

## 9 Rock and the saxophone

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In the vocally dominated genres of rock and pop, the saxophone has made its own special contribution, using its unique vocal attributes with conflicting personalities of sweetness and anguish. From the jump style of Louis Jordan to Courtney Pine's hip-hop, and from Junior Walker through the *Baker Street* phenomenon to Branford Marsalis and Kenny Gee, saxophone soloists and sections have played a crucial role. But is it rock or pop, is it rock and roll, rhythm and blues, soul, dance or funk? The transient nature of much popular music makes historical accounts sometimes vague, often conjecture, and always selective, but this short chapter will attempt to identify the general trends and most significant exponents.

The big bands of the 1930s and 1940s featured and relied on major soloists, and an important precursor of rock saxophone was to be found in the 'Texas' tenor sound of Arnett Cobb, Illinois Jacquet, Buddy Tate and the alto of Eddie Vinson. Stars of the Lionel Hampton and Count Basie bands in the main, their playing was renowned for its excitement and energy and was steeped in the blues. Cries and wails coloured their solos as well as riff developments; a trademark was the use of the extended upper register. Illinois Jacquet's solos with the Hampton band in *Flying Home* (original 1942) became legendary. 'Cleanhead' Vinson concentrated his career on blues playing and singing, although he was also a fine bop player, and employed the young John Coltrane in his band in 1948.

Simultaneously with the Texas sound came 'Jump', with its principal exponent Louis Jordan (vocal and alto). This style flourished from 1937 through the 1940s, and was titled because of its infectious dance rhythms. Big band versions were the well-known *One o' Clock Jump* and *Jumpin' at the Woodside* by Count Basie, but Louis Jordan and his Tympany Five established a small band set-up of trumpet, alto, tenor and rhythm section. The music was in swing style with much use of riffs, entertaining street-wise lyrics and perhaps above all a great sense of showmanship. Effective solos were not lengthy and cerebral, but in the groove, melodic and powerful. As a major part of the jazz-influenced blues at this time, Jordan was also significant in the development of rhythm and blues, leading the way to rock and roll. The popularity of this genre, with its first white stars of Elvis Presley and Bill Haley, followed by black stars Chuck

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Berry, Fats Domino and Ray Charles, was the beginning of modern popular and youth culture in many respects. Despite the heritage of black music, it took white stars to force the white recording establishments to place black artists in a high profile national (US) context. This was profit driven, naturally, but opened up much potential cross-fertilisation of styles. Chuck Berry said that he identified with Jordan more than with anyone else; Bill Haley's Comets imitated the Louis Jordan rhythm – their producer would sing Jordan riffs for the Comets to pick up.

Another popular saxophonist at this time was Earl Bostic, an alto player with a big sound, omnipresent growl and melodic flair. His hits *Flamingo* and *Sleep* (1951) influenced countless instrumentalists. This was also one of John Coltrane's early bands (1952–3) – Bostic is reputed to have taught Coltrane upper-register playing. Saxophone solos in the Bill Haley band were taken by tenor player Rudy Pompelli (*Shake, Rattle and Roll*, 1954), and despite the growing domination of the (electric) guitar, the saxophone was relied on to push the excitement factor in many bands. Lee Allen featured with Little Richard and Fats Domino, King Curtis was the soloist on the Coasters' *Yakety Yak* (1958) and *Charlie Brown* (1959), and Ray Charles used Hank Crawford for many years. Others with their own hits included Red Prysock, Sam 'The Man' Taylor, Sil Austin and Jimmy Forrest. In Britain Red Price was the tenor player with Lord Rockingham's Eleven, to be followed in the 1960s by the Graham Bond Organisation, whose saxophonist Dick Heckstall-Smith appeared on many 1960s sessions.

The early 1960s produced two 'novelty' numbers which were none the less influential in their own way, Boots Randolph's *Yakkety Sax* (1963) and Henry Mancini's classic *Pink Panther*, recorded by Plas Johnson in 1964. The decade as a whole produced the great solo artistry of King Curtis and Junior Walker on the one hand, and the soul horn sections of James Brown and the Motown groups on the other. Junior Walker and King Curtis, both tenor players, were enormously influential and enjoyed great commercial success. They defined the rock tenor sound of the 1960s, with extraordinary control of high tones, flutter-tonguing, growls, shakes and, above all, sensitive phrasing. Curtis backed many artists as a session musician, as well as releasing his own numbers such as *Soul Twist* (1962) and *Soul Serenade* (1964), whilst Walker was a singer as well as a saxophonist – his hits included *Shotgun* (1965) and *How Sweet It Is* (1966) (see Ex. 9.1).

