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"MELBA'S TUNE": AN EXAMINATION OF THE LIFE AND WORK OF TROMBONIST-ARRANGER MELBA LISTON

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ABSTRACT

Arranger and trombonist, Melba Liston was called upon to work for such jazz legends as Dizzy Gillespie, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Clark Terry, and Randy Weston. Not only was she praised as one of the best arrangers in jazz during her lifetime, but she was also a sought-after trombone player. However, her inclusion in the jazz historical narrative is limited. Liston worked behind the scenes as an arranger and faced extreme adversity as a Black woman in a male dominated profession. She was seen as a gimmick by audiences and treated as a caretaker and an object by her peers. Audiences, musicians, and now our historical narrative have viewed her as the exception to the rule of successful male jazz musicians. This is why an in-depth overview of her life and work is needed. This project compiles information about Melba Liston's career and discography into an exhaustive document, analyzing articles, newspaper clippings, oral histories, research at the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University, research at Melba Liston's Archive at the Black Music Research Center at Columbia College in Chicago, one interview with Geof Bradfield, Professor of Jazz Studies at Northern Illinois University, and several email correspondences with members of the Melba Liston Research Collective, Dianthe Spencer, Lisa Barg, and Sherrie Tucker. Findings include explication of Liston's genius and analysis of her unique way of arranging for a wide range of ensembles and styles, her complex personality traits and how she used them to gain success, her aversion to the limelight, the many adversities she faced including abuse and lack of promotion, and the effects of the male-centric culture of jazz on Liston's career and remembrance in jazz history. This thesis will include a biography, a musical analysis, and a selected discography of Melba Liston.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

Introduction

Melba Liston was a prolific arranger and skilled trombonist whose career, beginning in the early 1940s, spanned more than half a century. She worked with jazz legends and became very successful at her craft despite the cultural constraints put on Black women during her lifetime. She was so determined and had so much to offer that she overcame the odds to share her musical genius with the world. Those with whom she worked have extensive discographies and biographies written about them and have been studied extensively. However, Liston has not received this kind of attention.

There are discrepancies between the histories which jazz musicians tell and the narratives of widely used jazz history textbooks. Dizzy Gillespie clearly held Melba Liston in high esteem because she was one of his top calls for arranging and section playing and he forced male band members to be respectful toward her (Gillespie & Fraser, 1979, p. 415). However, she is barely featured in jazz history textbooks, and these textbooks often do not place her in the correct context. It is as if these authors chose to include certain women's names but did not have the information to provide context for them. As in classical music there are iconic figures such as Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, and others, there are now iconic figures of jazz. The history of jazz claims a lineage which can be boiled down to Louis Armstrong, Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, Charlie Parker, and John Coltrane. This lineage is that of Black men, and the historical

narrative is widely thought of with prominence of Black men. In the beginning of the 21st century American independent scholars and organizations have endeavored to shed light on women who made contributions to jazz. Many articles and some longer essays have been done in the last twenty years which bring Melba Liston into the limelight. These sources in addition to interviews, biographies, and analytical essays provide a variety of focuses on Melba Liston. Most have a biographical focus if they do not focus on Liston's experience as a woman. One article by Geof Bradfield analyzes Liston's arranging and compositional strategy and one article by Lisa Barg focuses on selected arrangements of Randy Weston's music, arguing that Liston deserves more compositional credit. A handful of sources focus on record dates which Liston was involved in and Jack Marchbanks includes her in some sections of his thesis concerning her contribution to the Civil Rights Movement and her arranging. However, the most prominent focus is of her experience as a Black woman. Though this is important, Melba Liston was a very complex person, and many aspects of her life and career can be focuses of research. These other aspects include her arranging, her composition, her trombone playing, her career and works, her personal life, also the fact that some people considered her a genius and a child prodigy, including her pre-high-school teacher (Bryant, 1996) and Randy Weston (Weston, 2010). Deeper research in each of these areas specifically can lead to a fuller and more diverse understanding of Liston.

Though we must do more research into the complex areas of Liston, there has been good reason to focus on her experience as a woman. Some writers have studied feminist philosophy in jazz (Kernodle, 2014; Smith, 2020). Others chose to write about Liston's experience as a woman in jazz, because it is a popular topic in the current social climate (Kaplan, 1999). Still others wrote about her through this lens simply because as members of our society, it is hard not to put

this rare characteristic at the forefront of any article concerning her (Gordon, 2014; Keyes, 2014; Wilson, 2008; Dahl, 1984). Because jazz history is shaped by macho ideals of competition male power by male figureheads, in 2024 we have begun to forget that there were many women participating in jazz throughout the 20th century. These women were not as prominent so they are being forgotten, leaving the construction of jazz history around the most famous jazz musicians. This is why the jazz historical narrative is so male-dominated.

Stereotypical Tropes for Black Women

Because of this narrative, any woman who shines through is thought of as an independent case. Kernodle uses the term *exceptional woman* to describe the way society views women such as Melba Liston. These women have entered the male playing field by playing music like men. Therefore, they can be part of the male discourse without changing it. These women are seen as unlike other women and more like men. This ties into an additional societal stereotype which Kernodle describes, which is competitivity between Black women. Kernodle brings ideas from Angela Davis' essay, "Black Women and Music: A Historical Legacy of Struggle," into the jazz narrative which Davis surfaces, but did not focus on. This essay explains that the greater scope of popular culture frames relationships between Black women as competitive and antagonistic. Kernodle gives modern examples of this as hostility between Black women on social media and on reality TV shows such as "Real Housewives of Atlanta" and "Basketball Wives." As she mentions, these depictions discredit Black women as intellectual beings. An additional Black female stereotype is what Tressie McMillan Cottom calls the *incompetent* stereotype. McMillan Cottom explains what she means by this in her article for Time magazine, "I Was Pregnant and in Crisis. All the Doctors and Nurses Saw Was an Incompetent Black Woman." She explains that

Black women in U.S. society are expected to be a superhuman, meant to care for others in higher status at all costs to themself. “Sister Sadie” is a character who originated in Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and has since been used to reference this Black female stereotype. McMillan Cottom explains that this woman can endure anything to continue caring for others. However, once a Black woman is seen to be using her wisdom to further herself in some way, she is incompetent and unruly. In McMillan Cottom’s case, doctors and nurses assumed that she was being dramatic about her pain and that she had an unhealthy lifestyle, causing her to be three days in labor without treatment and with two tumors.

The exceptional woman, competitivity between Black women, and incompetency of Black women create the complex framework of how society views Black women. These stereotypes are why it is so hard for our society to give credit to Black women jazz musicians as innovators of the music. It is also why it is so important to tell the story of Black women musicians and to understand the complex obstacles that these women faced. However, once the narrative of the Black female experience is explored, we must also tell the narrative of these powerful women not through the lens of their womanhood, but through the lens of their musicianship, intelligence, and musical contributions. If we can’t view female musicians in the same way that we view male musicians, then we are not giving them full respect.

I have gathered a selection of sources which contain some valuable information about Melba Liston but there are gaps to be filled. These sources contain mostly biographical information and some musical information (Bradfield, Bryant, Marchbanks, Dahl, Kernodle, O’Connell and Tucker, Kaplan, Gillespie, Jones, Spencer, Keyes, Gordon, Berliner, Weston, Smith, Wilson, and Isoardi). From these authors and interviewers, I have constructed a general timeline of Liston’s life and accomplishments.

Brief Biographical Overview

Melba Liston was born in Kansas City, Missouri in 1926. She was raised primarily by her mother and her mother's family. She began playing the trombone at the age of seven. When Liston was 10 years old, most of her family moved to Los Angeles. She began studying music and entertainment with Alma Hightower, a renowned teacher and pianist in the L.A area. When Liston was in high school, she began working at the Lincoln Theatre in Los Angeles. In the early 1940s, Liston was recruited by Gerald Wilson to play trombone in his big band, and she eventually became his assistant copyist (Isoardi). Through this mentorship, she learned from Wilson's writing techniques and cultivated her own style. The band played all over the country including stints at the Apollo in New York.

By the late 1940s, Liston had made a name for herself with leading band leaders such as Count Basie, Les Hite, Lucky Millinder, Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington, and Benny Carter, who often employed her (Kaplan, 1999, p. 420). Around 1950, Liston was recruited by Dizzy Gillespie to join his big band, which was focused on bebop. Liston went on tour with Billie Holiday in the southern U.S. (Isoardi) and continued to work in Los Angeles. In 1956, Gillespie contracted Liston to join his new big band. In the late 1950s, Liston began a relationship with Randy Weston which lasted the rest of her life. She arranged for Motown records, writing for singers such as Aretha Franklin, and Ray Charles. She worked in Clark Terry's big band, playing and writing, and worked with Elvin Jones, Mary Lou Williams, Milt Jackson, and many others. She moved to Jamaica in the early 1970s and upon her return, she created an all-female septet called Melba Liston and Company. In 1985, she suffered from a stroke and was mostly unable to perform afterward, but continued writing until her death 1999 (Kaplan, p. 425).

Accomplished jazz composer and pianist Hale Smith said of Liston, “she could write most guys under the table without trying, and I’m talking about the best out there” (Kaplan, p. 415). Gerald Wilson said, “She’s a marvelous trombone player.” Randy Weston said, “She has this wonderful way of creating beauty with great strength. Remind[s] me of Ellington’s Orchestra,” and discusses her large trombone sound, which he felt was just how a trombone should sound. Vi Redd said, “Melba has a most unusual gift...being able to play and write and arrange the way she does.”

Tokenism

Still, tokenism defines the way that Liston is included in jazz history textbooks. In one instance, the textbook, *Jazz* (2015), by DeVeaux & Giddins, includes a section entitled, “Women in Jazz” which features Valaida Snow and includes Liston in a short list of other female jazz instrumentalists with no further explanation of their contributions (Deveaux & Giddins, 2015). This is a clear instance of tokenism because the book is separating women instrumentalists from the rest of the history, rather than mentioning them in a chapter about the era they were most prominent in. This tokenism is made more prominent because the authors’ choices don’t reflect the history. Liston was more prominent than Valaida Snow during her career, and it would make more sense to feature Liston than Snow. It is as if Deveaux and Giddins arbitrarily chose which prominent female instrumentalist to feature and listed a handful of others as an afterthought. Furthermore, Mary Lou Williams is featured alongside Dizzy Gillespie, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald and others. Melba Liston deserves a place alongside these jazz musicians, because she was performing and writing alongside them with the same level of excellence. This is an example of jazz historians understanding that these women were part of the framework of jazz,

but not understanding the weight of their contributions. Mary Lou Williams was a giant in her own right, as was Liston, but history books do not give Liston the same recognition. This is a situation where a history textbook can make a difference by promoting not only those who were on the cover of albums, but those who were instrumental in the making of those albums.

Tokenism also affected Liston during her career, which contributes to the way she is remembered. Liston does not mention a time in her career when she was chosen to be a part of a band as a token woman. However, she does mention that throughout her career she was given the spotlight as a form of tokenism (Bryant, 1996). It was confusing for audiences to see her solo in the same way as the rest of the band, but if she had a feature every so often, the audience could understand that. This tells us that her career was not shaped by tokenism, but her public appearance was.

Problem Statement

Arranger and trombonist, Melba Liston was called upon to work for jazz and R& B legends including Dizzy Gillespie, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Clark Terry, Mary Lou Williams, Tony Bennett, Aretha Franklin, and Ray Charles. Not only was she praised as one of the best arrangers in jazz during her lifetime, but she was also a sought-after trombone player. However, her inclusion in the jazz historical narrative is incomplete and limited to tolken mentions. This means that young musicians learning the history of the music are unlikely to come across Liston and her prolific contributions to jazz. There are a few reasons why Liston did not reach the level of fame that many of those who worked with her did. One possibility is that jazz arrangers don’t receive the recognition of the headliners they are writing for. In some cases, they don’t receive any credit at all. The social constraints put on Black women in Liston’s

lifetime were another large barrier to her fame and, therefore, remembrance in our historical narrative.

Purpose Statement

Most writings about Melba Liston seek to bring her to light as a woman who has been forgotten in a male dominated history. Now that she has been brought to light by a selection of historical articles, it is time to create a more complete overview of her life and work. There is no definitive biography of Melba Liston, nor are there many informed selected discographies of her work. This thesis will supply both.

To address this gap in the jazz community's knowledge of Melba Liston, I will present a biography of Melba Liston in addition to a selected discography of her work. This document will give jazz scholars the opportunity to fully understand Liston's career and see a list of her major contributions to the jazz world. The information presented will no longer be scattered or unknown, it will all be accessible in one place

Methodology

For my thesis, I used qualitative historical research. Through analysis, I created a chronology of Melba Liston's life and career. In addition, I included my selections from Liston's full discography, found at the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University. I transcribed one of Liston's compositions for four trombones and rhythm section and her solo from this. I analyzed this composition and an arrangement of Liston's. I reached out to scholars to interview them, but only spoke with one over the phone. I discussed opportunities of further research with those who I was able to contact but did not uncover much information with this research. My conclusion was that I did not have specific enough questions for interviewees because I needed to delve into

my more detailed sources before contacting them. I had read through many sources, but many of these contained the same information. I felt that there was little information circulating about the topic and my only other option was through interview. Now I believe that more pointed research needs to be done. Through this research one may uncover questions to be answered by individuals with more experience in the area. For example, Lisa Barg, Associate Professor in Music Research at McGill, for example, has studied Liston's arranging. Research of Liston's writing style may be supplemented or expedited by working with her.

My interview data was collected from Geof Bradfield, Professor of Jazz Studies at Northern Illinois University, who studied African influences in Melba Liston's music. I had email correspondences with the members of the Melba Liston Research Collective, Lisa Barg; Dianthe Spencer, Professor of Jazz and Musical Theatre at San Francisco State University; Dr. Tammy L. Kernodle, Distinguished Professor of Music at Miami University, Ohio, and Sherrie Tucker, Professor of American Studies at the University of Kansas. Through these correspondences, I gained insight into others who may be interviewed for further research.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The sources discussed in this literature review will cover biographical material, philosophical thought about women in jazz, and musical analysis in a broad context of style as well as a more detailed context of technique. These include one dissertation, one radio broadcast, chapters from selected books, and multiple scholarly articles. Through variety in sources and topics, I have tried to create a more complete and varied perspective about Melba Liston. These three topics I mention above are the most common in scholarly articles about Liston. Liston's life was defined by being a Black woman, so this is a crucial subject of study and most authors have chosen to focus on this topic. The time has come to make more known the musical accomplishments of Liston rather than solely her experience as an Black woman.

Biographical Focus

Some of the most common sources about Melba Liston are biographical in nature, but not exhaustive. These give the reader an understanding of what her most significant musical accomplishments were as well as some of the trials she faced throughout her life. Analysis of oral histories is what makes up most of the historical documentation of Liston. I gathered seven oral histories, one newspaper article, one essay, and sections from three autobiographies which I used to create a context for Liston's life and career.

Some valuable oral history is documented in Nancy Wilson's 2008 NPR Jazz Profiles episode, "Melba Liston: Bones of an Arranger." The goal of the segment was to educate a jazz

interested public on who Liston was and what made her important. The segment generally followed a chronological biographical timeline and was split somewhat evenly between music and commentary. A large chunk of the segment contained oral content from several jazz musicians who worked with Melba as well as Melba herself, though Liston was not being interviewed during the segment. It is unclear how many of these interviews were conducted by Wilson and NPR and how many were taken from other interviews. There was no one speaking live during the segment except for Wilson. These clips gave the listener a lot of insight into what those who worked with Liston thought about her work and her personality. All respected her writing and trombone playing greatly. They explain that she was shy, but also could be assertive when rehearsing her arrangements with a band. She would occasionally even show frustration with bands. The musical aspect was featured greatly in this radio segment and will be discussed later in this review. However, much can be gained from this episode about Liston's career, life, and personality.

Linda Dahl's 1984 book, "Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazz Women," became a popular source among researchers of Liston because of its gritty truths about sexism. The book was meant to give credit to women jazz instrumentalists from throughout the 20th century, who, for many different reasons, were unknown or not known well enough. The chapter on Liston is about 10 pages long with a brief biographical introduction as well as biographical information throughout the chapter between interview segments. The biographical information was not gathered from the interview itself, but from research Dahl did before the interview took place. The chapter goes back and forth between commentary and interview, but the last two to three pages are entirely Liston discussing the experience of women in jazz. She is very articulate about her bitter attitude towards the forms which sexism took throughout her life

and at the time of the interview. Liston clearly understands exactly how Black women have shaped society and music, and how their credit has been stripped from them. The author wanted to bring out some of Liston's social and political stances as well as commenting on her physical gestures while answering certain questions. The author doesn't make any additional claims but leaves the reader with Liston's meaningful words. This interview gets to the heart of some of Liston's personal beliefs which she doesn't discuss in most interviews. This gives us an important perspective on Liston.

Monica Hairston O'Connell and Sherrie Tucker created a much more in-depth exploration of Melba Liston's oral histories in their 2014 "Not One to Toot Her Own Horn(?): Melba Liston's Oral Histories and Classroom Presentations." It was one of the essays in the 2014 special issue on Melba Liston in the *Black Music Research Journal* and written by two more of the administrators of Melba Liston's archive. The purpose of the article is to examine a selection of Melba Liston's class presentations, oral histories, and interviews to gain fuller understanding of "jazz practice, jazz historiography and the jazz archive" (p. 122). The two authors analyzed the aural nuances of selected class presentations, oral histories, and interviews between 1973 and 1996 which feature Melba Liston. Their reasoning was that by listening to these recordings and looking at the transcripts, one can "better understand and trace the relationship between orality, aurality, voice, and silence that provides meaning beyond the words as written" (p. 123). They listened for how Liston "renavigated and renegotiated--in face-to-face interaction--situated encounters with jazz ideals in tensions with one another" (p. 122). One of these authors' findings was that, when listening to Liston speak about ideas that were "powerful and complex" (p. 128), such as sexual abuse on the road, her tone of voice and manner of speaking allowed them to understand what she was really getting at. They explain how different contexts allowed Liston to

open up emotionally. They claim in Clora Bryant's interview with Liston, the two successful women have a way of giving themselves authority in certain contexts and giving themselves complexity outside of the box of "women in jazz" (p. 153). Liston is more comfortable talking to Bryant as a person who has had a similar experience. O'Connell and Tucker are doing mostly original research here, and they are uncovering and exploring useful information about Melba Liston while doing so. Finding out what subjects made Liston uncomfortable and what she did not come to terms within her life is valuable information when coming to a deeper understanding of her.

Probably the best introduction to Melba Liston would be to read Erica Kaplan's "Melba Liston: It's All from My Soul." Kaplan used the chronological timeline of Melba Liston's life as a frame for biographical information. She began with a paragraph outlining how meaningful and timeless Liston's music was, therefore making it full of *soul* (p. 115). Kaplan backed these claims up with quotations from renowned musicians about Melba Liston's music as well as from Liston, herself, but with no analysis of the music. These ideas were mostly surrounding Liston's conveyance of roots in Black music such as the blues (p. 425) and her lyrical style in part writing for big band (p. 418). The only in-text citations were of Linda Dahl's 1984 book "Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazz Woman," which is one of the most prominent sources on Melba Liston for scholars. However, there was no reference list, so other source material is unknown. In Kaplan's concluding paragraphs, she claims that Liston broke barriers of race, gender, culture, and disability. Kaplan also claims that Liston opened the door for generations of women musicians to come. These were some of the claims that I based my research questions on after reading Kaplan's article. A couple other important quotes included

Liston's quote about her arranging coming from her "soul," and Randy Weston's words about Liston's ability to "capture the spirit of the individual artist" (p. 423).

