



## Saxophonist Mike Lee

Mike Lee's musical career has taken him many places musically and around the world. From the mid to late 80's he resided in Brooklyn, New York where developed his musical concepts with many associates and mentors. This period of creative inspiration was high-lighted by his lessons with Joe Lovano and his musical collaborations with his then roommate, Dave Douglas.

Inspired by the wealth of information these associations gave him, he returned to Cleveland to assimilate this material. This was a productive time musically. Along with constant practicing this period was punctuated by gigs with Marcus Belgrave, Bobby Watson, Geri Allen, Joe Lovano, Rosemary Clooney, Marlon Jordan, Johnny Coles and touring as a member of the Woody Herman's Thundering Herd.

In 1993 Lee resumed residency in New York City and flourished on the the jazz scene playing on numerous occasions with The Village Vanguard Orchestra (Formerly The Thad Jones/ Mel

Lewis Orchestra) the Maria Schneider Orchestra (with whom he was featured in Maria's CNN profile) and the Bill Mobley Big Band with which he performed and recorded along side acclaimed pianists James Williams, Harold Mabern and Mulgrew Miller. He has appeared around town with small groups which include New York musicians such as guitarists John Hart and Ron Affif, bassist Ron McClure, and drummer Elliot Zigmund.

Two of Mike's compositions were selected among the top five in the 1997 Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz and BMI International Jazz Composers Competition. He was a member of Joe Lovano's "Celebrating Sinatra" touring ensemble. His critically acclaimed CD, Above the Battleground, Consolidated Artists Productions (CAP), featuring Tim Hagans on trumpet, Tim Horner on drums, Matt Ray on piano and Ben Allison on bass was released in 1998. My Backyard (Omnitone) released in 2000. Both albums received very high praise from trade publications.

Beginning in the late 90's, Mike became a very in demand Jazz Educator and guest soloist. He has toured the United States and Europe since then, performing with local rhythm sections and presenting clinics at over 100 universities and schools.

The past few years have found Mike continuing his musical pursuits while raising a family and digging deep roots in the Northern New Jersey/New York jazz community. His musical associations have flourished while interacting with other jazz musicians residing in the area. Musical encounters with Bruce Williams, Cecil Brooks III, T.S. Monk, Billy Hart, Andy McKee, Geri Allen and Christian McBride have made this a satisfying period in his musical development.

## Mike Lee Critical Acclaim

*(Bruce) Williams and (Mike) Lee provided a beguiling blend of tones and asides during the theme. Powerhouse Lee, who boasts tremendous technique and improvisational acumen, played a solo full of complex ideas that were deftly resolved. His affinity for early 1960s John Coltrane was front and center.*

- Zan Stewart - New Jersey Star Ledger - May 11, 2006 - Review of Bruce Williams' Gig at Cecil's Jazz Club

*Bill Holmans's arrangement of "Too Close for Comfort" afforded (Mike) Lee the space to show his mastery of technique and unimpeded flow of ideas. His control of the altissimo register permits his carrying a full, clear tone to the uppermost reaches, feeding each climax and contrasting with the flurries of notes he spits out in the middle range.*

- Eric Erickson - Northeast Wisconsin Music Review - August 1, 2005 Review of Birch Creek Academy Band

*This gifted composer and masterful saxophonist has crafted tunes of character, lilt, and elegance, buoying them with his fat back, velvety saxophone.*

- Carlo Wolff, Jazziz (February 2001) - Review of My Backyard (Omnitone)

*An inventive improviser, ideas flow from [Lee's] horn in great profusion.*

- Harvey Pekar, JazzTimes (March 2001) - Review of My Backyard (Omnitone)

*Mike Lee is a very gifted and exciting young saxophonist who has the future in his sound.*

- Joe Lovano, Blue Note Recording Artist

*The saxophonist has been gaining a reputation as one of the — baddest — improvisers on the scene which was evidenced on his brand new release, titled My Backyard.*

