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BIOGRAPHY

Very Early

Tommy Smith's special talent was obvious as soon as he appeared on the Edinburgh jazz scene in his early teens. He recorded his first album, Giant Strides, at the age of sixteen in 1983 with a trio featuring drummer John Rae, and that same year he won a scholarship, assisted by an extensive fund-raising programme organised by his music teacher, Jean Allison, to attend the prestigious Berklee College of Music in Boston.

Born in Edinburgh on April 27, 1967, to a Scottish mother, Brenda Ann Urquhart, and father, William John Ellis, whom he never met, Smith was brought up in the Wester Hailes area of the city. Here he was encouraged by his late stepfather, George Smith, an avid jazz fan and drummer in the Gene Krupa style, to take up the tenor saxophone at the age of twelve.

Under the skilful direction of Jim O'Malley and Jean Allison of the music department at Wester Hailes Education Centre, Smith made swift progress and was soon gigging around Edinburgh and Scotland with his quartet with John Rae. Within four years he had recorded Giant Strides (GFM Records) and was on his way to Berklee, where he formed the co-operative group Forward Motion with Norwegian bassist Terje Gewelt, Canadian drummer Ian Froman and Hungarian pianist Laszlo Gardonyi. This group remained active with varying personnel until 1994 and recorded two albums, Progressions and The Berklee Tapes.

At eighteen and on the recommendation of Chick Corea, Smith joined Berklee vice president Gary Burton's group, alongside bassist Steve Swallow, pianist Makoto Ozone and drummer Adam Nussbaum, touring the world, recording the Whiz Kids album for ECM Records and catching the attention of critics including Larry Kart of the Chicago Tribune who opined: "The key addition is Tommy Smith, who, if memory serves, is only the second saxophonist Gary Burton has employed in his twenty-odd years as a leader. Smith's angular, bristling lines suggest he has his own story to tell."

Into the Blue

Indeed, and with this impressive opening chapter, the story was only beginning. In 1989, Smith, still only twenty-two, signed to the legendary Blue Note Records. Recorded with producer Gary Burton's guidance and featuring Smith leading a band comprising jazz luminaries, John Scofield (guitar), Eddie Gomez (Bass) and Jack DeJohnette (drums), his Blue Note debut, Step by Step, catapulted Smith to the attention of an international audience.

Three further albums followed for Blue Note, Peeping Tom (1990), Standards (1991) and Paris (1992). During this period Smith also hosted a series of BBC TV specials called Jazz Types, in which he played with such guests as pianists Tommy Flanagan and Chick Corea, alto saxophonist Bobby Watson, bassist Arild Andersen, his old boss Gary Burton, pop/soul group Hue & Cry, and the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra.

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He recorded and toured with Hue & Cry, led by brothers Pat and Greg Kane, the American vibist Joe Locke, percussionist Trilok Gurtu and bassist Arild Andersen, among many others. In addition to his jazz-based commitments at this point, Smith also examined classical composition, leading to his first saxophone concerto, Unirsi In Matrimonio, and a suite for saxophone and strings, Un Ecossais A Paris. These works were followed by Sonata No. 1 - Hall of Mirrors, and Sonata No. 1 - Dreaming with Open Eyes, which is regularly played by the saxophonist Gerard McChrystal and virtuoso pianist Murray McLachlan.

Out of the Blue

In 1993, Smith joined Scottish label Linn Records. Reminiscence (1993), Misty Morning and No Time (1994), Azure (recorded with Jon Christensen, Lars Danielsson and Kenny Wheeler in 1995), and the hugely ambitious Beasts of Scotland (1996) all received critical as well as audience acclaim. Writing in Playboy magazine, Neil Tesser noted of Beasts of Scotland that: "Smith's artful writing makes the ensemble sound like a petite Philharmonic." Reviewer Chris J Walker, in the Los Angeles Jazz magazine, remarked that Smith's strong compositional talent "vividly conveys the aura of the various wildlife that his compositions are named for."

The Sound of Love followed. Recorded in only six hours in New York in September 1997 with the outstanding rhythm section of Kenny Barron (piano), Peter Washington (bass), and Billy Drummond (drums), it focused on the Duke Ellington-Billy Strayhorn songbook. A superb set of readings of classics by two of the foremost composers in jazz history, the album reached number 20 in the American Gavin Jazz Chart, an astounding achievement for a European jazz musician.

