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Steve Wilson: Consummate Pro

Steve Wilson | By [R.J. DeLuke](#)

Saxophonist Steve Wilson, one of the bright talents on the New York City--or any--scene, understands the value of music education. He's very involved in it. He also understands the importance of mentorship, which comes from his days hanging out with some jazz giants at his days as student at Virginia Commonwealth University, and later doing the same when he arrived as a young man in New York City and started to expand an already growing reputation.

Even with his experiences as an educator, a highly regarded sideman, and a bandleader, he understands--and relishes--that he is still growing, still learning. That's probably why the Hampton, Virginia, native is able to play with, and enhance the music of such a wide variety of outstanding artists over the years, from the Maria Schneider Orchestra and Chick Corea's Origin, to associations with Dave Holland, Dianne Reeves, Billy Childs, Don Byron, Bill Stewart, James Williams, and Mulgrew Miller.



Corea in his liner notes to *Rendezvous in New York* (Stretch Records, 2003), called Wilson “a complete lyricist and adventurer as an improviser... He interprets my compositions as I would have myself if I played his horns.”

“I do love being in the supportive role with some of my favorite musicians,” says Wilson, who has a busy 2008 ahead, teaching, touring and recording in a variety of settings. “I've tried to scale back on that in recent years because it gets to be too much and I want to try to concentrate on some of my leadership roles... Who knows, the next 10, 15, 20 years if I'll ever become a full-time leader. That remains to be seen because I still enjoy working and forging new musical relationships I don't know that I'll ever totally concentrate on my own music. There's always something new to be explored. But certainly I want being a leader as a major part of my activity.”

Wilson's alto playing, inspired by numerous players across the jazz tradition, but primarily Johnny Hodges, is strong, creative and adventurous. On soprano--particularly his work with

the Maria Schneider Orchestra--is clear and exciting. On flute, Wilson carries a sweet sound full of tasteful twists and turns.

"I'm trying to incorporate that more into my quartet now. I'm loving playing the instrument," he says of the flute.

Wilson is also a strong composer--check out the outstanding *Passages* (Stretch, 2000)--and in a busy 2008 he is even scheduling specific times to sit down and write for upcoming projects.

"Frankly, composing has been on the back burner for the last three years, with all of my teaching activities and other activities I've done," says Wilson. "This year, I've actually blanked out space on the calendar so that I can specifically write. Probably I'll have to turn down work that I would love to take, but I've got to make space for this. This is work also. I'm really itching to get back to it and find some new vistas in composition. I would actually like to study composition with someone, or at least take a couple lessons here and there and get different ideas; give me new impetus.



"The bulk of my activities right now is in education," says Wilson. "I teach at the Manhattan School of music, also at Columbia University and SUNY Purchase, all the jazz programs there. So that keeps me pretty busy when I'm home. In the summer, when I'm not touring, I'm going to get back to a couple of writing projects. I have to do a couple arrangements for the Blue Note Anniversary Band," a 70th anniversary group that will also feature Bill Charlap on piano, Lewis Nash on drums, Peter Washington on bass, Ravi Coltrane on tenor, Nicholas Payton on trumpet and Peter Bernstein on guitar. The band is set record in advance of the tour, which is in 2009.

"Then I've got a residency coming up at the University of Maryland next spring. I'm going to try to write a new composition for them. I'm hoping to write something for a larger ensemble, for a big band. Also, I hope to record my group sometime this year, a live recording. My quartet (Adam Cruz on drums, Bruce Barth on bass and Ed Howard on bass). And Lewis Nash and I have had a duet now for several years. That's been going pretty well for us, so we're looking to record that as well." A July tour of Europe with Maria Schneider is also on the docket, as is a tour with a band led by bassist Christian McBride. That's the kind of attention Wilson draws, because he brings something strong to each project with which he associates.

Amid all that, Wilson is eyeing the formation of different types of bands; in order to expand his creativity, take on different challenges.

"I'd like to have two or three different groups that I can play with because I like different directions in music. At some point, I want to try some more experimental type of things with different configurations of ensembles. But it is a tricky balance, because I pretty much cut my career on trying to learn how to be a great sideman. That's been invaluable. It's taught me a lot about how to be a leader, which I think is missing a lot these days from the scene ...

But I am trying to scale back sideman activity to a premium so that I can concentrate on some of my own projects now. “

That's good news for the music scene, because Wilson's projects to date have had a strong vision, with creativity as a priority.

But the work with other outstanding musicians won't come to a complete halt. “Working with people like Maria [Schneider] and Christian [McBride] and Buster [Williams] and Mulgrew [Miller], it really inspires me musically. Quite honestly, when I'm working with them I'm as fulfilled as when I'm being a leader. Their music and their artistry and their humility are just so great. I learn a lot every time I come away from those experiences. It keeps me creative because each of those situations is different. So it keeps my mind open to different possibilities. And all of that I bring to my leadership.”

