Sonny Stitt *Photo by Michael Wilderman*

stitt's time

1981: Stitt Dream

October: as if from far away, suddenly hearing you. I'd been preoccupied, distracted by my last-minute date, Beck's and Camel Filters, the little black enamel table with the ivory linen and the ballroom view on Grant Park. She wore taffeta, shiny stockings, mystery skin. (Later we went to her apartment, the baby was sleeping peacefully, the lamp on all night.) Suddenly hearing you—not with eyes closed studying whether Sonny was as great this time, measuring the speed and precision of a phrase that was pounced on and then whipped back, spooled through once more and punched up somewhere else I'd never quite be able to predict; suddenly hearing you—naked surprise of it, the music dancing off from us, breaking away, the old Blackstone Hotel with elegant blue drapes and the master in the house with his Chicago quartet, bass, drums, piano, pure blowing, the instruments polished, the music glossy, shining, nothing ragged, all smooth, oiled, shaped, passion leashed with super control. You switched halfway through from tenor to alto, brass rocket all systems go, afterburning out of the dark, fire of stars in my head and my hand on the woman and hers touching back—she'd never heard of you but was anyway moved, smiling too, taking that blast of grace . . .

On stage between songs you sipped a dark-gold brandy, Napoleon or Hennessy; sometimes after the solo you had a smoke while you stood and listened to Barry Harris or Wilbur Campbell as though considering the state of the equipment, how the machinery was running. The cigarette hanging for a minute from your mouth as you swung out your arm and snapped your fingers just once, called out something that could have been encouraging or could have been mocking, that sounded like directions, orders. *Play like Bud Powell, man . . . All right: you fucked up again . . . Do that one more time. . . .* At the same time looking into the eyes of people in the audience who might share the joke, the work, if they could hear it, another drag off the cigarette up from your long fingers resting on the keys, the thing would stay there burning as you

came back riding down hard on the song's finish as if the horn was cutting through so much smoke.

Stitt: an art of the whip, the barb, the stinger, fast and easy and sharp-darted by virtue of an exacting calculation of interval, punctuation—extra pull you took on the brandy standing away from the piano laughing, extra leap across the octave into a last arpeggio pressured out like a fisting of rain. Every motion apportioned its time, its share, its cut and no more, and then the period: your stone face, your high Einstein forehead, your eyes opening wider and almost closing again as the phrase shivered itself out. Diced into bits. Scattered to the winds. The amused spectator or the wise aficionado could savor the moment passing yet feel the swift kiss of death. There was no holding it. Now was the time, but the now was always just behind or ahead, approaching or moving off, the escape-velocity of Stitt's flight precisely in the sliding and breaking apart, the instant spidering away from itself in the same work that was assembling it with such infinite care—and what came trembling before and after, time when soul would be buried in flesh or flesh in soul, blink of an eye or wavering of what the ear would hear. Everything in readiness, the crowd waiting, the band turning over, gold of the alto and the tenor harped on their stands, and suddenly you're nowhere to be found, Joe Segal nervously rounding the stage looking for you . . .

"Now's the Time"—Charlie Parker song, beat mantra, Kerouac and Cassady chasing or being chased by its paradox, the Now always dividing with every attempt to know or fix it, mortal flower blossoming forever before or after the fact, lives and motions and words going in circles or exorbitantly jumping off. Now's the time, but it's late, late, there's no catching up, the ecstatic baroque fling of Stitt's solo is already ending, it's burning up even as we're flying with it, riding on it, delectating the invisible machinery that opens like a watery hole or a winding tunnel somewhere inside or outside our bodies. Bare place of the soul. The thing that must flee and that performs so many motions in order to do so: how can it be held?

Fifty-seven years old and you were strong, but not a year later you would be gone, cancer of the throat. You were touring Japan and suddenly in two weeks it was over. I feel the fever touch of her hand, and I promise I won't forget, I won't, that night you plowed the air with shoulders high, your chest wide though you were slender, String one of your names.

The saxophone's mouthpiece levering wind, outside the trees blew, the park fountains brimmed, and in that night you gathered flesh from the dark ground and in that body you swerved around tall corners, slammed through doors where breezeway children banged and hollered, loomed down cold stairwells and in windows rattled up shadow hawk. Soul flight: crashing out ceilings in bursts and tangles, hard knots and rope ladders standing like snakes, and on the Blackstone stage you carved the moment folded in the lights, across the applause the last phrases looping and tightening a wavy shimmering net over rumbling drums and then lofting off once more, a restless sweeping wheeling through some accelerating shifting rotary that at the same time geared irresistibly down into the finish, the point where we felt it had to stop though we felt it would never stop.

