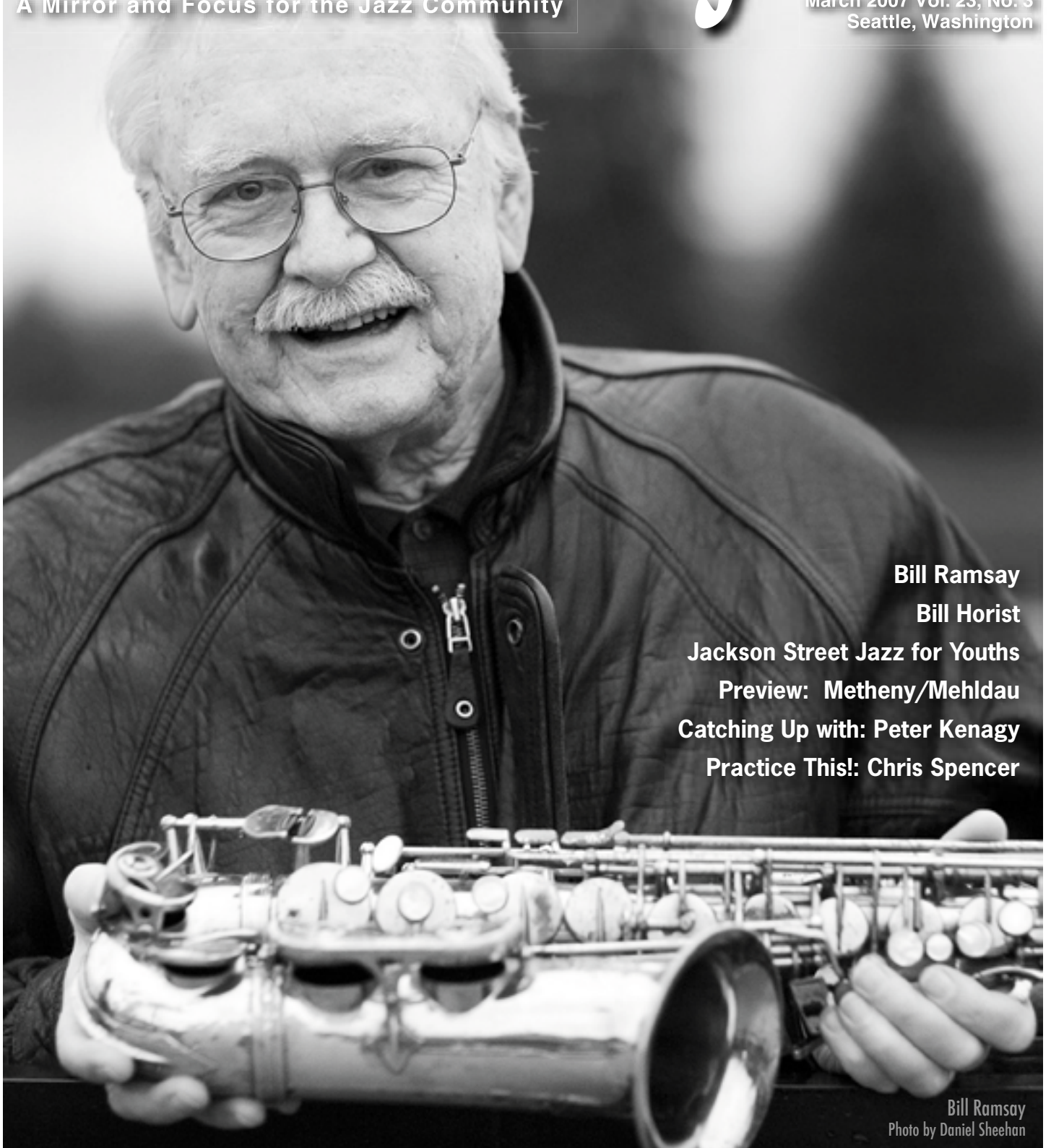


EARSHOT JAZZ

A Mirror and Focus for the Jazz Community

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Bill Ramsay

Bill Horist

Jackson Street Jazz for Youths

Preview: Metheny/Mehldau

Catching Up with: Peter Kenagy

Practice This!: Chris Spencer

Bill Ramsay
Photo by Daniel Sheehan

They Call Him “Rams”

BY HARVEY SIDERS

They call him “Rams.”

Yeah, that’s the name Bill Ramsay most often responds to. Short-and-sweet-like—Rams. Seemingly judging you by your sense of humor, Rams, tall and sardonic, at least tempers the latter with a gentle laugh.

He tested my sense of humor shortly after we got started with this interview. “I got a call a few weeks ago from the Basie band,” Rams told me. “They needed a hurry-up replacement for their regular baritone player, Johnny Williams, who had been hospitalized. So before I left to join the band, I called the hospital where he was and said ‘John, what happened to you?’ He said, ‘I got arrhythmia.’ So I shot back with, ‘Who could ask for anything more?’”

