Journal of the Society for American Music (2007) Volume 1, Number 2, pp. 257–280.
© 2007 The Society for American Music doi: 10.1017.S1752196307070095

Apart Playing: McCoy Tyner and "Bessie's Blues"

BENJAMIN GIVAN

Abstract
Jazz pianist McCoy Tyner's improvisation on the theme "Bessie's Blues," recorded with the John Coltrane Quartet in 1964, exemplifies the traditional Afrodiasporic performance practice of "apart playing." A formulation of the art historian Robert Farris Thompson, apart playing occurs whenever individual performers enact different, complementary roles in an ensemble setting. For interpretative purposes, the concept helps to provide a cultural context for certain pitch-based formal devices, such as substitute harmonies and playing "outside" an underlying chord or scale, which Tyner uses in the course of his solo.

During his five-year tenure with the John Coltrane Quartet of the early 1960s, pianist McCoy Tyner (1938–) forged a powerful, often percussive, keyboard style based on quartal harmonies and intricate pentatonic melodies.[1] Performing alongside three equally commanding musical presences—drummer Elvin Jones and bassist Jimmy Garrison together with the leader's saxophone—he constantly dealt with the opposition between individual expression and group collaboration. Tyner's recordings with the quartet, particularly his 1964 solo on the theme "Bessie's Blues," show that his negotiation of these contrary creative impulses involved a performance aesthetic with deep roots in Afrodiasporic culture: the practice of "apart playing."

Robert Farris Thompson has identified "apart playing and dancing" as one of five shared characteristics of West African music and dance.[2] (The others are "the dominance of a percussive concept of performance; multiple meter; . . . call and response; and . . . the songs and dances of derision."[3]) "Apartness" occurs whenever individual performers in an ensemble interact by simultaneously playing—or dancing—different, complementary things.[4] Although Thompson's five-part scheme has been widely influential in subsequent studies of West African and black

[1] For a detailed discussion of Tyner's harmonic vocabulary, see Paul Rinzler, "The Quartal and Pentatonic Harmony of McCoy Tyner," *Annual Review of Jazz Studies* 10 (1999): 35–87.

[2] Robert Farris Thompson, "An Aesthetic of the Cool: West African Dance," *African Forum* 2/2 (1966): 85–122. Reprinted in *Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin', & Slam Dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture,* ed. Gena Dagel Caponi, 72–86 (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999). All citations herein refer to the 1999 reprint. Thompson's five-part scheme draws upon Richard Alan Waterman, "African Influence on the Music of the Americas," in *Acculturation in the Americas,* ed. Sol Tax (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 212 and 214; and Alan P. Merriam, "The African Idiom in Music," *Journal of American Folklore* 75/296 (1962): 125–26.

[3] Thompson, "An Aesthetic of the Cool," 75.

[4] Roger D. Abrahams, Nick Spitzer, John F. Szwed, and Robert Farris Thompson write that "this aesthetic [of apart playing] depends not only on playing apart, but on voices and bodies interacting in such a way that they overlap and interlock in movement and voice." See their *Blues for New Orleans: Mardi Gras and America's Creole Soul* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 48–49. The classic theory of musical interaction in jazz is Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196307070095 Published online by Cambridge University Press

American arts,[5] the notion of "apart playing and dancing" may well, of all five traits, be the least prominent in recent scholarship, even though it is essentially a meta-principle underlying several of the other categories. Multiple meters and call-and-response, for instance, result from apart playing—Thompson writes that "West African musicians . . . play 'apart' in the sense that each is often intent upon the production of his own contribution to a polymetric whole."[6] On a small scale, "apartness" also characterizes Charles Keil's notion of "participatory discrepancies," the "[slight] out of syncness"[7] between different members of an African American musical ensemble that facilitates the creation of a "groove." As Christopher Waterman puts it, "grooves depend upon playing apart."[8]

Thompson surmises that "playing apart . . . grants the West African space in which to maintain his own private or traditional meter and to express his own full corporeal involvement in what he is doing."[9] Because playing apart affords each member of a group a discrete personal space, it involves a tension between individual autonomy and collectivity, a dialogic state that, according to Thompson, is common to both dance and music and indeed facilitates their mutual bond (because dancing apart enables individuals to respond more directly to the music, as well as to other dancers).[10] More broadly construed, the concept of apartness is applicable not only to the musical phenomena Thompson specifically cites—multiple meter, antiphony, and so forth—but also, by extension, to other familiar features of jazz improvisation, including pitch-based techniques like harmonic substitutions or playing "outside" a given harmony or scale. Metaphorically, apartness can even be manifested in the mental distinction between improvisers' spontaneous ideas and the musical theme guiding them and their fellow ensemble performers.