- Glenn Astarita, All About Jazz.com - Review of My Backyard (Omnitone)

*(Joe) Lovano....and (Mike) Lee (filling the Role taken by Joshua Redman on the record) played off each other with all the uncanny musical symbiosis that the great tenor teams of yore - Al Cohn and Zoot Sims, Sonny Stitt and Gene Ammons - used to exhibit.*

- David Sowd Akron Beacon-Journal, January 2, 1995

*...a wonderful saxophonist and composer as well...*

- Michael Brecker, Impulse Recording Artist

*On the basis of The Quiet Answer, Michael Lee has joined the ranks of the Cats (Branford Marsalis, Ralph Moore, Courtney Pine, Ralph Bowen): Fresh voices who are widening the envelope of possibility within the tenor/soprano saxophone post-bop mainstream. His sound on tenor is clean and strong...He writes good songs and he possesses the discipline and fluency to shape the flow of every improvisation into meaningful form...*

- Thomas Conrad CD REVIEW August/1991

*Tenor saxophonist Michael Lee represents the latest luminary in a long tradition of outstanding Cleveland saxophonists. His writing and playing exhibit a consistently high intelligence and concern for continuity and purpose. ...I have noticed an assimilation of varied influences in the hard-bop mainstream, and a marvelous fluency. His command of the instrument is masterful, and he has refined an incisive posture within his approach to improvisation.*

- Mark C. Gridley, author Jazz Styles: History and Analysis (Prentice-Hall)

*Mike Lee? Wow!! I really enjoyed creating with him. His sensitivity is superb.*

- Marcus Belgrave Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra

*Mike is an outstanding clinician and an excellent musician. He has much to offer both the beginning and advanced student. I recommend him highly.*

- Gene Aitken, Director University of Northern Colorado Jazz Studies Program

*Mike Lee gave an excellent saxophone/jazz improvisation clinic at the University of Miami. He chose to address the all-important issues of sound, time, and personal expression and definitely got his message across to my saxophone students, and to the members of the rhythm section as well. He also shared some good advice about establishing a career as a jazz musician, detailing the obstacles as well as the rewards. I would highly recommend his program to any music school.*

- Gary Keller, Saxophone University of Miami Jazz Program

# The Star-Ledger

**Music** Latest news and listings

## Mike Lee lives the jazz life at Cecil's

by Zan Stewart/The Star-Ledger

Thursday July 16, 2009,  
12:26 PM

Like many professional jazz musicians, Mike Lee found hearing a major-league jazz artist in person to be a life-transforming experience, one that set him on the road he travels today. For the 46-year-old Cleveland native, who has evolved into a spirited, intelligent saxophonist, woodwind player, composer, arranger, bandleader and educator, it was a performance by the great tenor saxophonist Johnny Griffin at Cleveland State University in 1978. Then a teenager, Lee, who had also been listening to records by saxophone powerhouses John Coltrane and Dexter Gordon, found that Griffin moved him in a special way.

"Griff was melodic and also played aggressively," he said. "Seeing him live, watching the band, the audience react, just turned me on. I remember saying to a friend, 'That's what I want to do.' Being a jazz musician became a career objective."

Lee worked hard, studied hard and eventually began playing with many of the best, including the Woody Herman Orchestra (directed by Frank Tiberi), Joe Lovano, the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra and Mulgrew Miller. This weekend, he will lead his own quartet, New Tricks, at Cecil's in West Orange. He also leads the club's Big Band on Mondays.

The philosophical value of music is always on Lee's mind, whether he's playing a club or jamming in his basement, teaching a student or writing a new tune. "Musicians practice for our edification, as well as for the edification of our fellow travelers," said Lee, who lives in Montclair with his wife of 18 years, violinist Rebecca Harris, and their three children: Julian, 14, an award winning saxophonist; Matthew, 7, a drummer; and Jackie, 3, who has started violin.