Released in 1998, Gymnopedie: The Classical Side of Tommy Smith, highlighted a completely different facet of Smith's musical vocabulary. Recorded with his regular duo partner, classical pianist Murray McLachlan, the disc featured music by Satie, Bartok, Grieg and Chick Corea, and Smith's Sonatas No 1 and No 2.

Returning to jazz and to New York the following year, Smith then recorded his final album for Linn, the tough, gritty Blue Smith, with old friend, guitarist John Scofield and his regular rhythm team, bassist James Genus and drummer Clarence Penn.

Alone at Last

Having premiered his 3rd Saxophone Concerto with the Orchestra of St. John Smith's Square at Chelmsford Cathedral in May 1998, Smith went on to produce singer Jeff Leyton's debut album with the City of London Philharmonic. Leyton, who is Smith's uncle, also sang on Monte Cristo, the saxophonist's commission for the combined forces of the Paragon Ensemble and his own Sextet, with text by Edwin Morgan. It was first performed at the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, in September 1998.

Smith's extraordinary creativity continued unabated. While maintaining a busy international performing schedule, he wrote the music for a play, Kill the Old, Torture the Young, which was also produced at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh. He also contributed tenor and soprano saxophone excerpts respectively to the movies Complicity and The Talented Mr Ripley, and premiered another large-scale composition, Sons and Daughters of Alba, incorporating Scottish folk music and musicians as well as text by Edwin Morgan, at Glasgow International Jazz Festival in July 2000.



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In recognition of his artistic achievements, Smith was made Doctor of the University by Heriot-Watt University in his home town, Edinburgh on July 14, 1999 and the following year, on May 4, 2000, he became Honorary Fellow of the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland. The Best Tenor Saxophonist title at the British Jazz Awards followed in May 2002. On Burns Night, January 25, 2000, Smith was announced as one of the first fourteen recipients of the Scottish Arts Council's Creative Scotland Awards. The award helped to fulfil his ambition of performing Alone At Last, a solo concert programme using tenor and soprano saxophones, high-tech equipment, poetry, natural sounds and special effects, which he toured extensively throughout Scotland and beyond in 2001.

Spartacus

In September 2000, determined to take full control of his recorded output, Smith established his own recording company, Spartacus Records. The first album on the new label, also called Spartacus, was released in February 2001 and was made in New York to the highest technical as well as artistic standards, featuring Smith alongside top American musicians pianist Kenny Barron, bassist James Genus and drummer Clarence Penn. That was followed by Smith's solo recording, Into Silence, recorded in Hamilton Mausoleum on October 30, 2001 and a recording by Smith's quartet of ten specially arranged Christmas songs.

Subsequent Spartacus releases include Evolution, featuring Smith's all-star sextet with Joe Lovano, John Scofield, John Taylor, John Patitucci and Bill Stewart; two duo recordings with BBC Jazz Awards-winning pianist Brian Kellock; Miles Ahead with the Scottish National Jazz Orchestra and guest soloist, trumpeter Ingrid Jensen; Smith's solo project Alone At Last; and Forbidden Fruit by Smith's all-Scottish quartet.

Smith continues to maintain a hectic work schedule. In recent years he has toured his own group to India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, France, America, Turkey, Switzerland, Azerbaijan, Malta, Bratislava, Russia, Yemen and Romania as well as the UK.

In April 2001, he was invited to take part in televised concerts in Switzerland alongside Benny Golson, Vincent Herring, Carl Allen, Buster Williams, Victor Lewis, Buster Cooper, and Randy Brecker. Then, in July that year, he premiered his extended composition, Beauty and the Beast, written for saxophonist David Liebman and the Scottish National Jazz Orchestra, and toured in a quintet with Liebman. This was immediately followed by his appearance as solo saxophonist in Sally Beamish's The Knotgrass Elegy, which was commissioned by the BBC Proms and performed at the Royal Albert Hall in London.

Other classical music endeavours have included the largest known work for the Edinburgh Youth Orchestra's 40th anniversary. Written for saxophone, bass and drums plus a one hundred-strong symphony orchestra and entitled Edinburgh, this was premiered on April 12, 2003 in the Usher Hall, Edinburgh before touring Latvia, Estonia, Russia and Finland.

Recognising that Scotland was producing an outstanding crop of young jazz musicians, Smith formed the Tommy Smith Youth Jazz Orchestra in 2002, financing rehearsals and travelling expenses for teenage players from across the country out of his own pocket.

