Earl Bostic: Up There In Orbit

by

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Introduction

I first heard a recording of Earl Bostic in June 2008, in a class called “Survey of Woodwind Styles” at Berklee College of Music. In the class our instructor, Jeff Harrington, would present significant work on the saxophone from the swing era to the present in the United States. Needless to say, we heard a lot of incredible music.

Earl Bostic, a saxophonist active from the 30s through the 60s, was one of the musicians presented. Harrington explained that he was a total virtuoso on the alto saxophone, but that his work is often marginalized by critics and by the jazz community, written off as commercial or entertainment music. He put on a recording of Bostic’s called “Up There In Orbit.” What played from the speakers was simply stunning. Bostic’s mastery of the horn was superhuman, his chops were extremely quick and well learned, his tone was heavy and strong, and he hit high notes I never thought anyone could reach on the saxophone, all with incredible precision. When Bostic started to play in the altissimo range, beyond the range the saxophone was designed for, Harrington nodded, smiled and said “Earl Bostic could play really high.” By the time he climbed a major scale to reach a double high C, a full twelfth above the normal range of the alto saxophone, my jaw was nearly on the floor.

Harrington told us that before he became a professional, Bostic would practice 9 to 5 every day except Sunday, just like a normal job. The time spent with his instrument gave him the ability to create music of tremendous energy and power in a real-time improvisational setting. This experience reaffirmed for me what my music
teachers had been telling me for years: that by really putting work and love into one’s 
music, one could accomplish truly amazing things.

I became curious about Bostic. I wondered how and why I had never heard of 
him. I felt as though I had never heard anyone play the saxophone with so much 
energy and with such a high level of technique. My curiosity later led to a lengthy 
investigation of Bostic’s life and music, which in turn led to this project.

In my research I investigated a number of LPs and CDs released under Earl’s 
name, as well as liner notes from his albums, and articles, books, and interviews 
pertaining to Bostic. Gil Skillman, Professor of Economics here at Wesleyan, was 
kind enough to let me borrow some Earl Bostic LPs from his collection. These proved 
instrumental in understanding the broad range of Bostic’s work, as well as the way in 
which he was presented by the record company. A CD box set called *The Earl Bostic 
Story* also lent by Professor Skillman had particularly useful liner notes and rare early 
recordings. I spent a great deal of time with the recording “Up There In Orbit” 
mentioned in the introduction, as well as certain recordings from different periods of 
Bostic’s career.

I also found that keeping up with Earl’s music by playing along on saxophone 
was both important and illuminating in understanding what, and how, he played. I 
played a piece on alto saxophone in my senior recital this year dedicated to Earl 
called “Up There With Earl.” The piece was which was made up of fragments from 
“Orbit” as well as my own improvisations in the same musical vein and was the 
product of many hours of transcription and practice.
In my research I slowly uncovered the fascinating story of a great American musician. Earl was a unique artist who participated in the inception of a new style of instrumental R&B, incorporating elements of jazz, and dance music. His buzzing alto tone is iconic among dance bands from his era. Earl’s solos always had a special bounce and a beautiful songlike quality to them. Earl and his music existed inside a larger system that created the music that post-war America came to know. Whatever his circumstances, he always humbly gave his best and created music that will continue to thrill and inspire generations of dancers and music lovers.

The following is both a summation of and a reflection on my research on Earl Bostic and his music. In chapter one I provide a brief biography and discuss different views on Earl’s music. In chapter two I explore Bostic’s relationship with King Records. In chapter three I discuss the significance of Bostic’s saxophone technique and his recording “Up There In Orbit”. A full transcription of Bostic’s solo on “Up There In Orbit” can be found at the end.

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1 Although there is no definitive biographical work on Mr. Bostic, I was able to put together something fairly comprehensive using liner notes and shorter biographies from jazz encyclopedias.
Chapter One: Earl’s Story

Early Musical Experiences and Apprenticeships

Eugene Earl Bostic was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma on April 25, 1913. He was introduced to music early on, playing clarinet and alto saxophone during his high school years.

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2 Photo courtesy of Marty Jourard, earlbostic.com. Jourard obtained it from Elmer Beechler, creator of the Beechler “Diamond Dot” mouthpiece which can be seen on Bostic’s saxophone. Jourard speculates that the photograph was taken in Los Angeles in the mid-1950s.
school years. He was active with territory bands as early as 1930 when he played saxophone in trumpeter Terrence Holder’s band, The Twelve Clouds Of Joy. By that time, at age 17, Earl was already a skilled musician who could turn heads and operate under pressure. Buddy Tate, a reed player from Holder’s band, recalls hearing Earl play one night “around 1930” in Tulsa, when the band was looking for a saxophonist. He had heard Earl described as “fantastic” and able to do “everything on the sax” by another musician earlier in the night, and sure enough he heard Earl play “all over the horn...triple tonguing and doing everything”. After asking Bostic to join up with them, Tate recalls the band testing Bostic’s ability to read music:

“the band director called ‘Louisiana Bo-Bo,’ that hard one...we says [to Bostic], ‘Just knock it off; what tempo you want’...We let him stomp it off and we didn’t get out of the introduction. He ran through it like it’d throw your pants off...When they got through there was nobody [playing] but him and the drummer...[and] the drummer was tired...We let him alone after that.”

Though we have no recordings of Earl Bostic until 1939, we do know that music was a constant part of his life. From his start in Oklahoma until the time he arrived in New York City where he would stay, he was performing, traveling, and gathering influence, working with many different musicians. Earl also went to college after his stint with Holder’s band, first at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska for one year in the early 1930s. He remained musically active in Omaha, playing with an ROTC band as well as local jazz bands. In 1933, Bostic worked with Bennie

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4 Pearson, Nathan W. *Goin' To Kansas City* (University Of Illinois Press, 1994) 58
5 Pearson 59
Moten, a bandleader whom Moten biographer David E. Spies describes as “the pivotal figure in the development of jazz in Kansas City and the Southwest” and “responsible for developing the swing-era jazz orchestra or big band.”

After a run with Moten’s band, Bostic relocated to New Orleans to study at Xavier University. There he developed familiarity with many instruments, and further honed his skills as a sight reader and arranger. Liner notes on his LP “Altotude” read that Bostic learned much of his musical knowledge from a nun at Xavier, though this is likely fabricated information. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree from Xavier in 1934, and set out to further his career as a professional musician. He played with many groups including those led by New Orleans pianist Joe Robichaux, Clarence Olden in Columbus, OH, Marion Sears in Cleveland, OH, and Clyde Turpin in Buffalo, NY, and a group co-led by trumpeter Charlie Creath and pianist Fate Marable (for which he also produced arrangements). In January of 1938, four years after leaving New Orleans, Earl arrived in New York City, a place he would call home for the next twenty years.

