

*I wrote the following in May 2011 at the request of Bob Bush at The Note, the newsletter of The Al Cohn Memorial Jazz Collection, held in the library at East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania. The prompt was to reflect on a recording by Phil Woods that made a big impression on me.*

I have always loved Phil Woods. He is the reason I decided to learn the saxophone when we all chose instruments in fifth grade. His tone will probably always be what I imagine when I think of the sound of an alto saxophone. And his eighth note phrasing shaped, as much as anything else, my conception of what swing is.

A couple weeks after I started learning clarinet in school (a prerequisite for the saxophone), I turned 11, and one of my birthday presents was a copy of *Phil Woods/Lew Tabackin*, which had been reissued that year on CD, having been recorded in 1980.

The album opens with Phil and Lew blowing unaccompanied for a chorus on “Limehouse Blues” before Bill Goodwin comes rumbling in with the rest of the band. They play another chorus together, and then Phil sweeps through the break at the end of the form to play the most intensely swinging solo imaginable.

One of my early conscious musical memories is hearing a trad jazz group on the street in Delaware Water Gap when I was probably five or so and being frustrated for months afterwards when I couldn’t figure out how to replicate the effect of the collective improvisation on the piano at home. I’ve been obsessed with all the textures possible through improvised polyphony ever since, and the instances on this album – the opening and final choruses on “Limehouse Blues” as well as the end of the trading on “Sweet and Lovely” – stand out as some of the best I’ve heard. Phil’s and Lew’s tones complement each other beautifully; both musicians play propulsive, solid time; and both have huge ears: they react to each other instantly without ever resorting to predictable parroting. And Tabackin is a miracle on his own. Through the angularity of his lines and his huge variety of tonal colors, he can sound like multiple saxophones at once.

The rhythm section is happening as well. The hookup between Bill Goodwin and Michael Moore is great, and makes me wonder on what other albums I can hear the two of them. Jimmy Rowles’s comping throughout is at once sensitive and provocative. He is never locked into one register on the piano, and his voicings, which range from simple shells to ornery clusters, are always balanced with whatever else is going on. It is probably no coincidence that my two favorite recordings of “Sweet and Lovely” both include Rowles, the other one being from his duo recording with Al Cohn, *Heavy Love*.

Another highlight of the album for me is Phil’s beautiful tune “Petite Chanson.” The surprising way he harmonizes his simple melody – especially with that Bb7#5#9 to Eb13 coming out of the DΔ7 to FΔ7 at the top of the bridge – has perked my ears every time I’ve ever heard it. And Woods and Tabackin are anything but mere doublers on the clarinet and flute respectively. They have real, personal sounds on their instruments.

This is one of those albums that can remind me when I need it of the excitement at discovering for the first time all of the awesome possibilities in playing music.