Stephen Isoardi conducted an interview with Melba Liston in 1992 for the UCLA Library Center for Oral History Research. She didn't speak much, and some of her answers were hard to understand because she was elderly and had had a stroke. Isoardi was very sensitive and encouraging when asking personal questions, but Liston was not comfortable discussing personal information. After Isoardi asks her a few ways, Liston offered little information about abuse she suffered from band members while on tour. The interview covered her early childhood through to her late career. Some of Liston's historical accounts mixed two events together or did not align with other interviews.

Melba Liston was interviewed by Clora Bryant when she was made an NEA Jazz Master in 1996. Liston already had a rapport with Bryant because they had worked together and shared many friends and colleagues. Bryant was a trumpet player about the same age as Liston and was also a Black woman who shared Liston's experience. Though, Liston was more comfortable with Bryant than other interviewers, she was still uncomfortable discussing her romantic relationships or her experience with sexual abuse. This interview gave a biographical timeline of Liston's life. As mentioned, Liston was not always reliable with chronological order of events and differentiating between different events due to her age and health.

Hale Smith, a classical composer, performer, arranger, and teacher at the University of Connecticut-Storrs, invited Liston to speak at his Black Studies class multiple times. Her first visit was in September of 1971, her second was in September of 1973, and her third was in November of 1982. One of the earliest accounts of Liston speaking about her life at length was her first visit here. She had much better memory in this first oral history talk than she did in later

years after her stroke. In these oral histories, Liston discussed her life, with emphasis on her time at the Lincoln Theatre in Los Angeles, and on her job as a Director of African American Studies in Jamaica, as this was her most recent major event. Smith plays some of her music on recordings, including hard bop arrangements and demos of Jamaican music for musicals she wrote. In these talks, Liston doesn't seem uncomfortable with personal topics, because the situation is more informal. She uses people's names more when discussing a close relationship with a man, and she discloses more about how she was dismissed in the music industry.

Randy Weston's autobiography contains a chapter called "Enter Melba Liston" (pp. 70-81) and a chapter called "Uhuru Afrika*"* (pp. 82-101). The chapter on Liston was about how Weston met Liston and how they began working together. He also explained their writing process together and a brief overview of their joined career and those they worked with. Weston explained his view of Liston's personality and the nature of their relationship. He also explained his view on how prejudice affected women musicians he knew. His chapter on *Uhuru Afrika* also included Liston, and how they were involved in supporting the Civil Rights Movement and freeing Africa from colonization. He described the process of making the work, who was hired, and his ideas behind the pieces. He also explained how he researched African music and culture to prepare to write the work.

In Dizzy Gillespie's autobiography, *to Be or not…to Bop*, a couple sections feature Liston. One section "Headache," (pp. 355-357) was about the end of his bebop big band when dance venues stopped hiring them. There is a quote from Liston on how she joined the bebop band briefly. The section, "World Statesman" (pp. 413-427) is about Gillespie's State Department Commissioned Tour and how he got it. There were quotes from multiple people on their experience on the tour: Herb Lance, Melba Liston, Rod Levitt, Carl Warwick, E. V. Perry,

Marion Frazier, and Charlie Persip. Gillespie described the tour in the Middle East and the various stories and interfering politics.

Quincy Jones' autobiography, *Q: The Autobiography of Quincy Jones* he wrote a chapter called "Free and Easy" (pp. 135-149). This chapter is about Jones being asked to write music for a Harold Arlen show entitled *Free and Easy* and the European tour his band did, which included Melba Liston on trombone. The musicians acted out the show in costume in addition to performing music. Unfortunately, they ran out of money early in the production, but Jones had so much faith in the band that he stayed in Europe instead of taking his producer's ride home, and they toured with very little money, barely making it from gig to gig. They traveled to Holland, Belgium, Italy, Yugoslavia, Finland, Austria, Germany, Sweden, France, and Portugal.

In 1983, W. Royal Stokes wrote a newspaper or magazine article entitled, "The Big Band Sound of Melba Liston." Found in the Newspaper Clippings at the Institute of Jazz Studies Archive at Rutgers, this article included a review of Liston's show with Melba Liston and Company and an interview of Liston. The interview included a brief description of Liston's career and her experience as a Black woman in a male-dominated business. Stokes wrote about Liston's recent notable concert dates and some history and personnel of Melba Liston and Company.

Record Dates with Liston

Maxine Gordon's "Dexter Gordon and Melba Liston: The 'Mischievous Lady' Session," from the Black Music Research Journal special issue on Melba Liston, was about the one session Liston did with Dexter Gordon. This article gave the details of the record date: who was on it, what the relationship with the producer was like, and the origin of the pieces. Some background

was given, like the relationship between Liston and Gordon who had known each other since they were children. Detail is given to Liston's personality and how she carried herself at the record date in addition to Dexter Gordon's clear admiration of her.

Charyl L. Keyes' "'We Never Kissed' A Date with Melba and Strings" was another article in the special issue on Melba Liston. Keyes discussed how Gloria Lynne chose Liston as the musical director for her debut album, how they met, and that they were both on the rise as jazz artists. Keyes informed the reader about Liston's original, "We Never Kissed", with a brief analysis and explained that Liston had already asked Lynne to premier this original. This was both Lynne's and Liston's first time working with strings and Keyes analyzed some of Liston's use of the strings as well as general voicings and pacing of the arrangements. Leonard Feather's praise for Liston in the liner notes of this record is described.

Lisa Barg's addition to the special issue on Melba Liston was a deep dive into Liston's artistic contributions to the four-movement work, *Uhuru Africa*, while making the point that Liston deserves more credit as an arranger, though she preferred to work behind the scenes. Melba Liston's notes from the record date were supplied by the archive at Columbia College in Chicago. Barg analyzed the score in addition to Liston's notes. She mostly discussed Liston's use of textural tools to create such a tasteful work, while incorporating African styles into American styles. The point was made that Liston's arrangements contributed much more to Randy Weston works than she is given credit for. Liston had researched West African music and culture to be able to contribute equally to the African aspects of the music. She often takes Weston's compositional motive and reworks it throughout a piece to create something much more than the motive itself. Barg believed that Liston may have shied from the limelight of soloing, in part, because of the extra attention paid to a woman among men. Barg concluded that

Liston faintly resembles the radical Black women poets of her time. This was because she was a uniquely creative Black woman who cultivated an indisputable skill for arranging, putting her in a place of power over male colleagues.

Experience as a Woman

Tammy Kernodle's 2014 article, "Black Women Working Together: Jazz, Gender, and the Politics of Validation," examines the experience of Black women in jazz, using examples from Liston's life as evidence. Kernodle cited Angela Davis' 2001 article, "Black Women and Music: A Historical Legacy of Struggle," which explored the stereotyped competitivity among Black women in American society and how this frames our understanding of Black women musicians' role in popular cultural history (Kernodle, 2014, p. 27). Because Davis did not delve into jazz, Kernodle focused on the jazz focused historical perspective of Black women working together. Kernodle is one of the administrators of the Melba Liston Research Collective archive at Columbia College in Chicago. This article was part of a 2014 special issue in the *Black Music Research Journal* made up of several essays which were meant to spread information about Melba Liston into the jazz historical research community. Kernodle's reference list includes many interviews and newspaper articles, most likely found in Liston's archive. Because the article focused on the relationship between Melba Liston and Mary Lou Williams, there were many sources listed which focused on Mary Lou Williams, including an article by Kernodle. Additionally, Kernodle includes information from philosophical writings pertaining to her topic, including a book on Black feminist thought by Patricia Hill Collins. Kernodle explores the complexity of the damage that assumed competitive personalities of Black women does to their careers and to their mark on history. Additionally, she explores how relationships among Black

women are supportive and imparting of both knowledge and wisdom. Her claims are that Black women 1) established lived experience as a criteria for establishing meaning and relevance; 2) prioritized verbal communication as a primary means of transferring knowledge; and 3) developed an ethic of accountability that defined how they engaged with each other and their social/professional circles (p. 53).

Kernodle backs these claims up with evidence based on the passing of wisdom from Billie Holiday to Liston while on tour together, and the mother-daughter relationship that blossomed between them; Liston's recollection of women's heightened roles in the music of the church; and Liston's working relationship with Mary Lou Williams. These claims prove that Liston was one of the pioneering Black women learning to create community with and empower other Black women in the jazz community.

Victoria E. Smith wrote a thesis entitled, "Listen to Liston: examining the systemic erasure of Black women in the historiography of jazz." Smith claimed that women have made invaluable contributions to jazz but are forgotten because of the "overtly male-centric culture of jazz" (Smith p. 24). She claimed that there must be an examination the societal norms and constraints that prevent women from being seen as equal to their male counterparts for us to understand why they are not seen equally (Smith, p. 26). Smith's topics include the nature of bebop as a highly exclusionary art; homosocial networks of jazz; coded language and gender stereotypes in jazz culture; social networks for Black women - church, home, and community; experiences of women outside of their social networks; Black women working together; and sexual harassment, assault and race.

Musical Analysis and Context

As mentioned, there is little analysis of Melba Liston's musical work. Part of the *Black Music Research Journal*'s special issue on Melba Liston was an analytical essay by Geof Bradfield (2014) as well as an essay by Emmett Price (2014) about how Melba Liston's work placed her in the Harlem Renaissance. These are among a few sources which do some broad analysis of Liston's writing.

Bradfield's 2014 essay, "Digging Down in the CBMR Archives: New Music Inspired by Melba Liston's Scores" uncovers what technical faculties are at play in Melba Liston's arranging and her compositions. Bradfield shares findings he made through analysis of Melba Liston's music for a project in which he composed music celebrating Melba Liston's legacy: *Melba!* (p. 86). He hoped, by researching Randy Weston's music, to gain understanding of African elements which could inform his own work in the future, but he came to value a focus on Liston instead (p. 86). He used small examples from his analyses of Liston's music to discuss broad and specific commonalities in Liston's composition and arrangements. Some specific analyses included use of motifs, intervallic development, and tonal ambiguity. A broader point of analysis was Liston's integration of solos into her arrangements. For example her choice to build backgrounds in a drum solo (p. 91) or allow a solo to begin as the compositional material is developing (p. 93). Though Bradfield is not arguing a certain point throughout the essay, he does make some concluding claims. One is that Liston had a sophisticated personal harmonic and melodic language that is much larger than what he felt he could convey through his essay. He claims that Liston's "masterful body of compositions has been almost completely neglected by the jazz community, performers and scholars alike" (p. 94).

Jack Marchbanks (2018) discussed Melba Liston in the context of the Black arts movements which took place throughout the Civil Rights Movement and afterward. Marchbanks' purpose was to explore whether art inspired by the Civil Rights Movement was more than "an individual opinion on the racial conflicts of the era" (p.44), and could be a powerful art in and of itself. The thesis, as he mentions, is more of an investigation than an argumentative paper. He comes to many findings through five focused chapters, which explore the Civil Rights Movement, Black arts, and how the two influenced each other or didn't. In his chapter entitled "Making Their Voices Heard: Women Jazz Artists and Writers in The Early 1960s" (p. 202) he is making the point that some of the female artists of the movement are less known than their male counterparts. This section emphasizes Melba Liston's work with Randy Weston to write African inspired music. Marchbanks describes the influence of the Hi Fly dance beat that became popular in West Africa during anti-colonialization. Randy Weston was exposed to the music on a trip to West Africa and brought it into his music. Liston subsequently found a way to work with this as well as other instrumentations and rhythms influenced by her time in South America. He claims that Liston and Weston transcend the "fake African music" (p. 197) in a way which many artists did not accomplish. None of Marchbanks' musical analysis goes deeper than these broad subjects, but the musical accomplishments made by Liston along with Weston to successfully integrate African and American jazz styles is conveyed.

Nancy Wilson's 2008 radio broadcast is great source of musical insight about Liston. The music that was played featured Liston's trombone playing, composing, and arranging. Much of this music is hard to find outside of this radio broadcast. As afore mentioned, there were many audio clips of musicians discussing their experience with Liston as well as audio clips of Liston speaking to her music. Some thoughts about her music included her use of a color palette in her

writing. Though Liston denies using this idea in her writing, Fostina Dixon uses it to describe how Liston's music sounded to her. My interpretation of this metaphor, as informed by others' descriptions, is that Liston had a way of creating a cohesive sound in each section of a piece which then complimented other sections. Other thoughts included Randy Weston's claim that Liston could make a small group sound like a big band. Gerald Wilson, who gave Liston her first big band position, claimed that Liston was a great lead player as well as a soloist in a big band setting. This would have been the reason for her high demand as a big band player. Charlie Persip, a drummer who worked with Liston, believed that Liston had a great sense of harmony and skill with dissonance to resolution. These opinions create some context for the importance of Liston's contribution to jazz during her career and the respect she gained in the industry.

CHAPTER THREE

BIOGRAPHY AND HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

Introduction

Melba Liston was a prolific arranger and skilled trombonist whose career, beginning in the early 1940s, spanned more than half a century. She worked with jazz legends and became very successful at her craft despite the cultural constraints put on Black women during her lifetime. She was so determined and had so much to offer that she overcame the odds to share her musical genius with the world. This chapter will serve as a biography of Liston's life.

Childhood and Early Career

Liston was born in Kansas City, Missouri in 1926. An only child, she was raised between her grandparents, Virginia and John Clark, and her single mother, Lucille Liston. She spent the school-week in Kansas City, Kansas with her grandparents and the weekends in Kansas City, Missouri, with her mother. Her aunts, Mary Miller, Thelma Stattion, and Anez Newman, were a large part of her life as well. In Liston's words, her college educated mother was overqualified for the work she was doing in Kansas City, Kansas, and she moved to Kansas City, Missouri to pursue work there. Liston felt that her family was economically comfortable (Bryant, 1996).

Being in Kansas City, Kansas, Liston was exposed to the city's rich musical community. Her grandfather's favorite band was Cab Calloway and her aunts' favorites were Jimmie Lunceford and Count Basie. She learned melodies from the radio and played their roll-piano for her aunts to dance to. She also sang in the congregation of church and sung along to the radio. Clora Bryant mentions in her NEA Jazz Master interview with Liston had a numerical system for

learning music. She numbered the different notes and memorized their order to learn melodies. This lead her family and church community to believe she was a genius, using math in that way at such a young age.

When she was seven years old, she had the chance to pick her instrument from a vendor. She saw the trombone and immediately fell in love with the shape of it. She thought it was beautiful. Though the vendor expressed his concern for a girl to choose trombone, Liston's mother saw how much Liston loved it and bought it for her on the spot. By the time Liston had the trombone for five months, she was teaching herself melodies of popular religious, classical, or folk songs that were played on the radio. She explains that she had to turn her head to reach the sixth and seventh positions because she was so small. Her grandfather encouraged her play songs for him on their back porch. She recalls playing the melodies of "Deep River" and "Rocking the Cradle of the Deep." She took two or three lessons with a trombone teacher but concluded that he wasn't right and told her mother to cancel lessons with him, after which she continued to teach herself. (Isoardi, 1992) (Bryant, 1996). She quickly began playing her trombone in public and was seen as a prodigy. She even performed with piano accompaniment on a radio show in Kansas City, Kansas.

In 1937, her family had decided to move to Los Angeles, possibly because of work her mother was pursuing. Her grandmother and aunts had moved four or five months in advance of Liston and her mother, to get settled. Then, Liston and her mother moved there to join them. At this point, Liston was 11 years old. Her school files had been lost in the move, so she took a placement exam at her new school, McKinley Jr High School. Her score placed her in the nineth grade, but being so young, she was put into eighth grade instead (Bryant, 1996).

Liston's new teacher was named Doddard Deal, and he saw a lot of potential in Liston, even asking to adopt her and send her to some talent-based programs. Liston and her mother didn't want her to leave home, so she declined. According to her interviews with Hale Smith, Liston began playing in youth music programs in her area. She performed at nursing homes and local events with these groups and at her church on holidays. She mentions that she met Alma Hightower through these youth programs, but in her interview with Bryant, she says that she met Hightower through Hightower's daughter, Minnie, who was Liston's schoolmate (Bryant, 1996). Alma Hightower ran a school which many Los Angeles jazz musicians went through in their early years. Melba's peers in this school included Dexter Gordon and Eric Dolphy (Kaplan, 1999). Hightower's students learned how to sing, act, dance, and play popular and improvised music. Liston recalls that they learned theory with Miss Hightower, but not harmony. According to Liston, their band performed "everywhere," including at the parks in the summer. She recalls that in 1938, she went on a short road trip to a fair as part of "Miss Hightower and the Melodic Dots," as they were called. She recalls that the kids rode in the bed of a pickup truck to get there. Liston made a lot of friends at this school, and was very close with Vi Redd, Minnie Hightower, and Alice Young who she recalled were the only girls in the group (Bryant, 1996). She was good friends with the boys, but they still treated her differently. The boys would playfully call her "bitch" and she claims that the female students were not allowed to take the tip basket around at their performances, so the male students would take all the money they made (Kaplan, 1999). Though her male peers may have teased Melba and treated her differently, they also encouraged her to go out to jams with them. She was a shy performer and they believed in her musical skill when she did not.

As Liston and her peers gained experience performing and learned their trade, Liston's friends encouraged her to join the Black musicians' union, the Local 767, in Los Angeles. Hightower was opposed Liston moving on from the school and getting a job. Despite this, at 16, Liston, along with her friend, Alice Young, took the union's test, and were hired for the band at the Lincoln Theatre. Liston explains that the Lincoln Theatre was a Black theatre in the ghetto of L.A. The theatre showed movies, stage shows, and brought in large-profile acts. The major theatres in L.A. were the Paramount theatre and the Orpheum theatre. Because of segregation, these theatres didn't allow Black artists to perform, whether they were part of an interracial act or an all-Black act, so the Black artists would perform separately at the Lincoln Theatre. She met a lot of famous artists this way, including Lena Horne, Pearl Bailey and various members of Duke Ellington's band. Vaudeville acts such as comedians Pigmeat Markum, Dusty Fletcher, and chorus line girls were common shows at the Lincoln. Liston even helped out on stage, acting in skits and dancing. The Lincoln Theatre band had 13 members, most of whom had been in the Les Hite Orchestra, the Benny Carter Orchestra, and others. They were mostly men older than Liston and were very patronizing toward her. It turned out that she was better at reading music than most, if not all, of them, so she was made section leader, making them bitter toward her. Adding even further to their bitterness, the audience loved the novelty of a young girl playing in the band and applauded more for her solos (Smith, 1973). The leader of the group, Bardu Ali of Chick Webb's orchestra, noticed Liston's skill and began giving her assignments to write music for the band. Liston assumes that Ali thought she was in college rather than high school. She claims when a band came through town with an arrangement that didn't fit the right amount of players, he would say "Girl, write the music for it" (Bryant 1996). She went to her high school teacher for help transposing instruments and formatting the parts for the band. She says that she

tried to become chummy with her male peers, and she thought this opened more opportunities for her once they could accept her as a peer (Smith, 1971).

Launching her Career

Liston had worked here for a little over a year when Gerald Wilson recruited her for a big band start-up. Gerald Wilson was a trumpet player, who had been touring with Jimmie Lunceford's band. He left to start his own band in Los Angeles and hired many of the Lincoln Theatre players to be in it (Berliner, 1994, p. 49). The new band was the best in the area, and they knew it. They were very successful, although some members chose to go back on the road to New York with Jimmie Lunceford.

