

DEXTER GORDON: OUT OF THE CRUCIBLE CAME LOVE

by Ian Muldoon*

There may be individual classical artists such as pianists which one prefers over others, as I prefer Claudio Arrau's overall interpretation of Beethoven's sonatas to any other artist, though Barenboim's take on the early sonatas is so joyously beautiful and Kempff's on the later sonatas so majestic, that one turns to them in those instances. But it's still Beethoven.

In the music called "jazz" the individual artist is both performer and composer regardless of the music's starting point. And because of this the differences between artists of this music can be so striking, so individual, it may seem like a different genre altogether. The tenor saxophone is no exception, and I example Stan Getz and Albert Ayler as evidence.



Tenor saxophonists Stan Getz (left) & Albert Ayler (below): differences so striking, so individual, it may seem like a different genre altogether...



**Ian Muldoon has been a jazz enthusiast since, as a child, he heard his aunt play Fats Waller and Duke Ellington on the household piano. At around ten years of age he was given a windup record player and a modest supply of steel needles, on which he played his record collection, consisting of two 78s, one featuring Dizzy Gillespie and the other Fats Waller. He listened to Eric Child's ABC radio programs in the 1950s and has been a prolific jazz records collector wherever he lived in the world, including Sydney, Kowloon, Winnipeg, New York and Melbourne. He has been a jazz broadcaster on a number of community radio stations in various cities, and now lives in Coffs Harbour.*

Dexter Gordon, as a person, composer, performer, in his appearance, art, manner, and presence like some warrior God of old, has enthralled me for 60 years. He was the only son of a doctor who was a graduate of Howard University. Duke Ellington and Lionel Hampton were patients of Doctor Gordon's. His birthday gift on Dexter's seventh was a clarinet. His father loved the best music and often took Dexter to concerts which included backstage visits. Dexter in short pants first met Harry "Sweets" Edison on such a visit.



A young Dexter Gordon in 1947, aged about 24... PHOTO CREDIT RAY WHITTON

Doctor Gordon's sudden death by heart attack when Dexter was 14 rocked Dexter's world. Musically, he forsook the clarinet for the alto, then the tenor saxophone, engrossed by both Lester Young and the featured tenor player in Andy Kirk's band, Dick Wilson.

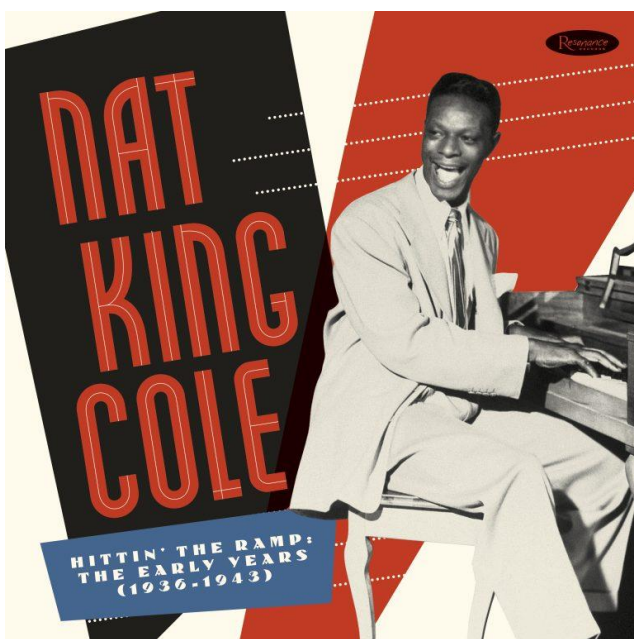
He auditioned for Lionel Hampton's band at age 17. Before graduating high school, and with his mother's blessing, Dexter took off from Fargo, North Dakota, for the big smoke, and Lionel Hampton. So much love from both parents must have been a lifelong emotional bedrock.

An 18-year-old Illinois Jacquet was Dexter's experienced tenor mate in Hampton's band. Jacquet encouraged Dexter to stop copying Lester Young. These two would engage in a two-tenor number called *Pork Chops* sometimes playing for 30 choruses at which point they had no idea what the changes were.



