

# STILL A FREE SOUL

## SAXOPHONIST AND COMPOSER JOHN KLEMMER

BY ANDREW SCOTT • ARTWORK BY RADEK

Thirty-five years ago, in 1969, tenor saxophonist John Klemmer entered the recording studio at Chess Records to lay down tracks for what would become his third album. Klemmer had been signed to Cadet Records (formerly Argo)—which, along with Checker, was a Chess subsidiary—for two years. His first album, *Involvement* (Cadet 797), was recorded when Klemmer was just shy of his twenty-first birthday. The record was a modest success. It garnered attention from *Down Beat* magazine and made fans out of Leonard Feather and *High Fidelity*'s John S. Wilson.<sup>1</sup> Although Klemmer claims he neither has nor believes in heroes, critics were quick to index Klemmer's sound and improvisatory approach to both the Chicago "tough" tenor tradition from which the young saxophonist emerged, and to Sonny Rollins and John Coltrane, two early influences.<sup>2</sup> In fact, it was Klemmer's incorporation of Coltrane's "sheets of sound" style that earned him the moniker "White Coltrane," a comparison he dismisses.

A&R man Esmond Edwards brought Klemmer to Cadet, which at the time was Chicago's premier jazz label. Edwards, who produced *Involvement*, heard Klemmer perform at the First Quarter nightclub in Chicago's Old Town neighborhood on the invitation of guitarist Sam Thomas. A photographer, cover designer, and former A&R director for Prestige Records, Edwards brought along his production experience from working with Coleman Hawkins, Kenny Burrell, Eric Dolphy, and Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis to Klemmer's debut recording session. Perhaps most importantly, Edwards brought the ability to leave the fiercely independent Klemmer alone. "I had an understanding with every record company: Don't tell me what to play or I'm gone," the saxophonist elaborates. "I don't want to be arrogant or a prick, but every time I did what I wanted to do, things went great and sold well. However, every time someone suggested something, it didn't work. It was my way or no way."

The Ter-Mar studio, where Klemmer recorded *Involvement*, was no longer housed at the same location where such revered blues artists as Muddy Waters, Willie Dixon,

John Lee Hooker, Sonny Boy Williamson, and Howlin' Wolf made their earliest, and, some argue, most important, records. That epicenter of Chicago blues, which had become the site of pilgrimages by the Yardbirds, who recorded "I'm a Man" there, and the Rolling Stones, who in June 1964 recorded half the tracks for their album *12 x 5*—including "2120 South Michigan Avenue," in honor of the studio's original address—had moved around the corner to 320 E. 21st Street in September 1966. There was, however, a lineage of strong musicianship and artistic integrity being forged at the new Ter-Mar Studio. And when Klemmer joined the Cadet roster in 1967, he became label-mates with some of the best-known names in jazz who recorded at Ter-Mar, including Sonny Stitt, Bunky Green, Ramsey Lewis, and Odell Brown and the Organ-Izers, whose hit, "No More Water in the Well," remains a sought-after 45 to funk collectors.

Both *Involvement* and Klemmer's sophomore release, *And We Were Lovers* (Cadet 808), feature the saxophonist performing a mixed program of original compositions and so-called "jazz standards" such as "You Don't Know What Love Is," Irving Berlin's "How Deep is the Ocean," and Jerry Goldsmith's theme from the 1966 war film *The Sand Pebbles*. While performing standard compositions was an important "rite of passage" for jazz players in that it demonstrated how well a musician synthesized the jazz lexicon and tradition, musical change was in the air during the late 1960s. Leonard Chess, who, along with his brother Phil, formed Chess Records out of Aristocrat Records in 1950, was not well. By October 1969, Leonard would be dead, leaving his only son, Marshall, in charge of the company. Marshall Chess, who would go on to form Rolling Stone Records and produce *Sticky Fingers*, understood that jazz was increasingly being outsold by rock music. And in Klemmer, Chess saw a musician of the people's generation—someone whose jazz talent was tempered by an interest in rock, psychedelia, and all things '60s. "Marshall called me up and said, 'The times are changing. Pick some guys and bring in some long-haired hippies,'" remembers

I was trying to double Coltrane's "sheets of sound." I'm up here playing chords on the Echoplex, all that stuff I was doing in Chicago, and this was like "sheets of sound" plus plus plus.

