

The Remarkable and Always Swinging Stix Hooper

By Mark Cantor, *Celluloid Improvisations, Jazz Filmography*

For the full story with videos visit: <https://www.jazz-on-film.com/stixhooper.html#learn>

The ability of an artist to look backward ... to recognize and value earlier expressions of an art form ... yet look *forward* as a vital, evolving artist is a rare commodity, indeed.

In the realm of jazz, many fine instrumentalists refused, for any number of reasons, to look back at their early careers. "I am not particularly interested in that shit," tenor saxophonist Art Drellinger bluntly told Mark Cantor many years ago. Another fine tenor man, Abraham "Boomie" Richmond, who had graced the bands of Tommy Dorsey and Benny Goodman, was offered copies of films that featured him in the early George Paxton big band. His curt reply: "What makes you think I would be interested in seeing them?" Artie Shaw and Jackie Kelso also feigned disinterest in their musical past, but could often be talked into considering it by an intelligently phrased question or two

Other artists, men and women who were active in creating something new within the realm of jazz, celebrated the music's past. The late Joe Wilder, one of the finest trumpet players of the 1940s and beyond, was thrilled to see himself on screen with Les Hite and his Orchestra, a band that his "entry to the big time," as he told the author. When the identity of a couple of sidemen in a Count Basie jukebox short was causing the author problems, it was Wilder who quickly solved the problem. "That's Al Killian, third from the left. He specialized in high notes and he had lips of iron, but along the way, you know, he forgot how warm and comfortable the trumpet can sound. I think that he perhaps lost the balance that people who specialize in one thing or another often lose. But you know, that's 'Sweets' Edison who solos here, right? Not Al! Sweets was a man who could do it all, and what a great tone he brought to the trumpet."

Stix Hooper is not a name known to all fans of "improvised music" --- this is a term that Stix prefers to "jazz" -- it should be, since Stix is one of the most remarkable figures that the music has produced. Born in Houston in 1938, Stix was a working musician in his teens, leading a group called the *Swingsters* that included pianist Joe Sample and tenor sax Wilton Felder. With the addition of trombonist Wayne Henderson, flutist Hubert Laws and string bass Henry Wilson, the group performed as the *Modern Jazz Sextet*. In a recent interview Stix noted, "We decided to see what was happening on the Coast, so we got into six cars and headed to Los Angeles. It was Joe, Wayne, Wilton and me. Out in California we began calling ourselves the *Night Hawks*, which was a spin on Hooper's music stands which bore the initials "NH." This represented Stix's birth name, Nesbert Hooper, and to establish a more commercial slant *Night Hawks* replaced the current name, *Modern Jazz Sextet*.

Then, in 1961, they became the *Jazz Crusaders*, after a very successful audition at Richard Bock's Pacific Jazz Records. This enabled Bock to create the jazz moniker *Jazz Crusaders*, presenting the group name as a concept, which was the tone of the day, as opposed to referencing the leader of the band. A number of string bass players passed through the band, but in 1961, when the band caused musical waves with a series of recordings for Pacific Jazz, the bass player was Jimmy Bond.

"I really don't like categorization. It can be a kiss of death to any musician, although the industry loves it. But most of the time, what does it mean? Like the term "acid jazz." Is this music played by a chemistry professor? I know people in the music industry like it because it allows them to pigeonhole a group, and then sell it like Kleenex or Coca-cola. But don't get me started on that aspect of the industry."

In all fairness to Stix, it needs to be noted that, at that time --- that is, the early 1960s --- the group was playing music that grew out of bebop and soul, often referred to as "hard bop." The combo appeared twice on Los Angeles-based television during this period, once on *Jazz Scene USA*, then *Frankly Jazz*. Of Frank Evans, the host of the latter, Stix said, "One hip fellow, big ears and always a smile. Man, he loved the music, and were very happy to share what we were doing on the program" (Another fellow who loved the *Jazz Crusaders* was mainstream Los Angeles disc jockey, Johnny Magnus, who generally did not play purely instrumental jazz; with

the *Jazz Crusaders* he found reason to make an exception.) From the *Frankly Jazz* series, 1961, here is the group's performance of "The Young Rabbits."

In 1971, the group dropped "Jazz" from its name and began performing as "The Crusaders." Stix explained, "We went into smaller rooms and people would ask, what kind of jazz are you going to play? We found that just so limiting. And by that time we were also incorporating elements of soul and funk into our music. The musical umbrella is huge and you don't want to restrict yourself. For example, we found that by occasionally dropping the 4/4 rhythm, we could find greater freedom of expression, and that is what it is all about." Stix was too modest to make the claim, but as drummer and leader, we find *The Crusaders* evolving into one of the most influential groups in what was eventually called "fusion," a combination of improvised music (jazz) and some of the rhythms of rock and roll.

In 2000 Stix assembled a group of veteran musicians to record an album that would pay tribute to the improvised music that Stix loved so much. *THE LEGACY LIVES ON* (ultimate four CDs, issued in two volumes) featured such master of the art as James Moody, Teddy Edwards, Cedar Walton, Jon Hendricks, Shirley Horn and many others. Why take this approach in a recording? Stix was clear in his response: "Music is a progressive, fluid art form. Keep in mind that if there was no 'old school,' there would be no 'new school.' My music reflects the time in which we live but, now dig this: If you are caring for a garden, or a tree, you don't go out and just pick up the leaves. You protect and nurture the roots, too. The roots may be out of view, but they are there, and the whole tree is supported by it. That's what we were doing."

"You listen to older forms of African-American music, gospel music for example, and they are part of the roots keep thinking of the tree that I was talking about. But that music, it grew and developed, and it is just as relevant today as when it was first played a long time ago."

"Jack Segal was a friend and a great songwriter... his song "When Sunny Gets Blues" is a deserved classic. Now, he wrote this song called "Old Man Jazz," something that paid tribute in a very modern way to some of the masters of improvised music, some of the practitioners who shared our indigenous art form. The recording featured singer Ernie Andrews, and I loved how it turned out. I contacted film archivist Mark Cantor and he, along with editor Robert Walker, they put images to the lyrics. We were hoping MTV would pick it up but, no too far from their limited vision. But the video, I am very proud of it and I think it should be seen by everyone who loves our music."

"Old Man Jazz" is indeed, as Stix put it, "a reference point that helps us see where our improvised music came from, but also in the many directions in which it can develop. Freedom of expression, that's what it is all about. But none of the music I play would sound like it does if I didn't recognize what had passed." And what does Stix play now? With a band that includes musicians from Sweden, Russia, Thailand, Brazil, New York and ironically New Orleans, which is sometimes referenced as the birthplace or cradle of jazz, Stix band is truly an international aggregation., This reflects Stix's forward motion of improvised music as it develops on a worldwide stage! Music, to Stix, is definitely the universal, global language.

Stix Hooper: a man who can look backward and forward at the same time!

Be sure to visit Stix at his website: stixhooper.com.

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