You lit a smoke. You bowed your head, let the empty horn swing down. Baffling thing, still somehow alive for us—its gold shell, the cunning of keys, your long fingers releasing it.

1972: Use Me Up

Chicago, November: North Avenue and Dayton Street, just off Halsted—the Black Angus, the Clybourn subway stop, Sam's Liquors, the Ravenswood El running shadows over the red brick apartment buildings along the tracks. The Seeburg Corporation, inside a huge gray box extending the length of the block, a grimy employees' entrance and a single vertical of windows letting daylight into a broad stairwell that climbed to the third floor. I'd taken an assembly line job there making jukeboxes—a new model that year with a curving streamlined cabinet, hard black plastic hugging two extra speakers and no longer the rows of mechanical pushbuttons but a small keyboard with soft-padded numbers offering all the combinations. It would be the disco machine, bassing and falsettoing in taverns and restaurants through the next several years, Donna Summer and K.C. and Bee Gees, the model with a built-in price increase from three plays for a quarter to one for a quarter and three for fifty cents.

The work paid well and wasn't very difficult because each task was so small, production broken down into what must have been hundreds of different steps. The partially assembled jukebox I was looking at, sent down to me on a long metal track, had rolled already along a series of such tracks, starting out at a distant point among fellow employees I'd scarcely ever seen. Far off on the other side of the factory, they were like

people in another neighborhood. You thought about talking to one of the women there, someone you saw on break, but ultimately decided against it, uneasy about venturing into unfamiliar territory.

Yet there was an underground solidarity among us all. Simple as the work was—probably for that very reason—the atmosphere under the hangarlike ceilings often thickened with a common boredom, disgust, and at times rage. The job demanded only two things: a consistent eye and a steady arm. I had to accurately position a small metal plate on the chassis of the jukebox and then fasten it securely with three self-setting sheet-metal screws driven in full force by means of an air-compression drill. The drill was branded with its maker's name, Milwaukee, and with each screw it rattled and screeched like something from a nightmare dentist's chair. The task occupied about three minutes, after which I'd send the machine over to the next in line, Jorge. He swiftly manipulated a tangle of wires behind the keyboard and shoved off the jukebox to Sammy, who in turn attached a type of solenoid to it. In between, Jorge and I smoked cigarettes, ruthlessly gunned each other with our drills, and attempted increasingly elaborate curses in Spanish and English. We swept the area now and then, or pondered the women working at the high tables behind us, or idly whistled or sang, since it was forbidden to ever sit down on the job. We had to be ready for the next unit on the line, whether it was coming or not.

And often it wasn't, since most mornings the word went around: *To hell with them. We're slowing it down. They're not getting their hundred.* We hardly saw one another, we had staggered breaks and lunch periods to manage the large number of workers, but all of us shared the same feeling when it was a question of the bosses—the foreman suddenly behind you out of nowhere telling you to move faster or to pick up a broom, you weren't getting paid for standing around doing nothing; the shiny-suited men, the syndicate, as they were called, up above in a windowed office where they monitored the progress along each assembly line, so that any minute you might be singled out and immediately there would be John the foreman again, gray hair mussed along his brow, perspiring and red-faced as if it was he who carried the burden of all the work, swearing that you had only one more chance before you were back on the street. But if each of us slacked off a little bit—a slight languor in the arm, a screw dropping to the floor instead of being driven home, maybe trouble with

the drill again, who could tell—it wasn't easy for them to identify a point of resistance, and if they did it wouldn't matter, because the point was moving, at the same time everywhere and nowhere. Sometimes the slowdown wasn't even noticed until far into the day, as if the bosses too were infected by the general spirit. For hours the suit syndicate would confer in the office, looking complacently over the plant. John would go for a coffee and finish his paperwork. Of course there was agitation upstairs and down, hell to pay, when the day's unit count was checked. But often it was too late: it would be impossible to make up the lost production without going into overtime. We'd won.

