

Meet Alek Razdan

“Alek sounds a lot better than I did at his age. Hell, he sounds better than I do now!”

--Sax Gordon, a leading r&b/blues artist in the USA and Europe

“The future of r&b and jazz is in good hands. Alek has a depth in his musicianship that is rarely found in someone three times his age.”

--Mark Earley, Roomful of Blues

Alek Razdan, based on Boston’s North Shore, is no ordinary saxophone and clarinet player. Only in his mid-teens, he’s pulling ahead of the legion of other talented young jazz artists found playing in clubs and studying in music programs around the country. Alek shows impressive technique and surprising expressive power. He has a musical intelligence well beyond his 15 years. These qualities, along with crispness of spirit and firm determination, elevate Alek close to an artistic level frequented by long-established musicians.

Want proof? Give a close listen to Alek’s tenor, soprano, and clarinet on his new album, *Something Different*, and/or hear him in concert with his crackerjack A-Train band—his father, Rikki, plays woodwinds, Dave Vincent mans the drum kit, and John Hyde supplies keyboards. Every day of practice and study he becomes more and more easeful with spontaneous creativity and his tone deepens. Every day, too, Alek continues to explore the artful possibilities offered by not only traditional jazz, swing jazz, bebop, and post-bop, but also blues, r&b, and, not least, Indian classical music.

Something Different is the latest important step in a musical odyssey that proceeds on a sure and steady track, without disruption to his school work and his family life. The journey began early, very early. Alek’s first instrument was a toy saxophone—he was all of 18 months!—and from there, inspired by hearing his father practice his tenor at home, he moved on to the recorder. At age eight, he started taking clarinet lessons. Next, Alek took up the tenor saxophone and eventually began playing in jam sessions at Gloucester’s Rhumb Line club and restaurant, where he befriended Dave and John. All the while, Alek stayed (and stays) attentive to the jazz and other types of music he found in his parents’ well-stocked record collection, savoring the golden sounds of Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Art Blakey, Sonny Stitt, Earl Bostic, Sam Butera, Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar Khan, on and on.

Alek’s debut album, *Tenor 12*, appeared in 2005. After kicking off the album with the swinging self-imagined title track, the pre-teenager winningly treated time-honored gems from the repertory of Ellington, Antonio Carlos Jobim, Sonny Rollins, and, to name one more notable, r&b bar-walker Big Jay McNeely. “*Tenor 12* was recorded live in our living room,” said Alek. “I learned a lot producing it, and I think for a home recording, it came out pretty well. We were pleasantly surprised to receive a very favorable review in *Saxophone Journal* [July/August 2006 issue].” Discerning critic Billy Kerr raved over his musicality: “[Alek] possesses a sound as big as a house, great time, and a true feel for improvisation...[He] swings his tail off.”

Good as that debut album was, *Something Different* offers even richer aural pleasures. Alek draws listeners into his fascinating jazz-and-beyond world, playing with unassailable integrity

and evincing a secure sense of craftsmanship. “I tried to have a nice, varied mix of material, the same as in my first CD,” said ever-articulate Alek. “This time, however, I wanted the songs to be more sophisticated, and I included the work of many of my favorite artists, such as Rahsaan Roland Kirk, Artie Shaw, Boots Randolph, and others, in an attempt to keep their music alive, in a sense.” (Ah, that record collection again.)

On the new release, Alek takes significant strides in forging his own poignant voice out of the personalized tones and styles of the saxophone and clarinet greats mentioned above, along with a good number more, such as Coleman Hawkins, Ben Webster, Red Prysock, Eddie “Lockjaw” Davis, and Arnett Cobb. The young musician has far-ranging, discriminating taste: rowdy Texas tenor, Kansas City swing, super-heated bebop, Nashville jazz (the great Boots Randolph, in fact, offered encouragement to Alek through letters), British traditional jazz (the colorful Acker Bilk), and even smooth-and-sweet *Lawrence Welk Show* music (clarinetist Henry Questa).

