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A SURVEY OF KANSAS CITY SAXOPHONISTS

PART THREE

## DOUG TALLEY

"IT'S ALL ABOUT THAT SPARK YOU SEE IGNITE WHEN A YOUNG PLAYER GETS IT."

BY CAROLYN BREWER

Listen to Doug Talley play the head on "Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye" from his album, *Night and Day*, and you can hear his love of the tenor saxophone. Watch him during a high school jazz band clinic and you'll see his passion for passing on that love of music, what he refers to as a magical quality he got from his own teachers. Listen to "The Sleeping Child" from his *Kansas City Suite*, a highly sophisticated yet lyrical tribute to a statue on the Plaza, and you'll hear a sense of place no composer from either coast could ever capture. A Midwesterner by preference, Doug has successfully combined playing, writing and teaching right from the beginning of his career.



Doug is a classically trained clarinetist and has never had a saxophone lesson, yet his warm rich-as-caramel tenor sound and his un-pretentious solo lines have set the standard for a new generation of Kansas City tenor players. That comes partly from listening with well-rounded ears. He grew up on his father's Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald

records, and he never listens as a sax player alone, but as an arranger and educator. He has never tried to copy someone else's sound. Although in person he's soft-spoken and seemingly unflappable, he brings an honest intensity to tunes as varied as his high-powered arrangement of Ellington's "Caravan" and his own playful "Potatoes and Gravy".

Born in Louisiana, Missouri (hometown of that other Kansas City jazz great, Paul Smith) Doug's family moved to Overland Park, Kansas when he was six. He began taking piano lessons the next year. He recalls his teacher's frequent frustration over his choice of fingerings, but that they found common ground with chords. "I remember her giving me a piece of sheet music that had the chord symbols on it and she'd show me how to work them out to fit my hand, which of course was small. So I understood inversions right from the start."

Doug remembers school instrumental music classes, where he first played cello and then clarinet, as being fun because of teachers like Ron McClellan and Jim Cochran who made it exciting and cool. Jim Cochran put his jazz band students at Shawnee Mission South through a kind of sight-reading boot camp, making them responsible for everything in the school's jazz library at once. "We never knew what he was going to pull out but his goal was to have us play convincingly in any given style." That eclectic style of playing carried over into after school jam sessions with fellow band members Andy DeWitt and Steve Cardenas. "Besides standards we'd play tunes by Sam Rivers, Oregon, the Paul Winter Consort and Dave Holland. Or we'd just get together and start blowing and see where it took us. We were on the fringe."

At this point Doug had played tenor just two years. Until high school he had never had any desire to play sax because, "they always sounded bad," and he continued to play clarinet all through school.

His opinion of saxophones changed when, as a high school freshman during a short move to New Jersey, Doug heard the school jazz band play "In The Mood" and thought, "Wow, wouldn't it be cool if I could play that tune with them. Then I found out I had to play saxophone to be in the jazz band. No clarinets allowed. I talked to my dad and he got me a tenor because there was an opening for tenor. I tried out but didn't make it because I'd only been playing a few weeks. The following year I got in."

By the time Doug got to KU he knew he wanted to be a musician and teacher. He had taken clas-

sical clarinet lessons from Tommy Williams for years and while working on his music education degree he continued to study clarinet, but played tenor in Ron McCurdy's KU jazz band. With the help of Dick Wright's jazz history class and KANU jazz shows he started listening to Coltrane, Dexter Gordon, Wayne Shorter and Joe Henderson.

It wasn't until North Texas, where he got his Masters in Music Ed, that he really got into writing and arranging. "I was lucky to have classes with those two North Texas legends; Rich Matteson and Paris Rutherford. I played in the Two O'clock band, but it was what I learned in my arranging classes that stayed with me."

Doug's first teaching job, Hillcrest Junior High, his alma mater, coincided with a five night a week gig at the Vista Hotel with Paul Gray and the Vista Orchestra. "This was a four horn band and we ran out of arrangements pretty quickly so I became one of the arrangers. You really learn by doing it."

As much as Doug enjoyed playing with groups around town like Kerry Strayer's New Kansas City Seven and Trilogy Big Band, (check out his soprano solo on "Three Card Molly" from the Trilogy Big Band CD) the idea of a small group, where there would be fewer restrictions, more possibilities for innovative rhythms, where chords wouldn't always do what was expected of them, was enticing. In 1995 he formed the Doug Talley Quartet. "I got my first pick for each player." Wayne Hawkins, Tim Brewer and Keith Kavanaugh all jumped at the chance to work in a quartet with Doug.

Clearly more comfortable talking about his band than himself, Doug says he made a conscious effort to pick players with backgrounds that were a little different from each other, that all the members bring something different to the mix. "The idea of putting these guys together was exciting to me. I thought it would work and it did. We're still going strong."

Although Doug also plays with Jim Mair's Kansas City Jazz Orchestra and still enjoys the big band experience, the freedom within the quartet fuels his composing and arranging. Each member writes for the band and their openness to trying new things, like contrafacts, added strings, non-traditional time signatures, keeps their playing fresh.

Through out-of-town tours and clinics the Doug Talley Quartet has shared their love of playing with countless young musicians. "It's all about that spark you see ignite when a young player gets it."

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