

100 Years of Alto, C-Melody and Soprano Saxophone Artists in Jazz and Popular American Music

Compiled by Jason Mingledorff (2022)

*The following is a list of prominent alto, C-melody, and soprano saxophonists who've made significant impacts on jazz and popular American music and brief descriptions of their music and importance. Many of these artists also played other instruments, especially tenor saxophone, but they are listed here because their contributions are, to many listeners, more significant on these instruments. I've grouped them together in categories for easy comparison, but please be aware that these categories can be somewhat arbitrary and can often overlap each other. You could easily argue that some of these musicians should be included in more than one group (or none at all), but I feel that there are general similarities within groups of them that make it easier to compare them than if I just listed them all in chronological order by birth. There are over 90 artists listed, so I've put a * next to a handful that are among the most influential and recommend that you start by checking out their music first.*

Light-Classical/Early Popular Music

Rudy Wiedoeft (1893-1940 – Conn, Selmer) – Weidoeft popularized the saxophone, particularly the C-melody, in the 1920s with his virtuosic technique, which included a mastery of double tongue, slap tongue, and sound effects. Most of his music consisted of light classical pieces, ragtimes and Tin Pan Alley tunes. With hundreds of recordings, he was an immensely popular showman (definitely not a jazzman). Some of Wiedoeft's hit recordings, which all seemed to have cheesy titles, include "Saxophobia" (the biggest saxophone hit in history at its time), "Sax-o-Phun" (featuring the laughing sax and slap tongue), and "Valse Vanité" (showing off his double-tongue technique).

Tom Brown (1881-1950 – Buescher) - Helping Weidoeft make the saxophone the country's most popular instrument (in the 1920s, music stores literally could not keep them on their shelves) was Tom Brown, whose Six Brown Brothers had huge hits (including "Bull Frog Blues" and "Smiles and Chuckles") with their vaudevillian show that (unfortunately) included them clowning around in blackface. The great irony to me in this is that their racist lampooning helped make the saxophone a household item, thus making it readily available to black musicians who eventually used the saxophone to create some of the century's greatest art and some of black America's most memorable contributions to American culture.

Al Gallodoro (1913-2008 - Selmer) – After spending his formative years in New Orleans, Gallodoro became a top session musician in New York, eventually playing lead alto in Paul Whiteman's Orchestra and bass clarinet in the NBC Symphony Orchestra (that's him playing the iconic clarinet portamento scooping introduction to "Rhapsody in Blue"). One of the most technically proficient saxophonists of any era (listen to his flawless double tonguing on his "Czardas"), Gallodoro is respected as a saxophone master by generations of saxophonists. **Freddy Gardner** was a popular British saxophonist who, like Gallodoro, also straddled that line between commercial pop/swing and a classical style (his old French-style vibrato and virtuosic altissimo control can be heard in full effect on Peter Yorke's "I Only Have Eyes for You").

Early Jazz

Sidney Bechet (1887-1959 - Buescher) – New Orleans' Bechet was a master clarinetist and soprano saxophonist whose influence and popularity can't be overstated. Known for his fast, wide vibrato and expressive musicality, Bechet became a towering figure in early jazz, particularly in Europe. Highlights of his recording career include "Wild Cat Blues" (as part of Clarence Williams' Blue Five), the exuberant "Sweetie Dear", "Blue Horizon" (on his smoldering clarinet, but too good not to include), "Petit Fleur", "Si Tu Vois Ma Mère", and "Summertime".

Frankie Trumbauer (1901-1956 - Holton) – Trumbauer played the C-melody sax and was known for his delicate tone and lyrical yet restrained scooping melodic lines. He had a huge influence on Lester Young and all of Pres's acolytes. His solo on "Singin' the Blues" (with frequent bandmate Bix Beiderbecke) is a classic. Their recording of "Way Down Yonder in New Orleans" and Paul Whiteman's recording of "You Took Advantage of Me" are also great showcases of Trumbauer's ethereal sound. "Trumbology" is an impressive example of Trumbauer's expert use of rapid double-tonguing, something any follower of Weidoeft would have had to master.

