

# THE DEFINITIVE THAD JONES

*Live from the Village Vanguard, Volume 1*

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Soloists: Joe Lovano, *Tenor saxophone*; Ted Nash, *Alto saxophone*;  
Ralph Lalama, *Tenor saxophone*; Gary Smulyan, *Baritone saxophone*;  
Dick Oatts, *Alto saxophone*; Mel Lewis, *Drums*

All selections composed and arranged by Thad Jones,  
published by D'Accord Music (ASCAP).

Mel Lewis, *Drums*  
Kenny Werner, *Piano*  
Dennis Irwin, *Bass*  
Dick Oatts, *Alto saxophone (lead)*  
Ted Nash, *Alto saxophone*  
Joe Lovano, *Tenor saxophone*  
Ralph Lalama, *Tenor saxophone*  
Gary Smulyan, *Baritone saxophone*

John Mosca, *Trombone (lead)*  
Ed Neumeister, *Trombone*  
Douglas Purviance, *Bass trombone*  
Earl McIntyre, *Bass trombone*  
Earl Gardner, *Trumpet (lead)*  
Joe Mosello, *Trumpet*  
Glenn Drewes, *Trumpet*  
Jim Powell, *Trumpet, flugelhorn*  
Stephanie Fauber, *French horn*

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Good things get better with time, and The Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra is without a doubt the greatest contemporary big band in existence. The band originated in December 1965 and flourished for 13 years under the loving care of Mel and his coleader Thad Jones. Jones was as original a writer as he was a cornetist, and during his time with Lewis they recorded many influential albums, toured the world, and gave big band jazz a new sound. When Thad left in 1978, the band's future seemed uncertain—but not to Mel, who kept things going by making subtle changes in the band's approach to performance, and by bringing his old friend and charter member of the band, Bob Brookmeyer, to help find a new direction. What resulted was a decade's worth of new and often brilliant music, penned by Brookmeyer, by talented newcomers like Jim McNeely, and, most recently, by band members Ted Nash and Ken Werner. The veteran writers Bill Finegan and Mike Abene have also supplemented the book in recent years.

Mel Lewis, it should come as no surprise to you, is a consummate artist with impeccable taste. This is attested to by the tremendous range of musicians who have vied for his services over the years: Dizzy Gillespie, Ben Webster, Hank Jones, Benny Goodman, Count Basie, Gary McFarland, Eddie Sauter, Lionel Hampton, Gerry Mulligan, Johnny Hodges, and Bob Brookmeyer, to name just a few. It's a little-known fact that both Duke Ellington (in 1960 and '63) and Count Basie (in 1948) tried to get Mel, but it never worked out.

The amazing thing is that Mel is not a chameleon who sounds different with each group, but a drummer with such a universal conception, so that if the group is any good, Mel will fit it like a glove. Mel has a way of doing all the right things so subtly that you hardly notice them, until, that is, you have to play with someone else! As one musician remarked after struggling through an evening with a plodding drummer, "Mel Lewis never sounded better than he did tonight!" These qualities naturally apply to Mel's band, too, since he picks all the material, the writers, and assigns the solos. Add to that the years that this edition of the band has been together, and you have something very special. There is a synergy that occurs only when a group has put in thousands of playing hours together. The only other band to have it to this degree was Ellington's. And Mel's band is truly the heir to the Duke's legacy.



In the same way that Ellington's Fargo recordings have assumed tremendous historical and musical importance over the years, this set of Thad Jones compositions newly interpreted by the band will also become an indispensable part of the Lewis Orchestra's recorded oeuvre.

Virtually all of the great soloists in jazz, from Louis Armstrong to John Coltrane, came up through the big bands: Louis Armstrong, Coleman Hawkins, Benny Carter, Red Allen, and Roy Eldridge with Fletcher Henderson; Bix Beiderbecke and Frank Trumbauer with Jean Goldkette; Johnny Hodges, Ben Webster, and Cootie Williams with Ellington; Dizzy Gillespie with Cab Calloway; Charlie Parker with Jay McShann; Lee Konitz with Claude Thornhill; and John Coltrane with Gillespie. The workshop atmosphere of a band, with endless opportunities for a soloist to try dozens of approaches to improvisation, resulted in masterful weddings of solos to ensembles. To give a solo a beginning, middle, and end was imperative. The lessons learned in the bands carried over to the soloists' careers.

