

Jazz Educators Journal

International Association of Jazz Educators

Summer 1993

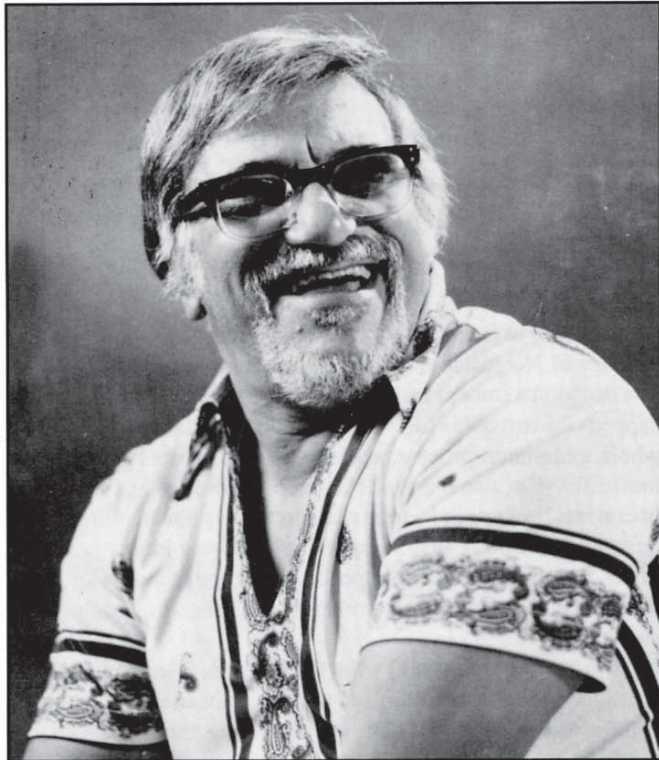
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The Prodigy Phenomenon
Sammy Nestico
Listening To Jazz

An Interview with Sammy Nestico

By Dave Black



It's almost impossible to attend a school jazz festival or concert without hearing the name Sammy Nestico announced as a composer or arranger of one or many of the charts performed. As a composer/arranger, Sammy Nestico belongs in the same league as Billy May, Sy Oliver, Nelson Riddle, Quincy Jones, Ernie Wilkins, Don Costa, Neal Hefti, Frank Foster, Bill Holman, Bill Finnegan and Billy Byers. To list all of his accomplishments you would need a card the size of a billboard. Not only has Sammy attracted millions of fans through his Grammy award-winning Count Basie albums (10 of them), but he's also enriched the lives of an entire generation of young musicians with over 700 published works for concert band, stage band and orchestra.

Sammy has arranged and/or orchestrated more than 50 television programs including "M*A*S*H," "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," "Love Boat," "Lou Grant," "Emergency," and "Mission

Impossible," and has orchestrated for all of the major motion picture studios. In addition, he has arranged and conducted records for Bing Crosby, Sarah Vaughan, Toni Tennille, Frank Sinatra, Pia Zadora and others.

For Sammy, life these days is slow and easy as he enjoys semi-retirement near San Diego, away from the hectic music scene in Hollywood. His home overlooks a golf course where he spends much of his spare time.

Who did you study composition with?

Early in my career, I couldn't find a teacher who could meet my particular needs. Each started me at the same level, regardless of my experience, and none of what they were trying to teach quite fit into the style I was trying to write in.

I finally took it upon myself to study the scores of Rimsky Korsakoff, Ravel, Debussy and Tchaikovsky. Following the scores while listening to the music was very enlightening. Later on I listened carefully to Nelson Riddle and Bill Finnegan. Much of what I was learning at that time started creeping into my orchestral writing.

I've just completed writing a comprehensive orchestration book that will help students avoid many of the pitfalls that I encountered.

What was your first professional break as a writer?

I remember, at the age of 17, joining the ABC Staff Orchestra in Pittsburgh as a trombonist. Though they had a staff arranger, I did manage to get a few simple writing assignments.

