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## Steve Lacy

### Supreme exponent of the soprano saxophone

08 June 2004

*Steven Norman Lackritz (Steve Lacy), soprano saxophonist, composer and bandleader: born New York 23 July 1934; married 1969 Irène Aebi; died Boston, Massachusetts 4 June 2004.*

Although he was later to become an avant-garde player who abandoned "melody, harmony, rhythm and form - taking music to the brink of destruction", Steve Lacy at 21 regularly played Dixieland and Mainstream jazz with some of the older jazz greats like Rex Stewart, Red Allen, Hot Lips Page, Pee Wee Russell and Buck Clayton.

It was the ex-Ellington cornettist Stewart who in 1952 changed the young man's name from the Russian Lackritz to Lacy and it was a 1941 recording of an Ellington tune, "The Mooche" played by Sidney Bechet, that attracted Lacy to take up the soprano saxophone. With it he spanned a wider range of jazz throughout his career than any other musician has done.

The soprano is an unlovely and capricious instrument. In those days it was hard to play (modern horns have some of the quirks ironed out) and Lacy was the only modern jazz musician making a stab at it. "It was completely in disuse when I began. Nobody could teach it to me really, and nobody could tell me what or how to play on it," he said.

He rose to become its greatest exponent. In 1960 Thelonious Monk's small group, with Lacy on soprano, shared a bill with John Coltrane's quartet. It was hearing Lacy then that persuaded Coltrane to take up the instrument and in turn he started a fashion for it that spread across the world.

Like so many jazz musicians Lacy was originally drawn to jazz upon hearing the trumpet of Louis Armstrong. He was first taught clarinet by the veteran player Cecil Scott, who also introduced him to and arranged for him to sit in with the older giants of jazz in New York. In 1953 Lacy left the city for a year at the Schillinger House of Music in Boston. The following year, at the Manhattan School of Music, he encountered the avant-garde pianist and composer Cecil Taylor, then experimenting with "free" jazz. "What's a young man like you doing playing old jazz?" Taylor asked him. It was enough. Lacy was fired on a career that led him to produce a cornucopia of abstruse and brilliant jazz for the rest of his life.

Oddly, for someone whose work was so abstruse, he often attracted full houses in later years and made countless albums, well over 200 of them. He eschewed the screaming rage of some of the less thoughtful avant-gardists and his contemplative inventions remained melodic, his tone on the instrument disciplined and precise. His music often looked back to its earliest roots. He travelled the world, spending 30 years in Paris, and drew influences from and involved himself in poetry, dance and from all aspects of foreign cultures.

He left Taylor, from whom he "received an excellent education, not only in jazz, but also in politics and strategy", in 1957 to seek out others on what he described as "the brink of music". These included Gil Evans, with whom Lacy had a 25-year association and, even more importantly, the pianist-composer Thelonious Monk, whose *oeuvre* became the mainspring of Lacy's own work. Lacy thought Monk's composition perfect for the soprano saxophone and summed it up as "not too high, not too low, not easy, not

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at all overlapped and most of all, full of technical problems". He played as a member of Monk's group for several months and in 1963 recorded in concert with Monk's big band.

From the moment he had joined Taylor, Lacy had been committed to his music's always being new and had interesting thoughts about it:

We may play some of the same tunes every night, but we play them in a different way. When I worked with Monk, his theme song, we would play that maybe four, five, six times a night, and every time he would play it he would come up with something that I had never heard him play before. That's the spirit.

The same thing with Ellington. He recorded a lot of those tunes over and over again, but each time it was fresh. It was like the first time, but also like the last time. It's a freshness that counts. It's also a surprise. They call it the sound of surprise.

Roswell Rudd, the trombonist, and Lacy formed a quartet in 1964 dedicated to Monk's music. But in 1965, when American audiences turned their backs to him, Lacy began his long odyssey. He made his way to Europe, where he worked in countries including England, often with other expatriates including Don Cherry, Carla Bley, Enrico Rava and Louis Moholo.

Then Lacy took a band to Argentina, where the political turmoil stranded him for nine months. On his return to Europe, he met a young Swiss classical violinist and singer, Irène Aebi, on a German television show. The two moved to Rome, where they played free and electronic jazz with the band Musica Electronica Viva and with various Italian rock and avant-garde musicians. Aebi abandoned classical music for jazz and became a vital component in Lacy's music for the rest of his life. He persuaded her to take up the cello and married her in 1969.

The two settled in Paris in 1970. Aebi's deep and unusual voice and her cello became part of the quintet, later a sextet of musicians led by and devoted to Lacy. Throughout the Seventies Lacy kept up an association with the pianist Mal Waldron, the two men often appearing as a duo.

He heard a "not very good" saxophone player in Sweden in 1972 playing unaccompanied in a club, and was inspired to try solo performance for himself. From then many of his recitals took this form. During the Eighties he worked with Japanese kabuki dancers, Indian musicians and a multitude of poets, with Aebi intoning poetry and literary and political texts. Lacy was much inspired by poetry. He came to regard his improvisational opera *The Cry*, based on the writings of the feminist Bangladeshi poet Taslima Nasreen and recorded in 1999, as his greatest work.

Lacy made a video in 1983 called *Steve Lacy: lift the bandstand* and published a book of biography and saxophone exercises, *Findings: my experience with the soprano saxophone* (1994).

Steve Voce

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