



**STAN GETZ - THROUGH THE YEARS**  
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**Stan Getz Through the Years**  
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A SUMMER EVENING IN MANHATTAN. Stan Getz is stretched out on his bed in a plush suite at the Parker Meridien Hotel, exhausted, chain-smoking Gauloise cigarettes. He is a barrel-chested, raspy-voiced man with a fondness for sharp clothes, intimidating when he wants to be, but tonight his face is as round and devoid of malice as a baby's. Getz is happy about last night's show at Carnegie Hall. It was the first public airing of some tricky new material from his new album, "Apasionado," and the crowd responded warmly.

At first the tenor saxophonist addressed the audience with an unfamiliar quaver in his voice, but typically, he cut the solemnity of the moment with an offhand remark about being thirsty, having just eaten some lox. The lox was a way to bring things down to earth and for Getz, who has moved to California, a way to say hello to the hometown friends and family. Also typically, the new material, which added two synthesizers to Getz's usual quartet, had gone over perfectly well.

What the audience would remember, though, was Getz's reading of a Billy Strayhorn tune, "Blood Count." Duke Ellington's musical alter ego, Strayhorn had written the tune from his hospital room, dying of cancer, and the Ellington band had performed it for the first time at Carnegie Hall a few weeks before his death. Since Getz first played it off the sheet music on a fine 1982 album, "Pure Getz," "Blood Count" has become one of his signature tunes.

"I think about Strayhorn when I play the song," he says. "You can hear him dying. When it's in minor key, you can hear the man talking to God." At Carnegie Hall, Getz played the song with a restraint, even a distance, that made the "crying out" passages more moving, as if Getz the musician were playing at Getz the mortal's funeral. It was not lost on many in the audience that the soloist on stage was battling liver cancer.

Getz, at age 64, is arguably the world's greatest living saxophone player. Inarguably he is one of that ever-diminishing handful of geniuses who have shaped jazz since the 1940's, about half the music's natural life. Yet no one would have predicted for Getz his gleaming twilight career. Here was a man who barely got out of the 50's alive. In 1954, after failing to kick heroin on his own, he tried to hold up a Seattle drugstore for narcotics. On the way to jail, he attempted suicide by overdose, and for the next three decades, he fell in and out of drug and alcohol dependency. Finally, in 1983, for the first time in his lost and found life, he began attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings regularly.

In the past two years, Getz has released two hit jazz albums, "Anniversary," a live recording from a 1987 concert in Copenhagen, and "Apasionado," an '89 studio effort produced by his good, new friend Herb Alpert, the "A" of A&M Records. Getz explains that, out of the blue, Alpert had contacted him and said: "I believe in you. I believe in jazz. Let's make a record." The result -- Stan's felicitous melodic improvisations set against Alpert's slick Spanish-flavored synthesizer background -- has hovered near the top of the jazz charts ever since its release. "Apasionado" served its purpose of reaching a larger audience: true believers wait for the next Getz, an album of duets he recorded with his quartet pianist, Kenny Barron. Barron is a musician after Getz's own heart ("the other half of my heart," as Getz identified him on the Carnegie stage), and in

several concert appearances over the last year, the two of them have pared a set of ballad standards down to the emotional essentials.

Propped up on a Parker Meridien pillow, Getz mulls over the Carnegie Hall homecoming. The show went well, he admits, despite a few glitches. After the intermission, he had forgotten to turn on his microphone battery pack. "I played 'Stella by Starlight' without amplification," he says, smiling at the thought of filling that enormous hall with pure Getz. "I've got a big sound. It's deceptively mellow but it carries."

"Sound" is to a sax player what "voice" is to a writer, one of those necessarily vague, verging on mystical, terms that sum up what it is you do and what makes you different from everybody else in the same line of work. When Getz first made a name for himself at the end of the big-band era, he was known as the Sound, for one of his trademark numbers, "Long Island Sound." He was a poor kid from the Bronx, but listening to the music you could hear, if you wanted, the clinking of highball glasses in Gatsby's West Egg.

