

Jazz History in a Historic Jazz Landmark

by Skoot Larson

The location is the Lighthouse Café in Hermosa Beach. There is a tension in the air on this chilly Thursday evening. On the tiny stage that juts from the center of the club's west wall, musicians are setting up a drum set, electric piano keyboard, string bass, and two large baritone saxophones.

The baritones are similar, like mirror images of each other as they sit on individual sax stands. Both feature the elongated bell that allows a low "A" note, beyond the range of most of Adolph Sax's creations, but the one on the right has a neck crook that loops to the left, the other sax's crown bends right.

The right bending saxophone is unusual. Most baritone saxophone necks turn the other direction. This uncommon saxophone has, for some 45-years, been a sort of trademark identifying Jack Nimitz, one of the finest and most successful musicians associated with the big horn in West Coast jazz. He is here tonight sharing the front line with Adam Schroeder, another bari sax star two generations below him, but fast becoming his equal as a jazz voice.

Jack Nimitz takes up a position center stage, with pianist Marty Harris to his left and Adam Schroeder on his right. Behind the front line, Paul Kreibich, a local favorite in jazz circles, sits at his drum kit and Chris Connor stands by his tall contrabass fiddle. These men confer briefly, then launch into an up-tempo line, two choruses of the rhythm trio before the saxes wade in for a unison assault on the chart.

Adam takes the first solo with a full-throated, hard-edged tone that tells you this saxophonist means business. Both Adam and Jack are from the *hard bop* school of jazz soloists. These men are an even match; both improvise in a melodic and lyrical manner. Each of their solo choruses could stand alone as a new song in its own right.

When the spotlight is passed to Jack, the tune's framework is explored from a different, but complimentary point of view. Jack's baritone has the same hard tone, but is clearly recognizable as it has a more brittle edge in the timbre.

As the song continues, I'm reminded of the old days, when a low drop ceiling covered the now spacious bare beam heights above this room that once had rows of red

banquettes squeezed closer than airline seating behind tiny round tables. A time when Jack Nimitz often appear here providing the bottom for the sax sections of big bands like Gerald Wilson and Oliver Nelson.

The bar along the east wall hasn't changed in all these years, but fewer, larger tables have replaced the tight seating of yesterday. Tonight, everyone is closely gathered around one side of their tables, facing the bandstand where Jack and Adam have moved on to trade four bar improvised snippets *ala chase o'rooney*, as the late Slim Gaillard might have described it. The chase heats up until the rhythm drops out leaving both of the big horns creating their own duet in a Dixieland manor, but with ideas far beyond the traditional triads of that style. Adam and Jack seem so simpatico, playing their own separate lines against each other, but remaining in harmonic compliment to each other as though they were reading music!

When the band finishes this opening selection, someone in the room asks what the song is called. Jack Nimitz take the microphone to tell the audience that he has recently written the melody, but has yet to give it a name.

Jack Nimitz started his musical career more than 60 years ago in Washington DC. He played with the big bands of Woody Herman and Stan Kenton. "It was on a tour with Kenton," Jack states, "that I arrived in Los Angeles. I liked what I saw. I decided to quit the band and settle here. That was in 1960."

"I put my name out there and soon I started getting work in the studios." In the years since, Jack was a part of Supersax, a group of master-saxophonists that could, in unison, play the best-known solos of jazzmen like Charlie Parker and Miles Davis.

Adam Schroeder began studying music in his native Iowa, went on to get a degree in that subject from South West Texas State University. After a year or so on the road with the Ray Charles band, Adam found himself in San Pedro, where he went to work for the Palos Verdes School District, passing his musical knowledge on to a new generation of players. Adam recently moved over the bridge to Long Beach, but he continues to make frequent appearances at Rosalie and Alva's Performance Gallery in San Pedro.

When asked who he listens to on the baritone sax, Adam names Pepper Adams without hesitation. "I listen to a lot of alto players too," he confesses. "Guys like Cannonball Adderly. And tenor players too."

What brought these two remarkable baritone saxophonists together? Adam tells us, “I knew Jack’s playing and reputation. When I came to LA, I looked him up and we became friends.”

In the course of the evening at the Lighthouse Café, these giants from differing generation covered an interesting array of original tunes and jazz classics including “A Night in Tunisia,” “Bernie’s Tune,” “Blue Bossa,” and more. Both men display amazing technique and thorough knowledge of their cumbersome choice of horn, serving up long strings of hemi-demi-semi-quavers with ease.

At one point in the evening, a listener asked if they could play Duke Ellington’s “Perdido.” The band members went into a quick huddle, discussing keys, how to divide parts and how to arrange the tune. When they turned back toward the audience, they delivered “Perdido” with such ease and grace no one could have known it wasn’t a song in their regular book.

Off stage, Adam told this writer that the display of saxophonic fireworks we’d been watching was just a rehearsal. Jack and Adam are warming up this amazing band for a recording date in the near future. If the CD is anywhere near the level of this concert, I will be a “must have” item for any jazz collector.

The Lighthouse Café, at 30 Pier Avenue in Hermosa Beach began serving jazz music seven nights a week in 1947. The Lighthouse has been recognized as a landmark in the history of West Coast Jazz. Currently, they have expanded their musical menu to include other genres, but great jazz can still be heard at the Lighthouse on Thursday nights and Sundays. More information or reservations can be obtained by calling the Lighthouse at 310-376-9833.