TRIBUTE TO KEN PEPLOWSKI

by Ben Redwine

Ken Peplowski

Ken Peplowski, internationally acclaimed clarinetist, died February 2, 2026. His passing was in the manner he might have chosen, between sets performing aboard the Celebrity Summit Jazz Cruise sailing in the Gulf of Mexico. His career was extraordinary, spanning decades, genres, and even instruments. Ken's biography would be the envy of any musician, regardless of accomplishment.

Ken recorded over 70 albums as a soloist and leader and nearly 400 as a sideman. He worked with artists such as Charlie Byrd, Leon Redbone, Mel Tormé, Rosemary Clooney, Benny Goodman, and Madonna. Many clarinetists knew Ken's jazz performances from his several appearances at ICA conventions, but he also performed "classical music" professionally. He recorded the Milhaud *Concerto* and Lutoslawski *Dance Preludes* on an album entitled *The Other Portrait*. Over the years, he performed such works as the Mozart *Concerto*, Bartok *Contrasts,* Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*, and premiered concertos written for him by Dick Hyman and James Chirillo.

It should be noted that, in addition to being a formidable clarinetist, he was also a masterful saxophonist. In fact, his first big break came when he joined the Tommy Dorsey "ghost band," playing lead alto. That band was led by Buddy Morrow, who was so impressed with Ken's playing that he featured him on clarinet in a small band set for every performance. He later played tenor in Benny Goodman's last band. Ken did not consider himself a "doubler"; he approached both instruments completely differently, treating each as his main "axe." Long time friend, collaborator, and vibraphonist Chuck Redd claims that "Ken was in the top five jazz clarinetists in history, and in the top twenty tenor saxophonists!"

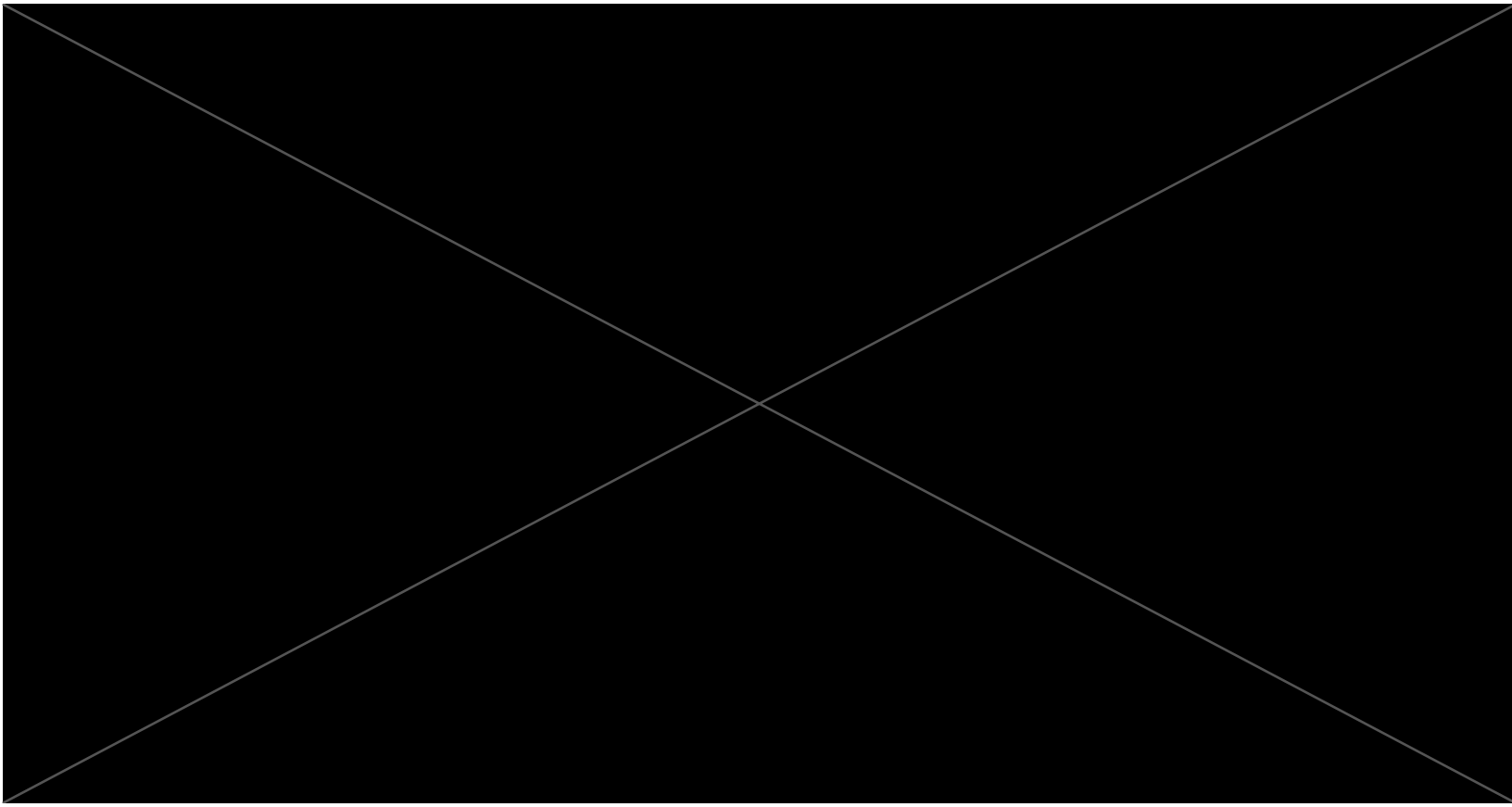
Ken left university to embark on his professional career, starting as a sideman, but ultimately succeeding as a soloist and bandleader. He had a down-to-earth approach to the clarinet, and freely shared his tricks for surviving on the road—like avoiding condensation gathering in a tone hole, how to approach a jazz standard, or how to conceive and construct an improvised solo (spoiler alert: he used classical étude books as inspiration). For the equipment nerds among us, Ken played an old Buffet clarinet and a very old Portnoy mouthpiece. He confided in me that he did not know how he would replace the mouthpiece if he should break it.

