

DAVID LIEBMAN

[Jazz Review, April-May 2008]

I caught up with David Liebman between his masterclass and concert in Manchester with guitarist Phil Robson's group, featuring bassist Aidan O'Donnell and Liebman's old partner, drummer Jeff Williams. This was the conclusion of a brief UK tour which began with a two-night residence at the Vortex in London. I met the saxophonist in the RNCM cafeteria, a throwback to British cuisine of the 60s. But we were not downcast – David was going to eat elsewhere later, and anyway was in talkative mood. As time was quite limited, his verbal tempo in fact seemed to speed up through the interview, but not at the expense of his musical wisdom and good sense. He is, I reckon, one of the most astute and articulate commentators on the music – as his sleevenotes to the Mosaic boxed set of The Complete Blue Note Elvin Jones Sessions attest.

The tenor and soprano player is inevitably best known for his work in the late 60s and early 70s with Elvin Jones and Miles Davis. But since that early exposure, Liebman has proved himself the real deal as a peripatetic improvising musician. Though in the interview he makes the case for leading one's own band, the gig with Robson's group turned out to be inspired, featuring an excellent mix of originals by the guitarist, plus some standards.

David Liebman was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1946. In high school and college, he studied with Lennie Tristano and Charles Lloyd, and graduated with an American History degree from New York University. After periods with Pete La Roca, Elvin Jones and Miles Davis, Liebman led his own groups, notably Lookout Farm with pianist Richie Beirach. In 1978, he formed his Quintet with John Scofield and Kenny Kirkland, then created the group Quest with Richie Beirach in 1981. Liebman's present group formed in 1991 includes guitarist Vic Juris, bassist Tony Marino and drummer Marko Marcinko. Liebman is the author of several books including A Chromatic Approach To Jazz Harmony And Melody, and Developing A Personal Saxophone Sound, and has taught at many universities and clinics around the world.

Liebman learned classical piano first, then from age 12 took up clarinet. He was attracted to tenor from early rock 'n' roll – Duane Eddy, Bill Doggett, Bill Haley's "Rock Around The Clock" – and finally his parents allowed him to take up the instrument. He attended a dance-band workshop on Saturday mornings, and his long gig-playing career soon began, as he explains.

At the workshop, you learned how to play club dates. In those days dance music was standards, cha-chas, mambos, "Anniversary Waltz", Jewish songs and Italian songs... By 13 years old I was already working in the Catskill Mountains near New York, in a little resort for \$15 a week. That's how I grew as a musician.

1960 or 61, when I was getting interested in playing jazz, was when Stan Getz's "The Girl From Ipanema", and Brubeck's "Take Five" appeared – and also Coltrane's "My Favourite Things", and Horace Silver hits, and Herbie Mann's "I'm Coming Home Baby". An interested teenager living in Brooklyn would most likely hear those people, because they were more available. Stan Getz was not really a influence on me, I felt he was a little corny.

But you very rapidly moved on to Coltrane.

Yes, he was by far my most important early influence. There was really nobody before him, as far as influence goes. I wish I had heard Charlie Parker first, but nobody turned me on to him [at that time]. In sequence would have been nice. Even with Coltrane, it wasn't in

sequence, because when I came in it was Live At The Village Vanguard. I had little idea that he played straightahead chord-changes with Miles, and I certainly didn't know what "Giant Steps" was.

When did you first see Coltrane?

When I was 15, in 1961. He was opposite the Bill Evans Trio. I first went to Birdland a few months before, and when I came back there was the sign – Bill Evans Trio, and John Coltrane Quintet. I didn't know either. In those days everything was double-billed – from the mid-60s it changed. They played two sets each. I saw Thelonious Monk more times than I wanted to, opposite John Coltrane. It wasn't like they matched up the show, it was whoever was around.

I had no idea who Coltrane was, except there was a picture of him playing soprano. I thought, "That's the guy I'm reading about in Downbeat who plays soprano". We went in, and you could hardly hear Bill Evans, [the audience] was very noisy. When Coltrane appeared, I couldn't work out anything that was going on – it sounded like he was practising, all this squeaking and squawking...When the alto-player appeared, who was Eric Dolphy, that made a little more sense to me.

