

Tristano, Lennie [Leonard] (Joseph)

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(b Chicago, IL, March 19, 1919; d Jamaica, NY, Nov 18, 1978). American jazz pianist and teacher. He started playing the piano in early childhood and later learned to play other instruments, including clarinet and saxophone. Born with weak sight, he was blind by age nine or ten. From 1934 until 1938 he attended the Illinois School for the Blind in Jacksonville, and from 1938 until 1943 the American Conservatory in Chicago; he graduated with a bachelor's degree in music in 1941 and stayed on for another two years taking graduate courses. Tristano began teaching in 1943; his students included Lee Konitz and William Russo. Early reports of his activities indicate that his music attracted attention mainly from musicians and critics. In 1945 he published an acute criticism of Chicago's jazz scene, addressing its commerciality and exploitative working conditions. In the spring of 1946 he wrote arrangements for the Woody Herman band and met its bass player Chubby Jackson, who, impressed by Tristano's prowess at the keyboard, encouraged him to move to New York.

Tristano moved to Freeport, New York, in the summer of 1946 and formed a trio with the guitarist Billy Bauer and the bass player Arnold Fishkin; with various bass players this group recorded in 1946 and 1947. During this time Tristano found a champion in the jazz critic Barry Ulanov, who considered him the most original voice in modern jazz. In 1947 he published two articles, in which he asserted that bebop manifested progress in jazz, professed his view of jazz as an art form, and discussed further development of jazz beyond bebop. In the same year he met Charlie Parker, whom he greatly respected as the progenitor of bebop. In 1948 he formed a quintet, adding the alto saxophonist Konitz and a drummer to his trio; the group became a sextet in 1949 with the addition of the tenor saxophonist Warne Marsh, another of Tristano's students. The sextet made influential recordings in 1949 for Capitol. Especially noteworthy are "Intuition" and "Digression," performed without preconceived harmonic progressions or form; the first group free improvisations, they predate the free-jazz movement by a decade. In December 1949 Tristano was one of the musicians featured in the opening show of the club Birdland, where he reappeared afterwards.

In 1951 Tristano opened a studio in Manhattan; he used it mainly for teaching, recording, and jam sessions, which many musicians attended, including Charlie Parker, Max Roach, Roy Haynes, Stan Getz, Charles Mingus, who studied with Tristano, and Leonard Bernstein. There Tristano activated his own label, Jazz Records, issuing one record containing "Pastime" and "Ju-Ju," which utilized multitracking. "Descent into the Maelstrom" and his album *Lennie Tristano* (1955, Atl., especially "Line Up," "Requiem," and "Turkish Mambo") display more extensive use of this technique. The studio's closing in 1956 due to the demolition of the building ended an important part of Tristano's career; it had been his foothold in Manhattan and represented his presence in the mainstream jazz scene. Tristano performed at important venues in the 1950s, including the first Newport Jazz Festival in 1954; his last long-term yet intermittent

engagements were at the Half Note from 1958 to the mid-1960s. In 1965 he toured in Europe, performing several solo piano concerts. He subsequently became more occupied with teaching and gradually withdrew from public life.

Central to Tristano's music is a linear approach to improvisation, counterpoint, and harmonic and rhythmic complexity. His recordings manifest his stylistic diversity and evolution through a series of innovations. The trio recordings of 1946 show a novel approach in the linear interaction between piano and guitar, resulting in counterpoint, polyrhythm, and superimposed harmonies. The sextet recordings of 1949 are notable for coherent ensemble playing and soloing, and the free group improvisations based on spontaneous group interactions and the contrapuntal principle. In the 1950s Tristano employed an advanced concept in jazz improvisation called side-slipping, or outside playing, which creates a form of temporary bitonality when chromatic harmony is superimposed over the standard harmonic progressions. Tristano intensified his use of counterpoint, polyrhythm, and chromaticism in the 1960s, evidenced by his solo piano improvisations recorded on Atlantic in 1961, in which he achieved maximum freedom within the confines of the structural model by superimposing different rhythmic, harmonic, and phrase structures. These recordings also exhibit relentless rhythmic drive and emotional depth and power.

A charismatic teacher and multi-instrumentalist, Tristano taught students of various instruments and singers for more than 30 years. Generally credited as one of the first to teach jazz improvisation, he was as innovative as a teacher as he was a musician. Significant elements of his teaching include his belief in feeling as the basis of expression and the importance of developing the ear. For example, Tristano encouraged students to learn improvised solos directly from the record by listening to and singing along with them; it was designed not only as a means of ear training but also to transfer the feeling of the jazz improviser to students at an intuitive level and to facilitate internalizing the musical language. Tristano especially encouraged his students to learn solos by Lester Young and Parker, both of whom he considered true originals. Equally significant was his stress on rudiments, discipline, and concentration, as he demanded that students learn the materials, such as diatonic scales and keyboard harmony, slowly and thoroughly.

Tristano is one of the most misunderstood and controversial figures in jazz history, and his historical significance and contributions to jazz have not been fully acknowledged; his stylistic individuality that transgressed conventional style categories has posed a problem in the tendency toward categorization and canonization in jazz historiography. His independence from the mainstream jazz world and the forces of the music industry, along with the progressive and non-conforming nature of his music, has hindered the public acceptance and understanding of his music.

Selected recordings

This Is Called Love (1945, Jazz)
Out on a Limb/I Can't Get Started with You (1946, Keynote)
Ghost of a Chance (1947, Vic.)

Subconscious-Lee/Judy (1949, NewJ)
Wow/Crosscurrent (1949, Cap.)
Intuition/Yesterdays (1949, Cap.)
Digression (1949, Cap.)
<i>Live in Toronto</i> (1952, Jazz)
Descent into the Maelstrom (1953, IC)
<i>Lennie Tristano</i> (1955, Atl.)
<i>Continuity</i> (1958, 1964, Jazz)
<i>The New Tristano</i> (1961, Atl.)
<i>Concert in Copenhagen</i> (1965, Jazz)

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