Klemmer. Donny Hathaway, who at the time was a struggling Chicago pianist, was among the musicians whom Klemmer auditioned for what would become the *Blowin' Gold* sessions. "I passed on him. He wasn't the right guy for the project, but he was a real sweetheart." Klemmer ultimately settled on guitarist Pete Cosey (who would go on to tour and record with Miles Davis), keyboardist Richard Thompson, bassist Phil Upchurch, and drummer Morris Jennings for the session.

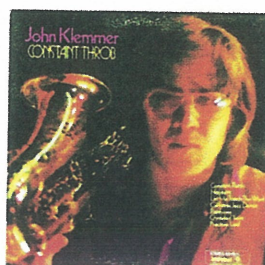
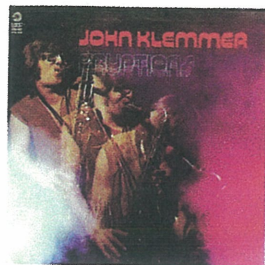
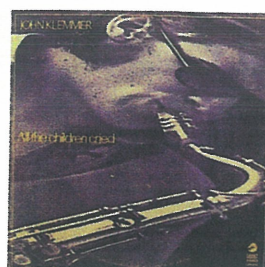
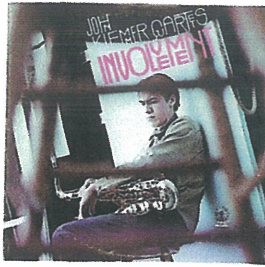
Recorded prior to Davis's watershed album *Bitches Brew*, *Blowin' Gold*'s employment of contemporary repertoire ("Hey Jude" and "Third Stone from the Sun"), quasi-Eastern melodies ("Excursion"), and electronic gadgetry ("My Heart Sings"), gives currency to the argument that Klemmer's album foreshadowed, if not initiated, the burgeoning fusion movement in jazz.

It was an interesting time in music history. Although the 1970s produced many of the tracks most valued by current producers, collectors, and DJs, many critics were suspicious when viewing the fusing of jazz with such popular musics as rhythm and blues, rock, and funk. Their icy reception was understandable. Disenfranchised by a history of critical discourse that devalued jazz as a marginal musical form, jazz historians and writers appropriated and applied a Western art/music canonical model to jazz in an attempt to legitimize this music. Paramount to the "music as art" equation was the belief that jazz was incorruptible—untouched by the commodified realm in which rock music was thought to reside. Accordingly, the incorporation of pop, rock, rhythm and blues, funk, and so-called world influences into the music of Klemmer, Davis, Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, and others failed to adhere to the newly constructed, and tightly circumscribed, categorization of jazz as art. Not

surprisingly, critics were quick to declare that this new music was not jazz and to accuse its proponents of selling out, even though much of this music—particularly that of Davis—remains among his most uncompromising and commercially inaccessible. Although Davis took the brunt of the journalistic criticism, Klemmer received his share of negative press. *Down Beat* awarded *Blowin' Gold* three out of five possible stars, suggesting the album "doesn't really make it," while reminiscing about Klemmer's more tradition-based—and, according to the magazine, better—first album.<sup>3</sup> For Klemmer, such negative criticism marked the beginning of a thorny relationship with the jazz press. "Jazz is like a cult, like a gang mentality, there is lots of inside shit," remarks the saxophonist.

Klemmer would be criticized repeatedly throughout his career. His foray into the mainstream with *Blowin' Gold*, his *Touch* album (ABCD-922)—which was seen by many as overtly commercial—and his solo saxophone work on *Cry* (AA-1106), were lambasted by the press, despite being embraced by the public. Most disturbing for the jazz intelligentsia was that Klemmer, unlike some musicians who rode the jazz/rock bandwagon to the bank, could actually play. In the eyes of many, Klemmer had abandoned the jazz mantle that was so rightfully his in order to "genueflect to the commercial," as Stanley Crouch famously concluded about Davis.<sup>4</sup> For Klemmer, however, music has always been about communication.