During the closing number, the woman sitting next to me said, "That's 'My Favourite Things' from The Sound of Music", and I said "No way – from that corny movie?" Whatever it was, it compelled me to return again and again. I saw him dozens of times over the years, till he died.

Seeing Coltrane was a revelation...He became more than a model, he became an obsession. The music had a core of energy and what we'd now call spirituality. I was a kid, I'm not identifying with that – but it was something that drew me back. They were fierce, they were playing two hour tunes sometimes...They were really hitting hard, Elvin was playing at the top of the volume level. I was sitting from 9 till 3 in the morning, hypnotised. That was my model – and remains my model.

What was the reaction of audiences?

With Trane it was like a revival meeting – people were screaming. The clubs were for the most part packed. He was a star. He had played with Miles Davis, which was the top of the food-chain for a sideman at that time. Plus "My Favourite Things" was a verifiable hit, like "All Blues" was a hit, and like "Sidewinder" and "Song For My Father" became a hit. These things were reduced down to 45's, and on jukeboxes. You saw John Coltrane next to Elvis Presley – he was definitely known.

And Sonny Rollins?

I got into Sonny, of course I did, you had to. But I didn't see him as much – he didn't play as much. When I did see Sonny Rollins it never approached the intensity of Trane live, and he rarely kept the same band together for much time. Whereas with Coltrane, we know the band intimately. With Sonny, it was hard for me as a young person to be so impressed by the performance. When you're young, the first thing you respond to is speed, power, intensity. Coltrane was like a rock band compared to anybody else! Of course later I came to Sonny Rollins from a technical standpoint – I know his music intimately, and from '55 right to the end of the '60s he's a monumental force. He and Trane are the two trees of the modern saxophone. Steve Grossman and I – he was my crony in the 70s and played with Elvin and Miles, we criss-crossed for a while – we used to have a running joke, we'd go up to someone in the street and ask 'Sonny or Trane?' Grossman is now more of a Rollins man, but then he was a Trane-ite.

Sonny was considered a true spontaneous improviser – some golden, magical moments, and some nights that were, not ordinary but OK. Coltrane had a musical agenda. He'd come on, this time he's working on trills, next time you'd see him, he was working on high G – then three months later, it was on harmonics and the low B flat. He was a practiser who had a very

laser-beam focus about what he wanted to do – as we know now, you hear it on the records. It's a matter of taste – but they were both unbelievable in the 60s.

And where did Bird fit in?

Bird for me is history, I was nine years old when he died. I had to learn about Bird. I still feel that Bird was from another planet. He was like a meteor. Where did he get that from, to do that in 1945? In the constraints of a three-minute record, it was unbelievable. Phil Woods told me that when you heard Bird live, the sound filled the room. I had the next Messiah – Coltrane."

There were a lot of imitators of Trane.

They didn't come till after. His influence was more after he died. I'm the first line of Coltrane followers, with Steve Grossman, to some extent Bob Berg – Michael Brecker was a bit younger. Steve and myself ended up playing with Elvin and Miles, so we went right into the path of Coltrane. We were the first guys to take that language and work it out – as Sonny Rollins, Phil Woods and Jackie McLean did with Bird.

To answer that question in 1970 is one thing, to answer it in 1985... Yeah, a lot of people took the surface of Coltrane and got the technique without the message. You can say that about any master – how many people really get the point, or do they just take the veneer and let that serve as the substance.

What did you take to be the substance?

Well, it's more than just playing a bunch of pentatonic scales up half a step, let's put it that way... It was more than honking on a low C and playing multiphonics... More than screaming in the top register, or than playing on a D Dorian mode for two hours. That's what my book is about, A Chromatic Approach To Jazz Harmony and Melody, my deduction of what Trane, Miles and those guys were doing in the 60s. This is my speculation of what they were aiming to do. They didn't talk about it, and they wouldn't talk about it. When an innovator of that level comes around in the history of an artform, he or she is most likely to be imitated very quickly on the surface elements – the most easily available by ear or quick analysis. It's those who want to go deeper who go beyond those.