"In some ways, we are all musicians," continued Lee. "Music is a necessary part of who we are. It brings peace and meaning. It brings joy. It



Mitsu Yasukawa

### Saxophonist Mike Lee appears Friday and Saturday at Cecil's in West Orange.

allows access to pain we need to feel."

Lee's current band, New Tricks, grew out of his experiences with Cecil's Big Band, which Joe Elefante led from 2003 to 2006, at which point Lee took over. Of that large ensemble, which ranges from driving swing to more adventurous pieces, Lee said, "It's a great musical and social community. It's inspiring how guys want to come out and play."

New Tricks, which just released its self-titled debut album on New Tricks Records, includes Lee, trumpeter Ted Chubb, bassist Kellen Harrison and drummer Shawn Baltazor. The band is comprised of "traditionalists who are also freethinkers," Lee said.

The sounds are similarly described. "The tunes are strong melodically and have clear harmonic movement, but there's always a possibility that the music could go someplace else," he said.

Lee gives credit to Cecil's and its owner, Cecil Brooks III, for the boost the room has given his musical life in general. "I can't imagine what life would be like without the club," he said. "It's basically who I am musically. It's what I'm doing every week."

It is that consistency Lee most values, even if some early dreams didn't come to fruition. "I used to think about being super famous, traveling, getting to play constantly," he said. "While those things haven't borne out, just that I have a lifestyle when I can practice my craft four-to-five hours a day is an unbelievable gift."



JAZZ NEAR YOU



Advertise Locally Here

## New Tricks at Cecil's Jazz Club

Published: August 13, 2009

By David A. Orthmann

New Tricks  
Cecil's Jazz Club  
West Orange, New Jersey  
July 17, 2009

Over the past few years, the northern New Jersey-based band New Tricks has painstakingly developed a distinctive sound during weekly sessions in the basement studio of saxophonist Mike Lee. It is almost bad form to single out contributions of the tightly knit quartet's members, which include Lee, trumpeter Ted Chubb, bassist Kellen Harrison and drummer Shawn Baltazor. An excellent, self-titled compact disc recorded in 2007 and released several weeks ago on New Tricks Records only approximates the high energy and single-minded intensity they generated throughout an opening set at Cecil's Jazz Club. "We are New Tricks," Lee declared after the first number, as if to underscore the group's "one for all" ethos.

The liberty provided by the absence of a piano or guitar was used wisely, as each player adroitly shifted between support and assertiveness. Harrison served as the band's workhorse, nailing down the bottom of Lee's and Chubb's compositions. On the head of Lee's "Old Dog," while the rest of the band swelled around the bassist, Harrison's minimal foundation was a model of stability. Throughout most of the set, Baltazor jostled the soloists by moving (and frequently blurring the boundaries) between jazz, Latin, and funk rhythms. The drummer stayed on top of Chubb during a burning rendition of Charlie Parker's "Ah-Leu-Cha" (the only non-original of the set and on the record). A pointed tom-tom fill answered the trumpeter's initial phrase and a few bars later a snare and tom-tom combination imitated some brief biting lines. Knowing that laying back is as important as hitting hard, Baltazor all but vanished during Chubb's simple and eloquent tones at the onset of the "Old Dog" solo.

On the heads of Chubb's "In His Steps," and Lee's "Jackie's Day," the trumpeter and saxophonist wrapped around each other like vines. They took turns playing a part of the melody of Chubb's exquisite tribute to his grandfather, "1919 (Dedicated to Donald Jacobus)," each stating the theme in his own manner. Lee offered brief, discreet commentary during Chubb's improvisation on "J's Other Bag." He followed with a soprano solo that alternately locked into and danced over Baltazor's straight jacket funk beats. Occasionally referring to the melody, Lee waxed both deliberate and verbose. He shaped a few long cries into phrases, and entered into a playful dialogue with Chubb. The trumpeter offered neatly clipped lines over the Latin-funk foundation of Lee's "After Much Discussion, Josie Moves East." Playing against the bass and drums, Chubb blazed his own trail by improvising a series of song-like melodies.