John Klemmer was born in Chicago on July 3, 1946. He came of age during the rock revolution—he was eighteen when the Beatles came to America and not yet ten when Charlie Parker died. Klemmer began studying guitar at age seven. Interested in all things artistic, Klemmer painted at the Art Institute of Chicago and studied both dance and



puppetry as a young man. He switched to alto saxophone as an eleven-year-old attending parochial school and took up the tenor at the end of his freshman year at Niles Township West High School. Even as a teenager, Klemmer's playing cut a wide stylistic swath. His improvisations were replete with cascading chromatic passages, false fingerings, avant-garde affectations, reed biting, humming into the horn, and a host of virtuosic artistry that confirmed Klemmer's complete understanding of the history of the saxophone. Accordingly, at his best, Klemmer combines the technical rigor of classical performance with the over-the-bar line phrasing, riff-based melodic material, pitch vocalization, and audibly inflected "blues" notes that index his improvisations to the entire trope of African American music making.

Klemmer's earliest musical experiences were social. The young saxophonist played in various rock & roll groups, which, he suggests, could be better described as "White blues bands," alongside guitarist Harvey Mandel and James Guercio, who would later produce Chicago and Blood, Sweat & Tears. Music was all-consuming for Klemmer at this point. He studied improvisation with Joe Daley—an avant-garde saxophonist who recorded for the RCA Victor label—learned about arranging, conducting, and theory from his high school bandmaster Charles Groeling, and spent most weekends "jamming" in a cramped South Side house owned by a Chicago pianist. It was here that Klemmer began to combine his jazz improvisatory abilities and classical saxophone technique with the rock music that surrounded him as a teenager. "I'd go to his house Friday afternoon and stay till Tuesday," Klemmer said, "just sleep on the floor, wake up four or five hours later and there would be a whole different rhythm section playing. I'd just roll off

the mattress and pick up my horn."<sup>5</sup>

Klemmer's intense work ethic resulted in a prodigious ability on the horn. But unlike some musicians who play jazz/rock hybrids, technique for Klemmer was always a means to an end, rather than an end in and of itself. "I knew that the sooner I got over the technical barrier, the sooner I would be really free to create." In this respect, Klemmer was drawn toward the music of John Coltrane. "I remember being eleven years old and picking up an album with an interesting picture on the cover," Klemmer says. "It was *My Favorite Things*. My interest in his music was from a purely intellectual place. It was, 'Hey, this saxophone player was playing more intricate than I can, and I want to do that.'"

Klemmer was a fast learner. He began working Chicago's Old Town neighborhood with pianist Jodie Christian and "sitting in" with fellow Chicago saxophonist Eddie Harris. A teenager in a town where bars still have an age limit of twenty-one, Klemmer was often accompanied to gigs by his father. At sixteen, Klemmer went on the road with the Ted Weems ghost orchestra, followed by short stints with the dance bands of Billy May (without May), Les Elgart, and Ralph Marterie. These opportunities provided the young saxophonist with experience in "teamwork and professionalism," but offered "little musical stimulus."<sup>6</sup>

In July 1968, Klemmer got his first career break. Don Ellis—a Los Angeles-based trumpeter who began his career as a side musician in ensembles led by Charles Mingus, George Russell, and Maynard Ferguson—was garnering attention for his experiments with odd-meter composition and electronic instrumentation. His orchestra, thought to be the first fusion big band, utilized ring modulators, an electric string quartet, Indian influences, and quarter-tone harmony to good effect. To be sure, the group was some-



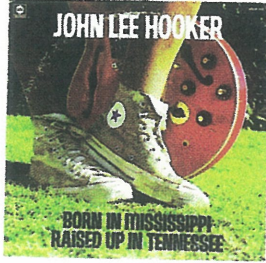
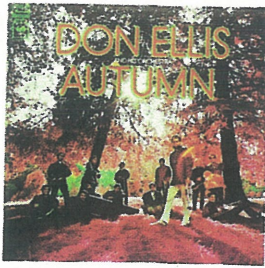
thing of an anomaly. Although the Ellis ensemble played uncompromising music, they were also a commercial success. Ellis's records *Live at Monterey* and, later, *Electric Bath* (which was nominated for a Grammy award) were blockbuster albums by jazz standards, and the Ellis group soon found itself on double bills with Quicksilver Messenger Service and Frank Zappa's Mothers of Invention. Not surprisingly, Ellis's music polarized the jazz community. While history has somewhat vindicated the trumpeter, who died in 1978 of heart failure, much of his music was dismissed at the time as being both pretentious and, according to *Saturday Review*, "lightweight."<sup>7</sup>