Modal jazz is one distinct phase of Coltrane's evolution – 1961-5. It ends with Love Supreme, basically. But we have also the Monk/Miles regular chord-change period, and Giant Steps, and the final period. We have three or four distinct phases, with sub-categories within them. That's never been matched in the history of jazz.

In the early days, you learned solos?

You should be able to mimic the language not close, but exactly. And that gives you an understanding from the ground level – you know how it was made up. But your challenge is to come through that, and out the other side – which means you're not a slavish imitator. You're supposed to find your own path. That took me ten or fifteen yours. Your goal is that on the first note, the experienced listener knows who you are. You [AH] should be able to tell me, from any other soprano or tenor player. If I can't do that to you, or somebody like you, then I haven't achieved that level of individuality which is one of the hallmarks of an accomplished artist.

[Or I haven't achieved the level of the experienced listener! – AH]

My voice on that instrument is meant to be uniquely mine. I hope I've learned enough to do that! To put that into an instrument is quite a challenge – that's what we all spend our life on. Kenny G is a singular artist. You might not like what he plays, he may be mundane, but as soon as he plays, I know it's him – that's a credit to him. I can't say that about every saxophone player I hear.

It's a matter of getting a tone that's unique. It comes through you, your body, applied to the instrument.

So you can have a totally individual sound, but your lines are crap?

You can – that's Kenny G!

[Laughs] That is my point – he is devoid of the other aspects of music. We like to fill in those spaces, obviously!

Earlier you had some interesting comments about audiences.

I'm not here to denigrate the audience, who you have to trust in the end. In one sense, the audience is the supreme judge. But they are going to hear rhythm first, and colour and sound, and intensity – hopefully melody, but the harmony is going to be last. And the intricate process of communication between musicians – they will notice that the players are smiling at each other, but their not going to know that the pianist played a certain voicing and I reacted to it. In other words, 90% of what we do, on a technical level, is not for the common listener, and even most musicians.

That's why we have what we call popular music. It doesn't necessarily mean that that music is cheaper or lower, but it's more apparent.

When you're performing, you've got to understand what the audience are going to get and what they're not going to get, and then you have to make a judgment call. Does it matter to you that three people get it and not 30, or 300, or 3000? That's a decision that's very heavy. That's something I lay on my students – by choosing how many people you play for, you're choosing what you play.

You can play to the audience – if I hold a high D in the middle of a ballad, they'll probably love it even more. We know what works, and we also know what is cheapening – and what is the right gesture to communicate. If I play a melody soft, that is obviously a more communicative gesture than if I play fortissimo in 32nd notes. I might do that consciously, or subconsciously, to get the audience on my side. So there's a very thin line between a desire to communicate, and pandering.

Liebman is best known for his associations with Miles Davis, and Elvin Jones. But before he joined Jones, he spent a valuable period with the great, neglected drummer Pete La Roca, who had earlier worked with both Coltrane and Rollins.

We served in the apprenticeship system, as it was in those days – you were meant to serve with a master. It was unspoken – these days it doesn't exist of course, for a variety of reasons. So if you had the opportunity to play with Art Blakey, or Freddie Hubbard, or as a bass-player with Bill Evans, or as a saxophone-player with Miles Davis, that was like doing a higher degree in university.

If you were talented, and sensitive, and hardworking, you learned everything you could from these guys.

Pete La Roca was Trane's first drummer, before Elvin – there are tapes floating around, it's different than Elvin but it sounds fantastic. His real name is Pete Sims. He was a great influence on me, and he took me under his wing. A very intense six months, every night we worked – \$5 a night. I was a substitute teacher in the city schools system to make a living. Pete was going to give it a go, he didn't want to be a sideman any more. We played the Village Vanguard, this was the first time I ever played there, '68 or '69, he finished and he said "I'm going to be a lawyer". The next time I saw him was two years later at NYU in a dormitory, with books up to the ceiling. Brilliant guy.

Pete La Roca's career was interrupted.

He became a lawyer – incredible! He did come out once in a while in the 70s, 80s and 90s, and we would do a weekend at Sweet Basil or somewhere. I wish he would play more – he's one of the greatest drummers that ever lived, and a unique personality musically.