Liston describes how the forced removal of the Japanese to internment camps left vacant areas of town. This real-estate was quickly turned into entertainment venues. These places employed jazz musicians and Gerald Wilson's band acquired a residency at a club called Shepp's Playhouse. Beneath clubs like this, there were often clubs employing small groups. Liston played below this club and many others and saw some of the best jazz musicians coming through town playing in small groups (Smith, 1971).

Liston became Wilson's copyist and learned arranging techniques from him such as how to voice the horns (Wilson, 1980), and placement of instruments in their respective sections (Smith, 1973). He began to pass on copyist work to her as his ghost writer. She did work for artists such as Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, and Count Basie. He introduced her to all the best musicians coming through town, including Gillespie, Basie, and Charlie Parker. Liston got to the point where she could copy Wilson's arranging style so closely that no one knew the difference.

The band went on tours across the United States. Liston said they played everywhere, including New York, Chicago, and Kansas. In addition to playing trombone, Liston sang and was asked to write features for herself, because the novelty of a female musician was popular with audiences (Bryant, 1996). While out on tour, they followed Jimmie Lunceford's band, playing at week at the Apollo in New York City. On the way back toward Los Angeles, they were stranded in Chicago without enough money to travel back. Liston had saved her money, but it was stolen when she stayed with relatives of the band members. Finally, Wilson was able to send for money from the musicians union to travel back to Los Angeles (Isoardi, 1992).

Liston was on the road by the age of 17 or 18. This was unfortunately the beginnings of harassment, abuse, and disrespect toward her as a young woman. In a 1992 interview with Steven Isoardi, she is asked about her treatment on the road with the Wilson band. She says, "Rapes and everything" to which Isoardi replies, "but not from the band itself?" She responds with "yup…I've been going through that stuff for all my life" (Isoardi, 1992). She claims "The only way I could survive was that I was young and strong then… and I was self-sufficient" (Johnson, 2022). She says that when she "started going with him [Wilson]" she had his support (Isoardi, 1992). She does not specify further whether she means that they were in a romantic relationship.

Liston was with Wilson for 8 years according to Wilson, and 5 or 6 years according to Liston (Bryant, 1996). Wilson's band was giving Liston all the writing credit, and even liked her writing better than Wilson's, so Wilson let her go from the band (Berliner, 1994, p.49). Still, Wilson respected Liston's writing and says he learned a lot from her as they worked together (Bryant, 1996).

In 1947, Liston was asked by her friend Dexter Gordon to play on his record date for Dial Records in Hollywood. The personnel included Gordon on tenor saxophone, Liston on trombone, Charles Fox on piano, Chuck Thompson on drums, and Red Callender on bass. They played two three-minute recordings. The A side was Dexter Gordon's composition, "Mischievous Lady," written for Liston, and the B side was "Lullaby in Rhythm." Liston was afraid to play memorized music, and she was very intimidated by a record date with her peers, who were more versed in improvisation, whereas she spent her time writing music (Gordon, 2014, pp. 9-10). At this time, Liston had a brief stint with the Count Basie orchestra. She is on a record from 1949 entitled, Count Basie and his Orchestra, and she is listed as arranger and director of the track, "Just an Old Manuscript."

Later in 1949, Liston joined the Dizzy Gillespie band. She was visiting New York City and writing arrangements on commission. She says in her interview with Bryant, that she did not have her horn, because she was only planning to write while she was there. In her interview with Bryant and her classroom talk with Hale Smith, Liston tells a similar story of how she ended up with Gillespie's big band. With Bryant, she involves Gerald Wilson's name but does not mention that she is in a relationship with him, and in her classroom talk she does not use his name, but says that she was close with a man who was on Gillespie's band, insinuating that they were in a relationship. From these two stories, I have pieced together what most likely happened. Liston was visiting Gerald Wilson at a place in uptown Manhattan. He had started playing with Gillespie's new bebop style big band. Gillespie had told him to get Liston on the band to fill the chair of a trombone player he had fired. Wilson had kept this information from Liston because he didn't want her to go downtown without him and he had gone to Detroit to visit relatives. Wilson's flight back was cancelled due to snow and while he was gone, Liston finished her work

one night and wanted see Gillespie's band. She asked a stranger how to get to Bop City where the band was performing from uptown, where she was staying. She showed up and Billy Eckstine was outside the club. He told her Gillespie had been waiting for her all week and she needed to get on the band stand immediately. Gillespie sent for a trombone for her to play and put Liston in the uniform of the trombone player he had fired. Later, Liston's mother sent her horn to her. This band included John Coltrane, John Collins, Jimmie and Tootie Heath, Specs Wright, Al McKibbon, Willie Cook, John Lewis, Milt Jackson, and others. Liston was hearing this bebop style music for the first time, coming from Los Angeles, and she was intimidated by the complexity. She refused to take any solos when Gillespie called on her. She was also very shy of hanging out with the band members. Finally, Bennie Harris, who was playing trumpet with the band, came to her and explained the bebop style, even singing characteristic phrases to her, so that she could practice it (Smith, 1971) (Berliner, 1994). The band only lasted five months together before their gigs stopped altogether (Bryant, 1996) (Smith, 1971). The bebop style was too modern to catch the interest of audiences.

Liston tells a brief story of how Gillespie persuaded the band members to respect her. Gillespie had Liston hand out some of her arrangements to the band, "He said, 'Go on and take one of those arrangements out and see if they [you] can play it.' Two or three bars later, he said, 'Now who's the …[Bitch]" (Bryant, 1996).

In 1950, Billie Holiday was going on tour with Gerald Wilson as music director and Wilson invited Liston to be his assistant music director. The tour was of the lower east coast, including Virginia Beach, Washington, Maryland, and South Carolina. This proved to be problematic. Audiences grew thinner and less happy with the music as the tour went on. The public wasn't very interested in the bebop influenced music they were playing, and as they

moved further south they became more and more hostile toward the Black musicians. The group ran out of money in South Carolina and they were stuck on the bus for three or four days. The bus driver eventually abandoned them. The police began to come by and threaten them, saying that if anything happened in the town that night, it would be their fault. Eventually, Liston was able to travel to Kansas City with saved up money, and from there she sent for more money from the Los Angeles union to get back home (Smith, 1971, 1973). Liston further explains that she grew frustrated with Wilson for pulling on everyone's money to have men go out and get food for them instead of putting it towards travel. She said that was when they finally left for Kansas City, eating only oatmeal for two days, while they waited for more travel money to come in (Isoardi, 1992). Through this experience, Liston fostered a relationship with Billie Holiday, which would help her shape her position as a Black female in the jazz industry. Holiday's manager had asked Liston to ensure that Holiday stayed sober throughout the tour, assigned them to room together. Through this shared experience, Holiday became a maternal figure for Liston. She told her stories about her own life and strategies for overcoming the inevitable social roles placed upon Black women. The two women's mother-daughter relationship remained for the rest of Holiday's life (Kernodle, 2014, p. 39).

Intermission

At this point, Liston continued playing in Los Angeles, but began to feel disillusioned by the demands of the night club scene and men refusing to hire her because she was a woman (Wilson, 1980). She decided that she should try to be a traditional woman as her family suggested. She had not made the decision to pursue music as a career, but she had been swept up in bands and tours until this point. She decided to take the test for the Board of Education to

work in the L.A. school system. She would have been about 24. She knew she could easily pass, and she soon began working in schools as a bookkeeper. She did this for three to four years, as she recalls, mostly at Polytechnic High School. She mentions feeling disillusioned with music in general and she had stopped playing altogether.

However, Liston began to miss playing jazz, and she started taking gigs again in the early to mid-1950s. She started to call out sick often from her job so that she could take gigs. The principal of her school lectured her about taking her job seriously and tried to convince her that playing these gigs was irresponsible and unsuitable for a young woman. After this she left a letter of resignation in his office and walked away from her job on the spot. She began gigging again, then worked briefly for Golden State Insurance Company before choosing to pursue music full-time. She recalls deciding that she had to be a musician and she would never leave it again (Smith, 1971, 1973).

As Liston worked her way up in the L.A. music scene, she also acted in movies and musical theatre. She worked for the studio Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer or MGM. It was common for studios to cast their musicians to act as musicians in movies. It was also common for Black jazz musicians to be cast as servants in films, and musicians such as Louis Armstrong and Billie Holiday were subjected to these roles (Kaplan, 1999, p. 421). Liston's most notable role was as Lana Turner's maid in the 1955 film, *The Prodigal*. In this role she follows Lana Turner around playing a hand-held harp. She also performed with a band which does not appear, but is heard in the 1956 film, *The Ten Commandments* (Isoardi, 1992). Gillespie was in L.A. during this time and was commissioning charts from Liston (Isoardi, 1992). He told her to get ready, because he was going to put another band together in New York and send for her when he was ready.

State Department Tours

In 1956, Dizzy Gillespie was commissioned by the U.S. State Department to put together an interracial band which would be jazz ambassadors to the world. With word spreading around the world of lynching and other horrible treatment of Blacks, President Eisenhower hoped to refute communist propaganda about the democratic U.S. (Marchbanks, 2018). The band was to do a tour of Africa, the Near East, Middle East, and Asia (Gillespie & Fraser, 1979). Since jazz was adored throughout the world and was an exclusively American art, this would help redeem the United States' image. However, Gillespie kept the upper hand when the State Department urged him to attend a briefing on a better racial image for the U.S. He said he had "three hundred years of briefing" already (Gillespie & Fraser, 1979, p. 414). Gillespie was scheduled to go on tour in Europe immediately after Eisenhower commissioned this tour, so he instructed Quincy Jones to put the band together for him and meet him in Europe. He instructed Jones to send for Liston and make sure she brought some arrangements. The band was made up of Joe Gordon, Ermet Perry, Carl Warwick, and Quincy Jones, trumpets. Melba Liston, Frank Rehak, and Rod Levitt, trombones. Jimmy Powell and Phil Woods, alto saxophone; Billy Mitchell and Ernie Wilkins, tenors; Marty Flax, baritone; Walter Davis, Jr., piano; Nelson Boyd, bass; Charlie Persip, drums. Herb Lance, male vocals; Dottie Salters, female vocals.

When Liston showed up to the first rehearsal, the male musicians said, "why the hell did he send all the way to California for a bitch trombone player?" (Gillespie & Fraser, 1979). Liston told the story in Gillespie's autobiography, "When we got to the initial rehearsals, and they started playing my arrangements, well, that erased all the little bullshit, you see. They say, 'Mama's alright.' Then I was 'Mama,' I wasn't bitch no more." (Gillespie & Fraser, 1979, p. 315). Liston was then expected to act as a caretaker. She most likely felt that she was partially

responsible for taking care of the male band members as well. She did the men's laundry, sewed buttons, and passed out medicine, as the band often ended up with food poisoning (Smith, 1973). She even cooked and cut hair for male bandmates (Stokes, 1983). She was seen as a gimmick by audiences, and had to prove that she could really play by doing a solos (Stokes, 1983). Later, Quincy Jones even introduced Liston to audiences as the band's "composer-arranger-seamstress" and "den mother" (Barg, 2014). The band went so far as to make a rule that she could not spend time with any one man more than the others, because they decided it wasn't fair to the rest of them. They refused to see her as a person capable of being responsible for herself, even though they knew she was intelligent (Smith, 1973).

Liston continued to contribute original music, and write arrangements along with Quincy Jones, Gillespie's other hired arranger. She had a similar arrangement with this band as with Gerald Wilson's band, in which Gillespie commissioned her to write features for herself to play and to sing on. This was the best way to please audiences who would murmur about a 'girl' in the band and expected the band to address this exception. Liston arranged a Duke Ellington and Count Basie medley for the tour. She also wrote three of her most well-known arrangements, "Stella by Starlight," "My Reverie" and her composition "Annie's Dance," based on the popular classical piece, "Anitra's Dance" from Edvard Grieg's Peer Gynt (Bryant, 1996). With New York City as their home base, they were back for a record date in June of 1956, *Dizzy Gillespie and his Orchestra*, then moved on to a summer tour of South America the same year. They performed in Ecuador, Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil, and recorded live in Buenos Aires, Argentina and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. These tours opened Liston's eyes to the subjugation of women in developing countries (Marchbanks, 2018). Liston was quoted saying that women of these countries approached her with questions about how she was able to travel as a single

woman, which to them was unprecedented and inspiring (Gillespie & Fraser, 1979, p. 415). It also inspired her already passionate love for African musical and cultural diaspora, especially in such places as Brazil and Ecuador. Liston saw "amazed gawks" from audiences on tour and realized that she was "breaking new ground for women, especially women of color." Gillespie believed Liston was inspiring women of color around the world (Marchbanks, 2018).

The band recorded at Birdland in New York in December of the same year. They were in New York in April of 1957, recording *Birk's Works* with three new vocal arrangements from Liston, "Over the Rainbow," "Yo No Quiero Bailar," and "If You Could See Me Now." They did some touring of the U.S. in the summer of 1957 and Liston recorded with some other bands including the Ernie Wilkins Jazz Orchestra, and the Ernie Henry all-stars band, Dinah Washington, and the Art Blakey Big Band (Rutgers IJS). By now, Liston had a reputation for her writing in New York. She was writing off and on for Motown records by this time (Stokes, 1983).

In 1958 Liston recorded her first and only album as a headliner, *Melba Liston and Her 'Bones*. The music was mostly composed and arranged by Liston and featured an all-star trombone quartet of Bennie Green, Al Grey, Benny Powell, and Melba Liston on one side and Slide Hampton, Jimmy Cleveland, Frank Rehak, and Melba Liston on the other. This shows how established Liston was at this point in her career. The best trombonists of the period wanted to play on her album. Liston had also written a song with words, "We Never Kissed," which she invited vocalist Gloria Lynne to sing. Liston met Lynne on the jazz and studio scene in New York, and Lynne was struck by Liston's warmth and friendliness toward her. Lynne was an up-and-coming pop and jazz vocalist, who had recently released her debut album. When Lynne was offered artistic control over her next album, she chose Liston as the musical director. It was very

rare to give an artist full control over an album and these two women were able to use this opportunity to experiment. The album was called *Lonely and Sentimental* (1959) and it was both of their first time working with strings. The result was beautiful. The album was mostly jazz standards, and included Liston's composition, "We Never Kissed." Liston was not in very good health and had called in Quincy Jones to help her. Jones, who had studied orchestration, helped Liston write for the string section. She mixed strings with horns in tasteful ways and made use of characteristic string styles such as shimmering, tremolos, and glissandi. Leonard Feather wrote the album's liner notes, giving both Lynne and Liston high regards to their sophistication and musicality. After this, Liston became a house arranger for Riverside Records and arranged multiple albums with strings for them, including features for Milt Jackson and Johnny Griffin (Keyes, 2014).

The same year Quincy Jones put an all-star band together, including Liston, to perform a new blues opera destined for Broadway, *Free and Easy*. This show had been produced by Stanley Chase and was to feature the music of Harold Arlen and Johnny Mercer. The plan was to open the show in a few European cities including Paris, then bring it to London, and, finally, to Broadway. Jones brought the band over to Europe for a four-month tour before the opening of the show. They recorded the album *The Birth of a Band* in New York City, published in 1959, which became very popular (Jones, 2001; Library of Congress). The recording was videotaped and can be accessed on YouTube as well. The opening of *Free and Easy* was at the Alhambra Theatre in Paris, France. The musicians were all part of the act and dressed in costume. Jones' arrangements were of very high caliber as he had been studying with Nadia Boulanger. The members included Clark Terry, Phil Woods, and Billy Byers, among many other great musicians (Jones, 2001). Unfortunately, the Algerian crisis hit Paris the same time that the show opened,

and the public was no longer safe. This, and the fact that the show was English in a French country, caused the show to do badly. They ran out of money and had to close, which was devastating for Jones and the band. They were sent back to the U.S. in the fall 1960, where Liston continued to do studio work. She played for bands of Sam Jones and Cannonball Adderley and was back in Paris with Quincy Jones' band in 1961(TDJ-Online, 2024). Jones kept a band running in New York after this stint, which Liston was a part of for two years. She claims in her talks with Smith's Black Studies class that though her arranging work was growing in demand, she always had to go through Jones to be hired. She claims that he wouldn't allow her to have any of the larger arranging gigs that came her way, and that he would take these gigs, but contract her on the band. She eventually quit Jones' band to focus on being an arranger. One quote is reminiscent of the way she describes her relationship with Quincy Jones, and there were likely many others that she is referring to. "It′s not what they intend to do- the brothers would not hurt for nothing…They would give money, they would take care of me or anything. But they couldn′t let me have the job" (Dahl, 1984).

In the early 1960s, Liston work with such notable artists as Charles Mingus, Freddie Hubbard, Elvin Jones, Count Basie, and Duke Ellington. She worked with Mingus for a while and claims that he was always nice to her, though she knows how aggressive he could be (Bryant, 1996). She arranged the album *And Then Again* (1965) for Elvin Jones. She arranged music for concert performances including the Duke Ellington Society concert in 1964 (Barg, 2014). She married in the early or mid-1960s, and continued arranging work from home, but the marriage only lasted three years. She began going to jams to play trombone again and decided to move back to Los Angeles in 1969 (Smith, 1973). Throughout this part of Liston's career she

was also working on some of her greatest contributions to jazz in a very fruitful musical relationship with pianist-composer, Randy Weston.

Randy Weston

While Liston was performing at Birdland with Dizzy Gillespie's big band in 1958, she met Randy Weston. Weston was a piano player who had been working in upstate New York, playing trio sets. He was also a composer who was influenced by his African roots and was inspired by Gillespie's Afro-Cuban jazz innovations with Chano Pozo. Weston described his impression of Liston the first time that he saw her on the band stand. He thought she was beautiful and striking and liked that she wore her naturally. He was amazed by her arrangement and feature on "My Reverie," and by the fact that she was the only woman on stage. He described her sound as big and gorgeous. He knew he wanted to work with her. Liston was living in Harlem, near Mary Lou Williams, whose place was a major hangout spot for young musicians. Weston went to Liston's place and explained the concept for an album he was working on, and that he wanted Liston to arrange the music. She agreed and this began a musical relationship which would last the rest of their lives.

Their first album together was *Little Niles*, an album of seven waltzes about children, released in 1959. Weston described their creative process in his autobiography. He would begin by explaining the story behind each piece to Liston. He would first play the melody and then solo so that she could hear his ideas. He would give her directions for how he wanted certain instruments to sound, and she may try voicings on the piano with him there. He would leave her with a recording, and then come back later to discuss questions she may have for him. This became their process for their entire working relationship. Liston listened to these recordings

over and over until she felt she was inside the idea of the piece and she would write in the style of Weston's improvisations, encompassing his ideas with her arrangement (Barg, 2014). The personnel for *Little Niles* included Jamil Nasser, bass; Johnny Griffin, tenor saxophone; Ray Copeland, trumpet; Idrees Sulieman, trumpet; Charlie Persip, drums; Melba Liston, trombone. Weston had to argue with Liston to get her to solo on the album, because he wanted to feature trombone on his composition, "Earth Birth," a depiction of the first child arriving on Earth and opening its eyes for the first time. She eventually agreed to do the solo, but through the rest of their relationship she refused to solo or even play on any of the pieces she arranged for him. Liston was a perfectionist about her arrangements and could never give the musicians their parts before the record date, because she was constantly perfecting them. Liston claims that she wrote all the arrangements for Weston's albums from that point on. The only music of his that she didn't write was piano trio or piano trio with one horn (Bryant, 1996). Their albums *Destry Rides Again* and *Live at the Five Spot* were done in 1959, as well. Weston mentioned that Liston was not able to be at the recording of *Live at the Five Spot* because she had been visiting Los Angeles and began having health complications while she was there. Weston mentions that Liston dealt with ongoing health problems for much of the latter part of her life, which culminated in a stroke in 1985, at which point she could not play the trombone anymore. This could very well have corresponded to a life of high stress and of denial about the abuse she suffered.

