

STANLEY SAGOV

Sagov Bio 2011

"Nobody really dies in jazz, Miles, Dizzy, Ellington, John Coltrane, Charlie Parker, Louis Armstrong, Thelonious Monk, Bill Evans, they're all really still so alive!"

Stanley Sagov



Looking Forward To Remembering The Future

Stanley Sagov is a dazzling jazz pianist and composer who is skilled on a number of other musical instruments and who is also skilled with surgical instruments, as he simultaneously has a full time career as a medical doctor. He constantly amazes his colleagues in both music and in medicine with his ability to lead such an intense dual life both as a physician and as a musician.

Dr. Sagov is again releasing a new CD but he produces enough music to fill the contents of a full CD almost every month in his

home studio. Sagov is also a top notch photographer who shoots nature, people and places with the eyes of an unusually sensitive personality.

Born in Cape Town, South Africa in 1944 to a Jewish family that had immigrated there to escape the chaos and anti-Semitism that followed the Russian Revolution, the young Sagov grew up in the midst of the horrid South African regime of Apartheid and its resulting police state.

The young boy was born with Gordon's Syndrome, an extremely

rare genetic disorder which can cause club feet, cleft palate, dysplasia of the hip and also thumb in palm deformity. He suffered greatly as he was forced to endure the horrors of sixteen different surgeries in London, New York and Boston during his first 13 years to help correct various deformities. At school he was stigmatized and teased by other boys because of his awkward gait and the necessity of wearing leg irons for many years. Marked by this great difficulty, he had a sudden insight at an early age.

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“This was not my fault,” says Sagov, “Suddenly there was a realization about this around age 9. I remember walking uphill from a violin lesson one day and suddenly understanding the parallel between my being stigmatized for looking unusual and the terrible way that black people in South Africa were being treated by whites. How could others think that this was something that I had willed or caused and for which I should be blamed?” It is actually a genetic disease affecting both my daughters and my grand daughter.

“No one in my family played music professionally though my mother dabbled in it a bit, but when I was age six, I suddenly asked to play the violin. I have no idea why I did this! I was a bad but enthusiastic violinist! I remember wearing a British school uniform with a dark jacket and gray pants in the winter and riding on the top level of the English style double-decker buses with my quarter-sized violin. I had leg irons on because of the multiple surgeries and I must have been a strange sight.”

“I always felt a kinship with the black people of my country. The Passover story with its themes of being strangers in a strange land and needing to be freed from slavery and oppression and the cruelty and

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mass murder of my fellow Jews and family members in anti-semitic Europe resonated with my perceptions of the unjust society in which I was living. All white people in South Africa had servants, even if you were extremely poor and on welfare, you had servants. Our servants would carry me around and take care of me and I sensed a kind of nobility about the Bantu people in Cape Town. They had a lot of pride. In those days [the ‘50s] there were so many more black people than white. The ratio was about 4 to 1.”

Cape Town was the legislative capital and in those days there were only three white members of parliament who strenuously opposed the ruling nationalist party.. One of them came to stay with the Sagov family during the 6 month legislative session every year and had a great impact on the young Stanley.

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His name was Leo Lovell and he played ukulele. Soon, he taught Stanley how to play the instrument.

This led to his purchase of a guitar on the way to England for another surgery.

“I was immobilized for a long time in England and there was blues revival happening there even before it really took hold in America. I was listening to folks like John Henry, Leadbelly and Big Bill Broonzy. I was crazy for Lonnie Donegan. Soon I was hooked on the guitar and was playing homage to the Chicago blues men and English skiffle music. When I went back to South Africa, I brought this music with me.”

“Back in Cape Town I remember that I auditioned for a band and I was wearing studs on my jeans. They liked me so I began playing with this very popular group called the High Five Plus Two. We played Fats Domino tunes, Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis titles and stuff by Buddy Holly and the father of rock & roll, Chuck Berry.”

“In a local band competition an R&B band led by a guy named Morris Goldberg who played reeds, won. Later Goldberg went on to play with Hugh Masakela and on the Graceland album tour with Paul Simon. So, when our band’s piano player got sick, I picked up the piano and learned how to play those hip R&B licks in our band.”