Every generation in jazz has produced revolutionaries -- Louis Armstrong in the 20's, Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie in the 40's, John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman in the early 60's -- who alter the underlying rhythms and harmonies of the music in ways that the idea of "sound" doesn't quite cover. Revolutionaries have produced dense, excitable music, and they have always been balanced by the romantics, who search for the beautiful at slower tempos.

Like classical-music virtuosos, the romantics are adored for the purity of their tone and the sensitivity of their phrasing. The romantic genius usually gets dubbed something like "jazz poet" and, one way or another, sex usually comes into it. The cornetist Bix Beiderbecke, dead of alcoholism at the age of 28, was the prototypical romantic, the doomed young man with a horn. It was said that his rich tone was "the sound of a girl saying yes." A generation later, the young Stan Getz came similarly equipped, another nice-looking white boy with a penchant for classical music, the distinctive sound, of course, and the sort of personal habits that make for a short but vividly remembered life. He had everything but the doom. Getz seems to have lacked the constitution for dying young.

"I was inordinately quick at picking up music," Getz says, contemplating his origins. "I had about six months of lessons and that was it. I never studied theory or harmony. I can barely find my way around a piano." As a young boy, Getz says, he had been a good student, a good athlete, and he was fond of the streets as well. But at the age of 13, there was only music. "I became a music kid," he says, "practicing eight hours a day. I was a withdrawn, hypersensitive kid. I would practice the saxophone in the bathroom, and the tenements were so close together that in the summertime, when the windows would be open, someone from across the alleyway would yell, 'Shut that kid up,' and my mother would say, 'Play louder, Stanley.' My folks were proud; they didn't want me to be a street kid. Most of the kids in my neighborhood in the Bronx either became members of Murder Inc. or cops. There wasn't much choice. I wanted to be a doctor, actually. I think I would have made a good research doctor, with my curiosity."

As it turned out, Getz left school in the ninth grade to become a professional musician. "The openness of jazz was so intriguing," he says. "Besides, I needed the money, for my family. My father was a mostly out-of-work printer and at that time in the 30's they didn't allow Jews into the printers union, so we had a hard time. I never saw him take a day off, he was always out in Manhattan looking for work."

It was 1942 when Getz dropped by a rehearsal of the Jack Teagarden band. Teagarden was the premier trombonist in jazz and a disarming vocalist as well. At the rehearsal, 15-year-old Stanley was discovered the old-fashioned way: the regular tenor player failed to show up. "Someone let me use their horn so I sat in, read their book," Getz says. "Teagarden tells me" -- here Getz assumes a Texas baritone -- " 'Well, you want the job, Gate, pays \$70 a week,' and I said yeah and he says: 'We leave tomorrow from Penn Station. Get a tuxedo and a toothbrush and a spare shirt,' and I got on that train. It was all older guys, all rejects from the Army. The reason I got the job after playing horn for two years was because it was wartime and all the good musicians were drafted."

Stan Getz left home a poor Jewish kid from the Bronx. Today, after all the records and accolades and triumphant concerts at Carnegie Hall, it's extraordinary just how well preserved that touchy, insecure kid is. In the living room of his suite, a few of the books Getz is packing for a European tour are spread out on a table: Faulkner's "Go Down, Moses," Octavio Paz's "Labyrinth of Solitude" and a Beckett novel, "Murphy." "See what the kid from the Bronx is reading," he says.

Any number of self-assured artists and intellectuals have grown up in the Bronx, but by and large they climbed the establishment's educational ladder; they acquired a sense of entitlement by degrees. At 15, Getz surrendered himself to the company of tough or eccentric men who lived out of suitcases, this in an era when jazz had something of the old whorehouse raffishness about it and was considered no art. "I don't think of myself as an artist," Getz says today. "I think of music as work, work that requires a lot of concentration."

