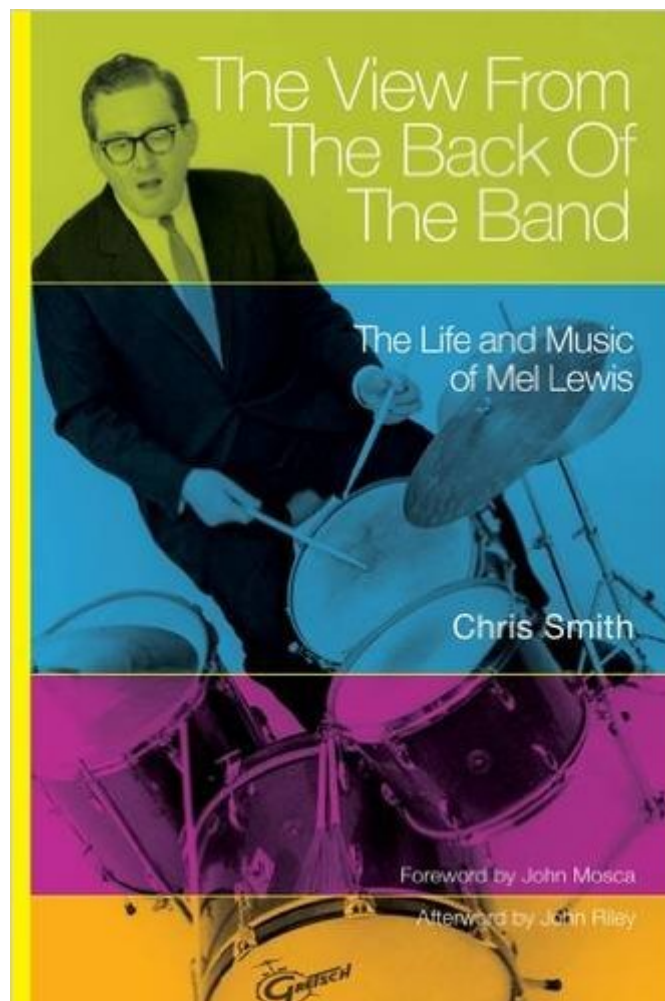


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# The View From The Back Of The Band: The Life And Music Of Mel Lewis (North Texas Lives Of Musician Series)



## Synopsis

Mel Lewis (1929–1990) was born Melvin Sokoloff to Jewish Russian immigrants in Buffalo, New York. He first picked up his father's drumsticks at the age of two and at seventeen he was a full-time professional musician. *The View from the Back of the Band* is the first biography of this legendary jazz drummer. For over fifty years, Lewis provided the blueprint for how a drummer could subtly support any musical situation. While he made his name with Stan Kenton and Thad Jones, and with his band at the Village Vanguard, it was the hundreds of recordings that he made as a sideman and his ability to mentor young musicians that truly defined his career. Away from the drums, Lewis's passionate and outspoken personality made him one of jazz music's greatest characters. It is often through Lewis's own anecdotes, as well as many from the musicians who knew him best, that this book traces the career of one of the world's greatest drummers. Previously unpublished interviews, personal memoirs, photos, musical transcriptions, and a selected discography add to this comprehensive biography.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Smith has written the long-awaited biography of the most musical jazz drummer who ever lived. In addition to the biography is a lengthy collection of transcriptions of Lewis's playing, a selected discography and a functional index! This will influence many young players and place Lewis among the often-spoken-about legendary jazz musicians of the last half of the 20th century but for some odd reason, is appreciated by older listeners but not by the young. I hope this changes as a result of

Smith's anecdote-filled book. Lewis's story is told by those that knew him-as a musician, a teacher, a mentor, a band-leader, a friend, a parent and husband. In all, a remarkable portrait. Thank you, Chris!