Weston believed the composer-arranger relationship and process between he and Liston were as intertwined as that of Ellington and Strayhorn. In Lisa Barg's article, "Taking Care of Music: Gender, Arranging, and Collaboration in the Weston-Liston Partnership," she points out that the parallels between the relationship between Ellington and Strayhorn and that of Liston and Weston go even further. Barg adds that both Strayhorn and Liston were described as having

self-effacing, quiet personas, and preferred to work behind the scenes (Barg, 2014, p. 100). Additionally, Weston and Liston's relationship merges professional, musical, and personal bonds, similarly to Strayhorn and Ellington. Weston wrote in his autobiography that he and Liston were in an intermittent romantic relationship, but that their connection surpassed romance and was shared even while the two were in separate romantic relationships (Weston, 2010).

Liston and Weston were both passionate about the Civil Rights Movement and the unity of the African diaspora. Liston had been inspired by the culture and music of the African diaspora on her tours to Europe, the Middle East, and South America. She was even one of the vice presidents of the African American Musicians Society, which several musicians, including Weston, were part of. This grew out of a larger movement of musicians, particularly jazz musicians, to promote the ideals of the Civil Rights Movement and of freeing colonized African nations. Weston's plan, which he began in 1958 when he met Liston, was to create a major work, his love letter to Africa which he called, *Uhuru Afrika*, Swahili for "freedom Africa." This work, eventually released in 1961, was a joint effort between Liston and Weston, though Liston is mostly seen as realizing Weston's vision (Barg, 2014). Weston had some connections in the United Nations and did research at meetings or gatherings to which he was invited. He was recommended by ambassadors of African countries to use the language Kiswahili in his music to represent African language. Both Liston and Weston did extensive research, interviewing African delegates, researching at libraries, and listening to authentic African recordings (Barg, 2014, p.106). Langston Hughes wrote poetry for each suite, which was realized through the voices of an opera style soprano vocalist, Martha Flowers, and Broadway and folk baritone, Brock Peters. Weston envisioned four suites: "Uhuru Kwanza," "African Lady," "Bantu," and "Kucheza Blues."

"Uhuru Kwanza's" theme was that African people have the right to determine their own destiny. Liston helped arrange Hughes lyrics alongside Weston and she created a soundscape of Swahili and English vocals and antiphonal sounds to begin the suite. Liston's notes for the arrangement told the story of the piece through musicians' entrances and the building of energy. Her voicings and orchestration gave the piece "striking tonal affects" (Barg, 2014, p.106), and her conducting of the piece also contributed greatly to the intricate dynamics. The theme of "African Lady" was to represent the Black women in Weston's life who had worked hard and were subjected to menial jobs while also taking care of him and others. This piece is one of the only odes to women in jazz literature which is not tinged with sexuality (Barg, 2014, p.111). Liston imbued this piece with the nature of feminine power and gives it a feeling of through-composition. Though there are connections between sections, there is a feeling of a constant flow. The theme of "Bantu" was of all Black people coming together in unity. Liston arranged rhythms and dissonant brass, to create energy and motion. The theme of "Kucheza Blues" was a depiction of a glorious moment when Africa is independent and people all over the world celebrate its freedom. The work was very successful in orchestration and bringing African and African diasporic rhythms and instrumentation into jazz. Unfortunately, Weston's label at the time would not record the album so Sarah Vaughan urged her label, Roulette Records to record it. The label marketed it as an "African drum" oriented album, similar to a popular album at the time, in order to increase sales. It didn't reach the correct audience and reviewers called it fake African music. This was devastating for Weston and Liston, who poured so much work into the project (Barg, 2014) (Weston, 2010).

Another concept work Weston and Liston created was *Highlife: Music from the New African Nations* (1963). The highlife, which Weston based the album on, is an African traditional

rhythm which became popular in the new West African nations. Weston had made a trip to Western Africa to learn from the place itself and realize his roots. He met people there who were important to the highlife music and he learned about it and played it with them. It is used as a dance music, often compared to the calypso and samba of the Americas. This album was one of the first to celebrate the rhythm throughout (Highlife Liner Notes). Liston and Weston transcended "fake African music" (Marchbanks, 2018, p. 197), in a way which many artists did not accomplish (Marchbanks, 2018).

Jamaica

Weston had family in Jamaica, and he brought Liston to visit them and introduced her to the music industry there. In 1973, a new Prime Minister, Michael Manley, of the People's National Party, was elected. There was political turmoil in the country at this time, but Manley promised to do the people's bidding. He created the Edna Manley College of Visual and Performing Arts, named for his mother, and offered Liston the position of director of the African American Studies Department of this school. Liston moved to Jamaica the same year, though it is unclear if the position was the reason for her move. She was involved in artistic movements of Black pride and creating awareness in the United States of the unjust situation in Jamaica. The locals were oppressed in a tourism and raw material industry run by Western powers.

Liston directed four performing groups and a concert band at the college. The groups often had unique configurations of classical and jazz instruments. She taught courses for beginners, amateurs, and professionals in composition, arranging, and performing in a variety of styles. Many of her students led successful careers in commercial and jazz music after their studies with her. She combined academic concepts with Black cultural pride and historical

information, giving her students the tools to succeed in more than just musical aspects. One of Liston's students who went on to write for Bob Marley explained that he learned the technique of writing in oblique motion (one voice in motion while the other stays the same) from Liston. His writing can be heard on the brass parts for "Buffalo Soldier," *Confrontation*, 1983 (Spencer, 2014). Liston also wrote for Bob Marley and other reggae and commercial Jamaican artists.

Liston worked on music for films while she was in Jamaica, using Jamaican styles and influences. She was musical director for *Smile Orange*, a film adaptation of the 1971 play by Trevor D. Rhone. The characters are crass and humorous, depicting both poor Jamaican workers and the wealthy tourists they work for. However, the underlying message is of Western domination of a formerly colonized nation. The film was made in a blaxploitation style, which was becoming popular in the U.S. It was premiered in New York City in 1976, presumably to reach the most promising audience. The term "blaxploitation" refers to films which were meant to "exploit" the Black film audience by reflecting their values and expectations, though it became popular with a larger audience. The music of *Smile Orange* included Jamaican folk music and Jamaican popular music forms such as ska and reggae. Liston understood that she needed to include a variety of Jamaican styles of music to capture its roots and their influence on the present music. The music captures the ambiguity of the nation's future.

Liston was also musical director for *The Dread Mikado*, which was celebrated as an emblem of Jamaica's cultural revolution. The music includes reggae, calypso, and mento, a traditional folk Jamaican musical style. *The Gleaner*, a Jamaican publication, published an article promoting the opening of *The Dread Mikado* on May 3, 1979, "Musical Director Melba Liston, rated the world's No. 7 jazz arranger by Playboy Magazine (Spencer, 2014, p.72). Liston was also involved in the film *A Marijuana Affair* (1975) while in Jamaica. In 1979 Carole Kromer

and Diane Gregg encouraged Liston to come to the First Women's Jazz Festival in Kansas City in 1979. Liston accepted the invitation, though she did not perform at the festival. Soon after this she moved to the United States for good. Her time in Jamaica was influenced by the leaders of the territory. There was unrest in the later years of Michael Manley's second term as Prime Minister, and he was forcibly removed from the position in 1978. This was largely why Liston left Jamaica in 1979. She briefly visited St. Lucia, where her friend and student was from, for two weeks. She then headed to New York (Spencer, 2014).

Later Life

Liston moved back to New York City in 1979 and claims she settled down at this time. She and Bryant discuss her marriage in conjunction with this period, but it is unclear if she was married at this time and for how long (Bryant, 1996). During the early 1980s, Liston continued writing with Randy Weston, and started a new group. In a newspaper clipping from the Institute of Jazz Studies Archive, Liston is quoted saying that she made a conscious decision to work with women. She knew how skilled and hard-working women like Mary Lou Williams and Carline Ray (bass) were, and she figured they couldn't be harder to work with than men. She put a group together to debut at the second annual Kansas City Women's Jazz Festival, which she had been invited to in 1979 (Stokes, 1983). The group was called Melba Liston and Company and featured Dottie Dodgion on percussion, Carline Ray on bass, Janice Robinson on trombone, Sharon Freeman on piano and French horn, Jean Fineberg on alto saxophone and Erica Lindsay on tenor saxophone (Stokes, 1983). This group also played for Universal Jazz Coalition's Second Annual New York Women's Jazz Festival (Unknown, 1981). The group played around New York City and then an agent offered for them to tour in China and Malaysia where they were very well

received. When they came back, they made a record with the help of Leonard Feather, but it was never released. Liston complains that the women she employed didn't take being a musician seriously. The group was constantly changing because some of the young women were either too tired of touring, or they settled down and got pregnant. Liston began adding men such as Britt Woodman, Budd Johnson, and Al Grey to the group, so that it was no longer just women (Bryant, 1996).

In 1985, Liston had a stroke. She moved back to Los Angeles at that time and remained there for the rest of her life. She had many friends in New York who helped her after her stroke. She names Frank Foster and a bassist, Major Holley, who took her to buy a computer after her stroke. Randy Weston flew out to Los Angeles to help her learn to write music on her computer. He pushed her to learn to use it and stuck with her to help her recover. Her ex-husband, Nelson Harris, also came to visit her when she had her stroke. In her interview with Clora Bryant, Liston said that she was married twice and mentions that she was supposed to marry Wynton Kelly, before he passed away in 1971. Because Liston kept her personal relationships so private, it is unclear when she was married to whom. One of her marriages didn't last very long at all and the man "was on some stuff" (Bryant, 1996, p. 19). Her other marriage, however, was much more formidable, though it still did not last very long. This is most likely the marriage she refers to as lasting 3 years. Nelson Harris was the name of this man, and Liston explained that he truly cared about her, but he would go through periods of time where he didn't care, so she was going to leave him three or four times before she finally left him. They had lived together in Los Angeles, and when Liston moved back to New York, he would visit her there, and call her when she was in Los Angeles. He was glad for her music career and would go out to see her play. Liston claims that she did love him, but they had both decided they shouldn't be married. Their relationship

remained this way until his death in 1996. Liston named a composition after him, which can be found on the 1965 album, *And Then Again*. The song is entitled "Len Sirrah," or Nel(son) Harris spelled backwards.

Historical Analysis

The Effects of Intersectional Racism and Sexism on Melba Liston's Life

Zora Neale Hurston writes through "Nanny" in her 1937 book, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, "De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see." This quote was expressed that Black women faced a social bondage that no other minority group faced. Melba Liston was born in Kansas City, Missouri in 1926 and her career came into full swing around the time that Hurston published *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. According to a 1977 statement by the Combahee River Collective, a Black feminist group, "We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we struggle with Black men about sexism." They go on to explain that Black men maintained power over Black women as a way of bringing themselves closer to the privileges of whites. Additionally, as Black rights movements and feminist movements have progressed for decades, it has become apparent that no one will fight for Black women, except for themselves (Combahee River Collective Statement). This is why Black women face what is called "intersectionality" of prejudice, meaning the intersection of racism and sexism.

Melba Liston's experience is no exception to these rules. She lived in a time when social expectations were very strict for Black women. Fortunately, her family had more financial opportunities and her mother and aunts were more forward thinking. Her mother was educated and worked a skilled job, and she also supported Liston playing music. These were some of the exceptions that made it possible for Liston to pursue her career. Even so, Liston would have

surely seen herself as someone who should have a male partner and children, take care of others, and be submissive. It would have been very hard not to see herself that way. Additionally, in the 1940s there weren't support systems or even vocabulary in place to deal with sexual harassment and rape. Melba Liston began her big band career at the age of 17 with Gerald Wilson's band. This was, unfortunately, also the beginnings of harassment, abuse, and disrespect toward her as a young woman.

When Liston experienced sexual abuse and rape, she couldn't tell anyone, and she had to go to the doctor by herself. She lived with this trauma and doesn't seem to have come to terms with what happened to her. O'Connell & Tucker discussed this topic in analyzing Liston's oral histories. They listen for how Liston behaves with these topics and others. When listening to Liston speak about ideas that were "powerful and complex" (O'Connell & Tucker, 2014, p. 128), her tone of voice and manner of speaking allowed them to understand what she was really getting at. She spoke about these things in an indirect way which would not be noticed by reading a transcription. This was her subtle expression of very personal feelings. Randy Weston expressed his feelings about women in the jazz scene. He felt that women would get into relationships with men who could protect them from other men. Unfortunately, these women often chose men who ended up hurting them (Weston, 2010). Women in jazz were put in a corner, where they had to be with a man to be protected. They often could not have children, because they were expected to be the sole caretaker of them and would have to stop playing music. Liston originally accepted the name "mama" from male colleagues as a replacement for "bitch," though she later opposed it. Though it appeared to be innocent, the name was yet another form of sexual harassment. Mama refers to the domestic role which Black women were expected to take as described by McMillan Cottom and the Sister Sadie caricature. Mama

prescribes the role of the stereotyped Black woman who has superhuman abilities to care for others and would never put her own needs above anyone else's. Throughout much of the 20th century, Black women were all but barred from any profession other than domestic labor. Even though Liston escaped domestic labor, the pressure of the domestic roll was impossible to escape.

In the face of adversity, Liston was able become successful and make a difference for other women who would follow her. One example of this was her creation of an all-female band which included younger women and played at women's jazz festivals. Another way which she made change was to inspire women for whom she performed. She saw "amazed gawks" from audiences on tour and realized that she was "breaking new ground for women, especially women of color" (Marchbanks, 2018, p. 207). When Liston was older, she had a better understanding of how she had been subjected, and she looked out for women younger than her. For example, Janice Robinson. "They used to call her 'Little Melba.' I told them that's wrong . . . all the cats was standin' there, and they said, 'Hey little mama!' I said, 'She ain't no little mama.' I said, 'That's Janice Robinson. Hopefully, she's not goin' to follow in my footsteps and let you do the same thing to her that you did to me. And you just quit it'" (Dahl, 1984, p. 258). Liston may not have changed these male musicians' minds yet, but she had planted the seed for change.

The Context of Melba Liston's Work Within the Civil Rights Movement

Melba Liston, at the height of her career, alongside her writing partner Randy Weston, played a key role in the narrative of jazz within the Civil Rights Movement. This movement among jazz musicians was complex and had roots in the 1920s and 30s. The Harlem Renaissance was a movement by Blacks in the 1920s-1930s to adopt "sophisticated" European art traditions.

This was to prove they were not the uncivilized stereotype, perpetuated by blues and ragtime dance music. Duke Ellington helped change this landscape with music borrowed from Black blues and dance music as well as white art music, defying sophisticated and unsophisticated stereotypes. He also used his music as activism to perpetuate Black pride. In the 1960s and 70s, jazz musicians protested violence within America and colonialism in Africa in a variety of ways ranging from subtle to bold. In the mid-1950s, college educated Blacks chose to take pride in their African heritage and reclaimed it for themselves. Activists such as Malcom X led an anti-colonial movement within the United States, inspired by the effort of African colonies to free themselves from the imperialist grasp. A new philosophy of Pan Africanism was created, which was the idea that all people of the African diaspora should be united. Activist writers sought to prove to Europeans and American whites that the propaganda of African biological inferiority was unfounded (Marchbanks, 2018).

Musicians who made protest music included vocalists Nina Simone, Billie Holiday, and Abbey Lincoln, drummers Art Blakey, Guy Warren, and Michael Babtunde using African drumming; and instrumentalists Charles Mingus, Max Roach, and Sonny Rollins, who did not make obvious his protest with *Freedom Suite*, but wrote it in direct response to Little Rock.

CHAPTER FOUR

MUSICAL ANALYSIS

Introduction

Melba Liston was a prolific arranger, and a sought-after trombone player for large ensembles. As will become clear, Liston's writing style was unique and must have been the reason established musicians were drawn to work with her. Multiple strategies are evident in her writing, whether she was conscious of them or not. In this paper, to explain some common traits in her writing, I will use analysis of one of her compositions, her solo on the composition, and one of her arrangements. The transcribed composition and solo is "You Don't Say" from Liston's 1959 album, *Melba Liston and Her 'Bones*, and the arrangement is "Forever Summer" by Thad Jones, from Elvin Jones' 1965 album, *And Then Again*, as transcribed by Dr. David Demsey of William Paterson University. Notably, Liston arranged all the pieces on the album *And Then Again* which included her compositions "Elvin Elpus," "Len Sirrah," and "All Deliberate Speed," about the slow-moving progress of civil rights for Blacks. Though Liston arranged "Forever Summer" as a trombone feature, it was ironically not Liston who played it, but J.J. Johnson. This probably would have been Liston's choice to stay out of the limelight but could have been the record company or Elvin Jones' choice as well.

Melba Liston's arranging had many definable traits which can be heard and which her peers agreed on. Musicians and writers such as Randy Weston and Clora Bryant mention that Liston had a way of writing in the style of the person she was writing for (Wilson, 2008). She had the ability to get inside an artist's music and write for their individual sound. Liston was also

said to have had a melodic way of writing. Weston explained: “Most arrangement writing is along horizontal lines, but Melba wrote the parts in an oblique motion" (Weston, 2010, p. 74). Another unique trait was her incorporation of improvisation into her composition. “Liston often allows the improvised solo to begin while the composed material is still unfolding,” (Bradfield, 2014, p. 93). She did this often for rhythm section instruments, but also for horns. Another defining trait was her use of motivic development. Instead of repeating material, she would build on that material each time it occurred. In addition, both Weston and Liston have mentioned how influenced Liston was by the soulfulness of Black roots music. In her NEA Jazz Master Interview with Bryant she described how her music comes from her soul rather than from an intellectual space (1996). She found inspiration from African diasporic soul music such as gospel, blues, calypso, and others. This analysis will delve into her writing and arranging as well as her playing. The specific strategies discussed here are her use of motifs, building on motivic content, incorporation of improvisation in the form of the melody, ambiguity of key centers, and use of octave, unison and harmony.

