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L'ESPION



THE LUCKY THOMPSON QUARTET



ESPION PHOTO: BOB SCHULTZ

# LUCKY STRIKES

## THE LUCKY THOMPSON QUARTET



LUCKY THOMPSON, soprano\* and tenor saxes  
 HANK JONES, piano  
 RICHARD DAVIS, bass  
 CONNIE KAY, drums

### Side A

1. IN A SENTIMENTAL MOOD\* ..... 5:40
2. FLY WITH THE WIND ..... 4:05
3. MID-NITE OIL\* ..... 4:30
4. REMINISCENT ..... 4:00

### Side B

1. MUMBA NEUA\* ..... 4:45
2. I FORGOT TO REMEMBER ..... 6:30
3. PRIY LOOT\* ..... 4:00
4. INVITATION ..... 4:45

Most musicians would make lousy critics. Not that they have bad taste necessarily, but their particular stylistic proclivities often stand in the way of their critical judgment. There are immortal jazzmen who watch *The Lawrence Walk Show* each week because they like the band, and the classic case is Louis Armstrong who favors Guy Lombardo and Teresa Brewer. An exception to this rule (and a couple of others) is Eli "Lucky" Thompson, whose taste and judgment are as impeccable as his musicianship.

"Music," he said recently, listening to records in my living room, "is the most interesting thing in the world." Sonny Rollins made him smile at first, then laugh out loud. "There's such great humor in the man's playing. I love to listen." On *Chu Berry*: "What a player! He's the only one who could play four bars alone and be swinging that hard by the time the rest of the band came in." On Coleman Hawkins: "Yeah, yeah, The master." Lester Young: "What a sound. Listen. Play that again (*Clap Hands, Here Comes Charlie* with Basie). What a sound! There's a whole world in that solo. Would you please play that again?"

Lucky Thompson, one of the great tenor saxophonists of his generation—this *elder dictum*, by the way, is not original; it comes from both the dean of conservative jazz opinion as well as from a pioneer modernist critic—is a curiosity even in the curious environs of what is arbitrarily called the jazz world. His career, his life and his music are a unique footnote to undercurrent themes in the American Drama. A jazz novelist would have a field day; and Lucky (is that really a misnomer?), says simply, "Music is my only vice." He is not a man much given to hyperbole.

### THE CAREER

A number of qualities emerge from the star-crossed journey of this superb saxophonist. Despair, loneliness and frustration have dogged many jazzmen. (Indeed, the same might be said of any sensitive person in our society) but few have reacted with the resilience, inner strength, and determination that have marked the Thompson career since he left Detroit, twenty years ago, as a fledgling musician.

His peregrinations, admirably outlined in Dan Morgenstern's notes to Lucky's first Prestige album *Lucky Thompson Plays Jerome Kern And No More*, (Prestige/Moodsville 39), have brought him into conflict with

people he calls "the vultures"—a breed of human efflu that preys on a musician's weaknesses and insecurities, draining him of his resources and constantly offering contempt as an attractive method of "teaching the top"; happy only when the artist wears their heavy chains, does their bidding, eats their crow. Lucky, somehow always in an uphill battle either to keep a big band together or to prop up faltering compatriots or simply to play his music, has earned a reputation for telling "the vultures" what they can do with their "ideas". And in such certain terms that they have tried to drive him out of the business. When pressures became too great he went into retreat—a sojourn on a farm in the country where he built his own furniture and learned he could survive on his inner life and the mere necessities without missing the glitter or the glamour—and to Europe where, even during thin times, he was accorded a measure of genuine respect on a large scale that is seldom found on this side of the Atlantic. God bless the child that's got his own.

### THE MAN

Lucky Thompson has never given up the struggle. Optimistic in the wake of private disasters, he is a man with one tape, a set of values and two extraordinary sons, Bo-Bi, 8 and Kimmie, 4. Bo-Bi is an astute judge of people (especially his father) and Kimmie a tiny tornado. Little boys are by nature exasperating, and the Thompson boys are no exceptions. What is exceptional is their understanding of the demands on their father, their patience and indulgence. It is difficult enough for one to become a "good father" on a part-time basis, but Lucky is at it, time and a half. Perhaps it is because they are so "much in the son" that the boys have already developed strength beyond their years. For, as the city of Florence is a museum without walls, so their life is a classroom without desks; they learn constantly — morally, philosophically and practically—from an excellent teacher. They are already young men of character and Henry James could ask no more.

At a recent date, like the one that produced this album, Lucky's fanatic devotion to music becomes immediately apparent. No sooner is one take finished, when Lucky is hauling out music for the next, running it down, checking the other parts. "Yeah, yeah," he says, nodding in approval while listening to a playback, looking like both the matador and the bull. "Music is the master. If you don't give it everything, it will whip you." His technical facility, perhaps the most accomplished of his generation, is constantly searching for challenges, constantly trying to fulfill itself. This, in turn, makes powerful and unusual demands on his sidemen. And, consequently, the musicians with whom he surrounds himself, like those assembled for this session, must have at their command an awesome amount of ability.

