

Gary Giddens: *Fifty Years* of “*Body and Soul*”

In the year of its 50th anniversary, let us now praise a song—the most recorded American popular song of all time (nearly 3000 versions). Few songs have survived as long or as well, and none have inspired as many durable interpretations by successive generations of musicians. “Body and Soul” first became famous as the showstopper in a 1930 Broadway revue called *Three’s a Crowd*, starring Libby Holman, Clifton Webb, and Fred Allen. Ironically, Arthur Schwartz and Howard Dietz, the show’s chief songwriters, tried to have it cut. According to Robert Sour, who collaborated with Edward Heyman on the lyric, the song was actually deleted from several performances at the tryout in Philadelphia, where they wrote several sets of lyrics in a plea to save it. Fortunately for everyone, Libby Holman sang it in New York, and thus was born the ballad that earned its 22-year-old composer, Johnny Green, a grateful footnote in the annals of jazz.

It’s hard to imagine jazz without “Body and Soul.” Excepting the blues and those songs (such as “I Got Rhythm,” “Honey-suckle Rose,” and “How High the Moon”) that were transformed

by jazz musicians into untethered chord progressions, no other piece has been interpreted as frequently or with such consistently rewarding results. Yet it's an unusually difficult example of the 32-bar AABA song, with three key changes in the chorus (and three more in the rarely performed verse), intricate major/minor circuitry, and a wide range; moreover, it has a cloyingly powerful melody. Jazz musicians favor "Body and Soul" not because the harmonies provoke vivid new variations, as is the case with Jerome Kern's "All the Things You Are," but because they like the tune.

Ironically, the improvisation that secured the song's place in jazz—Coleman Hawkins's 1939 masterpiece—suspended the melody almost entirely. Yet even his most demonic and irreverent descendants, including Charlie Parker and John Coltrane, found it difficult to shuffle off Green's imposing melodic coils. Basically, there have been three interpretive approaches: (a) personalized recitation; (b) whimsical variation employing fragments from other songs; and (c) genuine melodic variation. Perhaps only Hawkins, Teddy Wilson, and two or three others have achieved the last, which is a fairly commonplace goal in jazz improvisation. And yet performances of "Body and Soul" continue to proliferate, and several artists have recorded it repeatedly.

Johnny Green has spent most of his life writing movie music in Hollywood. His songs are few, but of high quality: "Out of Nowhere," written in 1931, became as much a part of the bop era (thanks to Charlie Parker, Tadd Dameron, and Fats Navarro) as "Body and Soul" was of swing, and "Coquette," "I Cover the Waterfront," and "I'm Yours" have also enjoyed the respect of jazz musicians. But "Body and Soul" is in a class by itself. Within a period of about eight weeks in the fall of 1930, at least eight versions were recorded, including those by the three torchiest ladies of the era—Libby Holman, Ruth Etting, and Helen Morgan. Louis Armstrong transformed it from a lament of unrequited love to a ballad with greater interpretive potential, and established it as a jazz standard. In trying to trace its progress during the past

50 years, and the progress of jazz as reflected in approaches to that one song, I listened to over 90 versions.

I encountered not only dozens of first-rate performances, but several milestones indicative of the development of jazz itself: the first fruits of what would be the most influential keyboard style of the '30s (Wilson), the long-meter approach to ballads (Eldridge), the culmination of the vertical style of improvisation (Hawkins), the rise of virtuosity in jazz bass (Blanton), the initial explorations of Charlie Parker, and the fullest realization of talented stylists (Chaloff, Cohn, Betty Carter, and others). The magical qualities of "Body and Soul" lay in its ability to inspire musicians to plumb the depths of their own creativity. I've narrowed the list to my favorites, plus a few interesting curios. Two sets of lyrics from the song's Philadelphia tryout are in circulation; Billie Holliday recorded the second set, but almost everyone else sings the first. Also, three writers are officially credited with the occasionally ungainly words ("my life a wreck you're making"). The ringer is Frank Eyton, a staff arranger at Chappell & Co., which offered to publish the song on condition that he work on the lyric. Eyton was cut in, but according to Sour, "He didn't even change a comma." Incidentally, the best "straight" recording is the 1947 rendition by Frank Sinatra (Columbia), who except for dotting one quarter note at the expense of another, sings it just as Green wrote it, thereby demonstrating that the song is pretty wonderful to begin with. I've dated the entries that follow not by the artist's first recording but by the one that seems to me most indicative.

1930: Louis Armstrong (Columbia). No one translated more pop into jazz than Armstrong, and though this effort with the Les Hite orchestra isn't as prepossessing as some of his other gems from the period, its feeling and drama make the torch singers sound like holdovers from a previous century. His trumpet swings the turnbacks and heats up the last eight bars, but his vocal, seemingly tenuous in its determination to rethink every phrase, is what you remember.

