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Community*

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***TOBI STONE
GOLDEN EAR AWARDS BALLOT!
2005 ART OF JAZZ AT SAM***

Tobi Stone: Rock of the Tiptons

BY TODD MATTHEWS

Consider for a moment the life of Billy Tipton.

Born Dorothy Lucile Tipton in Oklahoma City in 1914, Tipton learned to play the piano while living with her aunt in Kansas City. She developed a love for music and, by the age of 16, attended jazz clubs and played the saxophone. While auditioning for gigs, Tipton was repeatedly told that audiences wouldn't pay to see a female jazz musician. As a result, Tipton paid the ultimate price for her love of music: she became Billy Tipton and embarked on a life as a male jazz musician. The result? An impressive music career. It wasn't until

Tipton's death in Spokane, Washington, at age 75, that Tipton's biggest secret was revealed: the famous jazzman Billy Tipton was actually a woman.

I mention Tipton's story because it is an important part of a performance that took place last November at the Art of Jazz Series (sponsored in part by the Seattle Art Museum and Earshot Jazz). The Tiptons – an all-female quintet featuring Amy Denio, Jessica Lurie, Sue Orfield, and Tobi Stone on saxophones, and Elizabeth Pupo Walker on percussion -- performed for a crowd that packed the museum's lobby to hear the group create its unique sound of world-music, straight-ahead bebop, avant-garde influences, and orchestra-style arrangements. The audience was drawn to the music and the range of experiences that each musician brought to the stage – not to the fact that the group boasted all-fe-



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male personnel. Though that aspect of the band could not be ignored. Chances are probably slim that a female musician was part of the last jazz performance you attended. Yet with The Tiptons, there are four female saxophonists in one band.

"I get asked, 'What's it like being a woman and playing jazz?'" says saxophonist Stone, over coffee and scones at a Seattle café. "My experience has been really good in terms of my generation. I didn't go through what women of earlier generations went through."

Women such as Tipton, for example.

"For me, it's more of a choice. It's not like The Tiptons are the only group around. I think we kind of like the all-female aspect as a selling point. It's different. It's unique. And it honors her and the idea of being a woman musician and going for it."

Her father, a classical guitarist, intro-

duced Stone to music. She began playing guitar at the age of six, and picked up the clarinet at the age of twelve. The idea to seriously pursue music didn't occur until she was fifteen years old and discovered the saxophone. "That was it," she recalls. "I had to play the saxophone." Stone played lead tenor for the Kentridge High School Jazz Band. She won soloist awards at the Reno International Jazz Festival in 1994 and 1995. She participated in a national youth jazz band at the Kennedy Center. And she performed with Dave Brubeck at the Pierce Community College Jazz Festival.

Stone entered the University of Washington School of Music with plans to study orchestral clarinet and jazz saxophone. Tendonitis derailed those plans, and she settled on one instrument: the saxophone (alto and tenor). She landed some impressive gigs throughout college,

and performed with saxophonists Don Lanphere, Bert Wilson, Warren Rand, Rob Scheps, and Michael Brockman; pianists Ann Reynolds, Gary Versace, Carolyn Graye, and John Hansen; drummers Patty Padden and Jose Martinez; bassist Geoff Cook; guitarist Mimi Fox; vocalist Nancy King; and trumpeter Jay Thomas.

She also formed a friendship with the pianist Dawn Clement. "I met her at the jazz camp at Port Townsend when I was seventeen and she was fourteen," Stone recalls. "She was playing piano amongst all these horn players. I walked in and thought, 'She's incredible.' I became friends with her and we have performed throughout the years."

These days Stone divides her time between three projects: The Tiptons, Reptet, and the Seattle Women's Jazz Orchestra.

Alto saxophonist Amy Denio started the Tiptons in 1990. Though the group has changed since then (it was originally named the Billy Tipton Memorial Saxophone Quartet and included a slightly different personnel), its instrumental focus has always been the saxophone. The repertoire ranges from New Orleans jump groove to hip-hop, punk to East European, klezmer and beyond. Stone joined The Tiptons two years ago. She was called upon to fill in on baritone saxophone. "Before joining The Tiptons," says Stone, "I didn't play baritone. Now I really like it. I'm drawn to it because it's nice and low. It's powerful. It takes a lot of air, and it feels really healthy."

In March 2003, The Tiptons produced a five-song EP featuring brand new material. The group performed at The Women In Movement In New Mexico Music Festival, and at the Coleman Hawkins Jazz Festival in Topeka, Kansas. These performances were followed by a West Coast tour in October 2003. In February 2004, the group released an album titled *Tsunami*, and performed 14 concerts in Italy, Germany, Austria, and Slovenia. The group finished a West Coast tour last autumn – including a couple dates in Vancouver B.C.

The idea for an all-saxophone quartet may sound a bit strange and simply too brass-heavy, but The Tiptons create a signature sound that works well. "I think a lot of music lends itself to the saxophone quartet," explains Stone. "Think about music with accordions. The accordion is a reed instrument. Four saxophones sound like an accordion. That's one way to approach this music. Also, the baritone works as a bass instrument. It picks up the bass line, and the other three horns pick up the harmony."

The group's range of genres also contributes to its successful sound. Much of this is credited to Denio – a veteran musician and world traveler. "She's a bit of a mentor," says Stone. "I'm definitely picking up things from her. There are so many different kinds of sounds on the saxophone that I have never heard before. She's just translating what's happening in her imagination or what she has heard around the world. She has tons of stories about her travels. She brings a lot of experience and knowledge."

Another project for Stone is Reptet – a quartet that also performs a range of genres that includes funk, bebop, and avant-garde. Reptet's personnel includes leading freely improvised, avant-garde musicians John Ewing (drums and percussion), Ben Verdier (bass), Samantha Boshnack (trumpet and flugelhorn), and Stone (saxophone, clarinet and flute). Reptet released its first album last year, and was nominated for Emerging Jazz Artist of the Year by Earshot Jazz. The group is part of the Monktil Creative Music Concern – a large collective that is leading the charge of Seattle avant-garde music. "There's a lot of craziness in that group," Stone says. "It's opened up my world as far as free improvisation. I come from a more traditional background, as opposed to freer stuff. The music caught my ear, and it was the next area to explore musically."

Stone also re-joined the Seattle Women's Jazz Orchestra last summer (she originally joined the group in 1999). "I like the possibilities in that group, being

"Tobi Stone Rocks!"
— Amy Denio



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See Stone, page 16

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Tobi Stone, from page 5

able to write and travel," she says. "And they are playing once or twice a month. These are paid gigs. For a big-band, that's really rare."


The Tiptons will travel to Europe next spring. The trip will mark Stone's second journey overseas with the band, and sixth tour overall. "The last tour was great," she says. "We were laughing the whole time. It was such a good tour. I think we just blend really well as a group.

You can catch Tobi Stone performing with the Seattle Women's Jazz Orchestra at Tula's on Sunday, January 23 and with Reptet at Tula's on Thursday, January 27.

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