

*Sonic Identity as a Factor in the Popular Evaluation of Hank Mobley*  
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For every casual listener who assures acquaintances that he or she "loves jazz, you know, like John Coltrane and Miles Davis," there may exist a contrarian counterpart who insists that while those artists are historically important, the stuff that's *really* worth chasing down is the work of obscure artists whose public profiles never quite caught up with their prodigious musical accomplishments. One artist who may be cited by the latter category of jazz listeners is Henry Earl "Hank" Mobley (1930–1986), an oft-recorded tenor saxophonist in the sixties who died in poverty despite having recorded with many of jazz's brightest and most enduring stars. One of his earliest professional jobs was playing with trumpeter and bebop pioneer Dizzy Gillespie, and by 1961 he had both worked with Coltrane and replaced him as the saxophonist in Miles Davis' quintet.<sup>1</sup> Headlining on a string of LP's on the famous Blue Note record label in New York throughout the sixties, financial stability still eluded him; sporadic work in the seventies was insufficient to keep him in good health, and by the time of his passing from pneumonia in 1986, he had long lost the ability to play his horn.<sup>2</sup>

There is presently an air of reverence about Hank Mobley in the jazz community—or least among those who participate in such communities online—and it often centers around his perennial underratedness. Although I had first assumed that such an evaluation had come about only well after Mobley's death, he had in fact been described with that term as early as 1964<sup>3</sup>. The same sentiments are expressed throughout the liner notes of countless CD reissues of his work throughout the nineties and up to the present time. A 2011 doctoral

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, discographical details are taken from Michel Ruppli & Michael Cuscuna, *The Blue Note Label: A Discography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishers, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> Derek Ansell, *Workout: The Music of Hank Mobley* (London: Northway Publications, 2008), 140.

<sup>3</sup> Ira Gitler, liner notes to *No Room For Squares*, Hank Mobley, Blue Note BST 84149, LP, 1964.

dissertation on Mobley's music frequently points out the dearth of popular and scholarly attention Mobley has received in comparison to his contemporaries.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper, I seek to summarize the existing discourse on the reasons for Mobley's "underratedness" by the wider jazz-buying public, and to proffer that while many of the points raised by other writers were (and are) surely factors, the dominant reason for Mobley's popular obscurity lies in his lack of an easily perceptible and highly individual sonic identity.

Hank's peers of the time spoke of him glowingly; trumpeter Freddie Hubbard called him "one of the most important tenormen around" in 1965<sup>5</sup>, and Horace Silver wrote in 2005 that he could not "say enough about Mr. Mobley"—that for him, Hank "was always a heavyweight."<sup>6</sup> In the latter comment, Silver refers to critic Leonard Feather's 1955 appraisal of Mobley as "the middleweight champion of the tenor."<sup>7</sup> An oft-quoted phrase that Feather later insisted was not intended to be pejorative, it nonetheless has had the effect of damning with faint praise. No matter how many voices in the wilderness have decried Mobley's obscurity, insisting that he remains underrated, that label has become ubiquitous: *middleweight*.

At the time Feather wrote the liner note in which that now-inescapable descriptor appears for the first time, Mobley's tone on the tenor saxophone did indeed fall between the extremes of "heavy" players such as Sonny Rollins and "light" players like Stan Getz. The politics of playing "light" or "heavy" during the fifties could almost as easily be characterized as playing "white" or "black"; although Getz's chief influence, Lester Young, was Black, Getz himself was white and had come to prominence in a big band led by another white reed player,

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<sup>4</sup> Russell M. Clark, "The Exceptional Art of Hank Mobley's 1955-1970 Jazz Compositions" (DMA diss., University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, 2009), 1, 3, 8-10.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted by Nat Hentoff, liner notes to *Blue Spirits*, Freddie Hubbard, Blue Note BST 84196, LP, 1965.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted by Donald Elfman, liner notes to *Silver's Blue*, Horace Silver, Epic/Legacy EK 93856, CD reissue, 1956.

