

# An abbreviated history of Tenor Saxophone in Jazz

## About this episode

This episode introduces the history and lineage of the tenor saxophone in jazz and how conceptual and technical approaches to the horn have evolved throughout the history of the art form and the extent to which the technical and expressive capabilities of the horn have been explored and expanded by some of the instrument's most creative masters.

### The 1920s & 30s (Early Jazz)

Coleman Hawkins, Ben Webster, Lester Young

### The 1940s (Bebop)

Charlie Parker

### The 1950s (Hard Bop)

Dexter Gordon, Johnny Griffin, Sonny Rollins, Hank Mobley, Sonny Stitt

### The 1960s (Post-Bop)

John Coltrane, Wayne Shorter, Joe Henderson

### The 1970s (The Electric Revolution)

Charles Lloyd, Sam Rivers, Dewey Redman, and David Murray

### The 1980s and 1990s (The Acoustic Renaissance)

Branford Marsalis, Chris Potter, Joshua Redman, Michael Brecker, Joe Lovano, Mark Turner

### 2020s (Ever-Evolving)

## Learning objectives

- Learn about the role of the tenor saxophone in jazz.
- Learn about the history and lineage of jazz tenor saxophonists from the 1920s through the present.
- Learn about how conceptual and technical approaches to the instrument have evolved through the history of the artform.
- Learn about how the instrument's most creative masters have explored and expanded the technical and expressive capabilities of the saxophone.

## Preparatory activities

### Listen to the masters!

Listen to examples of jazz tenor saxophonists featured in the episode on the Audio Playlist which can be found on the episode homepage online at [jazzreach.org](http://jazzreach.org).

### Be on the lookout!

Prompt the students to listen for the featured musicians discussing the following topics during the episode and/or assign different students to follow specific musicians as they watch the episode. (See the list of the musicians featured in this episode in the summary below.)

- What is the role of the tenor saxophone in jazz?
- How have tenor saxophonists contributed to the sound and evolution of the art form?
- How do the featured musicians describe notable masters of the tenor saxophone, or specific bands and/or albums throughout the eras that resonate with them?

## Exploration questions/activities

Below are brief synopses of the style/sound/innovations of the tenor saxophone and some of the instrument's most creative masters through the eras. The descriptions summarize and reflect the unique perspectives of some of today's greatest practitioners of the instrument featured in this episode: Camille Thurman, Lucas Pino, Alexa Tarantino and Wayne Escoffery. Use these descriptions before, during, or after viewing the episode to reinforce the material!

### Use the information below and from the episode to discuss the following:

- What did you notice about how the tenor saxophone styles changed through the different eras? How did they stay the same?
- Did the sound/style of a particular saxophonist or specific era appeal to you?

## EARLY JAZZ: 1920s & 30s

During the emergence of early jazz, saxophonists were a part of an ensemble's woodwind section and would mostly play written or orchestrated parts that rarely required them to improvise or play a solo. During this era, the saxophone evolved from being a novelty instrument to being an instrument that displayed new harmonic and technical possibilities and beautiful sounds, as well as to being considered a solo instrument. The first three giants of tenor saxophone were Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, and Ben Webster.

### Coleman Hawkins

#### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Known as the "father of the saxophone"
- "Known for his approach to addressing and outlining harmony" (Alexa Tarantino)
- Hawkins was "able to play harmonically up and down the chords" (Wayne Escoffery)
- Had a rich, emotive, vibrato-filled saxophone sound
- He was the main influence to many saxophonists of his generation including Ben Webster, Buddy Tate and Don Byas.

*"As an individual he seems to be very open to the evolution of the music and to the innovation of the music and he's not trying to be stuck in past accomplishments or past sounds. He's just trying to forge ahead."* – Lucas Pino

### Ben Webster

#### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Webster played with Lester Young in the Young Family Band.
- The saxophonist worked with the acclaimed bands of Cab Calloway, Benny Carter and Fletcher Henderson.
- Webster was a soloist in the Duke Ellington Orchestra from 1940, appearing on "Cotton Tail".