Ken's online presence is significant. He was reviewed and interviewed in most major media publications, including a fabulous interview on *Fresh Air* with Terry Gross. In 2016, pianist and host/producer Judy Carmichael released a two-part interview on her NPR show *Jazz Inspired*. Ken presented YouTube live sessions titled *In the Moment* during the COVID pandemic, and there are many live performances and interviews on various social media and entertainment outlets. My fascination with Ken, based on the handful of times I met him, lay in his humbleness and his keen sense of humor. In an industry which requires audience connection, there was no one better than Ken with his witty banter on the bandstand. As saxophonist Mark Lopeman, Ken's best friend, stated: "he didn't have a 'bag of tricks'; he was genuinely funny and engaging." Lopeman affirmed that "except when he was playing music, Ken was constantly goofing off." Redd concurred, stating, "On the bandstand and off, we were always laughing and joking around." One of Ken's funny stories was in his youth; he began his musical life playing polka music in his family band. His father was an amateur musician who brought home a trumpet, which he quickly realized he could not play. Ted, Ken's brother, became a trumpet player. Next, his father brought home a clarinet, and quickly determined he could not play it. Ken got the clarinet. Finally, his father brought home an accordion. Both Ken and his brother were relieved that he did not bring home the accordion first.

Ken was inquisitive, reading voraciously and listening to and absorbing all styles of music. He was a fan of opera and frequented live opera performances in New York City, and would occasionally include an aria in the set of a jazz gig. Lopeman noted, "often when I'd call him, he was in the middle of a project which might surprise most people. One time I called and he was in Los Angeles preparing a performance of Jimmy Guiffre mu-

sic." Ken's influences were not limited to jazz and classical music. He was a huge fan of the Beatles, and of Elvis Presley. Ken presented a tribute to Elvis at J's, the New York jazz club. Ken played the part of Elvis—attire, vocals, and even recruited several friends to serve as backup singers.

Pamela Stark, Ken's close friend, asserted that he was an extremely generous person. Over the years, he donated to multiple organizations and individual musicians. Stark recalled that when they went to a club in New York, all of the waiters loved Ken. She mentioned this to him, and he responded, "it's because I tip so well!" While on a tour to South Africa, Ken procured a new clarinet he could donate to a school. He never made any publicity out of it, just thinking about the students and doing what he could to make their lives better. Ken was generous in his mentorship of younger musicians, often turned gigs over to them, and helped deserving musicians procure recording contracts. Ehud Asherie, a pianist and long-time collaborator said, "Ken's example of putting a setlist together, his expert audience communication, and his banter onstage was very influential on how I present a performance." Redd fondly recalled "Ken helped my career immensely by recommending me for Tormé's band, establishing me in the North American festival circuit, and hiring me for international tours."

In 2021, Ken was diagnosed with multiple myeloma. New York clarinetist Dan Levinson said that when he had his own health crisis, Ken called him just to talk and to lift Dan's spirits. Even while undergoing treatment, he maintained a positive attitude and even made light of his situation. Lopeman noted that Ken's personality became a bit more contemplative after his cancer diagnosis, but his musicianship never faltered. Redd observed that his personality became a little softer and more affectionate. Many people appreciated Ken for announcing his diagnosis, making it easier for those who also struggled with various ailments. Despite treatment, he maintained an aggressive concert schedule. Wanting to stay closer to home, he created "Ken's American Songbook" at Birdland in New York. For five consecutive years, from 2021 to 2025, he performed two nightly sets during his week-long residency. Ryan Paternite from Birdland stated, "his concept was to never repeat a song during the engagement, and I don't think he repeated a song from year to year!"

In the overarching history of jazz, Ken ranks as one of the giants. Carmichael commented, "if you don't put Ken Peplowski in the upper echelons of jazz history, you don't have ears!" Ken's legacy is a direct extension of other great clarinetists such as Barney Bigard, Jimmy Noone, Jimmy Hamilton, Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, and Buddy DeFranco. He wasn't satisfied with just being the next Benny Goodman, a position he could have easily exploited with his history of performing in Goodman's last band. His interests and performances defied category and genre. Ken Peplowski was my favorite living clarinetist, and I cannot imagine anyone taking his place. He will forever remain my standard, both as an extraordinary musician and as a human being.