

The
ALTOSAX
of
FRANK MORGAN

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Born: Minneapolis, Minnesota, Dec. 23, 1933
 Died: Minneapolis, Minnesota, Dec. 14, 2007

Introduction:

Oslo Jazz Circle was aware of Frank Morgan through his record sessions with Wardell Gray but never really discovered his qualities. His comeback was really not noticed very much. Our apologies!

History:

Frank Morgan was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 1933, but spent most of his childhood living with his grandmother in Milwaukee, Wisconsin while his parents were on tour. Morgan's father Stanley was a guitarist with Harlan Leonard and the Rockets and The Ink Spots, and his mother, Geraldine, was a 14-year-old student when she gave birth to him. Morgan took up his father's instrument at an early age, but lost interest the moment he saw Charlie Parker take his first solo with the Jay McShann band at the Paradise Theater in Detroit, Michigan. Stanley introduced them backstage, where Parker offered Morgan advice about starting out on the alto sax, and they met at a music store the following day. Morgan, seven years old at the time, assumed they'd be picking out a saxophone, but Parker suggested he start on the clarinet to develop his embouchure. Morgan practiced on the clarinet for about two years before acquiring a soprano sax, and finally, an alto. Morgan moved to live with his father (by that time divorced) in Los Angeles, California at the age of 14, after his grandmother caught him with marijuana.¹As a teenager Morgan had opportunities to jam with the likes of Dexter Gordon and Wardell Gray on Sunday afternoons at the Crystal Tearoom. When he was just 15 years old, Morgan was offered Johnny Hodges's spot in Duke Ellington's Orchestra, but Stanley deemed him too young for touring. Instead he joined the house band at Club Alabam where he backed vocalists including Billie Holiday and Josephine Baker.¹That same year he won a television talent-show contest, the prize of which was a recording session with the Freddy Martin Orchestra, playing "Over the Rainbow" in an arrangement by Ray Conniff, with vocals by Merv Griffin. Morgan attended Jefferson High School during the day, where he played in the school big band that also spawned jazz greats Art Farmer, Ed Thigpen, Chico Hamilton, Sonny Criss, and Dexter Gordon. Morgan stayed in contact with Parker during these years, finding himself in jam sessions at Hollywood celebrities' homes when Parker visited L.A. In 1952, Morgan earned a spot in Lionel Hampton's band, but his first arrest in 1953 prevented him from joining the Clifford Brown and Max Roach quintet (that role went instead to Harold Land, and later, Sonny Rollins). He made his recording debut on February 20, 1953, with Teddy Charles and his West Coasters in a session for Prestige Records. This sextet featured short-lived tenor player Wardell Gray and was included on the 1983 posthumous release *Wardell Gray Memorial Volume 1*. On November 1, 1954, Morgan cut five tracks with the Kenny Clarke Sextet for Savoy Records, four of which were released with Clarke billed

as the leader, with "I've Lost Your Love" credited to writer Milt Jackson as leader. Morgan recorded an all-star date with Wild Bill Davis and Conte Candoli on January 29, 1955 and participated in a second recording session on March 31, 1955, with Candoli, Wardell Gray, Leroy Vinnegar and others, which were combined and released in 1955 as Morgan's first album, *Frank Morgan*, by GNP Crescendo Records. Later releases also included five tracks cut at the Crescendo Club in West Hollywood on August 11, 1956, with a sextet featuring Bobby Timmons and Jack Sheldon. The album copy hailed Morgan as the new Charlie Parker, who had died the same year. In his own words, Morgan was "scared to death" by this and "self-destructed". Following in the footsteps of Parker, Morgan had started taking heroin at 17, subsequently became addicted, and spent much of his adult life in and out of prison. Morgan supported his drug habit through check forgery and fencing stolen property. His first drug arrest came in 1955, the same year his debut album was released, and Morgan landed in San Quentin State Prison in 1962, where he formed a small ensemble with another addict and sax player, Art Pepper. His final incarceration, for which Morgan had turned himself in on a parole violation, ended on December 7, 1986. Though he stayed off heroin for the last two decades of his life, Morgan took methadone daily. Fresh out of prison in April, 1985, Morgan started recording again, releasing *Easy Living* on Contemporary Records that June. Morgan performed at the Monterey Jazz Festival on September 21, 1986, and turned down an offer to play Charlie Parker in Clint Eastwood's film *Bird* (Forest Whitaker took his place). He made his New York debut in December 1986 at the Village Vanguard, and collaborated with George W.S. Trow on *Prison-Made Tuxedos*, a semi-autobiographical Off-Broadway play which included live music by the Frank Morgan Quartet (featuring Ronnie Mathews, Walter Booker, and Victor Lewis). His 1990 album *Mood Indigo* went to number four on the Billboard jazz chart. Morgan suffered a stroke in 1998, but subsequently recovered, recording and performing during the last four years of his life. HighNote Records eventually released three albums worth of material from a three-night stand at the Jazz Standard in New York City in November, 2003. Morgan also participated in the 2004 Charlie Parker Jazz Festival in Tompkins Square Park. After moving to Minneapolis in the fall of 2005, Morgan headlined the 2006 Twin Cities Hot Summer Jazz Festival and played duets with Ronnie Mathews at the Dakota Jazz Club in Minneapolis and George Cables at the Artists' Quarter in St. Paul. Morgan also performed at the 2006 East Coast Jazz Festival in Washington, D.C., and on the West Coast at Yoshi's and Catalina's. His last gig in Minneapolis featured Grace Kelly, Irv Williams, and Peter Schimke at the Dakota on July 1, 2007. For one of Morgan's final recordings, he composed and recorded music for the audiobook adaptation of Michael Connelly's crime novel *The Overlook* (2007), providing brief unaccompanied sax solos at the beginning and end of the book, and between chapters. Morgan is mentioned in the book by lead character Harry Bosch, a jazz enthusiast. Shortly before his death, Morgan completed his first tour of Europe. Frank Morgan died in Minneapolis on Friday, December 14, 2007, from complications due to colorectal cancer, nine days before his 74th birthday. A memorial service featuring members of Morgan's family and a performance by Irv Williams was held at the Artists' Quarter on Sunday, December 23 (ref. Wikipedia, Jan. 23, 2023).