With regard to jazz, Getz seems to have acquired the prejudices of the highly cultivated gentleman that, thankfully, he never quite managed to become. "It's night music," he says, softly, as if he were revealing an unpleasant family secret. He's probably right, at least about his kind of jazz. At his best, Getz can convey a feeling of bruised delicacy that is both too much and too little for a great concert hall. Whether you call it art music or night music depends more on the socioeconomics of who is doing the playing and the listening. Things can get confusing when a vernacular turns profound.

AFTER HIS ONE-YEAR stint with Teagarden, Getz moved on to the Benny Goodman band, and then in 1947 to the Woody Herman band as a member of the fabled Four Brothers saxophone section that included Zoot Sims, Al Cohn and Serge Chaloff. At a recording session with Herman, the 20-year-old Getz took a solo on Ralph Burns's "Summer Sequence Part IV" that one jazz scholar has called "the most beautiful seven-bar solo anyone ever played." Subsequently reworked as "Early Autumn," the tune made enough of an impression on the rest of the jazz public for Getz to be able to start his career as a guest soloist and as a leader of his own quartets. It was no accident that Getz rose to stardom in the 50's, the decade of Dean and Brando, of cool surfaces and passionate, roiled interiors. Dexter Morrill, a Colgate University music professor and onetime Getz collaborator, calls Getz "a defining spirit of the decade, which was preoccupied with surface and design, infatuated with the newness and sleekness that you see in color photographs and plastics."

Throughout the 50's, Getz was a headliner on Norman Granz's hugely profitable Jazz at the Philharmonic tours. The early 60's brought the bossa nova hits and with them, crossover fame. In the late 60's and 70's, he added electric instrumentation and continued to sell records for

Columbia when many of his contemporaries had withered on the racks or fled to Europe. The 80's became Getz's period of classical revival: he recorded a series of acoustic quartet albums ("The Dolphin," "Pure Getz," "Voyage" and "Anniversary") that invite comparison with his most fluent work of the late 50's.

Whatever the musical setting, Getz refined the materials at hand with an instinct for classical order, an unshakable technical facility, and a tone -- sometimes fat, sometimes feathery -- that could break hearts as reliably as any pop crooner.

For all that, it wasn't until the last decade that Getz won over the sophisticated jazz critics. He was always the poor little rich boy who dominated all the (white) jazz magazine polls. His only sin was playing beautifully in a style that happened to be accessible to a large audience. (He will be remembered by most people as the guy who played the bedroom-silky sax line behind Astrud Gilberto's little-girl vocal on the bossa nova hit "The Girl From Ipanema.") But his success highlighted the inequities of a musical culture in which most of the greatest musicians were black and most of the best-selling ones were white. As Getz says, for years critics persisted in seeing him as "just a pale shade of Lester Young."

Lester Young was Stan Getz's great stylistic mentor, a black man from Kansas City, who was in turn influenced by white sax technicians like Jimmy Dorsey and Frankie Trumbauer. Young didn't concern himself overly with a song's harmonic structure. Instead, he would play line after line of laconic, sometimes melancholic melodic improvisation. "Lester had a catholic way of playing," Getz says. "It was so right and pure and unassuming."

Young was a strange man with a taste for elegant suits and porkpie hats. He spoke little, and what he did say was likely to be couched in his own private language. Very few people know what Lester Young thought about anything, but for Getz it is important to believe that his idol didn't resent him. "He was too beautiful for that," he says. In the mid-50's, Getz and Young traded solos on the Jazz at the Philharmonic bandstand, but by then Young was nearing his lonely, alcoholic end. "I first met Lester in the mid-40's," Getz says. "I was sitting in on 52d Street on an off night from Benny Goodman's band. I saw him walk past me to go to the back room, so I went back there and met him and said: 'Hey, it's a pleasure. I love you.' He said, 'Nice eyes, Pres, carry on.'"

