

Coleman Hawkins, The Hawk Flies (1974)

Dan Morgenstern Grammy Award for Best Album Notes 1974



Even among the chosen few, the extraordinary men and women who make up the peerage of jazz, Coleman Hawkins stands out.

To begin, there is his sound, a thing of beauty in and of itself. Hawkins filled the horn brimful with his great breath. Sound was his palette, and his brush was the instrument that, for jazz purposes, he invented—the tenor saxophone.

In this post-Coltrane age, the tenor sax is so prominent a feature of the landscape that it's hard to imagine it wasn't always there. Lester Young once said, accurately, "I think Coleman

Hawkins was the President first, right?", here meaning "president" in the sense of founding father. Which wasn't the sense in which Billie Holiday had laid "Pres" on Lester—at a point in time when the President of the United States was a great man, Number One in all the land.

Tenor time in jazz begins in 1924, when Coleman Hawkins joined Fletcher Henderson's band. In a decade there, he first mastered, then established the instrument. While trumpet still was king, it was due to Hawk that tenor became president. Thus jazz became a republic in the Swing Era. King Louis was peerless by definition, but his powerful message unlocked the magic in other noble souls. If we hear young Coleman Hawkins both before and after Armstrong joined Henderson, the point is clearly made.

The saxophone family of instruments had been invented by Adolphe Sax to mirror the range and variety of the strings; he wanted his instruments to sing, to have the warmth of wood and the power of brass, and thus created a hybrid of wind mouthpiece and brass body, unlocked by a new system of keys. He did this in the 1840s, but with the exception of Bizet, Debussy and later Ravel, no major "serious" composer knew what to do with the new arsenal of sound. Until it was discovered and mastered by jazzmen in the early 1920s, the saxophone remained a brass band and vaudeville instrument—a novelty.

Coleman Hawkins' first instruments in St. Joseph, Missouri were piano and cello. (Of all the saxophones, the tenor most resembles the cello in range and color.) As a boy, he heard and saw

The Six Brown Brothers in vaudeville. They used the whole range of saxes, from soprano to contrabass, and with all their clowning really knew how to play. Young Coleman began to explore the saxophone.

Exactly when this occurred is not entirely clear. Hawkins, like so many other performers, prevaricated about his age. It was widely accepted that he was born on November 21, 1904; a date he unsuccessfully tried to adjust to 1907. Still, underneath incessant joking and good-natured teasing about age with his friends (Ben Webster: “I was in knickerbockers when my mother first took me to hear you.” Hawkins: “That wasn’t me; that was my father. I wasn’t born then!”) there ran a current of doubt, and when Charles Graham, doing biographical research, obtained a copy of Hawkins’ birth certificate, it read 1901!

By the time the Father of Tenor Saxophone left for Europe in March 1934, he had already created the two prototypical tenor styles in jazz: the fast, driving, explosive riff style and the slow, flowing, rhapsodic ballad form. He made the mold, he was the model: already, Ben Webster, Herschel Evans, Chu Berry, Budd Johnson and many more had sprung, fully armed, from his high forehead.

To Europe, where the greatness of jazz had been felt mainly through records, Hawkins brought it in the flesh. Sidney Bechet had spent time there back in the Twenties, and Louis Armstrong himself had flashed like a comet through England, Scandinavia, the Low Countries, France, Italy and Switzerland earlier in the Thirties. But Hawk came and remained; the first fixed star of magnitude.

When his erstwhile Henderson colleague, Benny Carter, that master of the alto sax, clarinet, trumpet and arranger’s pen, crossed the Atlantic a bit later and also decided to stay, the two often hooked up. Together and individually they put their stamp on European jazz for decades.

The process was reciprocal. Hawkins’ love for certain of the better things in life—good food, good drink, good clothes, pretty women, fast cars—was apparent before he left his homeland, but Europe sharpened and deepened his tastes. His sense of his own dignity and worth also expanded in the warmth of European appreciation and adoration. From here on in, Hawk was a cosmopolitan.

