

Coleman Hawkins... Soul of the saxophone

By Benson Idonije

The saxophone is today being identified with Charlie Parker and John Coltrane as having taken the technical limits of the instrument to modern and avant-garde heights.

Coleman Hawkins however prepared the ground for the development. On the Nigerianscene, names like Chris Ajilo, Peter King, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, Kayode Olajide, Igo Chico, Orlando Julius, Lagbaja, Y.S. Akinibosun, Sivor Lawson, Laitan Adeniji, Paul Isamade, Bob Edwards, Etim Udo, Olu Idienuma, Tex Becks, Chike Emegokwe and others have become synonymous with the saxophone as their customary instruments.

Their various levels of performance are traceable to Coleman Hawkins who provided a workable basis for the instrument - as a source of influence.

The saxophone, which, from the beginning, had been looked upon as being symbolic of jazz, perhaps because of its many technical possibilities, actually crept into jazz during the rose-coloured 1920s and grew up with that decade.

Without any tradition to act as guide, however, the instrument lacked soloists at a time when the trumpet and clarinet, for instance, had many virtuosi Johnny Hodges, the saxophone player who spent 18 years with the Duke Ellington Orchestra, and Benny Carter eventually gave the alto saxophone a typical grace while the saxophone became a vehicle for Sidney Bethet's aggressive genius.

But it was Coleman Hawkins who took up the tenor - perhaps the most difficult of the three - and gave it a real status in jazz.

Up to this time however, the instrument, shallow-toned and rather sluggish, had been used only for adding sentimental trimmings to melodies and arrangements. Hawkins endowed it with shape and colour, and in the process he also created a generation of young soloists, among them Ben Webster, Chu Berry and Herchel Evans, all of whom emulated his approach.

In the midst of encomiums and acknowledgements, Hawkins once admitted that he was not the first man to play jazz on the tenor saxophone, a statement that can only be credited to a genuine and modest artist.

Said he: "There was Happy Caudwell in Chicago and stomp Evans out of Kansas City. They were playing it like mad."

But he did admit that his playing had uniqueness, a feat that did not come easily. It is on record that his early solos with the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra, a big band he joined in 1922, lacked the confidence required of an ideal hornman. Three or four years had to pass before a distinct musical personality began to emerge.

By 1927 however, his style was becoming defined, and records such as Fidegety Feet, Clarinet Marmalade and Sensation originally recorded on 78 rpm contain solos which are recognisably his work.

In 1929, when he recorded Hello Lola and One Hour with Red McKenzie's Mound City Blue blowers, Hawkins was already a mature soloist, and Hello Lola is said to have a few traces of the slap-tonguing and staccato phrasing so fashionable with saxophonists during the 1920s, but

there is also a new boldness as the solo swings powerfully all the saxophonists during the 1920s, but there is also a new boldness as the solo swings powerfully all the time it is unfolding. It is alert and poised against the beat. The rhapsodic manner, however, has been regarded by critics as being Hawkins most individual contribution to jazz improvisation and *One Hour* is a masterpiece of this genre a careful exploration mood as well as theme.

Hawkins' technical skill improved with every live performance and recording and in 1944, he started using modern jazz musicians, both in his regular group and on record sessions. His own playing also began to incorporate certain elements of modern jazz phrasing, having come from a mainstream and traditional background.

This was not so much in the structure of the solos as in their defects. Hawkins modern jazz bent was not a radical change. His harmonic instinct was always keen and alert but he did not issue phrases progressive enough to be compared with those of Charlie Parker and his disciples such as *Sony Stitt* or *Julian Cannonball Adderley*. His accenting however had a certain amount in common with *Stein Getz* and *Gerry Mulligan* but his tone was broad, earthly and powerful in terms of intensity.

At the peak of his professional career in the late forties. Hawkins played with some of the new stars who were in the limelight at the time in terms of catching the attention of jazz musicians and devotees.

Hawkins began to perform alongside such stars as trumpeter *Miles Davis* trombonist *Kai Winding* and his counterpart, *J.J. Johnson* who were known as the greatest on the scene vibes player *Milt Jackson* of the *Modern Jazz Quartet*, a well-knit combo that was noted for its cohesion and intricate arrangements usually done by pianist *John Lewis* among many others.

However, the first half of the 1950s was to a large extent, a period when Hawkins suffered neglect, his style of playing thoroughly out of fashion.

Modern Jazz had completely taken over with the introduction of highly musical progressions and harmonies into jazz by *Charlie Parker*. *Dizzy Gillespie* and *Miles Davis* had revolutionised the trumpet in terms of tonal conception, technical skill and style. Mainstream jazz which Hawkins played began to be relegated as a thing of the past.

In 1957 however, Hawkins collaborated with *Ben Webster* in a saxophone encounter that has become a hard mark in jazz history, Titled; *Duel*, the LP features the two tenor giants from the same mainstream era, each reaching out for the other's throat as it were. An audacious and exciting partnership. Hawkins has the harder sound, the more garrulous style; and as far as inspiration goes, they both generate great feeling, especially on *Blues for Yolande* where they are both swing by a rhythm section that has pianist *Oscar Peterson* as the motivating force.

A highly fulfilled and accomplished musician, Hawkins also performed with the *Thelonius Monk Septet* where he played alongside *John Coltrane*, perhaps the greatest of them all, in an experience that is intriguing and exciting.

Some of his notable LPs include: *Coleman Hawkins All Stars*, *Bean and the Boys*, *The Hawk Talks*, *Genius of Coleman Hawkins*, *Blue Saxophones*, *The High and the Mighty Hawk*, *Hawk Eyes*, *The Hawk Fliers High*, among others.