Ellis was at his most popular when Klemmer joined his band in the summer of 1968. And although Klemmer did not love the music, he enjoyed the experience. Los Angeles was a musical hotbed in the late 1960s. Klemmer reconnected with his childhood friend James ("Jimmy") Guercio (who as a staff producer for Columbia Records had achieved success one year earlier through his work with the Buckingham's), worked with the folk singer Tim Buckley and listened to countless rock bands. "This was L.A. in 1969, and I was soaking it up like water," he remembers. Klemmer recorded three albums with Ellis, including the decidedly bizarre effort, *The New Don Ellis Band Goes Underground* (CS 9889), featuring jazz arrangements of Blood, Sweat & Tears, Harry Nilsson, Sly & the Family Stone, and the Isley Brothers. Klemmer had left Ellis's band by this point, however, and his contributions were limited to sectional work on a single track. Klemmer contributed most to the trumpeter's 1970 Grammy-nominated album, *Live at Fillmore* (CG 30243). He penned a number of the arrangements—including "The Old Man's Tear" and his own "Excursions #2" from *Blowin' Gold*, on which he

executed a lengthy and intense improvisation. While Klemmer claims Ellis exercised little musical influence over him, the trumpeter's use of electronics would point Klemmer in a seminal direction.

Klemmer was not the first saxophonist to use the Echoplex. Previously both Sonny Stitt and Eddie Harris had employed this electronic device. However, Klemmer was arguably the first to utilize its full potential, making it an integral part of his sound and musical approach. For Klemmer, who first heard Ellis use the Echoplex during a sound check, electronics enabled him to achieve an improvisatory aesthetic he had been striving for since he was a teenager. "In Chicago, I was trying to double Coltrane's 'sheets of sound.' I'm up here playing chords on the Echoplex, all that stuff I was doing in Chicago, and this was like 'sheets of sound' plus plus plus," he recalls. Here, Klemmer is referring to the Echoplex's "slapback" or delay effect. The pedal sustains pitches, affording the improviser time to construct chords heard both melodically (separate pitches) and harmonically (pitches sounded together).<sup>8</sup> I asked Klemmer if he worried whether this electronic timbre, which challenges the normative and decidedly Western conceptions of acoustically pure sound, would make him *persona non grata* in the jazz community. "Nope. I heard Ellis using it and I said, 'Plug me into that thing.' I fell in love with it instantly."

When Klemmer returned to Chicago to make *Blowin' Gold*, the Echoplex was already central to his style. The combination of jazz saxophone and a rock & roll attitude succeeded, coming across best during the vocal incantations that punctuate Klemmer's improvisation on "Free Soul," which remains a favorite track among breakbeat aficionados. *Blowin' Gold* remains among Klemmer's best recordings and helped solidify his reputation as a musical



trailblazer. Unfortunately, Klemmer lacked the opportunity to experience the success of this record firsthand. As soon as Klemmer finished recording, he headed out with fellow saxophonist Oliver Nelson on an American State Department-sponsored tour of Africa. When he returned in May 1969, Klemmer discovered he had a hit on his hands with the album's lone ballad, "Blowin' Gold (My Love Has Butterfly Wings)."

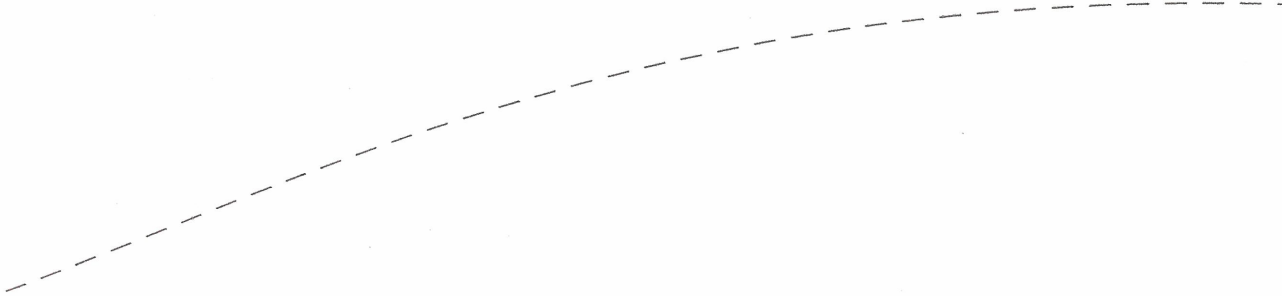
Bolstered by this success, Klemmer put together a band and set out on the road. The group's repertoire consisted exclusively of Klemmer's original music. "I really wanted to be a songwriter, and I was always frustrated I couldn't sing," remembers the saxophonist, who would go on to write music for Manhattan Transfer ("Walk in Love") and co-compose with Danny O'Keefe, Bobby Caldwell, Pamela Phillips-Oland, and David Barateau, with whom he wrote "Lost in Love" for Freda Payne.

