THE TROMBONE AND BASS TRUMPET IN MODERN JAZZ

A study into the harmonic, intervallic and melodic devices present in the improvisations of Elliot Mason

[Bones]

Research Project for the degree of Honours in Bachelor of Music in Jazz Performance, Elder Conservatorium of Music, The University of Adelaide

October
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ABSTRACT

This study will dissect and analyse the improvisations of bass trumpeter and trombonist Elliot Mason.

The first objective of this study is to analyse the melodic devices present in Mason’s improvisations, describing the recurring traits and patterns that are idiosyncratic to his playing through the transcription and analysis of his improvisations on three tunes: Boots, Norwich Union and Untied.

The second objective is to give context to this language in standard jazz harmony by explaining Mason’s application of these techniques in Norwich Union. In studying the techniques frequently used by Mason, one can gain insight into how best to emulate him as a musician, thereby incorporating elements of Mason’s musicality into one’s own performances.
1. INTRODUCTION

Elliot Mason can only be described as a musical prodigy. He was born in England in 1977 to a musical family – his father was a professional trumpet and trombone player, his mother a singer; his brother is an equally well-respected trumpeter. After taking up trombone lessons at an early age, Mason was performing at a professional level by the age of eleven. When he was only fifteen, he won England’s Daily Telegraph Young Jazz Soloist Award, while competing against musicians ten years his senior. From there, his career as a performer took off, with Mason sweeping up numerous awards, winning a full scholarship to study with trombone legends Phil Wilson and Hal Crook at the Berklee College of Music in Massachusetts, and eventually moving to New York where he continues to perform today as a trombonist and a bass trumpeter (Mason 2009).

As a brass player in today’s musical environment, it is vital that one has complete command of one’s instrument in order to make a living. Since the majority of jazz musicians cannot survive simply on the income from small-group jazz performances, they must have the technique to allow them to perform in as many styles of music as possible. Unfortunately, due to the technical difficulties of the trombone, even those who are considered to be world-class jazz trombonists often struggle to perform with the fluidity of the more agile pianists, saxophonists and guitarists that seem to be abundant in today’s jazz scene. With the current shift in contemporary improvisation, many trombonists have difficulty keeping up with the increasing complexity of harmony, rhythm, and the larger intervallic structures that characterise much of “modern” jazz. This may be the reason why there are so few trombonists that may be classified as having a modern sound, while the few modern trombonists often do not sound entirely at ease with the material, especially alongside those with keys or valves at their disposal.

Of course, Mason is a technician on the instrument, being an experienced commercial player as well as an accomplished improviser. As well as performing with the Jazz at Lincoln Centre Orchestra, he has performed with acts as varied as Bette Midler, Jessica Simpson, The Maria Schneider Orchestra, Willie Nelson and the Maynard Ferguson Big Bop Noveau (Mason 2009). What sets Mason apart from the vast number of trombone-playing technicians is that he has developed his technique and understanding of harmony to an extent that he can easily hold his own alongside performers of any instrument. As drummer and pianist Gary Husband (n.d) describes him, “he truly transcends [his] instruments...to a level where I wasn’t even aware it was trombone or a bass trumpet.”

This command of advanced improvisational techniques coupled with a strong sense of musicality makes him an impressive musician to behold and one of the most formidable trombonists/bass trumpeters in the world today. Further still, he manages to have a completely unique musical voice. He is an innovator, and is at such a level that “[he] sets the bar for jazz trombone and bass trumpet” (Brecker n.d.).

Mason’s command of the trombone allows him to perform on it as comfortably as he does on the bass trumpet. While it may be argued that Mason’s choice to play the bass trumpet stems from the technical difficulties of the trombone, Mason (2009) explains otherwise:

The bass trumpet brings out a different side of my playing, even from valve trombone. It’s really its own instrument. I believe the valves help the slide and vice-versa. The trombone brings a different approach to the valves and playing valves helps bring other concepts to the slide.

While he may have a different approach to the instruments, there is no doubt that he is equally proficient on both. Because of this, I have decided that there is little reason to study “Elliot Mason the trombone player” but rather “Elliot Mason the musician”. This project will examine Mason’s
improvisations on both the bass trumpet and the trombone, focusing on the musical aspects of his playing rather than the instrument-specific technical aspects.

Despite his impressive musical resume and his talent, Mason is a relative unknown in the jazz world. He is gradually gaining popularity as a trombonist through his performances with Wynton Marsalis’ Jazz at Lincoln Centre Orchestra; with bassist Janek Gwizdala; and with The Mason Brother’s Band, which he leads together with his brother, Brad (Mason 2009) – but it seems he has yet to truly gain the acknowledgment he deserves.

The difficulty with studying someone as young and unknown as Elliot Mason is that as a relative newcomer to the jazz world, there is very little written about him. Because of this, much of this research project has been based on the many hours I have spent listening to and studying his performances; as well as from correspondence with Mason himself.

What puts Mason at the forefront of improvisation is his advanced use of melodic material. Mason makes use of large intervallic leaps within phrases, lines interspersed with pentatonic patterns and arpeggios, and harmonic substitutions within his phrases. He is also an extremely lyrical player, even in a world of contemporary jazz where melody can so often be cast aside in favour of “hip” lines. This project will analyse some of the devices he uses, with the purpose of giving an insight into why he sounds so unique, thereby allowing current players to better emulate him.
2. INTERVALS

One of the features of Mason’s playing that distinguishes him from the majority of brass players, and which lays the foundation for many of his extended melodic devices, is his frequent use of large intervals. To understand why this is a technique so commonly overlooked by brass players, a brief explanation of playing technique is required.

Although brass players can alter the pitch played at any time by extending or retracting the slide or by depressing the valves of their instrument, more important is the use of air speed to control the vibration of the lips. This allows players to move up and down the partials in the harmonic series of the instrument without any movement of the slide or valves. This is of course one of the most fundamental techniques in learning a brass instrument. However, using this vibration to an extent where one can switch between the partials at speed requires much control, or “flexibility”.

Because of the difficulty in performing large intervals at speed on brass instruments, many players will utilise smaller intervals, restricting themselves to seconds and thirds and reserving larger intervals for cadences at the ends of phrases, rhythmically simpler phrases or slower moving lines. The difficulty of performing these large intervals is compounded when there are rapid and frequent changes in direction within the phrases. Figures 1 and 2 show sections of a solo by one of the pioneers of jazz trombone, J.J. Johnson, on the tune *Stratusphunk*:

![Figure 1](image1)

![Figure 2](image2)

Both of these figures demonstrate instances of Johnson’s fast playing. Note the lack of large intervallic leaps within his lines - he refrained from using intervals larger than a third except on the cadence at the start of figure 2, but never in quick succession. Despite Johnson’s impressive technique, he preferred to use smaller intervals when playing at fast speeds.

In contrast, Mason uses his extreme flexibility to great advantage, performing frequent wide intervallic leaps at fast tempi. Figure 3 demonstrates his use of large intervals in his solo on *Boots*. Note the use of intervals as large as a major 6th, and his frequent use of 4ths:

![Figure 3](image3)

As Mason is at ease playing large intervals at such high speeds, he is able to imply harmony within his melodic lines much more effectively and efficiently. Mason uses his command over intervallic
playing to great effect when he is “sidestepping” – building and releasing tension by implying dissonant harmonies over the current harmony through melody. He can, within the space of a few notes, imply a chord before rapidly implying another. Because of this efficiency in his playing, he is able to create harmonically complex melodies that move through various key centres quickly, allowing him to have a large degree of control over the tension and release in his phrases. Because of the difficulty of performing such intervals on a brass instrument, Mason manages to play lines that may usually be reserved for guitarists or pianists.

Figure 4 shows a section of his solo on *Untied*. The entire solo form is over a G major 7 modal vamp. Here Mason uses his command of intervals to rapidly imply moving harmony over the static harmony played by the rhythm section. On beat 3 of bar 52, he arpeggiates a G major triad before arpeggiating an F major triad, which is then followed by a D augmented triad. In arpeggiating the F triad, he briefly implies a G7sus sound, the melody becoming more dissonant with the D augmented triad, which suspends a D7#13 sound over the harmony, which is then quickly resolved back to G major over the next few beats. Here he has moved through four key centres in the space of as many beats.

Figure 4:

![Notation Image]

This use of larger intervals opens up an entirely new possibility in the melodic spectrum for the improviser. One aspect of contemporary improvisation that relies heavily on large intervallic structures is the use of pentatonic scales. Larger intervals are extremely important in playing pentatonics. When simply performed ascending or descending, the pentatonic already has larger intervals than most other scales, containing two minor thirds within the five note grouping. However when performed in patterns, where notes of the scale are “skipped” over, the intervals become much larger. Mason’s control over his instruments allows him to utilise pentatonics in various permutations fluidly, giving him an angular sound to his phrases which in turn gives him a unique sound of his own.
3. HARMONIC LANGUAGE

Pentatonics and arpeggios are extremely useful tools in contemporary improvisation, due to their effectiveness in implying a particular key centre. Because of the consonance of each note within the pentatonic scale, by playing the scale in some form or another, the listener can quickly draw a connection between the notes played and the key implied by them. Arpeggios can imply harmony even more explicitly, though the two are intricately linked. By arpeggiating a Cm7 chord for example, one is also playing notes from the Eb pentatonic scale (or C minor pentatonic scale). By using a combination of pentatonics and arpeggios one can easily create tension and release in one’s melodic phrases by interchanging various pentatonics with varying levels of consonance in relation to the key centre as played by the rhythm section.

Mason uses this particular technique to great effect. Figure 5 is a section of Mason’s improvisation on Untied. The chords in parentheses demonstrate the chords he is implying over the static G major harmony. (Note that as he moves between key centres so rapidly, there are often too few notes to fully understand which key he is implying and as such there may be more than one alternative for some of these chords. In these situations I have endeavoured to estimate which chord he may have implied based on patterns in the melody or on similar situations where the keys may have been more defined.)

Figure 5:

Here he rapidly shifts between key centres of various levels of consonance in relation to the key centre of the tune, G major. Note how dissonant Bbm is in relation to G major: not one of the notes within beat 4 of bar 11 forms part of the G major scale. By limiting himself to arpeggios, and simple digital patterns, Mason gains much more control over the level of dissonance in his phrases by limiting the number of notes common to the tonic key of G major.

Of great significance to the success of these melodies is the resolution of the lines. As the above example demonstrates, Mason returns to G major in beat 2 of bar 12. After moving through a number of key centres he strongly defines this move back to G through the use of the D major pentatonic which is entirely consonant with the G major scale. While Mason does not resolve each and every line in this manner, there is constant resolution appearing in his lines which gives context to the rest of the melody. Note how in beat 2 of bar 11 Mason uses an arpeggio to imply G major. This is the most explicitly stated chord in the entire phrase. Whereas playing lines that are consistently dissonant may cause them to lose musical meaning, Mason avoids this and gives the listener a frame of reference through the use of this arpeggio, giving context to the rest of the phrase.

Mason uses a segment of this phrase a number of times during this solo. Figure 6 shows one instance of this:

Figure 6:
Here, he repeats the first 3 beats of bar 11 almost note for note in bars 24 and 25. Mason often follows this downwards G major arpeggio with an Ebm pattern, which immediately creates tension due to the dissonance of Ebm played over a G major chord. Note how in this instance Mason does not resolve the line to G major. By ending the line on an Ab pentatonic, he creates a tension over the entire phrase, as well as tension and release within the phrase.

Mason also makes use of pentatonic patterns in a much more consonant context. Figure 7 shows a section on Mason’s solo on *Boots* – an afro-cuban tune containing long minor modal sections. Here he plays notes exclusively from the Db pentatonic scale over a modal Ebm section. This implies a strong Ebm11 sound, as the pentatonic off the bVIIth scale degree (Db being the bVII of Ebm) contains the 7th (Db), 9th (F), and 11th (Ab). This sound is quite consonant as the Db pentatonic lies entirely within the Eb dorian scale. Mason uses the particular pentatonic pattern seen here frequently throughout this solo. Beginning on beat 4 of bar 13, he moves up a step within Db pentatonic, then up two steps. Then he moves down a step and repeats the pattern. The large intervallic leaps within this pattern create the angular sound that characterises Mason’s playing (note that the time signature of the tune is 12/8):

Figure 7:

He uses a similar rising pattern later in his solo, as Figure 8 shows - this time playing a C pentatonic scale over a Dm modal section. Again, he is using the pentatonic off the bVII, producing a very consonant melody:

Figure 8:

Figure 9 shows another use of pentatonics in a diatonic context in Mason’s solo on *Norwich Union*. In bar 55 he plays C pentatonic over C major 7, creating a very consonant sound. Then in bar 57 he plays G pentatonic over C major 7. Again, G pentatonic is diatonic to C major, although the major 7th (B) within the pentatonic creates a more colourful sound.

Figure 9:
Mason’s solo on *Boots* also contains many instances of sidestepping. However instead of the frenetic changes of implied key centres that he employs in *Untied*, here he uses much longer phrases to convey specific key centres for extended periods of time – primarily through the use of pentatonic scales and arpeggios.

Figure 10 demonstrates Mason’s use of pentatonics and arpeggios over static Dm harmony (the parentheses indicate the pentatonic scales or arpeggios used). He begins by again playing the bVII major pentatonic (C) before using a sequence of rising 4ths ascending chromatically before arriving at Gb pentatonic (though with the passing note of A included). He remains on this Gb pentatonic for 3 beats before resolving back to Dm. This III pentatonic is highly dissonant against the Im chord, sharing no common notes with the D dorian scale and creating an extended period of tension until the resolution occurs.

In Figure 11, Mason again begins his phrase on the consonant bVII pentatonic, before playing the pentatonic off the bV (Ab). This pentatonic is also highly dissonant against Dm, with only the C in common with the D dorian scale.

Figure 12 contains another example of an extended harmonic substitution. In the following 3 bars, Mason uses notes almost entirely from the Db major pentatonic scale over Dm. In such an extended use of this scale, Mason seems to create a brief modulation to Ebm within his melody.

In Figure 13, Mason again plays patterns of the Db pentatonic scale over the Ebm harmony. However in beat 2 of bar 26, he arpeggiates a D major triad followed by part of an E major triad before returning to Db pentatonic. In this instance, Mason sets up the key centre of Eb and then very briefly
but very obviously moves outside of this key centre before returning, creating a surprising moment within the phrase.

Figure 13:

It is clear that in these situations Mason uses stark contrasts of consonant and dissonant sounds, moving rapidly between the two extremes. In doing so, he effectively creates immediate and definite tensions and releases in his melodies. Mason controls the degree to which he creates tension through the selection of particular pentatonics over the harmony of the tunes. He creates consonant sounds by using the pentatonic scale off the V over major harmony, and off the bVII on minor harmony – remaining within the chord of the moment but exploiting the extensions of these chords to add colour to the melodies. He also utilises the III, bV, bVII and bII pentatonics over minor harmony to create moments of dissonance. However, there is constant resolution within his lines that gives the dissonance meaning in the wider context of his improvisations, and more importantly, makes the music enjoyable.
4. APPLICATION IN STANDARD HARMONY

It is interesting to compare Mason's application of pentatonic and triadic melodic devices on modal tunes to his application of the same devices over standard harmony. Here the term “standard” refers to the use of chords reminiscent of those in the tunes of the Great American Songbook – that is, tunes from Hollywood films, Broadway shows, musical theatre and the Tin Pan Alley (Jazz Standards 2005) that contain primarily IIm-V based harmony. Studying Mason's performances on tunes of this nature is important as it gives an insight into Mason's application of these techniques over much more complicated harmonic movements.

Mason is an accomplished bebop player, having been heavily influenced early on in his musical career by “straight-ahead” hard-bop players such as Carl Fontana and Frank Rosolino (Mason 2009). However, Mason's approach to improvising over “standard” chord changes contains both elements of his bebop roots and the more modern elements associated with contemporary modal playing.

In this context, Mason seems to meld bebop and contemporary melodic devices together. He plays lines that are pure bebop; mingled with more dissonant sounds derived from altered II-V's and harmonic anticipation and delay in his melodic lines; right through to the use of pentatonics and harmonic substitutions.

A good example of Mason’s style of playing on jazz standards is his solo on Norwich Union – a piece penned by himself and his brother Brad. This tune has a melody that is both grounded in bebop, as well as being heavily influenced by contemporary jazz. However, the chord changes are entirely reminiscent of earlier jazz standards. On this piece, Mason's improvisatory style, like the melody, incorporates both idiosyncratic bebop language as well as more modern harmonic devices.

Figure 14 shows a section of Mason’s solo on Norwich Union:

![Figure 14](image-url)

It is clear that in the first two bars of this figure, Mason is essentially playing bebop. In the first bar he plays an altered IIm-V to F major, and in the second, he plays a rising arpeggio, followed by a descending chromatic line – a staple formula in bebop language. At the end of bar 33 he even explicitly plays the F bebop dominant scale. In the next three bars, however, he begins to take a more modal approach to improvising. He essentially disregards the changes at this point in time, and plays the Db pentatonic scale (also called the Bbm pentatonic scale) over the entire three bars. By doing so he is strongly outlining the Bbm7 chord over these three bars – anticipating it in the preceding bar and extending it to the following (a deeper analysis of his use of harmonic suspension will be given later in this section). Both the choice of pentatonic and the manner in which it is played give this section of his improvisation a strong modal sound.

In Figure 15 we can see how he takes a very similar approach to this section of the tune in the following chorus of his solo:

![Figure 15](image-url)
Again, in the first three bars it is clear he is outlining the changes, and although he is anticipating the F7 through the entire first two bars, the lines he plays are clearly derived from bebop language. In bars 83 and 84, he again plays notes primarily from the Db pentatonic scale.

Though this use of the Db pentatonic does imply a modal approach to improvising, in this context it is still very diatonic. By playing a Db pentatonic over a Bb minor chord he completely remains within the key centre of the moment. However Mason makes further use of the pentatonic scale over the moving harmony in this tune by superimposing various pentatonics over the existing harmonies to create more colourful sounds. In Figure 16 we can see two examples of how he achieves this.

Figure 16:

In bar 40, each note of the phrase belongs to the A pentatonic scale (with the exception of the D on beat 1). Superimposed over a C7 chord this implies a C13b9#11 sound. While the B natural is not strictly in the C7 scale, this can be viewed as a minor 3rd substitution of A7 over C7. (As Dm is the relative minor of F major, and A7 resolves to Dm, therefore A7 effectively resolves to F major.) Alternatively, this may be viewed as Mason once again “creating” a modal section within the tune, and anticipating the F major chord in bar 40. In this case, the use of the A pentatonic suggests an F major7#5 sound (if the sixth – F# - is not used, as in this situation). In either case the use of this scale creates a very strong sound due to the way in which he presents it. Once again, he uses wide intervals to arpeggiate the A major triad to the tonic, before moving stepwise up the A major scale up to the third and then returning to the root on beat 1 of bar 41. This explicitly states an A major sound, making this substitution particularly effective.