FRANK MORGAN SOLOGRAPHY

JAM SESSION**Altadena, Ca., July 1952**

Collective personnel: Chet Baker (tp), Charlie Parker, Frank Morgan (as), Don Wilkerson (ts), Amos Trice (p), David Bryant (b), Lawrence Marable (dm).

Recording date is now assumed to be limited to July 15 (night of July 14) (ref. Leif Bo Petersen).

Ten titles were recorded at Zorthian's Ranch, issued on Charlie Parker CD "Bird in LA" Verve(Jap)UCCV-45002 (all titles except "Au Privave" No. 2 also issued on RLR 88622, but with much worse sound quality), six assumed to have altosax solo by Frank Morgan:

7:03	A Night In Tunisia	Solo 4 choruses of 32 bars. (FM)
7:10	How High The Moon / Ornithology	Solo 56 bars (NC). (FM)
12:42	Cool Blues	Chase with (ts/as-CP). (FM)
6:05	Scrapple From The Apple No. 2	Solo 32 bars. (FM)
13:20	Au Privave / Dance Of The Infidels	Solo 12 choruses of 12 bars. 21 choruses 4/4 with (ts/as-CP). (FM)
4:27	Au Privave No. 2	Solo 10 choruses of 12 bars. (FM)

To be 18 ½ years old, playing altosax, and jamming with Bird, imagine! Such is the start of Frank Morgan's recording career. Looking at this summer date with fresh eyes, it is really not important for the old man (32 years), there is so much more better recorded music with him. However, to have the start of Frank Morgan (as well as the legendary Wilkerson) is much more important. The sound quality makes detailed observations very difficult (if you find FM soli omitted, please report!), and I suggest the listener starts with the "Au Privave"s, reasonably useful sound, then continues with "... Tunisia". There is no doubt where FM gets his inspiration from, but that he is able to play so confident is highly amazing. Easy to understand that he got his reputation very early.

TEDDY CHARLES' WEST COASTERS**L.A. Feb. 20, 1953**

Frank Morgan (as), Wardell Gray (ts), Sonny Clark (p), Teddy Charles (vib), Dick Nivison (b), Lawrence Marable (dm).

Four titles were recorded for Prestige, no FM on 470 "Paul's Cause" but:

467	The Man I Love	Solo 28 bars. F)
468	Lavonne	Solo 24 bars. (FM)
469	So Long Broadway	Break to solo 32 bars. (FM)

FM's first organized studio session shows that he knows very well the music of the Bird. The session as such does not belong to my favourite ones, the arrangements sounding somewhat artificial, and the soloists seem slightly constrained. The altosax soli on "Lavonne" and "... Broadway" are quite impressive though. Also, I am not fond of the way they treat "... Love" with multiple tempi, but FS executes his fast half chorus to satisfaction.

KENNY CLARKE**Hollywood, Nov. 1, 1954**

Frank Morgan (as), Walter Benton (ts), Milt Jackson (vib, vo-"... Love"), Gerald Wiggins (p), Percy Heath (b), Kenny Clarke (dm).

Five titles were recorded for Savoy, no FM on 4403 "I've Lost Your Love" (S) but:

4400	Sonor	Solo 32 bars. (M)
4400-alt.	Sonor	As above. (M)
4401	Strollin'	Solo 48 bars. (FM)
4402	Blues Mood	Solo 36 bars. (M)
4404	Skoot	Solo 32 bars. (M)

The occasion is almost a Modern Jazz Quartet session augmented by two reeds, trying to play it soft rather than hard bop. FM's sharp tone cuts through though, and his soli are competent but not really remarkable. Best seems to be the solo on "... Mood".

LYLE "SPUD" MURPHY**LA. Nov. 3, 1954**

Russ Cheever (sop), Frank Morgan, Benny Carter (as), Buddy Collette (ts), Bob Gordon (bar), Buddy Clark (b), Richie Frost (dm), Lyle Murphy (comp, arr, dir). Note however that BC is not mentioned in the liner notes of GNP 33 (LP) and cannot be heard.