Thomas Brothers's model of jazz's syntactic organization, grounded in the music's continuities with its West African progenitors, suggests how Thompson's concept of apartness can be applied to pitch-based aspects of jazz improvisation.[11] Brothers notes that the drum ensembles of Southern Ewe Ghanaian music are often divided into two rhythmic groups: a "fixed" group that sustains a constant, cyclic ostinato pattern in which the bell (*gankogui*) functions as a referent for coordinating all the other parts and a "variable" group in which the *atsimevu* (long drum), played by a

[5] See, for instance, John Miller Chernoff, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Actions in African Musical Idioms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 143–49, passim; Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1996), 49–50; Jacqui Malone, *Steppin' on the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Dance* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 15–21.

[6] Thompson, "An Aesthetic of the Cool," 79.

[7] Charles Keil, "Participatory Discrepancies and the Power of Music," in *Music Grooves,* ed. Charles Keil and Steven Feld (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 96. See also Charles Keil, "Motion and Feeling Through Music," in *Music Grooves,* 53–76, first published in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 24/3 (1966): 337–49.

[8] Christopher A. Waterman, Response to Charles Keil, "The Theory of Participatory Discrepancies: A Progress Report," *Ethnomusicology* 39/1 (1995): 93.

[9] Thompson, "An Aesthetic of the Cool," 79.

[10] Ibid., 80.

[11] Thomas Brothers, "Solo and Cycle in African-American Jazz," *Musical Quarterly* 78/3 (1994): 479–509.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196307070095 Published online by Cambridge University Press

master drummer, often takes a solo role.[12] He writes that "by shifting in and out of agreement with the fixed cycles"—that is, by "playing apart"—"the *atsimevu* creates the sense of being both connected to and detached from the fundamental level of temporal organization."[13] Parallel techniques are present in Afrodiasporic musics like jazz, in which a rhythm section functions as a "fixed group" while an improvising soloist's comparatively independent role corresponds to the *atsimevu*'s.[14] Because most jazz themes have cyclical formal structures, "the soloist's melody is perceived in terms of the cycle, and the meaning of the melody is determined by how it relates to the cycle."[15] "Jazz musicians . . . went further," Brothers adds, "when they discovered how to enhance the independence of their variable, solo layer by manipulating harmony";[16] in effect using "pitch . . . to articulate temporal relationships."[17] In this respect, even such contemporary jazz devices as "substitute" harmonies can therefore be "understood as a manifestation of . . . syntactical principles [that are] derived ultimately from Africa."[18] And the essence of these syntactical principles, whether in traditional West African performing arts or contemporary American jazz, is the practice of playing apart. The concept of apartness is, moreover, useful because it can help explain how a jazz improvisation's formal organization relates to its socially constructed referential meanings. In the case of Tyner's "Bessie's Blues" solo, it turns out that some of the most salient such meanings arise from the pianist's use of musical codes associated with different African American musical idioms; he often uses substitute harmonies (apart playing) in connection with switches between different stylistic codes.

Tyner had been playing with the John Coltrane Quartet for four years by the time he recorded his piano solo on "Bessie's Blues" on 1 June 1964. The quartet was continually evolving stylistically, and in 1964 Coltrane's personal musical development was on the verge of a major transformation. After recording *A Love Supreme* in December of that year, the saxophonist increasingly gravitated towards ways of playing without predetermined harmonic structures or regular metrical schemes.[19] By mid-1965 he had recorded the landmark *Ascension* with a larger ensemble featuring several leading exponents of the free jazz movement, and within eighteen months of the "Bessie's Blues" session, Tyner and Elvin Jones had left

[12] On the "fixed group"/"variable group" model of African music, see Olly Wilson, "The Heterogeneous Sound Ideal in African-American Music," in *New Perspectives on Music: Essays in Honor of Eileen Southern,* ed. Josephine Wright and Samuel A. Floyd Jr. (Warren, Mich.: Harmonie Park Press, 1992), 331.

[13] Brothers, "Solo and Cycle in African-American Jazz," 488.

[14] Thomas Brothers, *Louis Armstrong's New Orleans* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 286.

[15] Brothers, "Solo and Cycle," 489.

[16] Brothers, *Louis Armstrong's New Orleans,* 300.

[17] Brothers, "Solo and Cycle," 491.