Swing Jazz

***Johnny Hodges** (1907-1970 – Buescher Aristocrat Big B) – Duke Ellington's star soloist, Hodges (also known as Jeep and Rabbit) is perhaps the best known (and most copied) alto saxophonist of the swing era (he was also a fine soprano player). His buttery tone and expressive, bluesy nuances (he often would scoop a note up large intervals – a technique known as portamento) were perfectly displayed in ballads like "Passion Flower" (the version on Rosemary Clooney's Blue Rose features Hodges nicely) and "I Got it Bad" and on blues like "Jeep's Blues". "The Jeep is Jumpin'" and Lionel Hampton's "On the Sunny Side of the Street" show that he could also swing out joyfully. Early recordings by Duke Ellington of "The Gal from Joe's" and "It Don't Mean a Thing" were also wonderful showcases for Rabbit. Later on, he was much more economical with his notes, and his solo on "The Intimacy of the Blues" is a lesson on restraint (and a great solo for first time transcribers).

***Benny Carter** (1907-2003 – Conn 6M) – Another one of the swing alto masters, Benny had a long (LONG), fruitful career as a leading saxophonist, arranger, composer, and trumpeter(?!). Early collaborations with Lionel Hampton ("I'm in the Mood for Swing") and Coleman Hawkins (The Chocolate Drops' "I Can't Believe That You're in Love with Me") show Carter's swinging facility and pure tone. "Lonely Nights" and "Symphony of Riffs" are great examples of his inventive sax soli writing. The album Further Definitions has an all-star ensemble with great arrangements by Carter ("Honeysuckle Rose" and "Crazy Rhythm" are two highlights). Amazingly, Benny was still playing beautifully well into his 80s, winning a Grammy for his solo on 1995's "Prelude to a Kiss".

Willie Smith (1910-1967 – Buescher, Selmer Radio Improved) – The third of the three great swing era alto saxophonists (along with Hodges and Carter), Smith was a star soloist with the Jimmie Lunceford Orchestra (for whom he also wrote some very forward thinking and original arrangements – check out their "Sophisticated Lady"). He was also featured with Harry James and Duke Ellington for a while. His deep, expressive tone and virtuosic, harmonically rich soloing were a kind of stylistic mix of Hodges' and Carter's approaches to playing. Finding examples of his soloing is hard, but there's a

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great YouTube video of Willie playing “Sophisticated Lady” with the Duke Ellington Orchestra. Harry James featured Smith prominently on “Moten Swing” and “Who’s Sorry Now.” Smith’s versions of “Tea for Two” and “The Way You Look Tonight” are two other great examples of his virtuosic soloing.

Other swing era alto greats: **Jimmy Dorsey** – the popular bandleader and clarinetist was also a respected alto saxophonist (“Beebe” shows the strong influence of Al Gallodoro and his former bandmate Trumbauer had on his playing); **Buster Smith** – Kansas City player who mentored Charlie Parker; **Pete Brown** – highly respected NYC altoist.

Many of the swing era’s greatest alto players are known mainly for their work as lead altoist for the top bands of the day. Standouts include **Otto Hardwick** (Duke Ellington); **Russel Procope** (Fletcher Henderson, Ellington, and John Kirby Sextet); **Les Robinson** (Artie Shaw, “Temptation”); **Earle Warren** (Count Basie Basie - late 30s and 40s, “Cattin”); **Bobby Smith** (Erskine Hawkins - check out his sultry “Desert Night”). **Marshal Royal** was the lead alto for Basie’s “Second Testament” big band for over twenty years and defined the sax section Basie sound with his wide, expressive vibrato and hard swinging style.

Bebop

***Charlie “Bird” Parker** (1920-1955 – Conn 6M, Buescher, King Super 20, Grafton, *anything*): The legend, the most influential musician after Louis Armstrong, the greatest saxophonist of all time - what more can I say? Bird came from Kansas City, and the city’s blues-based swing bands, like Count Basie’s (particularly his star soloist, tenor saxophonist Lester Young), were a huge influence on him. After moving to New York, he created, along with trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, a revolution in jazz called bebop. He had a strong blues foundation (check out “Parker’s Mood”) and inspired listeners with his ability to play complex, harmonically and rhythmically rich solos at blistering speeds (“Koko”). On many recordings, like “Embraceable You”, he’d combine these qualities to create iconic solos that made every jazz musician want to play like him. He also showed his versatility with a beautiful album accompanied by strings (“Just Friends” is a highlight). Unfortunately, problems with addiction took him away while he was still young. However, he continues to be the single greatest influence on jazz improvisers today.

