



KANSAS LEGEND BIOGRAPHY

Coleman Hawkins (1904-1969)

The popularity of the tenor saxophone in jazz music is mainly owed to American musician Coleman “Hawk” Hawkins. For nearly 50 years, Hawkins helped cultivate American jazz music and even made the transition to bebop in his later years. He is one of music’s premiere instrumental voices and enjoyed international recognition throughout his career.

Coleman Hawkins was born in St. Joseph, Mo., in 1904. He learned music from his mother at an early age, listening to her play the organ. At seven years old, Hawkins tried his hand at the cello before switching to the tenor saxophone at age nine. By age 12, Hawkins was performing at school dances. He moved to Chicago, where he attended high school, before returning to Topeka, Kan., to attend Washburn University.

By 1921, Hawkins was playing with a theater orchestra in Kansas City when he was discovered by Mamie Smith. Hawkins joined her group, the Jazz Hounds, in 1922 and began touring the country. The group traveled to New York where Hawkins made his first recordings, including a guest recording with Fletcher Henderson, before heading across the country to California and back.

In 1923, Henderson heard Hawkins at a gig and asked him to join his group. Upon doing so, Hawkins recognition nationwide dramatically increased. He spent more than a decade with Henderson’s group before deciding it was time to move on. Hawkins joined Jack Hylton’s band in England and would spend the next several years abroad.

Hawkins toured with Hylton for nearly a year and then began performing freelance in countries throughout Europe. He even played a session with greats Django Reinhardt and Benny Carter. After four years overseas, Hawkins returned home in 1939 to form a nine-piece band that opened at Kelly’s Stable in New York. That year, Hawkins improvised two choruses on “Body and Soul,” which would become some of Hawkins most memorable work. For this, he was voted best tenor saxophonist by Down Beat magazine.

For a short time, Hawkins played with a big band he formed before returning to work with smaller groups in 1941. In 1944, Hawkins played with Thelonious Monk and Dizzy Gillespie, as well as a young Miles Davis. Two years later, Hawkins began his long tenure with the Jazz at the Philharmonic tour. He split time between touring and performing with his own groups in New York. He spent additional time in Europe during the late 1940s.

In the 1950s, Hawkins performed on television and recorded a great deal. Unlike many other jazz musicians from the genre’s golden era, Hawkins made the transition to bebop music and played with artists such as John Coltrane and Duke Ellington. Hawkins played in jazz festivals while continuing to perform with Jazz at the Philharmonic. His battle with alcohol finally caught up to him in the late ‘60s. He fought illness while traveling overseas to play in Denmark. Hawkins died from liver disease in 1969.