In the early 40's, 52d Street was the world's first showcase for be-bop. If any music can be said to be invented, be-bop was invented by Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonious Monk in the laboratory of a Harlem jazz club and brought to midtown for public inspection. Many of the established swing musicians, black and white, were frightened off by the music's super-fast tempos and jagged rhythms -- "Chinese music," Louis Armstrong called it -- but Getz, then a featured soloist with the Benny Goodman band, was hungry to play it. "Don't forget, I was only 18 years old and had a pretty open mind," he says. "I was in awe of be-bop." Getz found himself nose pressed against the window of a private musical party: "With Goodman, I had two nights a week off in New York, so I used to go around 52d Street and hear them Bird, Diz, Billie Holiday. None of them would let me sit in. The only two who would were Ben Webster and Erroll Garner, and then it was lovely."

Getz doesn't blame race for the cold shoulder. He says he didn't feel reverse discrimination until the 60's, the era of "free jazz" that was associated with the black liberation movement. "The hate music," he calls it. His cool reception in the 40's, he believes, simply reflected his lack of

musical status with the pioneers of be-bop, a style that with a few modifications remains the prevailing way to play modern jazz. And what if a Parker or a Gillespie had summoned the 18-year-old Getz to the stand? "I probably would have gotten stomped on," Getz says.

Eight years later, the producer Norman Granz paired Getz and Gillespie in the studio. "Diz and Getz" is Gillespie's session. He calls the tunes, sets the tempos, and he kicks it off with a blistering "It Don't Mean a Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing." By this point in his life, Getz was heavily involved with heroin, and headed toward his disastrous drug arrest. But one listens in vain for a hint of the chaos surrounding him. Getz jumps into the tune in unison with Gillespie, unfazed at the tempo, even playfully mimicking Diz's perfervid trumpet. "That's called knowing the literature," Getz says. "They thought they were going to show the White Hope what it was all about."

Albums like "Diz and Getz" or the 1957 pairing with the bop trombonist J. J. Johnson, "At the Opera House," showcase the remarkable ability of Getz, once considered a saxophonist of the "cool school," to turn up the temperature. He assimilates bop without losing his own relaxed swing feel, staying cool while playing hot. The music takes on the quality of a highly charged conversation between two people speaking slightly different dialects.

This assimilation of different voices is, as much as anything, what jazz is about. Unfortunately, when the music stops, the different cultural forces have a way of separating out. As jazz left the mass popularity of the swing era, the serious white jazz musician found himself in an anomalous position -- an insider (that is to say, not black) practicing an outsider's art, an art regarded by mainstream America as too abstract or too vulgar or both. Musicians like Getz and the saxophonist Art Pepper occupied a no man's land, further cut off from "straight" America by certain habits endemic to the working musician. "To be a junkie is to be an outsider," Getz says.

IN A COMFORTABLE mood, Getz will talk frankly about the drug years, sometimes with a wicked sense of humor. Other times, if he sniffs something he doesn't like in a line of questioning, he'll react with the old anger, or with a newer autumnal disappointment. "You make it sound so depressing," he complains at one point. "Yes the drugs and drinking caught up with me in the end, but for most of that time, I did what I wanted. I had a ball."

He has a point. Intoxication seemed to be bound up in the act of musical improvisation -- living in the moment. For an audience at Stanford University several years ago, Getz recalled a vodka-filled evening in London with the comic actors Peter Sellers and Spike Milligan. As dawn broke, Getz bet each of the men \$200 that he could swim the Thames. "I put on a bathing suit and sport coat," he recalled, "and walked down to Waterloo Bridge." As Getz plied his way across the river, Milligan telephoned the police and announced, "There is a jazz musician drowning in the Thames." By that time, a mud-covered Getz had already struggled up the opposite bank, \$400 richer.

"Musicians who didn't drink or take drugs back when Stanley and I came up, you didn't trust them," says the trombonist Bob Brookmeyer, a recovered alcoholic and one of Getz's musical soul mates. "We did have this great sense of intensity. Most of us didn't expect to live to see 30."

Getz began using heroin at the age of 16, he says, "because some older, decadent jazz musicians wanted to turn a nice kid on. I didn't even know that smack was habit-forming. In two

weeks I was hooked and I spent 10 years trying to get off. A good Jewish boy doesn't take drugs."