Phil Woods (1931-2015 – Selmer Mark VI, Yamaha Custom): Phil was the keeper of the Charlie Parker flame (he even married Bird’s widow!) and always brought a fiery bop sensibility to his playing. Whether playing scorching burners (George Wallington’s “Together We Wail”) or sensuous ballads (Quincy Jones’ “Quintessence”), Phil always showed a strong command of the instrument. This helped make him the leading alto saxophonist of the 1970s. He even contributed iconic solos to pop music (Billy Joel’s “Just the Way You Are” and Steely Dan’s “Doctor Wu”).

Sonny Stitt (1924-1982 – Selmer Mark VI): Stitt was consistently a monster bebop saxophonist, and one of the rare few who was equally adept on tenor and alto. A master of fast tempos, his clean technique made him a perfect foil for other saxophonists (“Eternal Triangle” (with Sonny Rollins) and “There Is No Greater Love” (with Gene Ammons) are two great examples - both on tenor). When playing alto, comparisons to Bird are inevitable, but I’d say Stitt’s approach to time is much more

straight forward and precise. Sonny Stitt Sits in with Oscar Peterson (“I Can’t Give You Anything but Love” is a classic) is a wonderful example of Stitt’s beautiful alto playing.

Sonny Criss (1927-1977): Criss is an often overlooked and underappreciated West Coast bopper who had a piercing, bluesy sound that came straight out of the Charlie Parker tradition. He came to prominence in the early 1950s in his late teens and soon was featured on Norman Granz’s Jazz at the Philharmonic tours. His strong bop sensibility can be heard on consistently fine albums such as Sonny Criss Plays Cole Porter and Go Man (check out his burning solo on “After You’ve Gone”).

Cool Bop

Lee Konitz (1927-2020 – Selmer Balanced Action): Konitz was a leading figure in the West Coast “cool” style of jazz, having played on Miles’ Davis’s landmark Birth of the Cool album. He was a student of pianist Lennie Tristano and forged a very original sound in a time when everyone was trying to sound like Bird. His detached, methodic style is in fine form on “Subconscious-Lee” and his duets with Gerry Mulligan (“Lady Be Good”) and fellow Tristano disciple Warne Marsh (Live at the Half Note). The 1961 album Motion (featuring drummer Elvin Jones) is undoubtedly Konitz at his best, playing phrases over the bar line and delaying resolutions as he obscures the forms of standards like “I Remember You.”

***Paul Desmond** (1924-1977 – Selmer Mark VI): Desmond was famous as the soloist for Dave Brubeck, who had a huge hit with his complex meter classic “Take Five”. Desmond had a light, lilting tone and a very melodic approach, definitely influenced by Trumbauer, Young and Konitz (he was one of the few alto players in the 50s that wasn’t noticeably influenced by Bird). The bespectacled West Coast saxophonist was known for his dry wit and once said that he was trying to sound like “a dry martini”. His reading of “Perdido” on Dave Brubeck’s Live at Oberlin set shows Desmond in top form and his mastery of contrapuntal playing can be heard on his duets with Gerry Mulligan (“Easy Living” from Two of a Mind).

Art Pepper (1925-1982 - Martin): Along with Desmond, Pepper was another West Coast follower of Konitz’s cool approach to jazz. He came to prominence in Stan Kenton’s band and became very popular in the 1950s (second only to Bird in the Downbeat polls), although drug abuse and prison sentences hampered his career at times. Compared to other cool jazz improvisers, Pepper’s playing could be quite emotional, and later recordings added an extra layer of seasoning to his clear, melodic tone. Two classic albums are Art Pepper Meets the Rhythm Section (with Miles Davis’ rhythm section – check out “You’d Be So Nice to Come Home To”) and Art Pepper + Eleven (“Groovin’ High”).