Meanwhile, there were not just contenders to his crown back home, but a whole new tenor style, introduced by Lester Young. Only a few of Hawk’s great European recordings had made their way into the hands of American musicians during his absence. The climate seemed right for battle and the tenor brigade was ready for Bean (as musicians then called him, “bean” being a synonym for head, i.e., brainpower) when he came home in late July of 1939, just before the outbreak of World War II. Chu Berry, Ben Webster, Don Byas and Lester himself were gathered to greet Hawk at an Harlem after-hours spot called Puss Johnson’s (there were many such music spots; the reputation of Minton’s is all out of proportion). The master arrived

without horn (but with a striking lady}, listened, and refused to be drawn into battle. A few days later he returned with horn and reestablished his sovereignty.

Hawk's victory became official with the release, late in '39, of the biggest record of his career: "Body and Soul." Consisting of just two choruses—framed by a brief piano introduction and short tenor cadenza—it stands as one of the most perfectly balanced jazz records ever made. After more than three decades it re-mains a model of flawlessly constructed and superbly executed jazz improvisation, and is still the test piece for aspiring tenorists.

Although young tenor men in increasing numbers were taken with Lester's cooler sound and unorthodox phrasing, the Hawkins approach remained firmly entrenched (as the newfound popularity of Ben Webster with Duke Ellington and Don Byas with Count Basie proved in the early '40s). There also arose a school of tenors equally influenced by both: Illinois Jacquet, Buddy Tate, Gene Ammons and Dexter Gordon are examples.

Furthermore, that leader of the new style soon to be labeled bebop, Charlie Parker, symbolized the possibility of a Hawkins-Young fusion. Though fashionable jazz criticism has emphasized only Young's influence on Parker, there can be no doubt that Hawkins, especially in terms of harmony, approach to ballads, and use of double time, also profoundly touched Bird's conception.

The influence was a two-way street. Hawkins was the first established jazz figure of major stature to not only accept but embrace the new music, which he rightly saw as a logical development. Consider this: Hawk was the *only* name leader to hire Thelonious Monk, the strange piano player from Minton's house band, for a downtown gig (on 52nd Street) and to use him on a record date (the earliest music heard on this remarkable collection, and Monk's studio debut). And this: for a February 1944 date with a larger band, Hawkins hired Dizzy Gillespie, Max Roach, Leo Parker and other young modernists to back him. And this: at the end of '44, Hawk took to California a pioneer bop group that included Howard McGhee and Denzil Best. As early as 1947, Hawk used Miles Davis on a record date; a few years later, he had him in his band. The 1947 date on this album clearly reflects Hawk's commitment to the new sounds, and his ability to fit himself into it. (Note also the inclusion of a Monk tune, perfectly interpreted.)

Hawk didn't just adapt to bop; profoundly touched by Parker, he entered a whole new phase of musical development at an age when most players have settled permanently within a given framework.

The new Hawk was most clearly visible in the blues. Prior to the mid-40s, Hawkins rarely played blues, and never with much of what we now call "funk." But Bird brought a new blue stream into jazz, and Hawk was nourished by it (hear him here on "Sih-sah" and "Juicy Fruit"). And Bird's song in Hawk's ear didn't end with the blues. You can feel it throughout the '57 session, and in the magnificent "Ruby, My Dear" which stems from a Monk-Hawkins reunion

album that co-starred John Coltrane. (The rest of that date, by the way, can be heard on Monk/Trane—Milestone 47011.)

For many years they had affectionately called him “The Old Man.” But he still looked, felt and played young and it was the Old Man’s pride that he could keep up. No resting on laurels for him; virtually everything new was a challenge. But for a while, when Lester’s way of playing tenor dominated the scene, and bop had little time to look back, Hawkins fell somewhat out of favor. When producer Orrin Keepnews gave him *carte blanche* to pick his own men for the ’57 date reintroduced herewith, the result was the first loose, modern jazz date for Hawk in some time. It compares most interestingly with the session of ten years before, and not only for the work of Hawk himself and repeaters J. J. Johnson and Hank Jones. (It is also interesting that Hawk did not choose a bop rhythm section for himself.)

