

LEO WRIGHT

by Dan Morgenstern

1961 has been an eventful year for Leo Wright, the 27-year alto saxophonist from Wichita Falls, Texas. In August, he completed his second year with the Dizzy Gillespie Quintet. In the spring, his lovely wife bore him twin girls. His first LP under his own name was issued. And not long thereafter, Leo's father, Mel Wright, who had played alto with the famous Texas band "Boots and His Buddies," passed away.

"My dad started me on the horn when I was very young. He taught me a lot—two things he used to say I'll never forget." Those two things were "learn your horn" and "don't forget what came before." Today, Leo Wright knows his horn, and his playing reflects his awareness of the jazz tradition. When I first heard Leo Wright play, I was struck by the beauty and richness of his sound, and by the clarity and directness of his conception. In an age where the branch often seems far distant from the root, Leo Wright stands out as a man who knows where he came from and where he is at.

"If you want to play jazz, you need bottom and meaning; effort and time." Leo defines "bottom" as "beat, soul, ability to play the blues—and that sound that is jazz. Nobody can teach you jazz—you have to go out and get it. And it's got to swing."

Leo Wright's family moved to California when he was very young, but he later returned to Texas to finish high school, and then continued his education at Houston-Tillitson College. (While in Houston, he met Ornette Coleman, who already was different. "His playing was very stimulating, but it was not for me," Leo recalls. "Ornette has his way—I have mine.") Then came the army. Leo spent most of his military career with the famous 7th Army Band in Stuttgart, Germany. "I learnt so much there. I played with big bands and small groups, for shows and dancing—jazz and classical." Among his associates during that period were Cedar Walton, Lannie Morgan, Don Ellis, pianist Joe Jones—and Lex Humphries. "Lex got out a little before me, and then he joined Dizzy's group. When I got out I went to San Francisco State, and I met Dizzy for the first time when they played in town." At school, Leo also continued his studies on the flute, an instrument on which he has no peers in jazz. (He won the "new star" category on flute in the Down Beat 1961 International Critics Poll.)

In San Francisco, Leo worked with Red Saunders and Virgil Gonsalves, cutting his first record with the latter. In the summer of 1959, he joined Charlie Mingus, who has an ear for young talent second to none, and appeared with him at Newport. And then, in August, came the telegram from Dizzy Gillespie.

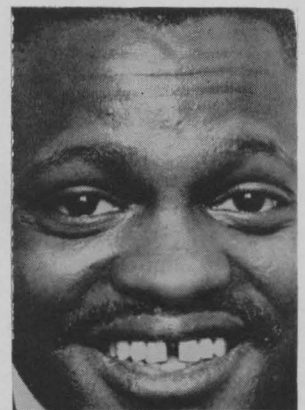
The association between Dizzy and Leo is one of the happiest meetings of generations on the current jazz scene. When you see them together, you know

that there is between them that special empathy that breeds great jazz. "Dizzy is a giant," Leo says. "And when you're working with the giants, you've got to improve. It is a challenge to play with a master. You've got to learn discipline, get down to business. I'm still in school. Dizzy can play one note and make you want to love everybody . . ."

In a day when every young musician wants to be a leader, Leo Wright does not contemplate leaving Dizzy just yet. "When I feel I'm ready, I'll go out on my own, but being with Dizzy is *it* for me now. It's an inspiration—and an honor."

When Dizzy's group participated in a *Jazz at the Philharmonic* tour last year, Leo had the opportunity to work with, and observe in action, Coleman Hawkins, Benny Carter and Don Byas. "It made me feel humble—even scared . . . there was so much maturity there." Leo's heroes are Bird and Dizzy, but as you can see elsewhere in this magazine (p. 21) he also has great admiration for Johnny Hodges. He respects Carter and Willie Smith. "And believe it or not, one of the first altos I became conscious of was Jimmy Dorsey—my father used to play his records." He also likes John Coltrane: "You can't deny that his music has meaning." In Texas, Leo received encouragement and instruction from John Hardee, a tenorman once well known on 52nd St. who now teaches in Wichita Falls.

He feels that "jazz is the greatest medium for bringing people together—here, and all over the world" and that there needn't be a gulf between the musician and his audience. "There is some creativity in everybody's mind—God put it there. Maybe they're just too lazy to find out about it . . . but music can reach it in them." Leo Wright, in his music and his approach to it, is one of the people who make one feel confident that the future of jazz is in good strong hands.



Leo Wright can be heard on his own LP, *Blues Shout* (Atlantic 1358), in the company of Richard Williams, Junior Mance, Art Davis, Charlie Persip and violinist Harry Lookofsky. One side has a front-line of trumpet and alto, the other features the novel combination of flute and violin. He is on several Verve albums with Dizzy Gillespie, notably *Gillespiana* (Verve 8394), which features some of his best recorded playing. He also appears on Richard Williams' *New Horn in Town* (Candid 8003).

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