Klemmer returned to the Chess studios to make his fourth album in late 1969. Entitled *All the Children Cried* (LPS 326), the recording featured a new band of musicians that included guitarist Art Johnson, pianist Pete Robinson, and drummer Bob Morin, who had worked with B. B. King and would later contribute to some of Gabor Szabo's finest albums. Only keyboardist Richard Thompson, who would also work with Szabo, was a holdover from the *Blowin' Gold* sessions. The album was better received than Klemmer's previous effort. Harvey Pekar—the Cleveland file clerk cum comic book creator whose life was the subject of the 2003 film *American Splendor*—reviewed the album for *Down Beat*, awarding it four stars and citing Klemmer's compositions as paramount to the album's success.<sup>9</sup> Although perhaps not as well known as *Blowin' Gold*, *All the Children Cried* utilizes many of the same concepts to good effect.

Both the greasy bass lines and the slick grooves that served Klemmer's previous effort so well are present, and such tracks as "For God" and "Mind Explosion" evidence the same intensity audiences first heard on "Free Soul."

Conversely, "Here Comes the Child," which features one of the first uses of ambient sound effects as a compositional device, demonstrates a gentler side to the saxophonist that, when viewed retrospectively, was prophetic. Finally, "Soliloquy," an unaccompanied piece for solo saxophone, was perhaps most suggestive of his future direction. *Cry* (AA-1106), and much of 1981's *Solo Saxophone II: Life* (5E-566), featuring "Love is Life/ Life is Love" and "Yes to Life," which DJ Krush used on his mix album *Code 4109*, are solo saxophone recordings. Also in the 1970s, Klemmer began giving saxophone recitals at such venues as Schoenberg Hall, where he would perform both solo and in duet with Bulgarian pianist Milcho Leviev.

In August 1970, Klemmer, now a California resident, recorded what would be his last album for Cadet. While some of the musicians, such as Art Johnson, stayed with him for the summer sessions that produced *Eruptions* (LPS-330), Klemmer did not return to the Chess studios. Instead, he recorded the album in Los Angeles. Klemmer not only augmented his band for the sessions—adding vibraphonist Lynn Blessing and percussionists Mark Stevens and Gary Coleman—but also increased his own instrumental palette, recording on flute ("Lady Toad") and playing his saxophone through a wah-wah pedal ("Rose Petals"). In retrospect, Klemmer suggests *Eruptions* simply "got lost." The album did not enjoy the same marketing initiative as did his earlier Cadet work and, accordingly, did not garner the same attention. With this recording, however, Klemmer underscored once again that he was in the vanguard



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of jazz. Klemmer, along with musicians he considered his contemporaries, was tired of the perception that jazz was an elitist art form. He wanted to return jazz to the people. "A handful of musicians have made jazz a 'now' music again—keeping their artistic standards and still reaching a lot of people," Klemmer said in 1974. "When a young audience hears Miles, Mahavishnu, Airto, Chick Corea, Herbie Hancock, Donald Byrd, and a number of others, they say, 'Wow! I like that, but I can't explain why. It's got a great feel to it, but I don't understand all that's going on.' So what? Aren't we asking a lot of an audience to expect them to understand the craft of music too?"<sup>10</sup>

It was with the notion of appealing to the "people" that Klemmer moved to the Impulse label for his fifth release. It was a calculated move designed to disseminate his work to as wide an audience as possible. "One of the reasons I signed with Impulse was because I knew that John Coltrane's catalog would last forever and therefore my product would have longevity," he observes.

Although Creed Taylor is perhaps best known to some as the producer of some of the finest work of Eumir Deodato, George Benson, Freddie Hubbard, Stanley Turrentine, and Hubert Laws on his CTI label (Creed Taylor Inc.), his initial foray into jazz production was with Impulse. Taylor, working for ABC-Paramount as a staff producer, pitched Paramount the idea of forming a jazz "imprint" label. The company agreed and, in 1960, Impulse was launched. Featuring the motto, "The New Wave in Jazz," Impulse quickly established itself as one of the most progressive labels, signing such artists as Archie Shepp, Charles Mingus, Albert Ayler, and guitarist Mel Brown. However, in 1961, Impulse pulled off a major jazz coup, stealing the tenor saxophonist John Coltrane from Atlantic Records. Coltrane made some of his finest music while at Impulse, where he remained until his death in 1967.

