



"What Paul Smoker produced on his horn was unheard of in these latitudes; his complete command of his instrument allowed him to play whatever extravaganza he would think of, harmonically as well as in terms of dynamics. Styles, modes and techniques of every era of the history of music -- Baroque and Bebop, Structuralism and Storyville, Blues and Berio... To the widely discussed question about the future development of the jazz trumpet, Paul Smoker's musical concept could definitely constitute a far-reaching answer." — Jazz Podium

Paul Smoker studied and performed both jazz and classical music while growing up in Davenport, Iowa. He attended the University of Iowa (eventually receiving a DMA in trumpet) where one of his fellow students was David Sanborn. While in high school and college he played in the clubs across the Mississippi River in Rock Island and Moline, as well as Iowa City and Cedar Rapids, getting to work with Dodo Marmarosa (pianist with Charlie Parker), among others. He was also a member of the Iowa Brass Quintet, touring throughout the United States, and the U of Iowa Center for New Music.

As a trumpeter his influences include avant-garde classical sources as well as the jazz trumpet tradition, and also the saxophonists John Coltrane and Anthony Braxton. For over twenty years he taught trumpet, jazz, and 20th-century 'classical' music at the Universities of Iowa, Northern Iowa, Wisconsin-Oshkosh and Coe College. During his tenure at Coe he founded the Paul Smoker Trio with Ron Rohovit and Phil Haynes, and they began to receive international attention, recording five albums and playing jazz festivals in the U.S., Canada, and Europe. In late 1990 he moved to upstate New York and now concentrates on teaching, composing, and performing.

Since the mid-80's he has made over fifty recordings as a leader of his own groups and with Anthony Braxton, Joint Venture, Vinny Golia, Lou Grassi, Herb Robertson, Jay Rosen, Adam Lane, Burton Greene, Dom Minasi, et al. He has also worked with David Liebman, Evan Parker, Don Byron, John Tchicai, Art Pepper, Frank Rosolino, Barry Altschul, Gerry Hemingway, Ellery Eskelin, Borah Bergman, Mark Dresser, and on and on...

Paul presently directs the jazz studies program at Nazareth College in Rochester, NY, and has been composer-in-residence at Rochester's School of the Arts and Cornell University. The Paul Smoker Notet debuted in 2003 at Tonic in New York City, and includes Smoker, guitarist Steve Salerno, bassist Drew Gress, and drummer Phil Haynes. Notet recordings include Live At the Bop Shop, Cool Lives, and the new Landings. It Might Be Spring, a duo concert with Phil Haynes in Buffalo, NY, is also available.

Smoker was first elected to the annual Downbeat Critics' Poll in 1986, and has been the subject of features and reviews in Downbeat, Jazziz, Coda, Cadence, and many other sources, including discographies, encyclopedias, and texts.



**Rick Holland:** Paul welcome. It's a privilege to have you here. My first question pertains to your more traditional roots. Growing up in Davenport, Iowa, home of Bix, you had to be exposed to traditional music. Tell us how this influenced you. As I listen to you more, I hear the traces for sure.

**Paul Smoker:** Yes, I'm a pretty traditional player in many ways. Some of the musicians who had played with Bix in Davenport were still alive when I was a teen, and some of them became aware of me starting about 7th grade, when word began to get out that there was this kid who could acceptably read, improvise and play jazz. I really wasn't aware of his importance until later; I was into Louis Armstrong, Clark Terry, Harry James, Harry Edison—and Duke Ellington, Tommy Dorsey, Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller, Dizzy Gillespie etc. big bands. Also Pérez Prado, Ray Anthony, Jonah Jones. I was playing along with those records (78's) and the radio—in a New Orleans/Dixieland/Swing kind of mixture. A bit later I discovered Clifford Brown (my first LP because I liked the cover, still do—it was Best Coast Jazz and I really didn't know who Clifford was until I started playing that record). Then Shorty Rogers, Conte Candoli, Jack Sheldon, Lee Morgan, Chet Baker, Miles' Birth of the Cool, Maynard, and the Stan Kenton, Woody Herman. and Count Basie trumpet sections.

