compositions which convey the feeling of jazz stylings and improvisation.

In closing, an apology and disclaimer must be issued. Any attempt to present a survey of this kind of history will inevitably have significant omissions. To those individuals who were not mentioned and to those who are not represented well, I apologize.

### A THUMBNAIL SKETCH OF IMPROVISATION

The mystery of improvisation is beginning to crumble thanks to many well written books and recordings explaining the craft. Any musician who desires to improvise or play by ear needs only to approach the subject in the manner of learning a new language. Crucial to becoming a good jazz player is learning the “dialect” of the language. This is achieved through hours of listening to live performances and recordings. Probably the biggest factor in becoming a convincing jazz player is mastering the “inflections” which rely on a specifically non-classical articulation, softer and more diffuse.

#### Recommended Steps:

1. Listen to the language (recordings) to get a feel for the sound of this foreign tongue. Sing along with those tracks you most enjoy.
2. Learn (memorize) the vocabulary: jazz harmonies, scales and patterns.
3. Build the vocabulary into sentences. Selectively play and paraphrase

learned “licks” as you spontaneously create new ones.

4. Expand the sentences to form paragraphs, chapters, complete volumes.

The major ingredient in developing this skill is the time factor. Just as with any language course, learning the “jazz language” requires hours of dedicated study and practice. Transcribing improvised solos of the master jazz players is crucial. Play-along recordings are enormously helpful. Maybe most important of all is playing with other musicians. Take every opportunity to play with other aspiring improvisers. In my personal experience I have found that an excursion into the realm of jazz not only broadens and intensifies one’s classical training, but also opens the door to creative challenges and opportunities.



## REFERENCES

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JIM WALKER was taught by his band-director father as a child. He was an honor graduate of the University of Louisville, followed by three years at West Point with the USMA Band. Advanced studies with Harold Bennett helped him win the Associate Principal Flute position with the Pittsburgh Symphony, and eight years later, Principal Flute of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. The move to Los Angeles heightened Jim’s desire to explore the rhythms and intellectual challenges of jazz, leading to his formation of “Free Flight,” a jazz/classical quartet. The success of this ensemble is manifest in its many recordings, “Tonight Show” appearances, and concert tours. Since 1988, Jim has been Coordinator of Flute at the University of Southern California School of Music. He is also a master teacher for the New World Symphony, and a member of the Board of Advisors for Vivace. He served two years on the Board of Directors of The National Flute Association. Whether he is performing concertos, chamber music, or jazz, motion picture soundtracks, pop recordings, or teaching, Jim Walker brings a uniquely beautiful sound and an exhilarating approach to the world of music.