I only spoke to him a couple of weeks ago, he wanted me to go to France in the summer [to tour] but I just couldn't make it.

I love him, he's an unbelievable drummer. He should be playing – he's amazing.

Why did he become a lawyer?

He was disgusted with the music scene, he only wanted to play his own music. He didn't want to be a sideman. He's a very eccentric man.

He's a perfectionist. If he did a road tour, it had to be supported on the road. I said, "Pete, this is jazz, they don't support bands on the road..." . "It has to be guaranteed \$15,000". I said "Pete, it's not about that...it's not like that". He's a frustrating guy, but I love him.

He did a lot of things for me legally – he was an unbelievable lawyer.

If he still plays infrequently, does that mean his chops are not that good?

He's the kind of guy who hasn't played in years, and sits down and it's all the same. He's a natural drummer, he never studied drums. He was a timbale player, from uptown New York, Spanish descent or whatever, and he just sat down at the drums one day and in a minute he picked it up naturally.

Of course he would get better if he played five nights a week.

How did it come about that you joined Elvin Jones.

We were a small community of musicians in those days. Nowadays there's a million people coming out of school, dozens of good saxophone players in a place like New York – more than dozens. In those days there weren't so many of us. And jazz wasn't at its highest point in 1969, 70, 71, as you know, because rock 'n' roll really was dominant.

Gene Perla, the bassist, was part of our circle, playing free jazz in the lofts in New York, and hanging out. He got the gig with Elvin, and when Joe Farrell couldn't make it any more, I took his place.

Elvin was Trane's drummer, he was my hero. He was a force of nature.

Steve Grossman had the gig with Miles. I had seen Miles around, you can't say it was a community in the sense of a brotherhood, but we saw each other a lot. It wasn't such a big world then. And I was somehow on line to be the next guy, I guess. So Miles recruited me, and I was with him in 1973-4.

He was reputed to be someone who gave minimal instructions.

Minimal – almost none!

But I'd gained experience way before him, and before Elvin. I was with La Roca for a year, 1969, playing with great pianists and bassists – Eddie Gomez, Steve Swallow, Dave Holland, Jimmy Garrison, Chick Corea, Joanne Brackeen, etc., but always me and Pete. I was very nervous with him, and screwed up. And Pete said, "If I don't say anything to you, you're OK!"

Miles hardly said anything to me. He pointed to you when he wanted you to play. A couple of times he said something about music – I tried to get something out of him about Charlie Parker, but he didn't want to talk about music, he just talked about himself, or getting high. He was a little bit of a nutcase in certain ways, in others he was very grounded. As far as directions go, we never rehearsed.

Once I asked him about what to play under him for melodies, and he said "Play thirds!" I had no idea what he meant.

Were you in awe of him?

Oh yeah, he was Miles Davis! That band was a lot of rock guys – this was around On The Corner time. Except for me and Al Foster, who knew the history of Miles Davis and every tune he played.

As far as being a sideman goes, as I said before, that was the highest gig you could get as a saxophone player. You were in the line of Wayne and John Coltrane. It was an honour and a privilege, and a responsibility and a challenge. Miles being as diabolical as he was, and not being in the greatest physical – or mental – shape at that time, he could be a difficult personality. But I got along with him very well. I didn't have a problem with him. He liked me, and we parted on good terms, we stayed in touch over the years. I saw him be rough on people and a real pain in the ass. I also saw him be a sweetheart, and very generous.

My take on Miles Davis is that he was a shy person who was thrown into a situation that his personality was not really made for. He had to adjust, and he had to form a wall of defence around him, to cope with it. Because the truth is, this guy would have been happy just playing the trumpet, and have nobody bother him. But he became Miles Davis, the best-dressed black guy of his generation, Mr. Cool, playing the music heard in every cocktail party in the world, the voice of the beatniks, and the leader who had all the greatest jazzmen with him for a 20-year period. So – voila! – there's a lot of tension on the guy. He was a very self-effacing, quiet guy in a way.