In the years since the demise of the big bands, the up-and-coming players have been denied the chance to attend this very important finishing school. The Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra has been turning out gifted graduates for many years now; and for the last eight years, the graduates have been sticking around for postdoctoral instruction—a rare phenomenon in this age of the free-lance sideman.

What keeps them there, week after week? Rather, *who* keeps them there? Mel Lewis, bandleader and drummer extraordinaire. "This is the premiere band in the world, and I feel that I should know. It's proven itself, and it's here to stay," Mel reflected in a recent discussion. He then gladly profiled the members of the band.

"I think Dick Oatts has developed into one of the greatest lead alto players I've ever heard or played with in my entire career. He's not afraid to take chances, he's got a tremendous technique, and he has a leadership quality. He's not afraid to turn around and tell the guys next to him what to do. He also understands the value of everyone, no matter how individual they are, that when they play in the section, they strive for a blend in sound. That's what it's all about. It's a known fact that Dick is Phil Woods' favorite among the younger alto players—and Jerry Dodgion feels the same way too.



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"Joe Lovano has got something different than the guys who try to play like Coltrane. His sound is very personal—and his command of the instrument knocks me out. How he can get in and out of that horn, and I mean in and out of it, and then go into double and triple time things and wind up on the downbeat is phenomenal. He also has a tremendous knowledge of scales. I think he's the hottest young tenor player today of the modern school. It's so lyrical—it's outside playing from the inside. He's also an excellent drummer, and he really swings.

"Ted Nash's father is Dick Nash, the famous trombonist, who was my roommate in Tex Beneke's band. And his uncle is Ted Nash, who was featured with Les Brown for so many years, so he comes from a very musical background. Little did we know that someday Dick would have a son who would play in our band, so everything comes full circle. He is a tremendous young musician who also plays a lot of tenor and writes beautifully, but in our band he is the deputy lead alto when Oatts has to take off.

"Ralph Lalama is in the chair where we've always had a booting tenor. It went from Eddie Daniels to Gregory Herbert to Richie Perry. Ralph is a hell of a swing player. He can stand up and just start swinging for chorus after chorus, and he's also got that big sound, you know. Richie Perry is back these days, too, subbing for either Joe or Ralph, and sounds great. I don't think anyone could have replaced Pepper Adams except Gary Smulyan. We were blessed with Pepper for so many years, that when he left we didn't know what to do. He was not only a great soloist, but also a great section player. Gary was with Woody Herman at the time, and as soon as he moved to New York, we opened the chair for him. Gary, like Pepper, is the only guy who knows his whole book by heart!

"Earl MacIntyre has been with the band longer than anyone else. He was recommended by Phil Ramone; and when Thad and I heard him, we knew right away that's what we wanted. He gets all kinds of sounds on the horn, and is very creative in the section. Sitting next to him is Douglas Purviance. Many people don't know why we use two bass trombones. Bob Brookmeyer brought that on. When we added the French horn, we used it as a surrogate trombone voice, and went with three low register instruments (the two bass 'bones and the baritone). Doug has been with



us ten years.

"When John Mosca joined us, he played third trombone. One night he filled for our lead man, and there was the definitive sound and conception we wanted. He's blossomed into a great soloist, and also has that leadership quality I was talking about earlier. Ed Neumeister joined a little later on. He's starting to write now, and adds a lot to the section. Stephanie Fauber was our first choice for French horn. Everybody, including Bill Finegan, fell in love with her sound. The older charts in the book had no parts for horn, so she got together with Bob Brookmeyer and wrote herself a book. Of course, now all the writers score the music for her.

