Film Reviews

Robert Daudelin's

Konitz

o a jazz musician, one's sound is everything. It is immediate and distinct; the medium of the musician's imminent communication. Yet alto saxophonist Lee Konitz seems to care unusually little about the clarity of his sound. To Konitz, tirelessly stitching line after seamless swinging line, it is melody that counts.

Similarly, in his recent film Konitz, director Robert Daudelin eschews the traditional demands of his chosen medium. Daudelin is after the melody behind the man, and perhaps due to this his cinematography, like Konitz's sound, is at times rough, unsteady and even disconcerting.

Yet Lee Konitz has stood for years, giantlike behind his artful melodies, and Daudelin's film undoubtedly communicates that artfulness. Konitz paints an admirable celluloid 'portrait of the artist as a saxophonist.'

The film is a montage of footage shot during three events: a concert, a master-class given at Concordia University, and a quiet evening at the home of the director. Although each event provides highlights, the film's funniest moment comes when two of them are cleverly juxtaposed as follows: during the master-class, Konitz and his pianist Harold Danko break into a seemingly spontaneous, and quite accurate, vocal rendition of Lester Young's classic solo on "Lady Be Good." The class is suitably impressed, as is the viewer, until that scene is intercut with concert footage of the two of them doing the same shtick live. Cutting back and forth between class and concert, never missing a note, the interlude offers a revealing and uniquely cinematic perspec-

Jazz musicians often take time to warm up. It

is hardly surprising then that the concert footage gets better as the film progresses. What is surprising is that the order of the pieces was not rearranged during the editing, so that the first tune might at least be close to as good as the last. Be that as it may, *Konitz* is definitely a musical treat.

Harold Danko plays with almost virtuosic sensitivity to Konitz's changing moods. His rhythms are at times so understated that Konitz's deft scalar flights seem to break completely free of the unifying pulse; only to settle back in without a hitch as Danko fills out and surrounds Konitz's deliberate harmonic insinuations with a gush of pianistic colour. The pair have played together for 14 years, and the result is duet interaction of the highest order.

Most of the concert footage was shot with a single camera, from the audience's point-of-view. And while this is not visually disturbing, (no more so than watching a concert), the rare but dynamic close-ups of Konitz's hands only serve to demonstrate how much more Daudelin might have done. One rare exception is a slow pan left, followed by a return to the right. Yet the only result of this sudden instability is a sort of merry-go-round queasiness.

From the long passages shot before dinner at the director's home, we learn that Lee Konitz is a gentle, thoughtful and easygoing man. Jazz aficionados will be interested to hear him discuss Steve Coleman, Oliver Lake and other contemporary sax players, as well as describe his early association with the now-legendary blind pianist/composer Lennie Tristano. But at heart one senses that Konitz is a shy man. With his thick glasses, white hair, cardigan, and almost awkward wisdom, he reminds one of a granddad who needs a bit of prodding to relax and spin a few varns. Unfortunately, that prodding is never quite provided. Perhaps, had Konitz's prodders included someone with a fluent command of English, a more fluid give-and-take might have been achieved.

Among the film's most interesting segments are those shot during the master-class. It is fascinating to hear a knowledgeable and experienced

artist talk about his or her art. Konitz emphasizes that "people should almost see the communication," between musicians and audience is evidenced by his insistence on their being at least a small audience provided for the concert footage shot at the Spectrum.

Which brings us back to the music – in a way, where we've been all along. For this is a documentary about a musician. And about jazz, his music. Robert Daudelin is working unabashedly in service of the music, not of film; which is terrific for the jazz community in all its breadth. Lee Konitz is only one of many uncompromising musicians whose integrity has been crucial to jazz's survival. Let there be many more much films, Huzzah! Yet it must be acknowledged that Konitz

will have very little impact outside the jazz community, where those who are indifferent or hostile to jazz are unlikely to be converted by it, as some few might have been by' Round Midnight. But so what? Jazz has always thrived in its ghetto. Its virtuous flourishing takes place in virtual anonymity. And chances are that, as men who know what they want, and have worked hard to achieve it, neither Lee Konitz nor Robert Daudelin ever expected anything else.

John Sobol •

KONITZ – PORTRAIT DE L'ARTISTE EN SAXOPHONISTE p./d./res. Robert Daudelin d.o.p. Jacques Leduc sd. Claude Beaugrand ed. Fernand Bélanger sd. mix. Hans Peter Strobl coul. 16mm running time 81 min.

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Swing time! - Konitz in concert

PAGE 40