

Marshal Royal: The Art of Lead Alto

An Analysis by Seth Carper

Marshal Royal is arguably the most important lead alto player in the history of big band. Royal nearly single-handedly changed the role of the player in the lead alto chair. Prior to his joining the Count Basie Orchestra as lead alto and music director in 1952, the role of the lead alto was primarily just playing the top note of the saxophone voicing. There was little difference in the stylistic approach of the lead player from the rest of the saxophonists. Marshal Royal elevated the chair to a true leading position, interpreting style, dynamics, and inflection and setting the tone for the rest of the reeds. His choices for many of these changes were largely informed by the solo performance practices of Johnny Hodges. Royal took the lyrical quality of Hodges soloist style into the sax section and revolutionized the sound of the big band.

Brief Bio

Before joining the Basie Orchestra, Marshal Royal was already an in-demand saxophonist, clarinetist, and violinist. He played with such luminaries as Lionel Hampton and Duke Ellington, and during World War II served in the Navy band where he led a swing band which included his brother Ernie, Earl Watkins and Jerome Richardson to name a few. Royal was a competent swing era soloist, but was better known as an excellent ensemble player. As a clarinetist, he was hired to

replace Buddy DeFranco in Count Basie's sextet in 1950. When Basie decided to reform the big band, he asked Royal to stay on as lead alto as well as the musical director (Royal 86-88). Royal accepted, despite being offered the same seat as a replacement for Johnny Hodges in the Duke Ellington Orchestra just after taking the Basie position (Royal 23). Royal remained lead alto and musical director for Basie until 1970. It was actually Royal who was responsible for much of the sound of the so-called "Second Testament" of the Basie band-brass included- especially regarding behind the beat phrasing and lyrical melodic treatments.

"Though I didn't do any of the arranging, I felt that I had contributed something important to the band by rehearsing the men, helping to give the saxophone section its distinctive sound and so on (Royal, 99)."

Not only did Royal change the nature of the saxophone section, his influence on the Basie sound, along with associations such as Jerome Richardson (lead alto with the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra), altered the course of big bands of future generations.

Johnny Hodges: Section vs. Solo

It is worth noting that Johnny Hodges made a clear distinction between his section playing and his solo playing. While in the section, Hodges was much more reserved with his interpretations than when soloing. Perhaps this is due to the

splitting of lead roles between the alto chair and the clarinet in Ellington's music. In any case, Hodges tends to do very little embellishing of the written part while playing with the rest of the section.

A clear comparison between Hodges' solo style and section playing can be made with a 1966 recording of the Ellington Orchestra performing "Sophisticated Lady" and the *Live At Newport, 1956* version of the same tune. Notice that while featured as a soloist in '66, Hodges bends and scoops into many of the pitches. On the live recording, the section is featured at the very beginning, and he does no embellishing of the line. This is an important observation to make. The blurring of the lines between the soloist style and section playing made Marshal Royal's contribution significant.

Johnny Hodges' Solo Influence

In his autobiography, *Jazz Survivor*, Marshal Royal recalls that he first played with Duke Ellington in 1930 on the soundtrack for *Check and Double Check* (Royal 22). Johnny Hodges was with the orchestra, and it is likely that this encounter sparked Royal's interest in Hodges. It is clear that Hodges had a huge impact on Royal's soloing, though Royal was never the improviser as Hodges. Nic Jones puts more gently saying, "Royal owed a debt to Johnny Hodges in the sense that he never overplayed (Jones)." Royal was featured from time to time with the Basie Band, however, particularly on ballads. On the Sammy Nestico composition, "Lonely Street" from *Basie, Straight Ahead*, it is easy to hear that Royal carries the expressive

inflections of Hodges into the melody. Even with some inflections notated in the lead alto part below, Royal further embellishes the melody much the way Hodges may have in the same situation.

Example 1: "Lonely Street" lead alto chart

LONELY STREET

1st Eb ALTO SAX by SAMMY NESTICO

Slowly 9

The musical score is handwritten and consists of five staves. The first staff is a blank staff with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a common time signature (C). Above the staff, the tempo is marked "Slowly" and the number "9" is written. The second staff is marked "A SOLO FREELY" and contains the first section of the melody. The melody is written in a single line and features various ornaments, including slurs, accents, and triplet markings. The third and fourth staves continue the melody with similar embellishments. The fifth staff is marked "B" and contains the second section of the melody, also with ornaments and triplet markings. The notation includes slurs, accents, and triplet markings.