On other occasions the slowdowns were unintentional—or perhaps in the course of the day intentions became confused because slowing down was more difficult and took more thought than working normally. The word would go out but it was questionable, smelling of rumor or subterfuge. The spirit of resistance could itself be ambivalent, the sense of slower and faster a relative matter, hard to measure. A punch-drunk weariness sometimes took hold, your limbs feeling like useless things even as they were being used, and in the dragging interval from one machine to the next, from one minute to the next, there was a sense that it would be better if things moved faster and there was no time at all between jukeboxes, all of it a dizzied blur of screwing and drilling and wiring, no chance then to think. Seeming infinitely divisible, time became such a burden that even though it was self-defeating—after all, you wanted time to pass, the day to end so you'd be out of there—you wanted to slow down time too, muck up its clinging perpetual machinery. Half-pints and reefers made the rounds in the bathrooms; the bar across the street was packed during lunch. Couples wandered off to find privacy along the dark stairway that went to the factory roof, later sealed off after a fight up there. Every once in a while Sammy, who never said a word to Jorge or me, disappeared for the afternoon, nodding off in a cardboard box hidden out of the way. We didn't joke about it with him. Like a fair number of Seeburg employees, he was recently out of prison, released through a program the company operated with the state. He knew how to do time.

The spirit moved differently, however, on Friday. Payday. A few of the Latino men were already dressed to go out after work, wide-necked shirts in bright colors, cowboy boots buffed to a pointy gloss. Some of the women showed off their new hairstyles, streaked Afros or curly perms,

and came laughing and dance-stepping down the lines on their way to break as though to get us in the mood. Even John the foreman had a fresh necktie and a less harried expression than usual, as if relieved the week was ending. Today we'd knock off a hundred boxes easily—hell, we could do two hundred if we felt like it. The latest Seeburgs got bumped and jolted down the line like old friends, the screws and wires plugging in effortlessly. At such times, we understood that we were all whores, the foreman pimping us to the suit syndicate, the suit syndicate pimping the jukeboxes to the world (the keyboards came in several languages, including Japanese), but it was all right. We were difficult whores. If time was money we at least had the satisfaction of being able to play with it, hold it back, give it up only after a struggle.

On certain Fridays the Seeburg factory attained a state close to the dream of bosses and corporations: a moving singing humming of people and tools and machines drawing into well-oiled unison, a contagious energy coming off all the bodies heating up with the hours. It didn't come easy, however. The morning would feel endless until the first break, then run fast all of a sudden up to lunch. A slow drag in the early afternoon, at one o'clock maybe sixty machines and the growing feeling that it was enough, they'd had their pound of flesh, a few guys down the line were suddenly sitting down, and John could go screw himself. A technician was testing speakers at full volume with the Bill Withers hit that seemed to be playing all the time somewhere in the factory:

You keep on using me

—expectant pause, bass line dropping—

'til you use me up.

There was a pleasure in the heated shout of Withers's voice, and in the tables being turned at the end of the song when the loser being walked on comes up as the winner, the servant as the master. Listening to the sardonic keyboard riff and tapping drumbeat I thought that as simple as it was—exactly the kind of thing that would be punched up a million times on the jukeboxes we were making—the song had its truth, on the smooth-rough edge of Withers's voice a taste of the elusive slippery thing called *soul*.

Soul—the company was using us. We were human tools, nonunion laborers being paid well so there would be no problems with work rules or sick leaves. Seeburg Corporation (Delaware) was consuming our souls, our hours offered up to the jukeboxes that after a while appeared as wicked plastic shrines prostituting music to mass production and mass taste, their purpose not the pleasure of sounds but the tinny clatter of coins being swallowed down a galvanized gorge, hoarded up in a stainless steel belly. But it was impossible to own the soul, soul itself an impossible thing. Soul wasn't a substance or energy residing in you that could be husbanded or extracted; soul floated outside, away, apart. It got used, but using didn't mean it was consumed, finished; it got used up, up; it went up, over the top—roles could be reversed, the tide turned, and under the weight of everything you had to deal with would come an unaccountable breeze lifting like a fresh wind that out of nowhere came blowing up a hot littered street, setting the leaves moving in the trees and sweeping the papers off the sidewalk, sending them driving and leaping along the curb. *Soul*: like time breathing the world. Coming always from somewhere else, going always toward somewhere else.

Two o'clock on Friday and John angry, expecting a lower count than usual, the suit syndicate studying the floor as if considering firing the whole factory. The last hour of a day that had started at seven, our checks handed out after lunch so we had nothing to lose if we started slacking off, but then it came, the second wind—*sure am using you, for the things you do*—as if everybody was thinking about the same thing: ecstasy in one form or another, how high you'd soon be getting, and always sex, sex, the place burning with it now, random singing and Spanish shouts, screws banging in, wires devilishly fingered, Jorge cupping the double speakers on number sixty-seven, Sammy bleakly smiling, buzzing his drill down from his crotch. In the inspectors' section below our line we could see the bank of finished jukeboxes stacking up, the machines glowing bright and seductive, vaguely tropical pinks stenciled on the smoky glass and the broad fronts edged with sly chrome smiles. Foxy ladies, ready for the night.