Hard Bop

***Julian “Cannonball” Adderley** (1928-1975 – King Super 20): Cannonball combined blistering technique and a bluesy soulfulness, becoming one of the leading hard bop altoists in the decades after Charlie Parker. His time with Miles Davis (“Milestones” has one of his greatest solos) made the former band director a star. He basically steals the show on Miles’ live rendition of “Oleo” (Jazz at the Plaza), and his album with Miles’ band (Somethin’ Else) is a classic (it includes a great version of “Autumn Leaves”). His later Quintet with his brother Nat embraced a funky, blues sound (“Mercy,

Mercy, Mercy” is a beloved song from that period). Their live version in Japan of “Work Song” is bluesy, yet ferocious. Highly recommended! **Vincent Herring** carries Cannonball’s flame as a member of Nat Adderley’s Quintet and on a number of excellent hard bop solo releases (Night and Day).

Jackie McClean (1931-2006 – Buescher True Tone): To me, Jackie is the epitome of the hard bop sound. His biting, edgy tone and aggressive attack of the chord changes had a blues sensibility that is exciting to listen to (almost the opposite of the detached cool school approach). He could sometimes be terribly out of tune, but his unique sound makes an impression and has a lot of admirers. Highlights include “Blues Function” and “Tune Up” (which amusingly starts off with band members actually tuning up). He also contributes a raw, bluesy solo to Sonny Clark’s “Cool Struttin”.

Lou Donaldson (1926-present): Donaldson is one of the leading alto saxophonists in the hard-bop/soul jazz style. His “Alligator Bogaloo” is a classic of the idiom. He has strong roots in hard-bop (Art Blakey Quintet’s Night at Birdland) but made a name for himself with his funky, soulful albums on Blue Note Records (Blues Walk is a classic). His simple, gospel-drenched solo on “Soul Meetin” is a great solo for beginning transcribers to learn.

Post-Bop/Avant Garde

***Ornette Coleman** (1930-2015 – Grafton): Ornette took the jazz world by storm with a whole new approach to improvisation and composition that inspired a new avant-garde style, called free jazz, that pushed the boundaries of what people thought of as jazz (or music). His album The Shape of Jazz to Come is a classic, filled with melodic blues-infused lines that didn’t follow the standard rules of form, harmony, and time (“Lonely Woman” is a highlight). His unconventional approach inspired many musicians to find their own personal style and he continued to explore different sounds and textures throughout his long career. A strong blues influence on his playing can be heard on early compositions like “When Will the Blues Leave” and “Turnaround”. His album “Free Jazz” featured two quartets (each with sax, trumpet, bass, and drums) playing together in different tempos and keys. To some it was a fresh new sound, to others it was garbage (it got both 5 stars and 0 stars in Downbeat). There is no doubt, however, that Ornette was a huge influence on the history of jazz.

Eric Dolphy (1928-1964 - Selmer): Dolphy was a gifted multi-instrumentalist and is considered one of the leading improvisers on bass clarinet and flute (check out his version of “You Don’t Know What Love Is”). Known by most as a periodic member of John Coltrane’s later band, Dolphy also played with Ornette Coleman (Free Jazz) and Charles Mingus (his duet on bass clarinet with Mingus on “What Love” is a powerful conversation between two giants). He also dabbled in third-stream jazz with Chico Hamilton (check out his classical vibrato on “Under Paris Skies”). As an improviser, he was beloved for his obtuse, unpredictable lines and intensity (his tone could be beautiful, strident, haunting, and disturbing – all in the same song!). His album Out to Lunch is a classic avant-garde jazz offering that he happened to release just before his untimely death (from a heart attack related to diabetes).

Steve Lacy (1934-2004 – Selmer Mark VI): Lacy was certainly the preeminent soprano saxophonist in the second half of the 20th century. After an early career playing traditional jazz, Lacy began promoting modern jazz in the 50s, particularly the music of Thelonious Monk (1958’s Reflections is a high-water mark - one of his many Monk inspired albums). He absorbed the influence of Ornette

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Coleman in the 60s and continued to record and perform highly original modern jazz throughout his career. He was particularly gifted as a solo saxophonist (check out his “Tao Cycle” on Remains), a master of using repetition to explore the different colors the soprano could paint with. Longtime bandmember and altoist **Steve Potts**, with his almost sour tone and unpredictable lines, was a perfect foil for Lacy in their many duets.