<sup>7</sup> Leonard Feather, liner notes to *At the Café Bohemia*, The Jazz Messengers, Blue Note BLP 1507, LP, 1956.

Woody Herman. The fifties also saw mostly-white groups such as the Dave Brubeck Quartet selling large quantities of records and concert tickets to mostly-white crowds on college campuses. Meanwhile, a harder-edged, more blues-based brand of jazz was being championed by a community of primarily black musicians, leading to the style now known as "hard bop." This was the scene in which Hank Mobley was involved, and, as was pointed out earlier, the scene in which he earned the abundant respect of his peers.

However, two of the most original and influential musicians of the hard bop style were tenor saxophonists as well. Sonny Rollins and John Coltrane both possessed strong and assertive musical personalities that left room for few soft edges in their respective manners of playing. Mobley's intention, as quoted on more than one occasion, was to have neither a light nor heavy sound, but a "round sound."<sup>8</sup> In an aesthetic world at least partially bounded by the imposition of a binary concept of race, "round" may not have been a viable option. It is thus widely posited that Mobley's disinterest in conforming to a tougher, entirely hard bop-appropriate sound kept him from connecting well with one audience or the other<sup>9</sup>—that he was impossible to pigeonhole, too heavy for those who liked light players, and too light for those who liked heavy players. As Robert Levin wrote in 1961, "Mobley's style has remained pretty much uncategorizable. He has learned and borrowed from others in a natural election process of the craftsman..."<sup>10</sup> For some listeners now, his "round sound" compromise may represent the best of both worlds, but in his own time, competing in the ring as a middleweight did not translate to any record-selling knockouts.

As Bob Blumenthal points out in his extensive notes to a collection of Mobley sides recorded in the late fifties, Hank's career was also complicated by

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted by Feather, *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Ansell, 51.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Levin, liner notes to *Roll Call*, Hank Mobley, Blue Note BST 84058, LP, 1961.

his heroin habit.<sup>11</sup> Russell M. Clark, in his dissertation on Mobley's music, points out that it was his drug use that forced him to part ways with Horace Silver in 1957, and drug-related jail time that caused his absences from the recording studio during 1958, '62, and '64.<sup>12</sup> Chronic returns to heroin and alcohol abuse forced him to flee to England in 1968<sup>13</sup> and presumably contributed to his ongoing physical decline throughout the seventies. Mobley, as a drug-using jazz musician, was by no means an unusual specimen—Chet Baker, Gerry Mulligan, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Bill Evans, and countless others were hooked at various times as well—but Hank's frequent detainment for it and his occasional expatriation could certainly not have helped him maintain a consistent profile in either continent.

In his 2008 biography of Mobley, Derek Ansell ponders at some length Hank's inability to get himself back on his feet and into a recording studio after 1972, and leaves the reader with the sense that Mobley was a most introverted and complex character.<sup>14</sup> Relating this impression to the previous point, pianist Walter Davis, Jr. observed that "Hank was a melodic person, but he grieved a lot. He was too sensitive. He found his remedies in the bottle and [in] drugs."<sup>15</sup> But even without the use of narcotics as an escape route, Mobley could still have been held back by a personal reluctance to self-promote. Ansell writes that even during the salad days of his career as a performer, Mobley would sit in his car between sets at clubs rather than bonding with his bandmates or greeting his audience.<sup>16</sup> Such a loner could hardly be expected to be at ease in any stage of restarting a stalled-out career.

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<sup>11</sup> Bob Blumenthal, liner notes to *The Complete Blue Note Fifties Sessions*, Hank Mobley, Mosaic MD6-181, CD, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Clark, 50.

<sup>13</sup> Ansell, 107.

<sup>14</sup> Ansell, 144.

<sup>15</sup> Clark, 43.

<sup>16</sup> Ansell, 2.

However, none of these problems—nor even their combination—were unique to Hank Mobley. Given the proliferation of alto saxophonists who followed in the wake of Charlie Parker, many have been as overshadowed as Mobley was by his more tough-sounding peers on tenor; the same is true of pianists in the immediate post-Bud Powell era and of swing trombonists in the time of Glenn Miller. Countless jazz musicians have served time for drug possession yet still built productive careers for decades afterward. As to being a complex character, that is practically a cliché for jazz musicians, and tales of improvisers' personal strangeness run the gamut from the endearing to the tragic.