It is interesting to hear a live version of the same tune from Berlin, 1968. Royal has obviously worked out the inflections in advance, as the two versions are nearly identical, even a note-for-note cadenza.

Another great example of Hodges' influence on Royal's soloing is found on a BBC video recording of the Basie Orchestra from BBC 4's *Show of the Week*, 1965. Royal is featured on the tune "The Midnight Sun Never Sets." Not only does he play embellishments of the original melody, but he also improvises a short eight-bar phrase. The characteristic soft articulations of 16th note passages, and a contrapuntal outline of the changes are directly influenced by the Hodges style.

Transfer of Solo Style to Section

Royal, having absorbed Hodges' solo style into his own soloing, transferred many of the soloist characteristics into the saxophone section. These stylistic traits fall under two main categories:

1. Pitch Manipulation- narrow scoops, medium scoops, wide scoops, fall between pitches
2. Rhythmic Manipulation- consecutive quarter notes, two eighth-note phrase

While some of these sub-categories may be closely related, there is enough variation to warrant differentiation. These main devices are also often mixed, manipulating the pitch and rhythm simultaneously. Royal employs these characteristics to some degree in nearly every Basie recording, but for the sake of this analysis, I will refer to one particular chart for most examples. Unless otherwise noted, the Nestico original "The Queen Bee" will provide evidence of most of the embellishments used by Royal. I will also be exclusively using Johnny Hodges'

solo melody and improvisation on “Don’t Get Around Much Anymore” as a reference point for Royal’s inflections.

Pitch Manipulation

The solo embellishment most heavily used by Royal is the “scoop”. A scoop is performed by starting below the desired pitch and subsequently “scooping” up until the target pitch is achieved. To execute a scoop on the saxophone, there are two main techniques: lip bend and fingering/lip combination. For the purpose of this analysis, I have included expression markings correlating to each pitch manipulation. The scoop is also the most recognizable Hodges solo trait. Royal has three basic scoops: narrow, medium, and wide.

1. Narrow scoop

The narrow scoop is generally less than a half-step movement and of extremely short duration, mostly executed mostly by lip bend. It can be used on most pitches above G in the staff¹. The narrow scoop is subtle and often overlooked. As seen in Example 2, Hodges uses the narrow scoop in m. 2 and m.4.

Example 2: Hodges narrow scoop



¹ All pitches referred to are transposed for Eb alto sax.

Royal uses this narrow scoop twice in m. 11 on the upbeat of one and on beat four, and again on beat four of m. 12 in Example 3.

Example 3: Royal narrow scoop



2. *Medium scoop* 

The medium scoop uses about a half-step to whole-step movement. A little longer in duration than the narrow scoop, but capable of variable lengths, the medium scoop is executed by either lip bend or fingering/lip combination. Hodges uses this scoop with fingering/lip combination in m. 13. and with a lip bend in m. 15 as seen in Example 4.

Example 4: Hodges medium scoops



In Example 5a, Royal can be heard using the medium scoop with a lip bend in m. 16. Examples 5b and 5c show m. 4 and m. 25 where Royal uses a fingering/lip combination to get a more pronounced medium bend. The latter excerpts are wider medium scoops than m. 16, but not quite a wide scoop. Notice that m. 4 and m. 25 also have longer durations.

Example 5 a-c: Royal medium scoops

a. m. 13-16



b. m. 1-4



c. m. 21-26



3. *Wide scoop*)

With a wide scoop, the pitch moves by more than a whole-step, usually about a minor third, but sometimes as much as a fifth or sixth. This is only playable with a fingering/lip combination. Due to the necessity of the fingering/lip combination, along with the intervallic content of the wide scoop, Hodges tends to reserve the wide scoop for notes played exclusively with the left hand in the upper register of the alto (G on top of the staff to F above the staff). The wide scoop can be long or short in duration, but tends to be on the longer side. Hodges favors the longer duration of the wide scoop on the “A” sections of “Don’t Get Around Much,” as in m.

1 and m. 3 of Example 6a, and a shorter duration in m. 23 leading into the note A of Example 6b.

Example 6 a-b: Hodges wide scoop

a. m. 1-9

b. m. 22-25

Royal is more reserved with his use of the wide scoop, but when he does it is quite dramatic and usually longer in duration. In m. 20 he begins the scoop on the last triplet, and continues it through the following two beats.

