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Body and Soul: The acid test for tenor saxophone ballad performance

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Ever since Coleman Hawkins committed his interpretation of Body and Soul to wax in 1939, the song has attained a special stature in the “school” of jazz tenor saxophone performance. Throughout the history of jazz, tenor players have made great recordings of this song, and at different career stages—early, middle, or late. A tenor saxophonist who renders a performance that combines elements of Hawkins’ historical precedent with those of obvious individualism is recognized as a master of the instrument. There are definite persuasions of Body and Soul interpretation, ranging from those that further develop the Hawkins ideal of romance and drama to those that introduce elements of mystery, or even quirkiness, into the discourse.

Body and Soul is not a straightforward song. Although its form is simple (i.e., 32-measure AABA), Body and Soul contains two distinct key areas (separated by half-step), a change of mode in the bridge, and frequent chromatic root movement. At the song’s hook (where the words “body and soul” occur), an ambiguous bluesy feel is implied by means of the flattened third scale degree. And although the concert key of Db major sits nicely on the tenor saxophone, for many contemporary players, it is not a common key in which to improvise. Furthermore, ambiguous chord changes (i.e., chord additions and/or substitutions brought about by Hawkins’ famous improvisation) may result in harmonic miscommunication between soloist and rhythm section members.

Coleman Hawkins never thought much of the tune, Body and Soul. He used it as an encore or practice vehicle during his steady engagement at New York’s Kelly’s Stable. And throughout his career, Hawkins maintained that the song’s inclusion on the 11 October 1939 four-song recording session was strictly to have another ‘B’ side available. Hawkins, however, did seem to care about the documentation of his improvisational prowess, and was perplexed that his contemporaries didn’t seem to know how he was handling the tune: “Everybody, including Chu Berry, said I was playing wrong notes. A lot of people didn’t know about flatted fifths and augmented changes...”

The recording, of course, was successful in terms of sales, with nearly 100,000 copies sold within six months of its release, all because people were apparently attracted to the sound of romance conveyed by Hawkins’ tenor saxophone. Musicians appreciated the complexity of Hawkins’ solo, and the freedom that it represented in terms of having a ballad recording focused mainly upon the improvisatory process. And with bebop’s approach, this consideration cannot be overemphasized.

By early 1940, Coleman Hawkins was the reigning king of the tenor saxophone. Although Lester Young offered an alternative tenor saxophone stylistic conception (and was quickly building up his own fan base), most players of the era wanted to cultivate a sound based upon Hawkins’ hallmarks. Players such as Chu Berry, Ben Webster, and Don Byas played with a sound that was full, contained plenty of vibrato, and could be either tender or gruff. It stands to reason that these players also felt they had to keep up with Hawkins in terms of repertoire, and hence, ballad playing became important to them. Byas, for example, was forever associated with the tune, Laura, and Webster, as a member of the Duke Ellington Orchestra, was featured on ballads such as Chelsea Bridge or laid-back swing tunes like Just A-Sittin’ and A-Rockin’. It is no surprise that Ben Webster and Don Byas would eventually record Body and Soul as a testimonial to their significance as tenor saxophonists.

In 1939, Hawkins drafted the “rules” for Body and Soul interpretation for all to follow. Gary Giddins, in an essay entitled Fifty Years of Body and Soul, provides a summary: “For two choruses and a brief coda, Hawkins rhapsodizes over the chords, never even hinting at Green’s melody after the first seven notes, and the profusion of ideas, the sustained tension, the incomparable rhythmic authority build dynamically, phrase after phrase.” Webster (in 1944) and Byas (in 1947) mostly play by these rules. From a sound standpoint, both performances are “old school” (i.e., plenty of vibrato, full sound, etc.), and the mood of romance, as initiated by Hawkins, is definitely maintained. Additionally, although there are elements of tension in both performances, nothing is “out of place,” either harmonically or rhythmically. Simply put, both performances illustrate the saxophone virtuosity and harmonic knowledge of each musician, something that was tremendously important when working within the shadow of Hawkins.