- Towards the end of his career, Webster worked with such acclaimed artists as Coleman Hawkins, Art Tatum and Gerry Mulligan.

*“The energy and the passion that you hear coming out of that horn, it’s a whole other side to the tenor. You can hear the lineage from Coleman Hawkins, but you can still hear how he puts his own twist to it. He’s setting the path for all of those powerhouse tenors that follow after.”*

– Camille Thurman

### Lester Young

#### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Nicknamed “The Prez”.
- Young was known for his smooth, lyrical sound, his unrushed playing and unexpected harmonies.
- Young introduced a new way of holding his horn (to the side of his body) that many would adopt in years to come.
- As opposed to Coleman Hawkins’ harmonic approach to playing, Young introduced a very melodic approach.
- Young was a focal point of the Count Basie Orchestra, and worked with the vocalist Billie Holiday.

*“He’s showing how you can be a powerhouse and punch through those lines and sound amazing, but you can also play something that’s smooth and rich and velvety. And it can have just the same amount of sophistication and respect as the other approach.”* – Camille Thurman

### THE 1940s: BE-BOP!

This period marked the transition out of the swing era, where the music was functioning as society music meant for dancing, to Be-Bop, a groundbreaking style that expanded the boundaries of jazz improvisation.

### Charlie Parker

#### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Nicknamed “Bird” or “Yardbird”
- Parker developed much of the vocabulary of bebop.
- On alto saxophone, “Bird” set the caliber for bebop’s standard of excellence and virtuosity, and continues to inspire musicians to this day.
- Parker compositions such as “Ornithology”, “Yardbird Suite”, and “Anthropology” have become classic bebop standards which every jazz artist must learn.
- “Bird was such a statement, that I think it was hard for others to be in that realm” (Alexa Tarantino).

*“Even though he didn’t play the tenor saxophone, Charlie’s Parker’s impact right in the middle of the forties there pretty much influenced everybody who played an instrument, whether you played the soprano, the sopranino, baritone.”*

– Wayne Escoffery

### THE 1950s: HARD BOP!

By the 1950s, under the remarkable influence of Charlie Parker, a younger generation of visionary tenor players were forging exciting new approaches to the instrument. There was a competitive spirit among the musicians as they further expanded and developed the language into their own personal styles and sounds.

### Dexter Gordon

#### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Gordon was among the most influential early bebop musicians.
- Dexter Gordon adopted the language of Charlie Parker, finding innovative and creative ways of approaching the music and pushing the boundaries, while leaning into the vocabulary of the blues.

- His playing was lyrical, he had a great command of the instrument, and he had a “humongous” sound (Wayne Escoffery)
- Gordon had unique phrasing and would often play behind-the-beat, creating a relaxed sound that swung deeply.

*“When you hear someone like Dexter Gordon, the first thing you immediately hear is the way he’s treating the time, his feel, how he has a swagger in his sound.”*

– Lucas Pino

*“He never over played, he never played more than he had to, but he played so much... And of course, (he) epitomized cool.”*

– Wayne Escoffery

### Johnny Griffin

#### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- A masterful bebop player who’s fast playing got him the nickname “the fastest gun in the west”.
- He was also a great ballad player and known for playing melodies that were “very sing-song” (Alexa Tarantino).
- Griffin was a pioneering figure in the hard bop genre.
- Griffin performed and recorded alongside Thelonious Monk, Art Blakey, Eddie “LockJaw” Harris, Kenny Clarke and many more.
- As a bandleader, Griffin made his Blue Note debut in 1956 with the album **Introducing Johnny Griffin** which featured Wynton Kelly, Curly Russell and Max Roach.

*“He found a way to make the horn speak with fire...with the dexterity of Bird.”* – Camille Thurman

### Sonny Rollins

#### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Rollins is known for his unique approach to rhythm, the percussiveness of his sound, and for his use of melodic and rhythmic motifs.