He says he is finally free of his chemical addictions. However, the habits of mind grooved over 40 years of drugging and drinking aren't so easy to lose, the self-absorption and suspiciousness that become second nature. It is a jazz cliché that a great improviser "tells a story" with his solo. In Getz, a streak of fabulism runs through almost everything he does: reality is often subject to the demands or the pleasures of the moment. He corrects a journalist's (correct) calculation that he has made approximately 130 records over the course of his career. "That should be 230 records," he says reflexively.

"You don't grow up when you're addicted," Brookmeyer says. "Whether it's good news or bad news, you're stoned." Getz was the classic prodigal son, indulged by a mother who worshiped him, arrested in the warp of anesthetizing chemicals. "You can get by with a lot," Brookmeyer says, "when you're cute and you play great."

Getz is a man of apparent contradiction. An addict for most of his life, his concern for his health has always bordered on hypochondria. For years, he has swallowed huge amounts of vitamins, followed one dietary regimen or the other, spent a good part of his life in the swimming pool, the sauna, taking a massage. One can only marvel at the depth of emotional need of a man always following the holy grail of good feeling, be it a transient chemical high or the admirably disciplined attempt to extend his life with herbs and acupuncture.

"Everything that has happened to me has made my music what it is," Getz says. The bleats and the trills of a Getz ballad are part of a one-way vocabulary of emotions, Getz talking to Getz through the medium of a grateful audience. "I would bore myself if I practiced the saxophone," he says. "I need an audience."

Now that Stan Getz is sober, he says he is no longer sure how he stacks up against his earlier, more troubled self. Certainly the things that draw people to Getz, his humor and the vulnerability that underlies it, weren't completely under wraps. "I have friends who say I was always someone worth being around," he says. He leans forward slightly. "And I have those who say the opposite. Some people said I was a monster."

GETZ'S LATE COLLEAGUE in the Woody Herman band, Zoot Sims, once remarked: "Stan Getz? Nice bunch of guys." It's a line that both his friends and enemies quote by way of explanation. At this stage in his life, Stan Getz would dearly love to gather his best selves together in Malibu, Calif., to spend time with his fiancée, Samantha, a woman in her mid-20's whom he met in a California health-food store, and admiring music friends and neighbors like Herb Alpert and the composer Johnny Mandel.

As for the past, he seems to have granted himself absolution, a reward for the years of physical adversity and improved behavior. "You can't have too much regret," he says. "When the end comes, the thing that I will be most proud of is that, toward the end of my life, I became what I always should have been, a decent gentleman. Or as much of one as I can be, coming from the Bronx."

Of course, his Bronx days are forgotten by almost everyone but Getz. The same cannot be said for his more recent life as a father and a husband in suburban Irvington-on-Hudson, N.Y. "He

doesn't want us to remind him of the past," says Steve, 42, the eldest of Getz's five children from his two marriages. "We are the vestiges and we carry the scars." No matter how fixedly Stan faces the Pacific Ocean that begins just beyond his sliding-glass doors, people keep trying to make him look back.

In 1980, Getz left his second wife, Monica, after 24 years of marriage. The case of Getz v. Getz has been knocking around the courts ever since, even though the divorce itself was granted in 1987. In November it made the newspapers when the United States Supreme Court declined to hear Monica Getz's broad constitutional challenge to New York State's system for handling divorce cases. Nevertheless, Monica is still trying to overturn the original divorce ruling on grounds of fraud. She is possessed by the idea of vindication, that she who had loyally stood by her man through his substance abuse and infidelities should not have been judged by a New York State divorce court to be the party at fault. By her reckoning, her legal challenge is an effort to reconcile Stan with the truth about their past and by so doing, to salvage her family's psychological health.

