

Coleman hawkins

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The 20's were a turning point in the history of music, which coincides with a turning point in the mindset of African Americans, especially in large cities like New York. The black entertainment industry, up until now, had always been a white man's exhibition of the Negro for white audiences (Cooper). The Harlem renaissance and the idea of the 'New Negro' was a precursor for a wave of African American musicians and songwriters who would not be restricted to the same conventions which their predecessors were.

Coleman Hawkins learned to play the piano at the age of 5, and two years later he moved on to the cello. At 9 he learned the saxophone and by the time he was twelve he was playing in the Kansas City Theatre Pit Band. Which black musician was most frequently broadcasted throughout the 1920's? Coleman Hawkins first inserted himself into the Jazz scene in 1921, at the very beginning of the Jazz age and the roaring 20's. He played alongside the travelling blues and vaudeville star, Mamie Smith. After playing this background role for 2 years, he joined Fletcher Henderson's Orchestra.

This would reinvent Coleman Hawkins as a lead soloist and a big star of American jazz, a title that he retained for more than 40 years (Yanow). Hawkins should be included in this course because he was a major part of the swing jazz and big band movement, both in America and Europe, while reinventing the tenor saxophone as a Jazz instrument and an art form. His single, 'Body and Soul', was not only outrageously popular, but did so while defying many of the swing conventions of jazz music at the time.

He was also one of the pioneers of early bebop and was a huge influence on later musicians such as John Coltrane and Sonny Rollins. Fletcher
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Henderson's Orchestra was one of the most popular and influential ' Hot Jazz' bands of the 20's, and Coleman Hawkins was a full time member for 11 years and was considered the centerpiece of the band (Oxford). Their home was the Roseland Ballroom. This dance club would later be known as the best dance club in New York. (Oxford). They also frequented the Savoy Ballroom, the most popular Black and Tan dance club in New York.

This club was influential because it was a mixed race club where both blacks and whites came to dance, and racial differences were largely left at the door. " The Savoy was a building, a geographic place, a ballroom, and the soul of a neighborhood. It personified a community and an era, and became a monument to the music and dance of ' swing'" (Engelbrecht 3). Fletcher Henderson and his Orchestra were likely the most influential swing group of the 1920's. One measurement of this is how often Henderson and his band were recorded and broadcasted. Henderson was the most frequently recorded black musician in the first decade of Jazz's recorded history" (Magee 8). Jeffrey Magee also notes that his highest frequency of recordings took place between 1923-1927. During this time period Coleman Hawkins was a permanent member of Henderson's Orchestra. " The Bands instrumental star was definitely Hawkins" (Chilton 26). In the years before and after Louis Armstrong was part of Henderson's Orchestra, Hawkins was the main soloist. " Louis influenced the band greatly by making the men swing-conscious with that New Orleans style of his.

That same effect that Hawkins had on reeds, that right down-to-earth swing, with punch and bounce" (Fletcher Henderson). Coleman Hawkins had a unique style of improvisation on the tenor saxophone, which was copied by

almost all tenors after Hawkins got big in the New York jazz scene. Coleman Hawkins style of playing the Tenor saxophone was his own, and was almost entirely different from anything previously heard on the tenor sax, which, in the early 20's was still primarily a marching band instrument. Hawkins arrived at his own [Musical] style without apparently being heavily influenced by anyone in particular"(Chilton 18). Hawkins, who is widely known as a modest and unassuming man (Chilton 27), made a statement saying that, " I guess its true that I introduced a new style, a new way of playing tenor. I had a much heavier tongue, for one thing, than most of the others, and their tone was kind of thin"(Chilton 27). However, Hawkins improvisational style was not a fixed entity. He strived to move away from the bad habit of ' slap tonging', and began to experiment with less conventional soloing techniques. Hawkins was beginning to experiment successfully with the use of 9th chords and augmented runs as part of his improvisations, often showing his confidence by including ' surprising notes'. "(Chilton 34). Hawkins began to put a European emphasis on his improvisations in his emphasis of the weak and strong beats (Williams 8). During the 20's Hawkins was the top tenor saxophonist in New York, and many young sax players copied his smooth and often atonic style. " Bud Freeman was about the only tenor who didn't sound like a replica of the hard-toned Hawkins"(Yanow).