The twangy keyboard on the Withers song kept stringing along, the drumbeat tapping out. Precipitated from our hundreds of different ways of dancing in time, through time, out of time, under the ceiling there gathered a slow fogging together of powers, a fragile vented clouding made of sounds and smoke and the exhalations of our body heat. Soul-haze. Production was a fucking joke. A wild jumping infiltrated the motions,

punctuations in time, phrasings of the hand, the arm, the leaning sweating brow and the cagey wandering eyes, the feet that wanted to lift and kick and run. We were pleasuring our own homemade machine, half the factory high already and the others taking it by contact, *sure am using you*, and William Blake in my mind singing along with Withers: *The soul of sweet delight can never be defil'd*.

Three o'clock and the usual time for us to close down, thirty minutes always killed off with brooms and smokes before quitting—but the eagle flies, the soul forgets where it came from, we slammed on until 3:25 and they had it from us, their hundred, their C, with ten or more extra, John pleased and trying not to show it, the factory then in a five-minute madness of clearing out and all of us holding our timecards on the way to the clock like tickets to heaven that would land us somewhere back in the world.

1970: Soul People

Soul. Breathing, breathless. Instant of wings before their rise. Awkward exposure, fleeting weakness, coursing pulling power and swift scissoring . . .

Float. Flight. Not inside—or letting inside outside, letting outside in. Hovering between. Shadow, mirror, name—everything that belongs to you, but by the same token is vulnerable, can be captured or used, seduced or captivated, infected or imitated or falsified.

June: Grant Park, the Cannonball Adderley show at the Bandshell, Ninth and Michigan among the elms, the brick castle of the old Illinois Central station down past the bridge and darkness along the paths, leafy places to drink a secret bottle. At the south end of the park the concert with a mostly black crowd, Chicago still feeling the heat of '68 and '69, the audience in the heat of a summer night and the Adderley brothers soul-exploding, breaking out and away, alto from trumpet, trumpet from alto, brotherly love, brothers having a tussle. In a highlight, Joe Zawinul from Czechoslovakia, the white man with soul, extending the piano solo on "Mercy, Mercy, Mercy" until people were loose and singing and shouting back to the music, swaying in long roping lines dancing across the grass.

After the concert, though the park was officially closed, my friend and I walked along a path circling a fountain that was still brimming water. The night air was heavy, fragrant, lush with the smell of trees. We talked to a middle-aged man who'd seen Adderley too, accepted the bottle he offered. No, he said, Cannonball was good but Stitt, Stitt—the way he

said it, the word sounded strange and angry, outrushed air making it like *sticks* or *Styx*—he'd blow Cannonball away if the two of them were together on stage. All that soul talk, people didn't know what in the hell they were saying, Cannonball was good but he played like he was in a Sunday church, fluttering up with the angels . . .

Seventeen years old, and we were a little nervous in the dark, but I said words about Charlie Parker, Bird. *Bird*—the sound felt awkward out of my mouth, like a thing was hovering there, soul touch, because I'd presumed to speak.

"Bird," he said: "Shit, that just Sonny Stitt. Son of Bird. Bird Junior. Soul went right into him. Cannonball, he in a hurry, eat it all up. Stitt, he takes his time. It's like sex," he said, and laughed and took a swig, gave us a lowering stare, a growl maybe for the hell of it. "Or the devil."

We were susceptible enough to believe the man was something like the devil himself, and after a while we thanked him for the drink and walked out of the park toward the Harrison subway station. Traveling home that night was the first time I'd ever thought about the fact that the subway was truly underground, burrowing below tons of dirt and pavement and buildings. For years I'd been looking at the streaking walls outside the window, the abrupt green-lamped openings into the dark, the sparks stuttering up now and then under the wheels with a fitful bluish light. I didn't see any of it as significant; I enjoyed the carnival-ride feeling, terror train or ghost railroad, and made a point of riding in the first car where I could gaze into the tunnel and watch the stops coming up. Now I was suddenly aware of how I was *inside*, not looking out but instead prone to being observed, something up ahead waiting or something behind following me. I was inside a body—inside the tunnel of brick and stone I was inside another tunnel made of flesh and skin, and what I called my soul was yet another tunneling-through, like the train humming and clattering from station to station, iron wheels screeching around the long curve from Division to Clybourn. In a chaos of echoes, dank smell of the air, reflections flashing and dragging over the window glass, I for an instant lost hold of where I was going, had no idea where I was. There was a shadow-thing made of sound and light and color hanging there in the window, a ghost image of myself in the seat flickering across the glass scarcely recognizable, a lone soul clinging to its brief life like one of Pound's petals on a wet black bough.

