



# Tenor a Packet?

*Whatever you do,  
don't call him Smokey Joe!*

**Philip Watson talks to sax-craftsman Joe Henderson. He loves Joe's music – does that make this a puff-piece?**

JOE HENDERSON casually takes a cigarette from his pack, lights it slowly, and watches it burn between his long, slim, elegant fingers. His air is studious, thoughtful; he looks comfortable and at home in the vaguely drawing room-like interior of his plush London hotel lounge. As he draws hard on the filter, the cigarette seems to give him a quiet dissenter's demeanour. With his scholarly spectacles, greying beard and avuncular smile, it seems an appealingly distracting incongruity.

"This is one habit that I don't really appreciate and I'm trying to deal with it," he confesses. His voice has a deep, dark bass to it and is lightly rasped by a lifetime with tobacco. "Photographers always used to ask me to hold a cigarette or blow some smoke for a picture, but I got sensitive about that. About ten years ago I decided 'no photos with tobacco' and I'm very strict about that."

It might sound angry, dogmatic even, but it's delivered softly with, as in all Henderson's pronouncements, verbal and musical, great dignity. He says it with a benevolent tone, his dark eyes swimming with wisdom behind his glasses.

"And you wait – I'm going to get this guy," he says, breaking out into a broad smile, "this isn't going to last. Next time you see me I'm going to be through with this guy."

THESE DAYS, it's unlikely that wait will have to be too long. As his standing and stature within jazz have improved over the last few years, Henderson has become an increasingly regular visitor to these shores. And he has almost, along with Sonny Rollins, become himself the recognised, progressive state of the tenor saxophone in jazz, and not simply because the success of his mid-80s, two-volume live trio set, *The State of the Tenor* has led to such an association.

A statesman of the instrument, and a master craftsman unrelentingly devoted to the creative challenges within the art of improvisation, Henderson has experienced a sea change of reappraisal and rediscovery over recent years. Just ten years ago





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## JOE HENDERSON

he might well have been dismissed as just another journeyman player, a saxophonist travelling his own hard bop and post-bop paths to little avail. The write-up in Joachim Berendt's *The Jazz Book* (1982), for example, is fairly cursory, Henderson's influence being reduced to his "leading the great bop tradition exemplarily into the jazz of the post-Coltrane era".

Yet he now suddenly enjoys an elevated position of almost impervious supremacy. Few musicians, let alone saxophonists, enjoy such widespread praise, regard and respect – especially from fellow musicians. Joe Henderson represents the touchstone of improvisational resourcefulness, a role model for anyone who has ever attempted to practice the art of the melodic solo. And it's almost as if, in the reformed neo-classical jazz arena, the mainstream has rediscovered him, as if his very singular musical path suddenly had come in tune with the times.

For in these days of being serious about your craft, of Marsalis-like practice and dedication, Henderson brings to his music (and, for that matter, to the way he approaches most things in his life, from smoking to thinking) a dignity, a determination, most of all a supreme elegance. His compositions, his selection of unusual tunes and his melodic and harmonic gifts have a graceful sophistication to them, a veneer of refinement, a polish.

On stage too he exudes a stately control. Appearing to full houses at London's Jazz Cafe recently with his own trio of Renée Rosnes (p), Larry Grenadier (b) and Al Foster (d), Henderson seemed more on top of his instrument than ever. Feet close together, body relaxed but anchored, he holds his buffed Selmer out into the spotlight, his head bowed gently as if lost behind the music in reverential humility. After a solo he moves back slowly to the rear of the stage, holding his horn up high, keeping it in his mouth, almost a cipher for a higher communication.

Nonetheless, he combines this selfless dedication with a very personal level of self-expression. On a much speeded up

version of his classic Latin shuffle "Blue Bossa", he displays all the hallmark majesty and oblique architectural capability that have been present in his playing from his very first Blue Note recordings in the early 60s.

Not only has his raw, burnished, gruff and breathy tone been gilded into a warmer and more rounded sound over the years, but the melodic and thematic improvisational possibilities he squeezes out of a tune become ever more inspired. He is constantly adherent to the principle of jazz as the sound of surprise.

SOMETIMES HE'LL start a solo off with a single repeated note played against and off the rhythm in staccato punches and legato rolls. But then he'll launch off, turning and stretching the harmonic permutations of the composition inside, outside and upside down. He has a peerless ability to really *build* a solo, to make it work logically in terms of reference points, ideas, development and climax. It's a combination of technique and invention that has taken Henderson 55 years to perfect.