After a few months in New York, Earl Bostic joined a group led by Don Redman, an experienced musician who had arranged for Fletcher Henderson’s group in the early 1920s. Bostic also played in pianist Edgar Hayes’ group for a short time. In 1939, he secured a residency with his own band at Small’s Paradise in Harlem. In

8 Altotude. LP Liner Notes
9 Visser, Joop. (December 11, 2006). The Earl Bostic Story. (p.6-37) [CD liner notes]. Proper Box UK. 9
addition to his alto saxophone, he could also be heard playing trumpet, guitar, and baritone saxophone.\textsuperscript{11} In addition to performing with bands in the city, Bostic also contributed compositions and arrangements to several groups. Gene Krupa had major success with “Let Me Off Uptown” a Bostic original featuring the famous Roy Eldridge on trumpet.\textsuperscript{12} Bostic also wrote for clarinetist Artie Shaw’s group, Paul Whiteman, trumpeters Hot Lips Page and Louis Prima. He would also play in groups led by Page and Prima.

Bostic’s first participation in a recording session was October 12, 1939 in New York with Lionel Hampton’s band. He was the only saxophone player in an eight-piece group that included trumpet, trombone, vibes, piano, guitar, bass, and drums. Of the four takes from that session, “I’m On My Way From You”, “Haven’t Named It Yet”, and two takes of “The Heebie Jeebies Are Rocking The Town”, Bostic can be heard throughout, playing background figures with trumpeter “Red” Allen, and trombonist J.C. Higginbotham.\textsuperscript{13} Bostic takes one solo in the session, playing on “Haven’t Named It Yet”. In these eight bars over the B-section of the form, one hears a musician, described in liner notes to \textit{The Earl Bostic Story} by Joop Visser, whose “playing was already quite positively established...confident, articulate and imaginative”.\textsuperscript{14} His tone is smooth and full, with a strong vibrato that could be heard throughout his career. Bostic was 26, had been playing in professional big bands on

\textsuperscript{11} Kernfeld 1
\textsuperscript{12} Visser 10
\textsuperscript{14} Visser 9-10
and off since he was 17, and his experience showed in his relaxed and effective playing.

Earl joined Hot Lips Page’s group in 1941, giving him the chance to work with Don Byas, a respected tenor saxophonist and a fellow Oklahoman. In 1943 Bostic joined Lionel Hampton’s group, now a larger ensemble than at their 1938 recording session. Here the recording opportunities start to pick up for Bostic; he would be involved in nine sessions throughout 1944, 5 with the Hampton orchestra, 2 with Hot Lips Page, 1 with Louis Prima, and 1 with the Buck Ram all stars. Bostic’s solid ability as a composer/arranger is evident in Hampton’s recording of “The Major and the Minor” which jazz critic Victor Schonfeld argues established Bostic as an “outstanding follower of Benny Carter’s orchestral tradition, in both conception and execution.” During this year he could also still be heard playing live with these groups, as well as with his own combo at Small’s Paradise.

Earl’s apprenticeships with so many different groups were an important and necessary part of his musical growth. The jazz tradition is one that values lineage, and Earl learned from some master musicians and entertainers. After playing with Lionel Hampton and Hot Lips Page, Earl adopted some of the techniques and aesthetics that made their groups so successful. Earl’s arrangements were consistently solid, and showmanship was always an important part of his music. Whether it took the form of

\[15\] Visser 10

\[16\] Lord

band vocals, or a featured soloist, his later recordings, and one could speculate his live performances were highly entertaining and full of energy.

Earl’s first recording session as a leader came in November 1945 for Majestic Records. The group, “Earl Bostic and his Orchestra” consisted of 13 musicians including tenor saxophonist Don Byas and drummer Cozy Cole. The group recorded four sides that day: “The Man I Love”, “Hurricane Blues”, “The Major and the Minor” and “All On”. Bostic takes a notably strong solo on “The Man I Love” described by Joop Visser as “probably his best early solo” displaying “added bite and fierce attack...striking command of the upper register”. The first part of “The Man I Love” features Bostic playing the melody in the style of a ballad. He plays with a wide vibrato that would be one of the major characteristics of his sound for the rest of his career. Two minutes into the song the band shifts into double time. Bostic signals this in an energetic solo break, before launching into a lightning quick improvisation. His playing outlines the chord changes in the high and low registers of the saxophone, and displays great virtuosity and speed. At the end of the recording, Bostic takes a 22 second cadenza in which he plays an impressive intervallic staccato line, climbs up to an A6 in the altissimo register, and bends up a minor third to a C7, after which the rest of the band plays a tonic chord. This bend in the altissimo register can be found at the end of countless recordings. To the listener, it is a knockout punch, delivering the unbelievable at the finish and dropping jaws. Joop Visser’s liner notes describe Bostic “beginning to apply his own style” in his playing on “The Man I Love.” According to

18 Lord
19 Visser 13
Visser, they were “aspects of a style that would make Bostic into the most popular saxophone player in the near future.”

At this session, Earl also displays other strong musical capabilities, adding lead vocals to “Hurricane Blues”. Though Bostic is generally the featured soloist throughout, there are many solo contributions from the rest of the band including Don Byas’ tenor, Benny Morton’s trombone, Dick Vance’s trumpet, and Tiny Grimes’ electric guitar. Earl’s own composition “The Major and The Minor” displays his strong arranging and compositional skills; a tightly arranged introduction is followed by a statement of the melody in the saxophone section accompanied by a countermelody in the trumpets. At 32 years old, Earl Bostic was finally leading his own group at recording sessions.

**Commercial Success**

At a session in late 1947, Earl made a recording of “Temptation” that would begin his road to international fame. His band was smaller now, a six piece with piano, bass, and drums in the rhythm section, and trumpet and tenor saxophone alongside Bostic’s alto. In this recording we hear a new approach from Bostic. Critic Victor Schonfeld wrote that at this time Bostic “turned his back on his previous work and set about constructing a new style.” In “Temptation” he makes full use of the “growl” technique on the saxophone, in which the player hums or sings into the

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20 Ibid.
21 Lord
22 Schonfeld 14
instrument while playing. The result is an interference in frequencies that gives a rough buzzing effect. We also hear a move toward what Schonfeld describes as “renouncing fluency for pithiness”. In other words, Bostic was leaving out some of the virtuosic and acrobatic displays which were common in his playing, in favor of a simpler and more fundamental approach based on “strong melody.” Bostic had a hit with “Temptation”, which hit 10th place on the “Harlem Hit Parade” in May 1948.

