

Tibor Molnar

A Life in Jazz

by Mark Kirby

It is obviously no longer news that our neighborhood, Williamsburg, is a Mecca for artists of all types and from all genres. The various media outlets, from local magazines like *Block* and *11211*, to national acts like *New York Magazine* and *Spin Magazine*, all tout how ours is the new SoHo, the new Seattle. Even MTV and French television are on the bandwagon. They all focus on punk/indie rock bands, DJs, or visual artists and galleries. But that only tells part of the story. A large number of jazz musicians who have the potential to contribute much more to the cultural landscape than all the hyped rock bands in town exist below the media radar. They are here for the same reason most artists come to the neighborhood: cheaper rents, more space, and like-minded people. In a word, because it's happenin', man.

Don't forget that jazz is the first – and most perennial – art form that America has to offer. It takes the blues, adds some swing, and spins the deep simplicity of this African/Irish/Native American jam-out, into a sophisticated, gold thread of a musical form that simultaneously has the complex architecture of western classical music, the grit and power of the blues, and the flexibility to be molded to the needs of immediate individual expression. To paraphrase Wynton Marsalis in the famous Ken Burns documentary on the history of jazz, a jazz musician plays his personality. Some have a great rhythmic sense, some a bizarre sense of humor and harmony, an angularity of phrasing, or intense, gut-bucket soulfulness. Like the best of human culture, jazz is rooted in tradition, yet can be relevant to the present.

Which brings me to Tibor Molnar, a local baritone saxophone player, composer, and arranger of big band music. The times I've seen him perform, usually with a quartet, it has struck me how different he is from the usual young, wet-behind-the-ears player who has moved here right out college, usually from the New England Conservatory or the Berklee School of Music. Tibor's sound, technique, and level of mastery show his music comes from lived experience, as opposed to knowledge and attitude gained from music schools and 'fake' books. Technical proficiency can't cover for callow, shallow, suburban raised youth. I'm not saying that one has to suffer pain and poverty to have musical and emotional depth, but it's good to see an old head who is not from around here. Indeed, it's a refreshing change from the would-be Bohemian musicians that dominate the Williamsburg scene (an unavoidable consequence of having such neighborhood vitality and the all-important, ever elusive "coolness" factor).

I conducted this interview with Mr. Molnar – Tibor to you – in his cozy Leonard Street apartment. Upon entering I had no doubt that a musician lived there: an elegant stereo and upright piano dominate the main room; the wall has posters of jazz greats like Charles Mingus, the great band leader and bass player, and Donald Byrd – the current professor of jazz at Howard University whose mid and late seventies funky groove-oriented music is one of the cornerstones of Acid Jazz. Under a loft was something that immediately caught my eye: what appeared to be a glass-encased recording booth.

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"That's where I practice. It's almost soundproof and I can practice at four in the morning if I want and it's not a problem," he said.

Kirby: Where are you from?

Tibor: Hungary.

K: What lead you to play jazz?

T: In high school I studied jazz with a couple of friends. I fell in love with jazz. I started playing trumpet in high school.

K: Was it hard to find records in Hungary? I'm asking because I knew this trumpet player from Russia, who ran across the East German border under gun fire, because he wanted to play and study jazz. He said that in Russia he had to sneak around in an underground way, to listen to and play jazz. Records were considered contraband, like illegal drugs, and were, of course, insanely expensive. You had to go to someone's house, or to an abandoned building, give the password, and get in. You had to play the records (whispered Russian accent) "Vedy quietly." Was it like that in Hungary?

T: No, it wasn't like that, politically. It wasn't banned or anything like that, but availability of records was practically nonexistent. You wanted to buy records, well, there were used record stores, but they were very expensive. Basically, you had to go to a western country to be able to buy new records. It was difficult, but because of that, it was also a lot of fun collecting them. If anybody you knew got a record that you didn't have yet, you just got excited about a friend of yours buying a record, and you went over to his house and taped it for yourself. I didn't have many records myself because it was so expensive, but I had a tape deck and lots of tapes.