I almost fell on the floor. I’ve tried that joke on musicians and non-musicians since meeting with Rams. Hip ones love it; those unaware of the lyrics to “I Got Rhythm” just give me a blank stare.

Many band leaders call on the Seattle Jazz Hall of Fame resident with a regularity that indicates the high respect Rams has earned in the world of jazz. Calls come from the Count Basie Band, an organization he has been linked with since before Basie died in 1984; the Seattle Repertory Jazz Orchestra, led by Clarence Acox and Michael Brockman, which Rams joined when SRJO was born in 1995; prime movers, behind the busy Los Angeles recording scene as well as Seattle’s on-again, off-again studio activity. Even his summers are cluttered with commitment, thanks to the Port Townsend Jazz Festival. They all call him. They call him Rams; they call him often.

For decades Rams has lived in Tacoma, near the Puyallup line. He was born in Centralia, a small, non-swinging Wash-

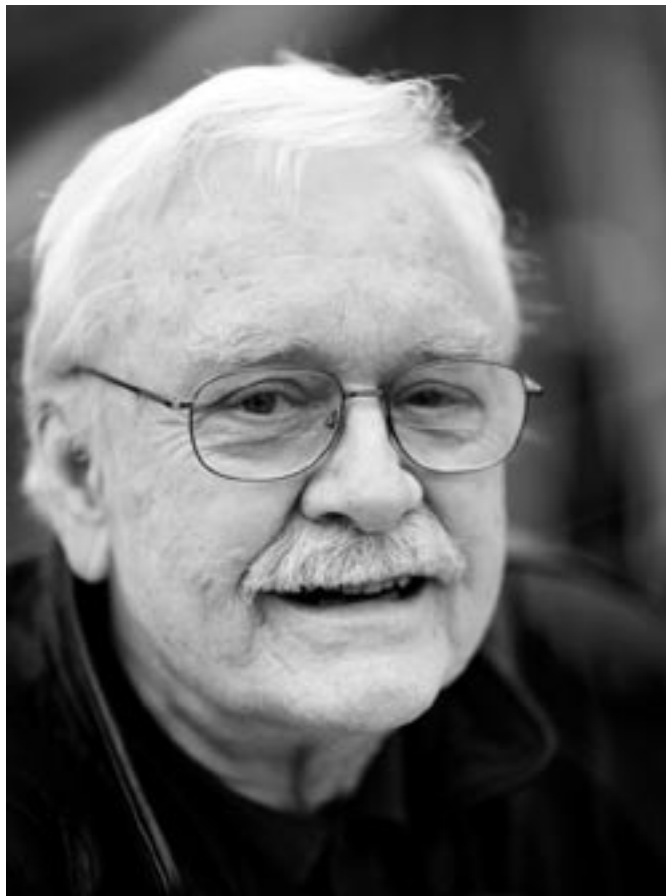


Photo by Daniel Sheehan

ington hamlet, proof that jazz greats can originate in, let’s say, Yelm or even Gorst. Tacoma’s only living jazz legend, now that Red Kelly has checked out, Rams can be found on Northwest recordings by Phil Kelly, this area’s top arranger. Kelly’s first two big bands, titled The Northwest Prevailing Winds and The Southwest Santa Ana Winds, wisely included Ramsay, along with trumpeter Jay Thomas, trombonist Andy Martin, and another tenor saxophonist, Pete Christlieb.

The more recent album, with SW Santa Ana, features a basic 18-piece band of straight-ahead swingers feasting on Kelly’s humor-laced arrangements, plus a bonus of vocalist Greta Matassa backed by strings. Rams stands out among the highlights. He anchors the sax section on baritone, subtly snakes beneath Greta’s haunting version of “My Museum” on bass clarinet, and stretches out on tenor during a Latinized chart of “Body and

Soul.” The recording is a good indication of where he’s at these days in terms of improvisation – an art that came quite naturally to him.

“I began on clarinet in grade school, where I had two lessons and discovered I could ad-lib. My dad owned a tavern just outside the city limits of Centralia. There was a trio playing weekends there, and by this time I was in high school and had switched to tenor and wanted to play with the trio. But I was only 15. So I did the next best thing. [which led to his first quasi-sexual encounters]: There was a window near the bandstand, so I got on a box outside, opened the window, leaned in and blew tenor with the trio.”

“Young ladies would walk by and many times they’d goose me! If I was in the middle of a solo, that would lead to a pretty horrible screech.” Another thing that excited me a little bit: The sax was a school instrument and the girl in the school band that usually played it left lipstick all over the reed.”

