

Lester Willis Young

Tenor Saxophonist
1909-1959

by Jeremy Drouin

Lester Willis Young was one of the premier saxophonists of the 1930s and 40s whose style and sound was emulated by future generations of jazz musicians. Hailed as “The President of the Tenor Sax” by his close friend Billie Holiday, he was simply “Prez” to his peers.

Young was born August 27, 1909, in the small town of Woodville, Mississippi, near New Orleans. His parents, both professional musicians, taught their children to play a variety of instruments and formed a family band that played carnivals, circuses, and minstrel shows. By age 10, Lester was playing drums for the band, but later convinced his father to let him take up the alto saxophone. Some of his early influences included Frankie Trumbauer and Bud Freeman.

Young quit the band in 1927 after a dispute with his Father and began touring with Art Bronson’s Bostonians. It was during this period that he took up the tenor sax. He joined the legendary Blue Devils band for a brief period in 1932 and settled in Kansas City a year later when the group disbanded.

While in Kansas City, Lester freelanced with Bennie Moten, George Lee, Clarence Love and other bands, before joining the Count Basie-Buster Smith band at the Reno Club in 1934. An extraordinary talent, Lester earned the reputation as “bad man” in Kansas City’s legendary jam sessions and duels with fellow musicians.

Young gained national recognition as the featured soloist with Count Basie Orchestra from 1936 to 1940 and recording with singers such as Billy Holiday (whom he nicknamed “Lady Day”) and Nat “King” Cole. After leaving the Basie Orchestra in 1941, he spent the next several years playing in New York and Los Angeles.

Young’s music career was put on hold in 1944 when he was drafted into the Army. By 1946, though, he was back on the road touring with the Jazz at the Philharmonic. He continued to tour and record

throughout the late-1940s and 1950s. However, by this time, his health was in decline due largely to malnutrition and alcohol addiction. Young died on March 15, 1959, in New York City.

Sources

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