When I was eight or nine years old, I had a fervent image of a white, glowing entity, wonderfully fragile and pure. In its delicacy it was easily soiled, tainted by the smallest of sins and sadly injured, even though I could still ask for forgiveness, do penance. I saw it as a webby gauzy creature inhabiting my chest and stomach, a dear creature of my own that I had to protect from harm. It was me and it wasn't me—*my soul*—a finer thing, brighter thing, a thing that floated and sang among the intoning of Latin during Mass, a thing I invoked by following the missal instructions: *Strike your breast, thrice* . . . As though that soul needed blood, like the shades of the underworld, as though there had to be a wounding, an opening, a way for it to get inside or to get outside—which of the two was never certain. The soul was a portable thing, would divorce itself from your body someday yet still be you.

I closed my eyes in my bed, struck thrice, and felt it growing in me like a black flood, a swelling wafer of light. In a childish version of *kundalini* belief I attempted to draw it up into my head. I would feel a kind of vibrating singing, a darkness whirling down a tunnel, my pulse murmuring a distant music, a passing then almost instantly into sleep. *I pray the Lord my soul to keep*—the soul traveled in an unknown only a god could see.

It was possible though to use the soul, to sell it for power and pleasure, which might seem a good bargain, because what was the soul after all? An insubstantial thing, maybe not even real, and besides, the payment didn't come due until the end. A popularization of Faust, a forgotten episode of *The Twilight Zone* or a Marvel comic book: after the pact was sealed in blood, the signature on the contract betraying just how empty a thing your soul really was and just how much your soul did indeed belong only to you, the story was animated by a dizzying tension. Time, which before had seemed a common and expendable commodity, now became infinitely valuable. By the same token, however, it was too late for time—what gnawed and troubled and made you dizzy was the realization that giving over your soul meant all your time was already gone and you could never recover it. You were forever the master and forever the abject slave of your fate. You'd been delivered over.

Under his own name, Sonny Stitt made close to one hundred albums from the 1950s through the 1980s. Almost seventy hours of music on record, much more if you include his dates as a sideman and the sessions with

Gene Ammons. Sonny wasn't his given name; he was Edward Stitt, born 2 February 1924 in Boston and raised in Saginaw, Michigan, his father a music professor, his mother a teacher. He began playing professionally when he was fifteen years old and was pretty much constantly traveling the United States, Europe, and other parts of the world for over forty years.

Sonny—a way of marking the son, the junior, the heir. And Sonny—wasn't he not only his father's heir but also, as many in the music world said, the heir apparent to Charlie Parker? When he met Bird in 1949, the story goes, Parker told Sonny, four years younger: *You sound like me*. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Stitt played and recorded with Bud Powell, Dizzy Gillespie, and the other bebop masters. Yet in the Miles Davis bands of the 1950s, or in Monk's classic recordings with Sonny Rollins and Johnny Griffin and Coltrane, where was Stitt, maybe not as great as Bird but at least very close?

You sound like me—the ultimate praise coming from Parker the genius, the fiery self-consuming sun of the bebop revolution. Stitt had Bird's blessing, and when Parker passed, it might have been the road was clear: Stitt was the heir to the throne, held the keys to the kingdom, was the main man. So he went on his own, which made sense professionally and financially—why work under Miles or mess with Monk? Until 1952, Stitt had a group with Gene Ammons, then was a solo act picking up bands in whatever city; nearly his whole career carried on that way. But there was the other side: people branding Stitt a Parker imitator: *he sounds like a copy of Bird, he's not his own man. . . .* It was said he played mostly tenor in the 1950s to avoid comparisons to altoist Parker, Sonny living on under the shadow of Bird until in the early 1960s he made the classic album for Atlantic, *Stitt Plays Bird*, perhaps enough time having passed.

