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Soloist

by John Grey

He purses, he blows, he coddles,
he skitters his fingers down the keys
like mice across a floorboard.
When breath shrieks through that brass body,
the saxophone doesn't know what hit it.
Forget the drums, the guitar, the vibes,
the guy bent over his piano.
Until the soloist steps out front,
brandishing his sax,
the music has just been toying with us.
The tune, so far, is
just an elongated starter's orders.
But now, the race begins
in turn, strident, garish,
then tenor sweet,
tasteful as birdsong.
Throat bulges, eyes stretch to bursting point,
sweat bathes the forehead.
In his head, he's Bechet, he's Hodges,
he's Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young.
Sound makes mockery of sense.
Notes burn, are then extinguished
by the next.
The melody is shaken by the root.
From table to table,
mouths are too amazed
for conversation.
Drinks freeze inches from their thirst.
Feet can't follow enough to tap,
so the head, the heart, must work the beat.

