

Lee Konitz – alto sax, composition

Alto saxophone legend Lee Konitz was one of the most original and distinctive soloists in the history of jazz. He has been creating and participating in music history for his entire career.

Leon Konitz was born on October 13, 1927, [Chicago, Illinois](#), of Austrian/Russian Jewish parents.

Konitz played early on with an uninflected, vibratoless tone, in contrast to the dominant [Charlie Parker](#) alto saxophone style. Konitz was therefore the first original virtuoso alto saxophonist to stray away from the influence of the Bird, with love and respect of course (they actually knew and performed with each other occasionally). Some epic fights occurred between fans to decide which man fast the fastest, the most brilliant of the two...

The entire jazz scene was influenced one way or another, directly or indirectly by Lee's collaborations with his teacher and bandleader Lennie Tristano, and the acrobatic lines they composed. Also of importance was his early work with Claude Thornhill, Stan Kenton, Miles Davis and Gil Evans, with Gerry Mulligan, Bill Evans... There is understandably much nostalgia for that era where Konitz and his accomplices wrote the pages that so many musicians and composers are still eagerly learning from. Noted for his frequent harmonic daring, and besides being often classified as a cool jazz player (a style he participated in creating, together with Miles Davis and Tristano), he was featured in the first two tracks credited as being "free jazz improvisation" as part of Tristano's band in 1949, and in rare [free jazz](#) events later on.

So, when Lee Konitz started to once again go into uncharted territories, he confused and saddened a large portion of his audience, who expected him to stay where they felt comfortable. That was not knowing him. Like Miles Davis, or Picasso, Konitz never stopped looking for the truth, and kept surrounding himself with young and old, jazz and not jazz, open, forward-looking artists who were willing to take chances with him. From the like of Jimmy Giuffre, Misha Mengelberg, Enrico Rava, Martial Solal, Paul Motian, Carla Bley, Paul Bley, Chick Corea, Ornette Coleman, to more recently people like Michel Petrucciani, Harold Danko, Fred Hersch, Gary Versace, Toots Thielemans, Kenny Wheeler, Bill Frisell, Joe Lovano, Kenny Werner, Ohad Talmor, George Schuller,

In 1992, Lee Konitz won the prestigious Jazzpar Prize. He kept a busy release schedule throughout the '90s and dabbled in the world of classical music with 2000's French Impressionist Music from the turn of the Twentieth Century. Konitz always kept an apartment in New York, but in 1997 he married a native of Cologne, and since then he lived there most of the time, in a flat near the city center. As he moved into his later seventies, Konitz was working with much younger players such as Matt Wilson, Joey Baron, Judy Niemack, Dan Tepfer, and Greg Cohen, as well as many European players such as Jeanfrancois Prins, Florian Weber, Andreas Schmidt.

In 2011, he released his own trio album *Knowinglee* and appeared on the ECM date *Live at Birdland* (recorded in 2009) with pianist Brad Mehldau, bassist Charlie Haden, and drummer Paul Motian.

In 2017, Konitz delivered the quartet date *Frescalalto*, featuring pianist Kenny Barron, bassist Peter Washington, and drummer Kenny Washington.

In his artistic Indian summer, as a nonagerian, Konitz's achievement became more widely recognized.

Konitz is a perfect example of musical honesty (as Dan Morgenstern put it so brilliantly in his ground-breaking article "Lee Konitz - No compromise").

He is a true improviser and he plays the whole band, and expects the whole band to play him as well.

Lee Konitz passed away on April 15, 2020 at age 92, from COVID-19.