

# Tom Varner

Tom Varner is known as one of the top living pioneers of jazz and improvisation on the horn, an inventive and passionate composer for his various ensembles, and an authority on jazz horn history and repertoire.

Tom was born in 1957 and grew up in New Jersey, and studied piano with Capitola Dickerson. He started playing horn in fourth grade, choosing it from a photo. He started taking private lessons during his freshman year of high school, concentrating on classical music. When he got interested in jazz, he thought he would have to listen to it but never be able to play it because of his instrument until a friend introduced him to a Thelonius Monk record with a horn solo (by Julius Watkins). Tom played in school and community orchestras, but also the school jazz big band. He studied briefly in 1976 with jazz horn pioneer Julius Watkins, gaining confidence that playing jazz on the horn was possible.

Tom studied for two years at Oberlin College, then transferred to the New England Conservatory of Music (Boston), where he studied horn with Thomas Newell and jazz improvisation and composition with Ran Blake, George Russell, and Jaki Byard and earned a BM in 1979. He holds an MA (2005) from the City College of New York, where he studied with Jim McNeely, Scott Reeves, and John Patitucci. Tom lived in New York City for 26 years, moving to Seattle in 2005.

Tom appears on more than 70 albums and has recorded 14 albums as a composer/leader. He has been in the *Down Beat* Critics Poll Top Ten annually since the mid-1990s and has been awarded grants from the Jack Straw Foundation, Seattle's 4Culture, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Chamber Music America/Doris Duke Foundation, and has been a resident at the MacDowell, Blue Mountain, and Centrum arts colonies.

Sidemen on his albums as leader have included Steve Wilson, Tony Malaby, Ed Jackson, Ellery Eskelin, Tom Rainey, Cameron Brown, Drew Gress, Matt Wilson, Kenny Barron, Victor Lewis, Fred Hopkins, and Billy Hart. He has performed and recorded with Miles Davis, Quincy Jones, McCoy Tyner, the Mingus Orchestra, and many others. His influences include Ornette Coleman, Steve Lacy, Charles Mingus, Anthony Braxton, Sonny Rollins, and minimalist composers such as Steve Reich and Philip Glass. His first album featured horn, alto sax, bass, and drums. Later albums were for a quintet of horn, two saxes, bass, and drums, with frequent guest artists. *Nine Surprises* is for a nonet of three brass, four reeds, and bass and drums.

Many of Tom's albums reflect both serious and humorous interest in religion, in particular the first century, the upheaval of the Roman Empire, the first 200 years of Christianity, and also Hollywood Bible movies. Although he grew up in New Jersey, his parents were both from a small town in Missouri, and Tom went to church every week growing up. Other influences are science and sci-fi, mythology and folklore, Americana and urban kitsch, James Brown and 20th-century music.

Tom is now Associate Professor of Music at Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle. He has written articles on Julius Watkins and afterwards for *The Horn Call* (1988, 1989). While living in New York City, he organized the first Julius Watkins Jazz French Horn Festival, featuring himself, Mark Taylor, John Clark, and Vincent Chancey. He plays a Paxman 20M full double horn.

Tom was elected an IHS Honorary Member in 2020.

*From:  
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