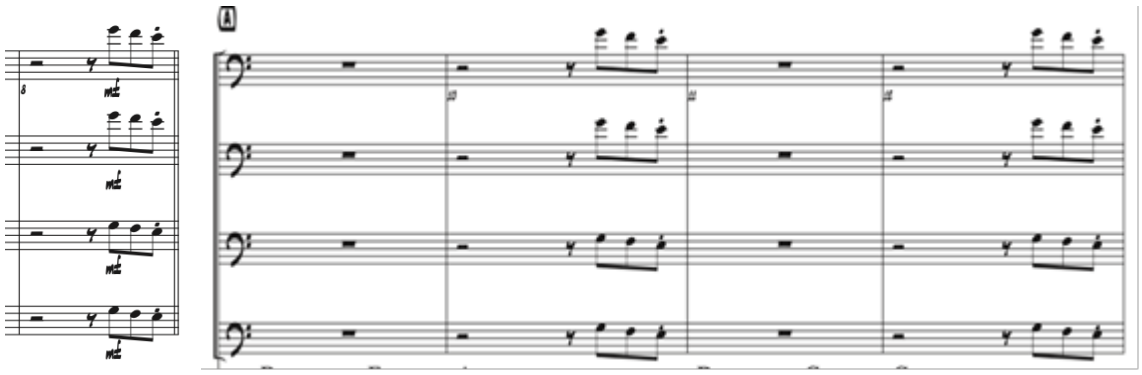
Use of Motifs

Geof Bradfield wrote a journal piece for the Black Music Research Journal entitled, “Digging Down in the CBMR Archives: New Music Inspired by Melba Liston’s Scores,” published in 2014. In this essay, he analyzed some of the commonalities found in Melba Liston’s arranging and composition. These included her efficient use of motifs, specifically intervallic motifs, and her use of falling fifths progressions. I will build on his comments. Melba Liston makes use of motifs in the composition, arrangement, and solo I have included. Geof Bradfield pointed out Liston’s use of a single three-note motif, put through multiple variations in the

melody of her composition, “Just Waiting.” Here, we will discuss another three-note motif in her composition, “You Don’t Say.” This motif either stays in unison or spreads into harmony for different effects. In this first figure, the horns play the same motif over changing chords.

Figure 1.

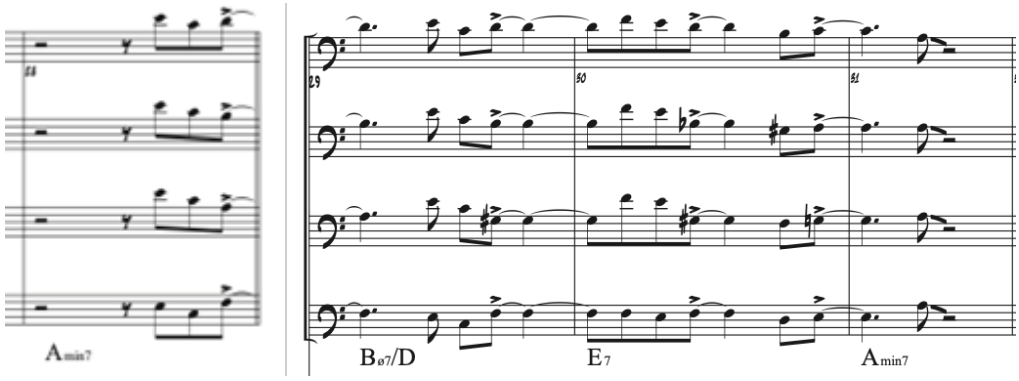
(mm. 8-12) Repeated Motif.



In Figure 2, Liston put the motif into a three-over-four ostinato, using harmony and octaves in the horns to build energy in unexpected ways. The horns are in octaves for the first two notes of each of the phrases, but the third note of each phrase is in harmony. In the first three iterations (measures 28 and 29), they play an E to a C, then break into harmony. In the last iteration, (measure 30 into measure 31), they change the rhythm and play in harmony, but then play an A in unison in measure 31. She corresponded the tension and resolution with the chords. Over the dominant chord, there is more harmony, including alterations, but landing on the root together gives the line a sense of finality. Figure 1 and Figure 2 show use of changing harmony, voicings and melodic intervals to build on a motivic idea.

Figure 2.

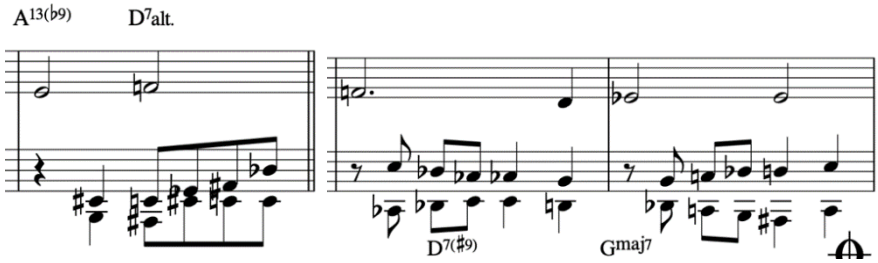
(mm. 28-31) Octave, Harmony, and Unison.



In her arrangement of Thad Jones' "Forever Summer," Liston employed motifs in a different way. She repeated a figure in her writing which can be found in measures 8, 16, 24, 26 and 32. Every eight bars, Liston wrote an ascending run in the backgrounds to signify a new section. An iteration of the motif repeating in measure 26, two bars after 24 is building to the climax in measures 31 and 32. The iteration in measure 32 is preceded by a mirror of the motif. Using the same rhythm, the passage descends before ascending in measure 32. This motif acts as a checkpoint for the listener at the ends of longer phrases, but it is different each time. Liston built on the idea using rhythm, intervals, and, in the last case, duration and ascension versus descension.

Figure 3.

(mm. 16 & 31-32) Ascending Run.



Writing Inside a Musician's Style

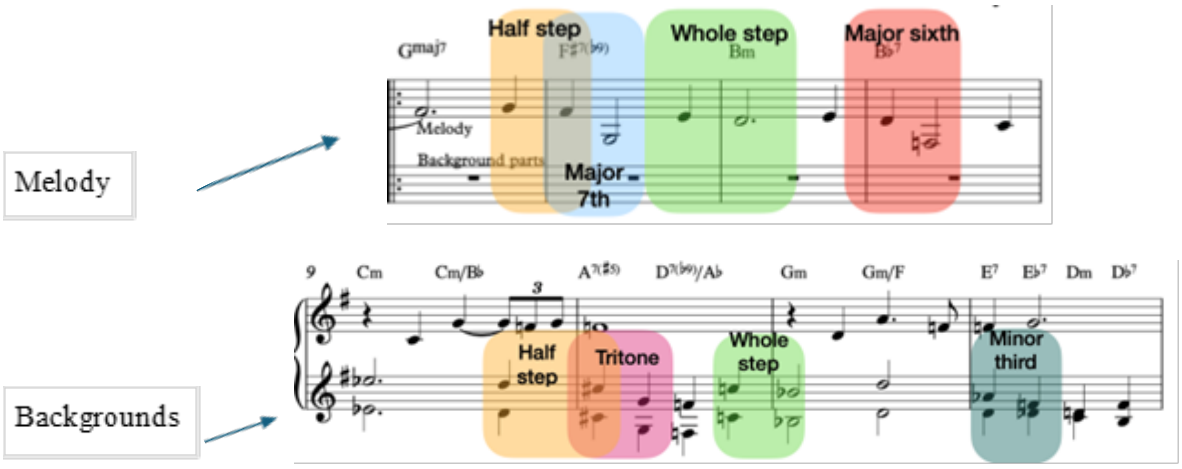
Melba Liston studied musicians' styles so that she could write arrangements that fit them. This is evident in her working relationship with Weston in which Liston listened to his compositions and ideas and created prolific arrangements out of them. In her arrangement of Thad Jones' "Forever Summer," Liston modeled her arrangement after the composition and most likely Thad Jones' writing style.

Her background parts are heavily influenced by the melody's intervallic material. As seen in Figure 4, in measures 9 through 12 Liston wrote backgrounds based on the melody from four bars earlier. Though these intervals are reduced, they mimic the melodic material. In measure 9, she used a falling half step into measure 10, as in the melody from measure 1 to 2. She then used a falling tritone rather than a major seventh in measure 10. The falling tritone in measure 10 lands on the flat seventh of the chord, which is a repetition of the melody in measure 2, where the motif falls on the major seventh. Since the chord is major in measure 2 and it is dominant in measure 10, this mirroring interval cannot be the same. In measures 10 into 11, she used a falling whole step, which mimics the melody in measures 2 to 3. Landing on the third of the minor chord in measure 11 also mimics the resolution from measures 2 to 3. Because Liston was

already mirroring the major seventh in measure 2 with a tritone in measure 10, we can assume that the minor third in measure 12 could be mirroring the major sixth in measure 4. The difference in steps between the tritone and the major seventh is five half-steps. The difference between the minor third and the major sixth is six half-steps. This means that both pairs of intervals have been condensed by a similar number of half-steps. This reinforces the point that these two intervals in Liston's writing are heavily inspired by the intervals of the melody. The melody is strongly based in motivic development, and Liston was sensitive to this, building on the composition rather than taking it in another direction. This is an example of how sensitive Liston was to the composer's musical style.

Figure 4.

(mm. 1-4 & 9-12) Mirroring.

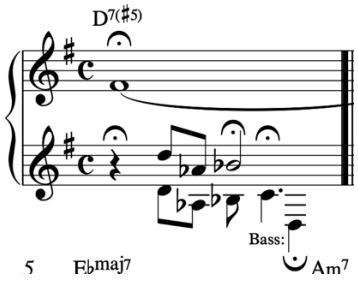


As seen in Figure 5, the introduction uses close voicings and altered tones, not unlike Jones' harmonic style, and it is likely that Liston wrote this introduction drawing inspiration from Jones. The introductory chord is a D7#5 meaning that included in the chord is a Bb, which rubs against the fifth of the chord, A, one half-step away. In addition, the horns are written to

play both an Ab and a Bb before resolving to a C, the dominant seventh, one whole step away from the root, which causes tension. Including Ab in the horns adds the sound of a tritone, as Ab is a tritone away from D and the most dissonant interval. Together these notes cause half-step and whole step rubs, creating close voicings. Including the tritone, all of these intervals create dissonance as well. Knowing that Jones often wrote close voicings and dissonances, this was probably Liston's way of incorporating Jones' compositional style into the introduction.

Figure 5.

(mm. 0) Close Voicings and Dissonance.



Call and Response

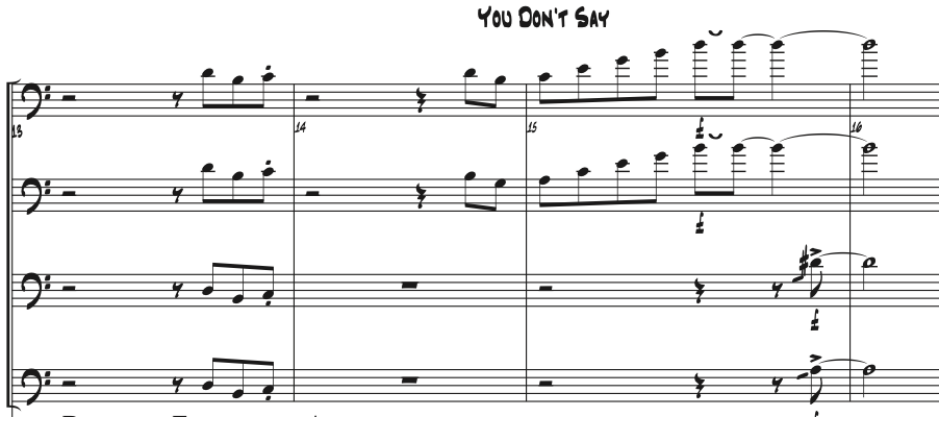
Liston used call and response often in her arrangements. An example of this is the first eight measures of the melody in "You Don't Say." As shown in Figure 1, the three-note motif is repeated three times, then answered with an iteration of the motif which resolves with the harmony in measure 13.

More broadly, this phrase from measures 8 through 13 is then answered by an ascending linear passage in measure 15, as seen in Figure 6. This could be compared to a work song or the gospel style in which one voice -in this case, trombones in octaves- repeat a phrase and then are answered by the rest of the voices—trombones in harmony, which sounds much fuller. The third

instance in this A section is when the trombones are split into two groups, one responding to the other. In this condensed score the uppermost trombone parts are the first group and the lowermost are the second group. In measure 15 the first group plays their ascending passage, landing on a held chord with a dip, and the second group responds with a different held chord with a dip, mimicking the first group. By doing this, Liston created a call and response much like a chorus of singers echoing a soloist.

Figure 6.

(mm. 13-16) Call and Response.

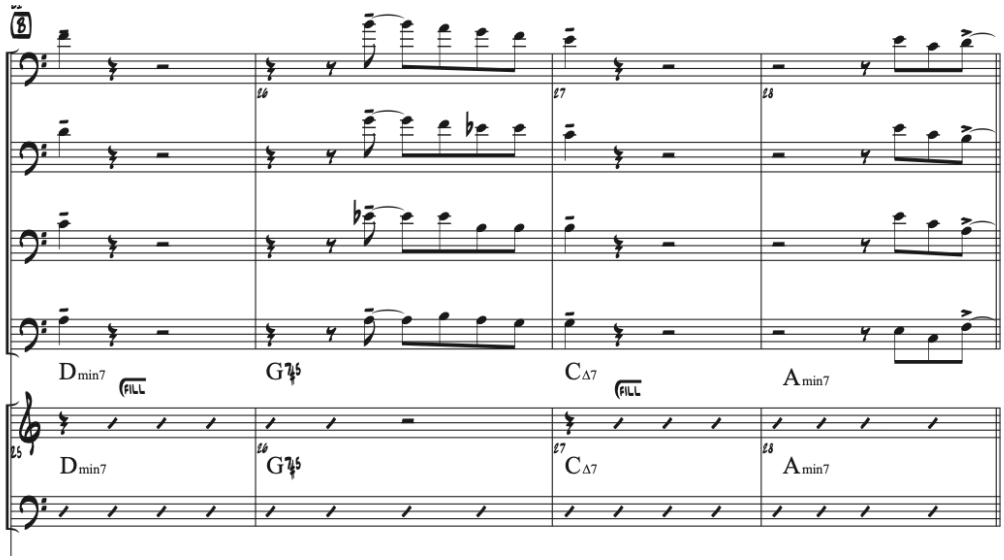


Melba Liston made use of call and response across sections of the ensembles she wrote for as well as within the horn section. In measures 24 through 29 (Figure 7) the horns play a melody which leaves space for the guitar to answer every two bars. In this way, Liston incorporated improvisation from the guitar into the melody of the song in addition to the guitar solo in the solo section. This is unique compared to most of the hard-bop music of the 1950s and 1960s, which mostly highlighted harmonized horn melodies, and a separate solo section. This technique can also be heard in Liston's arrangements for Elvin Jones' album *And Then Again* in

which she features the drums. Call and response of all types was idiomatic to Liston's writing, as can be seen and heard through these examples.

Figure 5.

(mm. 25-28) Call and Response.



Use of Unique Form

Melba Liston's composition "You Don't Say" exemplifies unique form in two ways. One is her use of tonal ambiguity. The other is her 40 bar AABC form. Both these traits were created organically to serve the melody and the arrangement of the composition. This may be an example of Liston's use of her ear, rather than relying on technique. As she says to Clora Bryant in interview (Bryant 1996), she listened to what she heard and dug deep within herself to find the music she created.

"You Don't Say," mostly hovers between C Major and A Minor throughout the AABC form. Because these two keys are related, Liston was free to switch back and forth easily. During the A sections, the piece alternates between two-bar sections of C Major and A Minor. The last

bar of each A section is a B7#9 chord, which makes A minor feel more like the tonic, though B7#9 does not tonicize either A Minor or C Major. The bridge slows down the harmonic progression with a clear ii V to C Major, then a clear move back to A Minor for 5 bars. Then, the harmony becomes less obvious. Pedaling on Bø7, it then moves to a ii V in A Minor, but doesn't stay on the A Minor chord for an entire measure. Instead, the piece moves directly to a tritone substitute of G, landing on a G Major chord. G is the tonic for two bars, but then turns into a ii V to C Major for the C section. The C section tonicizes A Minor with a common turn-around of ii - V - I - vi - ii - V in A Minor. The tune ends with a turn-around in A Minor, yet it begins by tonicizing C Major. This use of the key to keep the harmony moving without using conventional song-form harmony structures shows that Liston thought outside the box. She did not use a specific key center to decide the harmonic structure of a song, but instead let the song govern what the harmony would be. This is an example of ambiguous key centers created in a very melodic way. Another example of this is Liston's piece, "Just Waiting," which does not firmly arrive to the tonal center of C Major until the last two bars of the piece (Bradfield, 2014, p. 91).

Liston not only kept her key centers ambiguous, but her form as well. As can be seen in her composition, "You Don't Say," the form is an AABC with some irregularity. The A sections are each 8 bars, but the B section is 16 bars. With an 8 bar C section, this makes the entire form 40 bars rather than a more common 32. Additionally, the C section is more of a shout chorus than a new melody. It is as if Liston made the choice to do something more interesting in the C section of the tune. Rather than a variation of the first A's, she wrote a shout section with chord changes similar to the A's. The guitar played the melody, but the horn section played hits in between, in a call and response format, as in the B section.

After the solos, instead of coming back in with the A sections, Liston skips them as if repeating one idea more than three times is enough. This is another example of her penchant for building, rather than repeating. They play the B section and then instead of her shout C section, they play the A section once and land on the last note, including the response, on a B Diminished chord. This leaves resolution to the wind. Is the song in A Minor or C Major? This question will not be answered by the final chord. Liston's ambiguity of key centers and extended sections within the form are examples of unique form within her compositions. Her use of soloists within the melody section and her change in the form on the way out of the piece are examples of her unique ear for arrangement within her compositional forms.

Soulfulness

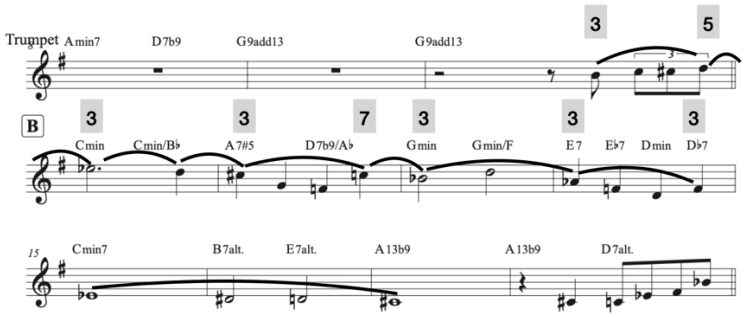
Melba Liston's arranging work has many unique facets, but across her work there is also a theme of soulfulness. Liston said herself, "I write soul music, more or less" (Bryant, 1996 pp. 26). She explained that she had to bring the music out from her soul, rather than by use of technique. Her deep understanding of the African diaspora was what constituted the soulfulness of her music. In work songs, gospel, the blues, and in Afro-Caribbean styles of dance music there is a heavy element of soul that Liston drew from. Randy Weston explained that because of segregation and because of unique opportunities he and Liston had, they had been immersed in the greatest of blues, the Black church, jazz, and calypso. He also said that Liston had the ability to embody each person she worked with perfectly in her writing. As was mentioned earlier, her effort to stay true to Thad Jones' composition, "Forever Summer," is evident in her development of his melodic material within her background lines and in her introduction. This also worked for places: Weston would tell her, "we're going to Jamaica today," or "we're going to the Congo, to Mississippi" (Kaplan, 1999, p. 423), and she would write about that place. With so much

experience all over the world and starting out in Kansas City to move to Los Angeles and then New York, Liston was an expert in Black soul music.

Liston mentioned that early in her career, she made the decision to create individual parts that would bring out more feeling from those playing them (Kaplan, 1999, p. 418). For example, in her background parts for "Forever Summer," the trumpet line is especially melodic because of her attention to intervallic cohesion within the entire piece. Her use of voice leading also helps make the trumpet line more melodic. One example of this can be seen in Figure 8, where the relation of each destination note to its corresponding chord is shown above the note. One can follow the line from the first B natural down to the C# in mostly half steps, and some whole steps. In measures 15 through 17, the line follows a chromatically descending voice leading line.

Figure 6.

(mm. 8-17) Voice Leading.