The horn section developed in this decade into a regular feature, particularly with the Motown vocal groups, where 'brass' came to mean trumpet, trombone and saxophones (various combinations but often alto, tenor and baritone). The horns were a vital part of the James Brown sound, from *Out of Sight* (1964), the beginnings of funk, through *Cold*

Ex. 9.1 Junior Walker, tenor saxophone introduction to *How Sweet It Is* (© Jobete Music UK Ltd).

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*Sweat* (1967) and into the 1970s. The emerging funk style relied heavily on the horn section for punctuation and drive, and Pee Wee Ellis, Brown's tenor man, was largely responsible for writing *Cold Sweat*. This had a heavy brass riff on beats 2 and 3, in addition to alternate bass figures on the baritone highlighting beat 1 with a pick-up. Sections built up of extensive repetition without harmonic change were a feature of this style. Ellis, Maceo Parker and St Clair Pinckney formed the sax section at around this time, and Parker was to follow bassist Bootsy Collins into George Clinton's Parliament band. This was funk plus rock plus psychedelic anarchy plus spaceships. This outstanding band of the 1970s featured the 'Horny Horns' led by Maceo Parker, and included the Brecker Brothers amongst others.

The end of the 1960s saw jazz embracing rock in the work of Miles Davis and others; in the band Blood, Sweat and Tears, the reverse process occurred simultaneously. Known as a rock 'big band', one of its most notable recordings was *Spinning Wheel*, with Fred Lipsius (alto). The successful band Chicago included Walter Parazaider on saxophone. These groundbreaking ventures also seemed to give legitimacy to the idea of jazz artists being used as session players for rock and pop recordings. One of the best-known collaborations in the 1970s was Phil Woods's solo in the Billy Joel song *Just the Way You Are* (1977); Paul Simon's album *Still Crazy After All These Years* (1975) features Michael Brecker on the title track, and Phil Woods contributes a surreal coda to *Have a Good Time*. This same album contains *Some Folks' Lives Roll Easy* where the saxophone section plays occasional semibreves. This particular saxophone section,

comprising David Sanborn, Eddie Daniels and Michael Brecker, could probably claim to have played the most expensive long notes in history. The Simon/Brecker relationship was revived years later for the Graceland tour in 1990.

The saxophone's role in rock and pop music was thus richly varied in the 1970s, with featured sections and also soloists. Some bands made a success out of integrating the saxophonist into the band (as opposed to a hired session player) as performer and writer. Andy Mackay took a major role with Roxy Music, John Helliwell in Supertramp, and Clarence Clemons with Bruce Springsteen. Mackay's saxophone skills as well as his electronics expertise combined well with the specialist knowledge and creativity of Brian Eno, also in the band. Early hits were *Virginia Plain* (1972) and *Do the Strand* (1973). Mackay's hard-rock licks, individual lines, and electronic treatment were an essential part of the Roxy Music sound. Ian Dury and the Blockheads enjoyed a brief time at the top of the music business, producing memorable numbers such as *Hit Me With Your Rhythm Stick* (1978), including Davey Payne's outrageous double saxophone solo. To be outrageous in the punk era was quite something.

The year 1978 saw the appearance of what can only be described as the *Baker Street* phenomenon. An attractive but seemingly innocuous rock ballad, a hit for singer/composer Gerry Rafferty, was decorated by a handful of notes turned into an eight-bar phrase at the beginning and between verses. No one really knows why, but following the success (and consequent air-play) of this number, it seemed that every self-respecting band had to include a saxophone. Soon after that an enormous percentage of TV advertisements had a sultry tenor or wailing alto taking prominence, and in the mid-1980s the saxophone became the most popular instrument for youngsters starting out. Rafael Ravenscroft, the player in question, can thus be said to have initiated the biggest boom in saxophone sales since the craze of the 1920s. This is testimony to the power of the mass media, as well as music itself, and follows in a direct line from Acker Bilk, whose *Stranger on the Shore* was responsible for a generation of clarinet players, and later James Galway with *Annie's Song*, similarly providing for flute players. It seemed that *Baker Street* legitimised the saxophone in mainstream pop, instead of being an extra instrument on loan from jazz. Almost the best part of this whole story is the fact that, like many inventions, it appeared quite by chance. The band were recording the number, and Rafael Ravenscroft was booked to do a session on soprano (heard briefly in the introduction). Having completed this, they were still waiting for the guitarist to arrive, who was due to record the now famous opening phrases. Time passed and Ravenscroft mentioned that he had an alto in the car if that would do as a substitute for the guitar. It was found to be satisfactory.

