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## Azar Lawrence: Enlightened in the New Age

By [Don Heckman](#)

When Azar Lawrence grabs you for a handshake, your fingers quickly know they've met their match. He may be past the mid-century mark, but the veteran Los Angeles tenor saxophonist still has the sturdy look and powerful presence of a first-string linebacker.

His playing is no less vigorous, but far more emotionally multifaceted, a gripping combination of fiery, fast-fingered technique and soaring, high-note lyricism. Although Lawrence is one of the most authentic of the Coltrane-influenced tenor players, he has, more than most, transformed the style into a uniquely personal expression. So unique, and so personal, in fact, that he has performed impressively with everyone from Ike and Tina Turner, Eric Burdon and War, Marvin Gaye, and the Watts 103rd St. Rhythm Band to Miles Davis, McCoy Tyner, Bobby Hutcherson, Clark Terry, Cedar Walton, Frank Zappa, Busta Rhymes and Maurice White. And many more.



Jay Jackson

## Azar Lawrence

Why is it, then, that Lawrence's name, despite decades of achievement, doesn't ring a bell with many jazz fans? In part because the performances and recordings that might have generated high visibility—beyond his native L.A.—were largely packed into a decade and a half or so. And also because he spent another significant period of time working actively in the pop and R&B arena. And, perhaps most importantly, because of the nine years—which he describes as his 40 days and 40 nights in the desert—in which he dealt with serious addiction problems.

Lawrence resurfaced in a significant way last year on *The Legacy and Music of John Coltrane*. Performing with the Edwin Bayard Quartet, he risked the most challenging of comparisons with such classics as “Mr. P. C.,” “Impressions” and “My Favorite Things,” and succeeded admirably, by channeling the Coltrane style without losing contact with his own creative vision. “If even half [of the John Coltrane tribute albums] were as vital and powerful as tenor saxophonist Azar Lawrence's *Legacy and Music of John Coltrane*, there'd be no reason for jadedness” wrote Scott Verrastro in the August 2007 issue of *JazzTimes*.

“I listened to Coltrane all the time when I was growing up,” says Lawrence. “But I never transcribed the solos and tried to play along with them, or anything like that. Maybe I should have. But so, even though we have similar approaches, what I play developed as a natural kind of thing. I listened a lot, but I never put my horn into my mouth and tried to play like him.”

Sitting with him in a Los Angeles Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf, watching the precipitation from the winter's first rainstorm streaming down the windows, discussing everything from the chord changes of a McCoy

Tyner piece to the Egyptian roots of his first name, the complex layers of Lawrence's life and times gradually unfold. He is what often seems a rarity in Southern California: a native Angeleno, born Nov. 3, 1953, to an upper-middle-class black family living in the then largely white area of Baldwin Hills. (It has since become known as the African-American Beverly Hills.)

"I was blessed enough to grow up in that area, and to have, among other things, the luxury of a pool," he says. "My mother was a very fine pianist, and she started me on violin at an early age. I also played piano and the drums. But all that changed when a man named Lonnie, a friend of my father's, started to come over. He liked to lie by the pool and play his flute. And one day he brought an alto saxophone. That's when I discovered the saxophone sound, and I really liked it. So my father went out and bought me one."

His jazz education proceeded quickly from that point, as he mastered the horn and soaked up sounds like a musical sponge. "I met Reggie Golson, Benny Golson's son," he recalls, "and he had a great collection of records—Coltrane, Johnny Hodges, Charlie Parker—and he had personal experience with Coltrane, Elvin Jones, McCoy Tyner, guys like that."

By the late '60s, Lawrence had become an active participant in the cutting-edge scene centered on the music of the adventurous pianist/composer Horace Tapscott. "When I first started working with Horace, I was playing alto," he recalls. "But Arthur Blythe and Will Connell were holding down the alto chairs, so I played baritone."

Shortly after he graduated from high school, Lawrence changed to tenor. "I met Raymond Pound," he explains, "the drummer on Marvin Gaye's 'Trouble Man,' and he told me, 'Hey, man. It's time to start playing a man's instrument.'"

When he was just turning 19, Golson introduced him to Jones. "I went with Reggie to pick up Elvin at the airport," says Lawrence. "He was playing at the Lighthouse, and when we got there I heard Reggie telling Elvin that I was a great sax player. I had my soprano with me, and at the club Elvin walked past me, pointed at it and said, 'You know what? You might get a chance to use that thing.'"