What was the first movie, TV or record date you scored?

I can't even remember. Well, I did write a couple of arrangements for a record date for Buddy de Franco and the Glenn Miller Orchestra. I also remember sending Tommy Dorsey and Woody Herman a couple of arrangements. I didn't have many of my tunes recorded, however, until Count Basie and I got together for our first album called *Basie Straight Ahead*.

What year was that record released?

I believe it was 1969.

Who are some of your favorite writers?

I would say Nelson Riddle was everybody's favorite arranger. I learned a lot from listening to Nelson's movie scores and vocal backgrounds. He also wrote some instrumental records using orchestra. I just thought Nelson Riddle was terrific! Billy May and Bill Finnegan are also a couple of my favorites. Bill Finnegan isn't known to a lot of young people today, but he was, in my opinion, the forerunner of a lot of the tone colors that we hear today.

Over the years you've had the opportunity to work with some of our greatest entertainers. Is there anybody with whom you've wanted to work, but haven't had the chance yet?

Yes, possibly Tony Bennett and Mel Tormé. I've always wanted to write for those two singers. I hope that sometime in the near future I will be fortunate enough to be given that opportunity. I would really like, however, to write for Ella Fitzgerald. Boy, she was always the one! One day Norman Granz called me and said, "Sammy, I want you to write a couple of arrangements for an upcoming album project I'm doing with Ella." Unfortunately, the record date fell through and I didn't get to do the project. I was very disappointed because I had always wanted to write for Ella.

Have you ever been nervous when working with a major personality?

Early in my career, working under pressure made me nervous. Writing for television specials (Goldie Hawn, George Burns, Gene Kelly, Julie Andrews, etc.) is very difficult because you always have a deadline to meet. Sometimes you're assigned an elaborate dance routine, and you work from a sketch written by the rehearsal pianist that "catches" movements spotted by the choreographer. When last minute changes arise, and you're working against the clock, it can be very nerve-racking.

My first assignments with Quincy Jones and Nelson Riddle were a little tense, but as I gained experience, I managed to keep my nerves under control.

Do you have any funny stories about some of those greats that the public doesn't know? Things that happened that would make them seem more human than what we perceive them to be?

I have been fortunate enough to work with some of the finest musicians in the world, including Nelson Riddle, Don Costa, Pat Williams, Billy Byers, Count Basie, Louie Bellson, Quincy Jones and Billy May.

Billy May and I worked together at Capitol Records for five years. Later, I worked as Billy's orchestrator for TV and films. One day while working on the TV show "Emergency," I asked Billy if he thought a particular cue would work against the film. He said, "I don't know for sure, Sammy, but remember, nobody gets mad at something pretty." Needless to say, this bit of advice has helped me solve more than a few problems through the years.

I also remember Bill Basie saying to me, "You know, Sammy, I get arrangements from writers trying to write like Basie. What they should do is write like themselves, and we'll play it like Basie."

What medium do you enjoy writing for the most? Is it television, movies, records or live performance?

I rarely did any of my own writing for television. Most of the work I did in that idiom was as an orchestrator for other people. I composed for one TV show (The Dick Van Dyke Show), and it was cancelled after the first night. There's always the possibility of writing a good score and having the show "dropped" due to poor ratings. If the show falls, you lose it. So, I never really had my own show, but I did orchestrate and arrange for over 50 other television shows.

I've never found writing for TV very gratifying because you hear the music over a 3 inch speaker, and half the time the music gets buried underneath some of the dialogue.

Records are terrific because they last forever! You really want to put your heart and soul into that recording because you know it's out there for everybody to hear, and that it's going to last.

I also enjoy performing live. I've done a lot of that with Frank

Stallone, Pia Zadora (she does a lot of live performing), Sarah Vaughan and Toni Tennille. But, I've also written arrangements that have been recorded by all those people, and I really enjoy that.

Do you have a special approach to your writing which has made your compositions so successful?