Four titles were recorded for Gene Norman, issued as "New Orbits In Sound", two have altosax soli by FM:

I Only Have Eyes For You	Soli 20 and 8 bars. (M)
Frantastic	Intro 4 bars. Solo 4 choruses of 12 bars. (F)

LA. Dec. 3, 1954

Same except Chico Hamilton (dm) replaces Frost.

Four titles were recorded for Gene Norman, three have altosax soli by FM:

Lost In A Fugue	Break to solo 64 bars. (FM)
Frankly Speaking	Soli 48 and 24 bars. (F)
Crazy Quilt	Break to solo 32 bars. (M)

Maybe it is incorrect to call this a 'forgotten' session, but I believe many are not aware of the excellent personnel and gorgeous saxophone music produced. I am also tempted to state that it is one of FM's most important of his alas so few vintage sessions. His strong soloing on the uptempo "Frantastic", "Fugue" and "... Speaking" shows that he could have been one of the main contenders of taking over from Bird (who still has some few months left). The two other items in medium tempo are also well worth noticing. And don't forget there are two other major sax soloists here, Collette and Cooper, contributing to the success of this pianoless session!

FRANK MORGAN**LA. Jan. 29, 1955**

Conte Candoli (tp), Frank Morgan (as), Wild Bill Davis (org), Bobby Rodriguez (b), Jose Mangual (bgo), Rafael Miranda (cga), Umbaldo Nieto (timbales).

Four titles were recorded for Gene Norman:

Chooch	Straight 32 bars to solo 32 bars. Straight 32 bars. (FM)
Whippet	Solo 3 choruses of 32 bars. (F)
Bernie's Tune	Solo 64 bars. 64 bars 4/4 with (tp). (FM)
I'll Remember April	Straight 32 bars. Solo 48 bars. 32 bars 4/4 with (tp). Straight 16 bars. (FM)

It is more sting in the altosax playing now, compared to the Prestige and Savoy sessions, and remember that FM still is just above his 21th birthday. Uptempi is chosen, and for once the latin rhythm seems to have a positive function. FM's tone is not really among the most beautiful, but who cares when he plays with such enthusiasm as he does here. "Whippet" is a "Sweet Georgia Brown"-clone. All four items have strong playing, and it is not difficult to understand that some hoped he could take off where Bird someday would fold his wings.

FRANK MORGAN SEPTET**LA. March 31, 1955**

Conte Candoli (tp-except items 5,6), Frank Morgan (as), Wardell Gray (ts-except items 5,6), Carl Perkins (p), Howard Roberts (g), Leroy Vinnegar (b), Lawrence Marable (dm).

Six titles were recorded for Gene Norman:

The Champ	Solo 5 choruses of 12 bars. (F)
Milt's Tune	Soli 8 and 64 bars. (FM)
Neil's Blues	Soli 48 and 12 bars. (M)
Get Happy	Solo 8 bars. Solo 4 choruses of 32 bars. 64 bars 4/4 with (dm). (F)
My Old Flame	Soli 32 and 16 bars to long coda. (S)
The Nearness Of You	Soli 36 and 20 bars to long coda. (S)

This session took place only a few weeks after Bird passed away, and I wonder why the group did not select any of his famous vehicles, but perhaps done on purpose. FM seems much more confident in his playing now, treating the uptempi tunes

quite easily, and roughly, with the long solo on “Get Happy” as one prominent example, ending up in a solid chase with the drummer. The groovy blues gets its chance on “Neil’s ...”, quite noteworthy. When all these nice things have been put on paper, we must turn to the two ballads, the first he ever recorded. Performed in a similar pattern with the great and underestimated Carl Perkins and Howard Roberts taking half a chorus, the two items show a new and sensitive artist, one we should wish to be more familiar with. Two fine gems. Postscript: Maybe “... Flame” was selected for Bird, who played this tune several times.

FRANK MORGAN

LA. Aug. 11, 1956

Jack Sheldon (tp), Frank Morgan (as), James Clay (fl, ts), Bobby Timmons (p), Jimmy Bond (b), Lawrence Marable (dm).

Five titles were recorded for Gene Norman:

Crescendo Blues	Solo 36 bars. (SM)
Huh!	Solo 32 bars. (SM)
Well You Needn't	Solo 32 bars. (SM)
B. T.	Solo 64 bars. (F)
Autumn Leaves	Solo 32 bars. (S)

After tasting some of FM's artistry on ballads, this session is encountered with expectation. Only one tune in uptempo, the dynamic “B. T.”, flowing easily along, one of the very best from this period. However, what about the four others? Simple answer: Gorgeous altosax playing, and probably the FM-session you would be most likely to play repeatedly. Three slow medium tunes of highly varied background but all played with sovereign artistry. Finally his goodbye solo for this time, “... Leaves”, a wonderful sortie from an artist who could not get rid of the demons from his youth. That he managed to come back to the limelight, in some way, many years later, is close to a miracle.

Next session in 1979! The solography therefore finds it convenient to stop here, but the life of Frank Morgan as described by Wikipedia is so overwhelming that maybe we should go on researching his music.

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