*The Logical Song* (1979), by Supertramp, continued the enhanced profile of the saxophone. John Helliwell's high-energy soulful alto contributions neatly combined his rhythm and blues heritage with the requirements of modern pop. Their album, *Breakfast in America*, was a huge hit internationally (the best-selling album in the world during 1979) – the saxophone image was there on the air waves and there in the lengthy stadium tours, with Helliwell as saxophonist and occasional keyboard player.

Other bands who featured saxophone in the 1970s were the Average White Band – Roger Ball and Malcolm 'Molly' Duncan (*Pick up the Pieces*, 1975) – and the exciting funk sectional playing of Earth, Wind and Fire on *Got to Get You into My Life* (1978) and *In the Stone* (1979). Deliberately less commercial but none the less successful were Tower of Power with saxophonists Skip Mesquite, Lenny Pickett, Richard Elliot, Emilio Castillo and Stephen 'Doc' Kupka, whose solid funk grooves backed often extended solos. Lou Marini was the tenor soloist with the Blues Brothers and Wilton Felder's unmistakable tenor sound was a vital part of the Crusaders, who began as a jazz group in the late 1950s, later incorporating rock and soul influences and finding commercial success with numbers such as *Street Life* (1979). The strongly jazz-influenced Steely Dan had a regular throughput of top session players. Phil Woods recorded *Dr Wu* with them in 1975, while Pete Christlieb played tenor on *Deacon Blues* (1977) – other notables included Tom Scott and Wayne Shorter. Even the more symphonic Pink Floyd used Dick Parry's atmospheric baritone and tenor on their *Wish You Were Here* album in 1975, and most notably his tenor on the track *Money (Dark Side of the Moon)* of 1973). And then there was Sonny Rollins's appearance with the Rolling Stones in 1981 on *Waiting on a Friend*. 'Famous amateurs' Van Morrison, David Bowie and Joe Jackson provided some of their own horn lines.

Many soloists also recorded their own predominantly instrumental albums, among the best known being Grover Washington, whose light-toned mixture of jazz and soul can be heard on *Mr Magic* (1974) and *Winelight* (1980). Tom Scott, one of the finest saxophone and Lyricon session players, released *Blow it Out* (1977) and *Desire* (1982). Jay Beckenstein led Spyrogyra to commercial success with *Morning Dance* (1979) and *Catching the Sun* (1980). Ernie Watts, David Sanborn and Michael Brecker crossed easily from jazz into rock and pop, Sanborn in particular releasing many solo albums since the 1970s; Brecker, surprisingly, released his debut solo album in 1987 but he had much success with trumpet playing brother Randy in the Brecker Brothers Band. Tenor player Gato Barbieri encompassed everything from folk tunes to the avant-garde, and when working in commercial areas he brought a strong

Latin influence from his Argentinian roots, and made extensive use of the growl like Earl Bostic before him. Frequently used at points of no tension, this timbral shift is very similar to subtle guitar distortion.

Often session players would team up to record an album; one such band was Dr Strut, with David Woodford on saxophone, who released *Struttin'* in 1980, an outstanding blend of rhythm and blues, funk and jazz. The title track was used as a signature tune for Alexis Korner's cult rhythm and blues radio show in the UK. Another one-off success of the 1980s was the baritone solo by Ronnie Ross on Matt Bianco's *Get out of your Lazy Bed* (1983). Others who featured with this band were Phil Todd, Jamie Talbot and Ed Calle. Hue and Cry were to use Lenny Pickett, Lou Marini, Dave Tofani and Roger Rosenberg in their horn section for *Remote* (1988) – subsequently the section was led by Tommy Smith, who also contributed several horn arrangements. It is interesting that 'live' horn sections were being used at this later period, which was the beginning of accessible midi technology – many bands used synthesiser brass pads for fills and stabs, which was perfectly adequate as long as you weren't listening too closely.