“My sister liked jazz and also my parents were listening to Django Rheinhardt, Duke Ellington, Lionel Hampton and Glenn Miller, so I was exposed to lots of jazz at home as well as to the music of the African penny whistles on the street. I heard the exciting music of the Black Township, this was Mbakanqga and Kwela music.”

By age 16, Sagov met a jazz bass player who was a romantic charismatic character; his name was George Kussel and he led the teen fully into the jazz world.

“The jazz scene in South Africa was a scene in the country that was strikingly integrated and different from the rest of life there. It was a life of beat philosophy, drugs like marijuana, sex and jazz. (naturally we also never inhaled!) This amazing music represented the fusion of European and Black cultures. This was an unusual niche in the apartheid society in which blacks and whites could reach out to one another. It was multicultural SOUL. It wasn’t about ‘it’s a black thing and you wouldn’t understand it.’ The jazz scene was always integrated in South

Africa. It was a statement that said ‘we aren’t a part of this Apartheid thing.’ There was sex across the color bar, and clubs that were openly integrated even in the face of it being totally illegal. Part of why it was sanctioned however is because the government was also using these jazz clubs as locations where they could spy on people, as many in attendance were real radicals and revolutionaries.”

“The music was great. Stan Getz, Bud Shank and John Mehegan came and toured. This was the ‘50s and early ‘60s. They told us that we were creating the only jazz outside America that was REALLY jazz. Many of the same elements of race, social protest, suffering and pressing through racism were the same as they had been in America. Grass-roots Political resistance efforts were happening at that time and people were coming together around those themes as artists.”

“Dollar Brand (Abdullah Ibrahim), Chris McGregor, Kippie Moeketsi, Dennis Mpali, Dudu Pukwana, Todd Matshikisa, Early Mbuzi, Martin Mgajima, Winston Manququo, Johnny Gertse, Monty Weber, Chris Schilder, Midge Pike, Cecil Barnard (Hotep), Basil Moses, Hugh Masekela and Miriam Makeba were some of my heroes at that time. I got to play with all of these amazing people and they would come and visit at my home as well. I always had sessions going on with jazz people. This was striking because it had such a social, spiritual and integrationist agenda around the music.”

“I saw jazz as an oasis. Dollar Brand was such a brilliant player and actor. There was this amazing club called the Vortex which was owned by an Indonesian guy with incredible dope and good food and the music there was always very, very powerful. Sometimes Dollar would be playing and there was so much black humor in the society there . . . there was a deep feeling of implacable forces of oppression on one level, but we were young and simply into the music. Our mix of African and American jazz elements had the power behind it and Dollar would perform satirical guerilla theatre, skits, poetry and always his deeply soulful and swinging music.”

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“These years as a teenager were wild years for me. I had a fling with an Indian woman, which was totally illegal. One day when my parents were away in Europe, my sister and I had one of our open jam sessions. By morning the house was filled with musicians sleeping everywhere and I was in bed with Aisha. Then my aunt showed up unexpectedly, checked all this out, phoned my parents and the next thing I knew, my sister and I had to live with my aunt till my parents returned!”

One night a wild jazz guy named Bob Tizard who played bass and trombone decided I needed to learn how to play “Perdido” and so we stayed up all night playing in a trio with Don Stegman on drums from 1 am to 7 am until I finally got it and could keep track of the 32 bar song form with cyclical changes and improvise on something other than the blues..”

While all this jazz life was going on, the young Stanley Sagov was also heavily influenced by medicine, as he’d been in and out of hospitals for most of his life with all the terrible surgeries to correct his club feet. Throughout high school he played music but he was equally drawn to science. Rebellious in high school, still he received high grades. There was never any pressure from his family to become a physician, but because he’d experienced so much surgery, he had met lots of MDs and was drawn to the profession. At age 13, he went to England for several operations there and met a great Harley Street surgeon known as Dennis Browne who headed up very formal tours of the hospital dressed in striped pants and tails. Dennis Browne was a famous orthopedist who was subsequently Knighted by the Queen for his work and he took a liking to the young Stanley. Sir Dennis wrote to him through medical school and he asked him to study and come to work with him in London. Stanley also was inspired by several uncles who were prominent physicians in Cape Town who were also very important in his choice of a medical

career. In addition, Sagov had evolved a deep understanding about how Apartheid was so oppressive to people of color and how that affected the death rate in rural areas of South Africa. In those days, 50% of black children perished by the age of five years old in rural areas. The life expectancy was essentially plotted against the color of one’s skin and even by the depth of the pigment. As a doctor, Stanley could see how unfair the society was based simply on medical outcomes. He wanted to make a difference. So, in 1962, Stanley decided that he would attend University of Cape Town to study medicine.