Syd Nathan, owner of King Records in Cincinnati, liked what he heard of Bostic’s new sound. He bought Bostic’s contract, and many of his already recorded masters, from Gotham Records in late 1948. This began a partnership between Earl Bostic and King Records that would last sixteen years. Earl led 6 recording sessions in 1949 and 1950 with King, some in Cincinnati OH, some in New York City. He was gaining popularity by the day, even winning a 19th place among Alto Saxophonists in the 1950 Down Beat Readers Poll, voted on by readers of the magazine. In January 1951, Bostic recorded “Flamingo”, a composition by Ted Grouya which was originally made popular by Duke Ellington in 1941. “Flamingo” would become the most successful recording of Bostic’s career, hitting #1 on the Billboard R&B chart. Bostic’s saxophone sounds big and shimmers with the delay effect crafted by the King recording engineers. He continues in the development of

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23 Ibid.
24 Schonfeld 15
25 Visser 21
26 Visser 21
27 Lord
28 “Down Beat Reader’s Poll” Down Beat. December 1950-1959. Microfilm. Bostic would continue to make the list for a further 9 years, earning 13th, 9th, 9th, 10th, 17th, 24th, 24th, 20th, and 15th place in that order 1951-1959
29 Visser 28
his new pithy style, staying close to the melody and occasionally adding short and well crafted improvised phrases. The septet, which includes vibraphone, guitar, piano, bass, drums, and tenor saxophone, has a big and heavy sound behind the soloist, giving the recording a “larger than life” sound. The drummer at the session was Jimmy Cobb on his first major professional date; Cobb would record the iconic jazz album “Kind of Blue” with Miles Davis eight years later. This same septet under Bostic recorded “Sleep” two weeks later, a track that, in September 1951, also hit Billboard’s R&B chart, rising to 6th place. Bostic was becoming a truly commercially successful musician. He had found a new sound, different from the swing groups he had been involved with, that embodied the straightforward and aggressive rhythm and blues sound that the public was turning their attention to from swing.

With his new success, Bostic could afford to take his band on the road. They toured across the United States, usually traveling in Bostic’s Cadillac followed by a pickup truck carrying their instruments. Bostic was the main focus of performances, playing melodies and improvising up front while the band read the accompaniment music behind him. The most important ability Bostic valued in his band was sight-reading. If they couldn’t do it quickly, they would be replaced. The musicians in Bostic’s band were well paid, earning $175 dollars a week on one tour in 1952. This was a substantial wage at the time, as $100 could rent a luxury apartment in New

30 Schonfield 15
31 Lord
32 Visser 28
York for a month. 33 Down Beat magazine in New York City called Bostic an “alto star”. On August 21, 1952 The Long Angeles Sentinel reported “2400 fans in San Diego”, “1400 turned out to marvel at his artistry and rhythms” in Los Angeles, and “a crowd of nearly 4000 at Richmond Civic auditorium. It has been the same everywhere Bostic and his crew have appeared”. In the same article, Earl is called “a great artist, superb showman and all around good fellow” and “tops in his field of endeavor.” 34 Earl’s superb musicianship and ability to perform were hitting big crowds and drawing deserved attention. Earl would continue to tour the United States throughout the 1950s.

He also continued to record for King Records, participating in sessions in Cincinnati, Los Angeles, and New York City. A car crash in December 1951 landed Earl in the hospital for three months, but he returned to the recording studio in April. 35 From 1952-1957, Earl had 20 recording dates. His groups ranged from small 5-piece ensembles, in which Earl was the only horn player, to 11-piece groups, some of which included a string section. Earl worked with many talented and important musicians, among them John Coltrane, Benny Carter, and Benny Golson, all saxophonists in Bostic’s band in the 1950s.

Earl went on an absolute recording tear in the years 1958-1959, leading 33 recording dates. 36 This high volume of sessions can likely be attributed to a heart attack Earl suffered in 1956, which kept him off the road and in the studio until

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33 Thomas, JC. Chasin’ The Train. (New York: Da Capo Press, August 1976) 59-60
34 John Coltrane Reference (Los Angeles Sentinel, Thursday Aug 21, 1952), (“Bostic Recovers; Hits Road Again” Down Beat May 7, 1952) 75
35 Visser 29
36 Lord
mid-1959. With his efforts, Earl became the most frequently recorded artist ever on the King label, though he would later be surpassed by none other than James Brown. King Records released many of Bostic’s recordings on EPs, smaller four track records; in fact, the only American musician to release more EPs than Earl Bostic was Elvis Presley.

**Bostic and Hipness**

One criticism that is often directed at Earl Bostic is that while his technical facilities were superb, his music lacked style or innovative qualities. Earl Palmer, a drummer who performed with Bostic a few times in 1958, called him a “technical genius” but also added that he “wasn’t as hip or as modern as Bird.” Saxophonist Benny Golson, a predecessor of Bostic’s who also played in his band, named Bostic as an important musician to learn from. When asked what, specifically, one could learn, he responded “technique...not style.” Palmer’s statement about being modern is probably closer to what Golson was trying to say. There can be no doubt that Bostic had an identifiable and strongly defined style. As for his lack of “hipness”, this we can attribute to both the demands of the record company, as well as his stylized way of playing, deeply rooted in the styles of blues and swing. Bostic did not have a progressive approach to playing like Charlie Parker. He was not, to use a term coined

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37 Visser 36
38 Visser 21
by Anthony Braxton, a restructuralist. Rather, he was concerned with placing every note correctly, harnessing the power inherent in existing styles, and the “basic folk form” of the blues.

Charlie Parker and Earl Bostic met and played together at least once. Lou Donaldson remembers a jam session at Minton’s Playhouse in New York. According to Donaldson, Earl Bostic “gave Charlie Parker a saxophone lesson.” Regardless of which musician could outplay the other, the important aspect of this story is that Bostic had technical facility at Charlie Parker’s level. Just because he didn’t exactly push the envelope in terms of style, doesn’t mean that his music could not move people in the same way as an innovator like Parker. Earl’s music existed in a different arena than Parker’s, they were quite different men personally, as well as musically. Earl was his own musician, and he still had the ability to make even intellectual fans of bebop snap their fingers.