The 1980s saw the continuation of Sanborn, Brecker and Scott playing for major artists (for example Tom Scott on Whitney Houston's *Saving all My Love for You* in 1985). One of Brecker's most breathtaking solos is *The Dry Cleaner from Des Moines* on the 1979 Joni Mitchell album *Shadows and Light*. Commercial funk was catered for by the likes of the Icelandic band Mezzoforte, which included Kristinn Svavarsson on saxophone along with session players Chris Hunter, Martin Dobson, Phil Todd and Dave O'Higgins – they released their debut album *Surprise Surprise* in 1982. Instrumental albums by Grover Washington, David Sanborn and Tom Scott are numerous, but for mainstream popular appeal (and coinciding with the terrific rise in popularity of the instrument), Kenny Gee and Candy Dulfer lead the field. Gee has a very attractive fluid sound and technique to match. Some of his music is similar in groove to that of David Sanborn; the emphasis is always on melody and production, with busy improvisations; a significant number of his tunes are of the soothing ballad variety. His 1987 album *Duotones*, including the hit single *Songbird*, was an international success. Candy Dulfer plays an exciting brand of raw funk on albums such as *Saxuality* (1990) and *Sax-a-go-go* (1992), where the powerful themes are matched by the solos.

One of the most significant bands of the 1980s was the band Sting formed for the *Dream of the Blue Turtles* album in 1985, in which Branford Marsalis (tenor and soprano) played a major role. Marsalis, whose previous employment had been with Miles Davis, returned to the band in 1987 for *Nothing Like the Sun*; many of the songs on these two albums became

Ex. 9.2 Branford Marsalis, soprano saxophone solo on *Little Wing* (© Intersong Music UK Ltd).

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classics, including *Fortress Around Your Heart*, *Consider Me Gone* and *Englishman in New York*. A film of the band's 1985 tour including the title track, Police number *Bring on the Night*, won many awards. As well as very fine playing, the film includes several insights into rehearsal techniques and business reality. The nature of the music allowed Marsalis to reveal his skills as a performer of the highest calibre – his fills always catch the mood, his riffs are never less than exciting, and the solos are finely honed works of art. One of his finest is the short chorus on *Little Wing*, from *Nothing Like the Sun*; this Jimi Hendrix song contains a guitar solo by Hiram Bullock, paying homage to the composer – Marsalis picks up from the end of the guitar line on a deceptive high long note, and successfully turns the music round from the guitar wails to the ensuing relaxed vocal entry (see Ex. 9.2).

There was much debate at the time of Paul Simon's 1986 *Graceland* album concerning the use of world music. In this instance Simon collaborated with South African performers and composers in the project, as well as with American musicians. The question was: was he using First World technology and marketing to project Third World music into a position where it could reap its just rewards, or was he exploiting these musicians for his own ends? From the musical content and from the obvious expansion of influence of many forms of African music, the answer would seem to be the former. From the USA, he used saxophonists Lenny Pickett, Alex Foster, Ronnie Cuber, Johnny Hoyt (of Rockin' Dopsie and the Twisters) and Steve Berlin (of Los Lobos). From South Africa he used Barney

Rachabane, Mike Machalemele and Teaspoon Ndlela. Senegalese singer Youssou N'Dour uses a similar mixture on his 1989 album *The Lion*, with David Sanborn, Phil Todd and Jimmy Mvondo Mvele on saxophones.

Courtney Pine, like Branford Marsalis, comes from a jazz performing background: his work in the rock field is radically different, and as much a contribution to the 1990s as Marsalis's was to the 1980s. Similarly to many players of his generation and younger, he was actually brought up listening to pop and rock music, learning jazz at a later stage. He has made many forays into soul, reggae, hip-hop and dance (rave) music. As a featured soloist on *Soul II Soul Volume II* on the track *Courtney Blows*, released in 1990, he creates a haunting soprano sound, which is probably quite original, typically for hip-hop the saxophone is down in the mix (both melody and solo). The whole concept is innovative, and Pine developed this further in subsequent albums. His classic track *In the Garden of Eden* from *Modern Day Jazz Stories* (1997) exposes a long soprano melody of great simplicity and restraint in the most solid of grooves, with solo episodes occasionally hinting at Garbarek and Evan Parker but really outlining his own style in an authoritative manner.

Style and fashion change rapidly in the world of pop and rock, but good songs remain essential. One of the major bands of the 1990s, Simply Red, use the technical bravura and creative improvising of Ian Kirkham, whilst the distinctive cry of Snake Davis on soprano and tenor is a vital component of songs like *Search for the Hero* (M-People, 1995). The studio player will adapt to requirements, having been booked for his/her playing qualities in the first place. The essence of a good rock solo is perhaps best summed up by Sting discussing Marsalis: 'In jazz, [he] is allowed three or four verses to warm up his solo, so he makes this organic curve and he's allowed to wander around, and find this avenue, and jettison that, and go somewhere else. In rock music you have to burn from the first bar.'<sup>1</sup>