

“GO”--Dexter Gordon (1962)

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Essay by Alex Henderson (guest post)*



Dexter Gordon

When Dexter Gordon recorded “GO” for Blue Note Records on August 27, 1962, jazz was moving in many different directions. Tenor/soprano saxophonist John Coltrane and trumpeter Miles Davis were leading the modal explosion, alto saxophonist Ornette Coleman and pianist Cecil Taylor were exploring the possibilities of dissonant free jazz, and the soul-jazz organists of Philadelphia favored a funky, groove-oriented mixture of jazz and R&B. Gordon, however, remained a committed hard bopper, although “GO” was by no means a carbon copy of the tenor saxophonist’s 1940s and 1950s output.

“GO” came at a time when Gordon was enjoying a renaissance despite his well-publicized battles with heroin addiction and periods of incarceration during the 1950s. Although Gordon was among the most influential bop saxophonists of the 1940s, he recorded only sporadically during the following decade. Gordon, in fact, was on parole from California’s Chino Prison when, in 1960, alto saxophonist Cannonball Adderley produced his comeback album, “The Resurgence of Dexter Gordon,” for the Jazzland label--and the following year, Gordon signed with Blue Note.

Gordon’s Blue Note albums of 1961-1965 are widely regarded as being among the most essential of his career--including “GO,” which underscores the ways in which he had evolved since his “Daddy Plays the Horn” and “Dexter Blows Hot and Cool” sessions of 1955. Gordon was still quite distinctive and recognizable, and many of his 1940s influences remained (including Coleman Hawkins and Lester Young). Yet on “GO” and other albums he recorded for Blue Note in the early to mid-1960s, one hears Gordon incorporating elements of Coltrane and Sonny Rollins--two of the most influential tenor saxophonists of that era.

The Coltrane influence one hears on hard-swinging uptempo selections like “Cheesecake” (a Gordon original), Billy Eckstine’s “Second Balcony Jump” and a stellar performance of Cole Porter’s “Love for Sale” as well as the Jule Styne/Sammy Cahn ballad “I Guess I’ll Hang My

"Tears Out to Dry" is ironic in light of the fact that Gordon was among Coltrane's early influences. Listening to Coltrane's solos of the early 1950s, one hears a saxophonist who was still emulating Gordon and had yet to develop his own sound. But by the time he joined Miles Davis' quintet in 1955, Coltrane had become quite distinctive--and countless saxophonists were influenced by his hard bop of the late 1950s and his modal post-bop breakthroughs of the early 1960s. Gordon was among them: he went from being a primary influence *on* Coltrane to being influenced *by* Coltrane. The teacher, in other words, ultimately learned some valuable things from his students.

Under the direction of its co-founder, Alfred Lion (who produced "GO"), Blue Note had an insightful A&R department. Lion not only knew what material would work well for artists who were part of the Blue Note roster--he also knew what combinations of players would be successful. And "GO" is no exception: the album found Gordon leading a cohesive acoustic quartet that also included Sonny Clark (a fine bop pianist influenced by Bud Powell and Thelonious Monk), bassist Butch Warren and drummer Billy Higgins. It's no coincidence that "GO," for all its improvisation, sounds so focused and that Gordon's Blue Note output was so consistent: Lion's A&R instincts served him well.

Thanks to his trailblazing work with Ornette Coleman's group in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Higgins went down in history as a crucial figure in the development of free jazz. But most of the albums Higgins appeared on during that time were not avant-garde, and his flawless work on "GO" shows why Gordon and many other bop musicians held him in such high regard.

In 1962, the bossa nova movement and Brazilian jazz were taking the world by storm thanks to the likes of singer/guitarist João Gilberto, composer/pianist Antonio Carlos Jobim and tenor saxophonist Stan Getz--and Gordon employed a Brazilian beat on "Love for Sale." But while the bossa nova as envisioned by Gilberto, Jobim and Getz favored a subtle, understated mixture of cool jazz and samba, Gordon's approach was decidedly more aggressive. On "Love for Sale," Gordon successfully combined a Brazilian beat with the passion and intensity of hard bop.

Throughout his career, Gordon was known for his gutsy uptempo performances as well as for his expressive, torchy ballad playing--both of which are very much in evidence on "GO" as it swung unapologetically hard on uptempo selections such as "Cheesecake" and "Love for Sale," while "I Guess I'll Hang My Tears Out to Dry" and Jimmy McHugh's "Where Are You?" are first-rate examples of Gordon's masterful ballad playing.

First published in 1919, the Julián Robledo standard "Three O'Clock in the Morning" is a waltz that was popular in the 1920s--so popular that author F. Scott Fitzgerald even mentioned it in his famous 1925 novel, "The Great Gatsby." And it was a major hit for bandleader Paul Whiteman in 1922. But when Gordon recorded "Three O'Clock in the Morning" for "GO" 40 years after Whiteman's famous version, he clearly wasn't going for 1920s nostalgia. Performed at a comfortable medium tempo, Gordon's 1962 interpretation was hard bop all the way.

Sadly, Clark had less than half a year to live when he was featured on "GO": the pianist died on January 13, 1963 at the age of 31. Clark suffered heart failure, which was seemingly caused by a heroin overdose. But for someone who died so young, Clark left behind a long and impressive

resumé that included the albums he recorded for Blue Note as a leader as well as his work as a sideman for clarinetist Buddy DeFranco, alto saxophonist Jackie McLean and many others. In addition to “GO,” Clark was featured on Gordon’s Blue Note album “A Swingin’ Affair” (which was recorded only two days after “GO” and uses the same quartet).

Born on February 27, 1923, Gordon was in his late 30s and early 40s during his Blue Note period of 1961-1965. And on “GO,” there is no doubt that the tenor saxophone giant was very much at the height of his powers.

Alex Henderson, based in Philadelphia, is a veteran journalist known for covering politics as well as arts and entertainment. His work has appeared in “Salon,” “Billboard,” the “L.A. Weekly,” “AlterNet,” “Spin,” and many other major publications. In the 1990s and 2000s, Henderson contributed several thousand reviews to AllMusic’s website and series of reference books.

*The opinions expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect the views of the Library of Congress.