While all of the previously offered explanations of Mobley's failure to achieve wider recognition are valid, they largely avoid (either consciously or unconsciously) relating his popular reception to the actual content of his records. However, it is my contention that the tipping point in Mobley's obscurity is not simply the fact that his personal life was erratic, but rather the fact that his erratic personal life made it impossible for him to convey a consistent and individual sonic identity to the record-buying public. Defining an "individual sonic identity" as an aural signature which a reasonably informed listener can immediately recognize, it is of great importance in jazz, an art form in which originality is highly prized. Since Mobley's contributions were both instrumental and compositional, I will examine those pursuits separately below.

While the rhythmic and melodic content of Mobley's playing follows logically as a development of the personality established earlier in his career, the actual sound of his saxophone playing shows a drastic timbral shift. For illustrations of how Mobley's tone changed over time, I refer the reader to practically any recording of Mobley from three time periods: 1953-1958, 1959-1963, and 1965-1972. This represents a span of less than twenty years, but three distinct timbral personalities can be perceived by the careful listener. Although Mobley's musical conception was always informed by the innovations of

Charlie Parker<sup>17</sup> and possessed of a blues sensibility consistent with the stylistic tendencies of hard bop, his sound was initially enveloped in a sheath of breathiness that clearly took cues from the timbral precedent set by Lester Young in the thirties. This is the sound that most clearly comes through in records he made from his 1953 debut as a sideman through his first narcotics conviction in 1958. This author would offer, as a representative example, the track "Just Coolin'" from Mobley's very first date as a leader (*Hank Mobley Quartet*, Blue Note LP 5066).

When Mobley re-emerged in late 1959 after serving time for drug-related offenses, he seemed re-energized, and within a year of his release he had recorded the three albums that are now widely considered his best work: *Soul Station*, *Roll Call*, and *Workout*.<sup>18</sup> Mobley reported in 1973 that during his 1958 break, he had made the switch to an all-metal mouthpiece<sup>19</sup>, which brought his hardware into line with what photographic evidence<sup>20</sup> shows Mobley's "heavy" colleagues were using; it is worth noting that Stan Getz, the light-toned star whose career was continuing to gain steam at this point, continued using the hard rubber mouthpieces that he had been using since at least the late forties.<sup>21</sup> However, the difference between 1958 Mobley and 1959 Mobley was not just one of instrumental equipment; his method of attacking each note became more decisive<sup>22</sup>, the onset of each phrase more robust, and the transitions from note to note more clearly delineated. For the purpose of contrasting his late-fifties sound with his early-sixties sound, a suggested point of reference against the aforementioned "Just Coolin'" would be the title track from the 1964 album *No Room For Squares* (Blue Note BLP 4149).

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<sup>17</sup> Ansell, 142.

<sup>18</sup> Blumenthal, liner notes to *The Complete Blue Note Fifties Sessions*, 13.

<sup>19</sup> John Litweiler, "The Integrity of the Artist, the Soul of the Man," *Downbeat* 40, no. 3 (March 1973): 29.

<sup>20</sup> Graham Marsh & Glyn Callingham, *Blue Note Album Cover Art* (San Francisco: Chronicle, 2002).

<sup>21</sup> Marsh & Callingham, *ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Michael Cuscuna, liner notes to *Another Workout*, Blue Note CD 62646, CD, 2006.

