

STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

Frank Morgan is an alto sax man who has been playing jazz professionally since he was 14 years old. He was born in Minneapolis and raised in Milwaukee; he later moved to Los Angeles. His father, Stanley—guitarist and leader of the famed Ink Spots—introduced him to countless jazz greats, including Charlie Parker. The L.A. fast lane got him into alcohol and drugs and also into prison. He was released in 1985 and since then has been playing gigs and concerts around the country and abroad. He prefers concert venues over clubs, although he plays Mr. P's in Madison because "Gene Parks is a special man." At 61, he has moved back to Milwaukee to fulfill a lifelong dream—playing with his very own group. He's putting together a quartet composed of himself, his cousin, Manty Ellis, on guitar; Skip Bey on bass and Allan Dawson on drums.

"I still think Charlie Parker is the greatest human being who ever picked up a saxophone—the greatest human being who ever played. To get private instruction from him, to get the help I got from him and not get involved with the kind of life he led—that didn't happen for me.

"Charlie Parker was my idol. I got involved with drugs because that's what he did. I got involved with everything I knew I shouldn't—alcohol, drugs—just everything that pointed to failure rather than success. I knew it at the time. Sure, I knew it. Of course. I was thrown into a situation before I was mature enough to properly deal with it.

"A younger person is so impressionable. You want to be accepted by your peers, and you think you have to do what they do. We all want to belong to something. We want to travel with the big boys and belong to the club. I did that up to about 10 years ago.

"When I came out of prison, I was scared to death because I knew little about success. I was an expert on failure. I was in prison for drugs, drug-related crimes. I won't go into all that because it really doesn't matter now, and that's all behind me.

"What turned me around was my age—and a woman who I really loved. She would not tolerate me being a ne'er-do-well. She told me: 'If you love me and you want to be with me, you're gonna have to use your God-given talents in a positive manner. You're gonna have to stop going to prison. You're gonna have to stop trying to kill yourself with drugs. You have to practice your instrument, and you have to treat me the way you want me to treat you. You have to be kind, loving and gentle—like you really are.'

"I was ready to hear that. I was tired of prison. I was tired of that life and I wanted to play the saxophone, to see how far I could really go, what I could really do in life. I never gave up the music. I played the saxophone all the times I was

in prison.

"Now I live by one credo: A wise person strengthens his weaknesses. So I not only practice on the saxophone, I also practice on all the things my higher self tells me I need to practice on.

"Yes, I see myself as more spiritual now than then. I consciously seek a higher spirituality. I seek out people who are more spiritual. I choose to play with musicians who are on a higher spiritual plane. I don't want to play with people who are mad, who are angry. I don't want to play angry music.

"Sure, the world sucks. It's very unjust. There's inequality. Democracy doesn't exist, certainly not in this country. But I don't want to play any kind of music that's gonna incite someone to anger or to riot—that's not in me. Whatever needs to be corrected in this world should be corrected through peaceful means. I think what the world needs is more and more and more love and respect.

"My intent is go from my heart to your heart. When I play something, I want it to

go straight from my heart to your heart so it does something for you. So it will encourage you to wake up the next morning and make the world a little better place to live—to treat the people like you want to be treated.

"I realize now more than ever in my life that I have an obligation to people, especially to the young people. I'm not a



Charlie Parker clone. I'm Frank Morgan trying to find out who I really am. I have an obligation to walk like I talk. That's what I'm doing—one day at a time." ■

Frank Morgan will be performing at Mr. P's on Friday, Feb. 10, along with Richard Davis on bass, Ben Sidran on piano, Ronnie Burrage on drums and Manty Ellis on guitar. Shows are at 8 and 11 p.m.



Morgan: 'I never gave up on the music...all the times I was in prison.'

**Spiritual
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alto sax
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