

# GARY SMULYAN, BARITONE SAXOPHONE/ BASS CLARINET

By Seth Graves



COURTESY OF ARTIST WEBSITE

**BARITONE SAXOPHONIST GARY** Smulyan was born April 4, 1956, in Bethpage, New York. The gifted multi-instrumentalist started his music career by first learning alto saxophone during his teenage years on Long Island. Today he is critically acclaimed across-the-board and recognized as a major voice on the baritone saxophone. His playing is marked by an aggressive rhythmic sense, an intelligent and creative harmonic approach -- and perhaps most importantly -- a strong and incisive wit.

While still in high school, he had the chance to sit in with major jazz artists such as legendary trumpeter Chet Baker, saxophonist Lee Konitz, trombonist Jimmy Knepper and violinist Ray Nance.

After graduating high school he attended SUNY-Postdam and Hofstra University before he joined Woody Herman's Young Thundering Herd in 1978. It was a remarkable collection of young musicians who ultimately would find themselves in the forefront of present-day jazz. Joining Smulyan in the band were saxophonist Joe Lovano, bassist Marc Johnson and drummer John Riley, who would eventually become a fixture in the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra.

In 1980, unlike many of his colleagues and peers Smulyan didn't have to go very far to move into New York City proper where he became part of the Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra then under the direction of Bob Brookmeyer, tonight's commissioned artist, composer and guest conductor. Smulyan also found work with other important large ensembles including the Mingus Epitaph band and the Smithsonian Jazz Masterworks Orchestra.

Gradually establishing himself the talented Smulyan was asked to share the stage and the recording studio with a stunning potpourri of luminaries including: trumpeters Freddie Hubbard and Dizzy Gillespie, saxophonist Stan Getz, pianist Chick Corea, timbales king Tito Puente, and R&B/Blues and soul icons Ray Charles, B.B. King and Diana Ross.

Smulyan, in addition to performing and recording in support of a myriad of people began to accumulate a discography as a leader. At this point in his career he has at least 10 recordings out under his own name. Meanwhile he continues to play with wide variety of artists -- each presenting him with an opportunity to fully express himself. In addition to his work on Monday nights with the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra, Smulyan remains close with Lovano, working with him in his nine-piece Nonet; then there is the exhilarating and liberating Dave Holland Octet and the seminal bassist's Big Band. Beyond that, Smulyan has also enjoyed stints in the cooperative Three Baritone Saxophone Band as well as working with powerhouse tenor saxophonist George Coleman in his octet and the Dizzy Gillespie All-Star Big Band that, similar to the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra, is comprised of some of the world's best players.

No matter who he is performing with -- or whether he is leading his own band at the time -- Smulyan brings to the

stage the spirit, style and savvy of a deep-toned master of bebop. "Gary Smulyan's lineage comes more from musicians like Cecil Payne, Leo Parker, Pepper Adams, Serge Chaloff and Nick Brignola -- the few baritonists that dared to master the tricky, chromatic music known as bebop," wrote All About Jazz's Francis Lo Kee in a review. "Indeed...Smulyan is fluent in the language." He was heavily influenced by Adams who was known as "The Knife" for his hearty tone and the energy of his rhythmic playing style. Smulyan's *Homage* was recorded following Adams' death, and every track on the recording, released in 1994, is written by Adams. Similarly, Smulyan organized the Three Baritones Band, which places him in the company of two of his seniors -- Ronnie Cuber and Nick Brignola. The group released *Plays Mulligan* in 1998, the date serving as a tribute to the late Gerry Mulligan, one of the foremost baritone saxophonists in jazz history and a mentor for many artists, including Smulyan.

"Smulyan's tone seems to get bigger and his ideas more expansive from album to album," wrote long-time critic Doug Ramsey in *Jazz Times* magazine. In 1995, WBGO, the all-jazz, Newark, N.J.-based NPR station voted Smulyan's *Saxophone Mosaic* as one of the best 25 CDs of 1995; two years later the *Boston Globe* selected the baritone saxophonist's *Gary Smulyan with Strings* as one of the 10 best jazz CDs of 1997.

Always in search of new ideas, in 2008 Smulyan released *High Noon -- The Jazz Soul of Frankie Laine*; it is a nine-piece band tribute to the prolific 1940s and 1950s pop singer Frankie Laine who died in 2007 at age 93. "This is the kind of album whose melodies linger after the session's over," wrote another long-time critic, Owen Cordle of *Charlotte News and Observer*.