Gary Bartz (1940-present – Yanagisawa): Bartz is a Julliard trained altoist who played with Art Blakey and Miles Davis (Live/Evil), later becoming a leading saxophonist in a style that combined hard-bop, late period Coltrane modality, soul, and funk music. His strong, focused sound often mines the lower range of the alto, giving it a resonant robustness. His band Ntu Troop’s “Blue (a Folk Tale)” from Harlem Bush Music – Uhuru is an epic survey of the blues art form, and the beautiful live record I’ve Known Rivers and Other Bodies has a social consciousness that is prominent in much of Bartz’s music. He has continued to dabble in funk (Music is My Sanctuary) and hard-bop (Woody Shaw’s “What Is This Thing Called Love” on Unity) and currently teaches at Oberlin Conservatory.

Arthur Blythe (1940 – 2017 – Buescher True Tone): Blythe effectively straddled the worlds of the avant-garde and traditional jazz with his distinctive sound, which was aggressive and full-bodied, with a wide vibrato. His album Lenox Avenue Breakdown is a classic and is a great example of his experimental yet accessible approach. Blythe’s playing on Steve Reid’s Rhythmatism (check out “Rocks (for Cannonball)”) shows the late-Coltrane influence in his playing but also a funky earthiness that drives this lost masterpiece. He later joined up with avant-garde supergroups The Leaders and the World Saxophone Quartet.

Sonny Fortune (1939-2018 - Selmer): Strongly influenced by fellow Philadelphian John Coltrane, Fortune had a strong, aggressive sound that continued Trane’s legacy after he died, playing extensively with many of Coltrane’s former band members – McCoy Tyner, Elvin Jones, and Rashied Ali. After a stint with Miles Davis in the early 70s (his playing on “Prelude (Part 1)” is a highlight of Agharta), Fortune embarked on a solo career that often highlighted his interest in African and Latin music (Sterengeti Minstrel and Long Before Our Mother’s Cried).

Anthony Braxton (1945-present): One the most curious and experimental saxophonists in jazz, Braxton pushed the limits of not only what a jazz composition is, but also of what the saxophone (and contrabass clarinet!) could do. With songs titles like “6-77AR-37K (Opus 23B),” Braxton doesn’t even consider himself a jazzman, preferring the more accurate term “creative musician.” An early member of Chicago’s Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, Braxton made a huge statement in the world of free jazz with the first solo saxophone album (a double album, at that) – For Alto. This prolific artist has put out over 100 albums of various music, including duos, symphony works, and jazz standards.

Kenny Garrett (1960-present – Selmer Mark VI): Garrett came to prominence in Miles Davis’s band during the trumpet player’s “electric” period (Amandla and Live Around the World – check out his solo on “Human Nature”). Since then this Detroit native and perennial Downbeat favorite has become one of the most respected altoists in modern jazz (he also plays soprano and tenor sax beautifully). His albums Persuance: The Music of John Coltrane and Songbook are definitely worth checking out.

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Jan Garbarek (1946-present - Rampone): This Norwegian saxophonist has forged his own unique sound and approach, which can be found on many of the ECM label's recordings. While equally adept on tenor saxophone (Keith Jarrett's Belonging), Jan's soprano work particularly stands out (Jarrett's "My Song" is a lovely example). His edgy yet wide sound comes from a background in free jazz (Albert Ayler was an early influence), but he plays dramatic, atmospheric music that draws from different cultures, including Scandinavia, India and Pakistan (Folk Songs and I Took Up the Runes). Some of his music can verge on sounding like new age music, but his complex sound and intense approach give his music a depth that other new age-related artists (like proto-smooth jazz icon **John Klemmer**) rarely achieve.

