
Sonny Stitt

Leaving the pack

BRIAN MORTON goes on the trail of the Lone Wolf. Part 1



Tom Marcellio

Sonny Stitt in New York, 6 July 1976

There's a lively debate about the origins of the expression 'lone wolf'. Some commentators have suggested that the term originated with an early TV detective show from 1954. Others point out that it started 40 years earlier in a series of tales by Louis Joseph Vance, running from 1914. Almost no one, other than constitutional historians, seems to know that it was enshrined in a Supreme Court decision of 1903 (*Lone Wolf v Hitchcock*) in which a Kiowa chief of that name queried Congress's right unilaterally to abrogate treaties with Native American tribes.

In our context, of course, the Lone Wolf is Sonny Stitt, so named by Dan Morgenstern in recognition of his tireless touring. Stitt spent much of his later life going single, playing with whatever band the promoter or club owner threw his way and doing so with the kind of remote, untouchable authority one hears in almost everything he recorded,

from the Kaleidoscope dates for Prestige, made after his release from Lexington prison in 1949, to the late sessions for Muse in the early 1980s, shortly before his death.

For me, Stitt is one of the very greatest of saxophone improvisers. Qualitatively and moment to moment, he may lack the sheer brio and harmonic extravagance of other, more celebrated names; his skill as a high-velocity bop technician and his ability to invest a ballad with emotion may not quite reach the speeds or plumb the depths of other saxophonists of the time; his modest longevity – just 58 years – wasn't enough to establish him as a grand old man of the music, and yet, taken whole and listened to patiently and at length, Stitt yields unrivalled musical riches. For me, he remains a representative figure, confirming D. H. Lawrence's suggestion that "the essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer."

INDIAN BLOOD?

The basic facts are easy enough to establish, though there are question marks even there. Born in Boston, 2 February 1924, he was raised in Michigan, in what is routinely described as a 'musical family'. His father, Edward H. S. Boatner, was a college music professor and choirmaster at Wylie and Sam Houston, his mother (who remarried a nightclub owner called Robert Stitt) a piano and organ teacher, his brother Clifton a classical pianist and his sister Adelaide a Broadway singer.

When I met Stitt in 1979, he seemed anxious not so much to debunk any notion of a cultured middle-class family background as to suggest that such an upbringing was historically latecoming and relative and that his longer background contained enough disreputable elements to keep the genes interesting. The tape was destroyed long since but the notes survive and they contain the intriguing reminder – 'Indian blood?' – that Stitt had hinted at some Native American strain in his background and had further suggested this had some kind of ancestral impact on his approach to life and music.

It's not difficult to believe, looking at photographs of that mournfully sculpted face but without context or further confirmation it remains unhelpful as a guide to the kind of artist he became, unless one sees his self-reliance as somehow spiritually connected to that of Lone Wolf's contention with secretary of the interior Ethan A Hitchcock.

Asked whether he had considered a classical career, Stitt said that he had not, though he clearly admired classical composers and can occasionally be heard quoting Prokofiev or Stravinsky. But he did insist that jazz music shouldn't be a reservation, a bounded area within which African-American artists could express themselves but beyond which they could not stray. That clearly angered Stitt, and he insisted forcibly – the reference is double-underlined in the notes – that jazz was the music he chose to play; it was not imposed on him.

I asked him who the key influences had been. He mentioned Billy Eckstine and spoke warmly of a tenure in Tiny Bradshaw's group, though he seems to have been unforthcoming about what came out of that musically. I recall him talking enthusiastically about working with Dizzy Gillespie's group – "hard work, but a pleasure" – and talking easily about the transition back and forth between alto and tenor saxophones, as if there were no additional freight to either question.

CHARLIE PARKER

The unspoken element, of course, is Charlie Parker. Stitt replaced him in the Gillespie group and was fated to be replaced himself and for similar reasons in Miles Davis's group a decade later. Stitt's poison was alcohol, though he'd also sold and used nar-