At 18 Rams moved to L.A., quickly got homesick and returned to Centralia and joined the army. “I figured I’d join the army band at Fort Lewis. It was either that, or get drafted and face basic training. At that time, Korea was heating up.”

During the years that led to 1984, Rams nourished his chops. He added clarinet, bass clarinet, soprano sax, alto sax and baritone sax to his arsenal; played with anyone he could, which included Cab Calloway, Mel Lewis, Gene Harris, Quincy Jones, and Steve Allen. He fronted his own band and co-led a 10-piece band with Milt Kleebe. Then he got the call to join the band that any straight-ahead swinger would die for: Count Basie. “I received a call from the road manager, trumpeter Sonny Cohn. Basie needed a

baritone player. Turns out that trumpeter Bobby Mitchell had recommended me to Basie after having heard me with the Benny Goodman band. Basie said that was good enough for him," says Rams.

Rams was under the impression that it was for a one-nighter in Yakima because baritone player Johnny Williams had gone home suddenly after his mother became ill. So Rams brought his baritone, a change of underwear and his toothbrush. "When I found it was the start of a tour, I asked Cohn 'Where are you playing tomorrow night?' He said, 'Well, we'll sleep over in Cleveland, then open the next day in West Virginia.' So I put in a fast call to Frankie (Bill's wife and life-long soul mate), and she packed up as much as she could and rushed it over to me, and in no time I was on the bus."

Three weeks after Rams joined the band, Count Basie died. A variety of famous alumni took over the leadership: Eric Dixon, Thad Jones, Grover Mitchell. There was even an aborted attempt at co-leadership with Frank Wess and Harry "Sweets" Edison. No matter who was out front, the Basie band lived on, even thrived. Although they offered Rams a gig in perpetuity, he knew he couldn't keep touring. He says, "At the time I was my in fifties and it didn't take long to find out that I couldn't sleep on transportation. If you can't sleep on a plane, or train, or bus, you're not gonna get any sleep, period."

Rams has flourished since getting off the road. Here in the Northwest jazz scene, he

finds himself more in demand than ever. He certainly has not severed his ties with the Basie band. As "sideman emeritus," he knows they can count on his virtuosity when it comes to replacing someone in a hurry. Rams has played three chairs on that band: lead alto, second alto, and baritone. It's nice to be wanted; even nicer to have the talent to respond.

Rams shares with *Earshot* another of his home-grown talents – as one of this area's best-loved raconteurs. Call it a distillation of his folksy Centralia roots plus his powers to observe human nature. Honed during his years of life on the bus and exposure to every facet of the human equation as seen through the eyes and ears – and exploits – of those unique philosophers, jazz musicians, Ram's enviable memory could fill a book. Guaranteed, it would include these stories:

"In 1982 I was playing in Carnegie Hall with the Benny Goodman Octet. It was one of those package deals: \$2,500 per person. It included the concert, dinner, cocktails, and dancing later at the Plaza Hotel. It was sold out. After the concert, Benny tells us we're on our own to get to the Plaza. Well it was raining very hard. We're in our tuxes and we've got our instruments. Benny's still inside Carnegie Hall with his rich friends and he's being interviewed. We notice his long, dark green limo with the driver waiting. Somebody says, 'We're gonna take Benny's limo.' So we all pile in and

the driver says, 'Where's Mr. Goodman?' and we assure him that Benny will join us later. So we went to the Plaza, set up and began playing for the diners and dancers. Benny comes out eventually, but can't find his limo. He can't get a cab either. You know, New York, Carnegie Hall, rainy night. He finally gets to the Plaza and begins asking if any limo came with a bunch of people and he's told there were plenty of crowded limos with movie stars. Benny specifies the long, dark green limo. 'Oh, a bunch of musicians got out of that one.' Well Benny was so pissed that he refused to play with us that night and immediately canceled the next night's sold-out gig in Dallas.

"Another time, we were getting on a plane and I was holding a tenor, my gig bag and something else, and Benny's walking ahead of me with just his tiny clarinet case and says 'Oh, man, I don't want to lug this. Here Bill,' and he shoves it under one of my arms. We board the plane. He heads for first class, and I don't see him until we land. He didn't do it to be mean. He was eccentric and could focus only on one thing at a time. There are a million Goodman stories out there. That was Benny. Sometimes he'd call you by name. Other times he'd forget and call you Pops.

"One time we headed to Seattle for some seafood. Benny wanted seafood, and I told him I knew of a great place. I knew the owner and called ahead and asked if he had a table for two. He said

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‘Bill, I’m so booked up I couldn’t even find a place for you to stand and wait.’ I said to him, ‘Look, it’s just Benny Goodman and me.’ He said ‘See you at noon’ and told everyone Benny Goodman was coming. When we arrived, there was a buzz in the place, and everyone was looking at Benny. I don’t know what I ordered. I don’t know what Benny had, but he took one look at my plate and began eating my food. Everyone’s looking at him, but he’s not aware of that. He was just talking, being congenial, said he was buying and ate my whole lunch! Then he even fumbled around for his wallet, but I just sat there...didn’t even reach for my billfold. After all I didn’t eat a thing.