"Earl Gardner has been with us 13 years. I went down to Philadelphia one night, and heard him play lead trumpet. I couldn't believe the sound he got. We named him Bird because he used to be so big that he looked like Big Bird from Sesame Street. He's lost weight since then, so now he's just Bird. He's our band choreographer too. He has developed into the premiere lead trumpeter of jazz today. Every time he plays a part he does it differently, but somehow or other everyone can follow him. He's put this trumpet section together of Joe Mosello, who's been in the band for ten years on second trumpet, and Jim Powell, who replaced Tom Harrell in 1982. Jim plays very lyrically. Then, a year later, Glenn Drewes joined. He's a hot jazz player, and can do a great job on any chair. Mosello has great high chops, and Earl has the biggest sound around, so they all have to have equal sounds.

"When you add the trumpets to the rest of the brass, you've got a great unit. But when you play with them, there's no weight. It's like playing with feathers because they play with a jazz small group conception. The three lead players, Earl, Dick, and John, have been together so long and know each other so well that when the band plays ensemble, everybody falls together. We have a unique style of playing with this band that I call Bird style. That's what makes it so much fun, because when things come off right, which they do most of the time, it's unbelievable.

"We've been lucky with piano players since the beginning. From Hank Jones to Roland Hanna to Walter Norris to Harold Duke to Jim McNeely. Now, where do you go from there? You go to Kenny Werner. Kenny had been playing with avant-garde groups, and he took a while to settle in. He has a very fertile mind, and he's



a lot of fun. Besides becoming an integral part of the band, he's turning into a great writer. Dennis Irwin joined in 1982, and brought something different again, with the gut strings and that acoustic sound. When he locks in with me, it swings so hard it's ridiculous. Many bass players are listening to him now—they all want to get that feeling he has. I'm proud that my guys are in demand. And our gig at the Vanguard is one of the most prestigious jobs around—think of the music that's been played there!"

The great thing about the Fargo recordings was that they captured the Ellington band playing tunes that had been in the book for years, but weren't featured on commercial recordings or broadcasts anymore. Since the band was so familiar with them, they had evolved in a fascinating way over the years. Similarly, these Thad Jones classics have grown since their first performances.

*Low Down* was written in 1965, for a projected "Count Basie plays Thad Jones" album. When it became evident at rehearsal that the band was having too much difficulty with the music, the project was scrapped. But the nice thing was that Count let Thad keep the parts, and those charts formed the first library of the new Jones/Lewis Orchestra. Originally a feature for Thad, it now shows off to great advantage Glenn Drewes.

*Quietude* was done for Buddy DeFranco and the Glenn Miller band. It was recorded a few years later on Thad and Mel's Central Park North album. What was the clarinet part is now played by Jim Powell on flugelhorn. Thad later added the second and third ensemble choruses after the piano solo. The other hits and drop-offs are this band's.

*Three in One* was included on the first Jones/Lewis album. Here it features Gary Smulyan, John Mosca, and Dennis Irwin. The backgrounds heard behind the soloists have been extracted from the first ensemble chorus, a tribute to the band's ingenuity in extending Thad's original chart. Also note Stephanie Fauber's lead during the trombone backgrounds.

*Walkin' About* was always announced by Thad as a tribute to Count Basie. Mel maintains that it is a "sort of tribute to Basie." You make up your own mind. Whatever the case, it lets us hear Dick Oatts and Ralph Lalama, both in fine fettle. It was writ-



ten for an album the band did years ago with organist Rhoda Scott, which was never released in the States.

*Little Pixie* is an inspired romp on altered *I Got Rhythm* changes. This piece has changed drastically since its first inception. The tempo is much brighter (Mel's tempo), and many of the dynamics are new. First written for a Basie small group album in 1962, Mel first heard it when Thad brought an unfinished version to a Gerry Mulligan Concert Jazz Band rehearsal. "It knocked everyone out," Mel remembers, "but Thad didn't complete it for a few years." How many big bands have world-class soloists in every chair? This band does, and the solo order here is: Joe Lovano, Ted Nash, Ralph Lalama, Gary Smulyan (who brought his own changes along for his choruses), and Dick Oatts. The backgrounds behind the first four solos were newly improvised, while the figures behind Dick were scored by Thad. The high hat solo that follows Kenny Werner was a spontaneous idea of Mel's that night. He had never done it before, and it's a masterpiece of structure and swing in percussion.

When Mel plays, the effect on the soloist and the ensemble is almost indescribable. But why try to describe it? It's *all* here.

**Loren Schoenberg**