Jim Jarmusch, a filmmaker known for his films *Down By Law* and *Coffee and Cigarettes*, included Bostic’s “Up There In Orbit” in one of his early films, *Permanent Vacation*. The film follows the wanderings of Chris, a romantic teenage drifter in New York City. In many ways, this character represents the bohemian aesthetic of Beat Generation writers and artists of the 1950s in America. These were people who celebrated bebop and the music of Charlie Parker were celebrated, and

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42 In his *Tri-Axium Writings*, Braxton defines “restructuralism” to as “changing the surface particulars of a given structure but keeping the fundamentals that gave that structure its laws.” (Braxton, Anthony. *Tri-Axium Writings*. Synthesis Music, 1985) 525
43 Neely, Hal. *Jazz As I Feel It* LP Liner Notes
for whom words like “hip” and “modern” (words Earl Palmer used in his criticism of Bostic’s playing), carried significant weight. In one scene of the film, as his girlfriend stares out the window of her bare apartment, Chris puts on a record of “Orbit” and dances to it for two minutes, snapping his fingers and spinning around. Jarmusch said in an interview that he picked the song because he wanted Chris to “dance in the bop style of the fifties”.45 Here we have a major claim for legitimacy for Earl Bostic in jazz circles. Though one might be quick to write off Bostic’s musical contributions because of his association with popular music, and this would already by a misguided judgement, Jarmusch reminds us that Bostic could play in a way that people could dig in the same way they dug the beboppers.

In fact, throughout my research I found that Bostic’s music is usually more praised than criticized, even by jazz critics. In an article printed in Down Beat, Decembeer 29th 1954, writer Will Jones wrote about a club owner in Minneapolis who hired a band to imitate the “sweating and honking” of a group led by saxophonist Big Jay McNeely, whose influence on the local scene had ensured that musicians had to “sweat to be successful.”46 After the imitation band played a few nights, Jones writes that “sanity returned for awhile with the booking of Earl Bostic.”47 Bostic’s musical contemporaries as well, have more positive than negative things to say about him. He was certainly a respected musician, however sometimes the genre he operated in was not looked at in the same way. To some jazz musicians, playing R&B

47 Ibid.
was a only good way to make money, not meaningful music. Bull Moose Jackson was a bandleader whose group had a similar R&B sound to some of Bostic’s groups at the time. John Coltrane joined Jackson soon after leaving Bostic’s group. Saxophonist Bill Barron, commenting on John Coltrane choice to join the group, said

“I saw John playing with Bull Moose Jackson. I’m sure that job was strictly due to economics. If you need a job and you’re a musician and the only gig you can get is with a rhythm-and-blues band, you’ll probably take it.”

48 Bill Barron quoted in Thomas, J.C. Chasin’ The Train 66
Chapter Two: Earl Bostic and King Records

Earl Bostic is a rather puzzling musician. Any musician who has heard him in person speaks of him as if he were one of the best saxophone players in history, yet many of his recordings feature a more subdued player than the one described by his contemporaries.

The term “Rhythm and Blues” or “R&B” was coined in 1948 by Jerry Wexler, then a writer for Billboard magazine as another way to speak of “race music” or, music marketed to African Americans. Earl Bostic’s music is inevitably tied to this genre label. His hits were listed on the Billboard “R&B” chart, and most liner notes on his albums called his music “R&B.” Morris Ballen, whose father Ivin Ballen acquired Gotham records, then Bostic’s label, in 1948 says that “when [Ivin] bought Gotham, he got to thinking about marketing records by black performers to black record buyers. Bostic’s contract was part of the deal.” When one considers Bostic’s work, it is important to keep in mind the controlling influence of marketing strategies. Bostic hit strong success with his music that had an “R&B” sound. Liner notes from “A New Sound”, one of Earl’s last albums, read “Earl heretofore was best known for his hard driving horn and his big beat...since it was during this ‘golden era’ of dance bands that Bostic reached his highest peaks of popularity.” His music was presented as something that would make one want to dance. Bostic played the role of a stylist throughout the 50s, using dance music as a vehicle for his expression.


51 A New Sound LP Liner Notes
King Records saw Earl as a highly marketable musician in terms of his potential to produce good quality music that had a wide appeal. Liner notes on his album *Earl Bostic Plays Songs of the Fantastic 50s Vol. 2* read:

“This is dance music at its very best...Here’s a dance band that plays the simple and true melodies...Here is Earl Bostic at his warmest and gentle best...Here is a band in absolute top form. Millions of dancers and fans have followed Earl Bostic ever since he started blowing his magic horn...a horn which stands out alone in its styling, its sound, its technique. The big warm and mellow tone of Bostic’s alto sax is a by-word in most parts of the world, his lyrical driving swingin’ beat is familiar to most all dancers”

Words like “simple,” “gentle,” and “mellow” are representative of the kind of easy-listening music King wanted potential listeners to know that Bostic could play. Interestingly, these notes also illustrate some of Bostic’s true qualities, his “sound,” and “technique” that set him apart.

Excellent examples of a subdued Earl Bostic exist on the album *Dance Music From The Bostic Workshop*. Released in 1959, the album was compiled from four recording sessions that took place in October and December of 1958. This album very effectively illustrates the sacrifices Bostic had to make in order to put a recording out with King. Out of the twelve tracks on the album, the first eleven exemplify the commercial aesthetic King Records pushed for, and the twelfth is “Up There In Orbit,” a piece I identify as a testament to Bostic’s greatness in the final chapter. Though Bostic still gives his individual sound to the recordings, (his vibrato, pitch bending, and growling tone are characteristic) the subdued nature of the other eleven recordings is clear, especially when heard in the context of “Orbit.”

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52 Neely, Hal *Earl Bostic Plays Songs of the Fantastic 50s Vol. 2* LP Liner Notes
The second track on *Dance Music From The Bostic Workshop*, “The Key” was recorded on the same day as “Orbit” with the same band. Bostic is the featured soloist for the entirety of the 2 minute 48 second track, though he only plays a pre-set melody which has two repeating sections. He also never plays a phrase faster than eighth notes at the moderate tempo of 72 beats per minute (where in 6/8 time a beat is a dotted-quarter note). It is an example of an effective track that is simultaneously totally uninteresting. It works well as a song for a slow dance, but Bostic’s potential is lost. Yet, Earl’s strong abilities as an instrumentalist still shine through in “The Key” His technical versatility allows him to provide what is needed for the song easily. Unfortunately for Earl, King Records knew this about him, and could call upon him to do just about anything.

Two other tracks “Ducky” and “Sweet Pea”, also recorded in the same month as “Orbit,” rely on novelty and humorous gimmicks. On “Ducky”, Bostic plays with a flutter-tongue, a technique in which the player moves his tongue as if he is rolling his “R”s in speech. The effect on this track is a saxophone that sounds like a duck. By calling the track “Ducky”, the emphasis is put strongly on the novelty of the duck sound. Another track “Sweet Pea”, features a vocalist who interjects with an extremely silly voice in vocal breaks. When the band cuts out he squeals “Sweet pea!”, followed by “Oh baby!” in the next break. Bostic can be heard in the introduction and in a solo section in the middle. He displays his characteristic rough sound and musicianship, never putting a note out of place. The emphasis of the track
is inevitably on the vocalist, whose vocal breaks are bookends to this forgettable song.

