



JOHN ABBOTT

THE CONSUMMATE SAXOPHONIST-COMPOSER **STEVE WILSON** HAS A NEW LIVE ALBUM—HIS FIRST FULL-BAND DATE AS A LEADER SINCE 2003—AND MUCH TO SAY ABOUT HIS THREE DECADES AS A WORKING MUSICIAN

the **Wilsonian** **Institute**

Steve Wilson, one of the finest alto and soprano saxophonists of our time, might not ordinarily ponder his earliest days as a full-time musician. But the details are particularly clear in his mind as we settle in for lunch at Henry's, on West 105th Street and Broadway in New York. This is where the "new" Birdland stood before moving to its current home on West 44th Street.

"One of the first times I played in New York was here [at Birdland] with Jaki Byard," Wilson recounts, fixing the year as 1987. "[Byard] had come to [Virginia Commonwealth University] as an artist-in-residence, and he told me to look him up when I came to New York. When I did, he said, 'Yeah, come by Birdland and play.' It was right over there." Wilson motions behind us. We attend to our niçoise salads, the vanished bandstand 20 feet away.

Bit by bit, Wilson's impact on live jazz in New York became considerable. Over two decades later, the famed Village Vanguard booked Wilson for repeat engagements with his new quartet, Wilsonian's Grain (or "The Grain," as he calls it for short). On *Live in New York: The Vanguard Sessions* (Random Act) one can sense the rhythmic heat and flux of those nights with pianist Orrin Evans, bassist Ugonna Okegwo and drummer Bill Stewart. Another lineup, a drumless but hard-swinging trio with Wilson, Renee Rosnes on piano and Peter Washington on bass, played the Vanguard in late 2012 (there's pristine audio archived at npr.org, along with a Grain set from 2010).

BY DAVID R. ADLER



► Wilsonian's Grain—Wilson, Bill Stewart, Ugonna Okegwo and Orrin Evans (from left)—at the Village Vanguard last year

With eight albums as a leader to his credit since 1992, Wilson can't be called prolific. But his dates always boast extraordinary lineups, enduring repertoire and a strong sense of artistic direction. His two recent duo outings, *Duologue* (with drummer Lewis Nash) and *Home: Live in Columbia, Missouri* (with pianist Bruce Barth), reveal a seasoned wit and spontaneity and an unshakable time feel, whatever the textural surroundings.

As for Wilson's voluminous sideman credits, that's a story unto itself. Ralph Peterson's Fo'tet and Quintet, the Dave Holland Quintet, Buster Williams' Something More, Chick Corea's Origin, the Maria Schneider Orchestra, Ryan Truesdell's Gil Evans Project and Christian McBride's Inside Straight are just some of the ensembles to gain immeasurably from Wilson's talents, not just on alto and soprano but also flute and clarinet. Talk to anyone about Wilson, in fact, and terms like "go-to" and "first-call" will be used. Pianist Billy Childs recruited him on alto for the Grammy-winning Laura Nyro tribute *Map to the Treasure*, to heighten the ominous mood

of "Gibson Street" alongside vocalist Susan Tedeschi. "He just brings this incredibly positive and life-affirming quality to every musical situation," offers pianist David Berkman, who hired Wilson on two of his early albums, *Handmade* and *Communication Theory*. "That's why he's so highly sought after. But [he plays] in a way that's not super egotistical and doesn't always draw such attention to itself."

McBride remarks, "Steve is the ultimate professional, besides being one of the greatest musicians in the world. He really does everything well, I can't say that enough. He's a superb sight-reader. He has a superb sound. He's always on time, he's always prepared, he always has a great attitude. And when you set the example you don't have to say anything verbally to anyone. They see Steve Wilson and they already know that the execution on all levels is going to have to match his."

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BORN IN 1961 AND RAISED IN HAMPTON, VA., Wilson took inspiration from his father's "small but eclectic" record collection. "The first thing I remem-

ber hearing, when I was 3 or something, was Ahmad Jamal's *At the Pershing*. [My father] was a tenor and sang in an all-male gospel choir that toured around the state, so I used to go to a lot of their concerts. And he started taking me to the jazz festival in the summers. So I heard a lot of music. On record he had some Miles Davis, Duke Ellington, Miriam Makeba, Stax, Motown, James Brown, Johnny Mathis, Mario Lanza, a whole array of things."

By age 10 or 11 Wilson was obsessed with Quincy Jones' *Walking in Space*, Les McCann and Eddie Harris' *Swiss Movement* and Cannonball Adderley's *Country Preacher*. Seeing these artists live, and in particular seeing Rahsaan Roland Kirk, is what "opened up a whole new world to me," Wilson says. "That's what made me want to play saxophone." He took up alto at age 12.