Wilson has learned something through all his apprenticeships. He says having mentors among the professional ranks is very important to a young musicians development. But it isn't as common as in years past, so, as a teacher, he tries to fill that roll. It's part of the enjoyment he gets in spreading knowledge to aspiring musicians. And he gets benefits in return.

He started teaching at William Patterson University in New Jersey in the 90s. Now he is teaching at SUNY Purchase in New York State, as well as Columbia University, and last year began teaching at the Manhattan School of Music.



“It's a wonderful experience. I've been really blessed with a lot of wonderful students who have a hunger for knowledge about the various aspects of the music, not just improvisation, but the other parts too, technical and professional. It really helps me to solidify my own ideas about what I'm trying to do on all those levels. And how to articulate them. So it helps me to really hone in and clarify the very points that I take to heart and that I'm working on. It makes me reinvestigate and investigate new possibilities with some of the ideas I've been working with,” says Wilson.

“Many times the students, they bring in new ideas. Sometimes new ideas, based on the concepts that we've talked about. So, there's an exchange there and it's very exciting. Many of the students now come in as freshmen or sophomores and their playing is very high compared to what it was maybe 25 years ago when I was in school. They come in now with so much knowledge and so much skill. But there's the mentorship factor that they need and are looking for... the nurturing. That's a role I've really embraced. Many of the students are not just good students, they're good people. The role that that played for me, and does play for me in my career--the mentorship--is so important. Especially now that we don't have, for all intents and purposes, an apprenticeship system in the business anymore, for various reasons. But I really embrace that goal of mentorship. It is a nurturing situation for me as well as the students.”

Wilson was fortunate to be in good musical climates all his life and had experiences with some of the outstanding professionals in the field. While not from a particularly musical family, his father was a jazz enthusiast, who took him to jazz festivals when he was young. He recalls seeing people like Cannonball Adderley, Rahsaan Roland Kirk, Eddie Harris, Les McCann, Freddie Hubbard and it fueled a desire to play music. The first record Wilson remembers hearing at a very young age was Ahmad Jamal: Live at the Pershing. "But my family had Stax, Motown, the Beatles. My father loved Mario Lanza. Being raised as a Baptist, there was Gospel. Later on R&B and funk and pop music of the '60s and '70s. So I had everything coming in to my ear. Later, as a teenager, that's when I became influenced by Rahsaan and Eddie Harris and Cannonball. There was such a wide variety of music I was listening to at that time. The fusion stuff was in full bloom at that time, so I was a fusion head. Return to Forever, Mahavishnu Orchestra, Brecker Brothers."

He started formal training at 12, in junior high school, mostly on saxophone. He played in various R&B and funk bands throughout his teens. Wilson went on to attend Virginia Commonwealth University, enrolling in the jazz studies program. He also studied oboe and flute, as well various aspects of jazz performance and writing.

"The best part about being there at that time was that it was a really vital time in the city of Richmond. The city was going through a renaissance period, especially with the arts. So there was a lot of work as a musician there and it was a great atmosphere. And we had many great artists-in-residence coming in, people who came in and spent several days or a week. People like Jackie Byard, the Heath Brothers, Elvin Jones, Sonny Rollins, Frank Foster. It was a great time to be there. That's where I made a lot of my first New York contacts, actually."

Among the gigs he got to play in college was one with pianist John Hicks, who would travel to Virginia occasionally and play with a local group. Ellis Marsalis was also teaching at Virginia Commonwealth for a time and their paths crossed. New York. In 1986, Wilson became a member of Out of the Blue, a sextet of promising young jazz players who were sponsored by Blue Note Records "It was a 'young lions' Blue Note group at the time, which afforded me the opportunity to come to New York, play with the band, and also my first tours to Europe and Japan. On those tours I got to meet a lot of New York musicians, so that was the impetus that helped me with the transition to New York."

The move to New York came in 1987. He was working with O.T.B. and also toured the U.S. and Europe for one year with the Lionel Hampton Orchestra. In 1988, drummer Ralph Peterson, also an O.T.B. alumnus, asked Wilson to join his band. He began to pick up work with the likes of Michele Rosewoman, Renee Rosnes, The American Jazz Orchestra and the Smithsonian Jazz Masterworks Orchestra. In 1989, he worked with bassist Buster Williams.

His saxophone sound was, and is, influenced by a wide range of people, including Grover Washington, Hank Crawford and Arnie Lawrence. "When I was about 16 or 17 I started listening to Charlie Parker and Coltrane. I was unknowingly hearing a lot of Gary Bartz in those days in the '70s. Gary was doing a lot of the solo work on those Blue Note fusion records. I was really listening to him. I didn't know who he was, but I was listening to him a lot and transcribing his solos.

“Probably the most important turning point along the line of influences was going into college the director of the program at the time, Doug Richards, was steeped in Duke Ellington, particularly early Ellington. And that's where the influence of Johnny Hodges came in. To this day, Johnny Hodges is my favorite saxophone player. That really made a change for me in terms of how I approach the sound of the instrument and lyricism. Of course, I still listen to everybody and everything, but Hodges is my favorite... Particularly early Hodges. People think of Hodges only as a great ballad player, and he was, but in the '20s and '30s, he was as virtuoso as any player out there.”