The band was relentless throughout "Ah-Leu-Cha," the set's final selection. Harrison's walking bass anchored explosive solos by Chubb and Lee, and his turn entailed vivid, percolating lines over the buzzing of Baltazor's sticks on the hi-hat. The drummer's four-bar breaks evoked the spirit of Max Roach and brought the group's energy level up to a fever pitch. Each stroke produced a broad, thick-set sound as he brazenly moved around the set in short, choppy phrases.

If this set is any indication, we can look forward to many more interactive performances from New Tricks in the years to come.

Visit [New Tricks](#) on the web.

Just Subscribe!



# JazzTimes®

[Articles](#) [Community](#) [Company](#) [Guides](#) [Promotions](#) [Reviews](#) [Shopping](#)

MARCH 2001

## Mike Lee

### My Backyard

OmniTone

By Harvey Pekar

Mike Lee's music contains strong traditional elements: it swings and the improvisation in it is based on preset foundations. But it's also fresh in that some of Lee's compositions have distinctive forms and unique, sometimes very difficult, chord progressions. "Just North of Normal" is an excellent and particularly distinctive tune. It's 16-bars long, but divided unusually into sections of five, seven and four bars, and contains a dense, unusually contoured chord progression. It's mostly in 4/4, but has one 6/4 bar. "Her Hair, Full of Heavenly Glamour..." "Sinuosity" and "Secular Living" are all 22-bars long, but each is divided differently. "Sidewalk Seven" is a 28-bar 2/4 piece. On "Her Hair" Lee does some nice contrapuntal writing, voicing himself on clarinet with his wife, Rebecca, on violin on one theme, while guitarist John Hart plays another. There are attractive combinations of guitar, clarinet, tenor and violin employed during the ensemble passages of "Crooked Halo."



Although he turns in infectious soprano-sax work on his calypso tune "Sandals and Seashells," Lee almost always improvises on tenor here. His main influences are John Coltrane, Wayne Shorter, Joe Lovano and Ben Webster. He has such excellent chops that he's able to play long, complex phrases and still sound relaxed. Sometimes he floats over the beat like Shorter. An inventive improviser, ideas flow from his horn in great profusion. He's also interested in textural variety, at times producing a breathy tone and rasping. He sounds somewhat like Webster on "Message From Home," a blues.

Lee couldn't have asked for more sympathetic band members than Hart, pianist Matt Ray, bassist Andy McKee and drummer Tim Horner. Hart and Ray, like Lee, make playing on difficult pieces seem like a breeze. Horner doesn't play loudly, but always seems to be doing the right thing, accenting in the right place.

Some of what Miles Davis said when he denounced dense chord progressions in 1959 was arguable, but he convinced many jazz musicians that he was 100-percent correct. In any event, Lee has shown that complex and unusual chord changes and forms can still help improvisers play creatively.

#### Next Article

#### ALBUMS

[The Dreams of Johnny Mercer](#)

[Monica Mancini](#)



#### Related Labels

- [OmniTone](#)

#### More Articles by Harvey Pekar

- [John Laporta: Themes and Variations](#)  
[Harvey Pekar](#)
- [Gil Evans: Out of the Cool](#)  
[Stephanie Stein Crease](#)  
[Harvey Pekar](#)
- [Lester Leaps In: The Life and Times of Lester "Pres" Young](#)  
[Douglas Henry Daniels](#)  
[Harvey Pekar](#)
- [The Art of Falling](#)  
[Jeff Johnson](#)  
[Harvey Pekar](#)
- [Op Ed](#)  
[Mario Pavone/Michael Musillami](#)  
[Harvey Pekar](#)
- [Playing It by Ear](#)  
[John LaPorta](#)  
[Harvey Pekar](#)



### My Backyard Album Review

#### **Mike Lee** **My Backyard** **(OmniTone)**

Mike Lee's third CD is a joyous, unorthodox jazz affair, deploying quintet and sextet formats to celebrate family and music.



