

Annals in the evolution of style- The improvisations of Paul Desmond

by Paul Cohen

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Within the realm of musical development, perceptions of growth and change are considerations of keen interest to performers and listeners alike. How the conception of a musical work changes in the course of time with each performance reveals much of the evolving maturity of the performer. Many performers have experienced the relative satisfaction of a certain recorded performance-even upon repeated hearings-only to come back to it a year or so later and suffer acute embarrassment by what is heard. (Perhaps more of us should experience this!) The gleanings and assimilation of insights over such time are functions of our musical and personal growth. This can often reveal the nature of our perceptions, and sometimes hint at the directions of our artistic ideals.

Most musical development closely parallels that of personal and physical maturity. Basic skills such as rhythmic accuracy, tonal control (whatever the tone concept), responsive hearing and how to use it (essential in playing anything other than unaccompanied works), range extension, technical development (such as learning to play and tongue faster), etc., often shape the interpretation of a work as much as the knowledge and experience of musical style and form. There are many saxophone recordings that vividly illustrate this tendency. Interpretations are often contorted to accommodate a particular technical skill (or lack thereof) at the expense of the composer's intentions.

For these reasons, it is uncommon among saxophonists to be able to find and trace significant stylistic change and growth predicated solely on musical materials. To do so would be an exploration of the most rarefied order - discovering what directions music can follow and how much the music can change as experienced by a mature, accomplished artist.

A comparison of selected improvisations by the late Paul Desmond, the great though somewhat neglected alto saxophonist of the Dave Brubeck Quartet, offers such an exploration. Although any one of his solos is worthy of individual study, it is the comparison of his improvisations on the same composition over a period of years that best traces his evolution of style. The improvisations chosen for this article are of Take Five, the 5/4 composition written by Desmond around 1959 (see example 1). The improvisations are from the albums Time Out (Columbia CS8192), recorded in 1959, and The Dave Brubeck Quartet (Live) at Carnegie Hall (Columbia C2S-826), recorded in 1963.

The recording of Time Out marked the first serious and extensive exploration of asymmetric meters in jazz. As particularly evident in Take Five, the approach is careful, cautious, and deliberate. In order to maintain a metric equilibrium, the piano vamp is heavy, rhythmic, and everpresent, with a tempo hovering at approximately MM-172. Desmond's improvisation, now considered a classic, reflects the experimental nature of the music and the recent involvement with these new materials (see example 2). Carefully adhering to the bar line and retaining the basic C minor tonality, the improvisation is constructed of two measure phrases throughout, reaching a climax in measure 71, at the melodic and structural highpoint.

By the time the Brubeck Quartet recorded their Carnegie Hall album, they had performed Take Five hundreds of times. Four years had elapsed, and the group felt as comfortable in 5/4 as in conventional meters.

In an interview by George Simon following this concert, Brubeck noted:

The way we play this number now shows how we've fallen into a 5/4 groove more naturally. When we made the original record, we had to be very careful. We weren't used to 5/4 time at all. On that record, I played strictly the vamp rhythm to give the guys a home base. But now we feel as much at home in 5/4 time as we do in 4/4, and at many concerts I don't use the vamp at all. All of us feel 5/4 now and surprisingly, it has become our favorite time signature to play in. It feels so natural now. That's why it's swinging so much more.

Desmond's improvisation (example 3) illustrates how natural this time signature became. On a technical level, the phrasing now spans up to four measures and is no longer limited or constrained to the bar line. The tempo is greatly accelerated (approx. MM-224), the range is extended well into the altissimo register, and the solo adopts a bi-tonal basis of G, opposing the quartet accompaniment of C minor (alto saxophone key). This gives the solo a somewhat exotic flavor or sound, particularly with the A natural sounding throughout. The climax of the solo (m. 71) occurs within the same proportions as the earlier solo and, remarkably, closely follows the "Golden Section" or "Golden Mean" proportions that are organically derived and found in many classical music forms.