In bar 41, finishing on the first beat of bar 42, he plays notes entirely from the G pentatonic scale. Again, the manner in which he presents this scale strongly lends the listener’s ear to G major. Perhaps a simpler way of viewing this is that the melodies which he plays are simply tuneful, even if they do not necessarily seem overly so in the context in which that are performed. By using these substitutions in a lyrical manner they are conveyed effectively.

Mason uses a very similar technique as in bar 40 in a different harmonic context during his solo on Boots. Here he plays an almost identical phrase over an Eb minor modal section. Here however, he is strongly implying Bb major, which results in an overall EbmMaj7 tonality.

Figure 17:
Mason also makes use of harmonic anticipation and suspension within his improvisations to create dissonance within his melodies. Figure 18 shows one example of this:

![Figure 18](image)

Here we see a very common progression in jazz standards: a IIIm-V7-I to the tonic chord then a VI7 chord leading to IIIm. Here we can see how Mason extends the implied C7 chord in his line over the next two bars, finally resolving to F on the Gm chord. He makes this suspension obvious by the use of altered dominant sounds in the bar 14 – the Eb, Db and Ab imply a C7b9#9#5 sound. By using these alterations, he makes it clear that he is playing C7 whereas playing more diatonically would have been harmonically ambiguous and far less effective.

Figure 19 demonstrates a similar situation in *Norwich Union*:

![Figure 19](image)

Once again, Mason delays the resolution of C7 to F for two bars. Similarly, he strongly emphasises the C7 chord through his phrases. In bar 45 he plays the C bebop dominant scale over F major and in bar 46 he once again plays C altered dominant sounds over the D7#9 chord.

In Figure 20 Mason once again demonstrates harmonic suspension. (As before, chord symbols in parentheses represent the implied harmony of Mason’s melodies.) Here instead of resolving to Bbm in bar 19, he performs a VI7-IIIm-V7-I to Bbm, which does not resolve until bar 21. On beats 3 and 4 of Bar 19 he plays a surrounding note figure leading to Cm, implying a G7 chord. He then performs an altered IIIm-V to Bbm in bar 20. Once again, the use of these alterations gives less ambiguity to the implied harmony in his lines.

![Figure 20](image)

In Figure 21, Mason uses a few different devices to create dissonance. In bar 22 he uses a tritone substitution of the G7 chord – the most common dominant chord substitute of the bebop era (Strunk 2001). Then in bars 23 and 24 he plays a long IIIm-V7 in Eb major resolving to C major. As Cm is the relative minor of Eb major, a IIIm-V7 to Eb will also resolve to Cm, and by an extension of this, to C major. In bar 25 he performs a V7-I to F major, thereby essentially playing modally by resolving to the key of the entire piece.
Mason’s ability to include structure within his melodies whilst using various harmonic substitution devices demonstrates a very important fact about his playing: there is evidence of “the most profound lyricism” (Husband n.d) in everything he plays. No matter how dissonant his phrases seem in the context of the whole ensemble or the preceding melodic material he has played, each of them reveals a deep sense of melody. This musicality is clearly evident in the way in which Mason uses motifs and repeated melodic ideas throughout his improvisations.
5. MELODIC AND MOTIVIC DEVELOPMENT

One of the characteristics within Mason’s playing that is significant is his use of repeated melodic material within his solos. By repeating a motif within an improvisation, he gives the entire solo structure, and by periodically returning to this underlying theme the improvisation becomes a piece of music unto itself, rather than a random stream of notes.

Figure 22 shows the beginning of Mason’s solo on Boots (following a brief interlude from the end of Brad Mason’s trumpet solo in which they improvise together).

Figure 22:

He initially makes a rhythmic and melodic statement of two quavers leading to four repeated crotchets which he restates over the next six bars, before contrasting this melodic material and finishing the phrase through the use of the long note in the eighth bar. This opening statement immediately gives purpose to the solo. He soon breaks away from this contemplative playing into a more erratic style comprised of fast pentatonic runs, but returns to this initial theme, as demonstrated in Figure 23. This time the statement has been transposed upwards, building the intensity of the solo.

Figure 23:

The intensity remains high as he continues to play fast pentatonic runs before once again returning with the initial melody, though transposed again and slightly rhythmically altered, as shown here in Figure 24:

Figure 24:
This time however, the melody descends, decreasing in intensity. Here Mason has effectively tied together the melodic content of twenty-five bars or so, and given a direction to this entire section of his improvisation. He returns periodically to this motif throughout the solo, bringing the listener back to the opening theme, and thereby giving the entire solo structure.

Figure 25 shows another melodic device (also taken from *Boots*) that Mason employs frequently:

Figure 25:

Here we see a form of cadence that Mason uses in his melodies. In the above example (over an Eb minor modal section), Mason plays the major 7th of the key moving to the minor 7th moving to the fifth – D to Db to Bb. Figure 26 shows another example of his use of the phrase (now in D minor):

Figure 26:

Bar 45 contains the ascending A altered scale from the root, which then resolves to the less tense minor 7th of Dm, then down to the 5th. In this situation there is tension built up within the melody, reaching its peak at the C#, before resolving to the A.

Figure 26 shows another use of this phrase, firstly played in its original harmonic context. Mason then transposes this phrase downwards, continuing the pattern of falling a semitone then falling a minor 3rd.

Figure 27:

Again, the continuity of this phrase throughout his improvisation gives additional structure to the solo. This sets Mason apart from many players, as there is musical purpose behind each of his phrases, which seek to engage the listener rather than alienate them.
6. SUMMARY

In the thirty-odd years that Elliot Mason has been on this earth, he has managed to reach a level that most musicians will not attain in a lifetime. His use of harmonic concepts and intervallic playing is at the forefront of contemporary jazz improvisation, and is certainly raising the bar for trombonists worldwide. Mason’s advanced melodic techniques are all possible because of his complete command over his instrument, whether that be bass trumpet or trombone. This technical mastery allows him to play material not thought possible on these instruments.

Mason’s ability to perform large intervals at speed opens the door to the use of pentatonics and arpeggios in ways not normally considered feasible, especially on an instrument as awkward as the trombone. He is able to use these intervals to imply harmony rapidly, thereby allowing him to move through key centres quickly, giving him a distinct angular sound rarely heard from a brass player. His command of pentatonics and arpeggios and understanding of harmony allow him to control the level of consonance or dissonance within his lines at any point in time. He has the ability to rapidly shift between improvising in a bebop style to using more contemporary melodic devices. The repetition of melodic material within his solos gives each of his improvisations a structure which the listener can grab hold of.

Regardless of the instruments he plays, and perhaps most importantly, Mason is an exceptionally musical player, not just an impressive technician. As I listened to Mason’s solos over and over again throughout this project, it dawned on me what makes his playing truly amazing. Within the blisteringly fast lines constantly interweaving between key centres, I began to realise how everything that he performed was so lyrical. Mason is not only exceptionally gifted at playing the “right” notes, but the “wrong” notes as well. By analysing the individual notes of his solos I could see smaller melodies interspersed throughout his lines that demonstrated an amazing sense of musicality. Even when he is using substitutions to create dissonance, he is still playing in a lyrical style, just not in the same key as the tune. This, coupled with his constant resolution in his lines makes his phrases so much more enjoyable, and gives the listener an emotional connection with the music, rather than just an intellectual one.

Elliot Mason pushes the limits of what can be achieved on the trombone, and indeed, what can be achieved as a musician. In doing so, he demonstrates that it is possible for trombonists to keep up in contemporary jazz playing, and perhaps it is even possible for them to take the lead.
7. REFERENCES


Mason, Elliot 2009. e-mail. 22 September. elliot@masonbrothersband.com


Recordings


National Youth Jazz Orchestra, 1996. “Norwich Union”. A View From The Hill. CD. Synergie OMP
A Discussion of Ron Carter’s Construction of Bass Lines.

B.Mus. Honours (Performance)
[Deuce]
Introduction

In practically every genre of music, the bass line plays an important and fundamental role. Within the context of a jazz ensemble, this is particularly true, with the bass providing a rhythmic and harmonic foundation. In order to fulfill this role, the bassist must have a strong sense of rhythm and a solid time feel. It is further developed with appropriate note choice and the construction of tension and release and momentum throughout the bass line.

In this research paper, I have looked at the bassist Ron Carter, with the aim of uncovering some of the tools he uses to create his bass lines. Carter is highly regarded in the jazz world for his exceptionally melodic bass lines. Jim Hall describes Ron Carter as a fantastic listener and says that every note he uses has a special meaning. Carter's bass lines are beautifully crafted, with a powerful sense of shape, direction and they are as previously stated, exceptionally melodic. His lines are always stunningly accurate and performed with a wonderful sound and flawless time. Focusing on three recordings, Beatrice from State of the Tenor by Joe Henderson, Dolphin Dance, From Herbie Hancock's Record Third Plane, and Good Bait on the record The Trio by Tommy Flanagan; I have looked at Carter's general note choices, his use of different rhythmic devices and other general double bass related techniques which he has used.
Ron Carter

Ron Carter is widely regarded as one of the greatest bassists in jazz history. His career has so far spanned over fifty years and he is still an exceptionally active musician today. As one of the most in-demand bassists in the world, Carter has appeared on over 2000 recordings and as a band leader on over thirty. Carter began his musical life on cello at ten years old before beginning the double bass at the age of seventeen. Carter earned his music degree from the Eastman School of music in Rochester NY, and his masters degree from the Manhattan School of Music. Since then he has been awarded three honorary Doctorates, from the Manhattan School of Music, the Conservatorium of New England and Berklee College. Carter was originally a classically trained musician, however due to prejudices against African American musicians in classical orchestras he decided to pursued a career in jazz. Carter’s most well known work was possibly as a member of the Miles Davis Quintet between 1963 and 68 with pianist Herbie Hancock, saxophonist Wayne Shorter, and drummer Tony Williams. Carter has won two grammy awards, one for his composition “Call Street Blues” from the film Round Midnight (1987) and the other for Best Jazz Instrumental Group, with his Miles Davis Tribute band. Carter has also been awarded the Downbeat Magazine Jazz Bassist of the year in the critics polls five times and the readers polls fourteen times, amongst various other awards. Carter has also been the author of several music related books.
Note Choice within a Walking Bass Line

A good time feel is essential to any jazz musician. In addition to this, the bass player’s role is to establish a clear outline of harmony as a basis for the band’s musical journey throughout the progression of the piece. Within Carter’s book ‘Building Walking Bass Lines’ he discusses the concept behind creating his melodic and correct walking lines. Carter is quite adamant about bassists choosing ‘correct’ notes to construct bass lines, as too often incorrect notes which do not correctly illustrate the chord are played and labeled as ‘passing notes’. These incorrect notes tend to go unnoticed by many. Throughout his book Carter spends a fair amount of time discussing how to spell a chord correctly from its basic triad to its extensions. From the transcriptions analysed in this research it is clear that Carters lines are based on this concept.

(Carter 1998, p9)

This figure is Carter’s visual example of how he perceives chords in his head. The lines indicate just two of the copious bass line options. Carter discusses his concept in an interview with Christian McBride for Jazz Times Magazine.

“When I see an F chord I don’t just see an F,A,C, I see five lines and four spaces. For the first beat I see and F,A,C,E and A. That’s just for the first beat only. For the second beat which is the same chord, F first finger, E string, Open A, C fourth finger. For the third beat, I hear the same five notes and for the fourth beat I see the same five notes. So what I see, I don’t just see F,A,C, I see a measure that offers me five different notes per beat, times four. That’s twenty choices right there.” (Primack, B, 1995)

Good Bait bars 49 - 52

In this four bar excerpt Carter’s line is constructed solely of roots, thirds and fifths (with the exception of one seventh). This is a prime example of a ‘correct’ bass line, it is a simple line which flows melodically. The construction of this line is flawless as it creates a definite harmonic outline, and is therefore an excellent backing for a soloist. Given that the bass line is the harmonic foundation for the band, it is extremely important that the correct notes are chosen. In the previously discussed interview with Christian McBride, Carter discusses the reality that many bass players use incorrect notes within their bass lines and consequently do not spell chords correctly.
“There are bass players who are leaders and playing the most wrong notes, absolutely. No doubt about that. And that’s because they don’t know how to spell a chord. They really don’t understand the implications of bass line.” (Primack, B, 1995)

Good Bait bars 113 - 116
(arrows indicate chromatic approach note moving to a chord tone)

In this four bar excerpt Carter has used chromatic approach notes in his bass line. These notes do not fit the harmony, however they can be justified by harmonic substitutions. Towards the beginning of this recording Carter uses very few chromatic approach notes with their frequency increasing as the recording progresses. The chromatic approach notes act as a device which creates tension in the accompaniment, which is released when the approach note moves by a semitone into a chord tone, acting in a similar way to how a leading note wants to resolve to its tonic. Carter is effectively using chromatic approach notes as a compositional tool within the development of his bass line over the entire recording.
Melodic Devices
Bass Line Direction

Line direction is an extremely important element in Carter's bass line construction. Through looking at his bass lines it is clear that he tends to make small changes in direction quite frequently; however if you look at his bass lines on a larger scale, his lines tend to continue in one direction for extended amounts of time, commonly three or four bars.

![Bass Line Direction Example]

Good Bait Bars 45 - 51

In this excerpt you can see that Carter’s bass line generally changes direction every three of four beats, however it is also clear that throughout these six bars the line is descending overall. Carter discusses his idea of line shape.

“You’ve got to sift through your head and try and make this line by the way you see this shape in your head, and this shape kind of dictates what’s going on.” (Primack, B, 1995)

These small and frequent changes in direction aid Carter’s ability to travel in an overall direction for a longer period of time, while still traveling within the most commonly used range of the bass (the upper register of the instrument can lack tonal depth and a strength of sound when played pizzicato in many jazz settings). The added length of direction in Carter’s lines gives him more time to create his chosen line shape, contributing to the melodic sense of his bass lines and the overall sense of phrasing.

Three Beat Motifs

Another tool Carter uses frequently within his bass lines are three beat repeated motifs.

![Three Beat Motifs Example]

Dolphin Dance 66 - 72
This simple three beat motif is based on the pedal bass note of E, in two different octaves. Carter repeats it three times and on the fourth time he switches the order of the notes, leading towards the next chord change where he begins a similar three beat pattern based on the new pedal note of Eb. Carter uses three beat motives quite frequently, as a distinct rhythmic and harmonic device creating an extremely strong sense of tension. Carter generally uses this device at the ends of sections or choruses, this creates an acute sense of release into the next section.

**Pivot Notes**

An additional device which is commonly found in Carter’s bass lines is the use of a pivot note. A pivot note is quite similar to a pedal note, though the pivot note has other notes within the line. If a pivot note is being used over a moving harmonic sequence it is generally a common chord tone to all the chords within the sequence.

![Good Bait bars 89 - 92](image)

In this passage Carter uses the high F as a pedal note from which he pivots back and forth. This four bars creates a sudden and dramatic change in the direction of the band and almost functions as comic relief. Virtually clowning around and almost march like impression is created for just these four bars. When listening to these four bars it is clear that the effect of melodic devices such as this can dramatically change the mood of the piece within a extremely short section of music.

![Good Bait bars 97 - 98](image)

Here Carter is using the same technique, in this instance pivoting from the Bb on the first and third beats of the bar and using the second and forth beats to colour the harmony. This use of a pivot note creates a completely different effect from the last example. In this excerpt the moving line is more aurally interesting than the actual pivot note as it draws attention to the moving line. Overall the device is quite subtle in this example and may go unnoticed by many listeners.
Two-Feel Note Choice and Construction

As with a walking bass line there are many different options and styles within this overall concept. This next section will look at some of the devices Carter used to create his two-feels over the three transcriptions.

*Good Bait* is a straight ahead swing tune, in this recording Carter begins with a very standard two feel. Carter plays mostly minum root notes with the occasional passing crotchet or quaver and kicks.

![Good Bait bars 1-4]

These are the first four bars of *Good Bait*. In this excerpt Carter uses only root notes on beats one and three. He also uses two passing notes, a seventh in the F7 of the second bar and a third on the F7 of the fourth bar. In this section Carter's bass line supports the phrasing of the melody.

![Good Bait melody first four bars]

Here the melody is constructed in a way that the first and third bars are the peak points of the melody, with bars two and four leading into these peak points. Carter’s bass line mirrors the shape of these phrases by adding passing notes in bars two and four, creating a continually seamless flowing feeling between the piano and the bass.

Carter also adds kicks in his two-feel, notated in the transcriptions as grace notes. A kick notes is a short muted note which falls slightly before a beat. Carter uses these ‘kicks’ quite regularly because they create momentum and added rhythmic interest.

![Good Bait bars 133-135]

In this excerpt Carter has used quaver and crotchet triplets within his two-feel bass line. The quaver triplet acts as a tool to draw attention to the notes they lead into, Carter then adds the crotchet triplets. Crotchet triplets are less common in this style but create added tension within the bass line.
Within the entire recording of *Beatrice* Carter stays in a two-feel. This style of tune naturally creates more space and therefore leaves him with more options. His use of rhythms is especially important in this recording. In the same way as Carter’s walking lines, his two-feels are predominantly based on triads and basic arpeggios.

**Beatrice bars 74 - 76**

In this section Carter’s note choices are all from the basic arpeggios. He has used them to create a chromatically descending line. This chromatic sound is exceptionally strong, and creates an elegant melodic line.

**Beatrice bars 105 - 107**

In these three bars Carter has only used root notes. He has taken advantage of the natural shape of the harmony in creating this line. These root notes create a lot of space for the soloist, Carter’s use of the octaves fills out the bass line but leaves clear space for the soloist.

**Dolphin Dance 153 - 154**

In this excerpt of *Dolphin Dance*, Carter has taken advantage of space in the melody to create a fill leading into the fourth bar. He has used four crotches in the third bar but this does not create the feeling of a walking line. This line has a very clear direction leading towards that fourth bar and effectively colours the harmony.
Rhythmic Devices

The use of rhythmic devices can be extremely valuable when creating a bass line. Rhythmic devices can support musical interaction between band members and can aid the rhythm section in creating tension and a sense of momentum. Ron Carter uses a wide array of rhythmic devices within his bass lines, the most frequent being his use of crotchet triplets.