Sounds like. But so many sounded like Parker. Bird was the inspiration, the demanding standard—Jackie McLean and Cannonball and Phil Woods and Ernie Henry, Rollins and Griffin and Coltrane. Was it that Stitt was too early, too close to Parker? Being the heir was his glory, but it cast a heavy shadow, offered a distorting mirror. It may have been that Stitt understood Bird so well, too well, because he didn't come to Parker's innovations as the latest thing to learn so much as he developed musically at the same time, not descending from Bird but next to him, parallel. And what did Stitt do with it? He worked. That was all he did, forty years

on the road, night after night—Parker compositions, the standards, his own works, a playbook with hundreds of songs. If he sounded like Bird, what was the problem with that—wasn't that what everyone wanted, what people paid to hear, what a whole generation of musicians was trying to achieve?

And did he really after all sound like Parker? Try listening sometime to Parker's original and then Stitt's "Cool Blues" solo on *Burnin'* for comparison. Bird kind of stutters, a fluid watery character to his playing along with its intense blues-fire, a sound from the alto like the phrases are getting pressured out right under the pads, spilling over, the horn and the ambient air wet, supersaturated, on the delirious edge of losing it, Bird-soul pushing and thrusting out its song. Stitt's musical idiom is very close to Parker's but there's an unmistakable difference—a tempering, a smoothing, those same impassioned stutterings distributed and managed with exacting care. What leaps and erupts and spills is measured out, under control, not the sound pressing the horn but throating further down inside, bored and barreled and tunneling, a sort of precision machining with a sustained attention to the fall and sway of the phrasings, clocking the points where they run up time, double and triple; clocking the points where they smear it across, burn time down.

Sounds like, but doesn't quite sound like—Stitt might be too perfect, too controlled. Mechanical, designed, lacking the creative imperfection of a Monk or a Miles, lacking the productive distance from Bird that powers McLean and Cannonball, Rollins and Coltrane. The machine runs effortlessly, music throating out of it so fast you often have to listen close to hear all the things that have been worked and finished in the span of ten, twenty, thirty seconds. Stitt said that playing the horn the fingers had to be like little hammers—the human hand was itself a part of the saxophone machine rather than the hand using the sax, a mechanism punching out hard eighths and sixteenths in triplet runs, a device of endless generation, creation, the instantaneous imprinting of a time and a space, a space and a time, Stitt's music a system of hydraulics, pistons in heavyweight oil, cooled tooling, a masterful administration of wind. Bird might be buried in there, a muffled grave, his sharp cry drowned in a lubricant of tears or sweat, mourning or triumph.

Sonny shadowed with a name, Sonny himself shadowing Bird as much as he was shadowed by him, shadows confused like a flocking of pigeon

wings over a statue in the park, or like phantoms of lovers sliding over walls in a candlelit room while the phonograph winds through the last song on the side, "Now's the Time" and then near silence, the needle riding over the black-mirroring vinyl of the record spinning forgotten. The lovers who say exactly what they want, how they want it, just there—no, not like that, exactly right *there*, and then *there*, *now* . . . an infinite lubricity. Soul.

Sonny Stitt: he always swings, always has soul—the commentary on the liner notes and in the reviews, through the years of West Coast cool and the gospel-soul style, Coltrane and the New Thing, the same words. But other words, too: Stitt makes too many records, Sonny's out for the dollar, going commercial, oil on the palm, soul gone to whore. The album cover images from Roost, Prestige, and Chess might mark a decline: from Sonny the young black virtuoso with head rearing high to Sonny the bad motherfucker with sardonic gaze, and always the cigarette somewhere, smoke floating like strands of soul plasm. A low point might be the 1974 album *Satan*, on the cover a fifty-year-old Stitt wearing a turtleneck, a leather vest, and a giant scarab ring (his hand appears oversized, too, the fingers long and thick, bending with the cigarette in ambiguous code: *Come hither* or *Don't fuck with me*), the smoke lifting away from his brow like wispy horns or hovering there like an infiltrating ghost. His gray Afro like frozen smoke, under a heavy mustache his lower lip preparing a sneer or a challenge, in all the concentration of his face—being bad, being the devil for this photo, for this new album (it will be one of his better sellers)—a subtle look also of loss, of puzzlement, of *What am I doing here?* In the gesture of his other arm, the one nested near his shoulder and keeping the cigarette hand up in a vague hex sign, you catch at the same time a smoky flickering: *What am I doing here—I know damn well what I'm doing here* . . .

Show business. The image. Through it all *Stitt*—name like a pair of scissors, a blade, a knife. Stitt *cuts*. Cutting sessions in the groups with Ammons, phrase building on phrase, topping it off, one-up. Over the years hundreds of pretenders—local stars, the up-and-coming, best students—getting cut. Carving the time way ahead, coming from behind, speed, control, gears and machinery, rhythm section working like mad to keep up, Jaguar XKE in a race with a Schwinn bicycle. Ammons was the best foil because it was Bird versus Lester and both of them copping from

each other, Stitt riding up and Ammons swerving off, they never got in each other's way, though you could hear sometimes where they touched, one inflecting the other: my buddy, my buddy.