"I was a big George Duke fan in those days, and I subsequently got to work with him. The Crusaders were big at that time, and that's when I discovered their earlier work from the '60s. 'Freedom Sound' was a tune that really touched me." That lineage of accessible groove has informed Wilson's music over the years—he even covered "Freedom Sound" on his 1992 debut, *New York Summit*, featuring Mulgrew Miller on piano. He addressed his roots once again on 2003's *Soulful Song*, an homage in part to '70s R&B and pop radio. To Wilson, classic '70s R&B "is some of the best crafted music that we've ever produced in this country."

After high school, Wilson toured with an R&B/funk cover band for about a year. In 1980 he enrolled at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, but he took a year off to tour with singer Stephanie Mills (of "Never Knew Love Like This Before" fame). He graduated in 1985 and remained in Richmond until 1987. "I played with people when they would come through Virginia: John Hicks, Frank Foster, Wallace Roney, the Heath Brothers. I started some associations before I came to New York."

Then there was Lionel Hampton. "That was the first steady gig I landed after I moved to town," Wilson says. "I played with him for about eight months; I think it was 1988. You hear stories about the way Lionel treated the band, but I gotta say it wasn't a bad experience. There were some rank-and-file New York players who taught me about learning to roll with the punches and be a professional. It was a great apprenticeship. I also learned a lot of great music—not just 'Flying Home' and 'Air Mail Special,' but newer stuff that was brought in for the band. Lionel was in his 80s at the time, and to see him go onstage every night and give it up taught me a lot about leading a band. Never take the audience for granted."

Another high-profile break came with Out of



► At New York's Jazz Standard in 2011, Wilson solos in the Ryan Truesdell-led Gil Evans Project

the Blue (O.T.B.), the Young Lion supergroup that recorded four albums for the revived Blue Note label in the second half of the '80s. Taking the place of Kenny Garrett, Wilson appeared on the last of the four discs, '89's *Spiral Staircase*. Billy Drummond, Wilson's close hometown friend, was on drums. Renee Rosnes, now a longtime Wilson collaborator, was on piano. "Input," Wilson's first original composition on record, closed the album in a swinging modernist midtempo vein.

Some 20 years later Wilson would join another supergroup, the Blue Note 7, in which all members brought in arrangements of Blue Note classics. For *Mosaic*, the band's 2009 release, Wilson contributed Bobby Hutcherson's "Little B's Poem" (a flute feature) and Thelonious Monk's "Crisis Cross"—"the original version with those extra two bars in the bridge," Wilson clarifies. For the tour he also arranged Jackie McLean's "A Ballad for Doll" and Dexter Gordon's "Soy Califa."

"We recorded the last week of the band, and we co-own it, so you never know," Wilson says. "We had a whole other book to be documented."

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RALPH PETERSON, O.T.B.'S ORIGINAL DRUMMER, went on to create some of the most vital jazz of the late '80s and early '90s for Blue Note and other labels, with Wilson almost always in the front-line. "The first time I heard Steve play was in high school," says Christian McBride. "I heard that record he made with Ralph Peterson called V. That

FRAN KAUFMAN

ZAK SHEIBY-SZYKZO



► **From top:** Wilson with Bruce Barth; at far right with Chick Corea's Origin in 1999; second from right in Christian McBride's Inside Straight; with duo partner Lewis Nash

was one of the records that helped me get through my senior year. I just remember thinking, 'Man, who is this dude Steve Wilson? He's smokin'!"

Wilson was essential not only on *V* but also *Volition*, Peterson's 1990 follow-up, both albums featuring Terence Blanchard and Geri Allen. He also rotated with Don Byron in Peterson's nimble Fo'tet, playing soprano saxophone exclusively. With Bryan Carrott on vibraphone and Belden Bullock on bass, the Fo'tet proved one of the most explosive, sonically interesting bands of this neglected period in recent jazz history. (The band is still together, in a new incarnation.)

On Peterson's *The Reclamation Project* and *The Fo'tet Plays Monk* ('94 and '95), Wilson's soprano is the sole horn, and the intensity and control he displays is remarkable. The group has an aesthetic roughness and harmonic openness reminiscent of the loft scene. "The soprano—that's an instrument where you could probably count on one hand the players who have a true, assured grasp of that instrument," McBride comments. "Steve is one of them."