Dolphin Dance bar 14 - 15

This example is one of the most common ways Carter uses the crochet triplet, using the triplets for an entire bar and coming out of the triplets with a small intervallic movement towards the resolution point. In this example the movement is only a semitone, throughout the transcriptions undertaken the movement is usually either a tone or semitone. The small movement adds to the sense of release when coming out of a triplet figure. Carter’s note choice for this device is generally based on basic arpeggios, root, third, fifth with the occasional use of the seventh and other extensions that may be important to the colour of a chord. Crochet triplets give a very distinct sense of momentum to the bass line, which in conjunction with the small intervallic movement out of the triplets can provide a fantastic sense of tension and release.

Crotchet Triplets

Beatrice bars 117 - 120

In this four bar passage Carter has used crochet triplets in quite a different way. He has played the triplets in groups of four and used them to outline basic arpeggios of the harmony. The use of triplets grouped in this way is aurally compelling, and the use of ascending arpeggios adds to the effect creating tension and a sense of energy. This use of rhythm is very interesting and as a listener you can feel Carter’s grounding of the time on the first beat of each bar even though he is not playing a note on that beat. This solid rhythmic feel adds to the direction and strength of Carter’s lines.

Repeated Quavers

Repeated quavers is another devise commonly found within Carter’s accompaniments. This technique was used quite extensively within Beatrice and also in Good Bait. The quavers were generally repeated root notes or chords tones.
Here Carter plays the motive twice with a small variation during the second time. This two bar motive was played at the end of a chorus and is an ideal tool to set up the next chorus of the piece.

**Off Beat Figures and Anticipation**

In this example Carter created an anticipated off beat figure. This three bar rhythmic device together with the long ascending line over the rapidly changing harmony, creates tension and forward momentum. Throughout this line Carter also anticipates the harmony. Using a device like this over a considerable length of time, such as in these three bars, creates a great sense of tension. It is also important to note that this line is ascending for the entire three bars, beginning at the bottom of the bass’ register. These three factors, anticipation, an off beat figure and long line direction, create an extra strength in the direction of the line and seem to aurally pull the line forward.

In this example, focusing on the bottom voice of the bass line, Carter is using both anticipation and delay. The forward movement here is quite understated in comparison with the previous example, and the use of delay is not as aurally obvious as the anticipation. Together the two techniques create an extra sense of spontaneity as it is virtually impossible for the listener to predict where Carter will place his notes at this point.

**Tremolos**

Dolphin Dance bars 126 - 127
In this example Carter is basically playing a pizzicato tremolo, though the repeated notes are not entirely even. This device acts as a blanket of sound which brings tension to this section of the piece through a strong sense of weight.
Bassisms

Although the word ‘bassism’ is not an official term, it is commonly used amongst some bassists as a general term to describe some techniques specific to the bass’ (and some other string instruments). I thought that the use of the word ‘bassisms’ was the most appropriate way to describe the following techniques such as double stops, glissandos, the general instruments range, harmonic and open strings. All are specific colours which carter used skillfully throughout the recordings.

Double Stops

Double stopping is a technique used by string players where two notes are played on different strings simultaneously. The most common intervals for a jazz double bassist to play are thirds, fourths, fifths, octaves and tenths. When this concept is applied to the double bass in a jazz setting it can present the performer with some technical challenges. The first and foremost being the big issue of intonation; the two notes played have to be in tune in order for this to sound effective. The use of left arm weight on the string is another pressing issue; if insufficient arm weight is transferred onto the string the notes will lack clarity and tone colour which will result in a mess of ugly sounds at the bottom of the band. Perhaps the most challenging part of playing a double stop lies with the right hand. In a pizzicato setting the fingers must work together to create the sounds of both strings simultaneously; Thought this may sound simple it is extremely difficult to make the strings speak together. The differences in the thickness of strings must be considered to be sure that the fingers leave the sting at the same time and therefore speak at the same time. The range of the two notes must also be taken into account; usually the bottom voice is deemed the most important and should speak slightly louder than the upper voice.

Carters use of double stops within Beatrice indicates that he does in fact use different right hand techniques for double stops throughout this recording. For the duration of the first two choruses Carter uses almost solely double stops.

Beatrice Introduction

The bottom voice of the double stop speaks just before the upper voice, which along with the tone colour of the two notes indicates that Carter is striking the strings with his right thumb instead of using his fingers. The use of the thumb does create some differences in tone colour. Each finger of the hand creates a slightly different tone colour due to its size, shape and strength. The use of just the thumb to strike both notes creates more even tone colour than that which can be created by using a different finger on each note.
In the excerpt I believe that Carter used his index and middle fingers to strike the string. Using two fingers instead of the thumb allows the musician to repeat notes quickly as it takes less time to reset your hand for the next notes. Carter uses this approach to playing double stops commonly throughout this recording.

In this excerpt Carter uses tenths extensively. Though they are not strictly double stops two notes are speaking at the same time. Using tenths Carter was able to play the root note of the chord in the low register of the instrument creating a solid foundation, and to also colour the chord by playing the third in the middle register of the bass. The large interval gives clarity to the two voices. As there is no pianist or guitarist on this recording, Carter used this technique to supply the harmony.

**Glissandos**

One of the most recognised bassisms within Ron Carter’s bass playing is his use of glissandos. He uses glissandos numerous times within each of the recordings examined.
In this example Carter does a short glissando into and out of the chosen notes. This is the most typical way Carter uses glissandos. This draws attention to the note and creates a sense of uncertainty as the intonation seems somewhat unstable until Carter arrives at the actual note. The tone colour of the note is also different as the attack on the note is physically different. In the piano, bass, drums setting of this recording the glissando has added effect as the bass is the only instrument which can manipulate its pitch.

In this excerpt Carter has used the glissando in a different way. He slides between the three different root notes and re-attacks the string when the next root note is reached. By doing this the overall effect of the glissando between the notes is achieved without losing volume. The re-attacking of the string also establishes a clear sense of time feel and clarity of pitch.

**Harmonics and Open Strings**

Another bassism is the use of open strings and harmonics which have quite different colours when being compared with stopped notes, they are generally clearer and brighter sounds and therefore can stick out. They are also more resonant than stopped notes and Carter uses this to his advantage.

In this excerpt Carter utilises his open strings. Although it is possible to play all these notes in one position, when listening to the excerpt it can be heard that Carter is using open strings to take advantage of slightly different timbre and resonance of the notes. Using open strings allows the bass player to extend their range without shifting position, or to take more time to set up their left hand while shifting, which aids the accuracy of intonation and consistency of tone. Carter discusses this concept in this excerpt from his book ‘*Building Jazz Bass Lines*’.

“We can increase the range of the instrument as we stay in position by the careful adding of the open string, notated by the X located under the particular note. It is
important to make the note length of the fingered or closed note match that of the open string note as closely as possible. Make the notes marked with X have the same sound blend or weight, not the open string loud and strong and the fingered not weak and anemic[...] You will notice how the substitution of an open string for a fingered not only Increases the harmonic possibilities of the chord...” (Carter 1998, p13)

(Carter 1998, p13)

Dolphin Dance bar 8

In this excerpt of Dolphin Dance Carter is using two open strings and a harmonic, he is taking advantage of the added resonance and letting these notes ring over each other, creating a dense layer of colour at the bottom end of the band. In effect this is the same as a double stop as the notes are speaking together.

Beatrice bar 172

In this bar from ‘Beatrice’ Carter uses harmonics, here the bottom note indicates where the harmonic is played on the bass with the top note indicating what pitch sounds. The actual notes are D, A and G. In this recording the harmonics are clean, crisp, and resonant. The harmonics create a good colour change from the preceding textures by lightening the overall sound.

**Instrument Range**

The double bass has quite an exceptional range, around four octaves, not including natural and false harmonics. The upper register of the bass does not speak as clearly when played pizzicato as it does with the bow, but it is still quite useful in different settings.
Pizzicato notes in the extreme upper register create a constricted and percussive tone colour.

Beatrice coda

In this final section of ‘Beatrice’ Carter uses the extent of the double bass’ natural range by playing the same line three times in different octaves from the low G on the E string, to the highest stopped G on the G string. This not only demonstrates Carters knowledge of the bass fingerboard, but also shows the colour of the instrument from the deep bottom end to the short and percussive sounds of pizzicato bass in the upper registers of the instrument.

**Large Intervallic Leaps**

When I began learning how to create a walking bass line I was under the impression that using primarily scalic movements with few larger leaps was the best way to create a solid and musical accompaniment; I was entirely mistaken. Used appropriately, large intervallic leaps can create depth and can lead to a more spontaneous and melodic bass line. Which in turn creates a superior and more original accompaniment. For the purpose of this paper I am defining a large interval to be anything exceeding a perfect fifth.

Carter uses a fair amount of large intervallic leaps within his walking bass lines. Octaves and tenths are frequently used in Carter’s accompaniment, especially when in a non-walking style accompaniment, sixths also feature strongly within his walking lines. Carter’s large intervallic leaps almost always occur between two chord tones of the current chord. I will now take a brief glance at a few ways in which Carter used large intervallic leaps within the transcriptions.

In this excerpt Carter has used used multiple large leaps bringing a strong feeling of contrast to the line.
Dolphin Dance bar 55

In this excerpt Carter has used only root notes all an octave apart.

Dolphin Dance bar 90

In this bar Carter has used two different large intervals to colour the chord extensions of the 9th and 13th.

Dolphin Dance bars 153 - 154

In this excerpt Carter has used two different large intervals in different ways. The first he has jumped a twelfth from the minor third of the Am7 to the minor seventh, this is an extremely large leap, it is not possible to play this leap on the bass without shifting. In the second bar Carter falls a tenth from the major third to the root of the D13.

Beatrice bars 114 - 116

In this section Carter makes large leaps over a quickly changing chord sequence, this is accentuated by the D harmonic.
Summary

Throughout this research I have looked at a series of different tools which Carter uses to create his bass lines. In Carters note choice, his bass lines are predominantly based on chord tones but he does use many other tools within his note selection. Chromatic approach notes, three beat motives, pivot notes, long line direction and kicks are all important parts of Carter’s bass lines. Rhythmic devices are also a strong feature of his bass lines, including crotchet triplets, repeated quavers, off beat figures, anticipation and tremolos. Carter also uses bassisms to colour his bass lines. Techniques such as double stops, glissandos, open strings and harmonics, the bass’ extreme range and large intervals are all significant parts of Carter’s bass lines. In my opinion Carter’s approach to bass lines is all about creating momentum and tension and release. By using all of these tools Carter creates exceptionally melodic bass lines which are an ideal backing for any soloist, therefore fulfilling the role of the bass to the highest level.
Bibliography

SHEETS OF SOUND

An exploration of the improvisational style of Allan Holdsworth

by

[Fender]

A research paper submitted to the Elder Conservatorium of Music, University of Adelaide in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Bachelor of Music (Hons)
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INTRODUCTION

Throughout this study I hope to gain knowledge about Holdsworth’s sheets of sound ability with the intention of incorporating this sound into my own playing. I want to discover what systems exist in his playing, how they are combined with a guitar-specific approach and how he executes them.

In order to determine how to create sheets of sound on the guitar, I have analysed transcriptions of Allan’s solos in a number of different situations. I have found many examples of melodic, harmonic and motivic ideas throughout his single-note lines. This study includes tunes, examples, transcriptions and quotes that support my findings. The first section of the body specifically addresses the range of techniques used by Holdsworth to create sheets of sound. The rest of the body contains sections for the three concepts that I feel are most prominent in Holdsworth’s playing. Each section contains a brief description of the concept followed by the discussion of a number of examples. The examples have been analysed on both a theoretical and a guitar-specific basis.

Allan Holdsworth is one of the greatest, yet most underrated guitar players of our time.

He has been pushing the boundaries of guitar playing and improvisation in general since the early 1970’s. He is famous for his work in the jazz-rock (or “fusion”) genre, a style of music that emerged in the late 1960’s. Holdsworth’s playing is characterized by his unmistakable sound, virtuosic and innovative technique and his amazing ability to create intricate “sheets of sound” on an instrument that does not easily lend itself to doing so. In my opinion Holdsworth has been underappreciated by many – it would seem his music is too complicated for most rock audiences and ‘too rock’ for most jazz audiences. Conversely, there are those from both schools who have realized the unfathomable brilliance that surrounds his music. Allan Holdsworth is an innovator of the highest order and his music defies genre. What stands out is his ability to create seemingly endless streams of notes without ever sounding boring or clichéd. Each solo features an advanced exploration of scales, patterns and intervals and is executed with unfathomably virtuosic technique.

The phrase “sheets of sound” was first used by Downbeat Magazine writer Ira Gitler to describe the way John Coltrane played: ‘His continuous flow of ideas without stopping really hit me.’ (Hentoff 1960, np) Coltrane is known for being a pioneer in terms of harmonic superimposition – that is, suggesting a different harmony over the one which already exists. The general idea is that any consonant sound played with conviction can sound logical in spite of the harmony. (Umble 2008, p.112) This is the core concept behind the sheets of sound model, which was a revelation for Holdsworth:

‘I think that was the biggest thing that I learned from [Coltrane] was that it's possible to play over changes without doing things that you've heard before.'
It didn't have to be diatonically correct if it's working. Different lines, different chords, some specific formula…

(Morrison 2006, np)

**TECHNIQUE**

The guitar does not usually lend to creating sheets of sound in the manner that Allan Holdsworth creates them. Holdsworth employs a number of techniques to create these sheets of sound. These techniques evolved out of the need to create and not from the desire to play faster. Like most aspects of Holdsworth’s musicianship, his technique is unconventional. As noted by Bill Bruford ‘Allan wanted to sound like John Coltrane. Problem was he played guitar, not saxophone, so he had to figure out a way to get a similar "sheets of sound" equivalent on guitar.’ (Guitar Player Magazine 2008) In an attempt to emulate the legato sound of a saxophonist, Holdsworth has developed his legato technique to an advanced level. Just as a saxophonist doesn’t tongue every note, Holdsworth doesn’t pick every note. Instead he relies heavily on his fretting hand using hammer-ons, pull-offs and slides to avoid picking every note. This not only allows him to play at impressive speeds but it also leaves his picking hand free to accent notes where desired. Holdsworth’s legato technique is an exceptional example, but it is not uncommon for many guitar players to use this technique to some degree.

Holdsworth’s improvisations feature a lot of vertical playing and arpeggios are used heavily (as they were in Coltrane’s playing). Rapidly moving vertically through scales or arpeggiating through multiple octaves are difficult technical tasks on the guitar, which is why most guitarists lean towards more linear playing at high speeds. Holdsworth has found innovative ways to resolve this problem, employing two underused techniques: string skipping and economy (or ‘sweep’) picking. One technical difficulty experienced by guitar players is changing strings, the more time a player spends on one string, the more time they have to prepare to move to the next. For this reason most guitarists, including Holdsworth, lean towards trying to fit at least 3-notes on a string before changing. This makes arpeggios and pentatonics very difficult to play at high speeds, and dictates that the majority of guitarists play in a linear manner, which can sound very dull. Holdsworth uses string skipping to move vertically without necessarily using arpeggios or pentatonics. Example 1a displays the conventional way that guitarists ascend through multiple octaves when playing in C major. The 3-notes-per-string concept creates a linear “trap” in which many guitar players never evolve from:
Example 1b displays string skipping which can be used to move vertically across strings.

![Example 1b](image)

This passage remains in the same area of the fretboard and uses 3-notes per string and allows the player to facilitate vertical movement easily. It creates wide intervals which would be very difficult to achieve using any other technique. Economy or 'sweep' picking is when one stroke of the pick is used to sound two or more notes. Most guitarists use this technique unintentionally to some degree, generally to cover arpeggiated and pentatonic passages but few have tapped into the potential of this technique. Guitarist Frank Gambale (who cites Holdsworth as one of his main influences), has specifically worked on and educated people about this technique for many years. Gambale says (1985, p. 2), '[Sweep picking] can be used to achieve mind-boggling speed and flawless accuracy while being completely relaxed in the right hand'. As an introduction to his book 'speed picking' Gambale presents the following phrase as a simple example of sweep picking. We can see that one pick stroke has been used to play the D, F and A notes, followed by a hammer on to complete the Dm7 arpeggio:

![Example 1c](image)

Example 1c displays a combination of sweeping and hammering that is used to ascend very quickly through a C major arpeggio. Generally in Holdsworth’s playing he uses this technique in short bursts with legato techniques (hammer-ons, pull-offs and slides) linking the sweeping phrases together:
There are three main techniques used by Holdsworth to execute the melodies that he desires: left hand legato, string skipping and sweeping. When all of these techniques are combined they provide the quintessential economy that is required to create sheets of sound on the guitar in the style of Allan Holdsworth.

**INTERVALIC PLAYING ON SYMETRICAL SCALES**

In his instructional book, *“Just for the Curious”*, Holdsworth reveals his fifteen ‘most useful scales’. They are numbered according to how useful he finds them:

- **Seven Note Scales:**
  - Scale #1: C Major/D Minor/G7
  - Scale #2: D Minor (maj7): D Melodic Minor
  - Scale #3: A Minor (maj7,16): A Harmonic Minor
  - Scale #4: A Minor (maj7,14): A Harmonic Major
  - Scale #14: C Dominant (F9)

- **Added Tone “Jazz” Scales (Eight notes):**
  - Scale #6: B♭ Jazz Major (add 15)
  - Scale #7: C Jazz Dominant (add 17)
  - Scale #8: B Jazz Minor (add 17)
  - Scale #9: A Jazz Minor (add 16)
  - Scale #11: D♭ Jazz Minor (add 11)

- **Added Tone “Jazz” Scales (Nine notes):**
  - Scale #12: C Jazz Dominant (add 3 and 17)
  - Scale #13: C Jazz Major (add 3 and 6)

- **Symmetrical Scales:**
  - Scale #5: G♭ Diminished - 1/2, 1/2, 1/2, 1/2, etc.
  - Scale #10: Symmetrical - 1/2, 1/2, 1/2, 1/2, etc.
  - Scale #15: Whole Tone - 1/1, 1/1, 1/1, etc.

(Holdsworth 1993, p. 5)

Because symmetrical scales consist of an intervallic pattern, they have their own distinctive sound which is perfect for the sheets of sound method. Symmetrical scales are particularly useful for creating tense sounds while still retaining a solid melodic structure. The symmetrical scale most commonly used by Holdsworth is the diminished scale. Not surprisingly it is number five in the above list; it is only ranked below common seven note scales. This scale will always create some level of dissonance because there is no consonant chord that accounts for its structure. The diminished scale features an
intervals of a tone followed by a semitone. The semitone leads into the 1, b3, b5 and 6th of the scale and hence it outlines a diminished chord. The diminished scale can also be used to colour a dominant chord as a diminished arpeggio can be built off the b9, 3, 6 and b7 to create a 7(b9) chord. Therefore the diminished scale can also start from these degrees. Holdsworth refers to the dominant application (½, 1, ½, 1, etc.) as the diminished scale.