Following Mobley's next absence from the recording studios (he did not record from December of 1963 through February of 1965), his sound grew rougher and darker still. A change of saxophone equipment at this juncture is not referenced in any existing literature on Mobley; this time, we can safely assume the difference is attributable solely to Mobley's own physical and musical intentions. The changes in his compositional output, which I will discuss shortly, are in some respects indebted to John Coltrane, and his timbral shift during the mid-sixties indicates a similar influence. The breathy envelope around his tone had all but disintegrated at this point, save perhaps for in his rare performances of ballads, and as the seventies began, Mobley's playing vocabulary grew to include gruff exclamatory cries as well as vocal interjections between his saxophone phrases. Derek Ansell states that Mobley's late-sixties albums evidence an "obliviousness"<sup>23</sup> to the innovations of the avant garde; while this may be true in some respects, Mobley's tone and especially his gestural vocabulary suggest otherwise. Particularly convincing examples of this can be found on the title tracks of his albums *Third Season* (Blue Note LT 1081, 1967) and *Breakthrough!* (Muse MR 5132, 1972), the latter of which was to be his final effort as a leader.

Such changes as these over the course of seventeen years are not unheard of, but Mobley's case is unusual in that such differences occurred so suddenly, and that those sudden differences tended to follow lengthy periods in which he did not have any new albums on the record store shelves. This is an important point of contrast with other rapidly transforming artists, such as the frequently-mentioned John Coltrane and Miles Davis, whose stylistic wayfarings, however remote, can generally be traced as gradual narratives rather than as discrete episodes.

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<sup>23</sup> Ansell, 110.

Following a parallel course to the changes in his sound as a player, Mobley the composer can be heard as a progression of different voices as well. His prolificacy is notable in the sheer number of songs on each of his LPs which are his own works; of the 197 tracks he recorded as a solo artist, 132 are from his pen; 29 more originals appear on albums he performed on as a sideman. By and large, these pieces are fascinating, swinging, and memorable; the number of works recorded also gives researchers a wide variety of works to transcribe and examine. My contention is that despite Mobley's aforementioned prolificacy and the high quality of his compositional body of work, there is again an absence of a wholly unified personality expressed within it.

Noted saxophonist Bobby Watson, who eventually succeeded Hank as a member of Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers, opined that Mobley's "writing is the top in the history of the music,"<sup>24</sup> and other musicians have been quoted with particularly strong praise for his harmonic sense. Jackie McLean, who worked with Hank and outlived him by several decades, stated that in terms of harmony, "you can't get any hipper than Hank."<sup>25</sup> Indeed, harmonic sophistication is a hallmark of Mobley's early works. Even a tune with a title as colloquial as "Barrel of Funk," which appears on the 1956 LP *Hank Mobley with Donald Byrd and Lee Morgan* (Blue Note BLP 1540), shows a remarkably sophisticated harmonic mind at work when transcribed:<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Clark, 7.

<sup>25</sup> Clark, 43.

<sup>26</sup> Transcription from Clark, 238.

$\text{♩} = 166$

After solos D.C. al Coda

While many of the above chord changes outline a harmonic progression with conventional tonic to dominant tendencies (outlined by the  $\text{Imaj7}$  in measure 2, the  $\text{IV7}$  in measure 3, and the  $\text{V7\#9}$  on the upbeat to measure 5), the transitional chords between such structural points show a variety of interesting techniques that elaborate upon an accessible underlying form. Consider the  $\text{E7\#11}$  (seen in measures 2 and 19), a tritone substitution for a secondary dominant leading to  $\text{IV}$ . Alone, it is an aural surprise, yet it then resolves logically, showing us that Mobley is well-versed in short-term tension and release models. The next time we encounter motion from  $\text{I}$  to  $\text{IV}$  (measures 6–7 and 23–24), the two chords are now bridged not by the  $\text{E7\#11}$ , but rather by an  $\text{D7\#5\#9}$ . The listener is surprised again, and as the  $\text{D7\#5\#9}$  only appears in pre-cadential sections of the piece, its increased instability makes the eventual resolution that much more satisfying. This reveals an additional level of harmonic sophistication on Mobley's part; it suggests he was thinking not only of how interesting a fleeting moment could be, but of creating a thoughtful and artfully constructed arc for the whole composition.