Jane Ira Bloom (1955-present – Selmer Mark VI) – An innovative composer and performer, Bloom is a masterful soprano saxophonist, with a beautiful, lyrical tone that sets her apart from others ("For All We Know" showcases her warm (and in tune!) sound very well). Bloom has also been a pioneer in combining art mediums, using painting, dance, and electronics in conjunction with music to create original performances that push the bounds of what is normally thought of as jazz. Her album of music inspired by the poetry of Emily Dickinson (Wild Lines) is a great representation of Bloom's fresh, inspiring approach and impressive command of an instrument that many have a hard time controlling. Another impressive soprano saxophonist who shares Bloom's adventurous spirit is **Sam Newsome**, who has a great blog, sopranosaxtalk.blogspot.com, that delves into many of the adventurous paths the soprano sax has taken.

More Soprano Players: A number of tenor saxophonists have embraced the soprano and at times made it their main instrument. **John Coltrane** popularized it with his hit version of "My Favorite Things," making it sound almost like a Middle Eastern instrument. **Wayne Shorter, Rahsaan Roland Kirk, Dave Liebman, Joe Farrell, and Branford Marsalis** are among a number of tenor saxophonists that also made significant statements on the soprano saxophone. **Gerry Niewood** brought a distinct soprano sound to the Chuck Mangione Quartet and is also worth checking out.

Other great hard-bop/post-bop altoists: The iconic Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra's great altoists **Jerome Richardson** (responsible for the use of soprano sax in that band as the lead sax), **Jerry Dodgion, Dick Oatts, and Billy Drewes**; Longtime Jazz Messenger **Bobby Watson**; Expat **Herb Gellar** (Stax of Sax); "Minority" composer **Gigi Gryce** (lots of great stuff with Art Farmer and Clifford Brown); Charlie Parker acolyte **Frank Morgan**, who had a huge resurgence in the 1990s; frequent Mingus sideman **Charles McPherson**; World Saxophone Quartet founder **Julius Hemphill**, Afro-Cuban master **Paquito D'Rivera**; genre blending M-Base pioneers **Steve Coleman & Greg Osby** (Anatomy of a Groove); Sun Ra's lead altoist **Marshall Allen; Donald Harrison** - New Orleans' Mardi Gras Indian bop master (Nouveau Swing and Indian Blues); **Wess "Warmdaddy" Anderson** - a prominent voice in Wynton Marsalis's famed septet of the 90s; Young Lion standout **Antonio Hart** (Dave Holland Octet's Pathways); **Justin Robinson** - an important contributor to the sound of Roy Hargrove's quintet ("Strasbourg/St. Denis"); producer and composer **David Binney** (check out Anacapa and Oceanos); cutting-edge Puerto Rican **Miguel Zenón** (Alma Adentro is his groundbreaking tribute to the Puerto Rican songbook); **Steve Wilson** – an excellent alto AND soprano sideman (dig his duo album with Lewis Nash, Duologue); **Godwin Louis** is a fresh, new alto voice (I love his playing on Herlin Riley's New Direction); **Patrick Bartley** has turned heads with his mix of an older swing style and a love of

video game music (check out his solo on Emmett Cohen's YouTube video of "After You've Gone"); and I love the deep, rich sound of D.C.-based **Bruce Williams** ([Brotherhood](#)).

Rhythm & Blues/Popular Music

Louis Jordan (1908-1975 - Martin): One of the undeniable giants of American popular music, Jordan had many massive hits (including "Caldonia" and "Saturday Fish Fry") that defined the jump-blues style, which strongly influenced early rhythm & blues and rock & roll. His six-piece Tympany Five played in a driving, blues-based style that kept dancers moving and jukeboxes playing. Louis rarely soloed, but "Keep a Knockin'" is a good example of his alto sax style.

Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson (1917-1988): A great Texan blues musician known for his singing as well as his simple blues playing, Vinson had a few hits with blues like "Cherry Red" and "Kidney Stew." His solos on songs like "Cleanhead Blues" are simple, masterful interpretations of the blues and are great for beginning transcribers to learn. Cleanhead is often forgotten for his contributions to blues and jazz – he was the actual composer, supposedly, of two popular songs that are credited to Miles Davis – "Tune Up" and "Four".