Illinois Jacquet in 1967: at 18 he was Dexter Gordon's mate in the Hampton band...PHOTO CREDIT LEE TANNER

In the summer of 1943 Dexter made four numbers with Nat King Cole: *I've Found A New Baby* (Palmer/Williams); *Rosetta* (Hines/Woode); *Sweet Lorraine* (Parrish/Burwell); and *I Blowed And Gone* (Edison) in a session produced by Norman Granz and released on the marvellous *Hittin' The Ramp: The Early Years, Nat King Cole* (Resonance) 2019.



He worked with Fletcher Henderson in 1944, and Louis Armstrong and by the end of 1944 was a member of the legendary Billy Eckstine Orchestra. Suddenly Dexter was in the company of Sarah Vaughan, Dizzy Gillespie, Fats Navarro, Sonny Stitt, Gene Ammons, Leo Parker, and John Malachi. Dexter was deep in the heart of the new music - a university of great artists with constant experimentation, testing this and that theory, and deep listening.



Dexter Gordon (left) and Billy Eckstine (valve trombone) with Eckstine's 1945 orchestra... PHOTO COURTESY THE BIG BAND YEARS

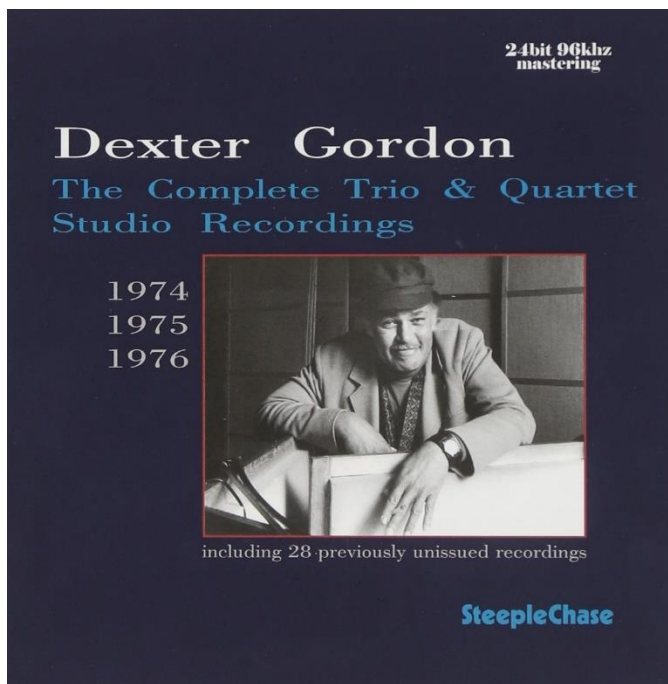
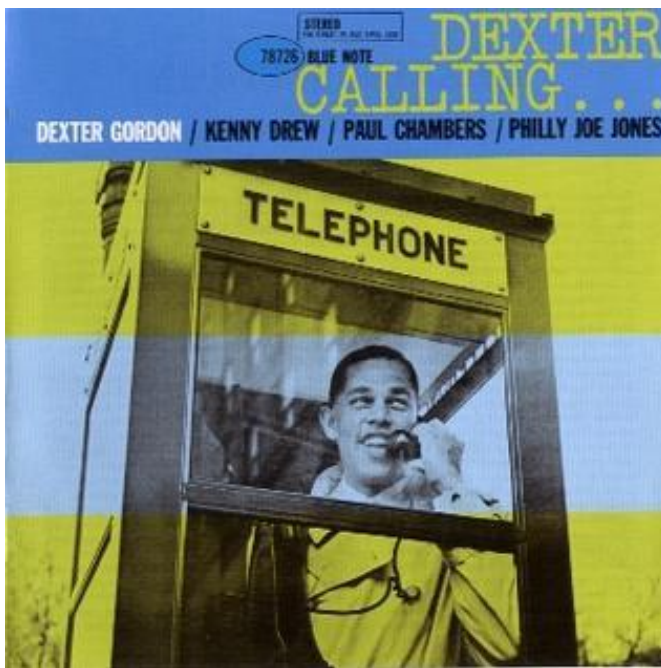
After a solid primary education from Lester Young - the importance of knowing the lyrics to a ballad you dare to play (in maturity when performing and with his deep mellifluous voice, he would recite the lyrics from each ballad before playing it) to make every note count, finish a thought, and develop strong ideas and then get a mouthpiece and instrument you like (he bought a Selmer Mk VI from Ben Webster) and listen - he was well into graduating from the university of Billy Eckstine.