- In his seven-decade career, he has recorded over 60 albums as a bandleader.

- Rollins has been identified as “the greatest living improviser” and nicknamed “saxophone colossus”.

- Well-known for his work with Miles Davis, Clifford Brown and Max Roach, as well as his stunning recordings as a bandleader.

- Some of his well-known recordings include Tenor Madness, Saxophone Colossus, and The Bridge.

*“Sonny will sometimes play ahead of the beat. Sometimes he’ll play behind the beat. Sometimes he’ll play this amorphous type of thing that envelops the beat. He’s also playing phrases that are odd, not so canned, maybe the same language but it’s turned on its side a bit.”*

– Lucas Pino

*“Sonny doesn’t sound like he’s striving for perfection. It sounds like he’s reaching for what’s next, what’s to come, what’s the next thing that I can possibly get to?”* – Lucas Pino

### Hank Mobley

#### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Nicknamed the “middleweight champion of the tenor saxophone”.
- Started his career performing with Dizzy Gillespie and Max Roach, and then was featured on Horace Silver and the Jazz Messengers.
- His 1956 debut album, Mobley’s Message, featured Jackie McLean and Donald Byrd.
- Mobley introduced a bluesy soulfulness to his music on albums such as Soul Station and Roll Call.
- Well-known for his beautiful, husky tone.

*“When I listen to him, he feels and sounds unencumbered by expectation and there’s a naturalness that comes out of it. It’s the type of playing that sounds like he’s not trying to prove anything.”* – Lucas Pino

## Sonny Stitt

### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Stitt was nicknamed “the lone wolf”, he had a tremendous work ethic but rarely played with the same musicians for long.
- Stitt played the alto and tenor saxophone within the bebop and hard bop genres.
- The saxophonist recorded over 100 albums.
- Stitt was a part of the big bands of Tiny Bradshaw, Billy Eckstine and Dizzy Gillespie.
- Stitt played briefly in Miles Davis’ quintet.

*“Sonny Stitt was a master of both the alto and the tenor. I love those players because you directly hear the history of the music summed up in their playing.” – Camille Thurman*

## THE 1960s: POST-BOP!

New genres and styles of black American music, such as gospel, rhythm & blues, rock & roll and soul music, emerged in the 1960s. The defining characteristics and sounds of American popular music permeated jazz and the tenor players of the era. Musicians were “experimenting with the sound” and “playing more extended techniques” (Lucas Pino). Three of the rising tenor stars were John Coltrane, Wayne Shorter, and Joe Henderson.

*“You start to see this generation of players now going beyond just playing the changes but seeing what can be done...How can we use our instrument? How can we use our rhythm? How can we use our sound? How can we use colors? How can we use tones? How can we use communication with the band, in telling the story?” – Camille Thurman*

*“What is capable on this instrument? What is being questioned? What tones can this thing produce?” – Lucas Pino*

## John Coltrane

### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Coltrane was a groundbreaking musician who worked in the bebop and hardbop idioms early in his career but then expanded to modal playing and into free jazz.
- Coltrane started his career working with bandleader Jimmy Heath, and then with Dizzy Gillespie, Earl Bostic and Johnny Hodges.
- The saxophonist rose to prominence in the Miles Davis Quintet, recording the seminal albums *Cookin’*, *Relaxin’*, *Workin’*, and *Steamin’*.
- Coltrane’s albums as a bandleader stand as quintessential jazz listening; albums like *Blue Train*, *Giant Steps*, *My Favorite Things*, and *A Love Supreme*.
- “Much like Charlie Parker, once John Coltrane hit the scene, it pretty much changed everything for everyone.”  
– Wayne Escoffery

*“When you check out his records, you hear the progression. You hear him dot the “I’s” and cross the “T’s,” speaking the language coming out of bird... You see him just opening up through time his perspective harmonically, rhythmically, and even spiritually.” – Camille Thurman*

*“When he’s invited into Miles Davis’ band, there’s a culture there of innovation. And there’s a culture of saying ‘we’re going to be the standard bearers, we’re going to be the tightest band.’” – Lucas Pino*