1935: Benny Goodman Trio (Bluebird). The trio's first record,

and one of Teddy Wilson's most celebrated solos—a 16-bar variation that sounds almost like an inversion of the melody. But it's a mistake to isolate Wilson's contribution. The record is gripping because of the constant colloquy between Wilson's melancholy provocations (in accompaniment as well as solo) and Goodman's straightforward recitation. Wilson offers a somewhat different paraphrase in the trio's 1938 version (Columbia), and reworks some of the same ideas in his 1941 solo performance (Smithsonian/Columbia).

1937: Django Reinhardt (Capitol). The guitarist's superb solo includes a rubbery stop-and-go phrase at the first turnback, a folkishly plucked release, and lightning strumming, as well as a doubletime passage in the third chorus. His 1938 version (EMI) with Larry Adler is charming, but less adventurous.

1938: Chu Berry and Roy Eldridge (Commodore). After Hawkins, Eldridge has the most claims to B&S, and it's his technical brilliance rather than Berry's rather decorative statement that makes this a classic, the epitome of swing. Eldridge was the first to play the song in long meter (each measure is doubled), a practice that is still widely imitated. He merely embellishes the melody—but what embellishment, and what velocity. Note Catlett's drumming during the release and when Roy returns to the original tempo. Among other Eldridge versions are a 1939 fragment (Jazz Archive), an amazing, extended blitz from a 1941 jam (Xanadu), a 1944 studio version in which a stunning reading is foreshortened by a piano solo (Decca), and a moving 1967 concert without long meter (Pumpkin).

1939: Coleman Hawkins (Quintessence/RCA). One of the most celebrated improvisations in music, and a gauntlet tossed at every other saxophonist in jazz. There is nothing to compare with it. 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. Incredibly, it was a huge hit—Hawkins's variations became as much a part of jazz as the original melody; Benny Carter

orchestrated part of it, Eddie Jefferson wrote lyrics to it, Hawkins used his improvisation as the basis for subsequent improvisations. In 1948, Hawkins recorded "Picasso" (Verve) after eight hours of preparation; it was the first unaccompanied tenor solo in jazz, and based on the changes of B&S. Of his many other versions, a 1959 concert reading (Verve) was outstanding.

1940: Jimmy Blanton and Duke Ellington (Smithsonian/RCA). A milestone in virtuoso bass playing. Blanton's arco is notable for its warmth, rudely attacked low notes, and glissandos, but his pizzicato half-chorus shows how remarkable an improviser he was.

1940: Billie Holliday (Columbia). She made all kinds of subtle alterations in the melody, and Eldridge took eight memorable measures. I slightly prefer her 1946 version (Verve), in which the phrasing is more legato and the alterations braver. She always sang, "My life a hell you're making."

1940: Charlie Parker (Onyx). Bird's first recording, from a Wichita broadcast transcription, is a curio—but note how confidently he toys with Hawkins's phrases in bars 9-14. A 1950 concert (Sonet) found him flying high, yet not beyond the tune's gravity.

1942: Lester Young (Phoenix). Naturally, he had to try his hand at it, and he's wistful and sure; Nat Cole's famous solo routine is here in embryonic form. Young's deeply considered 1950 version (Savoy) is an often overlooked gem.

1944: Jazz at the Philharmonic (Verve). Les Paul plays a comical Django solo and J. J. Johnson pays homage with a couple of Hawkins's phrases, but Nat Cole's whimsy just about wins out. His solo consists almost entirely of cleverly juxtaposed quotations, which he'd refined in his trio version (Capitol) earlier that year.

1944: Cozy Cole (Savoy). Ben Webster's turn. He's sensuous and breathy for the first chorus, and ardent to the point of violence when he tips his hat to Roy Eldridge for the long-meter chorus.

1944: Art Tatum (Comet). He left more than a dozen versions,

including broadcast and army recordings, but his first try—with his 1937 *Swingsters*—was inconsequential. A 1940 after-hours gem (Onyx) shows that he viewed the tune with irony similar to Nat Cole's—he alternates Monkian asceticism with flighty asides and makes the release a potpourri of off-the-wall quotes. This propensity came to fruition in the 1944 trio gambol with Tiny Grimes and Slam Stewart, which is to all previous versions what *Animal Crackers* was to drawing-room comedy. Here, and in his 1953 solo (Pablo), he showed greater ingenuity in long meter than at ballad tempo.

1946: Don Byas (Prestige). Yet another ravishing tenor seduction of the melody, virtuosic and ardent. A more relaxed but no less impassioned reading was captured after-hours in 1941 (Onyx).

1946: Boyd Raeburn (Savoy). George Handy's sumptuous arrangement is outerspace schmaltz with swirling harp, punctuating French horns, and a Ginny Powell vocal.

1947: Teddy Edwards (Onyx). I think this is the first bop version. B&S didn't appeal to the boppers right away, probably because its melody demanded attention, while the soloists were looking for new melodies. Edwards broadened his vibrato to suggest Hawk, but his nifty triplets and the injection of Latin rhythm are signs of the times.

