Dexter Gordon’s ultimate “Body and Soul”

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Soon after returning to the United States from Europe in 1976, Dexter Gordon formed a band with George Cables (piano), Rufus Reid (bass), and Eddie Gladden (drums). For the first time in his career, he was leading his own band, which stayed together for three years; it was described by Michael Cuscuna (Gordon’s record producer) as “one of the finest-sounding quartets in jazz history” (Britt 1989). Gordon also considered this his best band (dextergordon.com). “Body and Soul,” recorded live with this band at Keystone Korner in San Francisco on September 16, 1978, captures Gordon at the pinnacle of his creative genius. This was his last recording of “Body and Soul” except for a perfunctory version in the movie ’Round Midnight.

A transcription and analysis of the tenor solo, Reid’s bass line, and the chord changes allows for a detailed study of structural features of Dexter’s solo, and the interactions between the performers. This paper will address the following: an overview of the performance; basic motivic building blocks and their derivation from the tune; examples of polyrhythm; an analysis of Gordon’s substantial cadenza; and Gordon’s use of quotation. Figure 1 is a photograph of Dexter Gordon and Rufus Reid at Keystone Korner.

Overview

Gordon’s arrangement of “Body and Soul” borrows from an earlier recording of the same tune by John Coltrane. Cross-influences between these performers are complex. Gary Giddins (1998:333) states, “One of the musicians most profoundly touched by Gordon’s music, particularly his harmonic inventiveness, was Coltrane, three years Gordon’s junior.” The two musicians shared many common formulas. Who copied whom? Thomas Owens (1995:91) writes, “Logic suggests that Coltrane was copying Gordon, for he clearly had copied the older player in his early solos.” However, Gordon’s 1978 recording of “Body and Soul” shows a reversal of this
influence, or is perhaps a tribute to Coltrane. The most apparent borrowings are the opening two-measure vamp, third-related “Giant Steps” chord progressions in the bridge, and characteristic “Giant-Steps” melodic patterns in the cadenza.

The form of the tune is AABA. The overall structure of Gordon’s performance is as follows:

- Eight-bar introduction
- Head plus two choruses by Gordon
- Two choruses by Cables
- Out-chorus by Gordon, beginning at the bridge
- Extended cadenza by Gordon
- Coda by Gordon and the band, quoting the end of “If You Could See Me Now”

In the head, and in the first chorus of each of the solos, each A section is played over the rhythm of the introductory vamp, while the bridge is straight-ahead swing. In the second chorus of each solo, the vamp rhythm is enhanced by an extended dominant pedal, with complex polyrhythms and a heightened sense of tension. This format gives a clear shape or direction to each solo. The out-chorus returns to the vamp for the final A section.
Basic motivic building blocks

Many of the structural elements of the arrangement are derived from the tune and chord progression of “Body and Soul.” One important element of the tune is the descending chromatic pattern in both the melody and harmony, bracketed in example 1.

The second feature is the transposition of the opening gesture a perfect fourth higher, as shown in example 2.

These elements both occur in the introductory vamp shown in example 3. The vamp in the bass descends and ascends chromatically, and in the fifth bar the sax

Ex. 1: Body and Soul, (a) mm. 3–6 of the A section; (b) second half of bridge.

Ex. 2: Body and Soul, mm. 1–4.

Ex. 3: The Introduction.
Ex. 4a-c: *The head, mm. 9–72.*
doubles the line a perfect fourth higher. These statements on E♭ and A♭ echo the structure of the opening of the tune, a relationship also seen in the larger structure of each solo, which moves from the vamp on E♭ in the first chorus to the pedal A♭ in the second. During the vamp, the right hand of the piano repeats F and B♭ which, when combined with the prolonged E♭ in the bass, prefigures the first three different notes of the tune (as shown in example 2: E♭, F, E♭, F, E♭, B♭). Gordon makes this relationship clearer by simplifying the opening, reducing it to the three notes E♭, F, B♭. The perfect fourth is also emphasized in Gordon’s paraphrase of the tune, and becomes an important motive in his solo and cadenza.

The key scheme of the tune is also chromatic. The bridge tonicizes D major and C major, keys a half step above and below the tonic D♭, respectively. Gordon often echoes this relationship in his side-slipping melodic structures.

Example 4 is a transcription of the head of the tune. Note Gordon’s simplification of the tune, emphasizing the perfect fourth, the use of “Giant-Steps” changes in each section of the bridge, and the use of the vamp in each A section. Also see examples of melodic side-slipping in mm. 23–24 and 39–40.

