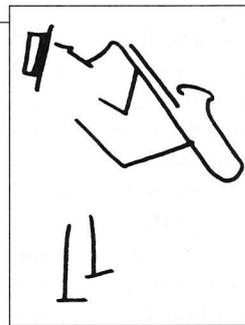


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Rock 'N Roll Saxophone



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Old School Honkin' In Ab

I love Ab concert on the tenor sax! The low Bb is my favorite note on the horn. When I try out a horn the first thing I'll do is hit that low Bb and play through the overtone series. I get a real sense of how the horn the sounds and how it's going to respond to my playing. It sounds very round and open to me and I think that's what led to the existence of some killer sax grooves in the key of Ab concert.

I have offered many examples of the key of E concert in this column because it is the predominant key in rock and blues. But Ab is a big part of the tenor sax tradition. I think that the swing classic *Flying Home* with Illinois Jacquet on tenor influenced a lot of the rock and roll sax players. When Illinois starts honking on that high Bb over and over it reminds me of so many blues records that I've heard. If you've never listened to this recording it's a must to track down. I have also heard a Duke Ellington arrangement of the song as well that has the sax solo as part of the arrangement. It's a great way to get familiar with Bb on tenor and to get into the jump groove feel. He also has a great sense of when to go to the blues scale and when to stay in the major key side of things.

I would also include *In The Mood* as an example of a swing tune in Ab that is basically a twelve bar blues with a bridge. If you don't know this one take the time to track it down and learn it. The ending line is a great chromatic lick! If you shed down the *Flying Home* solo you can play it over the *In The Mood* solo section at wedding gigs and give yourself a ray of sunshine between your doses of bad chicken dinners washed down with warm tap

water.

Have you ever heard the song *Mellow Saxophone*? It's by a New Orleans singer named Roy Montrell and it featured Lee Allen on tenor and Red Tyler on baritone. The tune starts as a kind of Cajun rhumba in Ab minor, with the saxes playing a blues scale line. The bridge goes to a rock and roll groove in Ab major, with a baritone sax line to transition back to the rhumba. It is really popular with a few of the bands I've played with in and around Boston, including my own. The first time I actually heard of this tune was around 1982 when I saw Robert Plant of Led Zeppelin fronting a old style fifties rock and roll band he had put together on a cable show (not the Honeydrippers, that came later). They played this tune and it floored me. Still does every time I play it!

Another classic would be *Night Train* as recorded by James Brown. Every public school band student on planet Earth has probably played this tune! And if you haven't heard the Godfather's version you haven't heard the song at all. The horns are so fat and James chimes in with just the right touch of vocals. The opening line of the tune is a descending line that ends on the ninth of the chord (a C on the tenor). The opening melody line does a very typical blues voice leading. The line starts on a high D, the third of the chord. When you play the line over the four chord it leads down to Db. A lot of blues tunes do this type of lick when there's a "quick four," a four chord in bar two of the blues going back to the one chord for bars three and four.

Rock and roll sax legend Junior Walker had an affinity for Ab concert

as well. His first single was *Twist Lackawanna*, a twist groove that was a blues with a bridge. The bridge is a turnaround from the four chord. It's very fast and he hits the root of the chord (low Bb, then Eb and F) on beat one of each measure of the twelve bar blues section. So you've got to pop out the low Bb and immediately jump to this real tight lick right after it. It's a real work out for the lungs! This is a fun tune to play.

His next big hit was *Cleo's Mood* and this is an Ab minor blues with all the chords played as minor sevenths, no dominants. It's a great groove to play over and it really shows off his amazing growl and flutter tonguing. He comes in growling on the low F to start the melody. The head is basically blues scale over the minor groove. The first lick of his solo he plays the natural third, a high D, and flutter tongues it heavily. The major third on a minor chord is usually a serious avoid note, but he puts some inflection into it and makes it sound great. As background for the other solos he plays a low Bb at the beginning of each bar. This is a great tune to play with a new band when you're subbing because it's very easy for the rhythm section to pick up.

Junior Walker had his first major hit with *Shotgun*, which is a one chord vamp in Ab. I remember when I first learned this song, I wasn't quite fully hip to the Ab tradition. I put a cassette of the tune into my Marantz to transcribe it and somehow decided that it was in G because it sound like the third of the chord was being played open C#, hence key of A on tenor. The two bands I was playing with had singers that could sing it in G, so I

assumed that was it. Then I had a student bring it in to a lesson written out in Bb. I told him up and down that it was G and he assured me that it was Ab because he listened to it on his CD, which would play it at correct pitch. In this case the teacher learned the open C# was actually a palm key D! Old school tenor players used a lot of palm key D because of the way clarinet is fingered. It's very light and open sounding compared to the regular six finger D. You can do a lot more scooping with palm key D as well. It's another unique aspect of playing in Ab.

There's one more Junior tune in Ab that I play often called *Homecookin'*. It's a funky vamp on the one chord with the vocals in right at the top. Most of his other songs (especially the hits) started with Junior blowing. The odd thing about this song is the breaks at the end of the verses. On the record there is a ten beat break with a bass fill and it leads back to the chorus. It is an arranging device that was used on many of his songs to give him space to sing. On *Shotgun* he finishes playing the head and there's an extra bar for him to get the horn out of his mouth and sing.

Homecookin' sounds like the bass player (James Jamerson) had a killer fill that everyone wanted to use and they stuck in the extra half a measure for Junior to sing! You'll notice that on later hits they used more modern multi-tracking and overdubbed him in.

In the 1970's a lot of hard rock and blues bands would add horns to their songs. Many of these groups would tune down a half step to get a lower, rounder sound and give their lead singer a little break as well! So you will find that the Rolling Stones, Aerosmith and others from that era had songs in Ab because of this. You probably won't play them live in Ab un-

less you're in a band that's tuning down. There are many blues tunes that can be played in Ab like *T-Bone Shuffle* and *All Your Love*.

If I had to name one drawback to playing in this key signature it would have to be the unenviable altissimo high Bb, saddest of all high notes! You would think that with the horn built to a low Bb that the altissimo Bb would pop out, but on most horns I've tried it's a brutal note. One exception was the Keilwerth straight alto that I tried at Berklee. High Bb sounded great on that horn!

That's it for intro to Ab! I will do a key of Bb column in the future, as there are many classics in this key, too. I also want to mention that I have been hearing from many readers lately and I always look forward to email from fellow saxophonists. I will do my best to answer any questions you may have. Rock on! §

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