

The Tenor Was Affection

By Thomas Albright

When tenor saxophonists get together, the result is usually an explosive "carving contest," a kind of musical sparring bout that is one of jazz's oldest traditions, and which some scholars trace to a West African custom of challenging one another with inventive, playfully high-spirited verbal insults.

Such matches have become a bit more formalized since the old-fashioned jam sessions that used to last well into the next day, and when Arnett Cobb, Buddy Tate and Scott Hamilton opened a four-night date at Keystone Korner Thursday, their first set lasted a mere 2½ hours (but it might be hard to convince the rhythm section, which not only played, but *swung*, non-stop, that it hadn't been performing all night).

Although the three tenormen challenged each other mightily, the prevailing feeling was one of a warm, affectionate give-and-take.

But they provided probably as vivid a portrayal as one is likely to find today of the sounds and spirit that filled the jazz clubs in Kansas City during the 1930s. Tate, a veteran Basie sideman who goes back to the Count's original Reno Club band; Cobb, whose funky Texas tenor style was becoming old-fashioned even then; and Hamilton, 24 years old, whose playing adds a bit to the case for reincarnation, are the three masterful musicians who play strikingly distinctive Swing Era saxophone styles as though be-bop and its progeny had never been invented.

Or, rather, as though it were still in the process of forming inside the crucible, for there is an "edge" to what all of them do — a sense of things newly conceived and freshly heard — that gives their playing a wonderful mixture of familiarity and contemporaneity.

The three opened and closed each of two sets — performing together, the dramatis personae established in quick, bold strokes as they rotated choruses and changed fours on such as "Bags' Groove": Fire (Tate), earth (Cobb) and air (Hamilton).

As in any good drama, however, each of the protagonists took on richer dimensions as one got to know them better in extended solo spots — half-an-hour or more each — a sequence of mini-sets, any of them sufficiently rewarding in themselves.

Thus Tate is the most torrid of the three, with a big, hard, declamatory tone that tends to erupt in flurries which sometimes pull up just short of spinning

At Keystone Korner

"outside" — but he also can be a surprisingly suave and urbane balladeer, as in his elegant treatment of "Body and Soul." Tate is the personification of the Herschell Evans-Ben Webster-early Coleman Hawkins tenor tradition:

Cobb spent five years with Lionel Hampton in the early '40s, and he has a strong streak of Hampton's lusty showmanship. He is the classic Texas tenor man — holding to compressed, vibrato-dripping style that narrows the gap between jazz and rhythm and blues, ribald and growling or crooning with honeyed insinuation.

But he, too, can spin a soulful ballad (although he is clearly impatient with slow tempos), he keeps his playing consistently off-center with a bagful of subtle and not-so-subtle, frequently comic surprises — false endings, delayed starts, an unexpected honk or klunky quotation.

Cobb is said to have been one of Rahsaan Roland Kirk's favorite tenor players, and one can discern the relationship in various ways: the vitality, the outrageousness, the warmth.

Hamilton is an astonishing newcomer who stands out from his older colleagues much as Lester Young must have stood out from his fellow tenor players in Basie's early Kansas City band, and he holds his own among them — as Lester Young did — through the power of understatement and clarity. His light, pellucid, unemphatic tone and clean-lined, legato style are occasionally strikingly reminiscent of early Young, especially in medium tempo jumps, but his rhythm and phrasing are more straightforward.

In ballads — which Hamilton favored in his solo spot — his timbre acquires a feathery breathiness that more nearly suggests Coleman Hawkins during his later years, when he had absorbed some of Young's influences.

Hamilton has been greeted as a kind of "phenomenon" by listeners who are mystified that he can play in such an "old" tenor style, but the real mystery — as these three tenor men show — is how any valid musical expression can ever be considered "passe." Hamilton, in any event, has forged an expression definitely his own — supple, but frill-less; introspectively lyrical, but



Tom Copi photo

Arnett Cobb: lusty showmanship

bristling with tensile strength — and he brings to his playing a surprising and extraordinary maturity. In particular, he is one of the most persuasive ballad players around.

The rhythm section under all this was a beauty to hear, sparked by Larry Vukovich, whose piano sparkled and sang but never flagged in the headlong momentum of its sharply contoured, racing lines; and Ray Drummond, whose bass provided a bedrock foundation.