By the time I got to Miles, I was a jazz musician – though unfortunately we didn't play any jazz in that band! We didn't play one walking bassline all the time, it was all funk.

Sly Stone and James Brown.

That was the influence at that time, in the early 70s. I wished I had been there playing "ESP", and "Joshua", and "Seven Steps To Heaven", but instead I was there on an Eb7 for an half and a half! But it was some of the greatest lessons of my life on a musical level – melody, how to control a band, rhythm, dynamics, use of space. Things like that are like flash-cards that come up in my mind when i play – they'll come up tonight [in the concert].

How do you feel, always being asked about Miles and the 60s and 70s?

You will be remembered for your first splash on the planet. That's the way it goes.

The style periods were clearer then.

The rules were clearer – everything was clearer! Life was simpler. The music world was a smaller world, in every way. For better and worse. There are more choices now, which is great – on the other hand there are so many styles that when we say the word "jazz" we don't know what we're talking about. Then there was a common understanding of what jazz was – a common repertoire, a common set of rules, and conformities, and habits, that were part of the game that you had to learn. And a white guy was visiting a black world, on top of that. Jazz belonged culturally to a world you didn't know about – I didn't, coming from my background, a Jewish middle-class home in Brooklyn. My parents were schoolteachers. This was a different world, and it's what formed me. I was with these three heavy guys, Pete La Roca, Elvin Jones, Miles Davis, in a four to five year period – it formed my aesthetic. It's changes over the years, of course, but you can't escape your early influences, especially if they're people like that.

How would you describe your style as developing?

It's about more flexibility, more freedom from where you started – and it's very incremental. It's the way I look at rhythm, at compositions, at what a band does...towards more freedom, yet hopefully more edited. Also, more variety, within a common ground of who I am. My understanding of what it is to play a ballad, an abstract harmonic tune, a "fusion" tune, a "world music" tune, is better over the years, because I've been maturing as a musician. But it's mostly towards more freedom, flexibility and variety, within the basic pattern that was set at the beginning. Most people don't change that, much. You refine it.

Have you ever felt commercial pressure to play in a certain style?

Definitely in the 70s, when I left Miles, because fusion was really riding high. I formed my first band, Lookout Farm, with Jeff Williams who I'm playing with tonight, Richie Beirach and a bassist named Frank Tusa, and Badal Roy the tabla player was with me for a period – we had a lot of interest in crossover at that time.

The mid-70s was when the major fusion hits were happening – Return To Forever, Mahavishnu, Weather Report, Herbie Hancock, George Benson... Everybody felt the pressure to get accepted by the rock audience, by a more mass audience than jazz was. So in '76 I formed a band with Pee Wee Ellis, who actually lives here in England, down in Bath, and we had a little fusion band for a while, recording and some touring. That went on for about a year. I wouldn't say that was pressure, so much, as my desire to see if I could find a way to access that music in an acceptably aesthetic way. It was obviously more commercial than what I was playing with Lookout Farm.

Did you find you could develop an acceptable fusion aesthetic?

No, short answer – it's a closed circle, it has its rules, and those rules are inflexible. Bebop has rules but they're much looser. They leave that little bit more room for communication between the musicians, and for individual personality to come forth. Fusion is a little bit locked in.

Is that in the nature of rock rhythm?

Mostly. And to some extent the harmony – but you can't say that completely about Weather Report, which was an exception. It's the rhythm and the intention of the music – it's not about improvising in the way that we're used to in jazz. The rhythm in jazz is a loose rhythm that invites communication and flexibility.

But there are loose rock feels.

Yes, but one way or the other things don't change once they are set.

The whole harmonic conversation is off the table. And on Miles's On The Corner, the melodic conversation is off the table, by the way. What were the melodies? Two bars long. I could sing all the melodies in ten seconds! That's a specialised thing – good to try, good to know about, but you don't spend a lifetime on it. Well, I don't. It ran its course, pretty shortly.

You've been very keen on forming long-lasting groups.

The advantage of playing [with a pick-up group] is the surprise of the unknown... But I think that's been a weakness of Sonny Rollins, who hasn't maintained a group over the years. And of Lee Konitz.

