

Howie Smith Biography

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“... idiosyncratic, high-flying saxophone playing.” (Sydney Morning Herald)

“... a highly distinctive voice, whose free solos have a strong melodic progression and an insinuating rhythmic feeling.” (London Jazz Journal)

“... an electrifying and versatile soloist.” (New York Times)

“... a rawly, emotional voice.” (Cadence)

“Howie Smith’s alto and soprano playing remains instantly recognizable. If empty virtuosity is the great blight of jazz, the combination of virtuosity with vitality and imagination is one of its boons. Smith has these qualities in abundance.” (Sydney Morning Herald)



According to Duke Ellington, there are only two kinds of music: music that’s good and music that isn’t. In that spirit, Howie Smith searches for opportunities for good music in various settings: big bands, chamber ensembles of all sizes, orchestras, electronics and mixed-media. His enthusiasm for the chamber orchestra is no less than for a Hammond organ trio, and he is as passionate about Frank Zappa as he is about Astor Piazzolla or the Art Ensemble of Chicago.

At age five, he was offered his first-ever instrument and music lesson at Wittich’s Music Store in Reading, Pennsylvania. Seduced by a shiny horn with three simple-looking keys, he hoped for a trumpet but the teacher was on his lunch break. By chance, a remarkable teacher and musician named J. Carl Borelli arrived, and 30 minutes later Howie had his first lesson on an old, curved, Buescher soprano saxophone.

Mr. Borelli began that first lesson by teaching him to hear the music first and after that to see it on the page. From the beginning he was encouraged to improvise and compose. Mr. Borelli taught music as a language rather than a series of skills to be mastered. This idea defined Howie’s musical development and is the concept behind the lessons he passes on to his students today.

He left Reading in 1961, received an undergraduate degree from Ithaca College in New York in 1965, and headed west to the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana for a graduate degree. His timing was musically perfect. He became the lead alto player with the U. of I. Jazz Band just as it became internationally known for excellent musicians and original compositions. Cecil and Dee Dee Bridgewater, Ron Dewar, Jim Knapp, Jim McNeely, Morgan Powell, and Donald Smith are among the alumni from that period.

In the late 1960’s, jazz became acceptable where it never had been before, but many high school teachers didn’t know much about teaching it. Howie developed and coordinated a state-sponsored program called Jazz-Rock Teaching Assistance to help them out, and he created a course at the U. of I. titled Jazz and Youth Music, designed to expand the use of jazz in the classroom. He was also on the faculty of summer jazz programs including the National Stage Band Camps and the Jamey Aebersold Summer Jazz Workshops.

As a free-lance musician he performed and composed on a regular basis, was active in the vibrant chamber music scene in Champaign-Urbana and toured with Elvis Presley, Glen Campbell, Warren Covington and others. He worked as an arranger for regionally popular rock groups, including Feather Train and the Rogues, and was a member of Sound Studio One and the Nickel Bag. He also worked with local and national advertising agencies as a free-lance composer/arranger.

In 1973, Howie received a Fulbright grant to set up the first college-level jazz studies program in Australia at the Sydney Conservatory of Music, an unlikely-sounding but welcoming home for the program. By day he was the Director of Jazz Studies, developing the program and teaching classes, and at night he composed and performed, a balance that suited him perfectly. He discovered several like-minded musical souls in Sydney and four of them formed Jazz Co/op to write and perform inventive, original material. The first recording of that group – with Howie playing tenor and soprano saxophones, Roger Frampton on piano and alto sax, Jack Thorncraft on bass, and Phil Treloar on drums – was released by Polydor in 1974. The group is now recognized as historically significant in the development of Australian jazz. Jazz Co/op was re-released by Votary Records in 2008.

Just months after his arrival, the Sydney Opera House opened amid a spectacular celebration and international attention due to its unique, soaring design. It became the home of some of the most important artistic events in the country, including the “Rostrum” series. Howie was a featured artist on the 1975 festival, along with Luciano Berio, Cathy Berberian, Roger Woodward and Yuji Takahashi.

In 1976, he exchanged a western view of the Pacific for an eastern one. In southern California, he free-lanced as a jazz and chamber music performer and was an adjunct faculty member at the University of California-San Diego. He was also a member of Sonor, a chamber orchestra dedicated to the presentation of twentieth century music that was directed by Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Bernard Rands.

At the urging of composer Edwin London, Howie became the Coordinator of Jazz Studies at Cleveland State University in 1979. Since then he has been a frequent performer with the Cleveland Orchestra and soloist with the Cleveland Chamber Symphony. His annual Concert in Progress has presented a wealth of original music – 184 new compositions so far – ranging from intimate solos and duets to larger ensembles and what might be called performance art.

Recognition and awards have followed his constant search for “good music.” Twice he has served as the co-chair of both the Jazz Fellowship(s) Panel and the Music Overview Panel for the National Endowment for the Arts. His compositions have earned him Ohio Arts Council Artist Fellowships on seven different occasions. In 1985, he was awarded the Cleveland Arts Prize for Music. He was commissioned to compose music for the opening ceremony of Cuyahoga Community College’s Unified Technologies Center in 1986, and the fanfare for the opening of the Michelson-Morley Centennial Celebrations in Severance Hall in 1987. He has been a Yamaha artist/clinician since 1971.

Howie currently works with and writes for Organ Ism, an organ trio; Iron Toys, a saxophone/woodwind quartet; the NEO Saxtet, composed of 6 saxophones/woodwinds, piano, bass, drums, and vocalist; the Jazz Unit, a forward-looking 13-piece band directed by Jack Schantz; and TCJF Soundworks, the resident ensemble of the annual Tri-C JazzFest. He is also a member of the Blossom Festival Band, the Blossom Festival Orchestra, the Cleveland Jazz Orchestra, and is a frequent performer with the Cleveland Orchestra.

Like all creative sorts, he’s often asked which piece or performance is his favorite. His answer is another quote borrowed – in the best jazz tradition – from Duke Ellington: “The next one.”

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