

"Synonymous with Soul" "A Big, Gentle Bear of a Man"

Dan Morgenstern

Gene Ammons was a big, gentle bear of a man who played the tenor saxophone with a sound and feeling synonymous with soul. His musical life spanned four decades, and he had hits in each of them—a record matched by few (if any) jazzmen. His music was direct and honest, and it reached and touched people. But forces of evil and ignorance in society made him pay dearly for the very human mistakes he made. And so the life of this man, who made so many people happy with his music, was scarred by injustice and misfortune. Yet he and his music remained whole to the very end, even through the ordeal of bone cancer which finally struck him down in his 50th year, on August 6, 1974.

An important part of his legacy is illuminated by this album. It brings together for the first time Gene Ammons' entire output for Mercury, the label for which he first recorded under his own name. It's all here, including two excellent numbers never before released, and the only date he made with his famous father, pianist Albert Ammons.

If, as Peter Keepnews, one of the brightest and best of the new crop of jazz writers, has pointed out, "Few musicians put so much real, unaffected emotion into everything they played (as Gene Ammons)", it might well have been because he was born into music. His father, who became famous for his rolling, stomping boogie-woogie style in the 1940s, was an all-round jazz pianist and musician who led little bands at various Chicago clubs in the '30s. The boy started on clarinet and received excellent musical instruction at Du Sable High School under Walter Dyett, whose illustrious pupils included Nat Cole, Ray Nance, Benny Green, Dorothy Donegan, Ahmad Jamal, Johnny Griffin and Richard Davis.

At seventeen, Gene joined the big band of trumpeter King Kolax, an important man in Chicago jazz. It was by all accounts an excellent band, and the teen-aged tenorman became its featured soloist. When the band went on tour in 1943, the youngster had his first taste of the road. In 1944 he was heard by Billy Eckstine, who tagged him for his newly organized big band—the chief incubator of budding bebop talent. Gene stayed three years, during which his fellow tenorists included Dexter Gordon, Wardell Gray, Lucky Thompson and Budd Johnson. It says a lot for the young man's abilities that he remained the band's star tenor voice throughout his tenure.

Gene formed his own quintet (soon expanded to six pieces) in 1947, and the group's first visit to a recording studio, on September 2, produced a durable hit in **Red Top**. Gene's idol, obviously, was Lester Young, but he had also heard Charlie Parker and other voices. As he developed his own style, other influences came into the picture. Interestingly, the warm ballad style that was to become a key ingredient in his success does not emerge until the final session of October 4, 1949. Other such

aspects of his art as the fluent blending of swing and bop elements, the strong feeling for the blues, the unflagging commitment to a swinging pulse, and the ability to construct succinct, coherent solo statements are evident from the start.

By the time Gene made his final Mercury session, he had spent five months as featured tenorman in Woody Herman's Herd, replacing Stan Getz in May, 1949. This was Gene's last stint as a sideman.

In 1950 he joined forces with his former Eckstine colleague Sonny Stitt. Co-leading a robust septet, these two formalized and greatly popularized the tradition of the tenor battle, which had its roots in the juxtaposition of the contrasting styles of Lester Young and Hershel Evans (in the classic Count Basie Band) and with duelists Illinois Jacquet and Dexter Gordon (in the first Lionel Hampton big band). Ammons himself was involved with Gordon in the first famous recorded tenor battle, **Blowin' the Blues Away** by the 1944 Eckstine band.

The partnership with Stitt dissolved in 1952, though they periodically renewed it throughout Gene's career. These encounters invariably pleased the public, particularly at in-person performances (though critics were wont to dismiss them as fabricated excitement). They also routinely put down Ammons' readings of popular ballads, which found great favor with record buyers. Gene's first great hit in this genre was **My Foolish Heart**, which no less than Billie Holiday chose as one of her ten favorite records in a **Metronome** poll of the early 50's.

When Ammons approached such material, he played close to the melody (critics notwithstanding, he was following in the honorable footsteps of, among others, Louis Armstrong, Jack Teagarden, and a considerable tenor influence, Don Byas), imbuing it with his big, warm sound, impeccable time, and personal turns of phrase. He also included in his repertoire such novelties as **Who Put The Sleeping Pills in Rip Van Winkle's Coffee** and even **When The Saints Go Marching In**, as well as many a vocal blues. And while the term was not in vogue at the time, he became a "crossover" artist between jazz and r&b.

It must be understood that Ammons' chief appeal, throughout his career, was to black audiences, and that the artificial dichotomy between popular and serious art is never more pointless than when applied to black music in America. Critics, influenced by traditional Western concepts, have had a hard time with this bugaboo, and Gene Ammons is a prime example of the jazz artists who suffered unfair critical neglect because of it. There were some writers, particularly Ira Gitler, who understood and appreciated Gene's artistry, but generally speaking, it was not until the early 70s that Gene was given just critical recognition as one of the major tenor voices in jazz.