Each musician, however, offers something new. Webster slows the tempo down considerably and contributes to theplaintive-sounding introduction. Although reluctant to let go of the melody during the first eight measures of the song, the contrast that Webster provides (in terms of melodic content) during the second eight demonstrates his ability
to easily follow in Hawkins’ footsteps. The bridge offers a conceptual mix of the previous 16 measures (that is, bits of melody inserted within fresh melodic material), and the last eight measures contain hints of sequences (something the Hawkins emphasized in his Body and Soul). Webster ends his ballad performance with a simple ascending major scale, intended, perhaps, as a bit of humor. This ballad section, of course, is only half of the total performance, as Webster continues with a double-time chorus. (See Example 2)

Don Byas’ 1947 recording at first seems to be a fairly close replication of what Hawkins played eight years earlier. The tempo is similar, and for the first 32 measures, the listener hears very little of the original melody, as Byas effortlessly demonstrates his change running ability, usually where chromatic root movement occurs. However, at the beginning of the second chorus, Byas lays on a note, begins to swing forcefully, and begins to offer something new. Beginning at measure 38, this conceptual change is solidified with double-time playing and a release from the bar line’s divisional boundaries at the section’s turnaround and the beginning of the chorus’ second A section. During this next section, Byas alternates between an older “up-and-down” swing-era style and a contemporary scalar bebop style. His bridge playing is initially very fresh sounding, but by the middle of measure 51, suggestions of a modern improvisatory style seem to vanish. The performance’s final eight measures bring back the melody. Byas has, in a brief instance, pointed the way for future realizations of Body and Soul. He has shown that Body and Soul can easily accommodate the language of bebop. (See Example 3)

Stan Getz’ 1952 recording illustrates a new style of Body and Soul realization. In brief, Getz’ recording is one of the first that breaks away from the totality of the Hawkins influence. While Webster and Byas certainly demonstrate individualism with their versions of Body and Soul, it is Getz’ personality, and not Hawkins’ antecedent, that is important in this recording. Getz presents a version that may best be described as “wandering,” and it illustrates an incipient mysterioso style of ballad playing, a style that people such as Joe Lovano and Rick Margitza come to fully realize during the 1990s. Getz begins oddly by referencing the melody in the tenor saxophone’s upper octave. In fact, he doesn’t descend into the horn’s midrange until well into the bridge of the first chorus. The use of the upper range of the horn results in a strident sound, something at odds with the traditional ballad sound established by Hawkins and his followers. Brief and unusual motifs are commonplace throughout Getz’ performance (e.g., mm 7–8; mm 19; mm 35–36) and harmonic tension is subtly introduced (e.g., the concert G# at m. 20, which is further developed at m. 36; the concert G at m. 31; the concert Ab, Gb, and F at m. 44). However, by introducing straight-ahead bebop runs (mm. 14–15; mm. 29) Getz shows that he can sound mainstream. If Webster and Byas are labeled “old style” romantics, then perhaps Getz can be called a “new style” romantic. (See Example 4)

Sonny Stitt, in a casual gig at Boston’s Hi-Hat club, presents a typical bebop version of Body and Soul. Stitt’s philosophy about a performance of Body and Soul was probably similar to that of Hawkins. It is doubtful that Stitt set out to create something exemplary on the evening of 11 February 1954—he simply played a ballad in a way that was expected of him. Stitt begins simply enough—the melody is dominant for the first six measures. At measure 7, Stitt introduces some double-time bebop runs (which, at the slow ballad tempo, are not overly impressive). Up through measure 13, the listener has heard some modern, straight-ahead jazz, complete with chord spelling, sequences, and passing-note scales. However, at measure 14, Stitt plays in an authentic virtuoso bebop style. An exceedingly lengthy quadruple-time phrase cadences at the beginning of the bridge. Stitt introduces a feeling of the blues in measure 18. Another quadruple-time phrase is played at the beginning of the second half of the bridge. During the tune’s last A section, one gets the feeling that Stitt again wants to “run” with the changes, but he instead settles for a Miles Davis quote at measure 28. Tension is released when a double-time chorus begins at measure 33. (See Example 5)

Stitt’s informal use of virtuosity is similar to that of Hawkins. Here, virtuosity is simply a means to an end. Whereas in 1939 Hawkins was one of only a handful of players who had great technical command over the instrument, by 1954 this type of wizardry was expected of all “name” saxophonists. And by the end of the decade, when bebop had run its course, such technical mastery of the tenor saxophone was commonplace and therefore could no longer serve as the main focal point of a ballad performance. Some alternative mediums for presenting Body and Soul were offered. In 1958 Sonny Rollins recorded an a cappella Body and Soul and in 1960, John Coltrane presented an up-tempo modal version of the tune. The latter served as a means for Coltrane to put his theories of pedal point use, modality, and “Giant Steps” chord progression integration to the test. It is logical to assume that any tune could have been used for this experiment. Rollins’ offering made more sense, as he was able to deliver a highly personal extrapolation of the tune. Still, because of a lack of accompaniment, it too can be viewed as an experiment idiosyncratic of Rollins’ interests.

