

The doctor is in

**Stanley Sagov's jazz remedies, plus
Saxophone Summit**

By **JON GARELICK** | October 8, 2008



That Stanley Sagov plays jazz at all is impressive. That he plays it at such a high level is stunning.

Sagov — a Boston family physician whose band visits Scullers this Tuesday for a CD-release show — is from South Africa. The son of Russian Jewish immigrants, he was born with Gordon's Syndrome, a genetic disorder that left him with two club feet. By the time he was 13, he'd endured 16 different surgeries in London, New York, and Boston. He spent much of his early years walking in iron leg braces. Yet through all the extensive medical care, he found himself bonding with the doctors who treated him. Inspired as well by family members in the medical profession, he decided that he too would become a doctor.

But he was also drawn to music, and a variety of instruments. "I played guitar a lot and played in a band that did covers, R&B — Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis," he tells me when we get together at his Chestnut Hill home. When the piano player left the band for a time, Sagov was tapped for the job. "I must have driven my parents insane, trying to teach myself to play these boogie-woogie and R&B things over and over and over. Then the piano player came back, but I was hooked."

Hanging with older musicians, getting into jazz, he acquired mentors. "Bob Tizard, a bassist and trombonist, decided he was going to teach me how to play 'Perdido' — a 32-bar song form — and he was going to make this rock-and-roll musician understand about playing more than three chords and how to remember the form. We played the song from midnight until six in the morning." By morning — "after around the 30th time" — Tizard had Sagov improvising.

This was Cape Town, during the depth of apartheid, about which Sagov had his own epiphany. At about the age of nine, he recounts in his press biography, he was walking uphill, wearing his leg irons, from a violin lesson when he "suddenly understood the parallel between my being stigmatized for looking unusual and the terrible way that black people in South Africa were being treated by whites."

Later, he tells me, he was among a group of "iconoclastic young South Africans" who experienced the music as a bridge across races. "We had this fantasy about America that the jazz community was an integrated community, white and black people demonstrating across the color bar that you could make great art together." In the meantime, as a medical doctor, he worked in the segregated townships.

Fast-forward to Sagov moving to New York in the '60s and falling in with its vibrant jazz scene. By 1970, he was studying at New England Conservatory, having been recommended by the esteemed trumpeter Ted Curson and one of Sagov's heroes, the great pianist Bill Evans.

Eventually Sagov had his own band, and they worked often, playing the clubs and opening concerts for acts like Gary Burton. But once he had a family, he had to make a choice, and working as a touring musician was not it. So he practiced medicine during the day and piano and composition at night in his home studio, maintaining his friendships from the NEC years with people like sax/flute man Stan Strickland and drummer Bob Moses, both of whom are on his new self-released double-disc, *Looking Forward To Remembering the Future*.

The CD mixes every strain of Sagov's experience. There are standards like the Gershwins' "Our Love Is Here To Stay," Miles Davis's "Blue in Green," and Evans's "Nardis"; there are lesser-played jazz pieces like Gary McFarland's "Gary's Waltz." Sagov's arrangements reconfigure the familiar tunes — the melodies of "Blue in Green" and "Nardis" are merely passing shadows. You can hear the music of the South African townships in "Stanley's Kwela," his Jewish background in Middle Eastern-tinged pieces like "Chord Too Bad" and the traditional "Avinu Malkkeinu." (His comment on the region's "fratricidal conflict: the music from both sides is the same!")

The playing from Strickland, Moses, and veteran trumpeter Mike Peipman is, as you might expect, stellar, with strong support from electric-bassist Tommy Lockett and percussionist Sean Mannion. On Sagov's idiosyncratic "Blooz for Another Time," Strickland, who can blow with Coltrane-like complexity and ferocity, settles into a Ben Websterish fat-toned melody before doubling the time on top of Sagov's

chords. Meanwhile, Sagov's writing and playing surprises everywhere. He stretches out the melody in his introduction to "Our Love Is Here To Stay," exposing inner voicings, wringing the song for emotion without sentimentality. His "Regular-Irregular" recalls one of the airy forms from the Miles Davis/Wayne Shorter book, with its rising horn fanfare, 12-tone-row middle section, and use of space. Sagov's solo here takes one unpredictable turn after another, sticking with the form but mixing up odd, varied patterns, quizzical and joyful.

Sagov says that even NEC couldn't get him to "unlearn" the bad habits of his early self-training. "I'm a jazz musician who learned how to play piano on the street. I never learned to play scales properly, I just scrabbled around in my own way." That rough technique might account for some of his individuality. "I don't consider myself a pianist in the way Keith Jarrett or Jacky Terrasson is. They're consummate players, well schooled. So I think of myself more as a composer who happens to use the piano as a means of expression."

Although he hasn't toured, Sagov has played regularly over the years in Boston and New York. The new CD (he released one with some of the same musicians in 2006, and another has just been completed) represents a special bond with long-time friends and colleagues. "This is how it used to feel when I started playing in South Africa — music that combined head and heart and had rigor and sexiness to it, that's got formal elements. But what makes it come alive in the moment of playing is the immediacy of feeling other people being in the game with you."