Klemmer signed with Impulse four years later in 1971.

His first effort, *Constant Throb* (AS-9214), was recorded over two days in August 1971, although not released until the following year. While much of this music evidenced Klemmer's earthy Chicago style, particularly his straight tenor and soprano work on "Rainbows" and "Let Me Touch the Wind," the side musicians—Shelly Manne, Howard Roberts, Jim Keltner, and Wilton Felder—brought a West Coast slickness to the project. Of note on this recording is the presence of Don Menza. The Buffalo-born tenor saxophonist who cut his proverbial musical teeth playing with Maynard Ferguson, Stan Kenton, Buddy Rich, and Don Ellis (with whom he worked in the 7th Army band while stationed in Stuttgart, Germany) joined Klemmer on alto flute and bass clarinet for the August 12th session.

Although Klemmer intended the album's title, *Constant Throb*, to convey a sense of musical energy—"keep on pumping and creating music"—critics, the public, and record marketing executives located sexual innuendo in Klemmer's music. Until this point, Klemmer's album and song titles had consisted of either vague astrological references ("Gardens of Uranus" and "Earth Emancipation") or 1960s romanticism ("My Love Has Butterfly Wings" and "A Mon Frer African [To My African Brothers]"), that were well suited for the tenor of the times. However, the sensual references of his music—which would culminate in his most recent recording, *Making Love* (Touch Records)—would lead directly to the marketing of his 1975 album, *Touch*, which was regrettably referred to by many as "the fuck album." But while Klemmer admits that record companies used sexually nuanced advertisements to sell his product, he maintains such initiatives were beyond his control. "I can't control what people do or think about my music and product," Klemmer says. "There can be a great difference to me between sex and sensuality. Most people have the two confused or tied together. Sensuality, meaning passion and honesty, is what I do. Everyone else takes that

A bell went off in my head. It was literally that unconscious thing, and I walked off stage. I went to my wife and producer and said, "I'll never play this music again."

to mean the 'sex and fuck' world."

Interpretations aside, Klemmer's romantic horn stylings were in demand in the early 1970s. In 1973 alone, Klemmer contributed some wah-wah-inflected soprano saxophone to John Lee Hooker's *Born in Mississippi/Raised up in Tennessee* (ABCX-768), and recorded two more albums for Impulse—*Intensity* (AS-9244), featuring two live tracks from San Francisco's Kabuki Theatre with his quartet (pianist Todd Cochran (Bayete), bassist James Leary, and drummer Woody Theus), and *Magic and Movement* (AS-9269). This later recording, which captures a performance on July 6, 1973, at the Montreux Jazz Festival with Tom Canning, Cecil McBee, and Alphonse Mouzon, represented a pivotal juncture in Klemmer's career.

"I was at the Montreux Festival where they had 'Impulse Live,'" Klemmer remembers. "They had me and Gato Barbieri on a live broadcast to French television. Cecil McBee, Alphonse Mouzon, and my own piano player were playing avant-garde stuff. I'm up there live to French TV and a bell went off in my head. I thought, 'Where do I go with this? Do I play louder? More far out?' It was literally that unconscious thing, and I walked off stage. I went to my wife and producer and said, 'I'll never play this music again.'"

Despite the success of his records and the high level at which he and his band were playing, Klemmer was not satisfied. Simply put, he wanted to communicate to a wider audience than he felt he could garner as a jazz musician and did not want to be restricted by labels. "I never thought of myself as a jazz musician," he says. "I am a creative artist. I chose jazz at the time [when starting out], as it was more intellectually challenging and free for more expression at that time. I have and will use whatever musical style vehicles I think best to express what I want at any given time." In the harmonically "outside" explorations of his avant-garde work, Klemmer saw a ceiling to how well he could do financially and to how many people he could reach with his music.

Accordingly, in early 1974, Klemmer, along with his manager Bill Siddons, who was the former road manager for the Doors, "walked down the hall" from Impulse to its parent label, ABC, and suggested a lateral move. Klemmer admits that his idea met initial resistance, as most people thought he was "going commercial." According to Klemmer, however, the move was about communication, not commercialism. "I called and said I want to get off Impulse and go to ABC, which to most ears meant commercial. [But] I did whatever I did at the time on *Fresh Feathers* because I'm an open, honest person musically. So I thought R&B is happening, and I'm from Chicago, and so we did that album and had a blast."