Through involvement with Dizzy Gillespie and the tenor player Wardell Gray, Dexter smoothed his sound and refined his articulation. A two-year stint in Chino Prison (California Institute for Men, Chino) for heroin addiction provided plenty of time for reflection.

California and the West Coast sound was not for Dexter. His big sound, lyricism and behind the beat phrasing foreshadowed the "hard bop" movement. A major breakthrough came when Dexter was invited to compose music for the film of Jack Gelber's play *The Connection* (1961) directed by the great Shirley Clarke (cf, *Dance in*

the Sun (1953); *Robert Frost: A Lover's Quarrel with the World* (1963); *Man in Polar Regions* (1967); *Ornette: Made in America* (1985).

The songs include *I Want More*, *Soul Sister*, and *Ernie's Tune*, all of which were later recorded to resonant effect with Blue Note on the album *Dexter Calling*. Ahhh. Blue Note. Among the greatest recorded legacies of the tenor saxophone, two of them are by Dexter Gordon: the first with Blue Note between 6th May 1961 and the 29th May 1965 later issued as *The Complete Blue Note 60s Sessions* and the second on a series of albums released in the 1970s on SteepleChase Records, founded in 1972 by Nils Winther. Bless that man and bless Alfred Lion (New Jersey) and Francis Wolff (Paris) both of Blue Note.



The big tone, swing, growth from “dixieland” to bebop and musical brilliance of Coleman Hawkins, the melodic inventiveness and rhythmic sophistication of Lester Young, the gut-breaking breathiness of Ben Webster, the bounce of Bud Freeman, the jamming stamina of Flip Phillips, the sweetness of Stan Getz, the coolness of Jimmy Giuffre, the speed and power of Johnny Griffin; the melodic twists, wit and declamatory power of Sonny Rollins, the Texas strength of Booker Ervin and J D Allen (Detroit-born), the breadth and passion of Archie Shepp, the range of Chico Freeman, the depth of feeling and improvisatory power of John Coltrane, the modernism of Dewey Redman, David Murray, and Jan Garbarek, and the mastery of Joe Lovano, the melodic originality of Wayne Shorter, and the inventiveness and majesty of Sandy Evans, the drive of Mark Simmonds, the tone and passion of Julien Wilson...

Each has a wonder and appeal, but my favourite tenor saxophonist remains Dexter Gordon.



While other tenor saxophonists have a wonder and appeal, my favourite tenor saxophonist remains Dexter Gordon (above)...

Dexter Gordon's individual sound, his attention to melody, his range, his breathy resonance, his intelligent structuring of a solo into a satisfying musical narrative, his swing, are an irresistible combination. Whether it's originals or found melodies from the Great American Songbook or anywhere else, he's a master. Take Charlie Chaplin's maudlin song *Smile* (Chaplin/Turner/Parsons) cf, Puccini's *Tosca* on which it is based, which Dexter recorded on 9/5/61. Along with Kenny Drew, piano; Paul Chambers, bass; and Philly Joe Jones, drums; he turns this sentimental ballad into an up-tempo swinging, swaggeringly beautiful bebop masterpiece without seemingly taking breath. It appeared on the Blue Note album mentioned above, *Dexter Calling*.

Like all classics, his works for Blue Note and SteepleChase remain a constant source of untiring pleasure. Dexter was a model for both John Coltrane and Sonny Rollins yet Dexter never embraced the spiritual or political. Coltrane's search for peace in another world, and Rollins' search for change in this, were not for Dexter. There seemed to be no agenda with Dexter except that of creating the most beautiful music he could.



Gordon was a presence, a dignified and articulate individual who had the persona of a leader...

Such beautiful music was prominent in his work in the beginning of the 1960s. But apart from his art he was a presence, a dignified and articulate individual who had the persona of a leader. Yet observing the contemporary world in which he lived - the performing art world, and seeing how its major figures were sometimes treated - Nat King Cole spat on whilst performing, Ella Fitzgerald in Hawaii escorted from a first class passage on a Pan Am aircraft en route to Australia - Dexter Gordon knew however much he achieved, however popular his art, however rich he became in the country of his birth, to many citizens he was not above the most lowly ordinary white man.

