No other jazz musician from Cleveland has ever achieved the world-wide acclaim that saxophonist Joe Lovano got in the 1990s and early 2000s. He was voted “Jazz Artist of the Year” by DownBeat magazine critics and readers in 1995, 1996 and 2001. He was named “International Artist of the Year” by Jazz Report magazine in 1995. DownBeat called Cleveland native Lovano “the very epitome of the ‘90s professional jazzman.”

DownBeat’s Larry Blumenfeld wrote, “The sheer breadth and ambition of Lovano’s artistic endeavors reflect a consistent level of achievement. Lovano raises the level of the game and of those around him.”

The DownBeat article said Lovano “knows his history, not just the history of the music, but the value of his personal history.”

That personal history began in Cleveland where Lovano was almost literally born to be a jazz musician. When he was born December 29, 1952 in Cleveland, his father, Tony “Big T” Lovano was already a highly-regarded local jazz tenor saxophonist.

“There are pictures of me as a baby,” recalled Joe, “with an alto when I was about six months old.” Fellow Cleveland saxophonist Ernie Krivda said, “I think he wanted to be a jazz musician before he wanted, like most kids, to be a cowboy or a fireman. It was always his dream.”

With music filling his home, Lovano began playing the alto sax when he was only five or six years old. His father was always his musical idol. “My dad,” said Lovano, “was a real passionate musician. He also was a barber, had a family, and he taught me about the whole way of life in music.”

Lovano told me, “My dad grew up in the bebop era. He played at jam sessions with John Coltrane in Cleveland and with (Clevelanders) Tadd Dameron, Benny Bailey, Bill Hardman, the great tenor player Joe Alexander, and Jim Hall.” Because of his family, Tony decided to remain in Cleveland. But he was so respected that he often shared bandstands with such artists as Stan Getz and Flip Phillips when they came to Cleveland.

Drummer Lawrence “Jacktown” Jackson, who frequently played with the elder Lovano, said, “He wasn’t as advanced (as Joe became). He didn’t have the same command of his instrument, but Tony was a hell of a saxophone player!”

When Joey, as he was called, was about 10, his father began giving his son serious lessons and he began listening to his father’s records, particularly saxophonists Sonny Stitt, John Coltrane and Lester Young, and trumpeter Miles Davis. When Joe was 11, his father bought him a King Super 20 tenor saxophone. Within a year, his father began taking his son with him to rehearsals and gigs. As the boy was listening, “I was starting to learn the music they were playing.” Lovano said, “All the guys in my dad’s generation (in Cleveland) were my teachers.”

One of those “guys” was Willie Smith, the Cleveland saxophonist who had arranged for the Lionel Hampton Orchestra. Smith recalled young Joey “used to come over all the time. He always wanted to play because he saw what his father was doing. Naturally, he wanted to be a musician.”

“I grew up knowing about the Cleveland scene from my dad,” said Lovano. Writer Howard Mandel quoted Lovano saying, “I was really lucky. My dad was a great player, had fun with music and just loved to play. I learned from him that jazz expression is vast. He never told me, ‘This is good and that’s bad.’ He let me explore it all and he taught me about each instrument. That taught me how to play. He taught
me to check out piano players and drummers and bass players and trumpeters. He'd say, 'If you're going to play with them, you have to know what’s happening. You're going to play with drummers; you have to know how to fit in your ideas with their rhythms.'

"This really opened me up," said Lovano. "From an early age, I used to listen to records from the inside of what was happening, and not just on the basis of what the soloist was playing. That was great," he said, "and I think it was really generous of him."

As a result of his father's enormous influence, Lovano gained a very broad view of what jazz music should and should not be. His father was never content to keep on playing the same old songs with the same old groups. Years later, Lovano, "the most straight-ahead jazz man on the scene today," as DownBeat called him, was constantly experimenting with new groups, new sounds, and new forms of musical expression.