Klemmer's first release on ABC was 1974's *Fresh Feathers* (ABCD-836). The album features some spirited playing, including Harvey Mason's memorable drum break at the beginning of "Fat Alligator Snap." Furthermore, with the apt title "Music for the People," Klemmer makes good on his promise to be a musical communicator.

For Klemmer, his foray into the mainstream would be a "one-two punch." Although *Fresh Feathers* would be mildly successful as a crossover record, commercially it did little more than set the tone for *Touch* (ABCD-922). Recorded in the summer of 1975, and featuring such funk stalwarts as George Duke, Harvey Mason, Chuck Rainey, and Crusader alumni Larry Carlton—with whom Klemmer later would work on Steely Dan's 1976 album *Royal Scam*—*Touch* entered the *Billboard* chart at the number 30 spot on November 22, 1976, and shortly thereafter gained Gold Record status.<sup>11</sup>

After the release of *Touch*, other records followed on Elektra Records and ABC—*Barefoot Ballet*, *Lifestyle (Living and Loving)*, *Arabesque*, *Solo Saxophone: Cry*, and *Brazilia*, featuring what has to be one of the most fantastic percussion sections, with drummer Lenny White and hand drummers Alex Acuña, Airto Moreira, and Paulinho Da Costa.

These recordings not only made Klemmer a star, but also earned him a reputation for being the “father of smooth jazz,” to which he quips, “Don’t blame me!”

Currently, Klemmer is in negotiations with several record companies about releasing his new music. As he feels the record industry has changed considerably during his lifetime, Klemmer is treading carefully, taking time to “choose the right one.” There have been many inaccuracies perpetuated about the last few years of Klemmer’s career, especially the dissemination of some false health rumors. To be sure, he has been less publicly active over the past two decades than he was initially—he released ten albums in the first eight years of his career alone. But Klemmer’s musical hiatus was a matter of personal choice. “I decided to take a sabbatical,” he tells me. “I had a young, early start and a non-stop productive, but hectic and grueling, career for many years. I knew that if I was going to last as both an artist and a human being, I needed to take a break.” While this sabbatical largely kept him out of the public eye, it did not prevent Klemmer from composing, practicing his horn, playing the occasional gig, making the occasional “sideman” appearance, and keeping up with new musical technology.

He still lives in Los Angeles, where he works out of his home studio, and suggests that he is again in the sort of transitional period in which he found himself before making *Blowin’ Gold* and *Touch*. He maintains that he has been busy creating some innovative musical concepts but is simply “waiting for the right time to release his music and present it to the public.”

While Klemmer waits for the appropriate time to release his new music, his older work lives on in samples. For the most part, he finds sampling agreeable. “If somebody played me something that they sampled and I sat here and said, *yeah, man*, then it is okay.” Klemmer’s tacit acceptance of the sampling technology is perhaps not surprising, coming from a man who built a reputation for being a

forward-thinking musician on his own employment of what was then burgeoning electronic technology. However, Klemmer, who according to his web site has been sampled over twenty times by some of the biggest names in hip-hop, would like to see fair-use legalities put into place so he would be more consistently rewarded for his efforts. “It would be nice,” he says sarcastically, “if the Beastie Boys paid me.” Here he is referring to the Beasties’ use of his “Children of the Earth Flames” for their “The Update” from 1994’s *III Communication*. But as I explained to him during our four-hour interview, imitation is arguably the most sincere form of flattery, and perhaps people are simply using Klemmer’s past music until the saxophonist again enters the public arena and starts another musical trend. ●

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Notes:

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1. Morgenstern, Dan. “John Klemmer: Chicago Find,” *Down Beat*, April 4, 1968, p. 24.
2. See, for example, Pekar, Harvey, “Record Review: All the Children Cried,” *Down Beat*, June 11, 1970, p. 22.
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4. Crouch, Stanley. “On the Corner: The Sellout of Miles Davis.” *Reading Jazz: A Gathering of Autobiography, Reportage and Criticism from 1919 to Now*. Ed. Robert Gottlieb. New York: Pantheon Books, 1996. pp. 898-914.
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