Coalescence occurs in 1963. Paul Gonsalves manages to combine the old romantic, new romantic, and bebop precedents with his own unique style. Gonsalves, no doubt attuned to hearing things differently because of time spent with Duke Ellington, begins his version of Body and Soul by circumventing some important melody notes during the first eight measures. Specifically, the expected concert Bb in measure 2 is never played, and the expected concert F in
measure 6 is also avoided, even though he has set up the listener for their arrival. Although his sound implies “Hawkins,” his presentation points towards something “new.” From a rhythmic standpoint, Gonsalves is very free—he seems to be consistently slightly ahead or slightly behind the rhythm section’s pulse. He alternates between playing off of a 3-note (triplet) and 4-note (16th-note) pulse. And just when this rhythmic ambiguity is becoming normal sounding, Gonsalves launches into a typical bebop phrase that occupies the second half of the bridge. By means of a sequential ascending figure, tension is introduced during the last eight measures of the first chorus. Lastly, a wandering effect is suggested by sudden register changes at measures 30-31. (See Example 6)

Gonsalves, like Getz, infuses Body and Soul with an element of mystery—one is never quite sure as to how a phrase will end or to where it will lead. Along with the “mystery of the line” there are numerous colorful note choices and a good amount of rhythmic ambiguity. In sum, it is a very unpredictable presentation of Body and Soul. It isn’t until 1991 that the nascent mystery approach of both Getz and Gonsalves is fully realized by Rick Margitza. Margitza records Body and Soul with only bass and drum accompaniment. The lack of an introduction and piano voice immediately establishes a mood of mystery, urgency, and detachment. Like Getz, Margitza stays in the upper register of the saxophone for most of the first 16 measures, with phrases frequently terminating on the horn’s uppermost notes (and beyond). Robert Hurst’s loping bass is dramatically offset by Margitza’s juxtaposition of duple (both straight and swung), triplet, and 16th-note figures. Certain note choices further enhance the strangeness of the presentation, specifically, the partial use of a concert D pentatonic scale over a Db chord at measure 11, and the pitch content of the intervallic pattern at measure 30. Moreover, Margitza often allows consonant sounds to be held into the following chord change, thus creating a type of prepared dissonance (e.g., mm. 24, 28, 34-5, etc.). Even Margitza’s bebop run (mm. 39-40) is not straightforward. It is initiated at measure 38 by a dotted 16th-note rhythm, and contains a high degree of chromaticism. The upper reaches of the tenor saxophone are further emphasized from measure 42 until the end of the performance but a descending blues figure at measures 51-52 provides a sense of stability. Another highly chromatic bebop run is heard at the second half of the bridge. A return to the (disguised) melody during the last eight measures of the performance does not really offer any sense of conclusion, as it is contrasted radically with an intervallic sequence beginning in the middle of measure 62. Margitza then, presents Body and Soul, and much more. (See Example 7)

Finally, there are saxophonists who have injected a high degree of raw emotion into Body and Soul. Two excellent examples come from the late 1970s: Joe Farrell’s 1978 recording for a one-shot Galaxy Records project; and John Klemmer’s 1979 Nexus recording that he made to help shed his “pop” jazz image. Both of these recordings are quite lengthy. Steve Grossman, however, offers a succinct version in this vein.

Grossman’s 1998 recording of Body and Soul is very slow and akin to the typical bebop era ballad tempo as favored by Parker and others. Grossman begins on the melody with a full sound and plenty of scoops. At measure 5, a Coltrane-like “cry” begins a quadruple-time run. A somewhat fragmented melody at measure 7 precedes a fast (and very chromatic) run at measure 8. In these first 8 measures Grossman reveals that he has patience for the tune’s melody, but at the same time, is anxious to inject his own personality into the performance. A somewhat relaxed motif (at measures 9 and 10) is suddenly interrupted by a chromatic run. This seems to be Grossman’s main technique—the listener is offered snippets of Johnny Green’s melody, but is never allowed to relax with it. Grossman continually reminds one that this is his version of the tune. In fact, Grossman seems to hammer away at brief motives; the repeated concert F at measure 14 provides one example of such. A quasi-double-time feel begins at the bridge, where Grossman, at measure 18, again hammers away at a repeated pitch. Runs that combine diatonic and chromatic content dominate most of the second half of the bridge. A full sounding return to the melody is offered at measure 27. However, this respite is offset at measure 29 by another “hammering” instance. In his one chorus, Grossman has managed to present a jarring version of Body and Soul, one that is apt to confuse casual listeners of jazz and remind true aficionados of the music’s individualism and emotive content. (See Example 8)

Body and Soul is a vehicle that provides the opportunity for tenor saxophonists to demonstrate true originality within a multitude of stylistic conceptions. With its historical precedents and significance as a standard tune, it is a good bet that it will continue to attract tenor saxophonists of future generations.
Notes:

1 Refer to Example 1 for the chord changes that are heard on Coleman Hawkins' 11 October 1939 recording of *Body and Soul*. Subsequent examples of performances by Webster, Byas, Getz, Stitt, Gonsalves, Margitza, and Grossman show that the rhythm sections accompanying these players significantly alter the chord progression.