With typically fine assistance from the regular gang, Alek shines on 16 album tracks, each a delight in its own special way. His fleet-fingered clarinet (*not* saxophone) propels a vibrant rendition of John Coltrane’s “Giant Steps,” and he rather amazingly employs Roland Kirk’s double-saxophone spontaneous circular breathing technique in his one-take (!) makeover of “Volunteered Slavery”—his difficult, intense practicing paid off. Alek’s imaginative impetus motors the clarinet-stoked revival of the Artie Shaw classic “Special Delivery Stomp,” and the teenager gives a fond nod to Indian music with his assured soprano saxophone work on “Raga Kuch Farak Hai.” Alek got the idea to write this raga (which translates as “Something Different,” after finding reel-to-reel tapes of this wonderful music in the basement of his grandfather’s home; back home in southern Asia, and in Europe, Raj Razdan, used to play violin in a ballet group’s orchestra. Still more good genes: Alek’s other grandfather, Sidney Shanbar, was a respected jazz pianist.

Several songs find Alek displaying a true affinity for the blues, something that can not be said of the vast majority of young, rising-star jazz musicians. He isn’t championing time-honored Delta and Chicago blues, mind you, but rather the fascinating strain of blues that overlaps jazz: what filled the magical horns of Count Basie’s and Ray Charles’s sidemen, Coltrane, Ben Webster, and so many other jazz heroes. Alek stamps his own bluesy mark on the Red Prysock numbers “Fruit Boots” and “Foot Stompin.” There’s a certain especial earthiness to his playing in “Willow Weep for Me” and “Volunteered Slavery,” too. Alek got it right when he said: “I love the raw energy of the blues and try to put a part of this into my sound and playing style.”

The maturity and aesthetic worth of Alek’s playing has been deepened by the outstanding company he keeps. In addition to his dad and Dave and John, he’s shared the stage with three internationally-known acts who live on the North Shore or not too far away from Alek in Rockport: singers Willie “Loco” Alexander (bohemian jazz-poet/co-founder of American punk-rock) and Barrence Whitfield (the r&b dynamo, a special favorite of European audiences), and the jump-blues band Roomful of Blues (active since the 1970s). There have been others too, including local jazz singer Karen Ristuben and organ specialist Marty Rowan and nationally-known trombonist Sarah Morrow and pianist Jeff Gardner (Alek performed with the latter two at the 2006 Rockport Art Association Summer Concert Series). And, not least, Alek has sat in with

the Megawatt Blues Crushers, an accomplished local r&b band that Rikki and Dave played with for 17 years (in 1996, the Crushers won the coveted Boston Blues Battle).

Alek appreciates his jazz and blues friends and family. “They’re extremely talented,” he said, “and they really inspire me to put my all into every performance. All of them are such great guys. They put so much effort into everything they’re playing, and have such a fun time doing it!”

What’s the high point of Alek’s musical life so far? “I’d say having the opportunity to sit in with Roomful of Blues at the Regatta Bar in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was really an exciting experience, because I had always listened to their records from an early age, and had always thought they were a great band. Plus, my dad, coincidentally, had also sat in with Roomful a while back, when he was attending college in Rochester, New York.”

Every day Alek becomes more and more comfortable with his journey to attain his own voice on his woodwinds. “Over the years,” he noted, “I think that I’ve greatly improved my ability to play a melody or line that I hear in my head. This has a lot to do with just being familiar with your instrument, and having the ability to translate your ideas into the actions of your hand.”

The time may very well come when Alek Razdan wields the power of the jazz universe with his fingers on the keys of his instruments. In the meantime, this young jazz communicator gives it his all to master his art. “Whenever I play,” he said, “I always think that I can do a better job, and I continually strive to make myself a better player.”

--Frank-John Hadley, *DownBeat* columnist/Grove Press author