**Early playing in Cleveland**

By the time Lovano was 13 (in 1966), his father often let him sit in and play during the last set of gigs. When Joe was 14, Tony took him to jam sessions at places like Hank Geer's Euclid Shore Club on Lakeshore Boulevard. This was where he first met such leading Cleveland jazz musicians as Bill Gidney, Paul Bunion, Hank Geer, Bill de Arango, Ace Carter, Tony Haynes, Emil Boyd, Chink Stevenson, Eddie Baccus and "Jacktown" (Lawrence Jackson) who later told me, "Dad really put it on his son. If it weren't for Tony, 'Big T,' there would be no Joey."

When Joe was a student at Euclid High School, his father took him to Public Hall in downtown Cleveland to hear pianist Dave Brubeck in a concert that also featured Gerry Mulligan.” According to Lovano, it was that concert that convinced him that he wanted to follow in his father’s footsteps and become a jazz musician.

Despite his interest in jazz, Lovano later admitted that while he was still in high school, he was playing all kinds of music including rock ‘n roll and Motown.

**At the Smiling Dog Saloon**

Before he graduated from Euclid High School, Lovano was playing at the Smiling Dog Saloon on West 25th Street, a club that presented many national jazz artists. Krivda, who often played there with Lovano, said, "It was an incredible experience, an opportunity to play opposite the major names in the music."

Lovano told me, "I remember hearing a lot of great bands there. I had a chance to play opposite a number of great groups at the Smiling Dog. Ernie Krivda and Bill de Arango and Skip Hadden played as the house trio and I used to sit in with them. (Vibraphonist) Ron Busch played in a number of different bands there with Ernie and Ron Kozak, another saxophonist from Cleveland. And I was a teenager and just coming on at that point in the early ‘70s. I had a chance to play there a lot."

It was at the Smiling Dog that Lovano said he got his first big break. He and Willie Smith were sitting in with Jack McDuff's group. "I was playing baritone saxophone in an ensemble with four saxophones and Willie was playing lead alto. About two weeks after we played a couple of nights with Jack at the Smiling Dog, he called us to join his band and go on tour."

**Berklee, Woody and New York**

After high school, Lovano went to the Berklee College of Music in Boston. He joined Woody Herman’s orchestra in 1976 and made five albums with Herman.

In the late 1970s, Lovano got a chance to sit in with the Bill Evans Trio, a group he had originally met at the Smiling Dog. "That was an unbelievable experience," said Lovano. "I just brought my horn down there. Mark Johnson was playing bass. It was a Sunday night and I just approached Bill and asked him if I could sit in. And he was great. It was incredible! He said, ‘Yeah, let me start the set and I’ll bring you up.’"

"I remember I played ‘Body and Soul’ and ‘Stella By Starlight’ with them and an arrangement of a tune he recorded on the Interplay album which featured Jim Hall, Freddie Hubbard and Philly Joe Jones, ‘You and the Night And the Music.’ I had heard them earlier in the week. They were playing this one arrangement from the record and I knew the part. When they asked me what I wanted to play, I called that tune and played his arrangement on it. I was really proud that I could play something that they were playing."

**With Thad Jones and Mel Lewis**

After he moved to New York, Lovano joined the Thad Jones-Mel Lewis Orchestra that was playing one night a week at the Village Vanguard. "I joined the band in 1980," said Lovano, "and played with the band every Monday night that I was in town and not on tour from 1980 until about ‘91. Mel died in 1988 and I stayed on..."
the band for about three years after he passed.”

Lovano later said, “The music of Thad Jones and Mel Lewis was a development from the Ellington-Basie school, a complete evolution in modern band writing. And the thing about this music that was so strong,” he said, “was that it was performance all the way. Most of the recordings were live recordings and every time, through the same arrangements, the musicians could be creative within the music. It was always growing and taking new shapes.

“When you play with older cats and legends, people like Woody Herman or Mel Lewis,” said Lovano, “they elevate you into another strength especially if you know where they’re coming from and you know their history and their life. All of a sudden, you’re a part of that. Thanks to my dad, I grew up really knowing about the history of jazz and the history of players, and the traps that a lot of cats go into. When I went to New York, I was already almost somehow seasoned a little bit to the way of life in the world of music.”