Throughout the Fifties, with Norman Granz’s Jazz at the Philharmonic and also on his own, he frequently teamed with old friend Roy Eldridge, ten years younger but a fraternal spirit. From 1957 on, the Metropole in New York’s Times Square area became their home base. Most jazz writers (except visitors from Europe) shunned the place, but musicians did drop in to hear Roy and Hawk: among them, Miles Davis, Sonny Rollins and John Coltrane.

At the soulful establishment across the street, The Copper Rail, the players and their friends congregated to eat and drink. Even when they were three-deep at the bar, you could hear Hawk’s laughter, or his voice emphasizing a point, from anywhere in the house. Though he was not a large man, his voice had a presence remarkably similar to his saxophone sound. Hawk was strong in those days. The new tenor voices, significantly that of Sonny Rollins, seemed closer in conception and sound to him than to Lester, and his star was once again in ascendance. He and Roy made periodic tours abroad. Recordings were again fairly frequent. His personal life was happy. His health seemed robust.

“You have to eat when you drink,” he used to say, and he was still following his own rule. A girl I knew thought nothing of cooking him eight eggs for breakfast, and he could go to work on a Chinese dinner for two or a double order of spareribs in the wee hours of the morning with the gusto of a hungry lumberjack. In the course of a working day, he’d consume a quantity of scotch even Eddie Condon would have deemed respectable, but he could also leave the booze alone when it got to him. When Lester Young died in 1959, not quite 50, the Old Man told me how he used to try to make Pres eat when they were traveling together for Jazz at the Philharmonic. “When I got something for myself, I’d get for him, too. But I’d always find most of it left under his bus or plane seat when we got off.”

Hawk liked Lester very much, but the only tenor player I ever heard him call “genius” was Chu Berry. Other musicians he bestowed this title on were Louis, Bird, Art Tatum, Dizzy Gillespie and Monk—the latter a personal favorite.

At home, Hawk rarely listened to jazz. His sizable collection was dominated by complete opera sets (Verdi, Wagner and Puccini) and also included a lot of Brahms and Debussy. Bach

and Beethoven were there as well, and some moderns, but Hawk liked music with a big sound and romantic sweep best of all. With his luxurious hi-fi setup, he could fill his comfortable Central Park West apartment with sound, and the commanding view of the park went well with the music. Sometimes he'd play the piano, which he did surprisingly well—always music of his own.

In the final years, which his friends would rather forget but can't, Tommy Flanagan would sometimes drop by and make Hawk play the piano and try to copy down some of the tunes. Hawk was always a gifted composer—even with Henderson—but never had the patience to write the stuff down. By then, the expensive hi-fi equipment had fallen into disuse, the blinds were often drawn to shut out the view, and the sound most frequently heard was that of the TV—on around the clock to keep the insomniac company. As often as not, there'd be food defrosting in the kitchen—chicken, chops, ribs, or steak—but “by the time it's ready for me to fix,” he once told me, “I've lost my appetite from this whisky.” He knew exactly what he was doing to himself, but some demon had hold of him.

It had nothing to do with the socio-psychological cliches of art and race so often applied to “explain” jazz artists, but it did have much to do with the fact that he was living alone now, and that his aloneness was of his own making. His last great love gone because in his jealousy he could not accept that a woman could love a man much older than herself, he now chose to accelerate the aging process he had previously hated and successfully fought off. He let his grizzled beard and hair flow freely, and let his once immaculately fitting suits hang from his shrunken frame.

Only work could shake him out of his depression, but now it seldom came. He'd never been one for managers and agents; if people wanted his services, they could call *him*. But only a few employers—mainly the loyal Norman Granz, sometimes George Wein, a club owner here or there—would still come through. My friends and I got him some gigs. It was a vicious circle: because he didn't work much, he was rusty when he did play (he had always disdained practicing and lifelong habits don't change), and because he was rusty (and shaky), he wasn't asked back. Even quite near the end, a few nights of work, leading to resumed eating, could straighten him out, and he'd find his form. But there was no steady work to make him stay on course.