By then he had more than paid his dues. The heroin habit, that scourge of post-World War Two jazz, caused many tragedies. Gene's involvement with it did not cost him his life, but it deprived him of his freedom twice—the second time for a full seven years behind bars.

It speaks well for Gene's integrity and essential straightness as a man that he never fell back on the easy, conventional excuses for having become an addict. He discussed the question in depth with Leonard Feather in **Down Beat** in 1970, some six months after he had regained his freedom.

Gene noted that, "Some say it's partly due to the environment, partly due to conditions they're living under, or the fact that they're trying to get away from something... The only thing I can say about that is the way I got in was through curiosity... It's just how far a man wants to go, and in my case, I just didn't have forethought enough to stop when I should have... When I looked up, I was so deep in it that I couldn't get out."

Ironically, Gene had remained "clean" throughout his stay in the Eckstine band and with Woody Herman's notorious Second Herd. It was in early 1950 that he became "hooked," by association with someone he describes, with characteristic charity and discretion, only as "another musician" he was touring with. There were no drastic consequences until 1958, when Gene was convicted of narcotics possession and sentenced to a 2- to 3-year term. He was paroled in June, 1960, but was refused permission to re-enter the music field. After a few months (during which he kept asking how soon consent would be granted and repeatedly was told he would be notified "in a few weeks"), he took matters in his own hands and went back to work.

"Then they said I had violated my parole and sent me back to the penitentiary. Luckily I didn't have but five months left to serve, so I went back and did that and came home on a discharge in January '61." The logic of a system of "justice" that first penalizes an illness with a harsh prison term and then offers parole but refuses a man the right to earn his bread seems topsy-turvy, but there was worse in store.

Gene resumed his career and soon recorded one of his biggest hits, **Canadian Sunset**. He was at the peak of his popularity when he was busted, again in Chicago, in September, 1962. It was a clear case of entrapment, including extortion of a bribe (\$5,000, according to Gene), but there was no mercy. "What it boiled down to, it seemed to me," Gene told Feather, "was they were going to make an example of me, due to the fact that I had a fairly big name in the music business."

Illinois had tough narcotics laws. Gene was first sentenced to 15 years to life, but the judge relented after his lawyer had gotten the right to a new trial. "The judge told me personally that he thought the sentence... was a little excessive... so he broke it down and wound up giving me 10 to 12 years, out of which I did seven calendar years, from September 1962 to October 1969."

Gene kept his sanity and health, and, thank God, his horn. "By me being who I was they more or less put me in charge of everything in the music department. I directed the band, played in the band, wrote music for the band, I taught some of the students, I was in charge of

the variety show they put on once a year and also participated in some of the church services." And during his last 18 months in prison, he was also put in charge of the radio system, which entitled him to a radio, personal TV set, phonograph, and tape recorder and enabled him to catch up with what was going on outside in the music world.

Thus Gene was ready when he got out, and just 12 days after his release, he opened at Chicago's Plugged Nickel. I was there that night, and the standing ovation that greeted Gene as he made his way to the stand was just the first of many. He was relaxed, happy and in full command of his horn and music.

"Dudes are trying new directions, and I dig it," he told me between sets, "but the avant-garde wouldn't fit my bag. I might try a free lick here and there, but I'll stick mostly to the Gene Ammons I know." And that's what he did in the remaining years granted him. He experimented with the Varitone amplification system but soon realized that a player with his big, natural sound didn't need it. Beyond that, he applied his skill and soul to what suited him best of the new crop of songs, put together some excellent blues and jazz pieces of his own, and rounded out his repertoire with evergreens and time-tested Ammons staples. He played in Europe for the first time in his life and was well received. He made new hits and new friends, and then the fatal illness took hold.

The last time I saw Gene Ammons, at Joe Segal's Jazz Showcase in Chicago in the spring of 1974, he looked thin and gray, but he played with the old warmth and swing. As always, he had no time to feel sorry for himself; there was music to be played. And in spite of everything, the music came out strong, clear and affirmative—a message of life and hope.

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Concentration, a boppish blues line, features Gene's Lesterian solos and breaks and a typically clean, well-structured sample of Gail Brockman's trumpet. A graduate of the Earl Hines and Eckstine bands, this underrated player made excellent contributions to the 1947 sessions presented here.

Red Top, Gene's first hit, has a group vocal intro, and was later made famous by King Pleasure's version, in which he vocalized the ensembles and tenor solo. As a result, Gene's version was reissued with a vocal group overdubbing the ensembles. Both versions are included here. **Idaho**, a 1942 hit, was favored by jazz musicians because of its interesting changes. Gene is on an Illinois Jacquet kick here. (The nice arrangements on this and Gene's second date are credited to George Stone.)