The Cleveland Heights native moved to New York some 10 years ago, retelling the story of such other jazz giants as Tadd Dameron and Joe Lovano. Lee has a beautiful, warm tone and a fierce improvisational drive, and both come clear in the crying, "After Hours"-styled "Message From Home" and in Charlie Parker's "Relaxin' at Camarillo," the bop classic that ends the disk.

In "Sinuosity," the gypsy blues "Crooked Halo," and the calypso "Sandals and Seashells," this gifted composer and masterful saxophonist has crafted tunes of character, lilt, and elegance, all buoyed with his fatback, velvety saxophone. The yearning, romantic "Her Hair, Full of Heavenly Glamour," and "Secular Living," which alternates a plush moodiness with nervy lines to suggest how hard it is to live spiritually in a secular world, indicate the kinds of concerns that capture Lee's attention.

Backed by his wife (free lance classical violinist Rebecca Harris-Lee), longtime piano associate Matt Ray, and lucid acoustic guitarist John Hart, Lee has spawned a cohesive and stimulating CD. Tunes like "Crooked Halo" and "Secular Living," with their doubled lines, leisurely gait, unpredictable structure, and underlying gentleness, indicate that Lee knows how to find peace with himself.

However, the songs are never complacent. While always accessible, they're subtly surprising and, one would think, rewarding to play no matter how difficult. The compositions featuring his wife — particularly "Her Hair" and the mesmerizing "Crooked Halo" — attest to Lee's emotional investment in jazz, a genre he effortlessly and uniquely projects. For Mike Lee, "my backyard" — with its connotations of childhood wonder and play — is home, whether he's reminiscing about his suburban Cleveland upbringing or gazing out his rear window in northern New Jersey.

— Carlo Wolff

- buy our featured CD
- subscribe
- subscription renewal
- mini subscription
- current issue
- back issues
- JAZZIZ Wine Club
- events, clubs, festivals
- backstage
- album reviews
- Independent Culture
- favorite links
- Shop JAZZIZ
- JAZZIZ on disc artist search
- JAZZIZ Radio
- Founders
- contact JAZZIZ
- about JAZZIZ publisher's notes directly.





JAZZ NEAR YOU

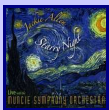


SHOWCASE ADS



Timoka

Walter Beltram



Starry Night

Jackie Allen



Nomina

Vector Trio



Mighty Long Way

Alvin Queen



Funkdaddy&3D

JuliousBass

# My Backyard

Mike Lee | OmniTone

December 1st, 2000

By Glenn Astarita



You can add multi-reedman Mike Lee's name to the lineage of notable jazz musicians who hail from Cleveland, Ohio.

Yet these days, the saxophonist spends much of his time in the New York area, where he leads a productive life, performing with Maria Schneider and piloting his own bands along with a seemingly hectic schedule as an educator/clinician. Equally important is that the saxophonist has been gaining a reputation as one of the – baddest – improvisers on the scene which was evidenced on his fine 1997 effort, Above The Battleground and here on his brand new release, titled My Backyard.

Lee engages in some – tenor madness – on the fervent hard bop-ish opener, "Just North of Normal", featuring the artist's diffusing lines along with crisp support from a hustling and bustling rhythm section while guitarist John Hart serves as an incomparable foil for the leader. Lee's "Sidewalk Seven" features a trace of samba amid linear movements and inviting motifs as the leader steers the ensemble through a few variations of the primary theme. However, the band alters the peppery flow with an enticing blues ballad, titled "Sinuosity" where the musicians incorporate a loosely swinging vibe in accordance with some affably suggestive call and response dialogue between Lee and Hart, augmented by solid rhythmic accompaniment here and throughout.