Example 7: Royal slow wide scoop

Measure eight of Example 8 is a faster wide scoop, appearing on beat 3. The sound is similar to a medium scoop, but starts slightly lower in register.

Example 8: Royal fast wide scoop



4. Falls between pitches ↘

A fall comes from quickly releasing the embouchure and allowing the pitch to fall into the next target note. This creates a smearing effect between the notes, similar to that achieved by a trombone or violin glissando. Hodges uses the fall to emphasize the flat third for a bluesier sound in mm. 7-8 of Example 9.

Example 9: Hodges falls between pitches



In Example 10 Marshal Royal uses this embellishment in place of written glissandos in m. 22 and m. 26.

Example 10: Royal falls between pitches



Another great set of examples of Royal employing these scoops and falls can be found in the introduction and background figures of Billy Meyers' arrangement of

“The Second Time Around.” In the introduction (Example 11a), Royal uses alternating medium and wide scoops. During the backgrounds of the trumpet solo (Example 11b) Royal seems to be playing on the title, using a narrow scoop the first time, but a longer mild scoop “the second time” the figure appears, each on the up-beat of four. When the same figure appears a second time, he uses a mild scoop the first time, and a long wide scoop the second time. He also uses falls between pitches in m. 47 and m. 51, further strengthening the only downward motion in the passage.

Example 11 a-b: “The Second Time Around”

a. Intro

b. Backgrounds

The image displays three staves of musical notation in treble clef with a key signature of two flats. The first staff covers measures 45 to 48, featuring triplet markings over measures 45-46 and 47-48. The second staff covers measures 49 to 51, with a triplet in measure 49 and a 'slow scoop' annotation under measure 51. The third staff covers measures 52 to 58, with a triplet in measure 52, a 'slow scoop' annotation under measure 56, and a double bar line at the end of measure 58.

Notice that only the saxes are playing the lines in each example above. As a general rule, Royal did very little embellishing when playing tutti with the entire band (unless he had instructed the entire band to embellish together). The excerpts also provide an important rhythmic placement of the embellishments, occurring primarily on up-beats. Since jazz emphasis is on the syncopated upbeat, that placement is more often than not where Royal uses embellishments, particularly scoops.

Royal's choices of when to scoop also seem to be targeting the beginnings and ends of phrases. Notice in m. 25 of "Queen Bee," Example 12, he scoops into the first note, but when emphasis is placed on the upbeat of three in m. 26, he avoids scooping in the middle of the phrase, opting to wait until the end of the line to scoop.

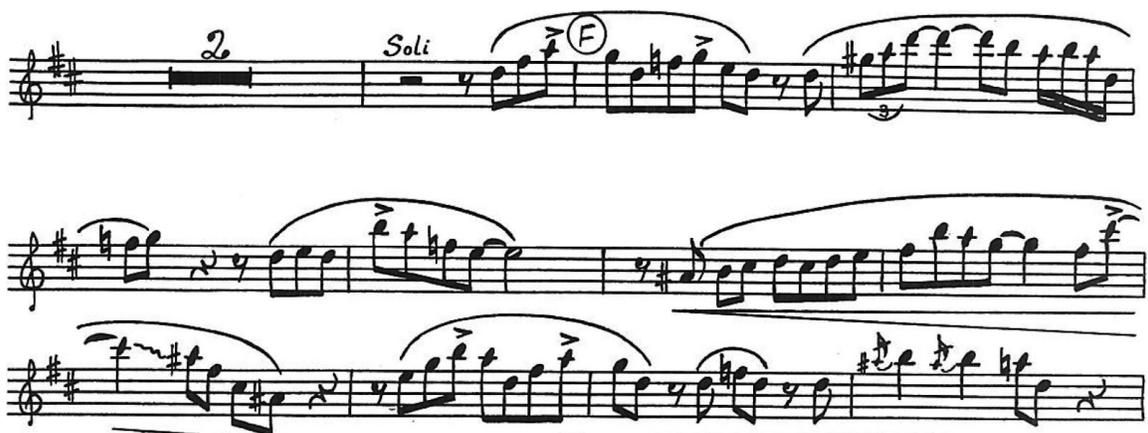
Example 12: m. 25-26



On Nestico's "Hayburner," shown in Example 13, Royal uses pitch manipulation to an almost comical extent. In the excerpt below notice that the falls between pitches are linked to the motive that begins in m. 2, and returns in m. 9-11. The medium scoop in the second measure of F accentuates the highest pitch of the phrase on the last triplet of beat 1. In the fourth measure of F, the medium scoops give the line a blusier flavor. Royal uses narrow and medium scoops on first two beats of the last measure for variation on the repeated B's.