Due to the inherent nature of the guitar most players approach scales in a very linear manner. For example most players would approach the diminished scale simply by playing it up and down as it naturally occurs, without ever investigating its full potential. However, the symmetrical nature of the diminished scale contains a large number of patterns and intervals which can be explored and are evident throughout Holdsworth’s playing.

‘This scale is a very useable scale because it’s very easy to disguise but at the same time if you play it in certain other ways it is too recognisable and sounds pretty lame. So I always try and juggle the notes around so that it’s more difficult to identify but when you listen to it you can still hear some kind of logic.’

(Holdsworth 2007, DVD)

The following phrase (Example 2a) contains two identical 3-note fragments consisting of a flat three followed by a flat second. The root of each fragment is separated by a sixth which is the result of string skipping in conjunction with the transposing nature of the instrument. This simple but interesting exploration of the intervals contained in the diminished scale is a perfect example of the kind of outside thinking Holdsworth employs. It should also be noted that he is using one sound to colour a number of chords. In this case there is one diminished arpeggio, Db diminished, which can be used to colour all four of the dominant chords.

Example 2a – bars 11-13 of A.H. solo on “Isotope”

Allan Holdsworth has truly revolutionized the guitar with his approach to intervals within scales. In many circumstances he uses this understanding to create melodies of such a vertical nature that it is hard to comprehend the fact that they are played on the guitar. In example 2b he uses a motif composing of stacked 4ths in groups of four. The motif’s structure and the way it is used are dependant on the symmetrical nature of the diminished scale. The first group of fourths creates fifth, root, fourth and flat seventh colours which are all acceptable on a dominant chord and all exist when a
diminished scale is built from the flat ninth. Any note in the diminished scale can be moved up a flat third and still remain in the scale. As the four notes contained in the motif already exist within the scale, the whole motif can be moved up in flat thirds. Building these fourths across the strings of the guitar would be difficult to do without leaving notes ringing on certain strings. Holdsworth uses both string skipping and stretch fingering to execute this phrase in a clean legato manner.

Example 2b – bar 10 of A.H. solo on “Tokyo Dream”

One way that Holdsworth creates extended phrases is by the use of ostinato passages, example 2c displays a repeated motif. The interval pattern belongs to the Db diminished scale, and so we can see the same scale being used over the same harmonic situation as in Example 2a. Another similarity is the flat third and b2 intervals on a single string. This example creates a polyrhythm by using a 4-note motif which moves through pentuplets. Odd note groupings (5 and 7 notes) are very common to Holdsworth’s playing. He particularly seems to have as much control of playing in groups of 5 as he does in groups of 4 or 6. The note lengths in the pentuplets are still equal, but sound slightly foreign in western music.

Example 2c – bars 23-26 of A.H. solo on “Isotope”

Example 2d is a perfect illustration of Holdsworth’s playing the sort of phrase that allows him to create seemingly endless sheets of sound. This is using another division of the intervals in the diminished scale, and again there is the presence of a sixth separating the starting notes of each motif. This entire 14-note phrase is then repeated up a minor third. In this example Holdsworth plays eight notes on the one string using only one right hand pick stroke. This is a crucial part of his legato technique, the ability to play relatively freely on one string without picking every note. It is one of the factors
contributing to his legato sound being so flawless. Again we see strong melodic content supporting the use of the odd note grouping, this time septuplets. This melodic and guitar-specific mobility allows the sheet of sound to continue until the desired resolution point.

Example 2d – bars 49-50 of A.H. solo on “Isotope”

**VERTICAL LINES**

The nature of the guitar dictates that vertical playing is technically difficult. Moving vertically requires a guitar player to move quickly across strings, or move quickly across frets, both of which can be difficult at speed. As previously discussed, guitar players tend to execute mostly linear lines whereas Holdsworth has overcome the limitations of conventional technique to allow the free use of vertical lines as a means of expression throughout his solos. He has specifically exploited unorthodox but highly economical techniques, the results of which are free flowing, expressive vertical passages. The exploration and application of these techniques has become an integral part of his sound.

In the following example from ‘Just for the Curious’, Holdsworth demonstrates how a combination of string skipping and stretch fingering can be used to create a vertical approach to ascending through a C major scale. The wide intervals between the 3-note fragments are created by string skips.

Example 3a demonstrates the use of this technique within a solo.
In example 3b, Holdsworth uses multiple diatonic major triads to create an exciting vertical passage. When the notes of the A, D and G major triads are combined they form all seven notes of the D major scale. As this sound is applied to a G major 9 chord, the triads outline the G Lydian mode. Although it is vertical in nature, the phrase is executed using the same legato techniques as used for a linear phrase. Before the first note of each triad is played three notes have already been played on the same string, the last of which is the leading tone into the root of the next triad.

Example 3c displays the way in which Holdsworth makes use of triads to ascend very quickly through multiple octaves. This example uses the exact same technique as outlined in example 1c, combining sweep picking and legato techniques. The harmonic situation is essentially a G Dorian, but notes from the C augmented and C minor triads create some tension as he launches into the phrase. These two triads are colours for a C dominant chord. The G# from the augmented triad and the Eb from the minor triad creates sharp ninth and flat thirteenth colours which suggest a C7 altered harmony.

Holdsworth combines this technique with some more colourful harmonic choices. Example 3d features triads approached vertically, combined with ‘side-slippping’ in a demonstration of harmonic-superimposition. As triads have a consonant sound, they can be used very effectively to imply moving harmony which can exist in spite of the underlying harmony. In this instance, the triads are moved down in semitones from F – E
– D♯ while also being raised an octave each time. The line direction is then reversed and triads descend from F♯ – F – E. In the latter case the line is more embellished. It is interesting to note that all connecting material between the triads is chromatic.

The following examples embody the calibre of ideas that make Allan Holdsworth an inspiring musician. Example 3e combines moving triads with string skipping and stretch fingering to create a very quick burst of vertical movement. The triads are created using eight-fret stretch fingerings. This is an extreme stretch and so the phrase is played high on the neck of the guitar, where the fret spacing is smaller. The roots of the arpeggios are separated by a 10th and a 6th which are created by string skips. This kind of intervallic leap (specifically the 10th) is an amazing feat on the guitar, but due to Holdsworth’s use of economical techniques it becomes more easily attainable.

Example 3f combines an intervallic pattern with string skipping and stretch fingering to create a stream of notes which could continue endlessly making this example truly extraordinary. Again the fragments involve seven-fret and eight-fret finger stretches. Due to the nature of the intervals in the fragments, this is a much more difficult stretch than in Example 3e. Yet again, string skipping has allowed for some very large intervals to be played.
Examples of motivic repetition and sequence are present throughout Holdsworth’s music. His control over this important aspect of any improviser’s playing is undoubtedly one of the abilities which allow him to create sheets of sound. Hal Crook defines a motif as (Crook 2002, p. 81) ‘A small, thematic unit of melody, roughly between 2 and 8 notes, consisting of a single idea or musical thought…’ Jamey Aebersold, another prominent jazz educator, has said (Aebersold 2000, p. 53) ‘When you solo, use repetition and sequence. This allows the listener to anticipate what you are doing.’ Holdsworth combines motivic repetition and sequence with the use of pentatonics, polyrhythms and melodic development to create well-constructed sheets of sound.

Example 4a displays the use of motivic repetition in Holdsworth’s playing. The motif is based on the G minor pentatonic scale and is repeated and developed to create an extended line. The guitar lends well to playing pentatonic scales. This allows the motif to be repeated without technical difficulties. As a result it is easier to focus on the rhythmic aspect of the passage. The motif consists of seven notes which are played over pentuplets thus creating a polyrhythm.

Motivic repetition is combined with pentatonic scales and polyrhythms again in example 4b; a fragment of the C minor pentatonic is used and a four note motif is played over triplets. In the third bar the fragment is altered and raised in pitch but the rhythmic element stays the same. This displays the use of sequence in Holdsworth’s playing.

Example 4a – bars 59-63 of A.H. solo on “Devil Take the Hindmost”

Example 4b – bars 61-64 of A.H. solo on “Isotope”
Sequence is when a motif is changed melodically or rhythmically to create continuity. (Crook 2002, p. 86) In contrast to example 4b, example 4d shows such changes occurring a number of times in rapid succession. The four note motif is played once and then repeated having been changed and raised in pitch. In this instance the new application is not necessarily diatonic. This shows that a motivic playing can provide melodic material that is instantly recognizable even when the motif is changed randomly.

Example 4d – bars 39-40 of A.H. solo on “Isotope”

Example 4e uses this same technique but in a more vertical manner.

Example 4e – bars 102-103 of A.H. solo on “Devil Take the Hindmost”

CONCLUSION

As this paper comes to a close, I would like to take a moment to reiterate what I feel are the main points learned from this study:

Trying to emulate other instruments can help a guitar player develop a unique style. Other instruments do not have the same limitations as the guitar and so one is forced to find innovative ways to overcome these natural limitations.

Holdsworth utilizes three economical techniques: legato, string-skipping and sweep picking. Legato technique relies heavily on the fretting hand and allows the picking hand to accent freely or move to another string when required. Trying to play a minimum of three notes on a string before moving to another can assist with creating more fluid lines. These lines can be played very quickly. A combination of legato playing and string skipping promotes a broader exploration of the intervals within a scale. String skipping and sweep picking are helpful when trying to execute difficult vertical passages.

The symmetrical nature of the diminished scale provides a large number of intervallic ideas to be explored. These intervallic ideas can be moved around the neck very easily due to the transposing nature of the guitar.

Diatonic triads can be used to emphasize the scale choice and highlight the upper extensions of a chord and non-diatonic triads can be used to outline superimposed
harmony. Using economical techniques can allow for a more varied application of these concepts.

Motivic playing helps create continuity within a melody. The melodic repetition involved in this kind of playing leaves more room for the exploration of rhythmic ideas. For example: a repeated motif can be used to create polyrhythms through uncommon rhythmic groupings like pentuplets and septuplets. Motifs can also be used to create tense melodic textures because they can be moved and altered randomly. The use of repetition and sequence in this kind of material allows the listener to anticipate the development of the line.

‘I’ve known Allan and his music for 30 years now, and after all this time, he still amazes me. His concept is still advancing with his playing and his technical prowess—which is phenomenal, and is in complete harmony with his very advanced musical direction. I saw him about 14 years ago, and, after the concert, I said to him, “If I knew what you were doing, I’d steal everything, but I don’t know what you are doing!”’ …

John McLaughlin (Guitar Player Magazine 2008)

It needs to be acknowledged that while the techniques outlined within this text are some of the key aspects of the Allan Holdsworth sheets of sound model, they are just theories and examples. The genius is in their application. From research conducted as part of this study I have become aware that his endless pursuit of deeper knowledge is fuelled somewhat by frustration. In his mind his music will never be good enough; he always needs to improve. And so even now that he is in his sixties his life still revolves around striving to become a better musician. He is an absolute perfectionist. (Fox 2005, np)

Learning about Holdsworth and his understanding of his role as a musician has both inspired and challenged me. It has exposed a great fault in my own philosophy of life and musicianship. I believe that many musicians spend a great deal of time trying to imitate the masters once the imitation is “good enough” we become complacent. Holdsworth’s intention has always been the opposite and so has developed his own voice which will always set him uniquely apart.

Jeff Berlin sums it up this way (Guitar Player Magazine 2008):

‘Only the elite musician wishes not to imitate. Originality and finding your own voice are the only beacons the elite musician follows. Allan is one of those musicians.’
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Appendix A -
Isotope: Allan Holdsworth's Solo

Fast swing $\text{d}=100$

C$^7$

$\text{F}^7$  B$\flat^7$  B$^7$  C$^7$  A$^7$

$\text{A}^\flat^7$  G$^7$  C$^7$  A$^7$  G$\flat^7$  E$\flat^7$

C$^7$

$\text{F}^7$ *Whammy*

B$\flat^7$  B$^7$  C$^7$

A$^7$

G$^7$

C$^7$

15
Appendix B -
Devil Take The Hindmost: Allan Holdsworth's Solo

Funk-Rock \( \frac{4}{\text{4}} = 140 \)

Trans  Allan Holdsworth

\[
\begin{align*}
G^7m7 & \quad A\text{Add}^9 \\
62 & \quad A^6 \\
66 & \quad B\text{Dim7} \quad B^9 \\
70 & \quad D\text{Add9} \\
74 & \quad G\text{m} \\
78 & \\
82 & \\
\end{align*}
\]
APPENDIX D

The attached CD contains the recordings of the 3 transcriptions included in Appendices A-C.

- 1. Isotope
- 2. Devil Take the Hindmost
- 3. Tokyo Dream
HARMONY IN IMPROVISATION:
A STUDY OF THE GUITAR STYLE OF BILL FRISELL

Research Project submitted in partial fulfilment of
the coursework requirements for the degree of
Honours in Music
Elder School of Music
University of Adelaide
October
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ABSTRACT

This research project will examine the unique way Bill Frisell presents harmony on the guitar within his improvisations. His unique approach will be also compared, where possible, with that of some of the established masters of the jazz guitar idiom. This project will analyse blues improvisations with specific reference to the use of arpeggios and counterpoint. The findings of this research will provide an insight into how Frisell is able to manipulate certain harmonic and melodic materials to achieve his individual sound. It will also examine the thought process employed by Frisell that differs from the conventional jazz guitar approach and consequently allow him to produce his unique sound.
1 INTRODUCTION

My interest in Bill Frisell was sparked sometime ago, when I first came across the album *Bill Frisell, Ron Carter, Paul Motian*. At the time I didn’t know what to make of this album and indeed Frisell’s playing. The repertoire consists of an eclectic range of material that includes the celebrated work of Thelonious Monk, 1930’s show tunes, country and traditional songs as well as Frisell originals. It was not only the collection of tunes I found intriguing, but the way in which they were interpreted. This recording contains none of the instrumental pyrotechnics found in the recordings of Frisell’s jazz guitar contemporaries and does not have the sound of a straight-ahead all-star blowing date, which it essentially is. Instead what can be heard are patient, interactive improvisations, free of flashiness and well-worn clichés. This approach as explained by Troy Collins (2006) results ‘in a genteel bout of casual, open-ended exploration of familiar themes’, where the sidemen are not merely providers of pulse but equal members in Frisell’s journeys of discovery. His improvisations do not employ rapid licks or technical virtuosity, but rather can be described as ‘a search for connections, for tiny revelations of melody, rhythm, or pure sound texture.’ (Woodward 1989 : 9)

My fascination with this particular album has led to the question that initiated this research project, namely, why does Bill Frisell sound so unique? This was further refined by asking why does he sound so unique when compared to the acknowledged jazz guitar greats? Of course there are many things to consider, not least his use of effects, choice of instrument (Fender Telecaster), and most importantly, his rhythmic approach. Whilst all these features are of great importance, what I find to be particularly noteworthy is the space that can be heard in his playing. Although some of this is certainly based around rhythmic elements, much of this is due to the way in which he presents harmony on the instrument. His unique approach results in a less dense sound than is usually associated with the more conventional jazz guitar approach. Although Frisell’s approach involves fewer notes he is still able to convey the relevant harmonic information, as John Kelman (2006) explains:

> With one guitar, Frisell distills the essential harmonies of a quintet and delivers them without the feeling that anything has been lost. His mastery of elongated notes and seemingly infinite decays creates a rich sound that’s appealing, ethereal and often ambiguous.

Much of this paper will deal with how Frisell’s approach to harmony compares to what can be considered a conventional jazz guitar approach. This will be achieved through the analysis and discussion of excerpts from solos transcribed by the author from the abovementioned album. These examples will be compared with examples taken from the solos of two of the most established masters or Jazz guitar, Wes Montgomery, ‘one of the most important guitar stylists of the century’ (Mathieson 1999 : 68), and Joe Pass, ‘regarded by fellow jazzmen as an incomparable soloist, a virtuoso so totally in command of the instrument that he has been called the Art Tatum of the guitar’ (Feather/Gitler 1999 : 517). The transcribed examples of Frisell’s work are taken from the 2005 release *Bill Frisell, Ron Carter, Paul Motian*. The points of comparison for these performances are solos transcribed by Steve Khan and Roland Leone (respectively) of Wes Montgomery playing “West Coast Blues” and Joe Pass playing his composition, “Blues in G.”

Not to be confused with a study on comping or accompanying other instruments this research project is purely concerned with the unique ways in which Frisell conveys harmony to the listener whilst soloing.
In a conventional jazz guitar approach, harmony is most often thought of in terms of block chords, as can be seen in Wes Montgomery’s “West Coast Blues.”

For guitar players the above example can also be notated in chord diagrams, which display the fretboard fingerings and demonstrate chord forms:

In this more traditional approach, harmony can also be expressed through single note lines (melodies). These melodies can be divided into two categories: lines that consist of both chord tones and non-chord tones, and lines that consist solely of chord tones. The first category is associated with a technique known as synchronisation. Synchronisation has its origins in the bebop style and involves the playing of chord tones on downbeats, and non-chord tones on the upbeats of a melodic phrase. Lines that consist solely of chord tones are called arpeggios.

Expressing harmony in terms of either block chords or chord-defining single note lines has been the predominant approach to jazz guitar playing for much of its history, but at times this approach can be somewhat limiting. As esteemed guitar educator and former Frisell mentor, Mick Goodrick (1987: 18) explains, it tends to lead to thinking of single note lines and chords as two separate entities, where ‘melodies are “licks” [and] chords are “grips.”’ A major reason why Frisell sounds the way he does is the fact that he often traverses the terrain between single note lines and chords by playing not one or the other, but seemingly a combination of both. Figure 1 demonstrates the traditional chord form approach to harmony.

Figure 1.

Figure 2 demonstrates how Frisell presents this harmony.

Figure 2.
This example is in a sense the essence of Frisell’s approach, in that he dismisses any notion of harmony and melody as being separate entities, and approaches harmonic material in a wider, more spacious manner, based upon intervals.

2 ARPEGGIOS

Virtually every jazz improviser makes use of arpeggios in their improvised solos, and Frisell is no exception. An arpeggio is, according to The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, ‘The sounding of the notes of a chord in succession rather than simultaneously; also, especially in keyboard music, the breaking or spreading of a chord.’ (Drabkin 2002: 63) The second part of this definition can be seen as being of particular interest in regard to Frisell, because whether using one or two notes at a time, much of what Frisell does can be described as the breaking or spreading of chords.