"There was a time when I was very mechanical about soloing," he says. "I can remember Pepper Adams turning me on to a writer called Henry Robinson who once wrote a sentence in one of his books that spanned about four pages. It was incredible; he used all the mechanics of writing – semi-colons, colons, commas, hyphen, brackets, quotations inside quotations – to keep the sentence going for as long as possible.

"I used to try to do that in my solos. I would play the most meaningful solo I could before having to take a breath. It wasn't circular breathing; it was just one long breath. And in my solo there would be references and phrases and pauses and quotations, and I would try to use the same mechanics in my music as Robinson did in his writing.

"Then I reached a point where I grew and became one with it. I de-frocked myself of all the information I had gained and stopped thinking about the mechanics of soloing. I just did it, and that's when the fun started."

All the same, in spite of the spontaneous creativity, in spite of this sum total of logic and surprise, most important in his music is a human fallibility, complete with chinks and flaws. Unlike other more technically commanding and reliable players (the implacable Michael Brecker comes to mind), Henderson messes up.

Sometimes, especially up high, he will push a solo just a little too far, snooker himself in smudged high-note patterns, end up the victim of the fearless momentum of his ideas. On one of his most famous and best-loved solos, "Invitation" (on the 1968 album *Tetragon*), Henderson floats fractured top notes that often fall away into nothing less than an abyss. The

space they create is almost heroically excruciating, until at last he recovers his position and rebuilds the solo with more dependable patterns and trills.

What he achieves, of course, is creative tension. It's like watching an experienced rock climber or trapeze artist. It's listening to someone at the height of their powers take the most frightening risks, and it's maybe because of this that, in contrast to these moments of inspired exploration, the main body of his work can occasionally seem over-familiar. It's as if the danger in his playing requires him to have more regular territory to fall back on. Smeared harmonic patterns, repeated note clusters and low trills are very identifiable Henderson hallmarks – dramatic effects that can seem clichéd and that diminish with over-use.

Yet focus on these hairline cracks in his playing and you'll realise they are far from being points of weakness. In fact, run them by Henderson himself, along with other criticism of his work – that it's perhaps too mainstream, lacking in stylistic innovation – and it's almost as if, in the least arrogant way possible, they don't even register.

He listens very intently when you ask him a question, holds his head in the same bowed position he does on stage and answers carefully, precisely, but his perplexity leaves you feeling strangely awkward, embarrassed almost to have suggested them. Henderson takes these criticisms in the same dignified, elegant fashion he applies to the rest of his life.

"Well, I'm not used to hearing about my faults, especially that I lack innovation," he replies in an even quieter tone than usual. "I find it difficult to disagree because it might sound like I'm too much on the defensive, but I don't think I've ever read that. And I've certainly never felt that myself."

Because, finally, there is an athletic expansiveness about Henderson's approach that overcomes any limitations. He has always exposed himself to the widest possible range of music – from Country and Western to string quartets, Polish polkas and Balinese gamelan – and derived as much inspiration from literary role models as from musical ones.

"My masters, my teachers were Charlie Parker, Ben Webster, Flip Phillips, Stan Getz and Bud Powell, but some of the great authors have sometimes been even greater sources of inspiration. Herman Hesse has been very influential in my life, as has the Bible, and Norman Mailer."

It's a strange literary triumvirate, uneasy and contradictory, but Henderson's extra-musical interests go further still. Because for as long as he has been interested in music, he has also been preoccupied (and this will come as little surprise to those who experience a profound directness of emotion and expression in Henderson's music) with the science of communication.

"I was going to study linguistics at one time, but the music gradually took over. But I'm still fascinated by language and

communication – it's just that now I use music to communicate sound. And I'm sure these varied interests have made me a better musician.

As the interview comes to an end, Henderson lights up another cigarette and smiles ruefully as he recalls his earlier comments.

"OK, it's bad for me; I would like not to have to admit to smoking, but still, I'm not really interested in carrying baggage from one day to the next. I see my life as a continual search for the undiscovered, I'm trying to look for new stones to see what's under them – a new tune, a composition, an improvisational form, a new idea.

"I've got to keep trying to visit areas of the unknown," he continues drawing on the cigarette slowly, knowingly. "That's one of the things I really respected, admired and adored about the great Miles Davis – he was continually moving forward. I'd like to be like that character in the Bible – Lot I think he was – who, if he ever looked over his shoulder, would turn into a pillar of salt.

"I never want that to happen to me," he says, pausing to stub the butt out in the ashtray in front of him. "I'm a venturesome spirit; I'm afraid to look back." ■