Louis Armstrong, Duke, Basie, Woody, and Stan all came to Davenport a couple times a year when I was in high school, to the Coliseum Ballroom. People would dance, and the bands would play a concert set or two with people standing around the bandstand listening—pretty cool. Around my junior or senior year I started getting deep into Bix and Miles both—Bix for his intervallic usage, articulation, and tone (and Frankie Trumbauer)—and Miles for his tone, melodic sophistication and beauty, and the people with whom he surrounded himself. As a result of Miles, I learned about Charlie Parker, Horace Silver, Monk, Sonny Rollins, Art Blakey, Lee Konitz, Jackie McLean, etc. Then, with Milestones (still one of my favorites), Coltrane, Cannonball, Red, Paul, and Philly Joe. By then I was gone. I didn't make distinctions between early jazz, swing, and bebop—to me it was (and is) all great music. I'm thankful and proud that I have that traditional background. I still love all that music, and I don't try to edit it out of my playing. It's part of me.

**Rick Holland:** Where did you meet Dodo Marmarosa? And were you playing bebop by this time?

**Paul Smoker:** He came to Rock Island (across the Mississippi River) at the behest of The Beachcomber Lounge, one of the many clubs there and in Moline which featured jazz music and musicians. I'd been playing in those clubs for a while, and was known by the owners. (No minors allowed. They only sold booze. A teenage kid couldn't do that today.) Anyway, I was hired, along with a local bass player and drummer, to play that extended engagement, a few weeks. The hours were 9PM to 3AM, 40-minute sets. I was 19 at the time.

I think I was trying to play bebop by then, although I never thought about it as a separate style or idiom. I was playing along with the records by Duke and Dizzy and Kenton, and Conte, Chet, Clifford, and Miles—so whatever that was, I was trying to play it.

Dodo was a university. We were playing mostly standards (no written music, no fake books), and after the first 3 or 4 nights Dodo stopped telling us which tune we were going to play, expecting us to get it from his piano intro (unless it was a tune we hadn't played before). Then a few days later I noticed the keys of some of the tunes were changing, he never said a word about this. We were just supposed to get it.

I knew that next to him I was a rank beginner, and during set breaks tried to get some response and advice about how I was doing. All he ever said was "you're doing OK, Paul." I also knew he had recorded with Bird, and tried to quiz him about that, but he would not talk about Bird, never a word.

I'll always treasure that time I spent with Dodo. He was a master musician, and playing with him improved my ears 100-fold. I also gained a new respect for the greatest musicians, which I've maintained to the present day.



**Rick Holland:** I was trained classically also. My Brass Quintet won the Brass Quintet competition at the Tuba conference many years ago. I value that training. Tell what the training did for you, especially when you toured with the Iowa Brass Quintet?

**Paul Smoker:** From sixth grade on I played everything I could, including, in school, band (including marching band), orchestra, chamber music, solos (but no jazz allowed in school). In the community I played with the youth symphony, three Broadway shows every summer, (and big band & small group jazz). By the time I got to college I was

playing everything I could get my hands on, including etude books, the Bach 2-part inventions, clarinet method books, shows, orchestral excerpts, duets, trios, etc.

Thanks to some great teachers, and J.B. Arban, Max Schlossberg, Rafael Mendez, and some Raymond Sabarich records, I had developed a pretty good technique on the instrument. This enabled me to keep up when I was playing jazz with older and more advanced musicians. I continued playing everything through college years, and was able to play a wide variety of repertoire—orchestral, chamber, solo, jazz, shows, opera, and more.

I joined the Iowa Brass Quintet (all faculty except for me) in 1967-68, and rejoined after a 3-year teaching sojourn in Wisconsin. I was with them throughout the 1970's. We toured all over, offering two different types of program, one purely contemporary new music, and the other the from the standard brass quintet literature. We also did a recording in 1976, Sounding Brass,



long out of print but available in some college and university libraries. (There's an arrangement of mine on that record.)