“At this time I was still playing in clubs and had moved from guitar to piano. Just before going to the university, I had the feeling that I really wanted to know more about harmony and counterpoint. The Juritz family had moved in next door and the husband was a professor of physics who also played first rate bassoon and harpsichord with the Cape Town Symphony.”

“We became amazing friends. Here I was, a seventeen year old Jewish boy hanging out with a patrician musician named John Juritz. We had a great affinity and he taught me recorder and introduced me to my first oboe teacher. We formed a group that played baroque chamber music., I learned a lot about classical music from this saturation experience and played oboe in an orchestra and opera company at the University of Cape Town. He was a very important part of my musical career. Even as I was studying medical journals I also read through every page of Grove’s Dictionary of Music; I wanted to learn everything about the subject and I was all over the map musically all the while studying medicine to the hilt as well.”

“I wanted the music, but at the same time I wanted to have a good impact on people who had such terrible medical care in the black townships outside of Cape Town. As a trainee, I became

skilled at re-hydrating scores of patients in our well equipped hospital. They’d walk in looking like death and leave looking pretty well, but then they might die a week later from something as simple as chicken pox or measles or gastroenteritis. I could take care of black people but black medical students were not allowed to see white patients. That was how insane the conditions were there for medical students and doctors then.”

“In the black townships there was an amazing music scene. Though black people were not considered citizens in South Africa, they were given 13% of the land, usually the least arable land and they were only allowed to be in South Africa as workers. The townships were essentially ghetto compounds with thousands of segregated people living just 12 to 15 miles out of town and all of them either walking or taking buses to work in the city every day. In order to go into a township, you had to have papers and report to the police to tell them where you were going and why. I went every week to perform with the musicians and never reported to anyone but I never felt afraid. I knew that my black friends would always take care of me. It was such a police state. I’d go every week, perform in concerts and then take musicians home in my car. Sometimes there would be riots in the township, but they’d put me behind a piano and protect me.”

“I worked in the townships as a doctor as well. As a senior med student I always had the need to do medicine AND music. I always gave equal time to music as I did to medicine. It took a lot of energy, but I had a real NEED to do and have both in my life. I was always totally prepared every day for school and I never crammed. I was a disciplined student by day but also a mad man at night! We had block parties, with music playing all the time and we’d even bring in huge grape trees and have these Bacchanalian orgies! Once we got arrested and I was taken before the university council! The



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“I got into the jazz scene in Johannesburg as well through a connection with South African born pianist Chris McGregor who had been playing in a band for the show,”Sponono.” This show followed the groundbreaking jazz opera King Kong, the story of an African boxer who was a tragic hero and this show also spawned a lot of other musicals. Miriam Makeba was in King Kong. Chris also recorded a very important big band

album at the Castle Lager sponsored the area jazz festival . It mixed jazz with Black Township music and documented our unique South African synthesis of the tradition. I had the heady privilege of playing with many of the musicians who were part of this era and this ushered me further into the African jazz experience.

“The music was a hot, heady mixture and some rich white people who’d be, in a certain way, slumming, by inviting us over to their very courtly upper crust houses enjoyed the music and blacks and whites would play together. This was totally illegal. Sometimes I’d sleep over in Soweto which was also illegal but I always felt protected by my relationship with the musicians and the spirit of the music.”