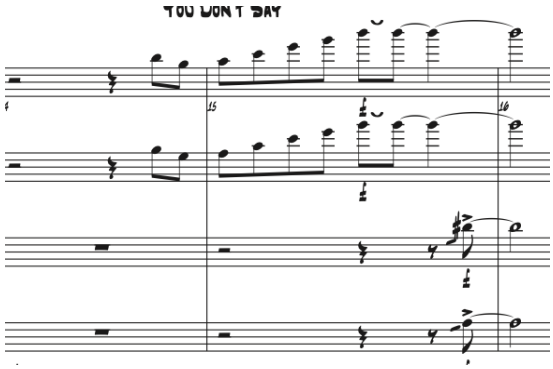


Every note Liston wrote is deliberate, and this brought out even more expression from the musicians playing her parts. When each member of a band has a melody in their part, they are going to feel the music on a deeper level. This is what made this aspect of Liston's writing so soulful.

One can also hear soulfulness in the time feel of her music. For example, in her piece, "You Don't Say," the band was very tight in a bluesy laid-back way. As seen in measure 15 of the piece, she uses a bluesy dip in the melody part, and in the response to the melody (Figure 9). Putting the dip across the bar-line makes it looser in time and more like a vocal inflection. The band playing this very laid-back phrase together shows off their capabilities in the style. Liston preferred to write for specific musicians (Bradfield, 2014, p. 92), so she knew these musicians could execute the nuances of her ideas. Another example of this are Liston's carefully thought-out melodic ideas in the trombones for the shout section. These ideas resemble vocals because they are something that could easily be sung and fit so well in the spaces of the melody. They sound as though she could have sung them to herself and then written them down to be played.

Figure 7.

(mm. 11-12) Time Feel.



Like this bluesy figure, Liston often writes music reminiscent of the voice, which is so strongly tied to blues, gospel, work songs and other African influences. I believe that some of Liston's soulfulness can be attributed to the fact that she was a trombone player. Trombone is one of the closest instruments to the voice, as it can imitate vocal inflections such as bends, turns and growls. It is a tenor instrument which is the mid-range of the voice and doesn't have the

more reedy sound of the saxophone. As we will see, Liston certainly played with the soulfulness and vocal-like tendencies found in her writing. The vocal nuances of blues and gospel-influenced music is readily communicated on the trombone. She may have come to some of her writing techniques through a trombone player's point of view.

Improvisational Style

Melba Liston was averse to the limelight. While there are many recordings of her solos, there would have been many more if she had agreed with band leaders to solo more often, or if she had given herself more opportunities to solo. One other large factor in her staying behind the scenes was the lack of interest from agents and record companies to make promote a woman headliner for either a live performance or an album (Wilson, 2008; Bryant, 1996). Many band leaders enjoyed her playing (Gillespie & Fraser, 1979; Weston, 2010). Randy Weston believed she had a sound like a trombone player should, and he had to force her to play on his records on a few occasions (Weston, p. 75). Her solo on "You Don't Say" exemplified some of her characteristics on the horn and many similar characteristics to her writing. Her improvisation was not complex in harmony or technique, but her understanding of phrasing, including tension and release and call and response; melodic content; motivic development; and soul music were evident. Vocal influences and influences of blues, work song, and soul music can be found in her improvisation as well.

Two attributes, which were prevalent in her writing, but are crucial to meaningful improvisation are motivic development and call and response. In this solo, Liston was playing on her own composition, and her outline of the melodic form can be heard throughout her solo. As seen in Figure 10, in the first four bars she used a descending motif. Starting on the same note in

measure 1 as in measure 3, each two-bar phrase descends in pitch using a similar rhythm beginning on the and-of-one. Then, she answered her more syncopated phrases with an 8th note line in the next four bars in a form of call and response. This is an example of call and response, but also of motivic development within her solo as well as motivic development on the melody. The melody began with shorter phrases in the first four bars and a longer phrase in the second four bars which is what Liston played in her solo. Additionally, as seen in Figure 11, the melody had a similar rhythm in measure 7 to what Liston played in measure 7 of her solo. She landed on the same beat as the melody did as if to tie the 8-bar phrase together with a nod to the melody.

Figure 8.

(mm. 1-7) Use of Motifs.

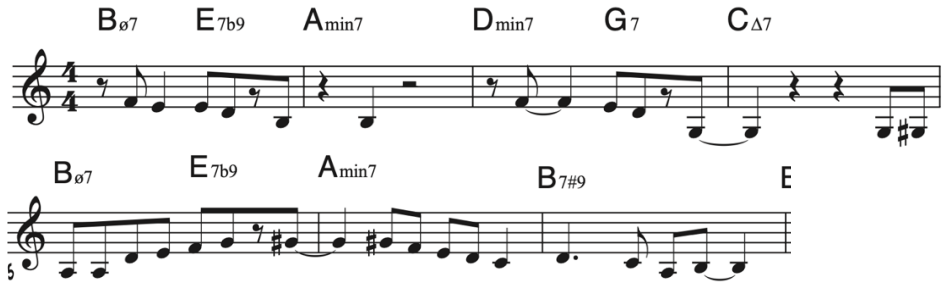
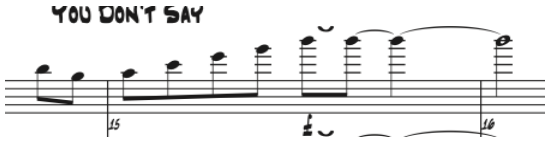


Figure 9.

(mm. 7) Liston's Composition (compare with mm. 7 of Liston's solo).

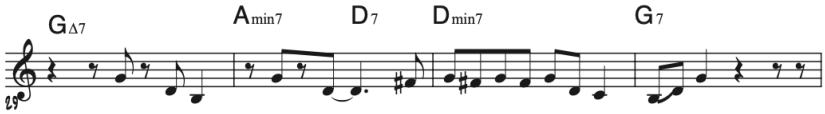


Liston proceeded with similar phrasing tendencies, but created less obvious phrasing, including phrasing over the bar-line as she got further into the solo. In the last four bars of the B

section, Liston created motion where the melody created motion. Through these bars, Liston used motivic development and call and response again to create and release tension. She played a short, syncopated phrase outlining the G Major chord in measure 29, then a similarly short and syncopated phrase that ended on the five of G Major in measure 30 to build tension, followed by an eighth note phrase in measure 31 which resolved the tension on the root in measure 32. This is an example of motivic development in addition to tension and release using chord tones.

Figure 10.

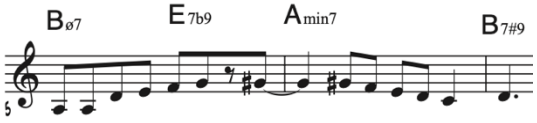
(mm 29-32). Phrasing.



Liston used some unique strategies harmonically in her solo but added color notes to break up the general key center. She played mostly within the C Major scale over both the A Minor sections and the C Major sections, but she was strategic to use an F moving to an E over the E Dominant areas, which outlines a flat 9, and is therefore representative of a minor ii V. In measure 6 of her solo, she plays a G# over an E Dominant chord, or the third of the chord. This chord resolves to an A Minor chord, but she holds the G# over this measure, making it a raised seventh in A Minor. This could give the A Minor chord a minor-major seventh quality, or, since Liston is playing mostly within the C Major scale over both the A Minor sections and the C Major sections, it could be a flat 13 in the key of C. This is an example of the use of a colorful note, which gives the solo more interesting content, while remaining melodic.

Figure 11.

(mm. 5-6) Harmonic Choice

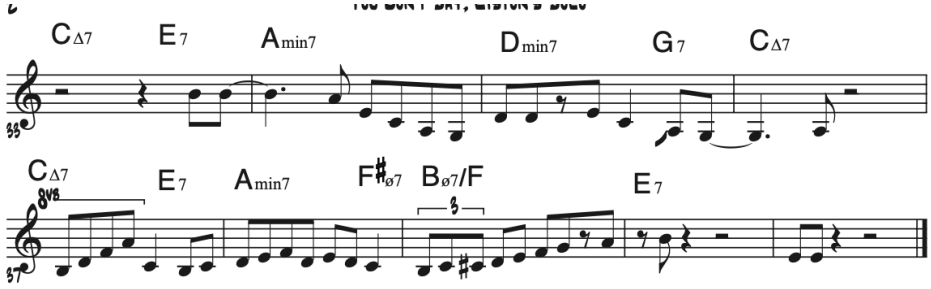


Liston also used tessitura to build and release tension. Liston played the high B an octave above the staff once during the A sections as part of an idea, but during the B section, she made a statement of the high B by repeating it in a riff. This choice accentuates the note and creates more tension. She played it over a G7 chord, then when the chord changes to D Minor, she continues with the high B, making it a 13 of the chord. By making use of this change from a third of the chord to an extension of the chord, Liston built more tension. She continued to build the tension with a short 8th note line and by playing the 9th of the A Minor chord, before the chords resolve to major.

As seen in Figure 14, in the final section of the form, Liston started on the high B and worked downward in pitch from measures 33 to 36. Her descending idea was another very vocal-style melodic phrase. Her next four bar phrase, measures 37 through 40, responds to her last phrase by ascending to the high B once again. These last eight bars signify the approaching end of the form perfectly. Liston sets herself up to end with a lot of energy by first starting high and descending, then ascending to her highest note to end the solo. Her phrase in measures 37 through 40 was also the longest line of 8th notes Liston used in the solo, including one of her only triplet figures, which gave it more momentum. These are examples of how Liston built tension, created melodies and good phrasing, and used call and response techniques to make her solo pleasing to the ear.

Figure 12.

(mm 33-41) Harmonic Choices.



Liston's solo was not very complex in harmony or technique, but the richness of her phrasing, melodic content, and motivic development gave the solo more body than flashiness ever could. One can hear her arranging and compositional style in her playing. She created meaningful phrases that relate to one another, and she played melodies which harkened back to the written melody, yet still took on a new personality. This is evidence of her vocal influence as a trombone player. Much of what she wrote and played could be sung or was reminiscent of a vocalist. This is partly because trombone is akin to vocals, but more importantly, because gospel, blues, and work-songs are rooted in the voice. Soul is pervasive throughout Liston's playing and writing.

Conclusion

Though there is a lot to unpack in Melba Liston's arranging and composition. I believe that she was able to write without thinking about many of these aspects. When she was asked by interviewers, what her influences were or what techniques she used, she refuses to say she thought of any techniques (Wilson, 2008; Bryant, 1996). She said that she wrote from her soul,

and many of the attributes discussed here could be ideas that she heard more than consciously implemented. In many ways Liston seemed to be a genius who did not need to use a lot of technique to write so prolifically. She knew that she had something to say, and she made sure that it was heard. Through analysis of her phrasing, including tension and release and call and response; melodic content; motivic development; and soulfulness, much can be learned and understood about her writing process. As her discography of work becomes more recognized, analysis of the points mentioned here and more will hopefully be added to her profound legacy.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Discussions and Findings

Melba Liston is greatly underappreciated and likely would have achieved the stardom of some the men she worked with had she been a man. Even in her bitterness about the way she was treated, she managed to put love into her music. She was a genius and a pure musician. She also had a unique career which took her in many different directions. The support and admiration from people like Gerald Wilson and Dizzy Gillespie brought Liston the opportunity to see the entire country and the world. Melba Liston was able to experience countries where jazz was more appreciated than it was in the U.S., and where her skin color didn't have such a huge impact on the way she was treated. She also had the opportunity to see the African diaspora throughout the world, which was something very important to her. The world was changing before her eyes at the height of her career, and she used these inspirations in her compositions and arrangements.

One the most unique aspects of Liston's writing, which is worth further study and should be considered innovative, was her ability to get inside the music of the person she was writing for. Liston asked Weston to improvise over his theme and she would listen to these recordings from Weston over and over until she felt she was inside the idea of the piece. Then she would write in the style of Weston's improvisations, encompassing his ideas with her arrangement (Barg, 2014). She described how writing for Charles Mingus was completely different than Thelonious Monk. She described leaving a lot of holes for Monk to play his own ideas in, because that was more his style. She claimed that she had no formal training, and so each project had to come from an original place rather than from a template (Bryant, 1996, pp. 28). Musicians

and writers such as Randy Weston and Clora Bryant mention that Liston had a way of writing in the style of the person she was writing for (Wilson, 2008).

Melba Liston spoke to her feelings on women in the music industry in Hale Smith's Black studies class. She said that she felt alone as a woman in jazz and that she shouldn't feel that way. She said family and friends should encourage young women to study what they are interested in rather than something corresponding to traditional feminine values, as was the case when she was young. She said that society would gain from women being part of jazz, and that women's touch is needed to make music, schools, and the world "real" (Smith, 1982). This shows that Liston analyzed her situation as one of few women in jazz. She also recognized that society was not changing its sexist beliefs, though it may appear to be changing on the outside. "The male-female thing is really something else. And that has not changed too much. You don't see it quite so clearly, and you don't hear it quite so clearly, but nothin' changed" (Dahl, 1984, p. 258). This is a phenomenon I believe pervades every movement. Since the beginnings of the feminist movement, the Black rights movement, and LGBTQ rights movements there have been agendas for certain demographics to reap the benefits. Liston was put in a unique position of intersectionality in discrimination, which forced her to see this systemic problem. Those who are not put in this situation, are not forced to see the problem, and therefore change much more slowly.

Liston had a complex personality. She has been described as caring and friendly, quiet and private, and a task master. Her full range of personality is evidence of her coping methods as a woman of color in a male dominated industry. She was private, which allowed her to keep her guard up. She was friendly when she felt comfortable enough to be so, and this allowed her to make friends with both men and women and stay on their good side. Being intimidating in a

professional setting demanded respect from those reading her music. Men did not want to be told what to do by a woman, but Liston may have found that she got more respect by not backing down. Liston worked with multiple musicians who were famous for their bad temper including Charles Mingus, Ray Charles, and Dinah Washington. However, she claims none of these people were ever rude to her (Bryant, 1996). This shows that she somehow commanded their respect. Gloria Lynne's description of Liston is the friendliest description of her. She explains that she was warm, nice, and friendly. This may have been a case in which Liston was supporting a younger talented Black woman, as Billie Holiday had done for her. Liston also mentions Janice Robinson, trombone, as someone she supported. She expressed feelings of pride for her and wanted to protect her. This is an example of the Black women's support system which Tammy Kernodle wrote about.

Melba Liston was a truly important figure in jazz in her lifetime. She deserves the recognition she is being given and more. She was a unique and innovative arranger as well as a skilled trombonist. In addition to both these qualities, Liston possessed a determination that allowed her to break social barriers for women, in particularly women of color, in jazz. Though women were often treated as equals in a musical sense, they were not treated as equals in a social sense. Nor were they given many chances to be a leader because of their expected roles in society. In addition, Liston's role as an arranger did not place her in a position of prominence for audiences and history books. Liston mentioned that she never had a manager to push her for record dates, which contributed to her lack of recognition in the public eye (Bryant, 1996). For these reasons, Liston did not achieve the recognition of the stars she worked with, and her legacy has diminished since her death.

Part of the reason for this is that jazz history has become codified in textbooks. No longer do students only refer to their mentor's memories for this information. This can be helpful, but these authors tell the history from an outside perspective. Jazz now has figureheads the way that classical music does, otherwise known as the Great Man perspective. Musical history can be boiled down to those who dominated their instrument or style by catching the public attention with innovations and/or virtuosic ability. These luminaries are often white men, because their status gives them a pedestal from which to achieve these goals. Jazz was created in Black communities and therefore the Great Man perspective applies to Black men. Similarly to Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, etc., jazz figureheads are Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, and others. Some history books combat the Black male dominated narrative with a separate section for "women in jazz," to account for women instrumentalists who did not receive the fame that Ella Fitzgerald or Sarah Vaughan did. Unfortunately, these authors pick female jazz musicians arbitrarily and do not account for who was more influential, as influential, or not as influential as other female instrumentalists. An example of this can be found in DeVeaux and Giddins' 2015 *Jazz*. Mary Lou Williams is given her own heading, which is deserving, as she was very influential. However, Liston is grouped with a few other female musicians under a heading which prioritizes Valaida Snow, who was not nearly as influential as Melba Liston, though she was a great instrumentalist. These are the issues that must be resolved in our history books and classrooms to give female musicians their due, and to make sure that Melba Liston's name is as well-known as Mary Lou Williams. Furthermore, that Mary Lou Williams, Melba Liston, and other female jazz musicians are better known in the younger jazz community, instead of being slowly forgotten.

Feminist study was done by both Tammy Kernodle and Victoria E. Smith. These authors studied philosophical reasons why women jazz musicians have been and are being forgotten. Though women were often treated as equals in a musical sense, they were not treated as equals in a social sense. Nor were they given many chances to be a leader because of their expected roles in society. Some of Kernodle's findings have been presented in the paper, but Smith's give some insight as well. Smith claimed that women have made invaluable contributions to jazz but are forgotten because of the "overtly male-centric culture of jazz" (Smith p. 24). She also claims that, though the culture has improved, the male-centric culture continues today. Scholars often write off the lack of women in jazz history, claiming that there just weren't very many. Smith claimed that there must be an examination the societal norms and constraints that prevent women from being seen as equal to their male counterparts for us to understand why they are not seen equally (Smith, p. 26). Smith's insights include the nature of bebop as it was a highly competitive and exclusionary art. Innovators of bebop discussed their ideas late at night in clubs or apartments where they could make sure their ideas were kept to themselves. Similarly, the homosocial network of jazz was a prominent challenge for women. Jazz has always been a social network, because it grows within a community and those participating can only grow as musicians and innovators by being a part of that community. Homosocial means that the community is only among men, which was the case for jazz in the early twentieth century. Clora Bryant speaks to the fact that women weren't welcomed at jam sessions, and often had to face sexual harassment and abuse if they dared to venture out to one. This greatly inhibited women from accessing the information that was being spread among the male musicians, and therefore becoming successful.

Recommendations for Further Study

Now that Liston is being researched, there is hope for her wider recognition in jazz communities. A biography of Melba Liston should be published. Research into her life including her ancestry would give more insight into her roots and her culture. Information about her grandparents' backgrounds is not readily available such as where they were originally from and whether they were descendants of American or Caribbean slaves or were subjected to slavery or sharecropping themselves. This could lead to better understanding of Liston's roots. Kernodle and Smith use Liston's story as a lens into the Black female experience in jazz. This deep philosophical analysis of society and the creation of a place for women in jazz is a subject that warrants further exploration. Liston's legacy is defined by her race and gender because she faced adversity that no male musician could have faced. However, she must also be thought of in the same vein as her male counterparts. She must be known for her musical and arranging genius, which no doubt influenced generations of arrangers after her. I hope this thesis paves the way for better understanding of what Liston contributed to the jazz arranging canon as well as the jazz trombone canon. To do this, more research of her music must be done, including research into work that is not found in her published discography, such as her work for Motown and with Bob Marley. Interviews should be conducted of people who worked with her. In addition, much more musical analysis must be done of her work to uncover more of what she contributed to the jazz arranging canon as well as the jazz trombone canon. Women arrangers' works should be studied in the same manner as in *Inside the Score* by Rayburn Wright, which studies eight jazz arrangements by three great male jazz arrangers. Clora Bryant and Melba Liston discussed women who they worked with in jazz. These women included Alma Hightower, Vi Redd, Alice Young, Carole Kromer, Diane Gregs, Boo Pleasant, Janice Robinson, Wilene Martin, Fostina

Dixon, Terri Lyne Carrington, Stacy Rowles, Ann Patterson, Roz Crans, and many others. These names are now further possibility for exploration of Liston and those she worked with. Additionally, Talib Kibwe, who was musical director of Randy Weston's African Rhythms band, Willard Jenkins, co-author of Randy Weston's autobiography, and Pat Mullan, co-leader of Melba's Kitchen, which plays the music of Liston, Mary Lou Williams and others. The Smithsonian archive also has resources for study of Liston.

