

George Who?

By Joe Agro

George who, you ask... why, George Young, probably the finest, most versatile and most ubiquitous reed player on the planet today. I'll bet you think you never heard him play - I'll bet you have, and many, many times. Do you remember Chubby Checker's "Let's Twist Again Like We Did Last Summer"? Or did you see "When Harry Met Sally", or "All That Jazz", or "New York, New York" or "Working Girl"? Maybe you didn't see any of those, but did you ever watch "Saturday Night Live", or listen to Frank Sinatra, John Lennon, James Brown, Liza Minelli, or Natalie Cole? How about Michael Brecker, Herbie Hancock, Jon Fads, Sammy Davis, Jr. Tony Bennett, the Manhattan Transfer, Jaco Pastorius, Mel Torme or the MJQ? Yep, you've heard him play... that was George on those soundtracks and many of those recordings, and that is just the short list.

George Young lives in a big world, musically. He has played with everyone, and touched just about everybody. If you have watched television, listened to a commercial or gone to a concert you have undoubtedly heard him. He has quietly built a formidable legend as one of the greatest studio and performing musicians of his era. Stan Getz once asked him how he fingered his high F#. Dizzy Gillespie called him a name too obscene to publish here, and 15 years later George learned it was Dizzy's highest compliment. By his own description, he is "one of the most-heard, and least-known players in the world."

George started playing the saxophone in Germantown, Pennsylvania at the tender age of six. His early musical career included playing with the prestigious Philadelphia Orchestra under the direction of the legendary Eugene Ormandy, and later with Fred Waring. Following that he toured the United States, Europe and Canada, including long stints in Las Vegas and Wildwood, NJ, with his own band. The George Young Revue was a smash hit in New Orleans, Philadelphia, Boston, Baltimore, Washington, DC., Reno, Lake Tahoe and Atlantic City. In the early 60's he became a top studio musician in New York City.

George was a member of the Saturday Night Live Band for five years, during which time he continued to record and perform. In 1995, George left SNL in order to devote more time to album projects, teaching, continuing his work as a studio musician and his favorite type of performance - playing live.

That is what he was doing when I first met him. He was headlining at the Big Sur Jazz Festival with the Kenny Stahl Quintet. I was so impressed by his playing that I had to meet him. His sound, his ideas and his chops were just amazing. I introduced myself, we talked, and I have been buying his CDs and following his career ever since.

That was two years ago. At that time he was in the process of trying to slow down a hectic schedule of travel and studio work to make more time for writing, playing, his new wife, Cynthia - a certified massage therapist, every bit as sweet and generous as George is, and their combined family of eight children and six grandchildren. They had just bought a house in Carmel Valley, and George was working hard on what seems like an endless backlog of musical projects that interested him. Mostly, Young focuses nowadays on giving back to a world that has rewarded him so richly. His current favorite recording and performing projects are for the benefit of the Pacific Grove's Gateway Center for the Developmentally Disabled.

His interests run the gamut from writing songs for each of his grandchildren to the ragas and chants of India, and of course jazz. Since 1991 George, together with other musical luminaries - including Bob Dorough, who he calls "the Guru" - have been working on a major project aimed at creating a sense of togetherness among all people, and especially the kids, who George calls "our future". Much like Quincy Jones' "We Are The World" project, George hopes to bring together performers from all over the globe to sing and play in what he refers to as a "get well party for the world". He started this project with the late Grover Washington, but Grover's untimely death has delayed plans for its completion. Not yet finished, George hopes to debut this major work in an appropriate setting very soon.

I was honored to be among the guests at George's surprise 65th Birthday Party, an event with an embarrassment of great musicians, including the legendary Louis Bellson. I also had the pleasure of enjoying a four-hour brunch with him the next day. We met at one of his favorite places in Carmel, and talked about: his career, and his mentors; some of the great performers he has worked with; how he practices and what he teaches; his plans for the future; his feelings about life and the state of the world; and of course, saxophones, mouthpieces and reeds. What a treat! I learned so much about George, and about music, enough for an extended article in "Saxophone Journal" or some other technical oriented publication. But this is an introduction to George Young, and all of that technical stuff would be inappropriate here.

George Young is a gentle, soft-spoken, spiritual man for whom music is everything. He says that he's "in a good place and really happy" - what a great space to make music from. He cites Johnny Mandel, one of his mentors, who taught him to "always go for beauty." "Music is all I know how to do," he laments, but oh, how beautiful is the music he makes. Whether playing one of his reed instruments, or his many flutes, including exotic Cambodian and Indian instruments, George always goes for beauty.

If you haven't listened to one of his CDs I recommend that you do so soon. There is a long list of them, both as a leader and sideman. Try a "Google" search on the web and you will be overwhelmed by the list. I strongly suggest you listen to "George Young plays George Young," all original material written by George, a true tour de force, published by Mellow Hill Music. I also recommend "Colours of Joy" on the same label.

George who, you asked: let me tell you who... George Young, one of the most genuine, most generous and gentlest people I have ever met, and truly one of the finest musicians performing today. Get to know him; you'll be glad you did.

Reprinted from JazzSteps Magazine and used by permission of SSU band member Joe Agro