K: You're 38, so this was during what years?

T: I was in high school from '78 to '82.

K: So Hungary was fairly open at that time?

T: Hungary was still a semi-communist or socialist country, but jazz was never banned. It wasn't like China or Cuba, where listening to American music, or watching American movies or buying American products was banned.

K: Did you study in college, or have any formal jazz training?

T: I studied trumpet for six years, and then I switched to a saxophone. For a short time I studied the trumpet at the Bela Bartok Jazz Conservatory – it's funny a jazz school is named after a classical guy, but that's how it is in Hungary. Later on I switched to the saxophone. On the saxophone I am basically self taught.

K: What made you switch from trumpet to the saxophone?

T: When I was leaving Hungary, I realized that it would impossible to practice every day. I went to a refugee camp in Austria at first. The trumpet is a more demanding instrument, in terms of having to absolutely practice every day, otherwise you lose

your chops. The saxophone is a little bit less demanding. Not a whole lot, but if you miss a day, it's not a disaster.

K: What are your main musical influences? When you first got into jazz, what artists grabbed you?

T: At first I was listening to rock when I was younger, like about 12 years old. Then I started listening to jazz fusion like Weather Report, Chick Corea, and other electric stuff. Then more acoustic jazz and avant garde jazz. Gradually my musical tastes changed a lot until I arrived at acoustic jazz, like bebop. I listen to all kinds of records. For saxophone players I like Bird (bebop jazz innovator Charlie Parker), John Coltrane, and Sonny Rollins. On alto I love Charles McPherson. I love Dick Oats. He plays mainly with big bands. He's a fantastic soloist. Some of my favorite players are not saxophone players. Some are trumpet players like Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, Lee Morgan, Tom Harrell, Clifford Brown. I love piano players like Bill Evans, and Keith Jarrett. There are so many, it's hard to mention names, you leave out half of them.

K: Did you see any jazz musicians from America when you were in Hungary?

T: I saw The Art Ensemble of Chicago. They incorporate everything – swing, African music, funk, reggae. I saw Eddie Gomez, Chick Corea, Michael Brecker, drummer Jack DeJohnette, Dave Brubeck. I saw them mainly at jazz festivals. There were several international jazz festivals in Hungary every year. And also, in Budapest, there was a sports arena that had jazz. That's where I saw Chick Corea and Dave Brubeck. It's amazing that you'd have jazz in a huge sports arena with probably 20,000 people. That's how starved for jazz some Europeans used to be, probably not as much anymore, but that's how it used to be. Me and my buddies used to go to Warsaw, Poland every year to the Jazz Jamboree in November, and that was fantastic. We saw the David Murray Octet, World Saxophone Quartet, Keith Jarrett, Winton Marsalis, Branford Marsalis, Lester Bowie, and Woody Shaw. We would hop on the train, and go up there. We were totally broke – we just had money for the festival – so we would sleep in the train station. It was November, so it was a little cold.

Also in Hungary we'd go to jazz festivals in other towns that were far away; we couldn't afford getting on the train, so we'd just hitch hike, see the music, then sleep in the train station. Those festivals were in the summer, so sleeping in the station wasn't so bad. In the morning the security guards came and chased us out. Many times we snuck into the shows. We couldn't afford the tickets to the festival, but we always managed to sneak in somehow. One time a friend of mine got beaten trying to pretend he was with the musicians. He only spoke Hungarian – he didn't speak English so well – so the security guards noticed right away and (sounds of a beat down). We had a lot of fun.

K: It's ironic that you could see all those musicians at one festival, yet in this country there's only the Newport Festival, the JVC festival here in NY, and perhaps a few others scattered here and there; and these events have a lot of commercial music that's barely even jazz, much less cutting edge or avant garde. There are towns in Germany with three thousand people that have a jazz festival, yet here in America where it's from...