A useful analogy to describe the relationship between chords and arpeggios is provided by Goodrick (1987 : 18) ‘Arpeggio – like a melted chord, Chord – like a frozen arpeggio’. From this explanation it can be understood that the use of arpeggios is the most explicit way of conveying harmony through melody. In order to understand the distinction in the way Frisell uses arpeggios (figure 3), it is useful make comparisons with an arpeggio played by Montgomery (figure 4) in the same harmonic situation.

These examples share two noticeable qualities - the use of a chromatic approach note into the first chord tone, and the inexact spelling of the Bb7 chord. Neither Montgomery nor Frisell is actually playing a complete Bb7 arpeggio, as Montgomery is in fact playing an Ab triad, and Frisell has omitted the fifth of the chord. What Montgomery is achieving by playing an arpeggio from the flat seventh of the chord is the sound of the chord’s natural extensions, the ninth and eleventh. Frisell is leaving out the fifth of the chord, but playing the root, flat third and flat seventh, giving a more overt representation of the chord. It can also be observed that the interval structure used in each example is noticeably different. Where Montgomery makes use of intervals that are similar in size; a major third, minor third and perfect fourth, Frisell employs intervals that are contrasting in distance; minor sixth and major second. Also worth noting is that the Montgomery example ascends throughout, while the last interval of the Frisell example descends.

Figure 5 further demonstrates Frisell’s departure from the chord form approach. The bottom stave of this example displays a C7sus4, in frozen chord form state, as employed by Joe Pass. The top stave displays Frisell’s use of the same notes, but presents the harmony in melted or arpeggio form.¹

¹ Many of the manuscript examples throughout this paper feature two staves. The top stave is the transcribed excerpt from the original Frisell performance whilst the bottom stave is used to display the harmony in block form being inferred by the series of notes or intervals on the top stave.
The following series of examples serve to demonstrate the contrast between the arpeggio playing of Frisell and Montgomery. Points of difference are found in both the chord/scale degrees used and the intervallic distance between successive pitches. Frisell’s arpeggio playing is littered with wide intervals:

Montgomery, by contrast, seldom plays intervals larger than a perfect fourth:

The previous figures demonstrate that Montgomery will often play arpeggios from degrees of the chord other than the root. This approach expands the 4-part seventh chord and produces natural extensions including the ninth and thirteenth, which provide colour. Frisell’s approach is almost the opposite in that he will make greater use of the pitches contained within the basic seventh chord, which allows for a more unambiguous statement of the chord with less colour.
What can be deduced from these examples is something of a recurring theme. Almost all of the time, with the exception of Montgomery’s use of upper extensions of the chord, Frisell is using the same harmonic material as Montgomery and Pass, but presents it in a different way. Frisell either breaks this material up by arpeggiating common chord forms, spreads it out by displacing notes from common arpeggios, or employs a combination of both techniques. The result of this approach is a sound that is both unique and more open than the approach taken by Pass and Montgomery.

3 COUNTERPOINT

According to Grove music online, counterpoint is:

A term, first used in the 14th century, to describe the combination of simultaneously sounding musical lines according to a system of rules. It has also been used to designate a voice or even an entire composition (e.g. Vincenzo Galilei’s Contrapunti a due voci, 1584, or the contrapuncti of J.S. Bach’s Art of Fugue) devised according to the principles of counterpoint. (Sachs and Dalhaus : 2002)

From the standpoint of an improvising guitarist, this definition is not altogether useful. For the purpose of this paper Goodrick (1987: 18) provides a more useful definition. ‘Counterpoint means point against point (which could be note against note). Counterpoint also means melody against melody. The point against point angle is vertical. The melody against melody angle is horizontal.’ He provides further clarification:

The notes C and E are a major third apart. Play C, then E: That’s melody. Play C and E simultaneously: That’s the beginning of harmony. You can’t call it a chord. (It’s a C chord; no, it’s A minor; no, it’s F major 7th; no, it’s F#7 alt.; no, it’s Ab+M7; no it’s Bb Lydian, etc., etc.) It could be a lot of things. But what it is is a major third. (18)

Goodrick goes on to explain:

Counterpoint can be viewed as the study of intervals that helps to dissolve the rigid ways of thinking of melody as one thing and harmony as another … Counterpoint (or the study of intervals) is one of the most neglected and important aspects of the guitar. (18)

These are significant points, as guitarists often focus on either comping or soloing where comping involves the playing of chords, and soloing consists of single note lines. Frisell is able to break down any thought of these concepts being two separate entities by embracing a more holistic approach through the use of contrapuntal motion, of which, according to Goodrick there are four types:

Parallel: both voices move the same distance in the same direction.
Similar: both voices move different distances in the same direction.
Contrary: each voice moves any distance in the opposite direction.
Oblique: one voice moves while the other stays where it is. (18)
Frisell learnt to develop his playing of intervals from Jim Hall. He credits Hall with having a large influence on both his playing of intervals as well as his overall approach to the instrument. ‘When you get to the very basics of what I’m playing, I just stole it from Jim Hall – the voicings, the attitude of where to put things.’ (Frisell in Woodward 1985: 46). In the same interview Frisell goes on to describe more specifically what he learnt from Hall:

In the few lessons I took with Jim, part of what he had me do was harmonize scales – first just with triads, but then random intervals. In any key, if a certain group of intervals has a sound that I like, I can use that in the whole scale. (Frisell in Woodward 1985: 47)

On his instructional DVD “The Guitar Artistry of Bill Frisell” he goes further into the specifics of this intervallic approach.

talking about playing up and down on one string, if you start adding intervals to that, like go through all the intervals... I use that a lot...try find intervals that have a colour that you like or some quality.

Once the peculiarity of Frisell’s style of verbal communication is overcome a significant idea presents itself, harmonising a scale with a certain interval along each string set. This is also the way in which Goodrick suggests one can get started on developing a contrapuntal style on the guitar. What has also become apparent throughout this study is that Frisell has certain intervals that he prefers to use.

The first few examples of Frisell’s use of counterpoint are comprised of a succession of harmonic intervals or harmonic intervals combined with single notes that either explicitly outline or subtly suggest certain harmonies. This approach can be seen as an extension of arpeggiation, in that it involves the ‘breaking or spreading of chords’ (Drabkin 2002: 67) but using harmonic as well as melodic intervals. This kind of playing is one of the most defining elements of Frisell’s approach in comparison to the likes of Montgomery and Pass. Frisell’s extensive use of double-stops, and the presence of large, sometimes angular intervals provides stark contrast to the closely voiced chords and long, uninterrupted single-note lines played by the aforementioned masters.

Figure 12 is an example of the way in which Frisell will present simple harmonic material.

Figure 12.

Through the duration of each chord he outlines the notes of a basic dominant seventh chord in a unique manner. This allows Frisell to completely avoid the mindset that most other guitarists adopt when approaching similar subject matter. Upon seeing the chords in the above example many guitarists will think in terms of chord forms like those in figure 13:

Figure 13.
Frisell, however, will eschew this thought process as he describes, ‘instead of thinking of a chord form, I’ll have whatever scale is available and whatever intervallic combinations I like.’ (Frisell in Woodward 1985 : 47) This allows him to present harmonic information in a way that sounds more open and releases the player from restrictions that could otherwise limit their thinking.

Figure 14 displays another way in which Frisell is able to outline a Bb7 chord with intervals. The chord is nominally a Bb7sus4, but because this performance took place in a trio setting without piano Frisell is able to dictate the specifics of the chords freely without the unwanted dissonance that can result from multiple harmonic instruments. In this example he uses two intervals that are closely situated producing a resultant voicing that is nearly impossible to play in block form.

Figure 14.

An additional example of how Frisell communicates a dominant chord type is found in figure 15.

Figure 15.

This excerpt can be thought of as being based around the chord forms seen in figure 13, a first inversion dominant seventh chord in drop-2 voicing. Frisell breaks this common chord form into two intervals to produce a more open sound. In doing so he brings melodic qualities to this semi-melted chord, which is an advantage of this technique. This simple method of breaking up chords illustrates the essence of counterpoint; two melodies played simultaneously presenting a horizontal component to accompany the vertical aspect.
The following examples demonstrate Frisell’s use of chromatic approach notes. Approach notes not only provide melodic embellishment but also can aid the player in avoiding the restrictions brought about by chord form thinking. Chromatic approach notes are both a convenient melodic device on the instrument, as semitones easy to play and visualise on the horizontal plane of the fretboard, and an effective way of emphasising important notes within a phrase. Figures 16 and 17 display the way in which chromatic approach notes help to discourage chord form thinking.

Figure 16.

These examples feature a note, which in each case is a chord tone that is played at the same time as a chromatic approach note that resolves to another chord tone. This requires the player to finger the passage in a different way to how they usually would. Consequently, forcing them to think more in terms of intervallic combinations rather than block chords.

Figure 18 makes use of double chromatic approach tones. It also demonstrates how a contrapuntal approach can make simple harmony sound sophisticated.

Figure 18.

The space and wider intervals that are evident in Frisell’s arpeggio playing are also present in the way he plays counterpoint, as illustrated in the following examples. Firstly, in figure 19 Frisell has slightly melted the chord by breaking it into two parts.

Figure 19.
The resultant voicing is both incomplete and spread out containing only the root, flat seventh and twelfth (fifth) scale degrees. These can be thought of as dominant seventh chords with the third omitted, a similar voicing can be found in Pass’s solo (figure 20).

Figure 20.

There are subtle differences in the voicing itself and in the way that Pass plays the voicing. The third omitted in the Frisell example is included, along with the ninth and the root of the chord played simultaneously with the other voices. The resulting sound is thicker contrasting with Frisell’s open spacious approach.

The following figures further illustrate the contrast between the respective approaches of Frisell and Pass in terms of notes used and intervallic spacing. These examples of a II-V-I progression show that Frisell uses fewer voices than Pass, and the voices he does use are separated by larger intervals. In figure 21 Pass plays the root, flat seventh, flat third and the fifth of the Bm7 chord:

Figure 21.

Frisell, on the other hand, (figure 22) plays only the flat third and flat seventh of the same chord, which is a very common practice.

Figure 22.

What makes this use of flat third and flat seventh a point of interest is the voicing of the intervals. The bottom stave depicts the conventional intervallic spacing of a perfect fourth between these two notes, and the way that they are voiced in the Pass Bm7 chord. The excerpt from Frisell’s solo shows the top voice displaced up an octave resulting in the interval
of a perfect eleventh between the two voices, which is both uncommon and more open sounding. A comparison of the approach taken to communicating the E7#9 chord by Frisell (figure 22) and Pass (figure 23) serves to strengthen the above points.

Figure 23.

Frisell communicates the E7#9 chord using just two notes, the major third and sharpened ninth. Figure 23 displays the way Pass voices an E7#9 chord with the root in the bass as well as the flat seventh in between the third and sharpened ninth, again giving for a thicker texture in contrast with the openness of the Frisell approach.

3.1 Seconds

Seconds are difficult harmonic intervals to play on the guitar and require much greater physical distance than that employed on piano. As a result, major and minor seconds remain largely neglected as harmonic tools by guitarists. This is evidenced by the fact that there is no use of seconds in the Montgomery solo and that seconds appear for only one bar in the Pass solo. Despite the physical difficulties there are advantages to playing seconds as Frisell states, ‘that's a big sound with only a couple of notes.’ (Bill Frisell : The Guitar Artistry of Bill Frisell) Consequently Frisell makes extensive use of harmonic seconds.

The most common use of seconds in Frisell’s playing is the use of major seconds on a dominant seventh chord. The lower note in the interval corresponds to the flat seventh degree of the chord/scale and the higher note is the root (figures 24 and 25).

Figure 24.

Figure 25.

Interestingly, the only instance of seconds in Pass’s performance of “Blues in G” has major seconds operating in the same way (figure 26.)

Figure 26.

One way in which Frisell makes use of the minor second interval can be found in figure 27.

Figure 27.
In the previous example Frisell has made the interesting choice of playing the sharpened fourth and perfect fifth degrees of the C7 chord. This unusual combination of notes can be explained in terms of the way in which he thinks about harmony as intervallic combinations within a scale as opposed to chord forms. Rather than limit his options with the use of block voicings, Frisell’s approach employs particular intervals that possess a certain character to suit the musical situation.

3.2 Major Sevenths

Another of the qualities that sets Frisell apart from most other guitarists, with the exception of John Scofield, is his extensive use of major sevenths. Frisell often makes use of major sevenths in dominant chord situations in two ways. The first way he uses this interval is as the third and sharpened ninth degrees of a dominant 7#9 chord, as in figure 28 below.

Figure 28.

\[ F^{\#}7 \]

This gives the essence of the chord whilst retaining the characteristic openness of sound. Joe Pass would express the chord including the root and flat seventh, as can be seen in figure 29.

Figure 29.

The other way in which Frisell makes use of the major seventh interval is as the flat seventh and thirteenth degrees of the chord as in bar 2 of figure 30.

Figure 30.

\[ D^{\flat}7 \quad G^{\#}7 \]

This example can be contrasted with the Pass’ approach to the same chord type (figure 31). The notes used, namely, the root third and ninth result in a thicker texture and a fuller sound.

Figure 31.
The approach Frisell adopts when conveying dominant chords promotes a feeling of space. This approach highlights upper extensions and gives a different impression of the harmony as it makes reference to the more colouristic elements of the chord.

### 3.3 Sixths

When Frisell uses sixths, he plays them in parallel sequence:

**Figure 32.**

$$G^5$$

diatonically through a scale:

**Figure 33.**

or a combination of both:

**Figure 34.**

In “Blues in G” Pass also makes use of sixths in parallel sequence, but in a chromatic fashion, as can be seen in the first bar of the following example:

**Figure 35.**

Another feature that is in contrast with Frisell’s use of sixths can be found in the second bar of this example, where Pass arpeggiates a G triad in the top voice that is harmonised in diatonic sixths by the bottom voice. Pass is using interval leaps of major and minor thirds as opposed
to the steps, major and minor seconds, that are used all but exclusively in Frisell’s playing of harmonic sixths.

3.4 Fourths

Parallel sequence can also be found in Frisell’s use of perfect fourths, a harmonic interval not present in the discussed solos of Pass or Montgomery. This can be explained by the fact that the following two examples came from Frisell’s performance of “Eighty-one”, a song that has several perfect fourth intervals as a part of its harmonic and melodic structure. This detail may have influenced Frisell’s use of this interval as a part of his improvisation.

Figure 36 displays one way that Frisell employs parallel fourths.

Figure 36.

\[
\text{B}_b^7\text{sus}^4
\]

Figure 36. B\text{b}_7\text{sus}^4

Figure 37 features a similar parallel sequence of perfect fourth intervals, which is followed by a blues lick that makes use of oblique motion.

Figure 37.

\[
\text{F}_b^7\text{sus}^4
\]

Figure 37. F\text{b}_7\text{sus}^4

With the use of fourths Frisell is adding another colour to his playing in contrast to the inherent dissonance found in seconds and major sevenths and the consonance of sixths.

3.5 Oblique Motion

In the terms of reference given for counterpoint four types of contrapuntal motion were described, thus far the examples have consisted of the first two types, parallel and similar. In these three solos Frisell avoids contrary motion, however he does make use of oblique motion on more than one occasion. Oblique motion occurs when one voice moves whilst the other stays where it is as in figure 37 above and 38 below. These two examples are blues licks that consist of the root of the chord being held on the E-string whilst a melody that makes use of notes from the blues scale (1, b3, 4, b5, 5, b7) is played on the G and D strings.

Figure 38.

\[
\text{G}_b^7
\]

Figure 38. G\text{b}_7

Figure 39 displays a different use of oblique motion where Frisell uses successive harmonic intervals to suggest a chord. This example differs from the conventional approach in that the resultant voicing is lacking a defining degree (the third), and the intervals used are conventionally uncommon, a perfect fourth and a major second.
The last example of oblique motion is slightly less obvious than the preceding two, in that it features both parallel and similar motion. It can be seen that throughout this quaver passage a D is played, whilst a B-flat (played on beat 3) changes to a B natural (on beat 4).

3.6 Octaves

The name Wes Montgomery is synonymous with the playing of octaves which is a form of counterpoint and ‘became a trademark of the Montgomery style’ (Kernfeld/Porter 2002 : 799). Frisell also employs octaves, but in contrast to Montgomery whose improvisations may use constant octaves for a long period of time, Frisell uses octaves in short bursts to give punctuation to his phrases, as depicted in the following figures 41 and 42.

3.7 Setting up the IV chord

Frisell’s contrapuntal approach is displayed when he harmonically prepares for the change to the IV chord in the blues progression, which is typically a period of increased harmonic activity. This is a point of interest, as Frisell outlines this change in a number of unique ways throughout these three tunes.
Figure 43 demonstrates how Frisell inverts arpeggios and makes use of fourths chromatically to create tension including altered tones to set up the IV chord.

![Figure 43](image)

In Figure 44 Frisell makes use of two minor third intervals taken from the Bb altered or eight-note dominant scale. These resolve to another minor third interval, the third and fifth of the IV chord.

![Figure 44](image)

The following figures, though not contrapuntal, are of interest in that they display the other ways in which Frisell outlines this harmonic change. Bar 2 of figure 45 shows an eight-note dominant scale ascending in diatonic/parallel major sixths up to a point of resolution at the IV chord. At this point, Frisell is playing the harmonic interval of a major sixth containing the root and the sixth degree of the chord/scale. The use of this interval to define this chord type in isolation would seem an odd choice but is being used as a logical resolution to the line that has preceded it.

![Figure 45](image)

Figure 46 shows a basic diatonic approach that is made interesting and unique through Frisell’s trademark use of wide intervals. Diatonic tenths are employed ascending the scale from F, which resolves to a Bb an octave above, this idea is conceptually simple but very effective.

![Figure 46](image)
4 CONCLUSION

Over the last three decades Bill Frisell has produced a large and inspiring body of work and continues to take on new and unprecedented musical challenges. Being fortunate enough to attend Frisell's first concerts in this country I witnessed first hand what a powerful and unique performer he is. Part of this uniqueness I attribute to the way he presents harmony on the instrument.