*“And Trane is stretching in a different way. In a more mathematical approach in terms of numbers and combinations and permutations. Even though it’s complex stuff, as a listener it feels very raw, very pure, very real. And it’s just one note, but the type of effect that he could create with one note, or one interval, stretching that out over the course of a whole solo.”  
– Alexa Tarantino*

*“The conversation within the music. Now it’s beyond just, ‘I’m playing a great solo. Now we’re telling stories with this music. We’re telling you stories with the lines that we play and we’re telling you stories harmonically.”*

– Camille Thurman

## Wayne Shorter

### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Shorter rose to prominence as a member of Art Blakey’s Jazz Messengers.
- The saxophonist was a member of Miles Davis’ second great quintet.
- Shorter is renowned for his groundbreaking, innovative compositions throughout all decades of his life.
- Wayne Shorter tapped into the harmonic possibilities and the spiritual side of the music, and, from a tonal standpoint, was clearly influenced by John Coltrane.
- Shorter co-founded the legendary jazz fusion group Weather Report.
- Compositions such as “Footprints”, “Speak No Evil”, and “Night Dreamer” have become quintessential jazz standards.

*“He has a brilliant mind and he extrapolated from his experiences the importance of finding his own voice.”* – Lucas Pino

*“He brought that openness into his compositions, and into his playing, and you could see the connection between him and Trane, too. And that willingness to be open, as far as how we’re speaking through the instrument, but also as far as how we’re seeing the changes.”* – Camille Thurman

## Joe Henderson

### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Characterized by a unique sound, a sensitive and expressive approach, and the knowledge to experiment with rhythm and harmony.

- Between 1963 - 1968, Henderson appeared on nearly 30 albums for Blue Note Records, including 5 where he was bandleader.
- His 1963 hard-bop classic Page One featured tunes like “Recorda Me” and “Blue Bossa” which went on to become jazz standards.
- His 1966 album Inner Urge explored new tonalities and featured rich, complex harmonic content.

*“He was able to explore the harmonic possibilities not just modally, but through a variety of different chord sequences over standard song forms.”* – Wayne Escoffery

*“You hear him experimenting with rhythms, playing with sextuplets, septuplets, playing against the time, in time, using time as a way of creating tension and release, not just harmonically doing that, but rhythmically doing that.”*

– Camille Thurman

## THE 1970s: THE ELECTRIC REVOLUTION

In the 1970s, the emergence of electric instruments and advancements in music recording technology expanded the creative possibilities for jazz musicians. The widening impact of pop music combined with greater access and exposure to musical styles from all over the world, inspired visionary jazz artists to merge genres, blur stylistic boundaries, and abandon conventional perceptions of what jazz was and could be. Musicians were “opening up even more” (Alexa Tarantino) and beginning to acknowledge that “we don’t have to adhere to the rules as much” (Lucas Pino).

*“The sax is starting to be seen in all genres. Not just a classical instrument. Not just a jazz/ bebop instrument. The saxophone becomes the quintessential horn.”*

– Alexa Tarantino

*“The playing seems more art-oriented. More holistic. Let me make a piece a statement. Records from the 50s and 60s feel more episodic*

– here’s a track, here’s a track, here’s a track.  
 As jazz is losing its popular music status to rock and roll, you have this desire to want to get back into popularity and it is influencing the music. With Weather Report and synthesizers, the electric bass. Influences of Eastern music. Indian influences. That evolution continued that John Coltrane started in the 60s.”  
 – Lucas Pino

### **THE 1980s & 90s: THE ACOUSTIC RENAISSANCE!**

In the 1980s, Wynton Marsalis, a virtuosic young trumpeter, arrived on the world stage. He placed a premium on blues and swing traditions and the notion that the musical achievements and legacies of previous generations should be more widely acknowledged, revisited, performed, and celebrated. He was a huge commercial success, and his charisma, and deeply felt convictions and ideals have inspired new generations of jazz musicians ever since.