These tracks, “The Key”, “Ducky”, and “Sweet Pea”, illustrate quite well the demands of King Records that Bostic had to satisfy. The other tracks on the album are also almost entirely composed and display a subdued character. I would assert, given the qualities of the other tracks on the album, that the final track “Up There In Orbit” represents an occasion when the studio let Bostic loose, so to speak. He was allowed to play what he wanted over a five minute recording, and he came out with something highly substantial.

Bostic went into semi-retirement sometime around June 1959. He returned to the studio in February of 1963. In August he began recording Jazz As I Feel It, an album in which King Records allowed him complete creative control over the personnel and material. The liner notes reference an interview with Bostic in which he stated “someday I hope to be able to pick some real good men, guys I know and want to play with, and go into a studio and cut some of the things I’d really like.” They go on to explain that “the executives of King Records [were] determined to record Earl just this way” (referring to Earl’s previous statement). The result was an album “based on variations of the blues” that featured Bostic, organist “Groove” Holmes, and guitarist Joe Pass (a highly respected and virtuosic jazz guitarist at this

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54 Lord
55 Neely, Hal. Jazz As I Feel It LP Liner Notes
56 Ibid.
time) taking extended solos. They were backed by two different bass and drum combos, one including drummer Shelly Manne, hailed as one of the most important jazz drummers on the west coast. A similar album entitled, “A New Sound” was recorded in January 1964, also with “Groove” Holmes and Joe Pass.

These albums represented a new direction for Bostic’s recorded music. After years of success with popular arrangements and a band that featured only Bostic, King decided to let Earl record jazz in a small ensemble setting. With strong solo contributions from not only Earl but from Pass and Holmes as well, the music takes on a flexible and exciting character. Earl is quoted in the liner notes to *Jazz As I Feel It* saying “when I play gigs I can then blow what I want and play jazz the way I feel it.” As the album’s title suggests, one can hear Earl playing with the kind of intensity, vigor, and quickness that he must have brought to his live performances.

The liner notes on *Jazz As I Feel It* also discuss how Earl’s recorded music was generally perceived by the musical community and his listeners. They describe Earl’s complex situation, that he was “recognized...as a jazz artist,” but “his recorded work was never allowed to be completely free and personal or in the true jazz vein.” It is significant that these statements refer to Earl’s “recorded work” and not his live performances. It suggests a major difference in the way Earl’s music was presented in recordings, and the way he sounded at his live performances. Nonetheless, in whatever way Earl was able to find a listener, be it through the medium of recorded

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57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
music or on the live stage, he gave it his unique energy and impeccable class. Though I cannot argue definitively that Earl would have recorded material of a different nature were he given complete control, his playing on “Up There In Orbit”, as well as Jazz As I Feel It and A New Sound, suggest that he was capable of creating much stronger work than much of his recordings for King Records.

In the way Earl spoke of his situation with the record company, we can see a very humble and grateful individual. He stated:

“I feel it’s up to the record people who handle my sessions to pick the material and decide what is best for me to record and release...our main object is to sell records...we have to make an album that will appeal to the most people. If that’s being commercial, well, then I’m that man.”

In this statement Bostic admitted in this that he deferred to the record company with the goal of gaining more popularity; he allowed his recorded music to be partially controlled by those who were trying to market and sell it. Most musicians would view this as an admission of defeat, the words of an artist who has turned his back on his creative endeavors for an easier and more secure path. The way Bostic defends his decisions, though, suggests a more complex situation.

Here we have a musician who values nothing more in his music than its ability to appeal to the most people. It is difficult to attack a musician for trying to reach more people, after all, the listener is an essential part of the musical experience. Earl likely made sacrifices in song choice, instrumentation, and in solo lengths in his recordings with King. He still gave each recording his own touch, regardless of how confined he was in his creative decisions. His unique rough sound can always be

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60 Ibid.
heard, along with his strong sense of melody and harmony. There was never a note out of place. Earl mentions record sales as a particularly strong motivation for allowing King so much control, and one might attack him for this sentiment as well.

Reading the rest of his statement though, it becomes clear that Earl felt a moral obligation to yield to the record company. He was grateful to be able to make an honest living in the United States playing music, he stated “the music business, the record business, my fans -- have been good to me.” In allowing King to decide what he should record, Earl saluted the people who made his career a possibility. After all, it was his success with his recording of “Flamingo” with King that allowed his band to go on tour full time. He enjoyed performing live and even spoke of it as his time to play what he wanted. He put his energy into recordings that, though they may have been heavily supervised and dictated by the record company, were still called “unfailingly enjoyable at worst” by critic Victor Schonfield.\footnote{Schonfield 15} These recordings gave him a bigger fan base to entertain and to communicate with live on the bandstand, when he could play his way.

King Records and Earl Bostic shared a mutual desire to create marketable and popular records. Bostic, though, may have had another reason to play conservatively when he was being recorded. Alto saxophonist Lou Donaldson remarked in an interview in May 2011:

“I’m telling you, Earl Bostic was the greatest saxophone player I ever knew. I didn’t like him ‘cause sometimes he’d play stuff that I’d consider corny, [with] that wide vibrato and the sound of growling in the mouthpiece. But the man could play three octaves. I mean play ‘em, I don’t mean just hit the notes. He was bad. He was a
technician you wouldn’t believe. But he never put those things on a record. And I asked him one time; “Earl, with all this stuff you can play” --and he said let me tell you something. “Don’t play anything you can play good on a record [because] people will copy it.” And the man was dead right. Now you’d see him, we’d run up there and think that we’re going to blow him out, and he’d make you look like a fool. Cause he’d play three octave louder, stronger and faster. But he never put that on a record”\(^{62}\)

Chapter Three: Up There In Orbit

This chapter will explore the components of Bostic’s style as a saxophonist that made his music significant. Earl was a super-virtuoso alto saxophonist, whose recordings across his career portray a musician in a variety of musical settings. His saxophone playing brings together many components of blues, bebop, and swing. In any of these recordings however, one can always find Earl contributing the most swinging sounds he could.