**Polyrhythms**

Polyrhythm is an integral part of this performance. It is first heard in the introduction, which implies two measures of 3/4 followed by a measure of 2/4 (example 5). Sometimes Gordon plays rhythms counter to this, and sometimes he plays along with it, as in example 6 from the beginning of his first solo chorus.

Ex. 5: *Polyrhythm in the Introduction.*

Ex. 6: *The beginning of Gordon’s first solo chorus.*
In example 7, from Gordon’s second chorus, Rufus Reid makes the 3/4 explicit by sustaining notes against the regular vamp in the piano and drums.

Reid often plays quarter-note triplets, implying 3/4 at a different level. In example 8, Gordon duplicates this polyrhythm in the first two bars, and then plays against it in the next two. Note also the sequence of “What’s It All About (Alfie)?”

Some of the most extraordinary examples of polyrhythm are initiated by bassist Rufus Reid in the dominant (A♭) pedal during Gordon’s second chorus. Example 9 shows the beginning of this chorus, in which Gordon quotes “Nancy With The Laughing Face.” In the first part of the excerpt the bass plays a complex rhythm (with eighth-note triplets) that conforms to the notated 4/4 meter. At the end of m. 144 Reid plays quarter-note triplets implying 3/4 beginning on the fourth beat of the measure. This pattern is confirmed by the melodic contour. During this passage Cables plays the original vamp while Gladden plays triplets with Reid. The heightened tension resulting from the extreme rhythmic complexity in this passage is released when the bass returns to a straight-ahead walking line in the last measure of the example.

A similar but more complex polyrhythm occurs in the bass in the A2 section twelve bars later (example 10). Reid begins the passage with a series of eighth-note triplets, prolonging the A♭ dominant with G lower-neighbors. The first two measures conform to the 4/4 meter. Measure 155 begins with three quarter-note beats,
Ex. 9: Gordon’s second chorus, mm. 137–148.

Ex. 10: Gordon’s second chorus, mm. 153–160.
but on the fourth beat Reid initiates two quarter-note triplets implying 3/4 at a faster tempo, followed by a single beat triplet (marked with “&” in example 10). Measure 157 repeats the pattern from m. 155, but this time Reid adds a third quarter-note triplet, extending the polyrhythm. This is followed by five beats of eighth-note triplets (3/4 + 2/4). In the last half of the final measure of the example Reid adds a final quarter-note triplet, echoing Gordon’s rhythm in the first half of the measure. The next measures (shown in example 7, above) reiterate the 3 + 3 + 2 polyrhythm of the vamp before releasing the tension by returning to a swinging 4/4 walking bass line.

**The Cadenza**

Gordon’s extraordinary extended cadenza (example 11) loosely follows the form and key structure of the tune. The band stops playing on the F7 chord three bars from the end of the tune. Gordon “prolongs” this V through a descending fifth pattern (F7→B♭m7→Em7→A♭m7→D♭ma7) before leading into the key of the bridge through a ii–V progression (Em7→A7). Gordon expands on the first part of the bridge (the D-major portion), beginning with a quotation from “With A Song In My Heart.” He then cycles through all or part of the distinctive Coltrane “Giant-Steps” changes (D–F–B♭–D♭–G♭–A–D) four times, with varying harmonic rhythm. The first statement, which is incomplete, overlaps with the end of the “With A Song In My Heart” quotation. In the second statement (beginning in m. 252) the chords change every half note; while the third statement changes every quarter note. The final statement (m. 260)—less regular, with chords changing every two to four beats—ends with a brief reference to “What’s It All About, Alfie?”

Gordon then expands on the second part of the bridge (the C-major portion), beginning with a quote from the opening of “’Round Midnight” (over the Dm–G7 changes), and a quick nod (Dm [Em7]–F) to “Giant Steps.” The following passage leads back to D♭ through a descending fifth progression and yet another statement of the “Giant-Steps” progression.

Gordon returns to the key of the A section with another quote from “’Round Midnight,” now in E♭ minor to accommodate the ii7 chord in D♭. He loosely follows the changes of the A section, which are again interrupted on the corresponding F7 (m. 295) that initiated the cadenza in the first place! This time he takes a long digression through Ddim7 followed by material that is mostly in the whole-tone scale. The cadenza ends in D♭, with pick-up notes into the Coda, which quotes from “If You Could See Me Now.”
Ex. 11a-c: Gordon's cadenza.
Quotation

Giddins (1998:330) calls Dexter Gordon “The King of Quotes.” He writes (1998:335), “They fold into his solos like spectral glimpses of an alternative universe in which all of Tin Pan Alley is one infinite song. That so many of the quotations seem verbally relevant I attribute to Gordon’s reflexive stream of consciousness and prodigious memory for lyrics.” Table 1 lists Gordon’s primary quotations in their order of appearance, and shows where they occur in the form.