Perhaps it would have been too late; he hated doctors and hospitals and refused all suggestions of medical attention. And since his voice, incongruously, remained as strong as ever and his ego just as fierce, it was difficult to counteract him. He welcomed company but never invited anyone. His daughters would come by to visit and straighten up the house when they were in town. Frequent visitors included Monk and the Baroness Nica de Konigswarter, but the closest people near the end were Barry Harris and drummer Eddie Locke.

Monk was at Hawk's bedside when it had finally become necessary to take him to a hospital. Monk even made the Old Man laugh—but it was for the last time.

Coleman Hawkins was a legend in his own time: revered by younger musicians, who were amazed and delighted at his ability to remain receptive to their discoveries; loved by his contemporaries, who were equally astonished by his capacity for constant self-renewal. He was one of those who wrote the book of jazz.

The art of Coleman Hawkins transcends the boundaries of style and time. Fortunately, it is well documented. The great sound and mind that is one of the landmarks of jazz lives on, as in these grooves, awaiting your command to issue forth once more.

Even among the chosen few of jazz, Coleman Hawkins stands out. Hear him well.

—*Dan Morgenstern*

Side 1

1. On the Bean
(Walter Thomas) Mayfair (ASCAP) 2:39
2. Recollections
(Thomas) Mayfair (ASCAP) 2:51
3. Flyin' Hawk
(Thomas) Mayfair (ASCAP) 2:48
4. Driftin' on a Reed
(Thomas) Mayfair (ASCAP) 3:01
5. I Mean You
(Thelonious Monk) Consolidated (ASCAP) 3:01
6. Bean and the Boys (Take 1)
(Coleman Hawkins) Stratford (ASCAP) 2:37
7. Bean and the Boys (Take 2)
(Hawkins) Stratford (ASCAP) 2:42

Side 2

1. Cocktails for Two
(Coslow-Johnston) Famous (ASCAP) 3:03
2. You Go to My Head
(Gillespie-Coots) Warner Bros. Music (ASCAP) 2:58
3. Sih-Sah
(Hawkins-Moody) 3:13
4. Bay-U-Bah
(Dameron-Hawkins) 3:18
5. Sophisticated Lady
(Ellington-Mills) Mills (ASCAP) 3:08
6. Bean's Talking Again
(Coleman Hawkins) 3:11

Side 3

1. Blue Lights
(Gigi Gryce) Jacogg (ASCAP) 5:43
2. Laura
(Raksin-Mercer) Robbins (ASCAP) 4:31
3. Juicy Fruit
(Idrees Sulieman) Orpheum Music (BMI) 11 :15

Side 4

1. Chant
(Hank Jones) Orpheum Music (BMI) 5:03
2. Think Deep
(Billy Smith) Orpheum Music (BMI) 3:21
3. Sancticity
(Coleman Hawkins) Orpheum Music (BMI) 9:10
4. Ruby, My Dear
(Thelonious Monk) Consolidated (ASCAP) 5:35

Coleman Hawkins - tenor saxophone
with:

On Side 1, #1-4:

Thelonious Monk - piano
Edward "Bass" Robinson - bass
Denzil Best- drums
(Recorded October 19, 1944)

On Side 1, #5-7; and Side 2, #1 and 2:

Fats Navarro - trumpet
J. J. Johnson - trombone
Porter Kilbert - alto sax
Milt Jackson-vibes
Hank Jones - piano
Curly Russell - bass
Max Roach - drums
(Navarro, Johnson and Kilbert do not play on
"Cocktails for Two" and "You Go to My Head")
(Recorded December 1946)

On Side 2, # 3-6:

Nat Peck - trombone
Hubert Fol - alto sax
Jean-Paul Menegeon - piano
Pierre Michelot - bass
Kenny Clarke - drums
(Peck and Fol do not play on "Sophisticated Lady")
(Recorded December 21, 1949; Paris, France)