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The orchestra has performed at jazz festivals throughout Scotland and launched its first CD, Exploration, in Toronto, Canada in 2008.

In 2005, Smith reunited with Joe Locke, recording the album Sirocco and touring extensively with the vibist's group, and formed a duo with another long-time colleague, Norwegian bassist Arild Andersen, Adding drummer Paolo Vinaccia, this has since developed into one of Europe's leading jazz trios, with a busy concert itinerary and a debut album, Live at Belleville (released on ECM Records in 2008), which received innumerable album of the year nominations in the press worldwide.

As well as two duo albums, Smith's partnership with pianist Brian Kellock resulted in Smith creating an expanded jazz arrangement of George Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue for the Scottish National Jazz Orchestra with Kellock as the featured soloist. This was premiered to huge acclaim as the opening concert of Edinburgh Jazz Festival on Friday July 28, 2006, a recording of which was released in May 2009. Another saxophone and piano pairing, with Swede Jacob Karlzon, has featured at jazz festivals in Edinburgh, Islay and Fife to enthusiastic acclaim.

Scottish National Jazz Orchestra

In a busy schedule of touring, writing and recording, Smith found the time and energy to launch the Scottish National Jazz Orchestra in 1995, and remains its director. SNJO has presented programmes of both repertory classics and more contemporary works, often specially commissioned.

The repertory programmes have included Duke Ellington's extended suites, celebrations of Count Basie and Benny Goodman (with special guest Ken Peplowski) and the collaborations between Miles Davis and Gil Evans - Porgy & Bess, Sketches of Spain (both with Gerard Presencer as trumpet soloist) and Miles Ahead (with Ingrid Jensen). SNJO has also presented the music of Charles Mingus, Oliver Nelson, Benny Carter, Kenton, Monk, Steely Dan, Astor Piazzolla and Pat Metheny (with guitarists Jim Mullen, Phil Robson, Mike Walker and Kevin MacKenzie) and premiered special commissions by Keith Tippett, Florian Ross, and Geoffrey Keezer as well as specially commissioned arrangements of John Coltrane, Chick Corea (with drummer Gary Novak), and Wayne Shorter (featuring Gary Burton as soloist) compositions.

In addition, SNJO has performed music by contemporary jazz creators. These include Kenny Wheeler's Sweet Sister Suite; Joe Lovano's Celebrating Sinatra, with arrangements by the late Manny Albam; a programme of the music of Maria Schneider, conducted by the composer; and Smith's own Planet Wave, an adventurous large-scale composition made possible by the Arts Foundation/Barclays Bank jazz composition fellowship prize which marries Smith's music to poet Edwin Morgan's text to great effect. The concerts with Joe Lovano also featured the premiere of Smith's acclaimed Torah, a work based on the first five books of the Bible, in which a titanic struggle between good and evil is vividly enacted. Written over seventy days, the fifty-minute composition was created specially for the phenomenal American tenor saxophonist and SNJO. The same evening Torah was being premiered in Scotland, Dame Cleo Laine and John Dankworth premiered another work by Smith and Edwin Morgan, The Morning of the Imminent, at The Kennedy Center in Washington, DC.



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SNJO has also provided a platform for jazz musicians and composers based in Scotland to write for big band in concerts devoted to suites comprising contributions by orchestra members and external contributors alike. These include The Solar Suite, Great Scots Suite and The Edinburgh Suite.

The Future

Tommy Smith remains full of creative ideas and continues to receive recognition - an Honory Doctorate of Letters from Caledonian University in Glasgow followed his BBC Jazz Awards' Heart of Jazz award in 2008 and he was voted winner of the Best Woodwind title at the inaugural Scottish Jazz Awards in 2009. It is clear that he is going to continue creating music of lasting value. His journey across more than two decades packed with original and inspiring music has demonstrated conclusively that his is a singular musical voice, and one which has much still to say.

His tireless work in jazz education, which has included conceiving the curriculum for the short-lived Scottish Jazz Conservatory and teaching individual students, continues and his campaigning for a jazz presence in Scottish further education was rewarded when the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama in Glasgow appointed Smith head of its newly formed jazz department, which opened in October 2009. In this, as in every area of artistic endeavour, Smith will be unstinting in his commitment and will be looking forward to sending fully prepared graduates out on the professional jazz musician's road that he has graced with such distinction since taking those youthful Giant Strides.

Please find all further information incl. contact details on www.tommysmith.co.uk.