Example 13: Hayburner Sax Soli Excerpt

Original:



Edited:

The image shows a musical score for a horn section in 4/4 time, consisting of three staves. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The first staff begins with a fermata over a quarter note, followed by a melodic line. A box containing the letter 'F' is positioned above the first staff. The second staff continues the melodic line, featuring a triplet of eighth notes. The third staff concludes the melodic phrase with a final note and a double bar line.

Rhythmic Manipulation

The Basie Band style is widely known for the laid back rhythmic feel of the horn section pitted against the precise time of the rhythm section. This feel was not present prior to Marshal Royal's appointment as musical director, so it stands to reason that he had something to do with the aesthetic change.

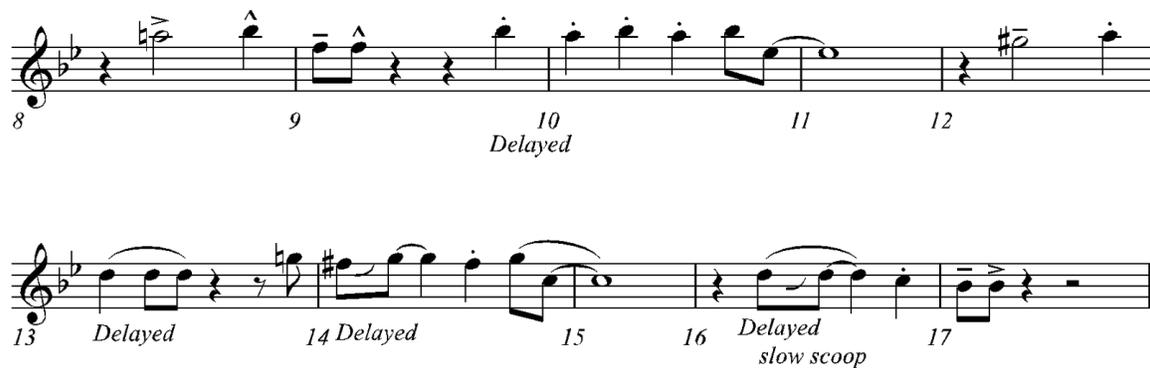
It is possible again to discern a link between this rhythmic feel and Johnny Hodges' soloing. Johnny Hodges played more or less in the middle of the beat while leading a sax section, but when soloing, favored the backside of the beat. This is clearly evident when he plays consecutive quarter notes as in m. 48 of "Don't Get Around Much."

Example 14: Hodges Consecutive Quarters



This same laid back quarter feel can be heard by the Basie Band in the melody of “Second Time Around,” where a very dominant sounding Marshal Royal leads the ensemble in the placement of the quarters. Note that the entire band is also following Royal’s scooping in m. 14 and m. 16.

Example 15: “Second Time Around” melody, alto part



Hodges also favored a longer duration downbeat in a two-eighth-note passage. This occurs mainly at the ends of phrases, or in isolated two-eighth-note sections. Listen to how long the downbeat is in m. 33 and m. 36 of Example 16.

Example 16: Hodges Two-Eighths

30 31 32 33 *Delayed*

34 35 36 *Delayed* 37 *3*

Marshal Royal mimics this feel in the “Second Time Around” example above. In Examples 17a and 17b below this subtle rhythmic manipulation can be heard in m. 32 and m. 62 of “Queen Bee.”

Example 17 a-b: Royal Two-Eighths

a. m. 27-32 “Queen Bee”

27 28 29 30 31 *Delayed* 32

b. m. 59-62

59 60 61 62 *Delayed*

Conclusion

The reasons behind Royal’s decision to take these characteristic solo traits of Hodges’ soloing into the realm of ensemble playing are not known. It is clear, however that the source of inspiration was not from previous ensemble performance practice, but rather from improvisatory inflections. This

understanding helps solidify the link between jazz improvisation and big band performance. Royal's style influenced a generation of lead alto players, including Jerome Richardson and Jerry Dodgion. More importantly, his derivation of ensemble technique from soloist practices changed the nature of saxophone section playing to the present day, as new soloist practices continue to be imported to the big band arena.

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