

## Saxophonist Joe Lovano

*A great tenor returns*

For many the tenor saxophone is the totemic instrument of mainstream jazz, and Joe Lovano is one of its prime high priests. Born in Cleveland into a family that worshipped music, he was largely self taught, although mentored by his father, "Big T," a barber who also jiggled around town on the tenor. Lovano eventually studied at the famous Berklee College of Music in Boston, where he graduated in 1972.

Lovano went on to work with two hard-playing jazz organists, Lonnie Smith and Jack McDuff, as well as with the big bands of Woody Herman and Mel Lewis. These gigs allowed him to develop the hard-hitting, emotional style he had learned playing club dates and bars in his hometown. At the same time he expanded his musical horizons through participation in the New York experimental "loft scene" and by playing with musicians such as Rashid Ali and Sam Rivers. In 1985 he made his first recording as a leader, which has been followed by more than thirty more; his most recent release, *Symphonica* (Blue Note), is a collaboration with a German big band and a full symphony orchestra.

Lovano has developed a recognizable personal style that draws upon the whole history of jazz tenor saxophone playing; while he has absorbed the sophisticated harmonic language of John Coltrane and his successors, his big, brawny tone owes more to the followers of Coleman Hawkins, and even to bar honkers and bluesy players such

as Hal Singer. He writes many of his own tunes but also plays standards and modern jazz anthems, and he's equally at ease in duets with ninety-year-old pianist Hank Jones or with newcomers such as twenty-something Esperanza Spalding. Although known primarily for his original tenor sax voice, Lovano plays many different woodwinds, and is especially effective on the rarely heard alto clarinet. He has recently been featuring the Aulochrome, a new invention by François

Louis that resembles two fused soprano saxophones.

Lovano returned to Berklee as a faculty member in 2001. For the last few years he has been touring with a group of Berklee faculty and students, including James Weidman on piano, Esperanza Spalding on bass, and the dual drum sets of Francisco Mela and Otis Brown. The energy of the young players, and particularly of the complex rhythms generated by the drummers, has reinvigorated Lovano, who seems to thrive on the vigor of the band. Even though

the rhythm section stays mainly in a safe mainstream modern jazz zone, the leader often takes more chances than he does in other surroundings, and blends his regular jazz grounding with the lessons he learned from his more avant-garde colleagues, often taking his solos into the outer regions of improvisation. Lovano is a master of rhythmic displacement, and he reacts heartily to the propulsion of the percussion, which is hardly surprising, as he is himself a first-rate drummer.

This quintet is at the Michigan Theater on Friday, November 7. The opening half features Lovano in duets with the wonderful pianist Jason Moran.

—Piotr Michalowski