“We played a winery in Northern California for a three-day weekend – two nights and a Sunday matinee. The band included Dick Nash, Mel Lewis, and, for the first time, Paul Smith on piano. Benny had called me the night before and said he tried to get a piano player, couldn’t find one and Paul Smith was recommended to him, so he asked me, ‘Is he a good player?’ ‘Oh, hell yes, he’s played with Steve Allen. He was Ella Fitzgerald’s accompanist for years. But, Benny, I got to tell you, he takes no shit.’ Benny said well I’m going to use him. When the music began that first night, he turned around and motioned Paul to play softer. Moments later, Benny repeated the call for ‘softer.’ When he did it a third time, Paul stopped, brought the lid down

on the keys and sat there, arms folded. Somehow the gig proceeded.

“By the time Saturday night’s concert ended, we decided to try a special wine that the winery folk were experimenting with. It was smooooth...something like thousand-proof cabernet. In no time we were smashed. None of us remembered how we got back to our hotel rooms, but all of a sudden it was time to get up for the matinee. I opened the door to the deck I shared with Mel Lewis and all of a sudden the fact that I had no sunglasses and the sun was blazing down hit me. I threw up all over the deck. I called Mel and asked if he had sunglasses and he groaned ‘Yes, but they’re covering my eyes.’ Then he told me he had a lady friend coming up to the winery soon and he would ask her to bring sunglasses. Sure enough she did, but they were pink-rimmed and heart-shaped. I had no choice. There we were in tuxedos, and I could hear people giggling about my heart-shaped sunglasses. Benny came on the stand and began the set and when he motioned me to take a solo, he noticed my glasses. When I reached the mic, Benny stretched and took my sunglasses off. He said, ‘Bill, these are not apropos.’ Then he looked at my eyes and gasped ‘Oh shit!’ and placed the glasses back. I remember that. It turned out to be the last time I played with Benny.”

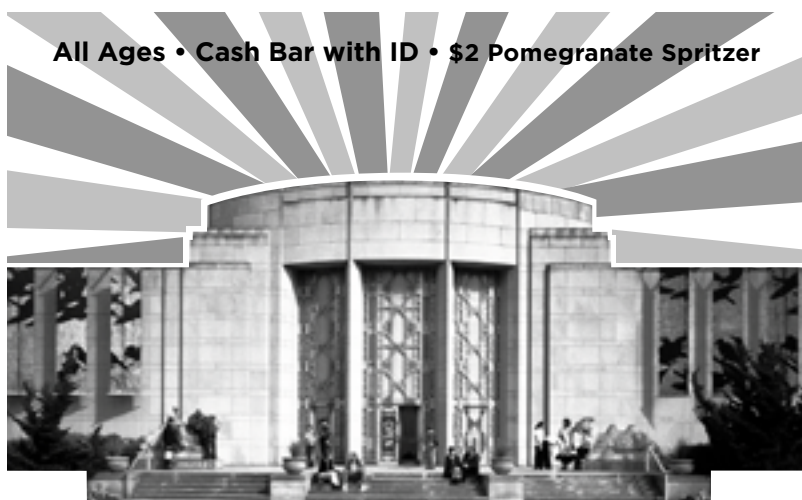
Rams’s final anecdote, involving the Basie band, took place in Hollywood

where the band was playing at a theater. As Rams recalled, “Before the concert we were standing around, backstage, near the band entrance when Leonard Feather gets out of a cab and begins looking around. Suddenly a voice from the rear – I think it was trumpeter Bob Summers – announces, ‘Hey, everybody, an empty cab just pulled up and Leonard Feather got out.’ Of course everybody broke up.”

I broke up when Rams told the story; his hoarse laugh takes you along with the momentum. But now, in the writing of that anecdote, I realize I don’t get it. Surrealism makes me a bit uncertain. I know the late Leonard Feather was reviled by many musicians, but they would always admit they needed his clout as a reviewer. I always referred to him as “Learned Father” because he had few peers among jazz historians, and besides he got me on the L.A. Times with him in the 1970s and I couldn’t have asked for a better break.

At 77, Bill Ramsay may be reluctant to go back on the road, but he’s equally reluctant to say no when he gets the call. His avuncular presence on the bus is still needed, just as his irrepressible sense of humor still spices up any local club gig or recording session. And, oh yeah, his horn still runneth over with original ideas.

That’s Rams: nearly six-and-a-half feet of swinging ad-libs and memorable stories.



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