"I went to a rehearsal with him, and he said, 'Hey, are you with me? I have a ticket for you.' We went up to Canada and then to New York. And it was phenomenal, playing with him. At first I used to get lost, because of all those polyrhythms. What it was, to play with Elvin, was that you had to become anchored and secure with your own sense of time."

Lawrence had always wanted, however, to play with McCoy Tyner. One night, Alphonse Mouzon, who was playing drums with Tyner, came in to hear the Jones band at the Village Vanguard. "He went back to McCoy," explains Lawrence, "and told him, 'Hey, man, what we need is down at the Vanguard.' McCoy told Alphonse to ask me to come over to their gig. When I got there, McCoy talked to me for a while. He said, 'Hey, so I hear you like music.' And I said, 'Yeah, I love music.' So he said, 'You like to play?' And I said, 'I love to play.' And he said, 'Well, come on and sit in.' I did, and afterward, McCoy came up to me and said, 'Give me your number, buddy.'"

It was the casual introduction to a gig with Tyner that would last more than five years. And what was it like, I wondered, to have the rare experience of playing consecutively with two musicians so closely associated with Coltrane? "Well, to start with," Lawrence responds with a smile, "I give thanks for that. Isn't it something? Especially since we felt the same way about music. Both of them, maybe because of their association with Coltrane, didn't have much to say about what they wanted you to do. If they hired you, you were what they wanted. Just play yourself. Do what you do. You're the guy they hired."

Lawrence's relatively brief encounter with Miles Davis in 1974, which consisted of a few rehearsals and the Carnegie Hall date that produced *Dark Magus*, called for a somewhat different kind of "guy," but it too was a role that he was fully capable of handling. "I came from an R&B kind of background," he says, "the Watts 103rd St. Band, etc. And I was a Jimi Hendrix fan, had the opportunity to hear him perform in Los Angeles. ... So Miles' band was just perfect for me. I was in hog heaven."

Lawrence's own albums, *Bridge Into the New Age*, *People Moving People* and *Summer Solstice*, the only releases under his name prior to the *Legacy and Music of John Coltrane*, were also released in the mid-'70s. At the same time, his career was expanding in the pop direction as well. Performing with acts such as Phyllis Hyman, Deniece Williams, Skip Scarborough, Jennifer Holliday, Marvin Gaye and Gene Harris, among many others, triggered the discovery of his "knack for writing."

A partnership with Chuck Jackson and Patryce Banks produced songs for Irene Carr, Stanley Turrentine, Ren Woods and others. "Then I ran into Maurice White," recalls Lawrence. "We found out we shared some spiritual ideas. He explained some of the stuff he'd seen in Egypt, and I said, 'Well, listen, I have a couple of songs.' But he was only mildly interested. They all thought of me in the John Coltrane context. But I played some things for him and he said, 'Wait a minute. I'm hearing some stuff there.' So I played the next one and he said the same thing. Well, we never did get to talk about Egypt, and some of the songs wound up on *Earth, Wind and Fire's Powerlight* album."

Escalating success, however, was accompanied by personal tragedy. Lawrence was also visiting his seriously ill father every night in the hospital. "I would go see him every night, no matter what time of night it was," he says. "And the one night I was so tired that I couldn't make it, that was the night that he passed. The nurse told me, 'Yeah, and he was calling your name.' It took me nine years to forgive myself of the guilt I was carrying. And because of that, I abused myself in various manners."

Lawrence pauses for a moment, still carrying painful memories. But he has been clean now for over three years, he says, and is moving forward with plans for another Coltrane tribute album. On a longer-range timeframe he also hopes to establish a clinic dedicated to the use of music, in correlation with color charts, natal and numerology charts, etc., for the healing of what he calls "dis-ease."

"I am where I am now," he says, "in part because Billy Higgins was very instrumental in assisting me. He came over, showed me his arms, and they were full of potholes. He said, 'Man, if I can become clean, you can.' And he was right. People can go out and fight battles and wars and shoot other people. But if you can win one battle over yourself, that's how you can experience growth."

### Recommended Listening

Azar Lawrence w/ the Edwin Bayard Quartet *Legacy and Music of John Coltrane* (Clarion, 2007)

Azar Lawrence *Bridge into the New Age* (Prestige, 1974)

Miles Davis *Dark Magus* (Sony, 1974)

McCoy Tyner *Enlightenment* (Milestone, 1973)

Elvin Jones *New Agenda* (Vanguard, 1975)

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