Frisell's approach to presenting harmony on the guitar is unique and differs substantially from the conventional jazz guitar approach. Although he often applies the same harmonic materials as Montgomery and Pass he puts a new spin on this information by expressing these materials in unique ways. When playing arpeggios he will make use of wide intervals and varied intervallic structures which make the most basic harmonic materials sound fresh. His contrapuntal style makes use of both large and small consonant and dissonant intervals in ways that outline and colour implied harmonic bases. His flexible approach to seeing harmony as a combination of intervals within a scale rather than fixed chord forms enables him to produce many sounds not heard in the improvisations of Montgomery and Pass. This approach also allows him to communicate harmonic information that would otherwise be very difficult if not impossible when operating within the confines of conventional thinking. His frequent use of certain interval types, in particular seconds and major sevenths creates further contrast between Frisell's sound and the sounds generated by a conventional approach. In these performances there is a large body of evidence to support the fact that Bill Frisell presents harmony in unique and exciting ways, providing inspiration for fellow guitarists.

This study into the guitar style of Bill Frisell has been of great benefit to me. Having to sit down and spend countless hours with someone's recordings and learning not only the notes they play but also the nuances and feeling they put into the music is an incomparable learning experience that produces results unattainable by any other means. My research has involved a trip to Melbourne to see Frisell play, and the collection of Frisell recordings, DVD's and journal articles. This contributed to a greater understanding of not only the subject matter, but a more complete overview of his work style and personality. A number of practical benefits have also been attained from this study. The first being a greater understanding of the character of different intervals and the way they can be used to either imply harmony or colour an implied harmonic base, particularly useful in a trio setting. I learnt the value of exploring fundamental materials in a more complete way in order to discover the range of possibilities available within familiar musical devices. Lastly I discovered that Frisell's unique approach could have only come about through a highly developed musical ear and a thorough knowledge of the instrument. Which is doubtless a result of many years of study and hard work, providing me with an insight and focus as to what is required to play at this level of mastery.
5 APPENDICES

5.1 Eighty-one Transcription

Bill Frisell: Eighty-One
5.2 Raise Four Transcription

Bill Frisell: Raise Four

\[ \text{\textcopyright 2010} \]
6.1 References Cited


6.2 Works Cited


Blues In G. Roland Leone. Mel Bay 1990. Taken from book: Joe Pass Live!!

BILL STEWART – UNIQUELY TRADITIONAL

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE ORIGINS OF BILL STEWART’S STYLE

[Kit]

B. Mus.

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Honour Degree of Bachelor of Music (Jazz)

October
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DRUM NOTATION KEY

- **Hi-Hat**
  - Played with foot

- **Open Hi-Hat**
  - Played with foot

- **Bass Drum**

- **Floor Tom**

- **Snare Drum**

- **Rack/Mounted Tom**

- **Hi-Hat**

- **Open Hi-Hat**

- **Ride Cymbal**

- **Crash Cymbal**

- **Rim Shot/Cross Stick**

- **Buzz Stroke**
INTRODUCTION

Within the Jazz tradition, many musicians have shaped the music by introducing new concepts and techniques to create sounds that have been innovative. It is important to understand that these sounds weren’t suddenly established. They were developed over time and inspired by ideas that had been used in the past.

While inspiration can come from all aspects of life and music, the musical influence that drummers have on each other is immense because no other instrument has the same capabilities. As an instrument with no formal melodic facility, it has meant that much of the development of drum kit language has been derived from ideas that drummers have played in the past.

This study investigates how contemporary jazz drummer Bill Stewart has developed some of the main aspects of his sound. In particular, it analyses the connection between Stewart and his major drumming influences to determine the origins of some of his signature phrases and techniques.

Stewart stated that, “I try not to copy anyone’s signature licks or ideas. I try not to obviously copy anyone, but what I do does not come out of a vacuum. It comes out of a tradition, of which many great players have added their own personal take on things… I am certain that the influence of some of my favourite drummers can be heard (in my own playing) and I personally know exactly when it occurs in a given moment”¹

With this knowledge it is hoped that a better understanding of Stewart’s style will be attained, as many great drummers and musicians have said that to truly understand an individual’s sound, one must first investigate their influences. Tony Williams once said that “you can’t just learn a lick; you have to learn where it came from (and) what caused the drummer to play that way.”²

Through a personal communication Stewart directly cited a short list of drummers as being major influences. This list included Roy Haynes, Tony Williams, Elvin Jones, Philly Joe Jones and Jack DeJohnette, who have all been regarded as innovators in the development of jazz drumming. Each one of these individuals has/had their own approach to the drum kit as well as certain ‘licks’ and techniques that are associated with them. Through the use of transcribing, many

¹ Stewart, Bill. 2009. Personal communication . 5 July
of these 'licks' and techniques have been adopted as well as expanded upon by contemporary jazz drummers. Among them is Bill Stewart.

**BIOGRAPHY**

Bill Stewart was born in Des Moines, Iowa, in October of 1966. Despite having limited access to live Jazz, he was exposed to music from an early age through his family. “My dad was a trombonist and also taught instrumental music in schools. My mother was a choir director, and my grandmother taught piano lessons. So we had a lot of music around the house,” he explains.³

At age 7 Stewart received his first drum set and began to teach himself by playing along to his father's records. He also learned to read music through piano lessons.⁴ For six months through high school he played five or six nights a week in a pop band while continuing to absorb jazz influences from records. He continued his studies at the University of Northern Iowa, studying classical percussion before transferring to William Patterson College in New Jersey. It was here that his abilities flourished, under the direction of such instructors as Horace Arnold, Eliot Zigmund, Rufus Reid, Harold Mabern and Joe Lovano.⁵

After graduating with a degree in jazz studies and performance in 1988, Stewart moved to New York where he worked as a freelance musician. It was at this point that he established a lengthy collaboration with keyboardist Larry Goldings and was given the opportunity to tour internationally and record with Goldings’ organ trio.⁶ While performing in a small club in Manhattan with this trio, Stewart was noticed by sax legend Maceo Parker, who booked him for a recording session after his drummer had cancelled at last minute. Stewart’s performance on the album, *Roots Revisited* gained him a position in Parker’s touring band and led to another two recording sessions with the saxophonist and the chance to back James Brown on an HBO special in 1991.⁷

---

Stewart began to show the full extent of his capabilities in 1989 when he released his first solo album *Think Before You Think*, with bassist Dave Holland and previous instructor Joe Lovano. Shortly after, he joined guitarist John Scofield, forming a band in 1990.\(^8\) “I loved playing with Maceo and it was a great experience for me,” Stewart states, “When John asked me to join his quartet, that was maybe more the kind of music that I had been preparing myself to play. It played more into my hand as far as what I could bring to the table.”\(^9\) After four and a half years with Scofield, Stewart left the band. “I wasn’t doing too many other things then,” he says. “I wanted to do some other things, to be free to pursue some new directions and hopefully grow musically as a result.”\(^10\) These new directions included two more solo albums, *Snide Remarks* (1995) and *Telepathy* (1997)\(^11\), which showcased Stewart as a bandleader as well as a competent writer. He states, “I don’t lead bands very often, maybe not as often as I’d like, but in doing all these CDs I tried to come up with interesting combinations of musicians whose abilities would compliment each other and I wrote or chose material with them in mind.”\(^12\)

Following the completion of *Telepathy*, Stewart continued to play as a sideman for artists such as Pat Martino, Larry Goldings, Michael Brecker and Pat Metheny, recording a number of albums as well as performing live.\(^13\) It wasn’t until 2005 that Stewart self-released his next solo album, *Keynote Speakers*. Staying faithful to his idea of combining interesting combinations of musicians, this trio album included the unusual combination of Larry Goldings on Organ and Kevin Hays on piano. The same trio also featured on Stewart’s latest release to date, *Incandescence.*\(^14\)

**DEVELOPMENT OF MOTIFS AND POLYRHYTHMS**

Stewart’s use of motifs and polyrhythms is one of the most recognizable traits of his soloing style. He bases many of his solos on a handful of ideas that he develops and layers over an extended period, often outlining different sections of

\(^9\)...
\(^12\) Brannon, Mike. Interviewer. “Bill Stewart Interview.”
\(^14\) ...
the form. Not only does he use them to create a sense of structure, but also to create tension.

This section will compare a number of Stewart’s motivic and polyrhythmic ideas to those of his drumming influences with the aim of displaying a direct connection. It will also explain how he has put his own ‘stamp’ on a number of Bebop phrases.

**MOTIFS**

**This section refers to the transcribed solo APPENDIX 1.**
- The letters in brackets throughout the text show where particular phrases occur within the full transcription.

The following excerpts contained in this section are only single examples of particular motifs but reflect motifs that occur frequently within the solo language of the musicians stated.

The first motif (A) occurs in bar three and is a simple three beat motif that was commonly played by many Bebop drummers. The three beat motif itself has been used in some way by nearly every notable jazz drummer with the concept even outdating jazz itself. For this reason, it is hard to determine who the first drummer to apply it to the drum kit was, or who made it popular. As the name suggests, the three beat motif is created when groupings that are three beats long are played over a 4/4 pulse.

**Motif A**

In this case it seems likely that Stewart has used a common idea from Tony Williams which involves both hands being used in unison on the snare and the cymbal, while the hi-hat fills in the spaces. Figure 1 is from a Tony Williams solo on the tune *Love for Sale* (1976) and shows a similar use of the hands interacting with the hi-hat.

**Figure 1**
Figure 2 is another excerpt from a Tony Williams solo on *Seven Steps to Heaven* (1963). It shows him using a very similar three beat motif to Stewart’s in which the hi-hat is playing the same role.

**Figure 2**

Philly Joe Jones was also heard playing this three beat motif commonly throughout his solos. Figure 2.1, shown below, is from the track *Billy Boy* (1958) and shows the style of phrasing which was more typical of the Bebop era. In this case the bass drum takes the place of the hi-hat. It was common for Roy Haynes and Elvin Jones to interpret this motif in the same way.

**Figure 2.1**

As seen in all three examples, the motif has been displaced differently. This is a common practice as it allows the drummer to create a slightly different variation while using the same pattern.

When the motif is combined with Williams’ sticking pattern they form the pattern that Stewart plays in bar three of his solo. It is therefore very likely that he was influenced by these ideas.

The next motif that Stewart plays (B) occurs between bars twelve and fifteen.

**Motif B**
This phrase resembles a motif heard in Tony William’s solo on *Love for Sale*. Like the example in Figure 1 he uses the combination of the snare and cymbal in unison. This can be seen in Figure 3.

**Figure 3**

\[
\begin{array}{cccccccc}
\cdot & \cdot & \cdot & \cdot & \cdot & \cdot & \cdot & \cdot \\
\cdot & \cdot & \cdot & \cdot & \cdot & \cdot & \cdot & \cdot \\
\end{array}
\]

In both Stewart’s and Williams’ solos, the upbeats of two and four are accented, giving a similar effect. The difference in Stewart’s interpretation is that he has layered the pattern with a Roy Haynes style ride cymbal pattern and split the above example between the bass drum and snare. This makes the accents more dominant.

One way that Stewart’s playing differs from many Bebop players is his use of dynamics within his phrasing. His gentle touch on the drums brings out a clear, articulate sound that is contrasted by striking rim shots to create staccato accents.

In bar 15 the previous Williams influenced motif quickly makes a transition into a crotchet triplet phrase (C) that is easily comparable to Philly Joe Jones who regularly used crotchet triplet groupings.

**Figure 4**

\[
\begin{array}{cccccccc}
\cdot & \cdot & \cdot & \cdot & \cdot & \cdot & \cdot & \cdot \\
\cdot & \cdot & \cdot & \cdot & \cdot & \cdot & \cdot & \cdot \\
\end{array}
\]

Figure 4, from John Coltrane’s *Lazy Bird* (1957), shows Joe Jones playing exactly the same triplet grouping as Stewart. The three note groupings are displaced as to extend the phase over the bar line. Though it is orchestrated differently than Stewart’s version it gives the same effect, as there is still the three note combination between the snare and other drums.

The Joe Jones phrase in Figure 4.1, from *Billy Boy* is another example of a similar motif, only this time the orchestration is closer to Stewart’s.

**Figure 4.1**
Stewart hasn’t so much developed this phrase from Joe Jones but has rather changed it to better fit the direction of his solo. The use of the ride cymbal and particularly the three note groupings looks as if it has been developed from the previous motif.

Many of Stewart’s solos seem to be very thought out and organised. Like many of Elvin Jones’ solos they seem to follow the harmonic and melodic structure of the tune however Stewart states the time much more accurately than Jones. The placement and development of motifs helps to create this effect. While some motifs Stewart plays are only very short, he makes references to them throughout the solo.

One example of this is the original three beat motif (A) that he plays in bar three. This is repeated briefly in bars twenty two and thirty nine. While these references are only short they show that the original idea was not just a random phrase. It was a thought out idea.

A similar occurrence happens between bars twenty two and thirty three with a motif that Stewart develops over this period (D). The original idea seems to stem from a previous motif that is played between bar twelve and fourteen. There is one main difference that stands out from the original motif. This is the use of the ‘buzz’ stroke, which is commonly used by Stewart throughout many of his solos and comping alike.

The buzz stroke, or roll was frequently used in Jazz music that came out of New Orleans. Particularly the second line street beat, which combines a swing feel with a military style march.

One player who adapted the use of the buzz stroke in bebop and post-bop style Jazz music was Roy Haynes. His frequent use of this meant that it became known as one of his signature sounds. Figure 5 is an example of Haynes using the buzz stroke from the track *Played Twice* (1960) on the album “The Straight Horn of Steve Lacy.”

Figure 5
These ‘buzz’ strokes are created when the drum stick is pushed onto the drum head. The sound is quite short and therefore can be used rhythmically. It is not to be confused with the longer ‘buzz’ roll, which is continuous and has no rhythmical value.

When asked about developing a specific idea from a drumming influence, Stewart stated that “I can think of some things that Roy Haynes did with little buzz rolls, but when I do it, I might use a different rhythm than he would… and also the sound of the roll is a bit different than what he gets.”

While it is likely that the motif at section (D) has been influenced by Tony Williams and Roy Haynes, the way in which Stewart develops it is very unique to his own style. Firstly, the period of time taken to fully develop this motif is very uncommon of bebop and Post-Bop drummers, who would generally move between ideas very quickly. He develops the idea over a full twelve bars, constantly building tension until he ends on beat one of the new form, reinforcing the idea that his solos are very considered and depict the harmonic peaks and troughs.

What is also very interesting is the fact that the original rhythmic phrase is altered and developed into a longer motif. This technique of altering motifs is commonly used by Stewart. It creates a surprise for the listener because the pattern is expected to continue after it has been stated a number of times. He says, “I’ll keep a constant and improvise over that.” In this case the constant sound is the snare, bass drum and ride combination as well as the buzz stroke. With the repetition of these sounds, the motif is able to change rhythmically while still staying recognisable.

The next motif (E) occurs in bar thirty seven but is not immediately recognisable. This is because it does not seem to repeat. On closer observation however, it can be seen to be virtually identical to bar five of the solo. This in itself is only a small connection, though it is apparent that this motif is played at the same point in the form each time. This reiterates that Stewart is thinking like a melodic player and is playing close attention to the form.

15 Stewart, Bill. 2009. Personal communication. 5 July
Between bars forty two and forty three Stewart plays a short phrase (F) involving inverted double strokes between the snare drum and bass drum. This is a typical Bebop phrase used regularly by Philly Joe Jones, as seen below in figure 6, from the track Jazz me Blues (1957).

**Figure 6**

![Drum Notation](image)

Like many of the previous motifs, Stewart revisits this phrase, repeating it in bar forty nine. This time however, he develops it further by doubling up the notes played on the snare and uses this variation to create a polyrhythm (G). The inverted double-stroke sound remains consistent as the bass drum rhythm does not change.

Figure 7 is an example of Roy Haynes developing a phrase in a similar way on the track Reflection from his first trio Album “We Three” (1958). Essentially the pattern remains the same as the bass drum consistently plays the same rhythm. Haynes uses an identical orchestration around the drum kit while simply fitting more notes between the bass drums.

**Figure 7**

![Drum Notation](image)

In the case of Stewart’s solo, a six beat motif is created as he simply leaves a short rest to separate the patterns. This motif is developed in the same way as the previous extended motif (D). He keeps a constant use of the original inverted double stroke idea while changing the orchestration around the drum kit, creating a rolling tom sound that resembles that of Elvin Jones.

To make the motif even more complex, Stewart reverses the pattern at bar fifty seven. This seems to be another way of building tension as it creates an unexpected surprise and leaves the listener guessing when the end of the form will come.
POLYRHYTHMS

Polyrhythms occur very frequently throughout Stewart’s solos. He says “I’ve worked on and developed the polyrhythms and can do a few variations on them. I’ve practiced those – I didn’t just play them one day. I try to play them in a different way, though.” Many of the patterns that he uses are similar to bebop phrases although he will add or subtract a note to form an odd grouping.

This section refers to the transcription APPENDIX 2

The pattern that Stewart plays at bar twenty six is orchestrated around the drum kit to form groupings of seven. He then resolves this pattern, going into the new section, so that it starts at the same place on beat one of the new section. The rhythm remains the same throughout the entire polyrhythm.

Tony Williams and Elvin Jones explored similar ways of creating polyrhythms while keeping the rhythm constant, however this was usually based on three beat motifs. This is shown in Figure 8 below, with an excerpt from Tony Williams’ solo on Seven Steps to Heaven.

Figure 8

While the hand and foot combination forms a simple three beat motif, the orchestration transforms it into a six beat pattern. The same technique can be seen in Figure 9 from Deed-Lee-Yah, on Stewart’s album “Think Before You Think” (Full transcription at APPENDIX 4). Patterns of ten are formed using accents and the melodic orchestration around the drum kit while the rhythm remains constant.

Figure 9

While it is apparent that many motifs used by Stewart bare a strong resemblance to Bebop phrases and common traits of his drumming influences, he creates his own voice by the way he plays these phrases and constructs his solos. His ideas are presented very accurately with a strong sense of metronomic and dynamic precision. A characteristic that is not evident amongst many Bebop players.

This precision is also discernible in his dedication towards the song structure, in terms of form and harmonic framework. Elvin Jones displayed a similar mannerism within many of his solos, though, he rarely stated it as clearly as Stewart often does.

BROKEN TIME

During the 1960’s, the role of the drummer in a small group jazz setting was changing. Influences such as modal compositions encouraged more interaction between rhythm sections and soloists as the focus was taken away from complex chord progressions. Also, the introduction of free jazz, involving collective soloing and melodic themes without any relevance to a particular key centre or bar lines gave the drummer a more predominant role in the ensemble, rather than just a time-keeper. To understand broken time, one must first look at the standard patterns commonly played during the Bebop period.