As the years went on, Mobley's compositional output of course diversified. Tunes falling under the general classifications of "ballads" and "swingers" were augmented by Latin-tinged tunes, bossa novas, gospel-oriented dance numbers (most of them modeled on "The Sidewinder," Lee Morgan's major 1964 hit for Blue Note<sup>27</sup>), and, in particular, songs with modal elements such as one-chord vamps or changes that involve using the same scale for prolonged periods of time. The last-named tendency was certainly due to the impact made by John Coltrane's one-scale, thirteen-minute version of Rodgers & Hammerstein's "My Favorite Things"<sup>28</sup> and the widespread proliferation of modal music which followed it. Mobley would also have gained a good deal of experience playing modally during his tenure with Miles Davis; one such example is the twelve-minute performance of Davis's two-chord opus "So What" during that time.<sup>29</sup> Mobley's own compositional experimentations with modal elements typically resulted in works that combined tonal progressions with modal vamps, but by 1970, his taste for modality had reached a point where his old compositional voice is impossible to detect.

For an example of Hank's modality at its apex, I point to his final recording session for Blue Note, which occurred in 1970 and was released later in that decade as *Thinking of Home* (BST 84367). The tune transcribed below is entitled "The Flight."

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<sup>27</sup> Ansell, 86.

<sup>28</sup> John Coltrane, *My Favorite Things*, Atlantic SD 1361, LP, 1961.

<sup>29</sup> Miles Davis, *At Carnegie Hall*, Columbia Records CS 8612, LP, 1961.

**Swing** ♩ = 176

Trumpet, saxophone  
Piano

One need take only a cursory glance to see the transformation that had occurred since the composition of "Barrel of Funk." Although I chose to account for sustained melody notes in my chordal analysis above, resulting in two Fm6s and one B $\flat$ 7/F, we are essentially hearing a tonic chord for twelve bars, a quick turnaround (which, oddly, skips straight from ii $^{\circ}$ 7 to i, bypassing V), and two more bars of tonic harmony. Two statements of the head are followed on the recording by just over four minutes of improvised solos that forgo the turnaround and consist only of meditations on the F Dorian scale.

It could be argued that John Coltrane's move from fast, hyper-chromatic changes towards one-chord (and later, indeed, no-chord) songs and albums represents an equally drastic shift, and I would not disagree. However, both the rapid and disorienting chord changes of "Giant Steps"<sup>30</sup> and the glacial pace of the harmonic rhythms of "A Love Supreme"<sup>31</sup> were essentially Coltrane's own original contributions to the jazz canon, and I would posit that such visionary

<sup>30</sup> John Coltrane, *Giant Steps*, Atlantic SD 1311, LP, 1960.

<sup>31</sup> John Coltrane, *A Love Supreme*, Impulse! AS-77, LP, 1965.

inventiveness is a large part of Coltrane's appeal. Hank Mobley was never seen as a groundbreaker, and he never expressed a desire to be one; thus, when *he* took a confounding left turn every few years—in playing or in composing—the jazz-buying public would have an entirely different, and perhaps not entirely positive, reaction.

The revival of interest in Mobley that has been occurring since his death includes major tribute concerts (at Carnegie Hall in 1990<sup>32</sup> and at the Jazz Standard in 2002<sup>33</sup>), multitudinous CD reissues, and biographical and analytical works, all of which have increasingly elucidated the excellence of Mobley's recorded output and attempted to solve the riddle of why his work remains so underappreciated by the broader public. In conducting the above analysis and in arguing that Mobley's lack of an instantly recognizable and consistent timbre prevented him from attracting a fan base, I do not seek to make a value judgment, or even a "hipness" judgment (to borrow from Jackie McLean's earlier quotation); in fact, *Thinking of Home* is among this writer's favorite records, and Mobley's tone, in all its incarnations, is a wonder to hear. Although a posthumous comeback among a dedicated coterie of fans is better than none at all, it remains especially regrettable that circumstances in Hank Mobley's life—some within his control and some without, some known and some only speculated upon—made it impossible for him to establish the unique voice that might have allowed him to enjoy greater recognition while he still lived.

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<sup>32</sup> Blumenthal, 1.

<sup>33</sup> Ansell, 152-153.

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