“Body and Soul”--Coleman Hawkins (1939)

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Essay by Stephen Rush (guest post)*

Coleman Hawkins

“Body and Soul”--lyrics by Edward Heyman, Robert Sour and Frank Eyton; music by Johnny Green; recorded by Coleman Hawkins on RCA records in 1939.

Attributed to three lyricists and one composer, “Body and Soul” was performed first by singer Gertrude Lawrence in London, England, where it was published in 1930.

“Body and Soul” was recorded by Coleman Hawkins in 1939, when he was 35 years old, after playing with Fletcher Henderson, Louis Armstrong, Django Reinhardt and Benny Carter. Soon after, it was also recorded by none other than Louis Armstrong (arguably the founder of the genre called “jazz”). It was also recorded in a more conventional style by Paul Whiteman. Hawkins’ recording is often thought to be the *second* most important recording for jazz improvisation--the first being Louis Armstrong’s “West End Blues.” This is due to Hawkins’ focus on the harmony and phrasing of the composition, all but ignoring the actual written melody. Hawkins’ recording is also thought by some to be the harbinger of “bebop” approaches, virtually devoid of New Orleans stylings or traditional swing conventions of the twenties and thirties.

Art lies in the abstraction of common knowledge, and Coleman Hawkins’ version of “Body and Soul” is an exemplary demonstrator of that principle--it is the not-so-subtle difference between art and entertainment. Hawkins’ recording of “Body and Soul” is not just a popular rendition of the song, it is an intellectual and artistic statement--using that composition as a vehicle. A comparison can be made to Charlie Parker’s “Bird of Paradise” (a version of “All the Things You Are”) and other such recordings made by bebop musicians in the 1940’s--in which the structure of the composition (harmony/phrasing) were the only aspects to survive the artists’ interpretation. By the late ‘50’s, only Ornette Coleman broke the “Tin Pan Alley” structural lock-hold on jazz, creating works that no longer heeded the four-bar structures such compositions held. In “Body and Soul,” however, Hawkins poured his creativity into

extrapolation from the core elements of a more traditional composition, but transcended the mere "rendering of a familiar melody." Very little reference to the melody (if any) makes up the performance, and he eschews the melody even from the beginning of the record, possibly to make even more room for improvisation on the foreshortened recording modality of the day, the 78 rpm record. The (dis-)rendering of the melody defies convention--he was improvising to the *idea* of the piece, instead of being obligated to deliver a predictable "song" to a popular audience.

"Hawk's" approach to this composition could be compared to another iconic take on a popular song--John Coltrane's immensely monumental version of "My Favorite Things" from 1960. Coltrane used "My Favorite Things" as an expansive vehicle for his improvisational approach, often performing the tune for up to an hour in length (see "Coltrane in Japan"). The phrase "vehicle for improvisation" is important. It is part of the jazz tradition to use a popular and familiar song as a space for the performer to venture further out than ever before (think of "Nearer My God to Thee" in 1920's New Orleans street music). This approach welcomes the listener in--since they already know the song--but it only provides a framework for a, perhaps, newly complicated picture, a brilliant genius improviser venturing into territory heretofore unexplored. Again, this is the difference between art and entertainment--the principle of abstraction. There are other wonderful examples of this, of course--Miles Davis' "Put Your Little Foot," Thelonious Monk's *own* "Body and Soul" or even Cecil Taylor's "Love For Sale").

The second chorus on the recording implies an almost Ornette Coleman-like harmolodic approach--with phrase transpositions drawing him into dangerous harmonic territory. The last "A" on the second chorus pre-dates athleticism rightly attributed to Eric Dolphy and John Coltrane but is shocking in historical context (compare Lester Young's recordings from this year).

The composition is a quintessential jazz standard with its most notable feature being that of modulating up by a ½-step in the bridge. Usually the piece is performed by instrumentalists in D^b, so the bridge is in D. A few explanations for the modulation to D in the bridge would perhaps satisfy inquisitive jazz aficionados. First would be that the lowered 2^{nd} degree of the bridge is a tritone substitution (see George Russell's treatise on such matters) for the V chord--in that D-natural is a tritone away from A^b, the dominant of the actual key center of the composition, D^b. A much simpler analysis would look at the lyrics and the feel of the composition. The head (and the subsequent out-head) are brooding. The opening E^b minor chord of the tune puts us in a sad space, and the bridge is slightly more optimistic, in D major. The lyric for the bridge, however, is sheer begging--"It looks like the ending, unless I can have one more chance to prove, dear..." Almost optimistic, but not really. The lyrics remain a depiction of a tortured soul, reaching their zenith (or nadir) in the out-head with "My life, a hell you're making, you know I'm yours, just for the taking."

The groove here is a bouncing two-beat (or "two-step") and is not the slow lumbering groove often heard in later versions of the composition (consider recordings by Lester Young, Charlie Parker or, especially, Sarah Vaughan). Hawk's faster tempo allows for an almost breakneck and blistering improvisational approach that pays, not dutiful heed to the melody, but allows him to explore a denser space within the melody that is rife with long tones in its original form.

A direct comparison with Lester Young's version of "Body and Soul" in 1942 is of use here. Young's version is slower and more literal, yet recorded with impressive musicians: "Red" Callendar and Nat "King" Cole. His version is clearly a competitive move if not by Young, then by his record company. It didn't work.

Yet, only Young (anointed the title "Prez"--as in President of the Tenor Saxophone) could rival Coleman Hawkins as the real "founder" of the tenor saxophone sound--and their tones could not be more different. At the time (the 1930's and '40's), the two competed for the top tenor spot in jazz, and there is no need to bicker about who was best, then or now, but their competing recordings of "Body and Soul" were an arena for this battle. They both had their unquestionably unique and important contributions. Coleman Hawkins was to perform with the founders of bebop throughout his lifetime, most notably Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, Benny Carter, Max Roach and Thelonious Monk, but he never ventured beyond bebop into the "New Thing" founded by Coltrane, Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor. Hawkins outlived "Prez" by ten years and continued to give us beautiful, swinging music until the late 1960's when he passed away.

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