There is abundant evidence that Earl Bostic was an incredibly skilled and knowledgeable saxophone player, a master instrumentalist. From recordings and first hand accounts of his playing, we are left with a picture of one of that all time greats on the instrument. His peers in the musical community remember his virtuosity as his greatest strength. Drummer Art Blakey stated “Nobody knew more about the saxophone than Bostic, I mean technically, and that includes Bird. Bostic could take any make of saxophone and tell you its faults and its best points. Working with Earl Bostic is like attending a university of the saxophone.”63 Tenor saxophonist Benny Golson saw Bostic play at Minton’s Playhouse in Harlem in 1950 and remembered “Coltrane was with me, and we heard Bostic play in any key, any tempo, playing almost an octave above the range of the alto saxophone.”64

John Coltrane, a very important voice on the saxophone, can attest to the value of Bostic’s technique. Coltrane, who would later become the most influential, imitated, and respected saxophonist since Charlie Parker, played tenor saxophone in

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63 Art Blakey quoted in Visser 6
64 Benny Golson quoted in Visser 6
Bostic’s group from April to September or October of 1952, on the same tour that packed thousands into auditoriums in California.\textsuperscript{65}

Coltrane’s apprenticeship under Bostic was significant in his musical development; the young saxophonist was inspired by Bostic’s fierce musical energy, and his formidable strength as an instrumentalist. Drummer Roy Haynes remembers Coltrane as “the only musician that I knew that could play as long as he played and still keep some interest and fire going. And Earl Bostic could do that too, and I think that’s where he captured that.” Coltrane also learned saxophone technique from Bostic. Earl showed Coltrane unique altissimo fingerings for specific saxophone models, advised him to curl his fingers when playing to better fit the instrument.\textsuperscript{66}

Coltrane also gained new vocabulary on his instrument. Roy Haynes remembers “[Coltrane] played a phrase, and I was singing it to him later, I said ‘Trane, where’d you get that?’ He said, ‘Earl Bostic.’”\textsuperscript{67}

Coltrane was a highly disciplined musician who, like Bostic, put thousands of hours of practice into his instrument. A strong personal relationship to a primary instrument was an important component for both musicians in the advancement of their music. Ben Ratliff, a biographer of John Coltrane, wrote “Like Earl Bostic in his time, Coltrane had become the ultimate saxophone student, recognized and respected as such; he practiced constantly, even regularly between sets at nightclubs.”\textsuperscript{68}

\textsuperscript{65} John Coltrane Reference 72-76
\textsuperscript{66} Thomas 60
\textsuperscript{67} Roy Haynes Interview. The Ultimate Blue Train: Enhanced Compact Disc (Audio CD) Blue Note 1997
\textsuperscript{68} Ratliff, Ben. Coltrane: The Story Of A Sound. (Farrar, Strau and Giroux. September 2007)
only could have learned through intense practice and dedication. This is an important aspect of the jazz tradition, known to musicians as “payin’ one’s dues.”\textsuperscript{69} Before one could be taken seriously, one had to put in practice time, lots of it. Saxophonist Benny Golson recalled in an interview a time when he had asked Bostic “‘How did you get like that?’” Bostic’s response was “‘Growing up in Oklahoma, I knew I was going to New York, so I approached it like a job. I would start [practicing] at 8 o’clock, take a lunch break from 12 to 1 and play to 5, every day except Sunday’”\textsuperscript{70}. Golson added “And John Coltrane did the same thing, more or less!”\textsuperscript{70} Bostic was determined to achieve greatness on the saxophone. It is interesting to note though his comparison of practicing music to having a job. This early attitude foreshadows his music’s close association with commercial interest.

Some of the best proof of Bostic’s mastery can be found in a recording from October 10th, 1958, that captures some of his most virtuosic and exciting playing. Bostic’s recording “Up There In Orbit” is an excellent example of the kind of energetic hyper-virtuosity that his peers remember him for. It is a soloist’s showcase with a fast tempo, an energetic rhythm section, and incredible playing from Bostic on alto saxophone. It is an absolutely astounding recording.

In order to discuss it in detail, I have transcribed Bostic’s five minute solo from beginning to end. This was no easy task, as many phrases had to be slowed down to be heard and notated exactly as they were, and as I found out by spending so much time with the recording at a slow pace, Earl really solos for a long time. I

\textsuperscript{69} Gioia, Ted. \textit{The History Of Jazz}. (Oxford University Press, 1998.) 195
\textsuperscript{70} Porter, Lewis. \textit{John Coltrane: His Life and Music}. (University of Michigan Press. 2000) 90
advise the reader to locate a copy of the recording, as western musical notation and verbal description can only go so far. You really have to hear the track to believe it. Following along with the transcription with the recording will say more than I could possibly write. The easiest way to find it would be to search youtube.com, though a higher quality version can be found by obtaining Bostic’s album *Dance Music From The Bostic Orchestra*. I would also add that when referencing musical fragments in the form of notation in the following section, it is the sound on the recording I am referring to, rather than the notation in itself.

In this recording we hear a band composed of Red Holt on drums, Johnny Pate on bass, Johnny Gray and Allan Seltzer on guitars, and Claude Jones on organ, all backing Earl Bostic’s alto. The piece is in 4/4 time with a quick tempo of 260 beats per minute. The harmonic progression is a 16 measure cycle similar to “When The Saints Go Marching In.”

\[ I / -- / -- / -- / -- / -- / V / -- / I / I7/ IV/ \#IVdim / I / V / I / - (V) / \]

In Earl’s key of C (concert Eb) we have

\[ C / -- / -- / -- / -- / -- / G / G / C / C7 / F / F\#dim7 / C / G / C / - (G) / \]

Earl once said when commenting on his music, “I am maybe one of the few musicians who likes simple recurring melody patterns and in all my playing I try to keep a basic melody line in my mind and attempt to develop meaningful inversions and variations.”\(^{71}\) In his solo on “Up There In Orbit”, recurring melody patterns play a big role. One can see upon analysis, that Bostic indeed develops “meaningful

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\(^{71}\) Neely, Hal. *Jazz As I Feel It* LP Liner Notes
inversions and variations” of many of these devices, and in doing so creates an original and energetic solo.

“Up There In Orbit” begins with a beat on a single floor tom drum. Next an electric guitar enters playing a palm-muted riff. In Bostic’s first few notes he establishes the hard-edged and rough tone that he is known for in a phrase beginning with an octave leap C-C which then descends A-G-C-F-E-C.

![Music notation]

The instrumentation in this first chorus is a simple trio, before drums, bass, and organ enter in measure 17.

In the repetition and elaboration of this first saxophone statement, one can already hear the introduction, repetition, and development of a theme from the beginning to the end of the chorus. This is a prevalent and important quality of Bostic’s music. The first two 16-bar choruses which comprise what one might call the melody of “Up There In Orbit” (the second chorus is played at the beginning and the end of the piece), display these characteristics. The first chorus, A, features three iterations of the first melodic figure with the octave leap. There are four phrases, and out of the four, the first and last are the same, while the second is a variation that leads into the G chord. The third phrase

![Music notation]
is the only unrelated phrase.

