



Saxophonist Mike Lee's No Copycat

By Nancy Ann Lee

Saxophonist Mike Lee is a native of Cleveland, Ohio, the city that yielded Tadd Dameron, Albert Ayler, Ken Peplowski, Joe Lovano and other jazz stars. Born April 10, 1963, Lee began piano studies at age five and switched to saxophone as a teenager, before discovering jazz and Miles Davis.

Today, Lee draws inspiration from Charlie Parker, Ben Webster, Duke Ellington and Sidney Bechet. But he's no copycat. Lee's caressive, communicative style is bolstered by college studies at Cleveland State and the University of Cincinnati, plus two years of studies in New York with Joe Lovano. Lee's self-produced debut, *The Quiet Answer*, was released in 1990 while he was in Cleveland. He now resides in New Jersey. Lee's second CD, *Above the Battleground*, is an exciting outing with Oberlin grad Matt Ray on piano, and New Yorkers Ben Allison (bass), Tim Horner (drums) and Tim Hagans (trumpet).

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An exceptional expressionist with a rich, burnished tenor tone and flowing unpredictable lines, Lee knows his craft. Eight of the 10 tunes on *Above the Battleground* exhibit his gift for writing such diverse, attention-grabbers as the hardbop opener "Desert storm," the straight-ahead Blakey-ish swing piece "Leisure Suit" and (Lee's personal favorites) the highly creative and expansive "Holy Instant," "Becca-Lou's Shoes" and title tune. Lee gains spiritual strength from studying the Course in Miracles. "(My spiritual life) affects everything, especially music," he says. "The state of mind you're in when you're playing, especially improvised music, is critical to what ends up coming out."

When not touring as a Selmer clinician, Lee subs with the Village Vanguard Orchestra and the Maria Schneider Orchestra, and performs with small groups. He participated in Lovano's Celebrating Sinatra tour and says, "My best N.Y.C. experience was playing with Lovano at the Vanguard. Hearing him play and develop his approach to the same Manny Albam arrangements night after night, and getting to solo a couple of times each set was lesson and an inspiration."