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“In 1967, I went to London and there, through my London family, I met Cleo Laine and John Dankworth, two of the big jazz stars of that time. Cleo told me to look up jazz singer Sheila Jordan when I got to New York and after three weeks of phone tag I finally got lucky. She took me under her wing and introduced me to all the jazz greats of the era including Ornette Coleman, George Russell, Jaki Byard, Elvin Jones, Roland Kirk, Jimmy Garrison, Charles Moffet, Ted Curson, Howard McGhee, Booker Ervin, Billy Hart and so many others. I had moved to New York after having taken the medical exams in South Africa and immediately went to work at Bellevue Hospital, Grasslands Hospital and New York Hospital and all the while I was playing at night in clubs like Slugs and the Village Vanguard, The Village Gate, Pooky’s Pub and Musart with many of my newly found jazz friends that Sheila had introduced me to. Some of the people who saw me at the clubs ended up in my care at Bellevue and they wondered if I really knew what I was doing as they’d seen me as a jazz musician the night before!”

“The music was inspiring me so much and I knew that I wanted to learn still more, especially about jazz. Around that time I heard that Gunther Schuller was starting a jazz division at New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, so I applied to the school and after two auditions and letters of recommendation from Bill Evans and Ted Curson, I was accepted in the jazz department. I moved to Boston and I was surprised to find out that although I was a jazz piano major, they had no piano teacher for me! I protested and they asked who I would like to have so I suggested some of the great players I’d heard in New York, like Bill Evans, Oscar Peterson, Hank Jones, Roland Hanna, John Lewis or Jaki Byard.”

“Gunther said ‘OK, we’ll get one of those people for you. In the meantime I studied with classical piano teachers who taught me the correct fingering and hand positions that I’d never learned. I practiced carefully for three months and then the school flew me to New York weekly to study with the great Jaki Byard. After a few weeks, other students heard about this and so the school decided to fly Jaki to Boston on a weekly basis to teach several students at NEC.”

“During my time at NEC I was also holding down positions as a physician at Harvard University Health Services, the student medical center at MIT and I was even the prison physician at Walpole Prison. I also moonlighted at various emergency rooms and in intensive care units. Again, I always needed to

balance the rigors of medicine with those of music. I had a wife and family at this time as well.”

“I put together a band called ‘Sagov’ and it featured trumpeter Stanton Davis and drummer Anton Fig, both classmates at NEC at the time. We opened for Gary Burton at one point and the famous jazz manager and booking agent Ted Kurland offered us a deal to go on the road and record. It was, for the music business, a pretty good deal, but in contrast to the steadiness and security of my medical career and in thinking about my wife and child, it seemed impossible to take the on challenges of touring.”

“I never expected to stay in Boston after my stint at NEC but I found New York to be a ‘cutting contest’ which was very harsh, almost racism in reverse. I was sympathetic to the reason for this, but really preferred the camaraderie of playing with musicians like I had done in South Africa and in Boston. I’m somewhat wistful about those choices now but I feel now like having my high tech studio with all the latest gear enables me to keep my chops up and write music. I now produce about a CD’s worth of music per month in my mini studio, playing all the instruments myself.”

“I’m idealistic about music. Jazz is a bridge between races. Neither could exist without the other. Jazz is a very unique music and rock and roll exists only because of it. It’s a mixture of European influences with sophisticated African rhythms and it’s a discourse, a conversation that is going on that can only happen in the moment, in real time. It’s being open to each other, in a creative context in which everyone is winning.”



“The title of my 2008 CD was ***Looking Forward to Remembering The Future***. That’s what came up with this album . . . it’s music that in a way, compared to music I’ve played, is pretty serene, reflective, drawing on tradition, but still fresh. It’s got its own group feel. It has eclectic openness to all that is in this place, at this moment. The meaning of the title has to do with the fact that by the time you and I know anything, it’s already over. We’re never in the present because it’s already over. We’re operating as if it’s now, but in truth, it’s already over. So, in jazz, we’re remembering that note that’s over and responding to that and the irresistible drive to get to the next moment. Jazz is a sexy mix of head and heart, and in order to experience a bit of now, you have to be impelled by the future oriented momentum of the music. It’s like making love with the other musicians in real time right in front of all of our audience. Nobody really dies in jazz, Miles, Dizzy, Ellington, John Coltrane, Charlie Parker, Louis Armstrong, Thelonious Monk, Bill Evans, they’re



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all really still so alive in our passionate resonance to remember them and anticipate and make the next possible musical gesture happen right now!”

STANLEY SAGOV & The Remembering The Future Jazz Band is a bunch of grizzled jazz veterans who never really grew up, still love to play the music and want to share that experience in the moment of creation with YOU!!

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