You miss out when you don't have the same people who understand your conversation, and therefore can go to a higher level. The responsibility of having a group, of getting past boredom, is a heavy one. When I'm with Vic Juris, or Tony Marino my bass-player, who I've been playing with for 17 years, they know everything I'm playing. But when we have nights that are good, they're great. We never have a bad night.

I think the audience is being cheated in jazz in the last 20 years, because guys don't keep groups together. Some people do, others don't even though they can afford to.

I can't afford to – my group isn't so successful, but they're loyal to me and we play maybe 20 gigs in a year. The level of music is higher and the people know it, I know they do.

They know the difference between a group, and a bunch of guys getting together.

Tonight is a bunch of guys getting together after a week of playing.

The most common reason not to have a group is the administrative chore?

Yes – and it's economics!

But musicians are very willing to be in a group if it will better them musically. All I can offer them is music – I can't offer them \$1000 a night, I don't have that. If you go out with Keith Jarrett, those guys make a lot of money. On the other hand, they do have a high

understanding in that trio. The three of them have a real chemistry. I believe in a group, I believe it's a responsibility and guys should take it upon themselves to do it.

You have a tendency to play with guitar-players as much as pianists.

Well, I play with pianists including Richie Beirach, and Marc Copland quite a bit, and Phil Markowitz. This band I've had now with Vic Juris – I like the guitar, it doesn't do the same thing harmonically as the piano, but it has sound, colour, immediacy and a volume. It can be a second horn, it's equal to the saxophone. It opens the music up, makes it more linear. The piano is more harmonic, a background, a carpet to walk over. I enjoy both of them.

You learned classical piano – you still play piano?

Oh yeah, when I'm home, if I have time at all, that's what I do. I do all my writing at the piano, because the piano is the way you see music – the whole orchestra is in front of you, visually.

Have you recorded on piano?

Yes, a couple of records. I'm doing one in a couple of weeks, in Holland – I'm doing the music of Kurt Weill, and I'm doing "My Ship" on piano, a reharmonisation, and "Liebeslied" from Threepenny Opera, in a trio. I can get around on piano OK.

What is your attitude to standards?

I think it's great to do them, in balance. It's a great barometer of where you are at musically, because the standards don't change, but you do. When I play a standard, most of the time I re-arrange it – although I'm not against just playing one off the cuff. It really helps your audience – the little they know, they at least know the melody. And it's good for the band, it brings them together in a common meeting ground. There's a unity immediately from that – whereas with my originals, or your originals, we have to find a common ground.

It's part of the repertoire of your field. It's like painting a vase, or a landscape, or a nude, if you're a painter. You might be painting dots on the wall, if that's your style, but you've got to do those things.

You played with Evan Parker on this tour.

I had never played with him till last Sunday, with Tony Bianco on drums.

We played two sets at the Vortex – we had a wonderful time. It couldn't be more opposite to the way we play tonight. I like playing free jazz – the late 60s, Ascension, that's where I really started. Evan is a master of what he does – it's a particular language. It doesn't appear to, but it has more rules than one would think. It appears that anything goes, but there are things you don't do in that context that are understood. We more or less observed them, I believe.

He did circular breathing – it seemed like he was playing what he normally plays. He didn't do that crazy bird stuff all the time! We played very good together.

And we had a wonderful time, talking about Coltrane – he's a bit of an expert also, and I would like to spend more time with him, doing that. It would be interesting to have an open forum with me and him.

Have you heard much of his music?

Over the years, yes. I can't say I've heard everything. But I've heard enough to identify his playing, and it's unbelievable. He has one amazing thing he does – it's a very specific way of playing. Especially on soprano – I don't know how he gets up to that high register and stays there for 30 minutes plus at a time. He has made it into another instrument, and I enjoy it very much.

What are your feelings about Anthony Braxton as a saxophonist? It's not a crafted sound, is it – an aspect I don't much like.

But he has made his own language, and along with that comes the sonic aspect you're referring to. He made his own world. Maybe it's not universal enough. But I have the greatest respect for him as an artist, he plays unbelievable stuff.