I hope this thesis paves the way for further study and understanding of Melba Liston. I also hope this thesis encourages more study of the sociological issues facing Black female jazz musicians. Hopefully, Liston will soon be featured in jazz history textbooks and become a focus of jazz history and jazz arranging studies.

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APPENDIX A

LIST OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Questions I planned to ask interviewees were:

“How did you become interested in Melba Liston or how did you meet her?”

“What do you know of Melba Liston’s personality?”

“What do you know of Melba Liston’s personal life?” – “Where did she live? Who was she close with?”

“What do you know of Melba Liston’s career?”

“Who did she work with?”

“Who hired her?”

“What recordings of her writing are available?”

"What do you know of Melba Liston’s discography?”

“What did she write that was credited to others?”

“What pieces did she or may she have collaborated on?”

Questions I asked interviewees were:

“How might I further my research of Melba Liston past accessible articles and books?”

“What should I look for specifically at the Center for Black Music Research Archive to find out more about Melba Liston’s discography and career?”

“Is there anything you can share with me about Melba Liston’s career and discography that wasn’t outlined in your written work?”

APPENDIX B

DISCOGRAPHY

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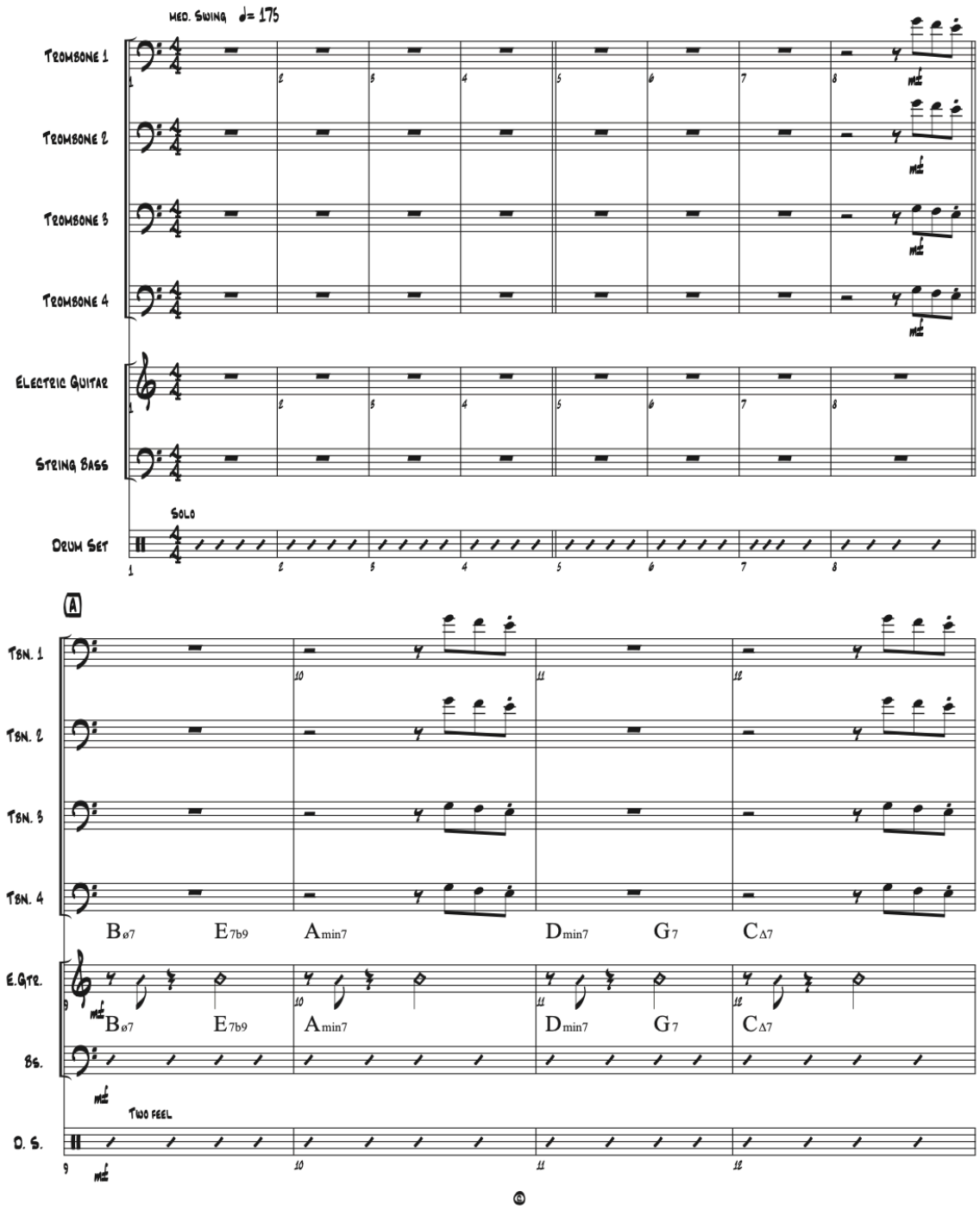
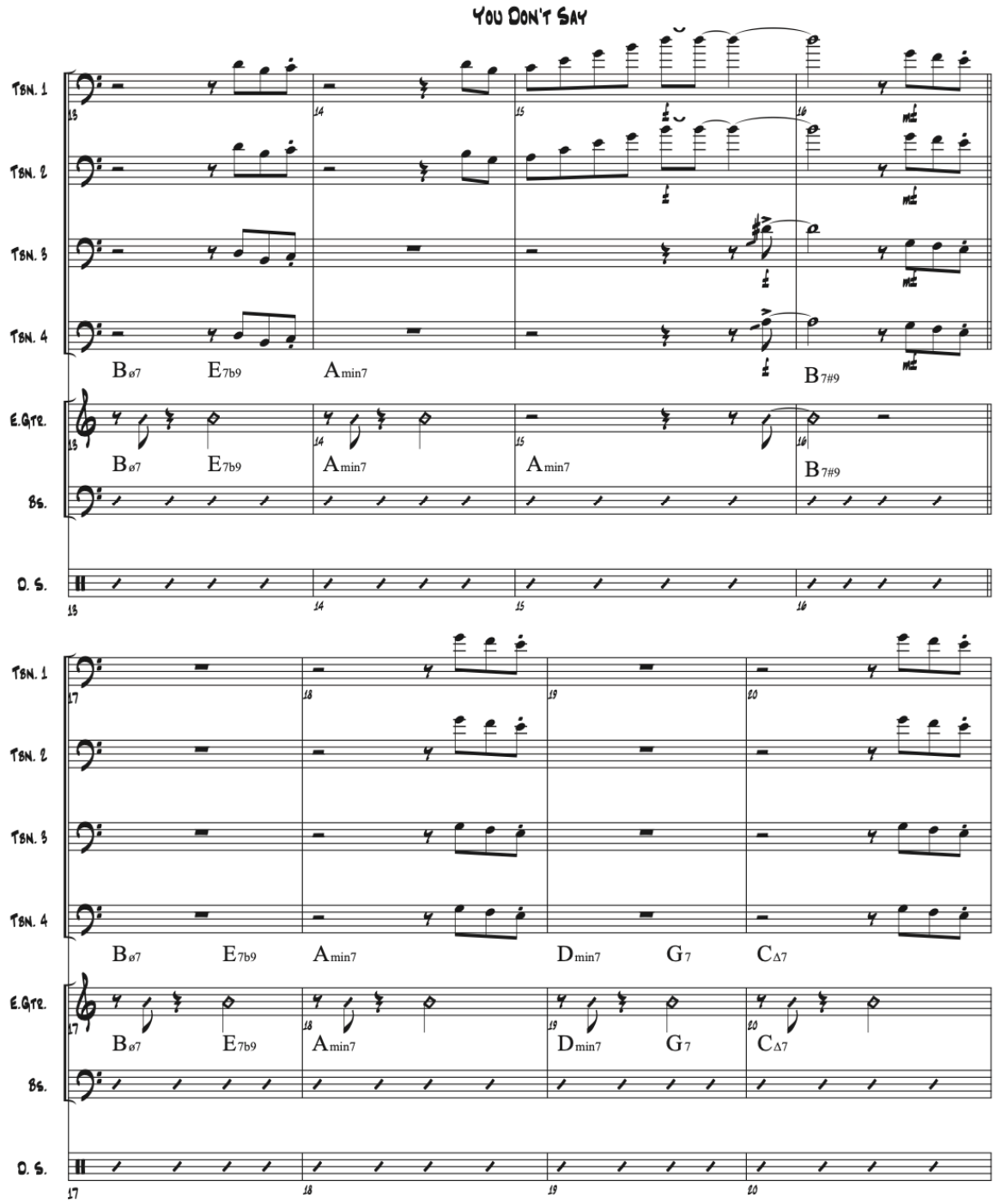
APPENDIX C

SCORE OF "YOU DON'T SAY"

Melba Liston and Her 'Bones, 1958

Transcribed by Isla Brownlow




You Don't Say
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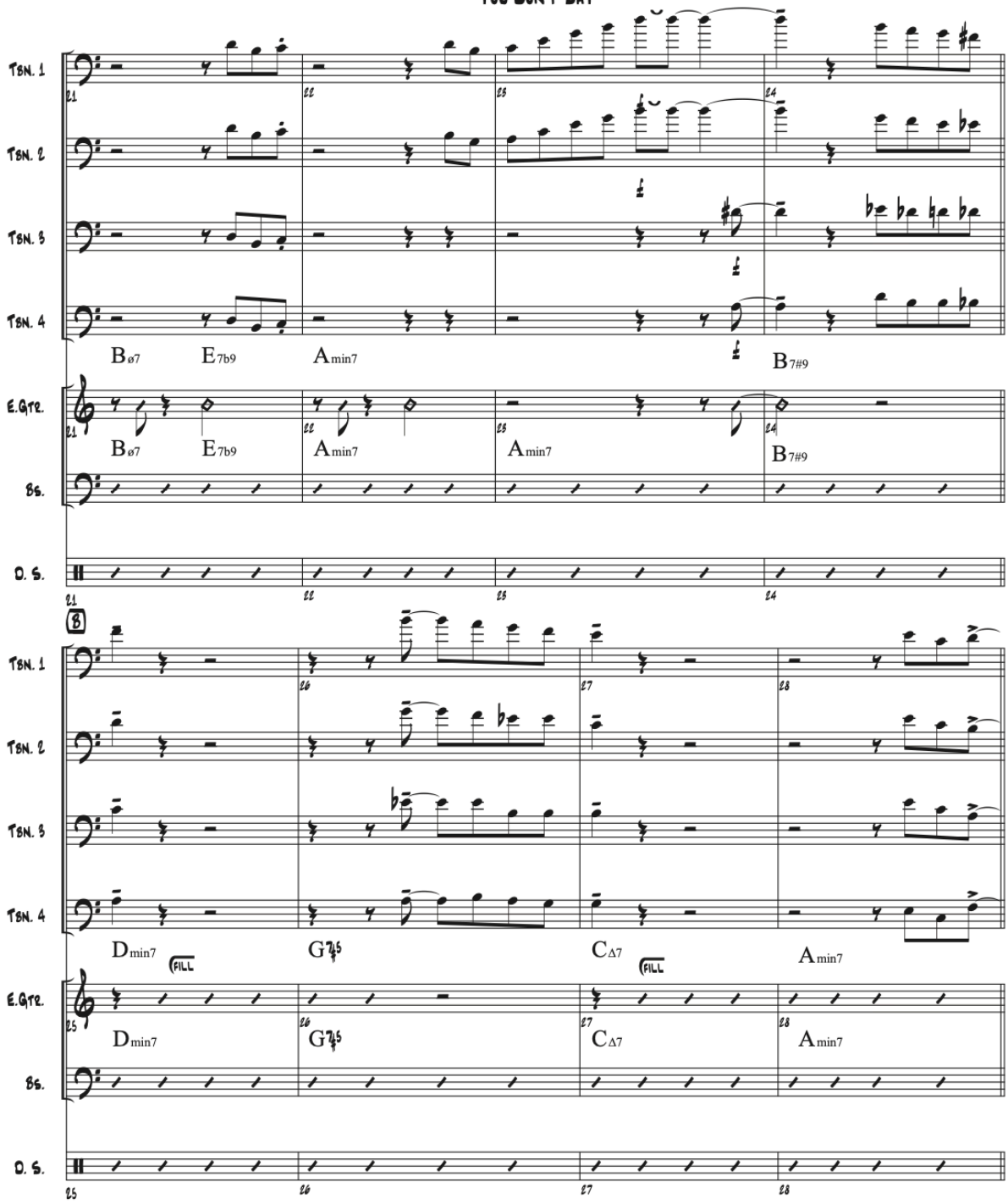
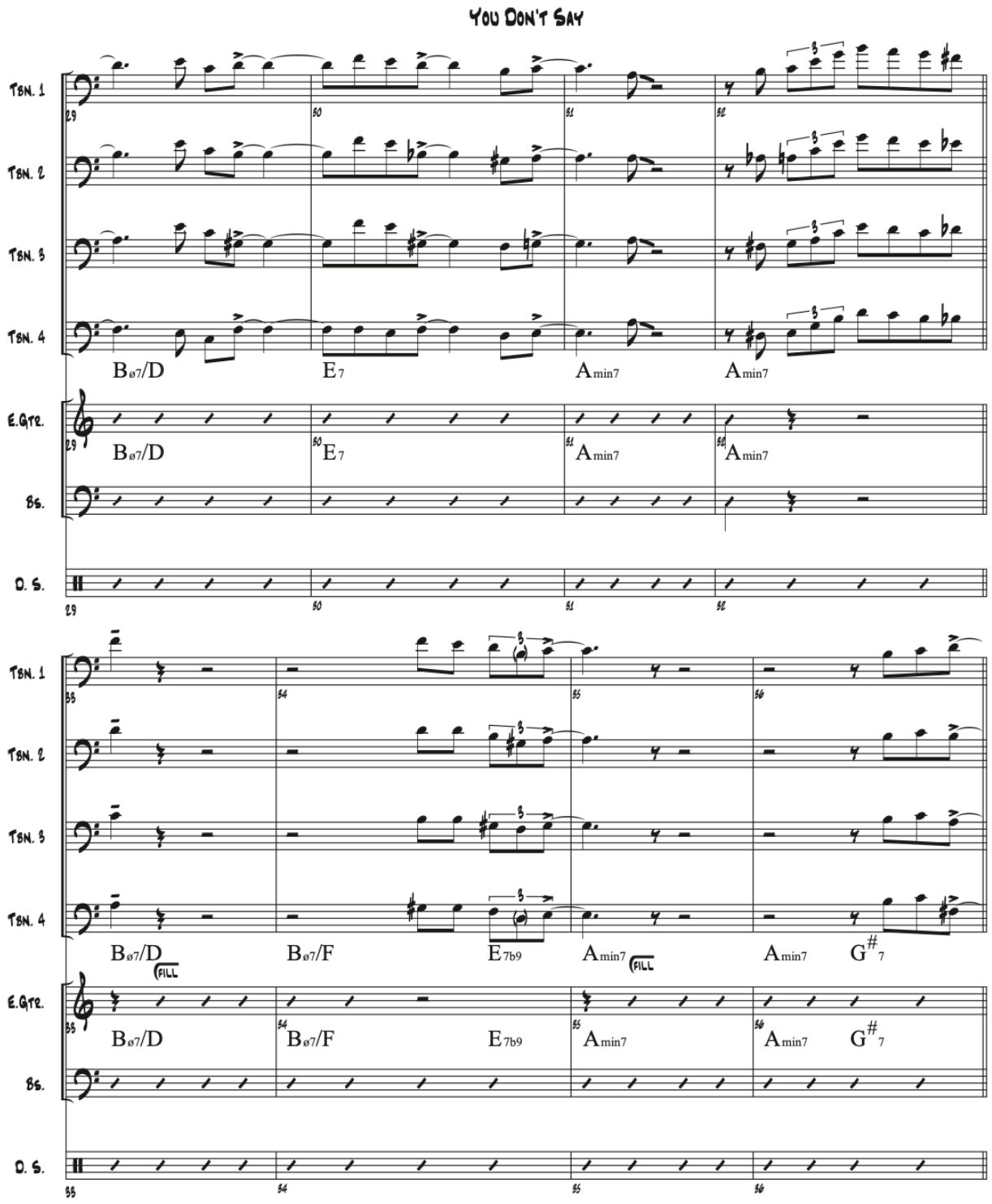
Tbn. 2
Tbn. 3
Tbn. 4
E.Gtr.
Bs.
D. S.
Bø7 E7b9 Amin7 B7#9
Bø7 E7b9 Amin7 Amin7 B7#9
Bø7 E7b9 Amin7 Dmin7 G7 CΔ7
Bø7 E7b9 Amin7 Dmin7 G7 CΔ7


You Don't Say
Tsn. 1
Tsn. 2
Tsn. 3
Tsn. 4
E.Gtr.
Bs.
D. S.
Bø7
E7b9
Amin7
B7#9
Dmin7
G7♭5
CΔ7
Amin7
FILL