Earl Bostic (1913-1965 – Martin Committee): One of the most virtuosic saxophonists to ever play, Bostic found his popularity in the jump-blues style popularized by Louis Jordan. His command of the altissimo register is unmatched and the tempos that he could play at were what Charlie Parker would strive to be able to master (Lou Donaldson tells a story of witnessing Bostic put Bird to shame in a jam session). Even though he was known more as a showman and technician than as an improviser, Bostic's influence was undeniable – even Coltrane cited him as one of his favorites. Bostic had a big hit with "Flamingo", but his outrageous virtuosity can best be heard on "Up There in Orbit," "Apollo Theater Jump," "Liza" and "Artistry by Bostic." **Tab Smith** was a former Basie sideman who had quite a bit of success recording rhythm and blues sides like the ones that made Bostic famous ("Because of You" was #1 R&B hit).

***Hank Crawford** (1934-2009 – Selmer): Lead alto and bandleader for Ray Charles, Memphis's Crawford was one of the leading soul alto saxophonists of the 60s and 70s. His albums [The Soul Clinic](#) and [True Blue](#) are great representations of his piercing sound and gospel-influenced style, as well as his wonderful arranging skills (he could make four horns sound like a big band!). His rendering of "Don't Cry Baby" is a masterclass on soulful ballad playing. Hank made a number of great albums with organist Jimmy McGriff over the years and was a huge influence one of the leading saxophonists of the next generation – David Sanborn. By the way, Hank's fellow Ray Charles band member, tenor master **David "Fathead" Newman**, was also a great alto saxophonist ("Hard Times").

***David Sanborn** (1945-present – Selmer Mark VI): Undoubtedly one of the most influential saxophonists in pop, r&b, and fusion. His bright, piercing sound has a deep richness that brought life to many pop recordings throughout the 70s and 80s (David Bowie's "Young Americans" and James Taylor's "How Sweet it Is" are just two of many hits that featured Sanborn). In the 80s, Sanborn became a solo star in a genre that came to be called smooth jazz ("Maputo", with Bob James, and "This Masquerade" were both very popular). In the early 90s, he hosted one of TV's best music

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programs ever, *Night Music*, which ended each episode with a jam session featuring all the night's guests, including the host. The show highlighted Sanborn's comfort in playing all styles of music. To say that he was copied by almost an entire generation of alto saxophonists would not be much of an overstatement.

***Maceo Parker** (1943-present – Selmer Mark VI): James Brown's solo alto player is the leading purveyor of funk saxophone. Maceo's sound is strong and clear, but his approach to soloing is known mostly for his strong sense of rhythm – full of funky syncopations and space. His simple, effective approach is featured on James Brown's "I Got You (I Feel Good)", "Funky Drummer", and "Licking Stick," among many others. He became a solo star with various groups (Maceo and All the King's Men, Maceo and the Macks, The JB's), all of which featured music in the James Brown vein ("Southwick" and "Parrrty" are irresistible). His live album Live on Planet Groove is a classic and a must-listen-to for any saxophonist wanting to play in a funk style.

Kenny G (1956-present – Selmer Mark VI): Kenny Gorelick may be the butt of many jokes, but he should be recognized as one of the best-selling instrumentalists of all time and is likely the only saxophonist many people have ever heard of. His syrupy smooth soprano saxophone is instantly recognizable and helped earn Kenny G huge hits in the 80s and 90s ("Songbird" is his biggest). Lately, he's had fun with his image as a cheesy smooth jazz star (there's even a Kenny G board game!), but early work with Jeff Lorber show that Kenny G started off as a respected fusion artist.

Tom Scott (1948-present - RS Berkley) – A master studio musician who practically invented the smooth TV and movie soundtrack sax solo in the 70's and 80's. Equally adept on tenor and alto, Scott has been the first call L.A. session player for decades. His famous tenor solo on Carol King's "Jazzman" set the stage for a non-stop run of hundreds of recordings and films that feature his clean (almost too flawless) saxophone playing (Steely Dan's "Black Cow," Paul McCartney's "Listen to What the Man Said," and Rod Stewart's "Do You Think I'm Sexy" are some of his best known.) His band L.A. Express was a supergroup of west coast studio musicians that also backed up Joni Mitchell. **Ernie Watts** is another top-notch session player who, after cutting his teeth playing alto with Buddy Rich, contributed many classic alto and tenor solos to recordings by, among others, Marvin Gaye ("Let's Get it On") and Christopher Cross ("Arthur's Theme"). Ernie's versatility can be heard in many different settings, including Charlie Haden's Quartet West. Other top session aces are woodwind specialists you've heard on thousands of TV shows and movies – **Ronnie Lang** (Body Heat, Taxi Driver), **Dan Higgins** (Catch Me If You Can), and **Gene Cipriano** (Peter Gunn).