Although Coleman's style became outdated by the 50's with the entrance of revolutionary tenor saxophonist Lester Young (Yanow), his style was still a huge stepping stone in the history of improvisational Jazz. " Jazz improvisation has travelled a long road of development...This evolution [was] instigated by the titans of jazz history of the last 40 odd years: Louis

Armstrong, Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young...etc". Hawkins added much of his own creative musical input to his music and to the 1920's Jazz scene in New York. Adolphe Sax invented the Tenor sax for the purpose of being a military band instrument.

As the tenor sax migrated to middle class America it was adopted as a marching band instrument. Coleman Hawkins was the first musician to play jazz on the Tenor sax, and he was certainly not the last (Yanow). " The prelude to jazz tenor saxophone originates from the Wilbur Sweatman Orchestra. The sound quality is quite primitive...there seem to be no tenor sax solos" (Evensmo 11). Sweatman's orchestra played prearranged music, leaving no room for improvisation, which means that their music cannot be called jazz, and falls into the category of ragtime, which is largely prearranged.

Therefore, when Coleman Hawkins joined Fletcher Henderson's orchestra, the jazz tenor saxophone was created (Evensmo 11). Since that point, there has been a plethora of tenor saxophonists in jazz. Many, like Coltrane and Sonny Rollins would become extremely influential jazz musicians of the bebop era. Body and Soul was Coleman Hawkins' most influential song, and also marked a turning point in Jazz (Moore). The song was a commercial success and was enormously popular among jazz audiences(Moore), however, critics also recognize the song as a musical and improvisational masterpiece. Right away, the Hawkins version of " Body and Soul" became one of the essential documents of jazz. It was not only a hit on jukeboxes until the 1950s, but also a textbook lesson in ballad playing. "(Moore). The song ' Body and Soul' was originally a Tin Pan Alley hit, and was covered by

various artists before Coleman Hawkins. The rhythm section in the song is very understated, and the songs chorus is played twice through while Hawkins improvises (oxford). The nature of Hawks solo is what makes this song a masterpiece. In Body and Soul, Hawkins did not use standard blues riffing, hich collects each part of the solo into even, neat sections. Instead Hawkins toyed with " Sharp cornered phrases and endless lines that were the jazz equivalent of run on sentences". Apart from the first 4 bars, Hawkins only rarely alludes to the melody of the original song. Instead he essentially left his solo entirely free form, which was relatively uncommon at the time in swing music¹. " He danced at the upper extremes of chords, foreshadowing the altered harmonies that later were so important to bebop. But he was hardly academic. His spry, seductive tone gave every phrase an unmistakable passion. 1. Body and Soul was not only a masterpiece, it also hinted at the beginning of a new era in jazz. " When the record first came out, well, everybody said I was playing the wrong notes. It was funny to me"

1. This recording was a step for jazz towards a more free form, atonic, and creative art form called bop. The remarkable thing is that Hawkins made this step while retaining mass appeal. In the 40's and 50's bop began to replace swing as the main popular form of jazz, although it took on a distinctively different role as a counterculture art form.

Most swing musicians resented this new, edgy jazz, but Hawkins encouraged it to such a large extent that he made an effort to systematically employ and collaborate with all of the up and coming jazz artists. " Unlike others of his generation, whose attitude towards bop ranged from resentment to hostility to bemused indifference, Hawkins championed the music, earning him a

degree of loyalty” 2. Hawkins was a role model to young bebop prodigies such as Kenny Clarke, Oscar Pettiford, Fats Navarro, Max Roach and especially Thelonious Monk, who remained a lifelong friend of Hawkins till his death².

