An acoustical appreciation of the extended performance aspects
of Eric Dolphy’s musical craft

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Abstract: Scientific research into sound production by woodwind musical instruments has tended to focus on a range of musical phenomena appropriate to the performance of Western classical music from the common era up to 1950 or so. From their earliest recorded works, it is apparent that jazz musicians have utilized alternative approaches to sound production that qualitatively extended the performance techniques available on woodwinds (as well as other instruments). The musical recordings of Eric Dolphy in the period 1959-1964 provide a rich source of material for the study of these more unusual techniques of sound production, which have subsequently become part of the musical craft of woodwind instrumentalists in various musics.

The early 1960's comprised an era of rapid innovation in jazz in which musicians transformed the compositional and improvisational form of the music. While instrumentalists have incorporated extended performance techniques in a unique manner from the beginning of jazz, an important aspect of the avant garde movement was the breadth of innovation in woodwind instrument performance. Eric Dolphy was a pioneer in this respect, a virtuoso performer of the alto saxophone, bass clarinet and flute, who helped bring the latter two instruments into prominence within jazz as solo instruments for improvisation. Literal acoustic distortion is present in woodwind multiphonics used by Dolphy and others, produced not merely by using unconventional fingerings and changes in embouchure, but also by alterations in the resonances of the player's vocal tract (1). Aesthetic distortions include the sheer temporal complexity of melodic lines, and the inclusion of speech-like and bird-song elements within extended musical forms that sometimes lacked a conventional harmonically-related musical structure. Such factors contribute to the overall artistic impact of this music.

REFERENCES