

# SAX LOVERS' CELEBRATION

## Lou Caputo

By Joe Patitucci

**JP:** How did your work in show bands with Lou Rawls, Frankie Valli, Shirley Bassey, Jack Jones, Bobby Short, and Frankie Avalon impact your creative pursuits as a jazz player? What were the challenges and benefits?

**LC:** I've had the occasion to accompany quite a few of what used to be referred to as "Night Club Acts" As a woodwind player, aside from trying to achieve a high level of consistency on several instruments, saxophone clarinet, flute and so on, which takes a bit of doing and which was very beneficial, I also had an opportunity to sit alongside some wonderful musicians who taught me a thing or two about being a professional musician. While the jazz content in most of those situations, with the exception of Lou Rawls and Billy Eckstine and a couple of others, was remote to say the least, what I did also notice and take away with me was that the most successful, and not necessarily in an artistic or esthetic sense, but in terms of a successful performance presentations, were the people who had a very organized and paced set or show. The most successful of them had a beginning and middle and end that included up things, not so up things, slow things, changes of pace they kept it moving to the point that the listener almost couldn't wait to hear what would happen next. Which is the way we try to do things with the Not So Big Band - it keeps the guys interested also, we try to present musical situations that asks the guys to put to use their diverse talents and know how.

**JP:** Talk about some of your experiences playing with trumpeter Richard Williams, and influential pianists Duke Jordan and

Jaki Byard. What kinds of advice or suggestions did you pick up from them that influenced you or opened up your understanding?

**LC:** I would first have to mention Walter "Baby Sweets" Perkins for in a very real sense bringing me in to the local jazz scene. Walter had a group that at various times included Duke Jordan and Richard Williams, "Notes", as Richard was sometimes called, was one of the first guys who asked me to come around and sit in on his gig. At that time there were a couple of clubs that had a jazz policy in Jamaica Queens, The Skylark, Gerald's The Village Door, and Carmichaels. They were long haul gigs where you worked 9 to 3am. I watched guys like Rhard and Walter pace themselves and they would be as strong at the 2am set as they were at the 9pm set, maybe stronger. But before anyone and above all, I would have to say that Dizzy Gillespie, Nina Simone, Quincy Jones, and bassist Chris White have been important influences. Chris and I go back to when I just got out of the Army and at that time he steered me into studying with Frank Foster which was an invaluable experience. He had enough faith in me to include me in a

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concert he did at Carnegie Recital Hall which boosted my own confidence at a time when I wasn't exactly knocking 'em dead. Through the years even when we may not have spoken to one another for awhile we always seem to know just when we need to be in touch with one another. We are also alumni of the same high school in Brooklyn Boys High School. Chris has been a big part of both my CD

projects and I owe a lot of who I am as a musician to him.



**Lou Caputo,**  
Saxophonist, Band Leader

**JP:** Could you discuss the idea and development of the "Not So Big Band" - which plays regularly and is the centerpiece of your latest recording?

**LC:** Well the roots of the NSBB go back sometime. Since I first found out about the Miles Davis Nonet I have been fascinated with the concept of a midsize group. Oscar Pettiford's big band is in effect a 12 piece unit there have been various Ellington and Mingus units that were smaller

than the traditional big band as well as the Monk large groups. They provide an improvisational freedom with power so to speak. You have so many possibilities of mixing and matching. I'm very fortunate to be a member of the Howard Williams Jazz Orchestra. Howard is a wonderful arranger and his band is one of the best kept secrets in New York. Several years ago I was encouraged to do a CD of my

own by many people including my section mates in the band, Virginia Mayhew and the late Frank Vicari. Since I was always drawn to mid-sized

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ensembles and there were other examples of how effective a ten to twelve piece group could be, Gil Evans, Gerry Mulligan and Charles Mingus were highly diverse approaches to this concept to mention just a few. So the cornerstone of that first project was a kind of "Not So Big Band". Most of the personnel for that group was drawn from Howard's big band and Howard contributed a wonderful arrangement on "Chelsea Bridge". We were able to attract some air play with that CD as well as some favorable reviews. One of the things that came out of that project was my meeting Howard Johnson. While running down some of the material for the first CD at the union rehearsal hall Howard looked in on us, liked what he heard and sat down and listened.

Since then Howard and I have become good friends. Through Howard, I got some wonderful insights into the music of Gil Evans and Charles Mingus and many discussions of Ellington, which all added to the present project. In planning the second CD I wanted to address the concept of a small big band, one of the things Howard and I spoke about was that Gil and Duke always favored musicians with individual sounds. So musical personalities became an important part of the NSBB and they are well represented in the group. I can't think of any two people who have more personal sounds than John Eckert and Howard on their instruments. Virginia and Dave Smith to me are two of the most interesting and original soloists around NY as we speak. Geoffrey Burke is a most adaptable young saxophonist. Joel Perry's ability to invoke the blues tradition when needed and yet operate in a traditional jazz context is a big asset. Duke Ellington once said that all music no matter how advanced or what have you was based on some kind of reminiscence, on times lived. This is true

of our band. We embrace a wide spectrum of approaches as our CD can attest to. If you have been around New York City for as long as some of us have been you know that there are a lot of musical styles and genres that you can be exposed to and it's inevitable that they will make an impression on you. Hopefully, we are successful in presenting a portrait of that eclecticism.