The number of quotations increases from the first chorus to the second, and culminates in the Cadenza and Coda. Thus, there is an acceleration of quotations from beginning to end. Given the statement by Giddins concerning Gordon’s memory for lyrics (above), Gordon’s choice of quotations implies a kind of narrative. The lyrics to “Body and Soul” embody several themes. One is the theme of lost love and the longing associated with it: “I spend my days in longin.” Another theme suggested by the lyrics is the clear reference to the body and to the soul, and the idea that the singer is willing to surrender these in order to regain love. References to the body include actual body parts, and general references to beauty.

All of the tunes that Gordon quotes relate to one or both of these themes. They also relate to one another. Considering the theme of longing, the first quote, from “Swinging on a Star,” is about striving to be better: “You can be better than you are / You could be swingin’ on a star.” (Note that “Over the Rainbow” also makes reference to a star: “Someday I’ll wish upon a star.”) The second quotation, “Nancy With the Laughing Face” also has a tinge of longing: “If I don’t see her each day, I miss her.” The tune “What’s It All About (Alfie)?” is quoted twice; the lyrics are all about striving for something more, especially longing for love: “Until you find the love you’ve missed you’re nothing, Alfie.” (Note that in the first quotation, Gordon repeats the “What’s It All About” motive obsessively, just as the lyrics in the original tune do at the end!) “Round Midnight” is all about lost love and the hope of reconciliation: “Let the angels sing, for your returning.” The lyrics to “If You Could See Me Now” are also about lost love, but with a hint of hope: “I think you’d be mine again if you could see me now,” which is the exact phrase that is quoted in the Coda. Almost as an afterthought, Gordon quotes from the bridge of “Over the Rainbow,” which is also about wishing for something, with the hope that “the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true.”

The lyrics of many of the tunes relate to the body or the soul. “Round Midnight” relates to both, with references to the heart and the mind: “You’re out of my heart, and I’m out of my mind.” “Swinging On a Star” contains references to animal body parts—the ears, back, and brain of a mule, and the face of a pig. “Nancy With the Laughing Face” makes continual references to her face as a refrain, but also describes her beauty. The quotation that follows this one—“Oh, You Beautiful
Doll”—is a fitting comment on the former tune; it makes reference to arms, and of course, beauty. “Isn’t She Lovely” is about the beauty of a newborn baby. Many of the lyrics refer to the word heart. “What’s It All About” contains the line, “When you walk let your heart lead the way.” Then there is “With A Song in My Heart,” which also refers to “her adorable face,” her hand, and her voice. “’Round Midnight” makes four references to the heart; “If You Could See Me Now” makes one: “Without my heart behind the smile.”

**Conclusion**

Dexter Gordon is considered to be “the first musician to bring the language of Bebop to the tenor saxophone.” (dextergordon.com) This recording of “Body and Soul,” which borrows Coltrane’s “Giant-Steps” chord changes and a vamp from an earlier Coltrane recording, can be thought of as a tribute to the great tenor player, who died eleven years earlier. The track was recorded live by Gordon at the peak of his creativity, and his mastery of every aspect of his art is evident. In addition, for the first time in his life, he was working, playing, and recording for an extended period with a group of hand-picked musicians. Dexter’s masterful solo plus the consummate interaction among the musicians make this take an important contribution to jazz discography on “Body and Soul.”

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<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Quotation</th>
<th>Location in Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>Head:</td>
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<td>A1 A2 B1-B2 A3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gordon’s 1st Chorus:</td>
<td>Swinging On A Star</td>
<td>A1 A2 B1-B2 A3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gordon’s 2nd Chorus:</td>
<td>Nancy With The Laughing Face</td>
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<td>Oh, You Beautiful Doll</td>
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<td>What’s It All About, Alfie?</td>
<td>A1 A2 B1-B2 A3</td>
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<td>Make Someone Happy</td>
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<td>Cadenza:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Over the Rainbow (bridge)</td>
<td>Over final tonic pedal</td>
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References


Taverner Bertrand (1986). 'Round Midnight. Written by David Rayfiel and Mr. Tavernier; director of photography Bruno De Keyzer; edited by Armand Pesenny; music by Herbie Hancock; produced by Irwin Winkler; released by Warner Brothers.


Notes

A Philadelphia (PA).

1 An out-chorus is the final statement of the tune at the end of a jazz arrangement. In this case, Gordon omits the beginning of the last chorus and begins at the bridge.