1949: James Moody (Prestige). He ejects from the melody by the second bar, doubletimes his pet licks (while avoiding long meter), and swings with relentless creativity. Not quite up to "I'm in the Mood for Love," but Eddie Jefferson wrote lyrics to this solo too. Moody's 1956 version (Chess) is notable for a splendid Johnny Coles long-meter trumpet solo that coolly navigates the major/minor changes.

1955: Serge Chaloff (Capitol). Perhaps no other recording demonstrates the full dynamic range of the baritone sax for such emotional effect. Chaloff, suffering from spinal paralysis, cut this from a wheelchair, and though "Thanks for the Memories" and "Stairway to the Stars" are contenders, this may well be his masterpiece, and is certainly one of the most compelling ballad performances in jazz. It's been out of print for nearly 25 years.

1956: Hank Jones (Savoy). Among the bebop piano versions are those by Erroll Garner, Bud Powell, and Barry Harris, but this is the most beautiful—lush chord modulations and a fanciful second chorus (until the release). How did we allow this man to disappear into the studios for so long?

1957: Gerry Mulligan and Paul Desmond (Verve). A four-part rickrack, though the saxophonists encircle the melody and each other so limpidly (the heat rises subtly but steadily) that you might forget that bass and drums also play "parts."

1958: Sonny Rollins (Verve). For his second attempt at an unaccompanied tenor solo, Rollins turned to tradition, and played two choruses plus an intro and coda (built on a single motif). Its chief interest is rhythmic, and though the playing is often magnificent, a comparison with the abstractions of Hawkins's "Picasso" makes the Old Man look godlike.

1960: John Coltrane (Atlantic). He plays long meter throughout, and gives B&S a new character with minor-key alterations. But he never gets beyond the surface, and the most interesting solo is McCoy Tyner's burrowing chorus. Interestingly, Coltrane played a better solo on a rejected alternate take, where Tyner's solo was relatively dull.

1961: Buck Clayton (Inner City). A personalized, melancholy statement with authentic drama, and a vividly Armstrongian open-horn finish.

1962: Thelonious Monk (Columbia). Studious stride in the left hand, and slapdash minor seconds in the right, and all the alterations in the world can't keep the ancient lament from shining through.

1966: Henry Red Allen (Impulse). The superbly eccentric New Orleans-born trumpeter-vocalist first recorded the song in 1935 (Columbia), but this version, his solo feature from a concert with the compatibly eccentric Pee Wee Russell, is looser and more inventive. He plays two trumpet choruses, over slow and fast rhythms, and sings with bellicose conviction.

1969: Betty Carter (Bush). From her famous medley with "Heart and Soul" (in which she "lost control . . . yes I lost it");

there is no more sultry or heart-rending ballad performance than her chorus and a half of B&S. She reprises Billie's "hell" and does the last eight bars a cappella.

1970: Buddy Tate (MPS). There is a jaunty after-hours version from 1941 (Xanadu), but this is close to definitive, although I've heard him do it even more effectively in concert. It's a beautifully controlled, piercingly vocalized recitation.

1970: Dexter Gordon (Prestige). The performance is shaped in part by Tommy Flanagan's minor-key vamp and the subtle long-meter manipulations of Alan Dawson, while Gordon moseys into fantasyland, combining methods B and C (see intro above). His 1978 version (Columbia) overdoes the vamp, and after a good beginning, he gets bogged down.

1973: Al Cohn (Muse). In which all the distinctive aspects of Cohn's style came together in two masterful, immensely communicative choruses—the second, especially, is a straight-from-the-heart marvel, in which hollow moans footnote the compelling sureness.

1977: Benny Carter (Pablo Live). He plays the first chorus fairly straight on trumpet, but his prolix alto chorus skirts through the chords with admirable independence, the melody pecking through and amplifying his own tale.

1978: Archie Shepp (Horo). The most recent extravaganza by an uneven tenorist, accompanied only by guitar. There's no escaping the melody for Shepp, who rummages through it songfully, ultimately taming it with his penetrating tone (his cries recall Buddy Tate) and acerbic asides.

1978: Sarah Vaughan (Pablo). Her 1946 performance (Everest) was merely flawless, the one from 1954 (Emarcy) expertly poised, as she imbued every syllable with nuance and worked in a long-meter section. This version, a duet with Ray Brown, starts with a long-meter release and circles back through the ballad for a creative tour de force.

1978: The Heath Brothers (Columbia). Percy Heath's "In New York" is a rarity—a bop line composed on B&S changes, in-

spired by Blanton's last half-chorus with Ellington. Jimmy Heath plays a chorus, but his real confrontation with the tune came in 1975 (Xanadu).

1978: Bill Evans (Warner Bros.). This bears comparison with the Goodman trio, since Toots Thielemans dominates with a locked-in harmonica solo, and the real breakthrough is a romantic and highly inventive half-chorus of piano; it's something of a disappointment when Thielemans returns.

1979: Helen Humes (Muse). What a surprise!—proof that a good singer can still invest the song with emotional fortitude and make it work anew. It's startling to hear her riff the second chorus, and take risks throughout. The allure of B&S continues.

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