It's hard to answer that question. I've always felt that there are three elements in music - melody, harmony and rhythm - and I try to make my music as melodic as possible. I love Tchaikovsky! When you go to the Hollywood Bowl to hear Tchaikovsky, it takes two nights to play all of his music because people love to hear melodies. I always think about an audience listening to my music, so I'm very conscious about melody first, harmony second and rhythm last. That's the rule I try to follow, and it seems to please the people who like my music.

Today's contemporary music, however, very successfully reverses these elements - rhythm has become the most important element, melody is second in importance and harmony is third.

What's the hardest musical situation that you've ever been in?

I think the most difficult situation any musician would have to face is writing for television. When I was a younger man living in Washington D.C., I remember listening to TV shows and saying, "Well, I can write something as good as that." Then, I came out to Hollywood and found that the person writing for TV has a very limited amount of time to get the job done. And, regardless of how quickly it needs to be done, the music still must sound fresh and very professional. You don't have the luxury of being able to write your greatest arrangement, or to make sure that every note is a gem. Your job is to be professional, make the music sound good and to do it as quickly as possible.

Of all the compositions you've written, do you have a personal favorite, one with which you are most proud?

Yes, I do. "Dark Orchid" is my favorite composition because it contains all the right elements, and I enjoyed writing it. When we recorded the album, we did it with orchestra and voices. I love the sound of an orchestra because of the many colors, and Dark Orchid lent itself to that particular instrumentation.

Do you have a favorite composition that somebody else has written?

Yes, I like Bill Finnegan's writing very much. I loved his arrangement of "Doodle-Town Fifers." I also remember and arrangement of the "Continental" he did years ago for Tommy Dorsey. That arrangement still amazes me even today. Some of my favorite contemporary songs include those sung by Al Jarreau and Michael Franks.

Have you ever written songs? If not, is this something that would interest you?

I've never really been interested in writing songs per se. However, in the course of my life I've been fortunate enough to have had a few of them become songs. Johnny Mercer wrote lyrics to three of my tunes, Steve Allen wrote lyrics to about eight or nine, and Bobby Troup has also contributed lyrics to some of my tunes. I can barely come up with a good title, so I really respect a good lyricist. Frank Sinatra, Jr. and Bing Crosby have both recorded "Have a Nice Day," a tune that Johnny Mercer put lyrics to.

What did you get while growing up that young players and writers are not getting today?

The main advantage I had while growing up was that there were working orchestras everywhere. I mean every theater, nightclub, radio station and dance hall had an orchestra. There was so much

work out there for my kind of music. I just idolized all the stars who played in those venues. Even as a young man, I worked in fairly good local bands in the Pittsburgh area. Young people today, unfortunately, don't have those opportunities. They are really missing something.

Do you think that being a good player or writer is a guarantee for making it?

No! Raw talent is not the answer. Many people are talented, but it takes a commitment. The music may offer a problem, and you have to solve it. There may be many times when you find yourself working in solitude with a piece of paper and a pencil, computer or sequencer. You work at it everyday...accepting and rejecting; not always finding new ideas but better ones. You must constantly evaluate your work, never become completely satisfied.

Should parents encourage their musically-inclined children to go into the business with it being so insecure?

That's a difficult question because when you love music (don't confuse music with the music business), it's the only thing that matters to you. Music is wonderful, but the music business can be very unfair! At times, you know, you'll see people who become stars on TV and on records, but that's a small handful when you consider the number of people in the business.

You can take a dentist for instance - not the world's greatest dentist, just a dentist who's a very good professional man - and he can come to work in a small town and make a very good living. A musician of equal caliber, however, has to compete against 100 of the greatest clarinetists in the country for only one or two openings in the Boston Symphony. Then, if you're lucky enough to get the job, you still may need to teach on the side in order to make a comfortable living. If you can deal with that kind of pressure, can accept the down side of the business, love music more than anything in the world and want a career, then it's worth making music an integral part of your life. There's always room for the best, but you better be willing to breathe, live and sleep it in order to survive. It's got to be the thing you want more than anything else in the world, otherwise you're not going to make it.