Mel has long been one of my very favorite drummers, then co-leader (with Thad Jones) and leader of the last of the great big bands. This (mostly) musical biography tells us much about the man, and a lot more about his music. But much of what I found interesting about this book were the details of bands he played with, sessions he played on, and the musicians themselves. We gain insights into the Kenton band and the musicians who played in it and wrote for it, the jazz scenes in both Los Angeles and New York where Mel spent most of his professional life. Along the way, we get to know a bit about some of the great players and writers, among them Pepper Adams, Bob Brookmeyer, Bill Holman, Thad Jones, and Gerry Mulligan. For musicians, there are a dozen or so annotated drum parts for selected recordings that illustrate Mel's techniques at various stages of his career, and for the rest of us, a selective discography. A quibble, however, with this and the bio of another of my favorite drummers, the great Shelly Manne. Both bios were written by drummers, and we hear far more than a non-drummer cares to know about their equipment, and far too much fawning over every session on which they played. I've read a lot of bios of jazz musicians, and I don't recall a single one that had much of anything to say about reeds, mouthpieces, or what piano they preferred. So why the continual talk about cymbals? But that IS a quibble, and a relatively small one. This is a fine read. I really enjoyed it.

As a professional drummer for most of my life I always felt that Mel Lewis was the epitome of what a drummer's function was within a musical framework. He was an absolute paradox in a world of monster players with astounding technique but may not understand what the true meaning of music is all about. I was fortunate to know Mel and had a chance to sit right next to him during a 5 hour recording session several years ago. Mel said had no technique (as he told me later on in a conversation), he had a 'musical technique' which he used to to get 'underneath' a band and propel it like no other players I've ever heard. Any 2nd year drum student could play anything that Mel played but never could they part it like Mel. He was like a DaVinci or Picasso but with only a pencil to draw the most incredible pictures. He amazed a lot of drummers and rightly so since he played for the music not the money as he stated early in Chris Smith's wonderful book. I would run into Mel from time to time after I met him in 1974. He was always a positive person and pushed ahead after Thad left the band. He did it single handedly but it was always for the music. Chris's book fills in a lot

of the 'gaps' that I always wondered about in Mel's life. Things that most musicians always wonder about when they have an idol like Mel...how did he get started, did he ever want to be a more technical player, why did he leave LA,etc. ? A lot of questions that are answered in this book. Mel was a strong person with strong opinions..... If you're a young drummer and not aware of Mel you should listen to him with the Terry Gibbs big band to understand that 'he was all about the music'. He always played for the band..... Buddy Rich would say that he himself was the band. Buddy would go to hear Terry's band with Mel and wished he could have the arrangements that Terry had in his band but he said that he could never play them better than Mel...True praise from another genius with more natural technique than any drummer of his time.....

This is one of the best biographies of a jazz drummer that I have ever read. The transcriptions included in the book are terrific. Only another drummer could write something as knowledgeable as this. Lots of hard work and listening to one of the finest big band and combo drummers in my life time. A must read for all drummers to get inside Mel's playing.

This book is about my Dad who has been gone 25 years from melanoma.. He always wanted to write this book but passed way too early. Chris Smith took on the challenge and wrote a best seller! Thank you Chris for your efforts ! We are so proud of you !

A detailed look at the life and music of one of our most influential drummers and leaders in jazz. Mel was a hero to so many of us, and this book only adds to my admiration, especially digging into his musical life before partnering to form The Thad Jones - Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra in '66.

Mel Lewis was a superlative musician who did not lead a glamorous life. He was a journeyman who did not mince words & who was quite blunt & didn't put on airs. And he never let his foot off the gas - was constantly hustling, constantly promoting himself. I know becuz I spent 3 days talking to him, & it was obvious that his favorite subject was himself! That's the bread & butter of the jazz business. He told me that he was one of the only drummers making a living playing jazz! This was while the Jones/Lewis big band was in existence. He knew it, & he wasn't afraid to say so! When I went to hear him I told him before he started I thought he was great & he came back with a classic "Thanks. I hope you'll still be able to say that at two o'clock!" I learned a lot from talking to him for those 3 days.

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