## Gary Smulyan

### SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

#### As A Leader

*Blue Suite With Brass* (Criss Cross)  
*Gary Smulyan With Strings* (Criss Cross)  
*Hidden Treasures* (Reservoir Records)  
*High Noon - The Jazz Soul Of Frankie Laine* (Reservoir Records)  
*Homage* (Criss Cross)  
*More Treasures* (Reservoir Records)  
*Saxophone Mosaic* (Criss Cross)  
*The Lure of Beauty* (Criss Cross)  
*The Real Deal* (Reservoir Records)  
*Three Baritone Saxophone Band Plays Mulligan* (Dreyfus)

#### With Others

Carla Bley, *Looking for America* (ECM)  
 Carnegie Hall Jazz Band, *Carnegie Hall Jazz Band* (Blue Note)  
 George Coleman, *Danger High Voltage* (Two & Four Recording)  
 Freddy Cole, *Merry-Go-Round* (Telarc)  
 Jon Faddis, *Teranga* (Koch Records)  
 John Fedchock, *Up and Running* (Reservoir Records)  
 Dizzy Gillespie Alumni All-Stars, *Things to Come* (Telarc)  
 Dizzy Gillespie All-Star Big Band, *Dizzy's Business* (MCG Jazz)  
 Benny Green, *Place to Be* (Blue Note Records)  
 Tom Harrell, *Art of Rhythm* (RCA)  
 Tom Harrell, *Labyrinth* (RCA)  
 Gene Harris, *Live at Town Hall, N.Y.C.* (Concord Records)  
 Gene Harris, *World Tour 1990* (Concord Records)  
 Joe Henderson, *Big Band* (Polygram Records)  
 Joe Henderson, *Other Side of Joe Henderson* (Verve)  
 Woody Herman, *Best of Woody Herman & His Big Band: The Concord Years* (Concord Records)  
 Woody Herman, *Fiesta* (Westwind Records)  
 Woody Herman, *Woody and Friends at the Monterey Jazz Festival* (Concord Records)  
 Conrad Herwig, *Latin Side of John Coltrane* (Astor Place Records)  
 Dave Holland, *What Goes Around* (ECM Records)

David Holland Big Band, *Overtime* (Sunnyside)  
 B.B. King, *Live at the Apollo* (Verve)  
 Mike LeDonne, *Bout Time* (Criss Cross)  
 Mike LeDonne, *Feeling of Jazz* (Criss Cross)  
 Mel Lewis, *Definitive Thad Jones: Live from the Village Vanguard, Vol. 1* (Music Masters Jazz)  
 Mel Lewis, *Live at Village Vanguard* (Sony)  
 Mel Lewis, *Lost Art* (Music Masters Jazz)  
 Mel Lewis, *Soft Lights and Hot Music* (Music Masters Jazz)  
 Mel Lewis, *20 Years at the Village Vanguard* (Atlantic)  
 Joe Lovano, *Streams of Expression* (Blue Note)  
 Joe Lovano, *52nd Street Themes* (Blue Note)  
 Kevin Mahogany, *Songs and Moments* (Enja)  
 Charles Mingus, *Epitaph* (Sony)  
 Mingus Big Band, *Essential Mingus Big Band* (Dreyfus)  
 Mingus Big Band, *Gunslinging Bird* (Dreyfus)  
 Grachan Moncur III, *Exploration* (Capri Records)  
 Charlie Persip, *Original Superband* (Hall of Sermon)  
 John Scofield, *Up All Night* (Verve)  
 Smithsonian Jazz Masterworks Orchestra, *Big Band Treasures Live* (Smithsonian Institution)  
 Vanguard Jazz Orchestra, *Lickety Split: The Music of Jim McNeely* (New World Records)  
 Vanguard Jazz Orchestra, *Monday Night Live at the Village Vanguard* (Planet Arts)  
 Vanguard Jazz Orchestra, *Thad Jones Legacy* (New World Records)  
 Vanguard Jazz Orchestra, *Way: The Music of Slide Hampton* (Planet Arts)  
 Gerald Wilson, *In My Time* (Mack Avenue)

These days Smulyan the Long-Island native lives in Amherst, Mass., with his wife, pianist and conductor Joan Cornachio. He is a faculty member of William Paterson University and serves as artistic director at Berkshire Hills Music Academy in South Hadley, Mass.

The baritone saxophonist, who is capable of doubling and tripling on other reed and wind instruments, is a four-time winner of the *Down Beat* Readers Poll and a multiple winner of numerous other official polls including the *Jazz Journalists* Award for Baritone Saxophonist of the Year. He is a five-time GRAMMY® award winner for his work with B.B. King, Lovano, Holland and the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra. At press time the group was up for a third GRAMMY® for its *Monday Night at the Village Vanguard* release. Last month, Smulyan's band played at the 2009 Century Jazz Festival, teaming up with the Centry Foundation to raise money for student scholarships.

Tonight marks the first Columbia and Jazz Series appearance of Smulyan. ♦

*Seth Graves is a graduate student at the University of Missouri. He has reviewed music, book, and film for publications in America and the United Kingdom.*



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