And when he read the history of his forebears: for example, the diaries of Thomas Thistlewood a British plantation overseer in Jamaica who described punishing a slave: “Gave him a moderate whipping, pickled him well, made Hector shit in his mouth, immediately put a gag in it whilst his mouth was full and made him wear it four or five hours” or legal documents which revealed amongst many things that around 150 Africans were drowned on a British slave ship, so that the owners could collect an insurance payment.” (*New Yorker*, p 50, 26/10/20) he packed his bags like some distinguished others of his chosen art, and sailed for Europe.

In 1976 he returned to the USA and performed at the Village Vanguard. He recalled: “There was so much love and elation; sometimes it was a little eerie at the Vanguard. After the last set they’d turn on the lights and nobody would move.”

Out of the crucible of his experience as an African American came much love expressed through his art which was returned by those who experienced it. And yet his five children and seven grandchildren must have wondered at his passing in 1990 at age 67 as they continue to witness right wing extremists or members of the white supremacist movement, who have been responsible for more than 320 deaths in the USA, has Dexter’s example had any effect? (*New Yorker*, Luke Mogelson, *We Go Where They Go*, 2/11/20 p 42) and then there is the wide publicity given to the deaths of Rodney King and George Floyd.



Luke Mogelson, author of the “We Go Where They Go” article in the New Yorker...

Dexter Gordon's legacy will be honoured 100 years from now and the white supremacist movement will be an historical footnote because love has always trumped hate (forgive the pun). Part of that legacy includes his appearance with Herbie Hancock on the latter's groundbreaking popular album *Takin' Off* (1962) at which time Coltrane's influence was apparent. The programme consisted of six originals by the leader: *Watermelon Man*, *Three Bags Full*, *Empty Pockets*, *The Maze*, *Driftin'* and *Alone and I*.



The band led by pianist and composer Hancock on his first album was: Freddie Hubbard, trumpet; Dexter Gordon, tenor saxophone; Butch Warren, double bass and Billy Higgins, drums. The opening blues track was written specifically to sell and paid Hancock's bills for nearly six years. Much of the success of the album lies with the contribution made by Dexter Gordon.

Although Dexter's work doesn't contain extended works like *Freedom Suite* (Rollins) or *A Love Supreme* (Coltrane) his compositions do bear comparison in their modest goals with the shorter works of these two greats.

The samba-influenced original *Soy Califa* (Gordon) on *A Swinging Affair* (Blue Note) 1962 does bear comparison with *St Thomas* (Rollins). His original *Cheesecake* (Gordon) on *GO* (Blue Note) 1962 bears comparison with Sonny's joyous wit and power.



But I will contend that very few other tenor saxophonists including Coleman Hawkins and Stan Getz can give the art works of the Great American Songbook the depth of feeling, melodic power or rhythmic drive that Gordon gives them and this may be tribute to the sterling lessons he received from Lester Young.

As evidence consider *You've Changed* (Fischer) the twelfth take of a session on 6/5/61 from his first Blue Note album as leader. The tempo is in keeping with Billie Holiday's version, its intensity of feeling approaches a rhapsody and its construction a climactic triumph. There are also 16 bars of delicious harmony with Freddie Hubbard. Holiday and Young would surely have approved. Coltrane's modal influence is also apparent.

Or consider take six of *Where Are You* (McHugh) which bears comparison with Frank Sinatra's version; the 12th take of *I Guess I'll Hang My Tears Out To Dry* (Styne/Cahn) in which he doesn't just quote the melody; he embellishes and transforms it to another beauty without losing it; and the 13th take of *Love For Sale* (Porter) with its wit (comparable to the great Dorothy Parker) and a mid-range tempo perfectly suited to the composition; all from *GO*.

In 1980 Dexter Gordon was inducted into the Jazz Hall of Fame. The US Government honored him with a Congressional Commendation, a Dexter Gordon Day in Washington DC, and a National Endowment for the Arts award for Lifetime Achievement.

In 1986, he was named a member and officer of the French Order of Arts and Letters by the Ministry of Culture in France. In 2018, his album *GO* was selected by the Library of Congress for preservation in the National Recording Registry for being "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant."

Dexter Gordon died on ANZAC Day 1990 at the age of 67.