FIGURE 10

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Figure 10 outlines the repetitive ride cymbal and hi-hat patterns common to a Bebop time feel. While the snare drum and bass drum were used for comping, this pattern often stayed very consistent.

One of the main aspects of a broken time feel involves breaking up this pattern, which is a sound associated with modern or contemporary jazz drumming. This concept was brought to light by Roy Haynes. John Riley states that “Roy is often cited as the first truly modern drummer, as he was a pioneer in breaking up the jazz cymbal rhythm.”

The breaking up of the pattern in Figure 10 involves mixing up the order of quarter notes and eighth notes to create many interweaving patterns. This allows the drummer to use the ride cymbal as a comping device in association with the snare and bass drum.

Figure 11, below, is an example of Roy Haynes breaking up the ride cymbal pattern from *Matrix*, the opening track on Chick Corea’s album, “Now he Sings, Now he Sobs” (1968).

This technique utilizes the ride cymbal as both a time keeping and comping device. By breaking up the pattern, the drummer is able to play off rhythmic ideas and motifs suggested by the soloist.

Not only did Haynes develop the use of the broken ride cymbal pattern but he also made use of the hi-hat as a comping device and a way of breaking up the traditional pattern. The resulting feel was less emphatic on the underlining pulse as the time feel was now being spread around different parts of the drum kit. This created more of an ‘open’ sound.

Later, this approach was developed by Elvin Jones and Tony Williams whereby the cymbal, snare drum, bass drum and hi-hat all shared the role of keeping time and interacting. Jones is quoted as saying, “It is one instrument, and I would

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hasten to say that I take that single idea as the basis for my whole approach to the drums.”

The ‘one-instrument’ concept, developed by Haynes, Jones and Williams can clearly be heard in Stewart’s playing and there is a definite sound of openness whenever he is playing time. He develops this sound even further by experimenting with many different textures. These include: rim clicks, striking rim shots, ‘trashy’ cymbals and ‘buzz’ strokes.

One notable quality in his feel is his use of layers to create a conversation within the drum kit. Not only does he interact with the soloist and rhythm section but also within the drum kit. In many situations, there are two or three sounds taking the role of keeping the time, however, they may be overlapping one-another to accentuate the pulse or a rhythmic figure. Figure 12 is an example of how Stewart breaks up the time around the whole drum kit.

**Figure 12**

The ride cymbal patterns that Stewart uses are very similar to those of Roy Haynes. The reverse of the traditional pattern is commonly used, as are simple crotchets to outline the pulse.

Stewart’s comping is often very busy. Despite this he still manages to create a sound that is very open, yet still drives the music along. This type of playing strongly resembles Jack Dejohnette, who also manages to make the music sound open, regardless of how much he is comping.

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Figure 13 is a similar example of DeJohnette’s comping and broken time feel on the track *Picture 3* from his album “Pictures” (1976).

**Figure 13**

![Drum pattern](image)

In both excerpts, the hi-hat seems to be used as a way of comping rather than keeping time.

Stewart’s concept of playing time seems to revolve mainly around the ideas that are being conveyed by the soloist. He says that “When I play with people, I *listen* to the other musicians. Even when I listen to records… I guess the key is to make the group sound good. That’s a drummer’s first priority; everything else comes after that.”

Not only does he support the ideas of the other musicians in the ensemble but he influences the direction of the music by contributing and pushing ideas.

**USE OF THE HI-HAT WHEN SOLOING**

Not only was the ‘one-instrument’ concept applied to playing ‘time’, but it was also adapted for use when improvising. This meant that the hi-hat gained a more equal role within the drum kit. Prior to the Bebop era it had been used for improvisation however the 1960’s brought about many new ways in which it was integrated into drum kit solos.

Independence of the left foot was one of the main developments in soloing which meant drummers started to substitute the hi-hat into phrases that were usually played on the bass drum. Before this, a common use of the hi-hat was simply to...

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keep time when soloing. This is shown in Figure 14 from *Let’s Cool One* (1958) played by Philly Joe Jones.

**Figure 14**

![Musical notation for Figure 14]

The next example (Figure 15) from *Shiny Stockings* (1968), shows Elvin Jones incorporating the hi-hat into his solo. He would commonly create patterns by alternating between the bass drum and hi-hat. This can be seen in bars two and four.

**Figure 15**

![Musical notation for Figure 15]

Stewart often uses the hi-hat as a substitute for the bass drum. Like Jones, he commonly places it on the off-beat like in Figure 16.

**Figure 16**

![Musical notation for Figure 16]

Stewart has since developed the notion of left foot independence further by playing repetitive patterns with the hi-hat and soloing over the top. He says “I like to layer one rhythm over another. I’ll play off-beats on the hi-hats and expand from that.”

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The following transcriptions show a number of examples of Stewart playing off-beats with the hi-hat.

1. From the track *S.C.O* on the album “I Can See Your House from Here” (1994) - Full transcription at APPENDIX 3

   - Full Transcription at APPENDIX 5

Stewart’s independence between limbs is a strong aspect of his playing and is one reason for the use of so many different layers throughout his solos. His left foot independence is particularly noticeable as his hi-hat is often heard creating polyrhythms under his solos and therefore manipulating how his phrases are heard.

Figure 17, taken from *Deed-Lee-Yah*, shows him playing groupings of three on the hi-hat while he layers his solo on top. This creates what is known as metric modulation and will be explained in more detail in the next section.

**Figure 17**
IMPLIED TIME AND METRIC MODULATION

While the idea of implied time and metric modulation has been around for many years, it wasn’t until the 1960’s when rhythm sections began to explore it within the context of Jazz. Tony Williams and Elvin Jones were the first to introduce this concept to the drum kit.23

Implied time and metric modulation occur when one pulse is superimposed over another. The most common instance is when a drummer or rhythm section plays in a double-time feel, where the tempo continues at the same rate despite sounding twice as fast. Just as common is the half-time feel, where the impression of the tempo being half its original rate is heard.

The revolutionary sound that Tony Williams and Elvin Jones brought to light was a type of metric modulation that seemed to have no relevance to the original tempo. John Riley explains that these metric modulations “would really capture the imaginations of the other musicians and their audience by creating the impression of a sudden shift into a completely new tempo.”24 In actual fact these new tempos where based on logical superimpositions.

A common method of time shifting involves the use of crotchet triplets to create what is known as a “6 over 4" feel. This gives the impression that the time is speeding up dramatically. It is created when the crotchet triplets are subdivided into groups of two.

Figure 18 demonstrates; firstly a transition into crotchet triplets and then, into the 6 over 4 feel.

Figure 18

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24 ...
The 6 over 4 feel is made even more obvious when the traditional ride swing pattern is played over the triplets. This is shown in Figure 19.

**Figure 19**

![Figure 19](image)

Tony Williams would often imply a 6 over 4 feel in this way, sometimes adding the snare and toms to create more of an afro Cuban feel. On the track *Capricorn* from Pat Metheny’s album “99-00” (1999-2000), Stewart plays this afro Cuban pattern shown in Figure 20. The snare and tom parts imitate the traditional conga pattern while the ride plays minim triplets. The major difference is that Stewart’s hi-hit provides the main voice in the 6 over 4 pulse.

**Figure 20**

![Figure 20](image)

In many cases Stewart’s hi-hat will often introduce the metric modulation, which is later stated more clearly by supporting patterns played with his other limbs. When playing time he often keeps the original pulse on the ride cymbal while layering the metric modulation over the top. During his solos he creates he couples the use of metric modulation with strong rhythmic and melodic motifs to clearly state the new pulse. This builds tension and can be very confusing.

There is no doubt that this type of metric modulation is most evident within his playing. He says “I hear a lot of things in 6/8 with dotted-quarter notes. Sometimes I put that against the 4/4.”

Another type of metric modulation that Stewart utilises when soloing is a way of manipulating certain rhythmic phrases associated with Elvin Jones. In Figure 21, from *(Go) Get It*, the opening track on Pat Metheny’s “99-00” Stewart plays an example of this Elvin Jones style metric modulation. Notice that

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the grouping in the first bar remains the same in the second bar, however, the use of the triplets slows down the pattern, giving the impression that the pulse has changed.

**Figure 21**

![Figure 21](image1)

Figure 22 below shows a common way that Elvin Jones would use this technique.

**Figure 22**

![Figure 22](image2)

Stewart has taken the basic concept to create the same effect, even though a different motif is used.

Another way of using metric modulation that was common throughout the Bebop era was the 3/4 over 4/4 feel. This sound uses the same concept as the three beat motif as it suggest that the pulse has changed to three beats per bar, while the tempo remains the same.

Figure 23, taken from *Go Get It* shows two types of metric modulation. Firstly, Stewart implies a double-time feel using the hi-hat. After stating this he uses the bass drum and ride cymbal pattern to outline a 3/4 over 4/4 feel. Each pattern is layered on top of one another, with the resulting feel creating groupings of six which are twice as fast. While both of these ideas were explored by drummers in the past, the use of combining them is something that Stewart has explored and developed.

**Figure 23**

![Figure 23](image3)
While many more types of metric modulation exist, the ones explored in this section are the most common in Stewart’s playing. They occur regularly on many of his recordings and take a number of different forms as he strives to play patterns differently every time.

CONCLUSION

There are many people who question whether Jazz is still developing, but with musicians such as Bill Stewart, who have brought their own sound and flavours to the music, it seems likely that it is.

Keyboardist Kevin Hays said that “The amazing thing to me about Bill, is that he had that Bill-ness from the beginning. You could hear the Tony, you could hear the Roy, but he really put it together in his own way.”

This study has outlined a number of aspects of Stewart’s playing that are common to his drumming influences however this quote states that despite having these connections, he still has his own sound.

Stewart himself states that “I’m aware that there are things I do that are unique to me and some things I’ve gotten from other drummers that are not unique at all. Those that are unique I try to develop; maybe that’s how a style is formed. You find your own slant. As long as I don’t play those things the same way every time it’s a good thing.”

The sections in this paper outline a number of stylistic facets that are prominent within Stewart’s playing and that have become sounds that many musicians associate with him.

It is apparent that through many years of listening to other drummers, Stewart has adopted some aspects of their styles, though he has developed these styles along with his own ideas to create a unique sound.

His close attention to song structures, along with strong melodic and rhythmic ideas throughout his playing outline his concept that playing musically comes before anything else. As well as this, his playing has the spontaneity and

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excitement of a musician who is not only listening and reacting but leading the direction of the music with his own ideas.

While still following in the Jazz tradition, there is no doubt that Bill Stewart has brought his own voice to the music he plays.
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LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: Solo transcription played by Bill Stewart on *What Do You Want?* (Metheny, Pat. 1999-2000. 99-00: Track 8)

APPENDIX 2: Solo transcription played by Bill Stewart on *One Way To Be.* (Scofield, John. 1994. *I Can See Your House From Here:* Track 10)

APPENDIX 3: Solo transcription played by Bill Stewart on *S.C.O.* (Metheny, Pat. 1994. *I Can See Your House From Here:* Track 8)

APPENDIX 4: Solo Transcription played by Bill Stewart on *Deed-Lee-Yah.* (Cohen, Marc. 1989. *Think Before You Think*)

APPENDIX 5: Solo Transcription played by Bill Stewart on *Sister Sadie.* (Silver, Horace. 1991. *Mo’ Roots*)
What Do You Want? (Bill Stewart solo)
One Way To Be (Bill Stewart Solo)

\( \text{\textcopyright } \text{Transcribed by } \text{Bill Stewart Solo} \)

\( \text{(As played on "I Can See Your House From Here": 1994)} \)

\( \text{\textcopyright } \text{Bill Stewart Solo} \)
S.C.O (Bill Stewart Solo)

As played on "I Can See Your House From Here" 1994

Transcribed by
Improvising The Song

[Steinway]

[Steinway]
Improvising the Song by [Steinway]

Appendix 1 – Celebrity – Charlie Parker.

I would like to record my thanks to my teacher Mr Bruce Hancock for his guidance and direction. And my thanks also to Miss Jodie Martin for her critiquing of this essay.
Has the jazz musician’s continual and insatiable desire for more harmonic, rhythmic and melodic complexity been at the expense of lyrical melodic creation in improvisation? Is it in keeping with the jazz tradition to revert to methods originally evidenced by early jazz musicians and utilise aspects of a song’s written melody for improvisational material?

Since the bebop movement of the 1940s, jazz improvisation has faced an ongoing struggle against monotony. An overwhelming disregard of a song’s individual components, and over-concentration on its harmonic progression alone, has, at times, caused widespread frustration amongst listeners and jazz-musicians alike. In the pre-bebop era, jazz improvisers would commonly utilise a song’s melody in improvisation to the utmost. In fact, often an improvisation was simply a variation and elaboration of the original melody. The more academic approach of bebop, however, with all its radical innovations of harmony, rhythm and chromaticism, meant (to an extent) degradation of the art of melody. It should be noted that many of the great jazz improvisers came from the bebop era. Although their melodies may have often been impersonal to the particular song, their sense of rhythm, their knowledge of harmonic progression and superimposition, as well as the spirit in which they played often made up for what else may have been lacking.

Fortunately, in more recent times, jazz improvisers have come full circle and begun to utilise (once again) a tune’s melody to form a part of their improvisations. The intention of this paper is to examine and promote new, creative and lyrical melodies in improvisation, not merely reproductions or alterations of a song’s original melody.

By comparing improvisations of early jazz masters with some of the modern era greats, this paper aims to determine whether constant innovation can be a detriment to lyrical and song-specific melodic creation.

Jazz is a complex music to define. It encompasses a vast number of styles; however, characteristics of one may be inconsistent or unimportant to another. Improvisation, although evident in other styles of music, is considered an important element of jazz. From the earliest jazz recordings, the element of improvisation was certainly evident and, among other features, was a notable difference between jazz and other musics. “Dictionary definitions of [improvisation] invariably stress the idea of composing or performing ‘extempore’, without preparation.” The emphasis on composition has often been ignored by jazz musicians of the post-bop era (music from the 1950s onwards). Improvisers of the pre-bebop era, however, harnessed the ideas found within a song’s original melody and, with their own creativity, improvised according to them. Pianist Dr. Billy Taylor, in a National Public Radio interview, is quoted as

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saying, “the whole idea of improvisation for most people, is that you take [the] melody and play around [it].”\(^3\)

_Improvising the Song_ is not an established principle, and the name is by no means a technical term. In the author’s opinion, however, the name explains the concept quite precisely. Improvising the Song encompasses a number of different factors, whose aim is to present a total composition; a performance in which the improvisation can hardly be distinguished from the pre-composed melody. This concept begins most importantly with a song’s original melody. Through analysis of its intervals, rhythms, and tonalities, for example, the improviser can establish a starting point for improvisation, choosing to either replicate those intervals, rhythms, and tonalities or to avoid them for their desired effect. A song’s harmony is an important determinant for its conveyed emotion. Modal compositions, for example, will convey a noticeably different mood to a bebop composition, simply because of the difference in harmonic resolution.

Pat Metheny’s _Question and Answer_ is a fine example of easily recognisable harmony, as shown in an excerpt below.

**Question and Answer**

If we were to analyse this part of the composition (the ‘A’ section) with the intention of applying the Improvising the Song principles to it, we could comment on a variety of elements. Perhaps, we should first begin with the melody. Intervally the melody is fairly scalar; however, the interval of a fourth is important (although it only occurs several times) as this is the opening interval of each eight bar section. From here, each eight bars take an alternate course, with the first eight bars moving down by step to bar 2, while the second section moves up by steps to bar 9. This excerpt is rhythmically strong, with an array of short and long note values, binary and non-binary rhythms, as well as cross-meter groupings. The repetition of them in each eight bar section highlights their importance; reflecting on them in improvisation would help to create a consistency in sound. _Question and Answer_ is a modal composition. This excerpt is written entirely in D Dorian; however, Metheny is able to accurately obtain harmonic

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colour, tension and release through his harmonic progression. Once again, improvising in a modal fashion (as opposed to playing the chord changes) would result, in a consistent sound, whether or not the player remains in D Dorian for the entirety of their improvisation.

*Question and Answer*’s harmony is incredibly melodic within itself, largely due to varying line progression within it. The excerpt could be analysed on both a macro and micro level. The first four bars, for example, contain a fairly common line progression moving up by semitone from the fifth degree to the seventh, as shown below:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Dm} & \quad \text{Dm}^b6 & \quad \text{Dm}^b6 & \quad \text{Dm}^b7 \\
\end{align*}
\]

Similarly, analysing the second eight bars could produce a line progression such as:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Dm} & \quad \text{Dm}^b6 & \quad \text{Dm}^b6 & \quad \text{Cm}^7 & \quad \text{F} & \quad \text{B}^7 & \quad \text{B}^7 & \quad \text{A}^7 & \quad \text{Dm} \\
\end{align*}
\]

Both of these examples are, of course, only one possibility of potential line progressions within this harmony, and they have been selected purely because of their independent melodic strength. An improviser could utilise these line progressions extensively in improvisation – in the most basic sense, an improviser could simply play a variety of line progressions (as found above) in a variety of rhythms.

Improvising the Song pertains to more than just analysing a composition’s melody, harmony and rhythm. The concept extends to a moods/emotions resulting from these elements. Naturally, a composer’s intent in establishing mood is not as clear as their use of the previously discussed elements of melody, and this element is, of course, open to personal interpretation. The following excerpt is from the song’s ‘B’ section:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Gm}^7 & \quad \text{D}^7 & \quad \text{Gm} & \quad \text{D}^7 \\
\end{align*}
\]

The absence of melody and the harmonic suspension created by a D pedal are of great importance in building tension and creating mood before complete resolution through use of ‘Coltrane changes’ (major third key centre resolution) in bars 5-8.
of the excerpt. Metheny could have resolved to D minor through a more simple II-V style of progression; however, the use of the matrix provides a more undulating, long-term resolution, with the result being far more aurally satisfying. Compared to the more consonant and non-tense A section, the B section assists in telling a story; a main theme with added conflict and resolution.

All of these elements discussed could be analysed by an improviser and, depending on their intention, used as a basis for improvisation.