From all of these "classical" experiences I learned and developed a number of musical concepts which I rely on constantly:

Becoming an actual part of (inside) the musical environment, as well as an individual contributor to it.

Playing with a good tone, and in tune, and with a wide range of expressive devices (control of dynamics, articulations, vibrato, balance, phrasing, and so on).

An awareness of the long formal arches in symphonic and chamber music.

A love and understanding of music that is not "tonal" in the traditional sense.

A first-hand, participant's awareness and knowledge of the historical scope of classical music, from the Renaissance to today.

More...

**Rick Holland:** Tell me how the Paul Smoker Trio was founded? With Phil Haynes and Ron Rohovit?

**Paul Smoker:** Phil was a music student at Coe College, and I was the music professor who realized that he had great potential as a drummer. He first arrived at Coe September 1979. In the first two weeks I realized he had Buddy Rich down, even though he rushed, and told him to throw out his Buddy Rich records. So we started getting acquainted with Philly Joe, Tony, Elvin, Jack, Shelly, Mel, as well as myriad others. During his sophomore year we started playing duo as often as schedules would allow, with me on piano and/or trumpet. His sophomore recital included duos with me, and also Ron—who we both knew and had played with in Iowa City. I think we may have played one tune as a trio.

So we began to talk about putting something together. We were doing some pretty out (but in) playing—listening to and incorporating Circle, Braxton, Ornette, late Trane, Miles' second 5-tet & funk, Mingus, Air, etc. Who would we ask to play this music and our own comps with us? Phil suggested that Ron would and could play it, but I was dubious. We did finally ask him and he jumped right in. At first I thought we should add a piano or guitar, but quickly decided that in that community the people who could play it, wouldn't, and the people who would play it, couldn't. So the three of us began to play together on a regular basis. I realized that we potentially had something that was beyond local notoriety, and in December 1981 we recorded a demo cassette in a local studio. Then, once again, I was gone and in musical ecstasy.



**Rick Holland:** You've had quite the recording career, recording with everyone from Anthony Braxton to Frank Rosolino. The thing that impresses me is your diversity, from straight ahead to free music. Tell me how you prepared for such a diverse career?

**Paul Smoker:** Well I don't know about the career part, the income is usually miniscule. But, since I don't rely on playing to make a living, I've been able to play/record whatever I want without worrying about the money or my reputation. (Unfortunately I did not record with Frank, I wish I had.) All my studies and experiences in music, from Louis Armstrong to John Coltrane, from Domenico Gabrielli to Karlheinz Stockhausen, from John Cage to Anthony Braxton, are still with me. Straight ahead, free, swing, New Orleans, Duke, salsa, funk, Cole Porter, baroque, classical, romantic, 20 th-century, "atonal"—it's all great music to me. Why not keep dealing with it?

**Rick Holland:** Now I'm going to pick a few players you have worked with. Tell our audience some memories, or something interesting you learned or appreciated from each player. First of all Anthony Braxton.

**Paul Smoker:** When I first heard For Alto I flipped out. Here was a guy improvising, tearing the alto apart, and reminding me of some contemporary new music I had heard and/or played. Then I got the Circle Paris Concert. That flipped me out even more—they were playing totally out and totally inside at the same time! The four of them—Anthony, Chick, Dave, & Barry—became heroes to me (they still are). Many of my concepts for the trio came out of those two recordings. I met Anthony in March 1983—the trio was playing in Portland OR and he was playing a solo concert the next night which of course we attended. We talked in the dressing room afterward, exchanging pleasantries as musicians just introduced do. It turned out that the next day he was also on the airplane to Chicago. Well, hello again! He had a long layover at O'Hare, and I was waiting for my wife, Beverly, who's a concert pianist and was coming back into O'Hare from a Dallas gig. So it was rap, rap, rap with bloody Marys, and then more rap, rap, rap after Bev joined us in the bar.

Well, we had a lot in common, not just about music. He said I should send him a cassette of my playing and compositions. Beverly kept after me all spring and summer about that, but I was reticent, thinking it might not be good enough. Finally in September I put one together and sent it off to him. Two weeks later he called me to ask if I could play Composition 98 with him, Marilyn Crispell, and Garrett List in Europe in December. Gone again!

