

# Paul van Kemenade: "Music, nothing more!" And it will stay that way!

By JazzNu Editorial Team  
December 18, 2024

**Journalists sometimes have to pivot unexpectedly. After months of preparing for the ultimate farewell interview with Paul van Kemenade, the musician suddenly announced he had no plans to retire. "That was never on the table," he clarified.**

Alright, perhaps a misunderstanding? "I'm a musician; I'll just keep playing," said the 67-year-old alto saxophonist, composer, bandleader, workshop and session leader, organizer, and more. "But when it comes to concerts, I'll focus on the highlights. And I'll definitely continue working with young musicians."

Fair enough. Let's shift the focus to his journey—from a shy, hesitant, aspiring musician born in Rotterdam and later settling in Tilburg, to becoming a beacon of Dutch jazz and improvisation. From an uncertain seeker, he embraced the confidence that shaped him into a key figure in jazz history. With his unique alto saxophone sound, he expanded the instrument's global jazz tradition to include new edges and boundaries.

Paul and I have known each other for fifty years—at first from a distance, then as musician and critic, and later as friends, despite that being frowned upon in serious jazz criticism. Times have changed. Over the years, we've discussed music and personal matters, some of which overshadowed the joy of improvisation. Could these shared experiences be why we're both a bit nervous about today's conversation?

Seated at a large table, there's an unusual awkwardness between us. How can this be after so many years? "I'll keep my answers short," Paul warns. I decide to abandon a standard journalistic rule for this session: instead of using his full name, I'll simply call him Paul.

This is not a farewell interview. After all, being a musician is a lifelong identity. Now at retirement age, Paul wants to shed some of the burdens he's carried for years. "It's overwhelming—bookings, arranging hotels, endless phone calls, managing administration. Being your own manager is exhausting. It's more than just making music."

But Paul, if it was so overwhelming, why did you take it all on yourself? "That's how it developed, partly because there was no one else. I've always said you're your own best manager. You keep control. Why play somewhere with sixty other groups? You're better off promoting your own projects, aren't you?"

Looking back, is he satisfied with his career? "I'm glad I could do so many things. I achieved what I wanted to say with music. I have no idea how many disciplines and projects I've developed. Back in 1974, when I started at the Brabants Conservatory, I just thought music was fun. I wanted to make it myself. A career? That didn't even cross my mind. Just music—nothing more!"

Paul witnessed the rise of jazz in Tilburg up close. Just before he arrived in the city, Groep Ohm, consisting of Tilburg musicians pianist Willem Kühne, double bassist Niko Langenhuijsen, and drummer Pieter Henrard, won the prestigious Laren Jazz competition in 1973. Niko Langenhuijsen wanted to pass on the success and experience of Groep Ohm to aspiring musicians. He started workshops, where the not-yet-20-year-old Paul van Kemenade also appeared. In 1978, Paul joined

the Gemeentereinigungsorkest Vaalbeek, marking the birth of the Tilburg School. Paul soon became a clear representative of the "angry young men" who defined this movement: long hair, shabby clothing, glasses held together with tape, and a head clouded by the smoke of heavy joints. But beyond the outward image was a unique combination of a biting, tearing, and razor-sharp alto saxophone sound, already infused with a profoundly moving lyricism.

Was that period pivotal for an emerging jazz musician? "It was certainly a very good environment to start in. The lead-up to the Gemeentereinigungsorkest, the arrival of Paradoks, and the improvisation lessons that Willem and Niko began teaching at the conservatory, where nothing like that existed before." So would his career have looked entirely different without the Tilburg School? "I don't know. I've always played with many people, including those from the Randstad. My development could have happened anywhere."

Young musicians often look up to major role models, and Paul was no different. When he began studying in Tilburg, he knew nothing about jazz music. "I thought Fausto Papetti was amazing." As he delved into jazz, he encountered towering figures like Pharoah Sanders, Gato Barbieri, Carla Bley, Charlie Haden, Ornette Coleman, and Art Pepper. "But I never really had specific heroes. Everything was new to me, even Piet Noordijk. Their music just moved me."

From the moment he picked up an alto saxophone, Paul van Kemenade began shaping and refining his sound. How did it ultimately take form? "I don't have an answer to that. I've always been searching for a particular alto sound—lightly aggressive, biting. I have suitcases full of mouthpieces and reeds, but I always return to my metal mouthpiece, the Berg Larsen 95M2. It just felt right from the start, though I've tried all the others."