You Don't Say
Tbn. 1
Tbn. 2
Tbn. 3
Tbn. 4
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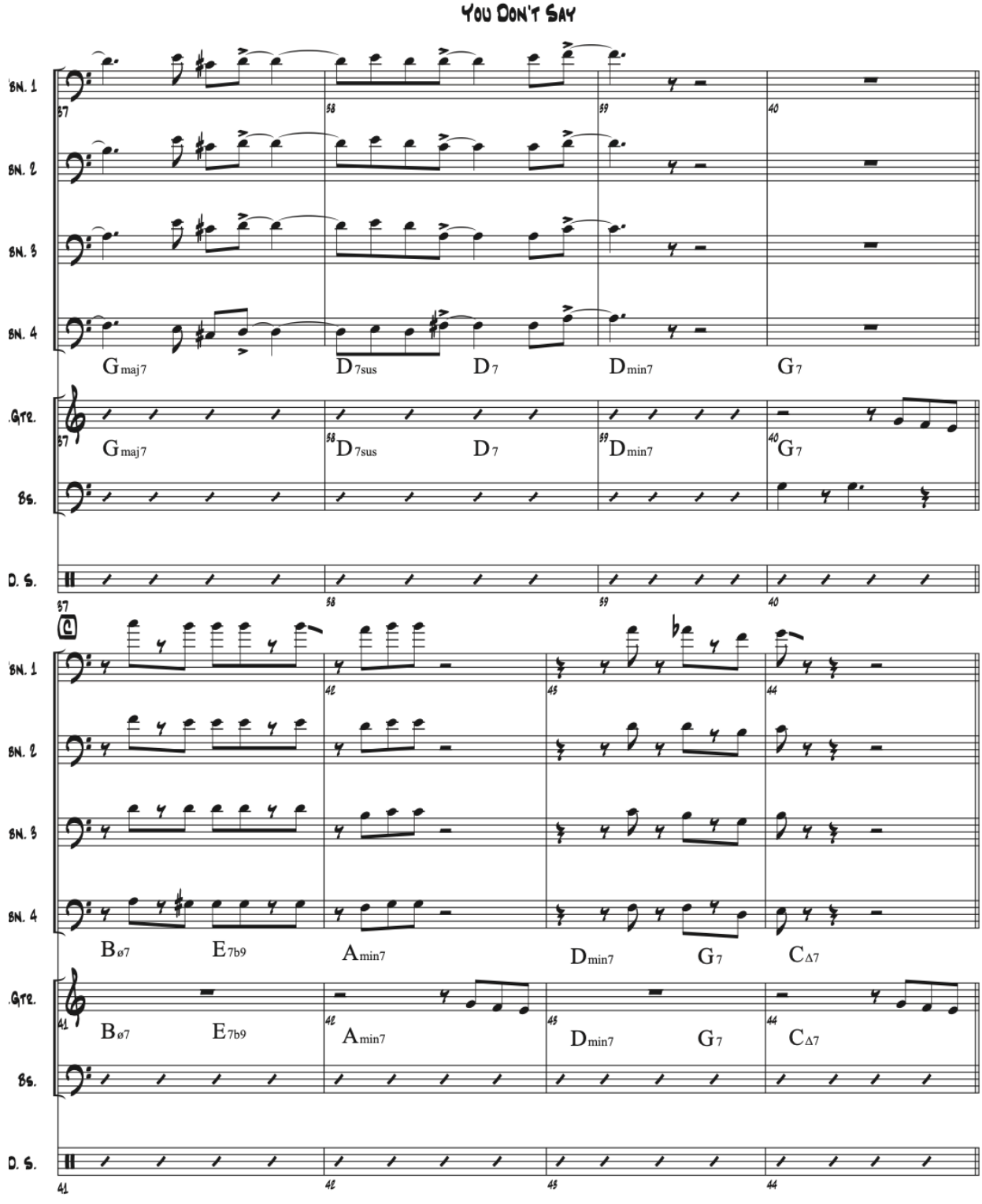
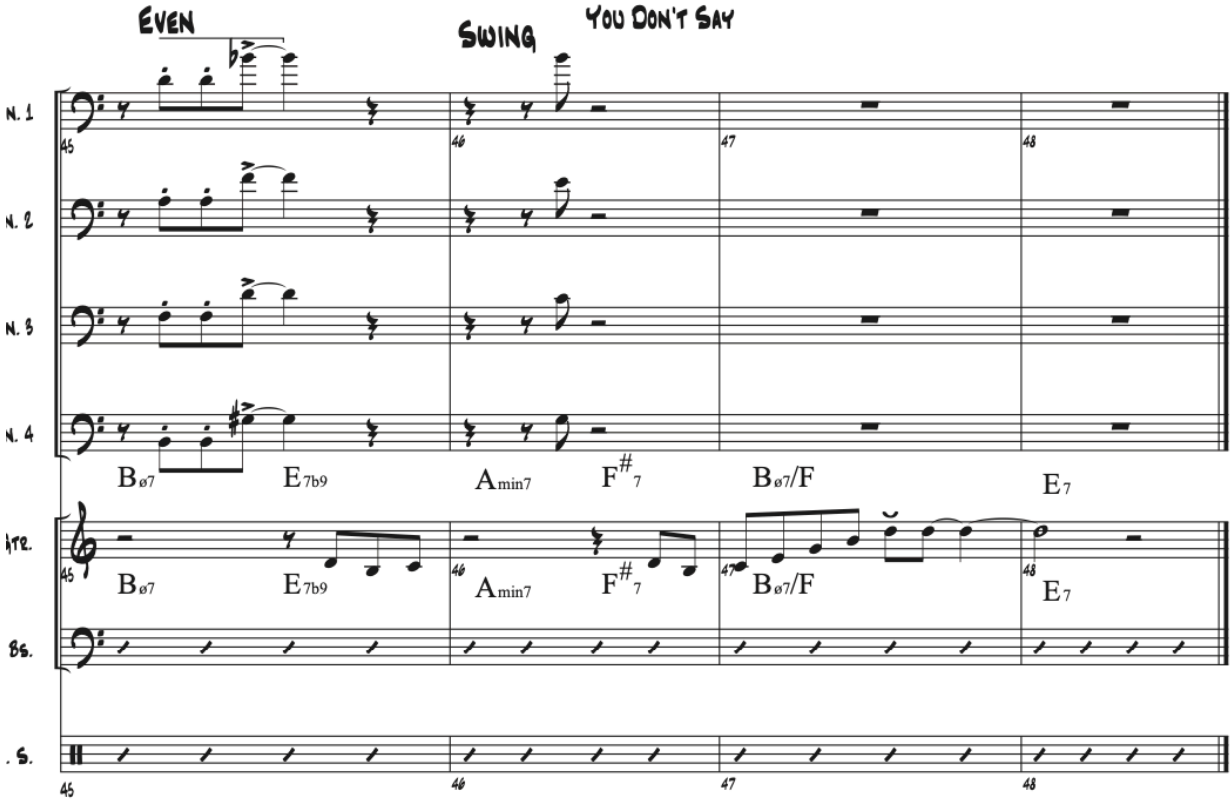
Bs.
D. S.
Bø7/D
E7
Amin7
Amin7
Bø7/D
E7
Amin7
Amin7
Bø7/D
Bø7/F
E7b9
Amin7
Amin7
G#7
FILL
FILL
Bø7/D
Bø7/F
E7b9
Amin7
Amin7
G#7


You Don't Say
Bsn. 1
Bsn. 2
Bsn. 3
Bsn. 4
Gtr.
Bs.
D. S.
Gmaj7
D7sus
D7
Dmin7
G7
Bø7
E7b9
Amin7
CΔ7

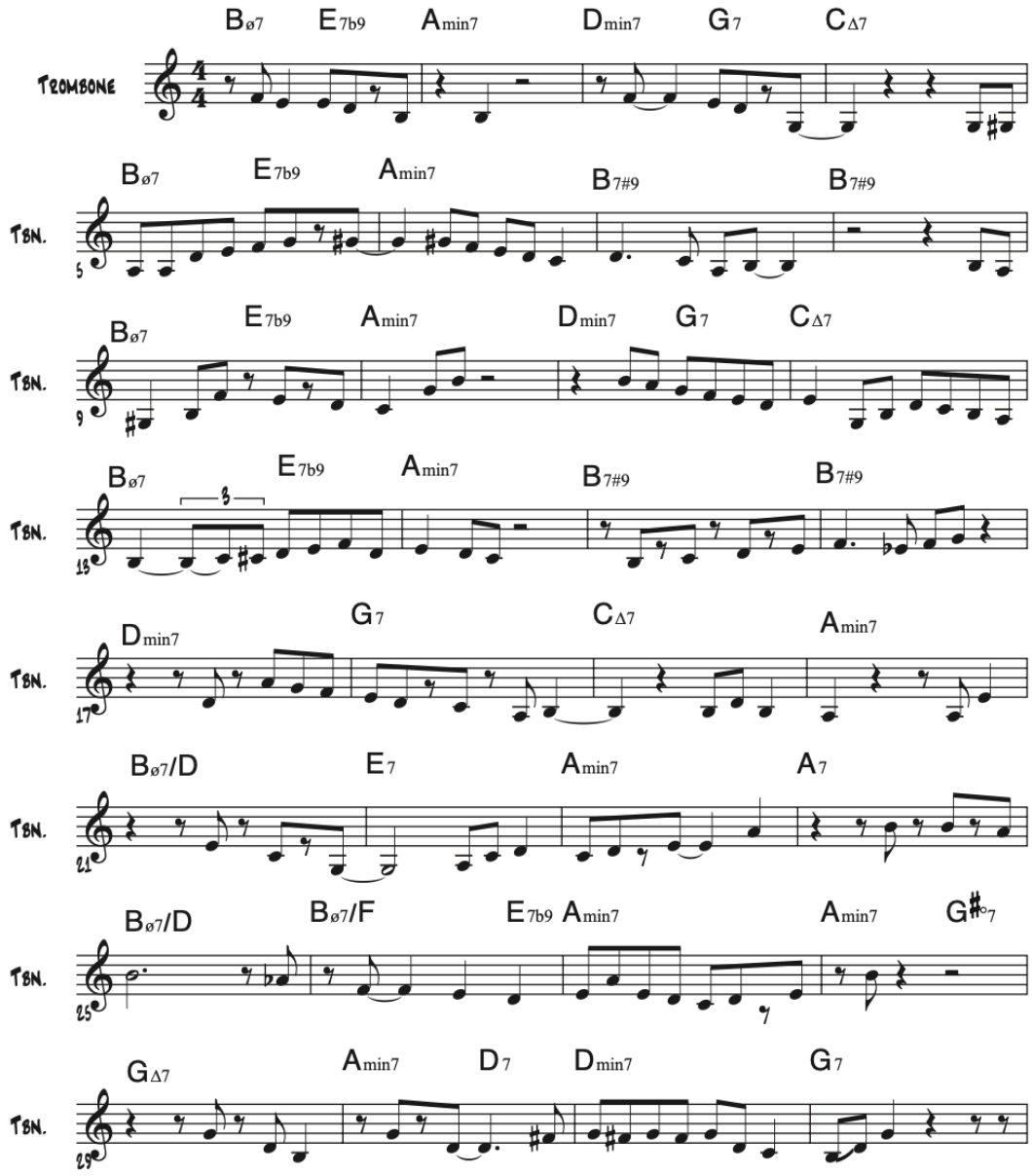

Even
Swing
You Don't Say
N. 1
N. 2
N. 3
N. 4
Gtr.
Bs.
. S.
45
46
47
48
Bø7
E7b9
Amin7
F#7
Bø7/F
E7

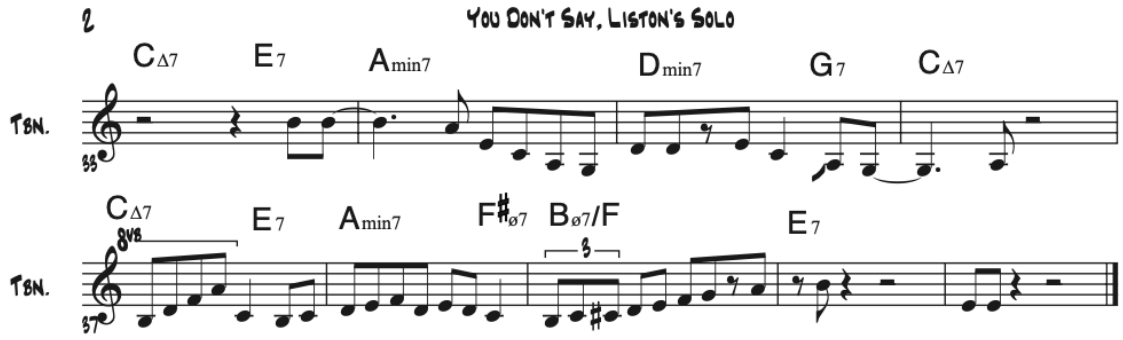
APPENDIX D

TRANSCRIPTION OF MELBA LISTON'S SOLO

Melba Liston and Her 'Bones, 1958

Transcribed by Isla Brownlow



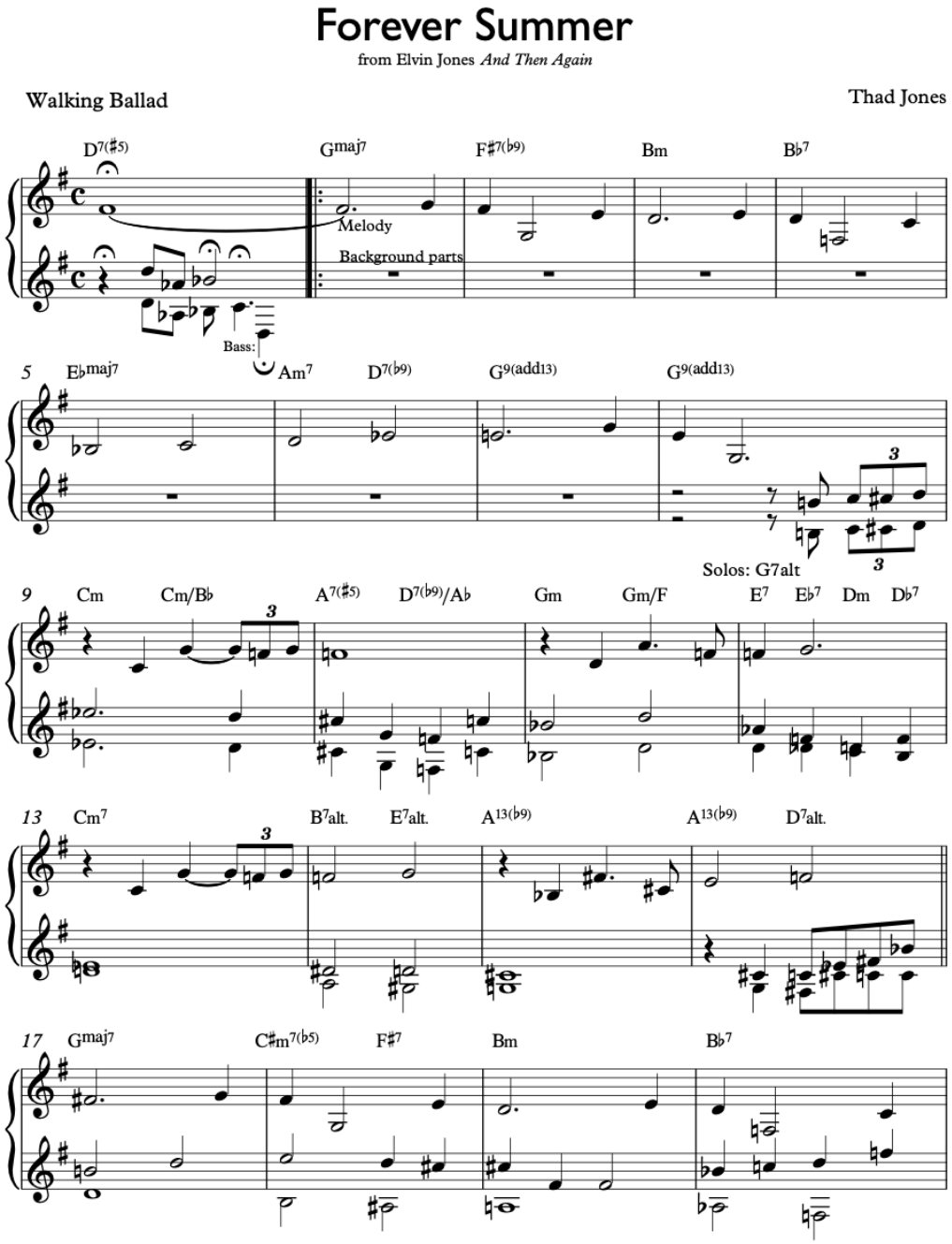

2
You Don't Say, Liston's Solo
C△7
E7
Amin7
Dmin7
G7
C△7
Tbn.
33
C△7
E7
Amin7
F♯ø7
Bø7/F
E7
8va
3
Tbn.
37

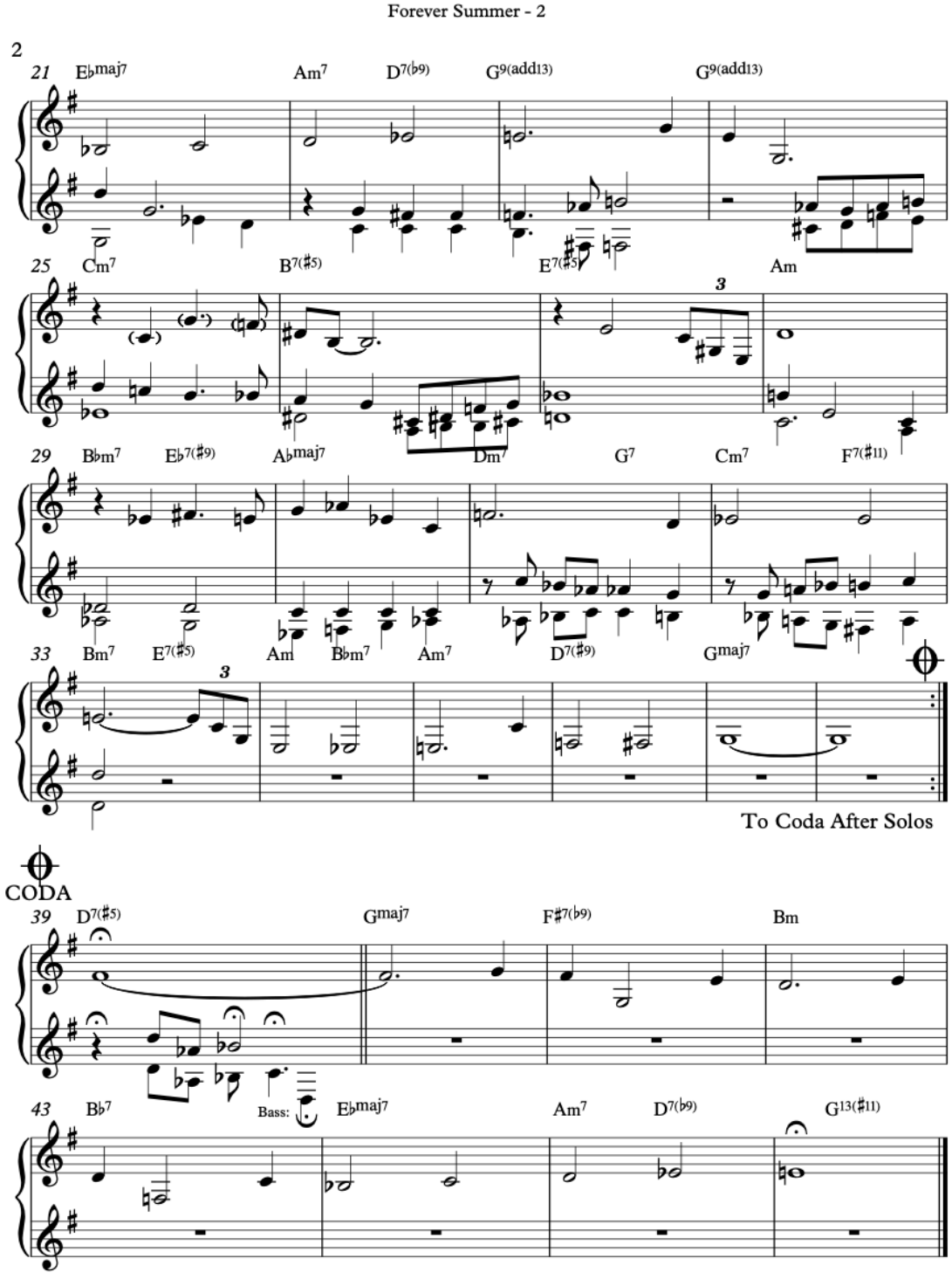
APPENDIX E

TRANSCRIPTION OF "FOREVER SUMMER"

And Then Again, 1965

Transcribed by Dr. David Demsey




Forever Summer - 2
2
21 E♭maj7 Am7 D7(♭9) G9(add13) G9(add13)
25 Cm7 B7(♯5) E7(♯5) Am
29 B♭m7 E♭7(♯9) A♭maj7 Dm7 G7 Cm7 F7(♯11)
33 Bm7 E7(♯5) Am B♭m7 Am7 D7(♯9) Gmaj7
To Coda After Solos
CODA
39 D7(♯5) Gmaj7 F♯7(♭9) Bm
43 B♭7 Bass: E♭maj7 Am7 D7(♭9) G13(♯11)