While over there we had long talks about the music and my place in or out of it. He said I needed to get my music out so the other musicians could hear it. "Don't wait for the record companies." Do it yourself. So I said if I do, will you play on it? Sure (I know he normally didn't do that).

I've worked with him a few times since then and always come away ecstatic. He is the one true genius I've been involved with, personally and musically. He is always full of ideas and big thoughts, so many that there is not enough time to bring all of them into reality. He's one of the

most prolific composers today, and also plays all of the woodwinds at super sonic levels. He is a great sight-reader, plus he never gets lost. No matter what the music is he always knows where it is. Lots of people in both the present and the past put him down because he doesn't "fit" in the "jazz musician" mold they're used to. I never understood this, I always thought an artist, by definition, should find his own way. And he certainly has...

**Rick:** Dave Liebman.

**Paul:** Dave is a very, very serious musician and student of music. He plays great drums and piano in addition to the saxophone. We brought him to Coe College in the early 80's to do improv workshops and play a concert of his music with us. He has serious harmonic chops and his writing reflects that. But he can play free, too. In 1987 he put on a concert of Coltrane's Meditation album(s) in which I was included along with Phil, Drew Gress, Ellery Eskelin and others. He had scored it from the recordings; it was 20 years since Trane's passing. The four of us formed Joint Venture on that occasion.



Dave has been ever supportive and encouraging. Having played regularly with both Elvin and Miles, he's pretty deep into the center of the music. I still see him from time to time. Right now he's playing in Phil's No Fast Food along with Drew. He is actively involved in, and concerned about, jazz education.

**Rick:** Don Byron.

**Paul:** I first met Don in person when he was curating a concert series at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. He was presenting Phil's 4 Horns and What? along with Paul Bley/Paul Motian/Steve Swallow. I think the 4 horns on that occasion were John Tchicai, Andy Laster, Joe Daley, and me. Anyway, Don seemed to dig what we were doing. By this time Ellery had left Joint Venture so we asked Don to play with us. We all wrote some new music to accommodate him. He just wailed on that bass clarinet (and clarinet), again and again. He's an inspiration, even though I haven't seen him in years.



Ron Rohovit

Paul Smoker

Phil Havnec

**Rick:** Frank Rosolino.

**Paul:** Frank has always been my favorite trombone player, from junior high school on. His music was always full of joy and a wonderful approach to bop. He had a unique voice, and never sounded like anybody else. In January 1978 I brought him to Coe College for concerts and improv clinics, and gigs at a local jazz club, The Tender Trap, run by drummer Joe Abodeely. I remember at the club playing Stella, me taking my usual five or six choruses. Frank played next, must have burned at least thirty choruses, not repeating himself, each chorus more elevated than the last. I was so into it and him that I swear I floated up off the floor,

farther with each 32 bars. At least that's what it felt like.

One of things that struck me about him was his very hip sense of humor. We spent some time at my house hanging, listening, dining. He was impressed that I knew of Rudolph Johnson and had his records. They had been playing a lot together in LA. To this day most people have never heard of Rudolph Johnson, in my book one of the great tenor players. Anyway, I thought Frank was one of the hippest and most together persons I had ever played and hung with. In November he was gone...

**Rick:** Art Pepper.

**Paul:** I brought Art to Iowa in 1976 while I was at the University of Northern Iowa as the jazz guy. I've always loved his soulful yet sprightly playing, and his tone, which cannot be mistaken for anyone else. I also played with him the following year in Colorado and kept in touch. I remember that almost unanimously the high school and college jazz educators told me I was crazy and making big mistake. Art was a junkie, unreliable, and so on. I brought him anyway, and he turned out to be more reliable and sober than all the rest of us. He was always on time and on the case throughout the four days he was there.

And he played so beautifully for those four days. I was able to play alongside him during the concerts, and we had sort of a musical rapport. One of the things I discovered was his ability and affinity to play ballads slower than anyone else I'd heard. And so beautiful and passionate. I really learned how to play ballads standing next to and listening to him.