Does "being at the right place at the right time" and "who you know" play a more important role in a person's chances for success, than just the talent he or she might have?

I think there is a lot of truth to being at "the right place at the right time." I know, it happened to me. However, when the opportunity presents itself, you must be prepared. "A break is when preparation meets opportunity."

What do you think of the ability of players and writers today as opposed to when you were growing up?

I think they're much more advanced! Today's musicians have been exposed to a greater variety of music and styles, and have been taught that each style has its own interpretations.

What do you think of big bands to day as opposed to when you were growing up?

There are so few bands today. The few that come to mind, however, I really admire. The bands of Bob Florence, Thad Jones/Mel Lewis, and Rob McConnell and the Boss Brass are as good as any band that ever was...then and now.

How do you feel about electronics and the electronic age?

Some of the best sounds produced today are those that utilize the best of both worlds...electronic and acoustic instruments. TV shows that use nothing but electronics, however, really start to bore me. They don't move air (as a violin string would), and after a long

diet of nothing but synthesizers, the orchestra of tomorrow starts sounding more like the organ of yesterday. Don't misunderstand me, some of my favorite artists/albums (Dave Grusin, Michael Franks and Al Jarreau) combine the best of both worlds, and it's very exciting. I, myself, have used electronics with both Toni Tennille and Pia Zadora, mixing the timbres very effectively with the standard orchestra.

What projects are you currently working on?

I'm currently writing for Toni Tennille's symphony concerts. I think it's becoming more and more popular for pop stars to go out and sing with symphony orchestras. They call these concerts "pop night."

Are you working on any record or TV dates?

I've recently written several things for Merv Griffin and Bob Hope, but living near San Diego has made it difficult for me to stay in touch with the TV world. Besides, at my age, I want to be very selective about what I do.

Outside of music, what do you enjoy doing?

I enjoy working with wood. I like carpentry, building cabinets, playing golf, etc. Outside of that, I stick mostly to music and visiting with my family.

At this point in your career, have you thought about slowing down?

No, not really. I'm slowing down slightly, but I'm still working. I keep saying that I'm "semi-retired," but I work in my studio five to six days a week.

Where do you see the music business heading within the next 10 years?

I don't know. There's always a chance (and I keep getting vibes from people that it will survive and actually regenerate) that live music will come back. But, when I look at what's happened in Las Vegas, I wonder if it will ever happen. Many shows there have now gone to pre-recorded music. It is definitely becoming a keyboard world! If the work force in the music business doesn't improve, I worry that young people, who have the same desires and love for music that I had, will miss the fulfillment I was able to derive from the business.

Editor's note: Look for Sammy's recently released book, "The Complete Arranger" (Kendor Publishing Co., Inc.)

Dave Black has traveled to many parts of the world with a variety of entertainers and shows, performing and/or recording with such artists as Alan King, June Allyson, Anita O'Day, Pete Jolly, Gordon Brisker, Kim Richmond and Jerry Hey. As a widely published and recorded composer/arranger (Alfred Publishing Co., Barnhouse Publishing Co., CPP/Belwin Publishing Co.), he has written both with and for the bands of Louie Bellson, Sammy Nestico, Bill Watrous, Bobby Shew, Ed Shaughnessy and Gordon Brisker. In addition, he is the recipient of six ASCAP Popular Composer Awards and two Grammy nomination/participation certificates. He is the co-author of Contemporary Brush Techniques; Alfred's Drum Method, Books 1 and 2; Alfred's Beginning Drumset Method; Alfred's Beginning Snare Drum Duets and Cymbals: A Crash Course, all published by Alfred Publishing Co. In addition, he writes articles and reviews for such magazines as Down Beat, The Instrumentalist, Modern Drummer, Drums and Drumming, Drum Tracks, Grammy Pulse, Jazz Educators Journal and others.