Hawkins, Coleman

(b. Nov. 21, 1904, St. Joseph, Mo., U.S.—d. May 19, 1969, New York, N.Y.), American jazz musician whose improvisational mastery of tenor saxophone, which had previously been viewed as little more than a novelty, helped establish it as one of the most popular instruments in jazz.

At age four Hawkins began to study the piano, at seven the cello, and at nine the saxophone. He became a professional musician in his teens, and some of his greatest work was done with the Fletcher Henderson big band between 1923 and 1934. He left that band to tour Europe (1934-39) and on his return was one of the few established musicians to encourage the unorthodoxies of the modernists.

Hawkins was one of the first jazz horn players with a full understanding of intricate chord progressions, and he influenced many of the great saxophonists of the swing era (Ben Webster and Chu Berry) as well as leading figures in modern jazz (Sonny Rollins and John Coltrane). Hawkins' deep, full-bodied tone and quick vibrato was the expected style on jazz tenor until the advent of Lester Young, and even after Young's appearance many players continued to absorb Hawkins' approach. He was one of the strongest improvisers in jazz history, delivering harmonically complex lines with an urgency and authority that demanded the listener's attention. He played with inspiration for decades, managing to convey fire in his work long after his youth. His most acclaimed recording was a combo version of "Body and Soul" made in 1939.