It was not that these new up and coming jazz artists were looking to model their musical style after Hawkins'. Rather, they looked at Hawkins commitment to improvisation and craftsmanship and the extraordinary achievements that he'd made, being a wealthy, self made black musician in mid-century America. A 1946 recording session called ' Bean and the Boys'; which included Fats Navarro, Milt Jackson and Max Roach; paid tribute to Hawkins relationship with his young proteges². In 1944 Hawkins was involved with what is known as the first bop recording session with Dizzy Gillespie and Don Byas³.

Although this classification may be somewhat arbitrary, there is no doubt that Hawkins was hugely important to early bop. His 1948 recording ' Picasso', a 3 minute tenor sax solo with no supporting instruments, was a creative step for jazz as the first unaccompanied sax solo recorded³. In this recording Hawkins expanded on many of musical ideas, which he pioneered in ' Body and Soul', and by taking out the rhythm section Hawkins is able to play an even more ' free form' solo which is not locked into a time signature or rhythmic scheme⁴.

Although Hawkins was not himself part of the bop generation, he certainly was an instigator and a catalyst of the bebop revolution. " The Peculiar combination of personal traits and musical abilities that marked Hawkins - steely ambition, a strong intellect, and virtuosity - characterized the bebop

revolution” 1. At the start of the 1950’s, Lester Young had become a much bigger influence on young tenor saxophone players than Coleman Hawkins was. However, Hawkins stuck to his melodic, edgy style of improvising and continued to play with various bands including a quintet with Roy Elridge.

Around this time Hawkins image and influence went through a resurgence period, when Sonny Rollins, the up and coming bebop tenor saxophonist, claimed that Hawkins was his main musical influence¹. In an interview Rollins said, “ Coleman Hawkins had a more intellectual approach maybe to music. He played a lot of very difficult things. So he became my idol” 2. Like Hawkins, Rollins went on to have a long, successful career, which was characterized by many of the same qualities that Hawkins possessed.

Listening to Rollins and Hawkins recordings side by side displays the distinct influence that Hawk had on Rollins. Sonny has a distinctive style of swing that takes elements from the 1930’s Harlem sound that Hawkins was a part of and Rollins grew up with³. However, similar to Hawkins, Rollins style did evolve greatly over his career. “ Rollins has a seemingly bottomless reservoir of musical knowledge (ranging from jazz standards and pop, to folk songs and classical music)” 3.

The most important trait, which was passed on from one tenor sax great to another, was the truly progressive nature of jazz. “ Coleman Hawkins”, Sonny Rollins said recently, “ was of [jazz’s] most prominent ‘ Role Models’: The prototypical progressive jazz musician. Coleman Hawkins was the foremost tenor sax player of the 20’s and 30’s, and played with some of the most influential bands and musicians of the swing era¹. Fletcher Henderson’s band was likely the most influential group of musicians to affect

the 1920's swing dance craze, and Hawkins played a prominent role in the orchestra².

In 1934 he left America for Europe as the one of the most prominent swing musicians in New York³. He came back 5 years later to find that nothing had changed in the New York jazz scene. He went on to cut his most beautiful and influential record, *Body and Soul*³. In his later years, when jazz began to change around him he did not resist. He encouraged the change and allowed his own musical style to develop as well⁴. The one thing that remained true for Coleman Hawkins throughout his career was his commitment to jazz as a malleable and ever-changing entity.

At the beginning of his career we see this when he "rescued the tenor saxophone from the oblivion of the circus"⁵ and turned it into an art form, and we see it in his later years when he passes on these same ideals to the next generation of jazz. He was 'the King of the Tenor Saxophone', and was an extraordinary influence to the evolution of jazz.

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2 Deveaux, 38 3 Yanow 4Oxford [3]. Yanow 2 <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/printmember/rol0int-1> 3 Carroll [4]. Magee 7 2 Chilton 23 3
Moon 4 Deveaux 39 5 Chilton 45