A year later we hooked up again in Colorado, and after playing some gigs he asked me to go to Japan with him as part of his group. I couldn't get off to go to Japan, and he took just a rhythm section. They really burned up the place. There are recordings. I love his playing to this day.

**Rick:** And finally, Evan Parker.

**Paul:** I first met Evan in Germany when I was there with Anthony. And then Anthony hired us both to play some of his new music at the 1988 Victoriaville Festival in Canada, along with George Lewis, Bobby Naughton, Joëlle Léandre, and Gerry Hemingway. The music came out fine and there is a recording. We got to hang a bit and talk at this festival.



So, six years later Evan turns 50 and there is a three-day Evan Parker Festival at the Greenwich House in NY. The group of musicians put together for this in addition to Evan and me were Borah Bergman, Mark Dresser, Gregg Bendian, and one night Joe Lovano (who worships Evan Parker, and can play free music). We did different combinations of duos, trios, quartets, and the whole group. I got to play, among other things, a duo with Evan and another duo with Gregg. I still treasure and listen to these performances today. Evan has super chops on both soprano and tenor and has his own unique approach. He can get three different lines going at once, creating contrapuntal interplay with himself. And it's clean as a whistle. I've heard Braxton do this, too, in a more organic manner. I really admire both approaches. I learned from Evan to go beyond my technical limitations, beyond myself. Another, on the surface minor, but liberating concept,

to utilize my double-tonguing technique more. And try getting into the other guy's turf—new and interesting things can happen. And really listen.

**Rick:** Paul, I get more and more into the free sound you create. Tell us what attracted you to this genre?

**Paul:** I was fascinated by, and fell in love with, some record albums:  
John Coltrane—Interstellar Space and Expression (which includes the incredible Offering);  
Ornette Coleman—Science Fiction;  
Circle—Paris Concert;  
Miles Davis—Live-Evil;  
Chick Corea—The Song of Singing;  
Bill Evans/George Russell—Living Time;  
Charles Mingus—The Great Concert and Let My Children Hear Music; Anthony Braxton—For Alto and New York, Fall 1974;  
Keith Jarrett—Expectations;  
Freddie Hubbard—Sing Me a Song of Songmy;

Marvin Peterson—Hannibal;  
Lester Bowie—Fast Last!;

Don Ellis—New Ideas and My Funny Valentine (aka Out of Nowhere);  
The playing on these records is masterful, musical, with on-the-spot viable formal construction and development. A number of them are inside and outside at the same time! I wanted (want) to incorporate all these different approaches into my music and playing, all at once!

To say nothing about the “classical” side—Schoenberg, Varèse, Berio, Xenakis, Cage, Ligeti, Schuller, Don Ellis playing Larry Austin, Gerard Schwarz playing Hellermann and Dlugoszewski, et al. And a desire to incorporate those conceptions and, in some cases, extended techniques into jazz improvisation.

So what attracted me, in addition to the music itself, was that free playing could be viable instant composition, even masterful, instead of just meandering or honking without listening.

**Rick:** The musical camaraderie between you and Steven Salerno on guitar is real nice. In fact on Cool Lives, you recorded without bass, it is remarkably good. Tell us the inspiration?

**Paul:** Mostly, the bass player was in Europe and unavailable, but we decided to go on anyway without him. It’s as simple as that. Steve and I had recorded trio before, with a bass player (Ken Filiano) but without a drummer. Steve is an extremely good listener as well as guitarist, and always surrounds me with harmonies and colors that make me sound good.

**Rick:** You and Ellery Eskelin get a remarkable musical sound together. If I can say, the one thing I appreciate about your playing, is you seem so patient. You were waiting for a musical happening to contribute to. Tell us, was there a process in developing this?

**Paul:** Getting older is the process. Yes, Ellery and I had good rapport, we listened to each other eagerly, I was trying to learn from him (and did). He’s a wonderful musician. Getting to the point where you have nothing to “prove” anymore is a good place to be. It does facilitate listening to the music you and the others are making, without any outside agendas. Instead of making something happen, you just let it happen.