Does this make him a man of strict habits? Certainly not, as evidenced by his wide-ranging and exploratory body of work. However, when it comes to his instrument of choice, he is unwavering. His Yamaha YAS 61 is sacred to him. Don't touch it, don't point at it, and treat it like a relic—because that's how Paul himself reveres it. Even though the saxophone looks like it could fall apart at any moment, Paul is undeterred. "I had a Selmer Mark VI until I played a Yamaha once. I immediately felt much more connected to it. Combined with my mouthpiece, the sound was just slightly thinner. I sold my Selmer, and everyone thought I was crazy—until they heard my sound. Sjoerd Rolsma also had a YAS 61, and I eventually managed to buy his. If anything breaks on my main saxophone, I can use parts from the other one."

Fifty years of musicianship—has it left its mark? "I was never handed anything on a silver platter. I worked hard for it, and it has taken its toll to some extent. I won't elaborate further on that." And all those trips abroad—did they affect his personal life? "They inevitably had an impact. That's inherent when you're away so often. But did I suffer because of it? That's a big word."

In 1982, the first Paul van Kemenade Quintet was born. Over the years, it had several different lineups, but about eight years ago, the Classic Quintet reunited for what was supposed to be a one-time performance. One-time? Not really. The bandleader is still touring with them, and now that the Last Call concerts are taking place, the Classic Quintet plays a central role. This raises the question: why was this successful and influential ensemble—perfectly suited to perform Van Kemenade's many compositions—disbanded in the first place?

"I felt the need to stop. I wanted to gather new ideas and develop them. Sometimes, stopping something is necessary for your growth, to move on to other things." But the urgency returned eight years ago. "This band feels so good; everything flows seamlessly. This year, we had a wonderful tour across five countries. It was amazing."

Paul has always valued his own ensembles. For instance, he has been performing duo concerts with pianist Stevko Bush for thirty years. He also formed duos over the years with flamenco guitarist Maurice Leenaars, Jasper van 't Hof, Mariá Portugal, and Budha Building. He collaborated in trios like the Podium Trio, Two Horns and a Bass, and worked with Aki Takase and Han Bennink. Listing all of his collaborations would take forever, but even a small selection sparks curiosity. Here are some highlights: the African ensemble Les Frères Guissé, the Prisma Orkest, the Contraband, Palinckx & Palinckx, Cappella Pratensis, the Surinam Music Ensemble, Trio Vandoorn, the Pierre Courbois Double Quintet, Eric van der Westen Octet, Fugara, the Brabants Jazz Orkest, Fantasy Colours, Kaisei Nari, and the International Quintet with American trombonist Ray Anderson.

Was the most beautiful moment of Paul van Kemenade's musical career found in these collaborations? "No, that's yet to come." And did any of these names leave a lasting impression? "Everyone leaves an impression, whether big or small." A typically Van Kemenade answer—and rightly so, because it's a rather silly question.

A more meaningful one, then: what does jazz mean to Paul beyond playing it? Freedom? "I don't need a term to feel free. Music is either good or bad; it doesn't exist to make someone feel free. That's given far too much weight. I feel free when I choose to feel free." Did freedom, perhaps, have anything to do with his travels to Africa, the birthplace of jazz? "No, absolutely not. It's often said that musicians want to explore that birthplace, but that's not the case for me. I've always been drawn to other cultures, people, and music. I experienced that during my travels to China, Russia, Indonesia, and the many other countries I visited."

he number of musicians Paul has played with is almost uncountable. Are there any musicians left in the world he'd still like to share the stage with? "No... well, yes, of course! I've been deeply influenced by people like Billie Holiday and Charles Mingus, by their interpretation of music, their depth. There are many musicians who have passed away but have written history. I've always loved musicians with guts and soul—there aren't that many of them. Those are the ones who truly matter. I don't like the academic; music has to have emotional weight." Fortunately, this category still includes some living artists, though it's a small group. But that's just this writer's conclusion...

In addition to being a performer, Paul is also a gifted composer, with 275 compositions to his name. How did he find the time to create them all? "I'm always working on music. A bit crazy, right? Do my pieces come together intuitively? Not at all. A line emerges here, a few chords there, a melody, a pattern, a loop. It always happens in different ways, never according to a set plan. It's Ikea jazz—I build a piece layer by layer. It's never a complete thing from the start."