Violinist Rebecca Harris-Lee (Mike Lee's better half) and Hart render sonorous unison choruses in conjunction with a memorably melodic motif atop a 4 bar blues interlude on the enchanting, "Crooked Halo". Here, pianist Matt Ray counterbalances the richly thematic proceedings with daintily executed voicings and progressions as the band finalizes the set with a series of vicious alternating fours on their brisk version of Charlie Parker's, "Relaxin' at Camarillo".....Recommended!



JAZZ NEAR YOU

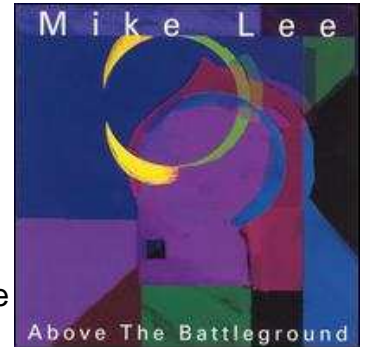


Advertise Locally Here

**Above The Battleground | Mike Lee | CAP**

By Glenn Astarita

Based in New York City, Multi-Reedman Mike Lee has been receiving a good deal of attention these days and deservedly so. Lee's work with "The Village Vanguard Orchestra", Maria Schneider, performances with Sax titan Joe Lovano, gigs with Louie Bellson and others find Mike Lee in estimable company.



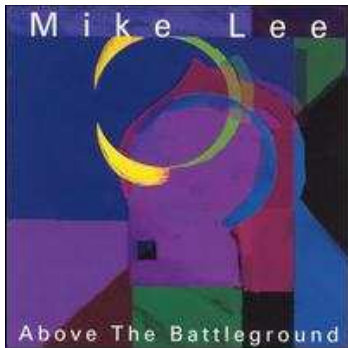
On his latest CD "Above The Battleground", Lee enlists Trumpeter Tim Hagans, Bassist Ben Allison, Pianist Matt Lee and Drummer Tim Horner. Here, Lee steps out as a first class composer, fine group leader and displays seasoned and proficient chops. On "Desert Storm", Lee comes across authoritatively with a commanding Tenor Sax delivery. Ben Allison and Tim Horner make for a fertile rhythm section as they frequently provide the sturdy backbone for ongoing dynamics as in Lee's "Holy Instant" where Lee picks up the Clarinet and rides atop a bouncy and cheerful melody line. The thematic movements are clear, concise and well stated. Lee is impressive on the licorice stick as he institutes phrasing that is clear toned and fluent. The standard "The Best Things in Life Are Free" is a tour-de-force for Lee who rips through this classic with a deep husky Tenor Sax sound and displays remarkable improvisational skills as he occasionally wanders into free-jazz turf. Mike Lee teaches jazz improvisation at various Universities and Conservatories as his improvisational savvy is prominently displayed throughout "Above The Battleground".

Lee's composition, "Please Me" prominently features his fleet fingered and multi-toned Soprano Sax work and a thoughtful, moving piano solo by Matt Ray. Lee's rich tone and articulate phrasing coupled with sporadic intonations of extended notes and clever improv further exemplify Lee's technical gifts and sharp wit. Lee's "Leisure Suit" is an affable piece that touches upon early Horace Silver while his "Laws Of Chaos" is a fitting finale to a compositionally diverse outing and features fine soloing by Hagans as Lee stretches out on Tenor Sax. At this juncture, the listener may find his or herself tapping out the rhythms on an inanimate object.

"Above The Battleground" is just the beginning for this talented instrumentalist. No hidden agendas or filler material on this project. Lee 's a bright composer and knows how to breathe new life into standards. The talented Tim Hagans and the fine rhythm section consisting of Allison, Horner and Ray compliment Lee's deeply personal sound and sharp attack to the highest order.

For info visit <http://mikeleejazz.com>

Published: May 01, 1999



## 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).

### *Eight of the 10 tunes on Above the Battleground exhibit Lee's gift for writing diverse, attention-grabbers.*

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 Sinatratour* 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."