St. Louis Blues finds Gene much at home with his father's band, which includes guitarist Ike Perkins, who had been on Albert Ammons' first recordings in 1936; drummer Alvin Burroughs, an exceptional if unsung percussionist noted for his cymbal work; and the great

bassist Israel Crosby. Ammons Senior plays stride as well as boogie, and his son's three fine choruses are almost pure Lester Young. **Shufflin' the Boogie** is a title better suited to the next track. (It's possible they were accidentally reversed.) It's a medium blues, with low-down guitar, a nice open trumpet solo, and some characteristic hollering by Gene. **S.P. Blues** opens with a shuffle beat; Gene's solo shows traces of Don Byas as well as Young. **Hiroshima** is a variation on **Nagasaki**, recorded by Albert Ammons in 1936. The pianist, in a non-boogie solo, displays his potent beat, and after Gene's solo, father and son trade breaks.

McDougal's Sprout was named in honor of saxophonist Ernie McDonald's newborn baby, but someone got the last name messed up. The addition of a third horn gives depth to the ensembles; the new man takes a baritone bridge in the last chorus of the snappy 32-bar piece. **Hold**

That Money features a blues vocal by Earl Coleman, a gifted Eckstine disciple, with apt trumpet and baritone comments. Gene solos, and there is a riff from the Parker-Gillespie canon. **Shermanski**, a nice line on familiar changes, has spots for Gene, Brockman, McDonald's baritone, and 19 year old Junior (then still Julian) Mance, in his recording debut. **Harold The Fox**, named for Chicago's tailor to the hip (and sometime bandleader) Harold Fox, is a fast blues with good dynamics. This is Gene's meat, and he rises to the occasion. Mance pays tribute to Bud Powell.

Jeet Jeet demonstrates the arranging skills of A. K. Salim, a fine writer responsible for the charts on this and the following session. (His best known work is **Blee-Blop Blues**, done for Count Basie.) The changes are from **Indiana**. McDonald plays alto here, and Gene is quite boppish, with a Dexter Gordon touch. **Odd-En-Dow**, a minor blues, has Birdish alto, Gene again in a Dexter bag (like Dex, he favors quoting) and good rhythm section work. **Going For The Okey-Doak**, previously unissued, is a relaxed performance featuring tenor and bass solos (Gene Wright, of course, went on to fame with Dave Brubeck). **E.A.A.K. Blues** (the initials stand for Eugene Ammons and A. K. Salim) is a typical Salim blues with good ensembles, a pleasant trumpet solo, and economical and very bluesy tenor.

Blowing the Family Jewels kicks off Gene's fourth session in a swinging minor groove. There's a lot of his tenor, topped off with a fine break. **Sugar Coated** shows that Salim liked the work of Tadd Dameron. Gene seems to enjoy the pretty changes, and Mance has a brief spot.

Dues In Blues sports a shuffle beat and Latin rhythm touches. The solos by trumpet, alto and tenor are excellent, with Gene in his lyrical Lester bag. **Jay Jay**, the second unissued piece unearthed here, is a fast, boppish ride on **I Got Rhythm** foundations. After trumpet and alto split a chorus, Gene digs in, his solo both harking back to Wardell Gray and presaging his future work with Sonny Stitt. Mance is also heard.

Daddy Sauce's Airlines lands Gene back in the Mercury studios after a 14 month interlude. All but the last piece from this date were penned by Marcel Daniels, best known as a singer (he later recorded with Elmo Hope). Except for holdovers McDonald and Mance, this is a new band, with guitar added to the line-up. Jesse Miller, a Hines alumnus, is more in the swing tradition than Brockman, but the climate is more boppish now. **Little Irv**, based on **Perdido**, has solos by trumpet (pretty good), alto (out of tune and not sounding much like the earlier McDonald), tenor, Blevin's guitar, and piano (which nobody bothered to tune). **Abdullah's Fiesta** has Daniels leading the ensemble and offering two choruses of his bop scatting after Miller and Gene have had their say. **Brother Jug's Sermon**, not unlike a slow **Flyin' Home**, has a party atmosphere, handclapping, shouting and a bit of spoken dialogue. It's mostly Gene (Jug, of course, was his nickname) and his first full-fledged venture into r&b.

Everything Depends On You is our first sample of the ballad format that was to make Gene famous. The tune is a fine one, and Gene's single chorus (at a tempo slower than most players would venture) and brief cadenza give the melody its due. **Hot Springs**, like the entire session, proves that the guiding hand of a skilled arranger (in this case, veteran Jimmy Mundy) can do much for a band. Gene features a leaner style here, and the group plays in the "little big band" manner. **When You're Gone**, a pretty Mundy ballad, permits Gene's rhapsodizing to stand out more than on **Everything**. He has found his style. The introduction is based on McDowell's **To A Wild Rose**. **Little Slam** is a bang-up finish to the proceedings. Mundy's bopdating of **King Porter Stomp** swings all the way, and Gene demonstrates that he has found his own voice fully on fast tempos as well. The trombone spot is too brief to reveal the player's identity, but likely candidates include Matthew Gee and Charles Greenlea.

Gene Ammons' music went to the heart of jazz. It wears well.

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