

Sonny Stitt - The Hard Swing (1959)

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1. *I Got Rhythm* 2. *What's New* 3. *Subito* 4. *If I Had You* 5. *I'll Remember April* 6. *Blues For Lester* 7. *After You've Gone* 8. *Street Of Dreams* 9. *The Way You Look Tonight* 10. *Presto* 11. *Tune Up* Alto Saxophone – Sonny Stitt Bass – George Morrow Drums – Lennie McBrowne Piano – Amos Trice Tenor Saxophone – Sonny Stitt

Sonny Stitt, who was a master saxophonist on alto, tenor and in his early days, baritone....was one of the most misunderstood musicians in the Jazz spectrum. Throughout his long career he was called an imitator and a copier of Charlie Parker on alto and Lester Young on tenor.....he stopped playing the baritone in he early 50's (he found it tiresome to lug the big horn around from gig to gig) but had he continued somebody would have called him a copier of Serge Chaloff or Gerry Mulligan. Poor Stitt never copied anybody. He grew up with the same influences as Parker and was musically stimulated by many of the same musicians as Bird so natually there were some superficial similarities in their concepts but Stitt was his own man. When he began playing the larger tenor in the late 40's, Lester Young was an influence to be sure but even the most tin-eared critic would never have confused Stitt and Lester. Sonny developed strong personalities on both horns and the few recordings he made on the big baritone showed once again an individual concept beholden to no one.

Edward Boatner was born in Boston, Massachusetts on February 2, 1924 into a musical family. His brother was a concert pianist and his dad was a college music prof. Boatner's mom was also musical and taught piano but when Edward was very young Mrs. Boatner divorced and remarried and Edward took his stepdad's name.....Stitt; and was nicknamed "Sonny". Young Sonny studied piano, then clarinet and then the alto saxophone, which remained his strongest and favourite horn. By this time Sonny's parents had moved to Saginaw, Michigan and soon Sonny began his professional career playing gigs and eventually joining and touring with the Tiny Bradshaw Band. It was during that tour in 1943 that he heard and met Charlie Parker. Bird and Stitt hit it off and Bird reportedly said "Sonny, man, you sound like me" to which Stitt replied, "Bird you sound like me". Stitt was in the famous Billy Eckstine band with his best buddy, tenor

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saxophonist Gene Ammons and others and then was with Dizzy Gillespie's small and big bands but Stitt was pretty much a loner and not a joiner and preferred to go it by himself and work with small groups as featured soloist. He did however work with a few bands that were to his liking especially his on and off partnership beginning in 1950 with Gene Ammons. Stitt and Ammons were one of the foremost two saxophone partnerships in all of Jazz. Stitt toured with Jazz at the Philharmonic in the mid-50's and loved it as it was basically a travelling jam session and Sonny, during this time made some of his best records: eg. "Sonny Side Up" with Dizzy Gillespie and Sonny Rollins and so many others. Miles Davis asked Stitt to join his band after Coltrane departed and some fine concert recordings were made during a European tour with Stitt. As an aside, Jimmy Heath was to be Coltrane's replacement in Miles' band but the conditions of Heath's parole (he had spent several years in prison for narcotics possession) did not allow for him to leave New York at the time, so Stitt got the gig. Sonny didn't last long as he was not a joiner and he left Miles to go on his own. The only other band Sonny was ever involved in after Miles was the 'Giants of Jazz' group in the early 70's with Dizzy, Kai Winding, Blakey and Monk et al. Other than that and the odd reunion with Ammons....Sonny toured all over picking up local rhythm sections until his death from cancer on July 22, 1982.

Sonny Stitt was one of the most widely recorded musicians in Jazz and while some of his recordings were rather routine, some were totally inspired and rank as some of the finest recordings ever. Even the discs where Sonny seemed to mail in his part have something to offer as his technique and endless flow of ideas and his immense knowledge of tunes are always worth checking out. Stitt had the respect of his peers, and people like Coltrane, Getz, Rollins, etc. all listed Sonny on either horn as a favourite.

Tonight's Feature is a rare recording that has never been re-issued domestically, called "The Hard Swing" was done in Los Angeles in 1959 with a band that he had picked up and worked a week with at a club in Watts. Sonny carries the ball on most tunes leaving very little space to his worthy rhythm section. We'll hear him on alto for the first seven tunes then on tenor for the final four. Stitt is backed by the obscure and rarely recorded pianist Amos Trice. George Morrow, who had just left Max Roach's band to settle in L.A. is on bass and the very talented drummer Lenny McBrowne keeps the fires burning. Stitt is in inspired form on this date and the ideas pour out of his horns with fiery intensity....."The Hard Swing" indeed!!!! ---Gavin Walker, vancouverjazz.com

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