Coming to New York, “I probably had it easier than some others and more difficult than others,” he says. “I did know a few people when I came in. I got a chance to play with a few people before I actually moved here. I was with the band Out of the Blue when I moved to New York, so I did have some 'ins' and that helped. The thing that helped me the most was having an open attitude, ready to try anything musically and professionally. The 'young lions' scene was sort of at its apex when I moved here. A lot of young artists were signing with record labels and getting big record deals. Though I worked with a lot of those people, I wasn't among those who, at least as an individual, were signed.” But it didn't dissuade him.

He started teaching at William Patterson University in “I am very glad for that, because that allowed me the opportunity to work with a lot of the older established musicians, which is what I really wanted when I came to New York. That allowed me to work with people like Buster Williams and Lionel Hampton, the American Jazz Orchestra, which was led by John Lewis at the time, working along side people like Jerry Dodgion and Jerome Richardson. Subbing in the Vanguard band. My situation allowed me to keep musical relationships going for the older musicians as well as the younger musicians. I was very fortunate in that way. It was a tricky balance, but a healthy balance.

As he continued to develop, the 1990s saw stints with Dave Holland's quintet for about a year and Chick Corea's group Origin.

“Those are two of my greatest professional experiences, and personal. Both of those guys are absolute giants in terms of what they do. The thing that impresses me the most about them, and was impressed upon me the most, is that they are not resting on any laurels. As long as they've been on the scene, as many dues as they've paid, and as accomplished as they are, they both are looking to constantly push the envelope, to find the next chapter. Every time they touch the instrument. It's pretty amazing; the level of creativity from night to night was always on the highest level, which is infectious. As a player, it makes you want to best yourself every night. That was probably the greatest lesson I took away from both of those experiences. They are just so respectful of musicians and of the music. It's the highest that one can experience in the business.”

The 1990s also saw records coming out under his own name, like *Four for Time* (Criss Cross, 1996), *Step Lively* (Criss Cross, 1995) and *Blues For Marcus* (Criss Cross, 1993). He's recorded steadily since and he's looking forward to this year's recording projects, even at time when

the music industry has changed so much, with major labels having less influence and some artists eschewing them altogether. The scene, it is a-changing.

“I think there is a positive aspect to it in that it puts the music back into the hands of the musicians, so that we have full control, at least over artistic aspect of it,” says Wilson. “Even if a label is expressing interest in involving themselves or releasing it; at least the artistic statement is true. That wasn't always the case when labels are involved. When they're putting up the money, they have say in the product. But now there's a lot of wonderful music coming out on independent labels and artists' own labels. It's great to see it. It's great to see the musicians being empowered. Of course the challenge is how to get the product out there. But it makes us all be creative about that as well.



He notes that the club scene is not as good as it was in the '80s. “I arrived here in 1987, and for a good 15-year period--before 9/11 and before Bradley's [a noted NYC piano bar and hangout for musicians] closed--the scene was great. Even when one club closed, another opened and filled the slot. There were more clubs around. You could see many of the great mainstays, people like Kenny Barron, Ray Drummond... Victor Lewis. You could see those folks every night.

“Now the scene is very different. There aren't as many clubs. The ones that we have, we do treasure them because they keep the music alive. But we don't have a Bradley's anymore. I don't think the scene has even been without a gathering place for all the musicians, where all the musicians could meet, see each other, share music and stories. I don't think we've ever been without that. The scene has changed drastically since

that is not there. I'm thinking of the young musicians who just get in town and they want to go to a place and be able to see the Who's Who of the music scene. And of course to go out to a club now can be very expensive. How many nights a week can even the most diehard fan go out to a club?

“But with that said, we do have some wonderful venues here,” says the upbeat Wilson, in his calm, yet reasoned, fashion. “We do treasure them. I think overall, it's still positive. It's not like it was in a better era, but it's still vital. So, we'll take what we can get.”

For Wilson, it seems to be plenty. He's worked hard to earn it and his skills are excellent enough to sustain it. Good news for jazz.

Selected Discography

Maria Schneider, [*Sky Blue*](#) (ArtistShare, 2007)
Steve Wilson, [*Souful Song*](#) (MaxJazz, 2003)
Steve Wilson, [*Passages*](#) (Stretch, 2000)
Steve Wilson, [*Generations*](#) (Stretch, 1998)
Chick Corea & Origin, [*Origin*](#) (Concord, 1998)
Chick Corea *Chick Corea & Origin - Live at the Blue Note* (Stretch, 1997)
Avishai Cohen, [*Adama*](#) (Concord, 1997)
Steve Wilson, *Four for Time* (Criss Cross, 1996)
Steve Wilson, *Step Lively* (Criss Cross, 1995)
Steve Wilson, *Blues For Marcus* (Criss Cross, 1993)
Bruce Barth, *Morning Call* (Enja, 1994)
Don Braden, *After Dark* (Criss Cross, 1993)

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