The saxophonist Martin Speicher, for instance, has taken aspects of his sound, and filled it out and worked on it, and to me it's more compelling than the original.

I don't know him. But there are times when the descendents surpass the model. They might be more technically advanced, and maybe rather a limited thing can be the seed of a development that has validity. We could probably find other examples of it.

Do you think he really doesn't work on the sound?

We can't say that. He might practise his sound a lot. But he just has another way of hearing it, and he was able to reinforce it by years of doing it. Pleasant or unpleasant is another story. If he played that sound on "I'm In The Mood For Love", I'm not sure I would take it. He did release a straightforward record with Hank Jones, and I didn't think it was cool.

He's a very sweet guy. I've not seen him for years, but one time, we were both teaching at a place in Western Canada, a pretty high level jazz camp. I was on the staff and he was the guest bringing his large group stuff. He said, "Dave, I've always wanted to talk to you – would you teach me about 'Impressions'?" So I said sure, and we had a wonderful time. He said "It's very interesting, you and I are around the same age, we both had the same epiphany, which was John Coltrane. But we took exactly opposite approaches to the Coltrane problem, 'What do you do after Coltrane?' I couldn't go more into it, and I saw Stockhausen. You looked, and you saw more possibilities within it." That's very accurate!

After he got back home to Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, I phoned with some final questions.

How was the tour with Phil Robson? I enjoyed the concert in Manchester tremendously, and his compositions were excellent.

The last two concerts, that one and Nottingham, were great – they were by far the best, which it should be after a few nights. Phil is a wonderful guitar-player, really a good musician. He's young, in his 30s, plays a little more than he needs to play, but he's going to be a real force in a few years, beyond the English scene. It was great to play with Jeff Williams. I leaned on that guy in my first band as leader, "Lookout Farm," he was my main man and there he was doing [that role] again. The compositions were great.

Is composing something you've done since early days?

Yes. It seemed like everyone I looked around at when I was coming up wrote tunes. It was part of what you were supposed to do as a jazz musician. Now I have 300 or 400 of them.

But that's a lot more than most people!

Yes, I did a lot. 70 or 80% of them are dedicated to something – a place, a person, a feeling, or a very specific programmatic way of thinking. I'm a very visually-oriented person. I liked to write something that is challenging to play, a little bit above what I ordinarily might do. You can really be logical about composition – when you play, that's not necessarily something you are totally in control of. So hopefully the composition leads you to places where you might not have gone.

On the other hand, there seem to be quite a few players who feel obliged to write their own pieces, when that's not where their strength lies.

I agree. There is a feeling of obligation there. But there is a reason, because succeeding generations have exhausted the standards. And the standards of our time –with some

exceptions are not musically as sophisticated as the Tin Pan Alley tunes. So there's not this never ending contemporary repertoire like Charlie Parker had. Also the young players are not coming up in the apprenticeship system as I did – they are playing with their peers. They want to write their own material in a kind of vibe of a rock band, even though it may not be the same language. And finally, the bottom line is the computer – it's easier to write now. I had to struggle to write things on the piano.

Finally, can you tell me your favourite albums of your own?

It's really apples and oranges. The solo record The Loneliness of a Long Distance Runner probably stands alone because it's solo soprano (with overdubs), and solo is the final frontier. You are responsible for everything, you can't look to your left or right [for support]. It was made in 1986 when I was 40 years old, and I put a long of work into it. I like Classique with string, wind and sax classical type quartets on Owl, the stuff with Richie Beirach and Quest, and my Miles Away and Homage to Coltrane records on Owl. And I like the Puccini arias record I did on Arkadia (Walk in the Clouds). I'm pretty proud of them!

You are quite prolific.

I would say so! We try to keep going.

Forthcoming albums include Seraphic Light (Telarc) with Joe Lovano and Ravi Coltrane, appearing in May; a Mosaic boxed set Pendulum-Live From The Village Vanguard 1978 in June; and a HatArt disc with Ellery Eskelin.

David Liebman's website is <http://www.davidliebman.com/>. For a major interview with Liebman on artistic creativity, go to <http://www.allaboutjazz.com/php/article.php?id=28416#1>