While reflecting on the piece’s relationship to “When The Saints Go Marching In,” a traditional composition having almost the same harmonic progression, it
occurred to me that the lyrics to the song have a identical form to the first chorus of “Orbit” in terms of their lyrical content. Just as the first chorus in “Orbit” to has a AA’BA form, so do the lyrics in “Saints.” The first line “Oh when the saints go marching in” repeats three times, twice at the beginning and once at the end just like Bostic’s first phrase. The second phrase in “Saints” even lands on the first beat of the 7th measure (the first chord change), just as Bostic’s second phrase does. The third phrase in “Saints,” “Oh I want to be in that number” differs from the others in terms of lyrical content and melody, just as Bostic’s third phrase is unique to the others. Interesting to note, “Saints” is a traditional piece from New Orleans, the city where Bostic attended Xavier University. From his playing on “Orbit” it is evident that he absorbed a considerable amount of vocabulary from New Orleans musicians.

Chorus B repeats this melodic figure: from measure 15 four times, and then repeats it thirteen more times, altering the top note by a half step each time. This is the first of many repeated patterns in the solo in which one note or a group of notes change by a half step in each repetition. Bostic likely composed these lines rather than improvising them, as chorus B appears at the end as well, and they set a template for his following improvisations.

Six measures into Chorus C, Bostic cuts loose from these repeated figures into quick lines based on the chord changes. Here Bostic displays a strong familiarity with jazz phraseology that is to continue throughout the recording. In a phrase from measures 39 to 45, Bostic effectively weaves seamlessly through the chord changes without an eighth note out of place, harmonically speaking. Using the harmonic and
rhythmic propulsion of the band behind him, he leads the group with energetic lines that are almost impossible to hear without starting to move to the beat yourself.

Doug Miller describes in his article “The moan within the tone: African retentions in rhythm and blues saxophone style in Afro-American popular music”, “A feature of dance-hall rhythm and blues was the way in which...soloists...were used to whip up teenagers to a frenzy with repetitive riffs...[this was] known pejoratively as ‘honking and screaming’”72

Bostic displays this kind of playing three measures before chorus D, in which a C5 is repeated for seven measures in eighth notes and quarter notes. Accentuating the “honking” sound, Bostic uses a technique common among rock and roll saxophone players. He plays some of the notes with the fingering for a C an octave below, creating a large sound a difference in timbre between the regularly fingered C and the alternate. Combined with his growling tone, this figure sounds particularly strong and exciting. Out of the repeated C, Bostic plays a line of repeated eighth notes descending by half steps. His strong breath support and rough tone make this line starting in measure 53 sound like an airplane coming out of the sky. His phrase in measures 55-56 is artfully crafted and precise. The hard biting repeated C figure returns for the last three measures of the chorus to finish it out.

In the very next chorus, E, we hear both statement and advancement of a theme as well as display of unusual saxophone technique. Bostic plays variations on a repeating pattern of sixteenth notes with the first note rising in half steps with each new group of four, and the last three remaining static as G5-F#5-G5.

This figure is extremely fast and is heard as a flurry of notes. It is repeated three times, with repeated G5 eighth notes leading in each time.

The in the first figure the rising note is A5-A#-B-C, in the second B5-C-C#-D, and in the third which is twice as long, A5-A#-B-C-C#-D-C#. At the end of this figure Bostic breaks out into descending chromatic repeated eighth notes which have marked clarity in contrast to the flurry of sixteenth notes.

In chorus F, we hear another repeated pattern with chromatic differences. This figure, like the one beginning E, creates the effect of a flurry of not easily distinguishable notes that create an overall sound. Bostic repeats a figure of two groups of triplet eight notes in which the first group, initially D6-B5-D6, moves in half steps, while the second group remains the same.

This is similar in construction to the figure from chorus E with the first part of the figure moving chromatically and the second part remaining static. The figure is repeated eight times with the first triplet moving down twice (Db6-Bb5-Db6, C6-A5-C6) up twice, down twice, then up twice. Again, as in chorus E, Bostic leaves the flurry of notes into a clearly articulated eighth note line at measure 85.

One distinct feature of “Up There In Orbit” is its display of Bostic’s skill in the altissimo register of the saxophone. This is a range above what can be reached by
normal saxophone fingerings. The Eb alto saxophone ranges from Bb3 to F6 (Db4 to Ab6 in concert pitch). Using special fingerings and techniques with the throat and mouth an “altissimo” register can be created. In “Up There In Orbit, Bostic reaches to the heights of a C8 (Eb8 concert). His explorations into this higher register begin at the top of chorus G with an octave G5-G6 leap.

Bostic repeats this octave jump pattern, with the G6 followed by G5 and the following note moving down in half or whole steps with each iteration of the pattern (F#5, F5, E5, D5), before ascending scalarly to C7. To the listener, this is an already impressive display of the altissimo register, both in precision and range, while Bostic still has a full octave of a major scale to unveil. In measure 107 on the F major chord we hear Bostic arpeggiate this chord over two octaves (F5-F7) with quarter note triplets.

The highest note squeals up into even higher territory at its release, and jumps out of the texture due to its extreme range.

When he starts playing in this higher range, Bostic’s playing takes on the character of a Louis Armstrong solo. Armstrong was still touring in 1958 and had been a significant jazz musician for over 35 years. There is a simplicity and gladness in Armstrong’s playing, especially in the higher registers, that Bostic shares in his improvisations. His vibrato and ability to “shake” notes in the upper register are also
Alto Sax.

reminiscent of the musical ideas of Louis Armstrong. Victor Schonfield in his article “Earl Bostic: The Forgotten Ones” from the *International Jazz Journal* wrote of Bostic: “his greatest gift was the way he communicated through his horn a triumphant joy in playing and being, much like Louis Armstrong and only a few others have done.”

Chorus H begins with a C major scale starting on G6 in half notes. Measures 118 an 119 display a resolving line that begins on a C major chord and arpeggiates this chord starting from G5 up to the 13th (A6).

This A becomes the 9th of G major in measure 119, and resolves to a G in a line that runs A6-E6-A6-G6. In measure 121 we hear a figure alternating between a C6 and a higher note that moves up in half steps, a familiar feature of Bostic’s improvisations with his command of the high register, and he would do so with climbing lines just like the one beginning in measure 121. Climbing in half steps enhances the effectiveness of the higher register; when each higher note is a powerful display, moving in half steps maximizes the power by allowing for the most notes. Other strong examples of phrases like this can be found in measures 145-147:

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73 Schonfield 15
Bostic only climbs higher following chorus H, hitting an E7 at the top of chorus I, which he holds for 5 beats before “shaking” between E7 and G7, a sound reminiscent of a trumpet. In measure 138 he climbs chromatically to a G7 that shakes up to A7.

This same phrase occurs again at the top of chorus J, and the G7 shakes for a full seven measures. These are other examples of climbing chromatic lines enhancing the power of the upper register. In measure 166 in chorus K, Bostic plays simple resolving line, F7-E7-D7-C7 in quarter notes over C major which then resolves B6-C7-D7 in half notes on the G major dominant chord. (this figure and the following one are notated an octave below the actual pitch)

This leads to Bostic’s most impressive display in the altissimo range. Starting in measure 169, he climbs a major scale in half notes starting on C7 and reaching C8, a full twelfth outside of the natural range of the alto saxophone.