Other great R&B/pop alto players: Several fusion bands of the 80s and 90s featured alto players, including The Yellowjackets (**Marc Russo**), Spyro Gyra (**Jay Beckenstein**) and Chick Corea Electric Band (**Eric Marienthal**). The popularity of "Smooth Jazz" during that time propelled the careers of quite a few alto saxophonists, including: **Gerald Albright** – more of an instrumental R&B artist; **Dave Koz** – who has continued to reach audiences with his popular cruises and recent collaborations with guitarist Cory Wong (and has the uncanny ability to continually smile handsomely while playing); Maceo Parker protégé **Candy Dulfer**, and **Mindi Abair** – wrote the book on "How to Play Madison Square Garden." The recent jam band/funk revival has brought attention to wonderful players like **Sam Kenninger** and **Ryan Zoidis** (Lettuce) and **Karl Denson** (Greyboy All-Stars). Christian Scott's

former sideman **Braxton Cook** has led a new generation of jazz musicians who mix hip-hop, R&B, and jazz in a fresh, engaging way.

Alto Soloists on Pop Hit Recordings

Many of these iconic alto solos were played by saxophonists no one has ever heard of, yet their contributions to pop music history are indelible. Undoubtedly, the tenor sax has reigned supreme as the instrument of choice for a solo in pop and rock music, but in the late 70s and 80s (especially the MTV era), the alto became an integral part of countless hit records. Here are some of the more memorable alto solos in the last 50 years that have not been mentioned yet and the artists who brought them to life. Much credit must go to historian John Laughter for his extensive research in the sax's role in popular music.

What's Going On (Marvin Gaye) - **Eli Fontaine**
Me and Mrs. Jones (Billy Paul) - **Leon "Zack" Zackery**
Low Rider (War) - **Charles Miller**
Do It (Til You're Satisfied) (B.T. Express) – **Bill Risbrook**
Laughter in the Rain (Neil Sedaka) – **Jim Horn**
Dazz (Brick) – **Jimmy Brown**
Baker Street (Gerry Rafferty) - **Raphael Ravenscroft**
Stuff Like That (Quincy Jones) – **George Young**
After the Love is Gone (EW&F)- **Don Myrick**
The Logical Song (Supertramp) – **John Helliwell**
We're in This Love Together (Al Jarreau) - **Lon Price**
Harden My Heart (Quarterflash) - **Rindy Ross**
I Can't Go for That (Hall & Oates)- **Charlie Dechant**
Only the Lonely (The Motels) - **Marty Jourard**
Caribbean Queen (Billy Ocean) - **Jeffrey Smith**
The Glamorous Life (Shiela E) - **Larry Williams**
Some Guys Have All the Luck (Rod Stewart) - **Gary Herbig**
Careless Whisper (George Michael) - **Steve Gregory**
Love Theme from St. Elmo's Fire (David Foster) - **"Rev" Dave Boruff**
One More Night (Phil Collins) - **Don Myrick**
You Belong to the City (Glenn Frey) - **Bill Bergman**
Living in America (James Brown) – **Crispin Cioe**
At This Moment (Billy Vera) - **Jerry Peterson**
(I've Had) The Time of My Life (Bill Medley/Jennifer Warnes) - **Gary Herbig**
Kokomo (Beach Boys) - **Joel Peskin**
Hands to Heaven (Breathe) – **Jamie Talbot**
Never Tear Us Apart (INXS) – **Kirk Pengilly**
Waiting for a Star to Fall (Boy Meets Girl) - **Andy Snitzer**
Get on Your Feet (Gloria Estefan) – **Mike Scaglione**