Lovano was also playing dates and making records with Paul Motian, Carla Bley, Jack McDuff, Lonnie Smith and others. Lovano said, “Playing with musicians like Paul Motian since 1980 was really a key factor in my development about that concept, about developing solos that are special for the moment, not only the tune they’re playing, but the people you are playing with.”

Living with his wife, singer Judi Silvano, in New York, Lovano was playing frequently in the city and teaching at New York University and William Paterson College.

First album as a leader

In 1985, Lovano recorded his first album as a leader, Tones, Shapes and Colors. The Joe Lovano Quartet included pianist Ken Werner, bassist Dennis Irwin and drummer Mel Lewis. They recorded three Lovano compositions, “La Louisiane,” “Tones, Shapes and Colors” and “In the Jazz Community” as well as three originals by Werner. Lovano demonstrated his long exploration of the concept of using a variety of instruments. He said, “I had acquired a lot of instruments during my travels and tried to develop a concept of accompanying myself on solo sax with gongs.” The liner notes of that album said prophetically, “Joe Lovano is ready to step up and out.”

As he was beginning to “step out,” Lovano never forgot his jazz roots in Cleveland. In March of 1986, he came home and had a party at the Beachwood Studio in Cleveland to celebrate the release of his first album. “To celebrate,” said Lovano, “we had a jam session. We just called tunes and had some fun.” They recorded that informal session. Included were Joe’s father, his uncle Anthony Lovano, organist Eddie Baccus and drummer “Jacktown.” The jam session was released on a compact disc entitled Hometown Sessions. It included father and son tenor duets – probably their last.

Tony Lovano died less than a year later (January 8, 1987) at the age of 61. Unfortunately “Big T” did not live to see the world-wide acclaim his son was about to achieve.

In 1991, Joe signed a contract with Blue Note Records and began recording a series of excellent compact discs including From the Soul, Universal Language, Quartets Live at the Village Vanguard, Trio Fascination, Celebrating Sinatra and Rush Hour. On Rush Hour, Lovano soloed within large ensemble arrangements written by Gunther Schuller. It was an unusual setting for a musician who was best known for his work with small jazz groups, but he drew on his experience with the Herman and Jones-Lewis big bands. Lovano said later, “I would have never made a recording like Rush Hour and play with the intimacy that we did, with a large ensemble like that with strings and woodwinds, if I had not experienced
playing in large groups.”

Lovano expressed himself, seemingly effortlessly, within the context of the large orchestra, playing his mainstream, bebop and even free-jazz solos, as integral parts of complex and sometimes difficult Schuller arrangements.

Lovano said, “Putting things together with different combinations of people, shaping music, and making jazz happen,” was his way of life. He said he wanted to do it in a variety of ways, drawing on the artistic stimulation he was getting from a variety of musical environments.” The *Rush Hour* CD won the *DownBeat* Critics and Readers’ Polls for 1994 Album of the Year and a Grammy nomination.

On *Celebrating Sinatra*, featuring songs made famous by singer Frank Sinatra half a century earlier, Lovano discovered that within the big ensemble arrangements of Manny Albam, there emerged a variety of small combos – duets, trios, quartets and quintets – in which he and the other jazz artists could spontaneously interact with each other, improvising original music.

Lovano told *DownBeat*, “I find that half of my audience, the young crowd, never heard these standards played at all, by anybody. The other half of my audience never heard any original music; they’ve only heard standards done in fairly conventional ways.” By using the Sinatra standards as frames for new pieces of musical art, Lovano and his fellow players performed the same arrangements, but they never played them exactly the same way twice.

Like many outstanding jazz artists, including his father, Lovano was seeking more artistic challenges than he could get playing with the same group all the time. Perhaps more than anyone else in jazz, he played and recorded with a wide variety of stimulating jazz artists.

