

# Chasing Dexter and Wardell: An Examination of “The Chase”

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## Introduction

2022 marks the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the recording of Dexter Gordon’s composition, “The Chase” for Dial Records on June 12, 1947. The recording features solos by Gordon and Wardell Gray in what is one of the earliest examples of a two-tenor battle, a format that inspired later battles such as those between Gene Ammons and Sonny Stitt and Johnny Griffin and Eddie “Lockjaw” Davis, among others. Ross Russell, owner of Dial Records, stated that sales of “The Chase” were greater than any other song in their catalog, including the legendary recordings by Charlie Parker.

This presentation covers three areas. First, it looks at the development of the partnership of Gordon and Gray. Secondly, it examines the details of the composition of “The Chase.” Finally, transcriptions of the solos by each tenor saxophonist are examined. Examples of the influence of Young and Parker on both soloists are presented. Additionally, similarities in their approaches are noted while also pointing out differences that mark their individual voices.

## Dexter Gordon and Wardell Gray

Dexter Gordon and Wardell Gray were two tenor saxophonists inspired by Lester Young and Charlie Parker, each synthesizing lessons from these masters into their own personal style. They developed a personal friendship and musical partnership in the late 1940s in Los Angeles. As Gordon explained in an interview, “I came back to LA in ’47. And the jam session thing was going on very heavily at that time ... But there would always be about ten horns up on the stand. ... But it seemed that in the wee small hours of the morning – always – there would be only Wardell and myself.”

Discussing the importance of Lester Young and Charlie Parker on their styles, Gordon continues: “We were coming out of the same bags – Lester and Bird .... That’s where I was. That’s where Wardell was.”

Finally, summarizing his thoughts on Wardell Gray, Gordon states, “Wardell? He was a *beautiful* player. I learned a lot from him.”

Their friendship and musical partnership formed the basis of their recording “The Chase” together.

## Examination of the composition

As the following analysis shows, “The Chase” can be seen as an amalgam of three parts: an introduction (which also serves as a coda to the piece), an A section theme based on a quote from a famous solo, and a B section using a harmonic device famously used by Charlie Parker.

Additionally, a comment regarding the key of the piece is warranted. Gordon composed the piece in Bb, but due to an error in the speed of the recorder used during the recording session the pitch sounds incorrect. This artifact of the recording session has led to some confusion as to the true key as well as one publication of a transcribed solo in the wrong key.

## Introduction and Coda

The composition begins and ends with the following introduction (all musical examples are shown in the tenor saxophone key):



This theme is also used as an introduction and coda to Charlie Parker’s composition “Klactoveesedstene”, raising the question of who composed it. Henry Martin (in his book “Charlie Parker, Composer”) posits three possibilities:

- Charlie Parker wrote it and Dexter Gordon learned it from him
- Dexter Gordon wrote it and Charlie Parker learned it from him
- Wardell Gray wrote it and both Gordon and Parker learned it from him.

A fourth possibility not mentioned by Martin is that the theme grew from Gordon and Gray’s frequent jam sessions, with each musician contributing to it and refining it over time. As Parker worked with both musicians, he may have heard it at one of the jam sessions and used it as an introduction for his composition.

Each possibility has its adherents with no definitive attribution having been made.

## A Section Theme

The beginning of the A section theme is shown below:



This theme is based on a fragment of Alphonse Picou’s famous clarinet solo on “High Society” which Charlie Parker would frequently quote, particularly in the key of Bb. While Picou’s solo remains in the major key when he repeats the opening phrase, Gordon transposes the second fragment to the minor key to accommodate the F7 chord.

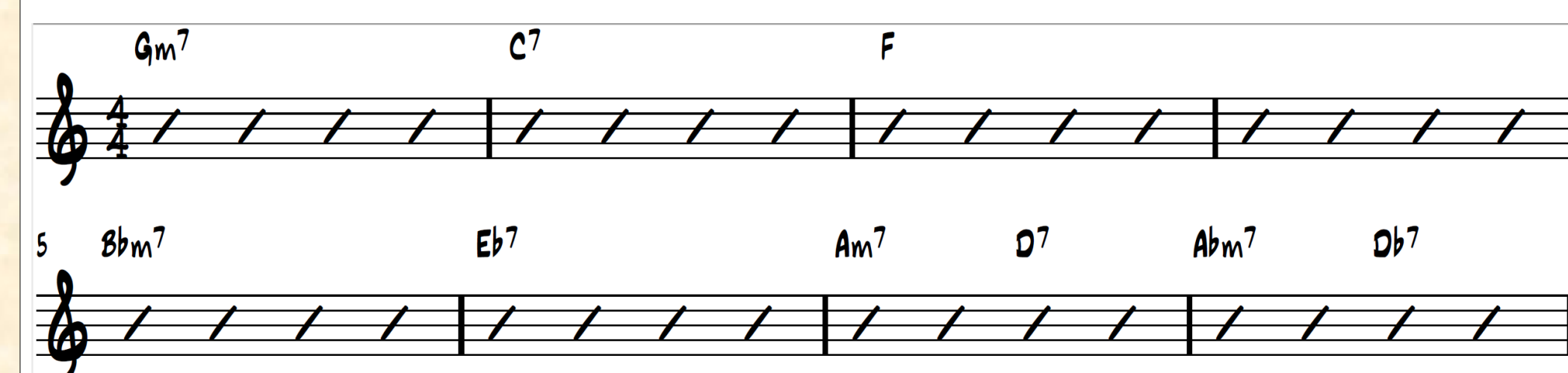
## B section Theme

The B section is shown below:



The bridge theme uses variations of the “Tea for Two” motif that Charlie Parker famously used on the bridge of “Cherokee” in multiple recordings.

During the solo section, the chords for the bridge are altered, beginning with a ii-V progression to the IV chord. The entire sequence can be viewed as an extended (and altered) cycle of fifths progression, leading back to the tonic chord of the A section via a tritone substitution.



## Solo Transcriptions

The complete transcriptions for both soloists are presented separately in a bound folio. There are a total of 9 solo choruses (including 1 piano solo chorus). Solo choruses by Dexter Gordon are marked (DG) and those by Wardell Gray are marked (WG).

In general, Gordon has a gruffer tone compared to Gray, whose sound is closer to Lester Young’s. Gordon also displays his trademark behind-the-beat phrasing, while Gray tends to be more on top of the beat. Both soloists show the influence of both Young and Charlie Parker, incorporating chromaticism, enclosures, passing diminished chords, etc.

The solo section builds with each saxophonist taking full choruses, followed by a section in which they trade 8 bar phrases, followed by a section with 4 bar trading. The final solo chorus starts with both saxophonists playing a rhythmic figure on one note (a Lester Young trademark) before launching into 4 bar improvised sections.

## Summary

- This presentation examined Dexter Gordon’s composition, “The Chase” on the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its recording
- The growth of the partnership of Gordon and Gray leading up to the recording was discussed.
- The composition itself was examined and 3 main components of it were identified.
- Transcriptions of both soloists were completed and influences of Lester Young and Charlie Parker on both soloists were shown.

## More Information

For more information about Jeff Rzepiela, visit his website containing nearly 100 solo transcriptions, several big band arrangements, and a copy of this presentation (including the Dexter Gordon and Wardell Gray transcriptions): [www.scooby-sax.com](http://www.scooby-sax.com)