Thanks to our rhythm section, we can easily slide from one groove to another. Bill Crow needs no introduction and anyone who played with Rudy Petchauer knows his versatility. Special mention should go out to pianist Don Stein not only for his musicianship but his good council and clear vision. In the process of preparing the material for the CD we asked David Coss to line us up a gig or two which he did and the management at the Garage was so please we've become a regular attraction there.



Dave also handles some of the vocal chores and adds to our versatility along with Jann Parker who also remains a truly unsung hero among female song stylist in NY. Another person who has been a supporter of ours has been Len Triola, who has gotten the band a chance to do a concert at Hofstra University and recently booked me at Ronnie Scott's in London and hopefully will get the band over there soon as well.

**JJ:** What jazz artist or recording that you heard first or early on provided the spark for your inspiration to take this creative path and a life in jazz?

**LC:** Once I decided to take the plunge and started taking clarinet lessons, it seemed like a process of synconization took place in respect to my jazz awareness. I began coming in contact with people who would offer me information. Or who were knowledgeable about the music. Back then there was a club on 7th Ave and 48th street, "The Metropole", where you could actually see and hear the bands from the sidewalk. Being too young to actually go in we would stand outside and get an earful of Gene Krupa & Charlie Ventura, Woody Herman, Dizzy, Maynard, Lionel Hampton, Mongo Sanatamaria, a whole slew of Dixieland guys, Henry Red Allan, Sol Yaged. You would bump into a whole cast of jazz hipsters on the sidewalk in front of the Metropole who would be filling you in on the jazz lore of the time. Also during those years there were quite a few record stores around midtown, in fact the original Sam Goody's was on 49th St, and Mr. Goody would actually be at the location, his only location! These stores would not only provide a chance to buy records but also give you a resource to read up on the music. You could stand there and read the liner notes on the back of the LP package. One name seemed to keep popping up from the hipsters and the liner notes and that was "Bird" Charlie Parker. He seemed to be the barometer that all musicians were being compared to. So the first Bird record I purchased was on Roost called the Charlie Parker All Star Sextet with Miles and J.J. and Duke Jordan as well. By this time I was already playing alto. The first cut I heard was "Dewey Square" when Bird started his solo after they played the head, I jumped out of my seat and ran over to the turn table and stared down at the record. The music was so powerful that I thought I would actually see something by staring at the record. It became apparent that to create music this genuine and powerful and on such a high creative level

you needed to dedicate a lot of not only your time and energy but your total awareness to that end. So for better or worse that has been my path.

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**JP:** What kinds of practice or studies or compositional pursuits do you engage in to expand your musical aptitudes and abilities?

**LC:** I have been very lucky in that my assignments as a musician have directed my study and practice direction. Trying to remain viable on an array of woodwinds can be daunting, so for instance if I know an assignment requires me being prepared on a clarinet or bass clarinet or flute or what have you, I direct my attention to that. However, there are some things I love to get myself involved in as a way of spending some time alone with the instrument of choice, which is very important. I like the challenge of getting a new tune up to performance level especially if it's a challenging tune that requires your attention.

**JP:** Could you share your ideas on what John Wooden said: "Be more concerned with your character than your reputation, because your character is what you really are, while your reputation is merely what others think you are."

**LC:** The Wooden statement on the surface seems self explanatory. However, in the dictionary the word character is used to describe the word reputation. So I think what John Wooden must have been trying to get at is don't believe your own press "to thine own self be true" Be honest with people and most important be honest with yourself. Are you living up to the things you profess to believe in and value?

Are you a loyal friend and are you charitable toward others? Are you giving in to envy, that sometimes raises its head among performers? Do you help someone when you can just because you're able to do so? Your character is something you carry with you, it's part of the nitty gritty that makes you the person you are. I guess he's saying you should worry more about the person you really are than the person others have made you.

**JP:** What have you discovered about human nature in your life on and off the bandstand?

**LC:** What I've learned about human nature can be boiled down to this "What You Give is what You Get" People who have a tendency to keep a goal in mind are not only usually successful but they are more uplifting to be around. Joe Bataglia, who is a very successful bandleader against a lot of odds, very often uses the word VISION. That is the visualization of what you're striving for even when things don't seem to be headed in the direction you had hoped. Just hold on to the "Vision" which is hard to do. Those people who see themselves as helpless and as underdogs or victims usually stay that way. □□□

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