It is important to note how the characteristics of the two solos are so different despite the similarity of the musical materials. Both are comprised of relatively simple scalar, intervallic, and triadic lines. The rhythmic construction -- not terribly complex but subtly inflected -- is very much the same for both solos. Pyro-technical displays and intricate harmonic inventions or mannerisms are virtually absent. The greatness of these solos lies in their pacing and development. It is the cumulative effect of their gradual development that helps sustain and becomes part of the message.

The impact of the second solo (example 3) is not best described by this briefest of technical descriptions. Within the solo is a feeling of subdued, pulsating freedom whose tension gradually builds and develops until the release (climax) at measure 71. The remaining

part of the solo acts as a type of summation, bringing together all of the elements of the improvisation in a way that gradually eases the built-up intensity and tension.

Throughout the organic development of the solo, Desmond is obviously searching and reaching for something, and in sharing that pursuit we feel a sense of satisfaction in its attainment (perhaps best revealed in the last section of the solo, after measure 71). To see and explore such creative music making -- the forging of musical materials to one's will and design while unencumbered by those materials -- is an exciting and revealing experience. The assimilation is complete -- the message is pure.

A word about the transcriptions. Our notational system is woefully inadequate in representing how music should sound or be played. It is estimated that written music reveals perhaps 10 percent of the content of classical music, and certainly less for jazz. In Paul Desmond's playing, there is a fluid, liquid legato sound and phrasing that is present throughout, almost as if the entire solo were under one slur (except where indicated). His smooth phrasing treats eighth notes often as triplets with a connection from the last note to the first note of successive beats. The X indicated ghost notes.

To attempt to meticulously notate all of the rhythmic and musical subtleties into our approximate notational system would only clutter the page and unnecessarily distract from the freshness and directness of the music. The best way to appreciate these transcribed solos is to listen to the recordings. Therein lies the essence of the music.

See the next three (3) pages for transcription examples.

Examples for **The Improvisations of Paul Desmond** by Paul Cohen

Example 1

Musical notation for Example 1, consisting of four staves of music in 5/4 time with a key signature of two flats. The notation includes various rhythmic patterns and articulations. The first staff ends with a "Fine" marking. The second staff continues the melody. The third staff features a more complex rhythmic pattern. The fourth staff concludes with a "DC al Fine" marking.

Example 2

Note: Improvisation over a chord pattern of Cm/Gm⁷ per m.

Musical notation for Example 2, consisting of five staves of music in 5/4 time with a key signature of two flats. The notation includes various rhythmic patterns and articulations. The first staff starts with a "p." marking. The second staff has a "6" above the first measure. The third staff has an "11" above the first measure. The fourth staff has a "16" above the first measure. The fifth staff has a "21" above the first measure. The notation concludes with "Transcribed by Paul Cohen".

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Example 3

The musical score for Example 3 consists of ten staves of music, all in G-flat major. The notation includes various rhythmic patterns, melodic lines, and improvisational techniques. The first staff begins with a 5-measure rest followed by a melodic line with a 5-measure slur and a 3-measure slur. The second staff starts at measure 6 with a 6-measure rest and a melodic line. The third staff starts at measure 11 with a 7-measure rest and a melodic line. The fourth staff starts at measure 16 with a 7-measure rest and a melodic line. The fifth staff starts at measure 21 with a 7-measure rest and a melodic line. The sixth staff starts at measure 26 with a 7-measure rest and a melodic line. The seventh staff starts at measure 31 with a 7-measure rest and a melodic line, featuring a 3-measure slur. The eighth staff starts at measure 36 with a 7-measure rest and a melodic line. The ninth staff starts at measure 41 with a 7-measure rest and a melodic line. The tenth staff starts at measure 50 with a 7-measure rest and a melodic line, featuring a 4-measure slur. The score is written in a single system with ten staves.

Examples for **The Improvisations of Paul Desmond** by Paul Cohen

56

61

66

72

77

82

88

94

pva

3

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