After appearing on Billy Drummond's *Native Colours* album for Criss Cross, Wilson led four dates for the label: first *New York Summit*, then *Blues for Marcus*, *Step Lively* and *Four for Time*. Mulgrew Miller, Cyrus Chestnut, Bruce Barth:

Wilson had his pick of the finest pianists. On the first two recordings, the presence of bassist James Genus, also from Hampton, five years younger than Wilson, was significant.

Some of the true gems of Wilson's repertoire date to this period. "Ms. Angelou" was revived for McBride's *People Music*, the 2013 Inside Straight release.

FROM TOP: COURTESY OF "WE ALWAYS SWING" JAZZ SERIES; JAZZTIMES ARCHIVES; CH MODU; JOHN ABBOTT



JOHN ROGERS/ECM RECORDS

"Patterns," a difficult uptempo piece by Joe Chambers, is now in the book of Wilsonian's *Grain*—as a big set finisher, vividly captured on *Live in New York*.

In some ways Wilsonian's *Grain* seems a nod to that raw, thoroughly New York flavor of swing that the Peterson dates symbolize so well. Take, for instance, the opening track on *Live in New York*, a funky, vamp-inflected, somewhat stretched-out "Well, You Needn't"—a tune rendered more straightforwardly on *The Fo'tet Plays Monk*.

There are contemplative moments as well. Wilson first recorded "Chrysalis" in 1998 for *Generations*, the first of two albums he made for Chick Corea's Stretch label. Mulgrew Miller was the pianist, full of radiance and clarity on this dark soprano sax ballad, locking in with bassist Ray Drummond and drummer Ben Riley. The *Grain*'s version on *Live in New York* is four minutes longer, full of unknowns as in-tempo and rubato sections alternate, opening up the form. Halfway through his piano solo Orrin Evans goes fully percussive and free in his attack, along the lines of his work with Tarbaby and others.

Another standout in Wilson's book is "The Epicurean": intensified by Daniel Sadownick's percussion on *Step Lively*, also documented on Bruce Barth's *Hope Springs Eternal* (possibly the last live recording from the vital New York club Visiones, which closed in 1998). "Ah, great tune," Barth says. "That just put a smile on my face when you mentioned that tune. Steve wrote 'The Epicurean' for Billy Drummond—Billy loves good food and wine."

Barth continues: "Another of Steve's tunes, 'A Joyful Noise,' he wrote for James Williams while James was still alive. It's been in my repertoire for probably 20 years. I'm still trying to play it better. I still find new levels of the tune. There's also Steve's tune 'Wish You Were Here,' one of his most beautiful 3/4 songs, lyrical and very soulful at the same time. We would always trade on that at the vamp, and I can just say that trading with Steve, you'd better bring your 'A' game or heaven help you. You never know what kind of stuff he's going to pull out."

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THE OPPORTUNITY WITH CHICK COREA'S ORIGIN came about by chance. Wilson played on *Adama*, bassist Avishai Cohen's 1998 debut album for Stretch (featuring Corea on one track). Corea envisioned a new sextet and essentially repurposed the *Adama* group, managing to lure Wilson away from the Dave Holland Quintet.

Corea had to differentiate between Steve Wilson and trombonist Steve Davis, so he began referring to them as "Sdavis" and "Stilson." Or he'd lengthen Davis to "Davissimo." But the long and dignified nickname

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CHRIS POTTER UNDERGROUND

Follow the Red Line: Live at the Village Vanguard

(Sunnyside, 2007)



Exploratory funk from tenor saxophonist Chris Potter's Underground, which also features guitarist Adam Rogers, drummer Nate Smith and Craig Taborn on Fender Rhodes. The absence of a bassist adds an interesting openness, and the music ends up feeling gigantic—too big, in fact, for the tiny Vanguard. So it must have been a treat to hear it there.

ANAT COHEN

Clarinetwork: Live at the Village Vanguard (Anzic, 2010)



Anat Cohen plays saxophone and clarinet, but here she deals only with the latter instrument, on which she is the reigning champion. Throughout a set of small-group-swing standards infused with the seeking spirit of contemporary postbop, Cohen is backed by a megatalented trio: pianist Benny Green, bassist Peter Washington and drummer Lewis Nash. She gets particularly passionate on "St. James Infirmary."

FRED HERSCH TRIO

Alive at the Vanguard (Palmetto, 2012)



The music on this double-disc set from pianist Fred Hersch, featuring his working trio with bassist John Hébert and drummer Eric McPherson, is both emotional and urgent—as if it must be made. In a program split between standards and Hersch originals, the pianist's shadowy "Jackalope" stands out.