Stitt—writing his signature in the air, *Stitt, Stitt*, who else could roar up out of time like that, who else could hold back so long and then let rip so you didn't know for a second what happened, surgical incision, in the middle of it all you forget and there's soul-traveling, the room lifting up and the women pressing toward the stage and the men raising their glasses and the bar mobbed with money passing everywhere, in five minutes make them five hundred dollars, in five minutes lose them five hundred dollars, make them a thousand if you're in the mood for telling a story . . . Soul people: living for once, one night, inside their clothes and their smoke, no secret about what they are—bodies: cocks and pussies pulsing like souls under their veils and vestures, their own show business for one another and for Stitt, too, the local undertaker or the politician or the bookie shaking his hand, a few words, smoke or a shot, a request for "Groovin' High" or "I'm in the Mood for Love," the owner's wife languishing somewhere backstage, a crash off the drums, chimes from the piano or the Hammond organ gurgling a prayer, bass getting to work and the machine starting up, laying down a cushion, a road, assembling a body with a throbbing heart and skittish quivering nerves and in its blood dance waiting for the run, the ride, waiting for the *stitch*, Stitt, the brass dick, the golden brain, the horn work that traces the lip of the wound it's forever sewing together, the breath labor that animates it, delivers it into time.

1982: Japanese Folk Song

Use you up but you're cutting out, cutting away, monstering a thing that has your face, and across that face the branding of your name, and in the letters of the name—S-T-I-T-T—the tongue and the teeth, the embouchure's bit, the caressing bite on the air and under it the swelling of the opening throat, the pump of the breath, forty years on the road and fifty thousand hours on stage, *So doggone good*, laughter there that dices everything up, *Yes sir, that's my baby, call that boy Sonny,* give the devil his due, I'm yours body and soul.

And I can't help imagining Stitt in that last July: flags splashing under the wind at the Tokyo airport, the breeze smelling of jet fuel and flowers,

a group of people meeting him at the gate. It seemed everybody here potentially knew him—he was well loved, one time called the highest master of the alto saxophone, another the samurai warrior of jazz, man of the golden sword. In Stitt's mouth the new teeth from the year before; for a long while his upper incisors had been in bad shape, no insurance and no chance for the dentist, though it hadn't much affected his playing. But he'd been roaring like a lion since, the old fire burning strong, the embouchure perfect and tight, except now there was something else, like a pit stuck in the throat, the craw, at times the breath not drawing easy. The doctor had gone in through his chin for a biopsy, a small bandage there now scarcely noticeable, and Stitt was feeling decent but after the flight he was ready for a rest, laying off cigarettes and having a drink to relax and sleep a while in the hotel room.

Coming to him through the afternoon light, a new idea, a thing to try with the Monk song tonight if he was in the mood. It was a simple, angular melody, the kind of tune where he could rearrange and shift tempos while at the same time blowing the hell out of it. He lay there under the light of Japan he thought of as a free light. In some way the sky here was full of air, best place for him to be, the mountains and the sea around, it was like floating in another world. They said souls lived among the snows of the peaks, but in Japan the body right here and now was the soul too—that was why the people loved jazz. The warrior soul fought off its enemies, held its death at bay, claimed its own time using the body, blood beating and muscles poised and standing inside your power. How they could stand here—hours at the concerts, in the streets and the restaurants, standing room only and standing ovation: *Sonny Stitt, Sonny Stitt*. It made him happy.

Stitt imagined the snow peaks far off beyond the window, the place of souls, nothing there but clear air, clean winds blowing, source of all the waters running down into the world, of everything's flourishing and quickening. Souls, though, didn't really have a place, were everywhere and nowhere. Like your own shadow on a late night, a figure accompanying you along the sidewalk, sliding long up the walls of the buildings, foreshortened behind you somewhere or looming somewhere up ahead. You had the uncanny feeling it was leading you on its own dance, following or leading, casting your image from itself. A bold and forward thing, pretending to life; a weak and wandering thing, dependent in its every

move. It showed a truth that fell from you, was cast by you alone. And it made a lie and an illusion, took something away from you, exposed you like an image off a camera's film.