And where does the inspiration for all of this come from? "Nowhere. I listen a lot to Klara (a Flemish radio station of the VRT that mainly broadcasts classical music). I hear the same tempo changes in classical music that I write. That's how I discovered that these were once very normal in classical music. It has—partly unconsciously—left its mark on me. Only now do I realize this may have to do with my classical education. It must have influenced me without my noticing. Tempo changes have been normal for a long time; they don't come from Mingus. I think that's so pure! Why call it jazz? Furthermore, South African culture has also influenced my development as a composer, and certainly Cappella Pratensis. All my travels have shaped me as a composer. I've undoubtedly gained ideas from them."

Performer, composer, and also organizer—take, for instance, the Stranger than Paranoia festival, which celebrates its 32nd edition this Christmas. It involved grueling efforts to continually create surprising programs. After all, that was the festival's credo: contrasting acts on stage each evening. This meant all kinds of disciplines appeared—not just music. "I look back on it with great pleasure, immense pleasure, even. Over the years, the festival has undergone many changes, which was a natural evolution. Even when body painting was done on stage. And for years, there were emcees."

Not to mention poets, mystery guests, comedians, mime artists, fado and tango performers, a bass saxophone quartet, folklore from Moldova, free-jazz musicians from the early days, and major international names like Archie Shepp and David Murray. Again, too much to list.

The question many are asking—those who have grown alongside the significance that *Stranger than Paranoia* has gained over the years—is whether the festival will see a 33rd edition after Paul van Kemenade steps down. According to the organizer/programmer, it will only happen if funding is secured.

Money has always played a role in the arts, and consequently in all of Paul's activities. Funding, once available through subsidies, now seems to have nearly disappeared in the current societal climate for arts and culture. In Paul's words, the government views culture as "a bus trip for people over 70." However, he remains hopeful. "Jazz will never die. Creative expression cannot be suppressed. People will always want to express themselves through art. It has nothing to do with boundaries or restrictions. It's just being made harder to practice."

Art and culture have been struggling for years. How has this affected the jazz sector? What does the current jazz landscape look like? "I try to keep up with developments, but of course, I miss a lot. I stick to the things I enjoy and want to be surprised. Sometimes the scene feels a bit tame; there's often less adventure to see and hear. Jazz in the Netherlands develops slowly, rarely rising above the average. It could all be a bit bolder, with more grit."

Naturally, this development has its reasons. "In my opinion, there are too few initiatives from musicians to support the jazz scene. It's fine for musicians to focus on their craft, but it's equally essential to create your own opportunities, such as projects, workshops, and festivals for young people and others. In short, we need musicians who take the lead and invest in the future. Playing well and other well-intentioned efforts are simply not enough to 'save' the jazz world."

If anyone is committed to contributing to the potential "rescue" of jazz, it's certainly Paul van Kemenade. Throughout his career, promoting jazz and introducing this genre—especially to young people—has always been one of his priorities. In the late 1970s, he began leading workshops, and in 1979, he founded the Brabants Leerorkest, which later produced renowned musicians like Eric Vloeimans, Jeroen Doomernik, and Pieter Bast. For over ten years, he led workshops at Tilburg's music venue Paradox and successfully participated in the SWING Workshop Festival with his orchestras on multiple occasions. In recent years, he and Jeroen Doomernik have been leading the South Netherlands Workshop Orchestra, and this fall, he launched the youth festival K.O.T.S. (Sounds Meet Various Styles).

Paul's engagement with young people is one of the main reasons he continues to "keep playing," as he puts it. The South Netherlands Workshop Orchestra and K.O.T.S. remain his cherished projects, and it's entirely possible that more initiatives will emerge from him in the future. For now, though, he is starting to unload the burden of fifty years of hard work. What he plans to do starting January 1st, he says, "Even if I knew, it's nobody's business."

Will he possibly return to live in the Netherlands, given that he's been living in Belgium for the past three years? "That's possible. It depends on whether the Netherlands will still exist. We're walking through an open minefield. I struggle with it enormously. I haven't watched the news in months—I get deeply depressed from it."

Still, gloominess is not characteristic of Paul van Kemenade. Perseverance and courage, however, certainly are. The shy young man of 1974, who enrolled at the Brabants Conservatory, has grown into an eloquent artist who follows his own path and cares little about what others think of him.

We look at each other, understanding what the other is thinking. What hasn't been said during the hours we spent together doesn't need to be said. Paul has spoken his mind, thankfully not always in short answers. He's ready to face January 1st. "*The scene changes*," as Bud Powell once said—and played. Isn't that right, Paul?

Rinus van der Heijden