



## KANSAS LEGEND BIOGRAPHY

### Lester Young (1909-1959)

A man with a hip style all his own, Lester Young is one of the most memorable tenor saxophonists in the history of jazz music. Young played with numerous legendary jazz musicians and in a number of notable jazz ensembles throughout his career, offering a light, revolutionary sound that would prove to be unforgettable.

Lester Willis Young was born in Woodville, Miss., the oldest of three children. Young's father taught his children to play a variety of instruments including violin, trumpet, drums, clarinet and saxophone. After spending his early childhood in New Orleans, Young moved to Minneapolis with his family. The family started a band and began touring in vaudeville shows and carnival circuits, but at the age of 19, Young left to pursue music on his own.

After touring with Art Bronson's Bostonians and Walter Page's Blue Devils for a few years, Young decided to settle in Kansas City in 1933. Once in Kansas City, Young joined the Bennie Moten-George E. Lee Band before joining Count Basie's band, which would bring Young national recognition. Young spent four years recording and touring with Basie before leaving the group to join Fletcher Henderson as a replacement for Coleman Hawkins.

At this time, Hawkins was the most prominent tenor saxophonist of the time, whose dominant approach was hailed by many jazz enthusiasts. Young received criticism for his back-line, airy approach to the instrument and quickly left the group to pursue other opportunities. From there, Young enjoyed success playing with the likes of Billie Holiday, Nat "King" Cole, Al Sears and Bennie Goodman. Young proved to be an amazing soloist and improviser on tracks such as "Shoe Shine Swing," "Lady Be Good" and "Lester Leaps In." He even starred in a film short "Jammin' The Blues."

In 1944, Young was drafted into the U.S. Army, which proved to be a life-changing experience for him. He was caught with drug paraphernalia and sent to detention barracks in Georgia, where he spent one year before being dishonorably discharged. Young came away from the experience with a different playing style, with a strong emotional component to it. Regardless of the change, Young continued to record brilliant sessions with Norman Granz's Jazz at the Philharmonic.

Young's music continued to evolve as he aged, but alcohol slowly began taking over his life. His recordings became less consistent with the decline of his health, but "Pres," as Young was affectionately nicknamed, played on, always dressed distinctively and wearing his trademark pork pie hat. In 1955, Young suffered a nervous breakdown.

After recovering, Young made several guest appearances with Basie's band. In late 1957, he appeared with other notable jazz musicians on a CBS television special "The Sound of Jazz." Young performed with Billie Holiday for the first time in several years, and the piece "Fine and Mellow" is still remembered as one of Young's most magical performances ever. Young then attended an engagement at Blue Note Club in Paris before returning home to New York very ill. Young passed away in 1959 just before his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. He is remembered still today as one of the most influential musicians of jazz and bop music in history.