In the clean white room, Stitt napped a while and then woke up in the dark. He switched on the lamp over the desk and the phone, thought about making a few calls. He rubbed his eyes, looked over his equipment stacked on the luggage rack, the Selmer and the Yamaha in their cases like parts of his own body waiting assembly—tubes of flight, pistons of breath packed in blue velvet. He took out a sleeve of reeds and held each one up to the light inspecting the grain, a hunger infiltrating his tongue for the taste of the shaved bamboo, the desire coming anyway for a cigarette.

The soul—it had to be invoked and coaxed, had to be waited on. He called room service and ordered coffee sent up, a light meal to come later. The cigarette in the meantime drew wrong, a little cough and then the smoke made him feel sick. The cough set something off, cut the blood flow so that for just a second there were watery stars floating in the air, a washing across the bedspread and over the bright reflection of the room in the glass of the window. Once it settled down, Stitt's gaze kept running to the shadows, not the things that were in the light standing clear, but the darknesses subtending them, patches and stains, a second world that seemed to gather more density as he noticed it: the shadow blades of the lamp, the phone, the dark halo around his own head, and the weird claw of his own hand hovering over the cradle to make a call home—a kind of heaviness there, a weighting of black.

Like a cage, a prison. And he'd spend what seemed like years in that room though it was only a matter of days and weeks. The shadows heavy, heavier from night to night as though a soul was being lustrated with black oil. But at the same time an increase of light, a knife's edge that made it shine harder off things, soul getting sharpened, defined to its maximum, right where it shaded off from itself. Shows had to be canceled; there was a question each day whether Stitt would be able to go on with the tour. He looked often at his hands in the light, his own hands, moving his fingers—they were long, remarkably long, he'd never thought about it before. The skin was engraved with a multitude of fine lines, like pieces of thread. The knuckles especially appeared strange, an intricate folding and tracing like the inside of a body or a shadow inside flesh itself.

Moving his fingers, Stitt felt the pressure of everything that had gathered there, forty-some years, all his time . . .

Those last days: light running along the edge of dark, hard shadows. Gazing out the window of the airliner on the flight home, Stitt leaned back, holding one of his hands inside the other. It was a strange gesture for him, a thing he'd rarely done: hands together as if he were consoling or congratulating himself. Off in the sky, he didn't see any shadows at all. Only the clouds, now and then shot through with blue, vapors weaving and stringing like hair blowing in strands, colors there like pearls. Pearls—he'd always liked them, things that seemed to take light and mix it with dark. He thought awhile about what they were supposed to mean: rarity and price, jewel in the muck, pearls before swine—the last a laughable image, somehow, all that snorting and snouting over beauty.

Traveling east, the hours going backwards, he was losing time. But he drifted off easily into sleep, a dream pearl globing cool and slippery through his mind, a thread being cut somewhere like a wandering finger of cloud parted by the wind. How the pearls would lay so perfect against the smooth skin of her throat in a necklace made of air. A quick pulsing where he would imprint his lips in a kiss. It would be *lingering*—that was the word. All the time in the world.

May 2000: On the Soul

Shadowing Stitt—yes, my words are shadows, words that would fix the soul and at the same time steal it away. Stitt's own sentences tell all the story: the tenor solo on "Casbah" (*Constellation*), or on "Sunday" (*Soul Shack*), the alto on "Cool Blues" (*Burnin'*), the trumpet-tunneling of the Varitone on "The People's Choice" (*You Talk That Talk*). Elaborate power charms, soul medicines: a language that consumes itself, burns itself away. Motto on an effigy, the devil in flames getting his share, but it turns into air, into breath. It leaves behind a kind of lapse in time: blank slate of forgetting, fresh slate of possibility. Gearing inside the machine, another machine. Soul technology. I can't use it, can't use it up, because it takes off its share in the very gesture by which it apportions it to me.

The soul is impossible—I think of the speculations of Plotinus and Parmenides, their troubling over how to maintain the power and dignity of a grand universal or world Soul while explaining what soul has to do with body, earth, and time. In one place, the great Soul is imagined not as

something on high, but instead as a netting over the waves of the sea—as though souls are surrounded and floating and whirling, nourished by what touches them everywhere. Not a raying of emanations, a powering-down through levels and hierarchies, but a swimming contiguity. Winds moving over the waters, the lapping over of each along its borders, crossing, recrossing, tangling, roping currents and foam-stringing waves, tongued with one another.

Soul: on this wave, the next, passing. Arriving soon and already gone. Tunneling through an everywhere and a nowhere, through passages between. Leaping from the cut, its doing and its undoing.