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SOUNDS LIKE ...

[Joe Lovano]

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Love +
Respect

Joe Lovano
2000



“There’s a humanism in his sound
that maybe was lacking in other guys
from the post-Coltrane era.”

by Ted Panken

photographs by Tom LeGoff

He isn't brash, he doesn't profile, but Joe Lovano isn't the type to blend into the background, either. When he strolls into an arts-center dressing room on this night and exchanges greetings with Paul Motian and Bill Frisell, the mood instantly lifts. Lovano's last performance with the drummer and guitarist, his partners for 20 years in Motian's trio, was eight months earlier in Rome. Now, they're about to take the stage at Caramoor, an elegantly landscaped arts center set on a former estate in the middle of New York's Westchester horse country, to conclude a remarkable afternoon of music that's featured the Sam Rivers Trio, and Steve Lacy and Mal Waldron in duet.

Lovano has a ruddy tan, his salt-specked goatee-moustache is trim, he's casually

dapper in blue circular shades, a bebopper's straw beret with alternating zig-zag stripes of white and sea blue, and a violet silk short-sleeved shirt with black markings resembling musical notes that drapes his burly torso. As greetings are exchanged, he assembles his silver tenor and begins to warm up, effortlessly filling the room from the first breath.

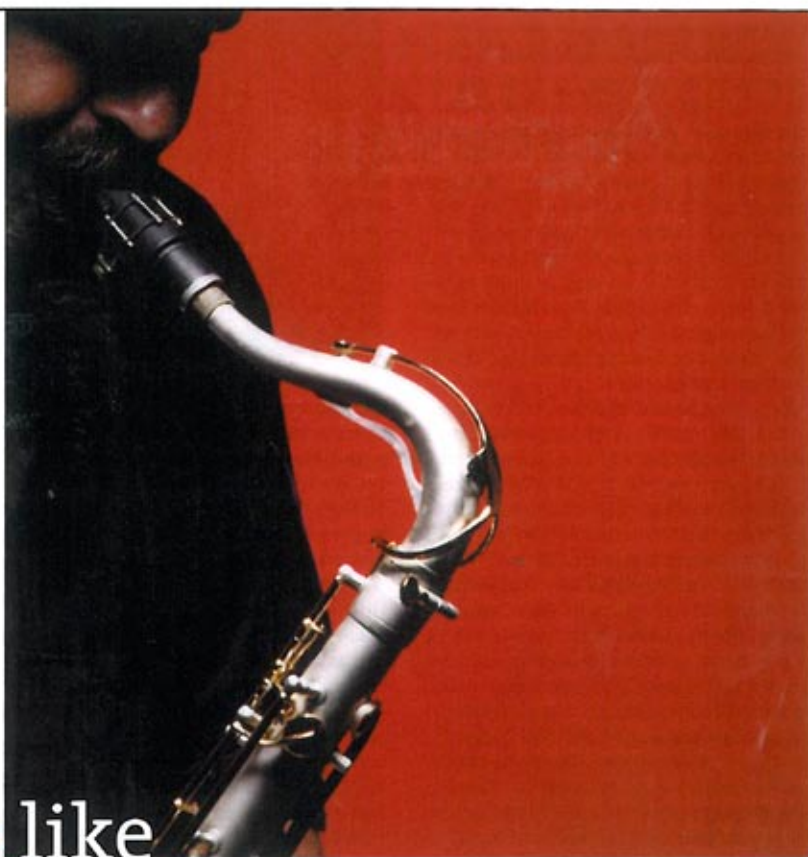
A few hours before in this same room, Chris Potter, fresh from a turbulent tenor solo with Hilton Ruiz's band, had come upstairs to say hello. I reminded him of a comment he had made — that Lovano's influence on his generation of saxophonists is so pervasive that he, Potter, is making a concerted effort not to sound like him. “That's absolutely true,” he replied.

“What you said to Chris is funny,” Motian said, once Potter had dashed back to the stage.

“I was just in Manchester, England, and as I walked into a club I heard a saxophone over the sound system. And I said, ‘Oh, that's Joe Lovano.’ The sound engineer who was playing the CD said, ‘No, it's not.’ I said, ‘You can't tell me that's not Lovano. Lovano has been playing with me for 20 years. I know when it's Joe. All he has to do is play two notes. I know it's Joe.’ It wasn't Joe.” He laughs. “I couldn't believe it. It's an English guy. I don't remember his name.”

“That's far out,” Frisell said.

“It is,” Motian shot back. “I stole the CD. After I got home, I played it; it doesn't



If it sounds like Joe Lovano... it is.

sound like Joe. But at that moment, I thought it was Joe. And I hear lots of other saxophone players now who sound like Joe, which I didn't when I first met him. He sounds better now than he did then, but not that much better. He sounded good then."

Lovano sounds good in improvisational flight to the music's outer partials with Motian and Frisell, I thought, and he sounds just as good on, say, his inspired and thoroughly idiomatic solo on "How High The Moon," for a record with the Ray Brown Trio a few years back. After I said something to that effect, Motian jumped back in.

"Do you know why he can do that? It's very simple. He's a good musician. He has

a lot of experience. He played with Woody Herman and other big bands, with the organ trios, with all these different groups; he can read anything, play all the reed instruments."

Motian offered deeper evidence: "Early when the trio was first forming, we had a gig in Cleveland, and we stayed overnight at Lovano's home. His mom cooked up this great food. I'm sitting on the couch with Joe's father, who says to me, 'You know, Paul, I'm an official at the local musicians union here in Cleveland; you have to give me \$8.' So I gave it to him! And he gave me his card, which later I gave to Joe after his father passed. Up on the wall of their living room is a picture of Joe in the crib, a couple of months old. Also in the crib with

him, there's a fucking saxophone! So check that influence out. That's the thing about Joe. It just comes naturally to him."

"He's natural, but he works his ass off, too," Frisell added.

In his alchemical ability to play any style — to play it convincingly and to retain his identity — Lovano is a model of what today's savviest young mainstream improvisers strive to attain. Part of the mystique involves his big, furry sound. It's a sound that tenorist Eric Alexander, a student of Lovano's at William Patterson College in the 1980s, describes as "ultra-breathy, broader and darker than just about any tone I've ever heard on the saxophone. A lot of younger