6 For another fine mysterioso example of *Body and Soul*, listen to Joe Lovano's 1991 recording from the Blue Note CD, *From The Soul*.

Please scroll down
Example 1

COLEMAN HAWKINS, 1939; BODY AND SOUL CHORD CHANGES

(TENOR SAXOPHONE KEY; SOUNDS M9TH LOWER)

A6 Fmi Fmi Bb7 Eb Bb7 Gmi Gbo Fmi G7 Cmi Bb7 Eb C7(b9)

A6 Fmi Fmi Bb7 Eb Bb7 Gmi Gbo Fmi G7 Cmi Bb7 Eb B7

E B7 E Ami E B7 E E Fmi A7 D/F# F0 E Fmi A7 D7 D5 C7

A6 Fmi Fmi Bb7 Eb Bb7 Gmi Gbo Fmi G7 Cmi Bb7 Eb

E B7 E Ami E B7 E E Fmi A7 D/F# F0 E
Example 2

BEN WEBSTER, 1944

\[ \text{E} \quad \text{C7} \quad \text{F6} \quad \text{F7} \quad \text{E} \quad \text{Emi} \quad \text{A7} \]

\[ \text{Fmi} \quad \text{Fm7} \quad \text{Emi} \quad \text{A7} \quad \text{D7} \quad \text{D7} \quad \text{C7} \]

\[ \text{B7} \quad \text{Bb7} \quad \text{Gm7} \quad \text{Gm7} \quad \text{Emi} \quad \text{C7} \quad \text{Emi} \quad \text{E7} \]

\[ \text{Eb} \quad \text{Bb7} \quad \text{Gmi} \quad \text{Gm7} \quad \text{Emi} \quad \text{C7} \quad \text{Emi} \quad \text{C7} \]

\[ \text{Emi} \quad \text{B7} \quad \text{Eb} \quad \text{D7} \quad \text{C7} \quad \text{Emi} \quad \text{C7} \]

\[ \text{Emi} \quad \text{E7} \quad \text{Eb} \quad \text{Bb7} \quad \text{Gmi} \quad \text{Gm7} \]

\[ \text{Fmi} \quad \text{G7} \quad \text{Cmi} \quad \text{Bb7} \]

\[ \text{Emi} \quad \text{B7} \quad \text{E} \quad \text{Fmi} \quad \text{E/Gb} \quad \text{Ami} \quad \text{B7} \]
Example 3

Don Byas, 1947
Example 4

STAN GETZ, 1958

(Staff notation of musical composition)
(Example 4, continued)

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E    Evi7    G7sus7    A7    E/A    F7b11/7    B7
E    Evi    A7(9)    F7b11/0    7
Evi    A7    D7    D7    C7
Evi    C7    E7
E7b11/0    A7    G7sus7    G7sus7    F7b11
D7b11/0    G7    C7
N.C.
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Example 5

SONNY STITT, 1954
Example 6

Paul Gonsalves, 1966

A/D  F7  E4h7  A7

D7  D4h7  C7

Gm13  Gm13  F7  Ebm7  Abm7  C7  A7

Fm7  Bb5  Ebm7  Abm7  Gm13  Gm13

Fm7  Fm7/Eb  Dm7(b5)  Dm7(b3)  Cm7  F7  Bm7  E7

Ebm7  Fm7  B4  E4  Fm7  Gm7  Abm7  D7

Abm7  G7(b5)  Fm7  B4  Ebm7  E4h7  A7
Example 8

STEVE GROSSMAN, 1998

\[ E_{4,7/8} \quad B_{4,7/9} \quad E_{4,7} \quad A_{4,7} \]

\[ G_{4,7} \quad G_{4,7/5} \quad F_{4,7} \quad F_{4,7/Eb} \quad D_{4,7} \quad G_{7} \]

\[ C_{4,7} \quad B_{4,7} \quad E_{4} \quad C_{4,7} \]

\[ F_{4,7} \quad C_{4,7} \quad F_{4,7} \quad E_{4,5} \quad B_{4,7} \quad G_{7} \]

\[ G_{4,7} \quad G_{4,7/Eb} \quad F_{4,7} \quad B_{4,7} \quad E_{4,7} \]

\[ E_{4,8} \quad F_{4,7} \quad G_{4,7} \quad A_{4,7} \quad G_{4,7} \quad C_{4,7} \quad F_{4,6} \quad B_{7} \]