**Remembering his Cleveland roots**

By the early 1990s, Lovano had become a world-class jazz artist. He was ranked number four saxophonist in the 1991 *DownBeat* Readers’ Poll. More than any other jazz artist from Cleveland, Lovano always had great respect for his jazz roots in Cleveland and returned home frequently to perform and take part in what he called “Cleveland’s rich musical scene,” a scene which his late father had helped create.

In 1995, when he was first voted “Jazz Artist of the Year,” Lovano spent more than a week in his hometown playing and serving as the artist-in-residence at the Tri-C JazzFest.

**With Jim Hall and Dave Brubeck**

Also in 1995, Lovano was further honored when two all-time jazz giants, Jim Hall and Dave Brubeck, wrote songs honoring him.

Guitarist and composer Hall, who also grew up in Cleveland and had played with Tony Lovano, wrote a song dedicated to Lovano called “Calypso Joe.” It was reminiscent of an earlier Hall recording with Sonny Rollins, “St. Thomas” (from the *Saxophone Colossus* album). Lovano had been so impressed with the Rollins-Hall recording that he had recorded the song in 1986 when he came home to Cleveland for that recording session with his father. Hall invited Lovano to join him on the recording. They made the record for Telarc, the Cleveland-based recording company, in February of 1995 at the Power Station in New York City.

Brubeck, whose concert in Cleveland years earlier had inspired Lovano to become a professional musician, wrote a song entitled “Joe Lovano Tango.” The pianist said he began repeating Lovano’s name and it fell into a tango rhythm. Brubeck said, “I finished Joe’s tune in the car on the way into New York from my home in Connecticut.” He went to the Clinton Recording Studios in New York City on June 6, 1995 to record for Telarc. Not only did Brubeck compose and record “Joe Lovano Tango” in honor of the Clevelander, he also invited Lovano to record it with him. Brubeck told Lovano he wanted the piece played “Not as a typical tango, but as more of a comment on the tango. He said to Lovano, “You should feel free to take it any direction you want to go.”

Lovano said, “It was truly an honor to be part of the 75th birthday recording session for Brubeck. In my wildest dreams,” said Lovano, “I never thought Dave Brubeck would compose a piece for me to play with him on such a milestone in his life and career.”

**Touring the world**

Lovano was in demand everywhere. He recorded with a huge number of different artists and toured the nation and the world, playing an almost endless number of jazz festivals and such jazz clubs as the Village Vanguard, the new Birdland, the Blue Note and Sweet Basil’s in New York City; the Jazz Showcase in Chicago; the Bimhuus in Amsterdam; the New Morning in Paris; and Yoshi’s in Oakland.

When Lovano came home for Christmas in 1998, he spent a couple of nights playing with some of his old Cleveland musical friends at Ron Busch’s Bop Stop on
West 6th Street. He asked his father's old friend, Willie Smith, to write some arrangements for a ten-piece group.

Less than a year later (November, 1999), Lovano recorded several of Smith's arrangements on a Blue Note compact disc, 52nd Street Themes. The CD included several of the pieces Smith had written for Lovano's hometown session at the Bop Stop.

It also included five compositions by bebop pioneer Tadd Dameron, who had also played with Lovano's dad in Cleveland – "If You Could See Me Now," "On a Misty Night," "The Scene is Clean," "Whatever Possess'd Me," and "Tadd's Delight." Lovano said, "I laid heavily on Tadd's tunes because that's where Willie really lives. Learning tunes like 'Hot House' and 'Good Bait' really taught me a lot about how to play this music."

In the liner notes, Lovano expressed his thanks, as always, to his late father, Tony "Big T" Lovano.

The recording by one of the biggest names in jazz was, in effect, Lovano's salute to his hometown and particularly Willie Smith and Tadd Dameron. With so many Cleveland connections, Fifty-second Street Themes could easily have been called "Euclid Avenue Themes." It won a Grammy Award for Jazz Record of the Year.