**Rick:** When recording with just Phil Haynes on drums, what is the process? The timbre of each drum? The overall color? Rhythms? Tell us what motivates you and inspires you to play?



**Paul:** I don’t think about any of that consciously, maybe Phil does. I’m just trying to play the music as it unfolds, listening to and reacting to what I hear from the drums, and from my trumpet. Trying to be musical.  
My motivation—I think I have something to offer after learning/stealing from all those musicians and their music. Hopefully I’ve digested much of it, mixed



it all together, and it's coming back out in a little different way. I want to sound like myself, informed by but not imitating all those great giants of music.

**Rick:** On the disc *Brass Reality*, Brass Quartet and Drums, was the motivation to create an avante garde experience using a classical quintet, and throwing into a jazz arena?

**Paul:**(3 brass and drums.) Not really. I wanted to showcase the great brass players Herb Robertson and David Taylor, along with myself and Phil, on some of my compositions, written expressly for them and emphasizing group improvisational as well as interpretation skills. There was no other motivation. I knew they would make some great music. Jazz or not never entered my mind, although we are all jazz/new music players. Herb plays trumpet, valve trombone, and Eb tuba; Dave both bass trombone and BBb tuba. There are a lot of possible combinations of timbre, color, and density— and then add mutings, and wow! I'm very proud of that recording.

**Rick:** Paul, tell me why you think most straight ahead players can't make the transition to Free Music?

**Paul:** I don't really know, but I do have some speculations. Playing free is both demanding and dangerous—like flying on a trapeze without a net. You're constructing a piece of music without the comfort of playing on a set of chord changes, or on a form, or even in a style. You're only limited by the confines of your instrument or voice, the extent of your musical experience and knowledge, and your willingness or unwillingness to dive into the deep end or jump off the cliff. And you're doing it in real time.

If you lose your focus or don't fully pay attention, even for a split second, to how the "piece" is developing, the music can immediately turn into garbage and BS. Or, it can meander aimlessly, or it can become just noise, or it can be boring, or it can miss its ending. And unfortunately a lot of free playing and free music does just that. It's dangerous!

When the construction of the music is over, if successful we have built a logical piece of viable music with a beginning, middle, and end. And it sounds like a composed piece of music, which it is. But not necessarily a jazz piece, even if performed by persons who most of the time play jazz. We are not limited to jazz phrasing, or jazz harmony, or the forms used in jazz, or the traditional definitions of "swing". (Of interest—check out the Beethoven Piano Sonata, Op. 111 [1821-22], second movement, for an early example of swing.) It's entirely up to us as to what concepts, materials, and techniques to utilize as the music is unfolding—nothing planned, just listening and reacting and asserting as the music unfolds; going where the music is going, without an agenda of any kind. It's dangerous!

Another possible reason is a lack of exposure or affinity with music outside the realm of traditional jazz music. In my experience "straight ahead" musicians may have heard of Arnold

Schoenberg or John Cage or Karlheinz Stockhausen or even Gustav Mahler and Béla Bartók, but few have actually sat down and listened to their music over and over, the way we all do with Miles or Trane or Sonny Stitt, or Bird.

I've drawn many concepts and ideas and even instrumental techniques, primarily from the world of "classical" music, and most particularly a sense of the construction of longer forms (especially Mahler and Stockhausen). I've not only listened to, but performed their music in concert and/or improvised with their recordings. Just as I played along with Miles and Conte and Sonny and Trane, I play along with Five Pieces for Orchestra, Op. 16 (Schoenberg), Piano Variations II (Cage), Gesang der Jünglinge (Stockhausen), and more, hopefully being inside of and becoming part of the music. This is all good for one's ears and conceptions about what music is and what it isn't, beyond the confines of "straight ahead", although I enjoy playing that way, too. Other "free" players I know draw on other cultures for inspiration. It's all good. I love playing free, alone and with good musicians. But it is dangerous!