### THE MUSIC

There is the history of the saxophone in Lucky Thompson's music. But for that very reason, do not expect the past here. Great as his playing has been—in 1947 on *Just One More Chance* (a jazz masterpiece), with his own groups in the late forties, with Stan Kenton, with Oscar Pettiford on the famous trio sessions, with the Dave Pichonnet Quartet in Paris or with Miles and J. J. on *Walkin'*—this is a different Lucky Thompson. The elements of his style—out of Hawkins through Byas and Webster—are still there, but now one hears more

Pies and more Bird. Can a man remind of so much and still be authentically himself? The answer is yes, and one has only to play a few bars to rest assured that the sum is distinct from its parts.

The sound is new—leaner yet still soulful and serious on tenor—for this promises to be the beginning of a "new" era in the Thompson saga. As the fifties saw a rediscovery of the still-fresh giants of swing, perhaps the sixties will bring the prime movers of the revolution once known as bebop, but now fully absorbed in the jazz mainstream, back into the forefront. Surely, this is one of the ends towards which Don Schlitten, who produced this excellent date, works. Lucky Thompson may well be one of the first to re-emerge and an important part of the "new" Lucky is the soprano saxophone. The soprano is an instrument that lay dormant in jazz for a lot of years, the exclusive property of the imitable Sidney Bechet, until Steve Lacy found a modern dress for it and Coltrane popularized it as an avant-garde property. Lucky, needless to say, plays it like no one else—in fact, the four soprano tracks on this album are, to me, the high points of the record.

Once, rehearsing for a night club engagement, Lucky played the introduction to *Yesterdays* as a duet with Bassist Richard Davis. Davis, who Lucky alternately calls "The Tank" and "The Monster" because of his tremendous drive and fingerbusting technique, played his part with a bow, making cello-ish figures. Both improvised freely, out of tempo, one bowing, the other blowing soprano. They came together finally, miraculously finding the same, thrilling note. After a moment, Lucky turned away and looked down at his straight horn. "Yeah, yeah," he said, looking up suddenly. "That's what this thing is all about (pointing to the soprano), you know? Yes, really, the cello is the sound that I hear when I play this. This fellow here (pointing at Richard) . . . well, what can you say?"

Hank Jones has been a friend of Lucky's since boyhood. "Brother Jones," says the leader, "is a terrific man. You can't fool him and if you make a mistake, he's right there to make it sound like you meant it." Jones, the possessor of the most beautiful "touch" extant, adds his unique sense of "rightness" to the proceedings, comping and soloing on a formidable level. Connie Kay, the resident drummer in the Modern Jazz Quartet rounds out the all-star rhythm team.

The music, all written and arranged by Lucky (except Ellington's *In A Sentimental Mood* and the lovely Bronislaw Kaper motion picture theme *Invitation*) is melodic and intimately personal. Although there are a variety of tempi, there is no screaming, and an avoidance of cliché, gimmickry and pretention. Lucky is a melodic improviser; and jazz is rooted in song: its *vox humana* aspect, often overlooked and today oversimplified, is the magical ability of an instrumentalist to bend his horn to shape the artist's needs, to make it an extension of his own, personal voice. It is a magic at which Lucky is a Merlin. In listening to this record all you need to think about are the names of the tunes. Each has a particular message. All you need to hear is track number one; Duke's *In A Sentimental Mood*. If you're not a Lucky Thompson fan after that, I pity you. It's just a man and a good melody. But a jazzman, a great one, *Lucky Strikes*. And he's wicked, man. Yeah, yeah.

Notes: David A. Himmelstein (Dec. 1964)  
 Recording: Rudy Van Gelder  
 Produced by Don Schlitten

**LUCKY STRIKES**  
**LUCKY THOMPSON**

PRST 7365  
SIDE 1



1. IN A SENTIMENTAL MOOD  
(Kittington-Mills Music-ASCAP) 5:48
2. FLY WITH THE WINDS  
(Thompson-Great Music-BMI) 4:05
3. MID-LITE OIL  
(Thompson-Great Music-BMI) 4:30
4. REMINISCENT  
(Thompson-Great Music-BMI) 4:00

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SIDE 2



1. MUMBA NEUA  
(Thompson-Great Music-BMI) 4:45
2. I FORGOT TO REMEMBER  
(Thompson-Great Music-BMI) 6:30
3. PREY-LOOT  
(Thompson-Great Music-BMI) 4:00
4. INVITATION  
(Kaper-Rebbins Music-ASCAP) 4:45

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