T: But that small town in Germany is well known for its jazz festival and people come from all over Europe to the festival. For some reason there are a lot of avant garde jazz festivals in Europe. I don't know why. I'm not so much into avant garde anymore. Hungary wasn't so great for catching well-known musicians and bands, but Warsaw, Poland was pretty good.

K: What made you decide to leave Hungary? Was it to pursue music?

T: It was political. It was to have more freedom. It's very difficult to have a happy life in Hungary.

K: What was the music scene like in Austria, compared to Hungary?

T: Austria was much better. I stayed there for two years, one year was in Vienna. I played in a big band and went to jam sessions. It wasn't like New York, of course, but it was all right. I met a lot of American musicians who were staying there, who were living there, not just passing through.

K: Did you go to any other place in Europe?

T: No, from Vienna, after I got my political asylum, I moved to Los Angeles for eight years and I moved to NY about four years ago.

K: When you moved from Hungary, did you always have it in mind to come to America to play jazz?

T: Yes. I never had any doubt in my mind that when I left Hungary I wanted to come to the United States. Other friends I made in Austria, in the refugee camp, while we were waiting for our asylum paper work, went to Australia, to Canada, and to other parts of Europe. But I never had any doubt that I wanted to come to the U.S.

K: What was the music scene like in Los Angeles?

T: Not so good. A lot of musicians I knew couldn't play much jazz. They were mainly doing studio work, or teaching. There were a few jams sessions that were okay, but not that great. I played in a big band that was a lot of fun, and I had a quartet that played every Saturday in Pasadena, but it wasn't nearly as good as NY.

K: How did you wind up in Williamsburg?

T: (Laughter) No particular reason. I was looking around — I lived in Rego Park in Queens, then I had to move and I wound up in Williamsburg. No particular reason. Of course I looked around in Manhattan, but I found a place here that was two or three times bigger for the same price.

K: When you played at Artland, you played Thelonious Monk songs, and Mal Waldron. Are you mostly into '60's post-bebop or hard bop styles?

T: It's hard to name categories for what I like. I like a lot of contemporary music — Joe Lavano, David Murray. I like the old stuff from the '50s, the '40s. I love big bands.

K: Are you working with any big bands in New York?

T: I have a short demo of some big band stuff, not much though. I love writing for big bands, I like doing arranging, it's very challenging, and very rewarding.

K: What is your view of the New York jazz scene? Not for famous people — for what I call grassroots jazz, people at our level who want to play but aren't world famous.

T: I haven't noticed much change since I moved here. It was always relatively great. To me it's always up and down, always struggling (laughter). New York is great in terms of having a lot of great musicians and, of course, for audiences it is the best place to go out and listen to live jazz.

K: Do you do any teaching? Are you able to survive from just playing music or do you have to hustle like the rest of us (laughter)?

T: I have to hustle. As I mentioned before, I listened to jazz first, and loved it, and that's what made me want to play music. I know a lot of people who almost entirely gave up jazz, who were not able to make a living on jazz, who play for weddings, who are teaching, who end up playing all types of music that they don't necessarily like, and I didn't want to do that. A long time ago I made a decision that I would only play jazz, the music that I love playing. There were times when I had to play music that I didn't like, and I got pretty frustrated. I decided that I'd rather, when I'm broke, have a temporary day job on the side, and support myself that way, rather than find myself playing less and less jazz.

If you can catch Tibor at Artland bar or Galapagos, do so. His combination of deep feeling, and harmonic and melodic exploration on the baritone sax, along with a stately style and approach to the music should be seen and heard. His bands, like himself, are usually understated, but with an intensity of feeling. Like the best jazz, his music will leave the listener feeling more nourished and nurtured than any amount of emo/indie postgraduate college rockers.

Mark Kirby is a freelance writer for various webzines. A drummer in the jazz trio Los Abajos, he has lived and breathed the air of W'burg since '94, and seldom leaves the neighborhood.