It is not so much hitting this note that is most impressive, as it is possible to bite down on the reed and produce a similar sounding squeal without thorough training, but
Bostic’s ability to hit each individual note of the C major scale in this extremely high range. He returns to this high range briefly in choruses N and O, again playing simple scalar and arpeggiated lines, and again invoking the power and joy of Louis Armstrong’s feats in the high ranges.

Coming out of this high range, Bostic gets right back into his jazz vocabulary, rock and roll honking and virtuosic chordal improvisation. Chorus L begins with a phrase entirely similar to the beginning of chorus D. Bostic repeats a note (A5) in syncopated quarter notes and repeats this two measure phrase three times. The third time, just like chorus D, the end of the phrase becomes descending eighths notes repeated twice.

The phrase ends in a resolving arpeggio line over the G dominant that goes up to the 9th, A, and resolves to G, the root. The following eighth note line, lasting a full six measures, descends scalarly from Bb the 7th of the underlying C7 chord, and enters an impressive four measure phrase in which groups of 2-4 ascending notes first ascend for two measures, and then fall for two.

These last four measures (187-190) display Bostic’s knowledge of approach notes and his ability to
create rhythmically complex lines in real time. Like almost all of his playing on this
song, and any recording of Bostic one might find, his phrases are calculated, accurate,
and logical, while at the same time propulsive and dazzling.

At chorus N, Bostic brings back the altissimo energy with a climb from G5 to
an E7 up the C major scale.

The drummer catches on to Earl’s energy at the beginning of the chorus, and
accentuates his thrilling climb with big cymbal crashes on beats 2 and 4 of each
measure. Earl here displays his great endurance, and his ability to keep “interest and
fire going” during a long solo, as Roy Haynes once observed.74

In measure 244, Chorus P, Bostic plays a line constructed of diminished
chords reminiscent of the chordal improvisations of Charlie Parker.

The line, beginning over a C major chord, begins with an arpeggiated C dominant
chord, descends scalarly to an ascending arpeggiated F# diminished 7th chord, which
then descend scalarly to an ascending arpeggiated B diminished 7th chord. Though
Bostic often returns to the resolving line B-D-F-A-G when playing over the G
dominant chord in this solo (mm39-40, 88, 183, 216, 247-8) he never plays B-D-F-

74 Roy Haynes Interview. The Ultimate Blue Train: Enhanced Compact Disc.
Ab-G, save for this diminished line in chorus P. The phrase with the Ab on top is an extremely common on in bebop. The Ab acts as the b9 in a G dominant chord, resolving to a G over the C major. “Up There In Orbit” points to more traditional roots than bebop, though it does show some overlap.

Winding down, in chorus R Earl returns to the theme from chorus B that began the tune. He plays around with different rhythmic configurations of the phrase, and varying the top note by a half step for two choruses before he and the band both reach an ending. One has to wonder what the atmosphere in the studio was like after that take, if the musicians were stunned by Earl’s display, that he would put something like that on a record, or if they simply moved on to the next tune to record.

“Orbit” is an extraordinary recording. It is the wailing of an all time great musician, an alto-man who played a thousand gigs at dance halls and bars. It is the song and dance of a red hot coal of jazz, powerful enough to make one want to dance until the sun comes up. It is a realization of the power of American music, the band and the improviser operating inside the harmonic space, with each instrumentalist engaged and contributing a specialized energy. Earl displays a mature understanding of phrasing throughout his solo, keeping the high energy of the music always within his control. The power of Earl Bostic’s technique really speaks for itself. Should one question whether Mr. Bostic’s music is still significant or worth one’s attention, they need not look further than “Up There In Orbit.”
Conclusion

On December 2nd, 1965, *Down Beat* magazine printed an obituary for Earl Bostic. It read:

**Altoist Earl Bostic Dies Of Heart Attack**

Alto saxophonist Earl Bostic died Oct. 28 in Rochester, N.Y., following a heart attack two days earlier. He was stricken the night after he opened at the Midtown Tower Hotel. Bostic had recently begun playing engagements again after a period of semi-retirement because of ill health.

Bostic was born April 25, 1913, in Tulsa, Okla., and was best known as leader of a jazz flavored rhythm-and-blues group. He had several hit records in the late ‘40s, and early ‘50s. Before he formed his successful group, Bostic played with the bands of Charlie Creath, Fate Marable, Edgar Hayes, Don Redman, Oran (Hot Lips) Page, Cab Calloway, and Lionel Hampton.

At various times, his combo included young musicians who later became well known jazzmen, among them saxophonist John Coltrane, who worked with Bostic in 1952 and ’53. “I consider [Bostic] a very gifted musician,” Coltrane once said. “He showed me a lot of things on my horns. He has fabulous technical facility and knows many a trick.”

Bostic also was an arranger-composer and had written arrangements for bands led by Paul Whiteman, Louis Prima, and Ina Ray Hutton. His best-known composition was *Let Me Off Uptown*, which became a hit in the ‘40s.75

The man who dedicated his life to playing music, entertaining, making people dance and smile with his alto saxophone, died after doing just what he loved most. This obituary, though painfully short for such an accomplished musician, covers many important components that form Earl’s musical identity: paying his dues and soaking in influence with various groups, forming a “successful group”, and authoritatively being praised as a “very giften musician [with]...fabulous technical facility” by none other than John Coltrane, a man who readers of *Downbeat* voted the #1 Tenor Saxophone player and “Jazzman of the Year.”

Earl Bostic was a great American musician. From the night he was discovered by Terrence Holder in 1930 to his fatal heart attack on the road in 1965, he played his music across the United States, wowed countless fans at his shows, and made

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recordings so that future listeners could experience his mastery. His life and music remind us of the truly remarkable things human beings can accomplish through love and honest work. His devotion to the alto saxophone, to the music he grew up playing in the mid-west, and to the music he would later discover in New York City was lifelong and impeccable, and it manifested itself in legendary performances later recounted by his peers, and in select recordings such as “Up There In Orbit” in which his genius was allowed to shine.
“When you work you are a flute through whose heart the whispering of the hours turns to music.”

-Kahlil Gibran, The Prophet (1923)
Up There In Orbit

From Dance Music From The Bostic Workshop King LP 613, 1959

Earl Bostic

Alto Saxophone

260 BPM

G7 C C7 F F#dim C

G C

C7 F F#dim E

C G7 C G7 C

C7 F F#dim E

C G7 C G7 C

C G7 C G7 C

G C

C G C

C7 F F#dim E

C G C

C7 F F#dim E

C G C
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