Although not applicable to this song, lyrics too play an important role in creating moods and emotions for a composition, as well as determining (in many cases) the shape of the composition. For many jazz musicians (past and present), the bulk of repertoire comes from a collection of songs originally composed for Broadway, film or on Tin Pan Alley, known as Standards. Within the Standard repertoire, the role of lyricist is important, for two main reasons: Sheila Davis, in her book *The Craft of Lyric Writing*, discusses the varying methods of collaboration chiefly adopted in this era of composition. She explains the preference of some composers to work *from* lyrics, which would help to influence their melodies, tonalities and rhythms, for example, depending on the tone of the lyric. Gerhard Béhague, in *Grove Music Online*, validates this idea in explaining bossa nova music, writing that “in several examples [of bossa nova composition] the lyrics seem to have been conceived together with the music, so close are the verbal rhythms and the melodic”. Just as an analysis of a song’s musical content can greatly assist an improviser, so too can a study of its lyric. Saxophonist Lee Konitz was a key believer in this idea, and has taught master-classes concentrating on learning lyrics before looking at any improvisational technique. As the author deems compositional elements important to improvisation, so too are lyrical elements through their association with composition.

The pre-bebop era improvisers were adept melody interpreters, whose improvisations would often be a variation on a song’s original melody. Heralded modern-day trumpeter, Wynton Marsalis explains and demonstrates how early-day musicians, such as cornetist and trumpeter Buddy Bolden, would ‘rag’ a melody, emphasising the differences between the playing style of brass bands and jazz musicians:

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6 Hancock, B. 2009. Personal Communication.
In this brass-band style example, Marsalis is careful to perform each rhythmic unit with accuracy and evenness, in order to demonstrate the stark contrast to Buddy-Bolden style playing:

This example is much more triplet-oriented, enhancing swing feel. However, there are still rhythmic replications between the two, demonstrating the attention the original composition would have been given. Marsalis states (in reference to the second example’s playing style), “now I have the big four, so when I phrase [the melody], I’m gonna make it sound like me and I’m gonna play with another entire feeling and groove, and use all the different growls and shouts and cries...”

Another example of this process is pianist Art Tatum, labelled “one of the greatest improvisers in jazz history”. Heralded also for his virtuosic abilities at the piano, Tatum has an immense catalogue of recorded works (totalling more than 600), often recording several versions of the same song. Though each recording is creative and spontaneous, a common thread between each is the importance given to the melody, which Tatum had “a seemingly unlimited capacity to expand and enrich.” Such an example is Tatum’s improvisation on the song All The Things You Are.

Originally from the Broadway production “Very Warm For May”, All The Things You Are contains an easily identifiable melody. Its rhythms are quite simple; its melody very consonant, with most notes being strong chord tones of the passing harmony. This too is quite consonant, largely moving around the cycle of fifths with occasional substitutions. Below are several excerpts, demonstrating the first eight bars of the song. Firstly, an example of commonly used sheet music for the song, as found in The New Real Book:

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This sheet music testifies to the afore-mentioned characteristics of the melody. Naturally, personal interpretation will often transform the melody’s rhythmic content into something more complex. The following excerpt is Art Tatum’s first improvised chorus, which acts as a restatement of the original melody:

It should be noted that Tatum’s playing does not necessarily embody some of the fundamental principles of the Improvising the Song concept; this song is originally rhythmically quite tame, whereas Tatum’s playing is completely contrary.

However, his approach to replicating and complimenting an original melody is of great importance and should be considered the primary focus in these excerpts. Tatum plays much more, however, than just the melody in these examples (quite obviously more than the several notes of the original melody). In the above excerpt, he uses line progression to great effect. For example, in bar 3, underneath the melody, Tatum plays D Flat-D Natural-E Flat. Similarly the left hand in bar...
adds chromatic movement from B Flat-A Natural-A Flat finishing with G in the right hand’s chord in bar 3. Howlitt and Robinson, in *Grove Music Online*, comment on the “textural variety of his work, which frequently led to contrapuntal relationships among lines in different registers.” This method by which Tatum plays the melody is varied, with some instances blatantly obvious and others subtly hidden. For example, the melody in bar 1 is established through the opening chord as well as the high A Flat (aurally quite obvious), whereas the melody in bar 5 is quite discreet, being a part of the five note grouping; however, the dynamic of this note is much more noticeable than the rest. In bar 7, the melody is the top note of the first chord, and half way through the bar, given a longer rhythmic value to discern it from the previous notes. Once again, this is aurally distinctive and effective.

This next excerpt is from Tatum’s third chorus. The improvisation takes on a more creative approach now, and focuses less on restating the melody, but instead, utilises elements of the original melody strongly to fuel the improvisation.

Once again, in analysing this excerpt, the melody is clearly played in bars 1 and 2, given lengthy rhythmic values (in comparison to the neighbouring rhythms). In bars 5 to 7 (and 9) of this example, it is the left hand which is given the responsibility of outlining the melody. It is primarily through the rhythmic ‘weight’ (the longer the rhythm, the more powerful and noticeable it is) that the melody is recognised.

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Tatum was a key influence on jazz musicians of his own instrument and generation, as well as those who were not. “His first professional solo recordings in 1933 were seen as a challenge to his own and future generations of jazz and popular pianists.” He was a particularly prominent influence for many of the bebop era’s greats, including Bud Powell and Charlie Parker, perhaps for his “profound and continually evolving grasp of substitute harmonies.” In the above examples, the use of extended and alternate chord tones serves as an influence to the bebop era improvisers also, as the inclusion of upper chord tones was a particularly large innovation of their music. However, contrary to many of the beboppers, Tatum “retained the original melody and harmonies of a tune as starting-points for his improvisations” which perhaps provides a reason for his longevity as a performer.

The bebop era was radically different to the preceding swing era with wild, sporadic rhythms and complex, often dissonant harmonies. Its approach to melody, too, was quite contrary through an increased use of chromaticism to form ‘synchronised lines’ (melodic phrases in which the main chord tones are played primarily on a downbeat and passing tones on an upbeat). Furthermore, its relation to a song’s original melody is less obvious and sometimes seemingly non-existent. Carl Woideck, in his book Charlie Parker: His Music and Life, writes, “Older jazz players had attained continuity by creatively embellishing and paraphrasing a song’s melody while soloing... In their quest for fresh and continually evolving improvisation, and to accept the challenge of improvising over difficult harmonies, advanced swing style and modern jazz players had largely abandoned references to a song’s melody during solos.” Bebop musicians chiefly focussed on a song’s harmonic progression, or changes, rather than focussing on the tune itself, resulting in compositions and improvisations with very similar (sometimes identical) melodic phrases. Renowned jazz education writer Mark Levine writes, “Jazz musicians can’t leave well enough alone. They often discard the melody of a tune but keep the changes, using them as a basis for a new melody.”

This style of improvisation is also evidenced by Art Tatum. Dr Billy Taylor states, “He was one of the most sophisticated users of modern harmony.”

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and demonstrates (in an audio interview) a Tatum-like process of reharmonisation over *Body and Soul*, explaining that while the underlying harmony may be constantly altered and reharmonised, he would “take the melody and play it over and over.” This is directly influential to bebop through the emphasis on harmony and its alteration. Furthermore, this seems to promote a procedure, whereby similar melodies (or melodic fragments) can be played over almost any harmonic progression (which, once again, becomes the focus).

The ‘golden child’ of the bebop era was saxophonist Charlie Parker, still considered one of the “most important and influential improvising soloists in jazz... A legendary figure in his own lifetime, he was idolised by those who worked with him, and he inspired a generation of jazz performers and composers.” It is by no means the intention of the author to contest or question Parker’s playing and its innovations to jazz music; rather it is to analyse and discuss the repetitive nature and non-song specific improvisational elements found within some transcribed solos. Through comparing small fragments (or ‘licks’) of improvised solos (as found in The Charlie Parker Omnibook), the amount of melodic repetition occurring over numerous different compositions is clearly apparent, as will be evidenced below. Indeed, many of the selected fragments are the epitome of bebop language. Firstly, one of the most commonly found fragments:

![G7 chord](image)

This lick, in which Parker plays from the third degree of the scale to the flattened 9th before encircling the tonic note is found in numerous different solos, including those recorded over: “Confirmation” (bar 2 of solo); “Moose the Mooch” (bar 32); and “Celebrity” (bar 4) to name a few. There are also variations on this lick (for example beginning from the fifth degree) which also occur commonly. Another commonly found fragment is:

![Fragment 2](image)

Parker performs this lick on numerous occasions in varying situations, hence the lack of a chord symbol. It is found in near-equal occurrence over a G minor7 chord as well as over a B Flat Major7 chord. Parker rhythmically displaces the beat on other occasions also, sometimes beginning from beat ‘2 and’ instead of the above example. This fragment is found in “She Rote” – No. 2 (bars 7 and 38); “An Oscar for Treadwell” (bar 38); and “Constellation” (bars 5 and 65) for example. Finally, the following fragment:

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Though not near as common as the previous two, this fragment is important in demonstrating the repetitive, lick-based improvisations of Charlie Parker. This is the opening line to both “Now’s the Time” and “Billie’s Bounce”, both compositions based on the 12 bar blues form (and both in the same key). Patrick, in *Grove Music Online*, suggests that “many of [Parker’s licks] are specific to certain keys... or to particular pieces.” These analysed fragments are, of course, only a few of many licks commonly utilised by Parker throughout his improvisations.

In a more extended sense, Parker’s composition *Celebrity* (also known as *Celerity*) utilises many of the typical fragments, including those analysed above, as shown in Appendix 1. *Celebrity* sounds akin to a Charlie Parker improvisation, largely due to the near identical nature of the composition’s melodies and rhythms. This is only the first half of the composition – the second is quite similar, in terms of its style; however, it is by no means a duplication of the first half. In analysing the composition, numerous permutations of the above fragments are distinctly noticeable. For example, bars 4, 13 and 27 are all variations of the first analysed fragment (3rd to flattened 9th); bars 11, 19, 25 and 29 utilise the second fragment in varying incarnations. This composition demonstrates the improvisation-like quality of bebop compositions. It could be argued that bebop improvisers indeed embraced the Improvising the Song principle; however, the frequent reproduction of fragments within improvised melodies are contrary to the concept. Indeed the melodic language may be quite complimentary; however, rhythmic content (which may be the only discerning factor) is often ignored in favour of constant quaver lines.

Charlie Parker’s usage of licks is well documented and analysed. “In his improvisations, Parker most often drew from a corpus of formulae and arranged them into ever-new patterns, a technique sometimes known as cento. This aspect of Parker’s art has been exhaustively investigated by Owens, who codified Parker’s improvisational work according to about 100 formulae.” Again, it is by no means the intention of the author to debate Parker’s genius, nor comment on the suitability of ‘lick’ usage in jazz improvisation. The fact that Parker’s recorded output remains so influential highlights the importance of this improvisational method. Furthermore, Parker’s manipulations of these licks allows them creativity and musicality. However, through the above analyses, it is quite clear a lack of

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attention was payed to a song’s melody in preference to the chord progression alone.

Following the bebop period, jazz has undergone several regressions and revivals. The seeming inattention to melody by players such as John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman (whose improvisations were not necessarily non-melodic) was fiercely confronting to the general listening audience. The highly academic approach of jazz as an art-form was radically different to the days of the Swing era, when dance bands existed chiefly for the audiences’ entertainment. Musicians too were confronted by this approach, and opinions were polarised as to its suitability and potential for sustainability. In the liner notes for Getz-Gilberto, celebrated saxophonist Stan Getz wrote that “the desperate craze for innovation had been overextending itself.”

In more recent times, jazz music has celebrated the arrival of numerous masters, particularly guitarist Pat Metheny and pianist Brad Mehldau. Their ultra-melodic approach to modern jazz is complimented further by their harmonic and rhythmic sophistication, prodigious technical abilities and fusion of various styles with jazz have made them two of the most successful jazz artists in modern times. “Metheny’s versatility is almost nearly without peer on any instrument… he has performed with artists as diverse as Steve Reich to Ornette Coleman to Herbie Hancock to Jim Hall to Milton Nascimento to David Bowie.” The ‘diverse’ range of musicians (and their respective genres and styles), with whom Metheny has performed and recorded, undoubtedly has affected his approach to jazz music. An important element of any music is the impact and influence musicians can have on each other. In jazz music (and its many sub-genres), which is most commonly played in ensemble formats, this is particularly the case. When listening to Metheny, one can quite noticeably recognise the results of these collaborations. His sometimes-minimalistic improvisational approach is akin to the minimalistic compositional style of Steve Reich; his attention to, and focus on, melody similar to that of Ornette Coleman and Milton Nascimento, who, along with Jim Hall, could be partially responsible for his guitar-tone. Barry Kernfeld explains: “Metheny brings together elements of bop, free jazz, jazz rock, country music, the folk revival and Brazilian music in a manner that is consistently accessible and yet often maintains emotional and intellectual depth.”

Similarly, Brad Mehldau, considered by Gary Kennedy “as perhaps the finest pianist of his generation”\textsuperscript{24}, incorporates influences from beyond the jazz idiom to contribute to his improvisational and musical style. Kennedy also describes the combination of “the classically influenced piano aesthetic… with a flexible rhythmic understanding of bop and other styles.”\textsuperscript{21} Mehldau has recorded songs written by bands from the pop, rock and folk genres, including several recordings from band Radiohead. Undoubtedly, the importance of simplistic and lyrical melody found in pop music is incorporated into Mehldau’s style (though he may not always play simplistically).

The influences of popular music into the playing styles of Metheny and Mehldau are important for several reasons. Arguably the main musical focus of a typical pop song is its melody (after all, this is what an audience most commonly would identify with first). Harmonic and rhythmic elements of the typical pop song tend to be fairly simplistic (in comparison to jazz compositions), and jazz-like improvisation is usually non-existent. Metheny and Mehldau both seem to identify strongly with the emphasis given to melody in this music. Such an example is Mehldau’s recording of Rogers and Hart’s *Bewitched*, for which the composition’s original music is found below:

This standard (which premiered in the 1940 Broadway production *Pal Joey*) has a distinctive melody, with effective use of repetition, line progression, as well as other elements. The continual reappearance of melody note C in the passage is of importance as it becomes the focal point of this A section. Mehldau effectively recreates this aspect of the melody in the first five bars of his improvisation:

Mehldau’s opening line mirrors the original melody’s very closely, with an almost identical interval shape. The ascending scalar line in bar 3 is strongly reminiscent of bars 3-4 of Rogers’ melody. His continual repetition of melody note “E” is a successful reflection on the original; however Mehldau continues to expand on the simple melody, adjusting the focal note to the underlying harmony. This focus on “E” remains throughout the entirety of this excerpt – beginning bar 3 and concluding bars 4-5. Furthermore, Mehldau’s left hand voicings are extremely sensitive to the simple melodies of the right hand, so as not to confront the melody (or the listener). Mehldau to reference the melody at the beginning of the second A section, as shown below:

Although only a short example, this small fragment of Mehldau’s solo relates perfectly to the Improvising the Song concept; the fact that Mehldau has returned to simplistically reflect on the melody having developed ideas, which were not necessarily reminiscent of the song’s original melody, in the previous four bars displays a heightened awareness of musicality. Also, the lack of left hand in this bar allows the right hand melody to truly ‘sing’, and express the lyrical nature of the original melody.

The ‘B’ section in Bewitched continues as below:

Once again, there is a strong intervallic identity within this excerpt, and, once again, Mehldau effectively comments on it in his improvisation over the first two bars:
Mehldau’s right hand, in effect, sequences the original melody by utilising the same intervallic structure. This is perhaps more effective than a pure replication of the melody (for example, if both hands were to play the original melody) as it provides the listener with the sense of the original melody, however, contributes a more ‘bluesy’ feel.

Much of modern jazz’s improvisations (and compositions) have become much more rhythmically ambiguous. Players seem to be constantly finding new methods to obscure the main beat while remaining secure in their time-feel. Mehldau is arguably one of the finest examples of this. In transcribing the above excerpts, the author would suggest that the rhythms be taken as a guide only, and not exact replications of the aural effect. This element of performance is important in making the above improvisation relevant to audiences today, who are perhaps much more open to rhythmic ambiguity. The influence, however, of the original composition in this improvisation is undeniable, and consequently, rhythmic obscurity does not affect the musicality therein.

Furthermore, each musician is similarly a prominent composer. This paper has already analysed one of Metheny’s compositions, *Question and Answer*, in which the effective harmonic, rhythmic and melodic choices were commented upon, and their implications for the improviser. Another of his compositions, *Always and Forever*, is stunningly melodic and, once again, his harmonic progression is perfectly suitable, as evidenced in the following excerpt:

**Always and Forever**

In the author’s opinion, this melody epitomises true lyricism. Although the harmony is quite consonant, it is not necessarily diatonic. The melody, however,
seems to take little notice of any harmonic tension, and truly sings above it. Metheny’s improvised solo, similarly, is incredibly lyrical, and is another true example of the Improvising the Song concept:

Unlike Mehldau’s improvisation over *Bewitched*, which effectively utilised aspects of the original melody, Metheny’s playing over *Always and Forever* seems to relate more to the prevailing lyricism evident throughout the original melody, rather than concentrating on any particular melodic or rhythmic phrases. This is not to say that Metheny’s improvisation does not reflect on the original melody. Rhythmically, the original melody is quite varied, which helps to create the aforementioned lyricism. Metheny’s improvisation is similarly rhythmically diverse, with an emphasis on triplet subdivision, which, through its concealing of the main beat, seems to be a particularly important rhythmic unit in aiding ‘sing-ability’. The melodic contour of Metheny’s improvisation is also similar to the original melody, which is aurally noticeable, providing a strong association between the two. For example, bar 1 of the original melody is effectively considered in bars 1-2 of the improvisation, in terms of its shape (the interval span is virtually identical). In contrast, bar 4 of the improvisation utilises an alternate melodic contour to its original melody (the direction of the line is virtually opposing). This is still effective in establishing a sense of the original melody within the improvisation, once again through the similar intervallic range.

The above analyses show the diligence of both Metheny and Mehldau in presenting song-specific improvisations; ones that embody the principles of the Improvising the Song concept. There is an effective ratio of spontaneous melody creation to original melody consideration, which culminates in incredibly musical and creative improvisations.

Improvising the Song is more than just analysing and replicating a song’s melody. It is delving into the emotions presented through its melody, harmony, rhythms and lyrics (where applicable) to fuel an improvisation. The creativity and brilliance evidenced by early jazz musicians, such as Tatum, is echoed today by that of artists like Mehldau and Metheny. These artists (who are indeed modern-masters) mix convention with innovation, suggesting that the jazz tradition remains alive and well today. There are, of course, many musicians who, on the surface, seem to ignore this principle; however, are considered godlike amongst...
generations of jazz musicians. On the other hand, it could be argued that this principle is embodied by all of the greats (to varying degrees) and is partly responsible for their prominence.

Celebrity

Charlie Parker
Reference List

**Musical Examples**

- Marsalis, W. 2000. *Jazz – A Film by Ken Burns* [motion picture]. America: The Jazz Film Project.