Monica says Stan was the great love of her life, and obviously he is still the great subject of her life. She's been explaining him in public since the bossa nova days when, she says, she used to write the album liner notes that were signed "Stan Getz." In the library of Shadowbrook, the family's Westchester mansion, where she still lives, Monica pulls a blackboard up by the coffee table and begins to chalk the solid and dotted lines that trace an addict's rate of descent. The thought occurs that maybe Stan didn't want to be saved from himself by a wife who had all the answers. "I wish I didn't know all this," she replies. "I wish we could have learned it together."

Monica can tick off the regrettable scenes from her marriage like a veteran caseworker. Two of the children, Steve Getz and Beverly McGovern, 37, resort to military metaphor to describe their home life. "A war zone," Steve says. Says Beverly: "We were casualties of war." In the late 60's, primarily, Getz's drinking would periodically slide into a well-rehearsed nightmare. Monica would grab the car keys and the kids and head for the nearest motel as Getz brought the house down around his ears.

"When he would come off the road, he would be Mr. Nice Guy," Beverly recalls. "But then he would get restless."

Monica concurs: "He would play father charmingly but then you would catch him looking at his watch." However, Monica believes that during the good times, it was she and she alone who had access to the real Stan Getz who lived underneath all that anxious role-playing. "That's the person who I care for the most -- searching, curious, fragile," she says. "From 1970 to 1978, I saw that person on a daily basis."

Beverly, however, is persuaded that the father with whom she has forged a close adult friendship is in fact the best Stan Getz. "He's a totally different person now that he's not with Monica," she says. "He can be self-sufficient and introspective now."

LIFE IN MALIBU follows a rhythm as pleasant and predictable as the Southern California weather. "Every three or four weeks," says Lou Levy, pianist behind Getz off and on ever since the Woody Herman days, "I'll drive out to Stan's and bring whitefish and lox and all the other stuff that Jews like to eat on Sunday. We'll breathe the fresh air, listen to an Al Cohn album. Then he'll take a nap and I'll go out on the lawn to smoke a cigar. Later we'll talk and the phone



will ring and Stan will be making some kind of business deal. Afterward, it's hard to get the train of the conversation back. After all these years, sometimes it's difficult to think of what to say. How much can you talk about a macrobiotic diet? Stan will get bored and then it will be time for me to drive back down the hill to L.A."

Levy remembers an interviewer once remarking to Getz that he looked so cool on stage. Getz replied, "Yeah, but inside I'm a seething mass." The same tension that drives the music can make ordinary life a trial. For Getz, small talk is all but impossible, and even an animated conversation needs to give way to something more kinetic. Like a swim. The Pacific Ocean is his River Jordan, chilly but it soothes his soul. Stripped down to a bathing suit, he looks like a hearty sea lion diving through the swells. Afterwards he takes his habitual walk a mile or so down the beach where he says the rich movie stars live.

Everything looks good on Stan today: the beachcomber's tan, the big smile, the belly laugh that makes most people's delight sound anemic by comparison. "He's got something," Steve Getz says. "People just want to be around him."

A horse rides by and Stan gets excited because he's working on a deal with a neighbor, trading his wide-screen TV for a horse for Samantha to ride on the beach. "Bigger than that one," he says, "16 hands." The walk continues and pretty soon no plan seems too big. He talks about getting married to Samantha. Of having a child by her. He checks the math in his head to see if the number of years works out and nods with satisfaction.

Today anything is possible. Other days, other moods, he's less sanguine. "The miracle can stop being a miracle in the time it takes to die," he says later.

True to character, Getz has charmed and bullied his cancer into temporary submission, enlisting the same inexplicable concentration that accounts for his extraordinary musical career. "I practice chi kung," Getz says. "It's a Chinese visualization process where you push the energy down into your liver. Also, I lie down in bed and then I stand up and do certain movements that look like tai chi. All that stuff works." But now even Getz realizes he may not win his good fight. The most recent reports suggest that the disease has gained the upper hand.

It's almost too sobering to contemplate that the wild ride will not go on indefinitely. Nor will the music. "I never played a note I didn't mean," Getz likes to say. That the notes mean so much -- and we can hear that they do -- hasn't made for an easy life, for him or for anyone around him. But in the end, the notes are why he will always matter.