#### **Branford Marsalis**

##### **Defining Style and Characteristics:**

- Brother of trumpeter Wynton Marsalis.
- A member of Art Blakey’s Jazz Messengers
- Branford’s debut album Scenes in the City was released in 1985.
- Primarily known as the leader of the Branford Marsalis Quartet, originally featuring drummer Jeff “Tain” Watts, pianist Kenny Kirkland, and bassist Robert Hurst
- While Branford Marsalis plays many different styles of music, which vary from album to album, he also maintains the focus on the tradition of swing.

*“You have this turn back towards bebop, and this turn back toward the language that Charlie Parker invented. Even with the music that Wynton and Branford Marsalis were playing, they were still trying to innovate. But they kind of re-grounded the music in the swinging tradition.”* – Lucas Pino

#### **Chris Potter**

##### **Defining Style and Characteristics:**

- Potter came to prominence as a sideman with trumpeter Red Rodney
- Potter would go on to perform with Paul Motian, Dave Holland, Dave Douglas, Pat Metheny, Kenny Werner and many more.
- Well-known for his electric ensemble featuring Craig Taborn on keys, Wayne Krantz on guitar and Nate Smith on Drums.
- Albums like Underground and Follow the Red Line: Live at the Village Vanguard showcase Potter’s technical virtuosity and his deep soulfulness.

Chris Potter is “taking all of the stuff that came before and doing an extended, overlapped exploration of different traditions.”  
 (Alexa Tarantino).

#### **Joshua Redman**

##### **Defining Style and Characteristics:**

- Son of saxophonist Dewey Redman
- Rose to prominence after the release of his seminal album Joshua Redman, which earned him his first grammy nomination.
- On Redman’s second album, he was joined by legends Pat Metheny, Billy Higgins and Charlie Haden, that group became the Joshua Redman Quartet with Christian McBride replacing Charlie Haden.
- Albums such as Wish and Elastic showcase Redman’s tremendous range.

Joshua Redman has an amazing range, incredible technical mastery, and stretched the instrument to different sounds and possibilities. His playing demonstrates having a serious foundation of the history of the instrument and “a lot of personality” (Wayne Escoffery).

*“So now we’re tapping into new sounds. Now we’re tapping into new ways of expressing our ideas because we have this incredible range to work from.”* – Camille Thurman

## Michael Brecker

### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Brecker first rose to prominence in the jazz-rock band Dreams, which featured him and his older brother Randy Brecker.
- Brecker is perhaps best known for the legendary jazz-funk band The Brecker Brothers.
- As a prolific sideman, Brecker appeared on nearly 900 albums, including on hit albums by Steely Dan, Joni Mitchell, Frank Sinatra, John Lennon and many more.
- Brecker released iconic albums as a bandleader including *Time Is Of The Essence*, *Nearness of You*, and *Wide Angles*.

A great innovator of his generation, Michael Brecker's tone is described as "perfect," and becomes the quintessential pop saxophone sound" (Alexa Tarantino).

*"A lot of what happened really, from Michael Brecker on, is these guys being able to play the heck out of the saxophone."* – Wayne Escoffery

*"When you hear Michael Brecker's tone, it just cuts through."* – Alexa Tarantino

## Joe Lovano

### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Lovano gained recognition performing with Jack McDuff, Lonnie Smith and the Woody Herman Orchestra.
- In the 1980's, Lovano worked extensively with guitarist John Scofield, as well as with a trio featuring guitarist Bill Frisell and drummer Paul Motian.
- Lovano recorded iconic albums for Blue Note Records including *Landmarks*, and *From the Soul*.
- Lovano's iconic sound has influenced many, and he is still actively touring and recording.

Joe Lovano plays with conviction and has a unique approach to lines and harmony.