PAUL MOTIAN

Lost in a Dream (ECM, 2010)



Here's a supergroup: drummer Paul Motian, pianist Jason Moran, saxophonist Chris Potter and the Village Vanguard. The band takes Motian's hazily melodic originals (plus one standard) and turns out an album brimming with smoke and mystery. A 21st-century noir-jazz classic. BRAD FARBERMAN



► Motian and company cast a spell in February 2009

"I HEARD THAT RECORD HE MADE WITH RALPH PETERSON CALLED V. THAT WAS ONE OF THE RECORDS THAT HELPED ME GET THROUGH MY SENIOR YEAR OF HIGH SCHOOL.

I JUST REMEMBER THINKING, 'MAN, WHO IS THIS DUDE STEVE WILSON? HE'S SMOKIN'!'"

— CHRISTIAN MCBRIDE

he gave Wilson stuck: The Wilsonian Institute. Barth's composition "Wilsonian Alto," inspired by the Brazilian *partido alto* rhythm, spun the nickname as a play on words (it appears on *Soulful Song*). And Origin drummer Jeff Ballard brainstormed the title "Wilsonian's Grain" for a track from *Passages*, Wilson's second album for Stretch. (It immediately seemed like a potential band name.)

Corea wanted Wilson on all his doubles, so his solid year as a flute major at VCU paid off. Not that Wilson needs prodding as a flutist: "Song for Anna" (from *Passages*) and "Tortola" (from *Soulful Song*) are among his strongest recorded performances, his flute blending impeccably with Barth's Fender Rhodes in the Corea-Joe Farrell mold.

The clarinet, however, Wilson calls

his "weakest instrument." One wouldn't know from the sterling clarinet solos on "Avalon Town" and "Sunday Drivin," from *Lines of Color: Live at Jazz Standard*, the second release from Ryan Truesdell's Gil Evans Project. "On the gig I was hearing this clarinet solo and I was like, 'Who's that? Oh my God, that's Steve!'" recalls Frank Kimbrough, the band's pianist (who features Wilson prominently on his latest

Palmetto release, *Quartet*). "Steve hates playing the clarinet," Kimbrough declares. "I say that jokingly, because those Claude Thornhill clarinet parts are like concertos. Steve gets it done, he sure does. The piano parts, I was joking I could break both arms and still play it."

"I like that Steve was featured on something he's not normally known for as a soloist," Truesdell says, noting Wilson's initial reluctance. On the other hand, Wilson leapt headlong into his burning soprano sax showcase "Just One of Those Things," a highlight of *Lines of Color* that picks up where Steve Lacy's 1957 original from *Gil Evans & Ten* left off. "Every single take of that was just incredible," Truesdell marvels. "It was a challenge picking the one we'd eventually release."

Wilson also played on *Centennial*, the first Gil Evans Project record from 2012, delivering brilliant alto solos on "Punjab" and "Variation on the Misery." "Steve to me sounds like no one else that's out there,"

Truesdell says. "He has a quality to his playing that almost goes beyond music. It becomes emotion. It's not like, 'Oh, he's playing a II-V-I there.' It's so far beyond that. And that's what those pieces really needed."

Wilson was a shoo-in for the Gil Evans Orchestra full-time while Truesdell was her band manager. Lately Schneider has been featuring Wilson on "Nimbus," "a powerful, stormy, sort of minor tune," says Kimbrough. "Steve just kills on it. Before that it was 'Sky Blue,' and he'll bring you to tears every night with that one."

Schneider wrote "Sky Blue," the title track from her 2007 release, for a friend who passed away, so Wilson's soprano feature as the sole soloist is no small honor. The piece is "very diatonic," in Truesdell's words, and Wilson plays the melody purely and beautifully above all. But he also takes risks, slipping into chromaticism and dramatic arpeggiated

runs, hitting subtly unexpected scale tones when the music grows quiet and still. "I'm trying to let the piece speak to me and go from there," Wilson says.

"One of my dream projects," he continues, "is to do some concert band or brass ensemble music with soprano. So playing 'Sky Blue' takes me back to my symphonic wind band roots in school. It's like a wind ensemble piece. One of the reasons I love playing with Maria is that it's like a total sum of my musical experiences. Everything is there: swing, funk, groove, expansive harmonies, symphonic wind band stuff, classical approaches—almost everything I've ever done I can touch on through that book."

At this writing Schneider's orchestra was gearing up for a five-night stint in June, in celebration of its April release *The Thompson Fields* (ArtistShare). In spirit if not in exact location, it will be right where Wilson started: Birdland. **JT**

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