**Lovano's role in jazz**

In an interview during a break that night at the Bop Stop, I asked Lovano how he viewed his position in jazz. He said, "I feel all these things that are happening right now, are happening right on time for me. It takes a while to develop your music and your sound. And it takes some experience playing in a lot of settings. I'm starting to blossom and just trying to find myself in my sound and in different directions and concepts within jazz." He added, "I feel it's such an honor to be playing this music and it's really a gift and a treat to be touring and to be able to present things like this.

"I feel really proud that I'm getting some recognition for some really creative projects and not a lot of overproduced things or a lot of hype. You know, people are reacting to things that I've done. I would like to build up a library or a catalog of not only my playing but my compositions as well."

In 2001, Lovano also joined the faculty of his alma mater, the Berklee College of Music in Boston.

And what does one of the world's leading jazz musicians do when he is not playing jazz or teaching? In a 1997 interview, Lovano said, "I love nature, walking in the woods, swimming, and playing golf." He said his uncles in Cleveland all played golf and he used to caddy for them when he was a teenager.

In a few short years, Lovano amassed an enormous catalog of recordings, both as a leader and as a sideman.

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**Joe Lovano Discography**

**Lovano as leader:**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Worlds: Joe Lovano Wind Ensemble (Evidence)</td>
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<td>1995</td>
<td>Quartets: Live at the Vanguard (Blue Note)</td>
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<td>1996</td>
<td>Celebrating Sinatra (Blue Note)</td>
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<td>1997</td>
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<td>1998</td>
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<td>1999</td>
<td>Friendly Fire (Blue Note)</td>
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<td>1999</td>
<td>52nd Street Themes (Blue Note)</td>
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<td>2000</td>
<td>Unknown Voyage (Robi Drol)</td>
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<td>2000</td>
<td>Grand Slam (Telarc)</td>
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<td>2001</td>
<td>Viva Caruso (Blue Note)</td>
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**Lovano with others:**

- **Woody Herman Orchestra** - 40th Anniversary in Carnegie Hall; Roadfather; Chick, Donald, Walter and Woodrow; Woody and Flip Phillips
- **Mie Lewis Orchestra** - The Definitive Thad Jones, Vol. 1; The Definitive Thad Jones, Vol. 2; Soft Lights and Hot Music: Make Me Smile; Live at Montreux; 20 Years at the Village Vanguard
- **Paul Motian** - Psalm; One Time Out; On Broadway; 1, 2, 3; Motion in Tokyo; Jack of Clubs; Monk in Motion; It Should've Happened A Long Time Ago; Bill Evans; Story of Maryam; Trioism
- **John Scofield** - What We Do, Time On My Hands, Meant to Be, Live
- **Tom Harrell** - Sail Away, Form, Visions, Passages, Upswing
- **Peter Erskine** - Transition, Sweet Soul
- **Charlie Haden Orchestra** - Dream Keeper
- **Don Grotnick** - Night Town
- **Judi Silvano** - Dancing Voices, Songs I Wrote or Wish I Did
- **Gust Tassili** - Sequestered Days
- **Henri Texier** - Paris Botignoles, TransAtlantic Quartet, TransAtlantic & Abercrombie
- **Salvatore Bonafede** - Actor-Actress
- **Lonné Smith** - Afro-Desia; Lonnie Smith and George Benson; When the Night is Right; Keep on Lovin'
- **Jim Hall** - Dialogues, Grand Slam
- **Dave Brubeck** - Young Tigers and Old Lions
- **Bill de Arango** - 299 Bridge Street, Anything Went
- **Ray Drummond** - Excursion
- **Allen Farnham** - The Common Thread, 5th House
- **Eric Feltzer** - Gratitude
- **Andy LaVerne** - First Tango in NY
- **Lee Konitz** - Rhapsody
- **Judy Miemack** - Long as You're Living
- **Peter O'Mara** - Avenue U
- **Saheb Sirajb** - It Couldn't Happen Without You
- **Ed Schuller** - To Know Where One Is
- **George Schuller** - Looking Up From Down Below
- **Alain Solier** - Durence
- **Kenny Werner** - Uncovered Heart
- **Yosuke Yamashita** - Kurdish Dance, Dazzling Day, Ways of Time