*"A lot of tenor players, after hearing Joe Lovano, sound like Joe Lovano. And that's a testament to his individuality."* – Wayne Escoffery

## Mark Turner

### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Turner draws influence from Warne Marsh and John Coltrane
- Turner released his debut album *Yam Yam* in 1995, the album featured pianist Brad Mehldau, guitarist Kurt Rosenwinkel, bassist Larry Grenadier and drummer Jorge Rossy.
- Turner actively performs and records with such renowned musicians as Billy Hart, Gilad Hekselman, Kurt Rosenwinkel and many more.
- The saxophonist has played or collaborated with over 45 jazz groups.
- Turner continues to perform and record actively.

*"Mark Turner has his vastly different approach. It almost takes me back to some of those earlier batches of tenor players, but with a more contemporary approach to harmony."*  
– Alexa Tarantino

## THE 2020s: EVER-EVOLVING

In this concluding segment, the featured musicians listed many of their favorite saxophonists who are thriving and flourishing today – inspiring musicians coming from different backgrounds and different influences. They included: George Coleman, Seamus Blake, Immanuel Wilkins, Abraham Burton, Walter Smith III, Sam Dillon, Roxy Coss, J.D. Allen, Melissa Aldana, Chad Lefkowitz Brown, and Myron Walden. Additional present-day saxophonists mentioned by the episode narrator were: David Sanchez, Donny McCaslin, Marcus Strickland, Dana Stephens, and Ben Wendell.



## Further exploration

Have your students choose an era and/or musician from the episode and conduct research to create a written, oral, or multimedia presentation, including an explanation of why they chose this particular era or artist. They can discuss innovations of the era or by the musician and/or focus on the historical/social/political/cultural context of the time.

Here are some possible areas of focus:

- Choose a musician and conduct research about their personal journey with jazz; how they began their musical careers; their main contributions to jazz history; the characteristics of their style; who their influences were and/or who they influenced.
- Provide an overview of one of the eras and look at how music is influenced by the historical, social, political, and/or cultural context of that time.

In the episode, tenor saxophonist Alexa Tarantino described the playing of three of the jazz greats who emerged in the 1960s: John Coltrane, Wayne Shorter, and Joe Henderson. Use this quote as a basis for discussions about self-expression; breaking boundaries; and how music can express such a wide variety of emotions.

*“(With those three) It’s much more about self-expression, it’s much less about form and more about creating a statement over time. They’re breaking the boundaries of the instrument, of what we thought was happening. A raw self-expression a raw presentation. Pure emotion, whether it’s anger, whether it’s joy, whether it’s frustration, I think these are all things that we hear in their music, and I can’t imagine the plethora of emotions that would have come up during that time as a creative and black person. To have music as an outlet, we are privileged to be able to experience the results of that.”*

– Alexa Tarantino

- How are music and other art forms an outlet for creativity and self-expression?
- What does it mean to break the boundaries as an artist? Find examples of musicians and artists breaking boundaries.

- How do musicians and other artists express emotions through their art forms?

Similarly, Camille Thurman discussed how musicians were using music to not only express their feelings, but also the world around them.

*“You look at the big picture: ‘oh wow, they really used their music to express not just how they’re feeling but to express the world that they were in.”*

– Camille Thurman

- How do artists express what’s happening in the world around them? For example, in music, paintings, dance pieces, film, and theater?
- How is expressing emotions and reflecting the world around them different for musicians than for other types of artists?

In the episode, tenor saxophonist Wayne Escoffery talked about the black empowerment movement happening in the 1960s and 70s, and how that influenced the musicians.

*“Think about what was happening in the 60s and the 70s, black empowerment. They internalized that, and it came out on their instruments. Music is mirroring what’s happening in societies, what’s happening in people’s lives.”* – Wayne Escoffery

- Discuss the black empowerment movement of the 1960s and 70s and the impact it had on people during the time. How did it impact other art forms besides music?
- What are some examples of social/political movements throughout history or that are currently happening and how do they impact artists?

## Musicians in this Episode

Wayne Escoffery, Lucas Pino, Alexa Tarantino and Camille Thurman (Tenor Saxophone)