[18] Ibid., 498. The solo-cycle relationship has parallels in other African American art forms. In a discussion of the painter Aaron Douglas, Richard Powell writes that "the layering of a pure abstraction over a representational scene is not unlike a similar phenomenon in black music, where an improvised solo rides over a fixed melodic composition." See his "Art History and Black Memory: Toward a 'Blues Aesthetic,'" in *History and Memory in African-American Culture,* ed. Geneviève Fabre and Robert O'Meally (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 239.

[19] John Coltrane, *A Love Supreme,* Impulse! AS-77, 1965.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196307070095 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the group.[20] Considered in this context, Coltrane's composition "Bessie's Blues" is anomalous. The sole up-tempo number on the album *Crescent*, which mostly features comparatively rhapsodic, meditative performances, it is stylistically closer to the quartet's earliest work on albums like the 1960 *Coltrane Plays the Blues*, and at only three-and-a-half minutes in length it is one of their shortest recordings from the period.[21] Four decades later, it seems like a brief nod to the past before a decisive plunge into the musical future. The theme's traditionalist orientation may also be signaled by its title, which conceivably refers to Bessie Smith, the preeminent female blues singer of the 1920s and 1930s, although there seems to be no known record of Coltrane explicitly confirming this reference.[22]

Tyner's improvisation on "Bessie's Blues" follows two opening choruses of the head, played by Coltrane, lasts for four twelve-bar choruses, and precedes Coltrane's saxophone solo. A transcription of the head and piano solo appears in Example 1.[23] After a harmonically conventional first eight measures (I–IV–I–I–IV–IV–I–I), mm. 9–10 contain a dominant-subdominant progression, V–IV. This progression is associated more with traditional blues styles—and their R&B and rock 'n' roll derivatives—than with jazz of the post–World War II era, which more frequently features a II–V progression at this point in a blues form.[24] Indeed, bassist Jimmy Garrison often plays lines suggesting a II–V progression in the corresponding measures of each chorus, even while Coltrane's melody and Tyner's accompanimental chords imply V–IV. The implied II–V progression is particularly evident during the last three transcribed choruses, shown in Example 1 at mm. 45–46, 57–58, and 69–70; in the earlier choruses, Garrison's lines are harmonically ambiguous at the equivalent points, but they never articulate an unequivocal V–IV progression.[25] Although it is not possible to determine from an external perspective whether these discrepancies are intended, nor whether one or the other progression is primary, this momentary harmonic "apartness" nevertheless serves to illustrate that collectively improvising musicians are attuned to their own mental conceptions of a theme as well as to their fellow performers' playing.[26] Intentional discrepancies

[20] John Coltrane, *Ascension,* Impulse! AS-95, 1966.

[21] John Coltrane, *Crescent,* Impulse! AS-66, 1964; *Coltrane Plays the Blues,* Atlantic 1382-2, 1966.

[22] Coltrane's biographer Lewis Porter speculates that the reference is to Smith though he acknowledges the absence of verifying evidence (e-mail communication with the author, 13 May 2005).

[23] An alternate take of "Bessie's Blues" is commercially available on *Coltrane: The Classic Quartet—Complete Impulse! Studio Recordings,* Impulse! IMPD8-280, 1998. Recorded on 27 April 1964, it is incomplete, beginning in the middle of the piano solo. The tempo and duration are similar to that of the original release, but the solos are substantially different.

[24] The V–IV progression does appear on a few well-known jazz performances from this era, including Miles Davis's "Freddie Freeloader" from his album *Kind of Blue,* Columbia CL 1355, 1959; and on Coltrane's own "Blues to Elvin" from *Coltrane Plays the Blues.*

[25] This ambiguity generally rests on the harmonic status of the pitches A-flat and B-flat in the tenth bar of a chorus. For instance, in m. 10, where Garrison plays the descending line C–B-flat–A-flat–G-flat, if the prevailing harmony is considered to be an A-flat7 chord, the note B-flat functions as a passing note, whereas if B-flat7 is regarded as the harmony, C and G-flat become non-chord tones. The pitch A-flat is of course common to both chords.

[26] On the problem of establishing a "primary form" of a piece's chord progression, see Henry Martin, *Charlie Parker and Thematic Improvisation* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 5–6. On the simultaneous use of different harmonic progressions within an improvising ensemble, see Paul

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196307070095 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Example 1. "Bessie's Blues," performed by the John Coltrane Quartet, 1 June 1964. Copyright © 1977, renewed 2005 JOWCOL MUSIC. International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Used by Permission.

indicate a conscious degree of tension between the performers—an impulse towards individuality—whereas accidental divergences point to the limits of intersubjectivity among an ensemble—the thematic structure may not be mutually agreed upon in all its details. Tyner's solo, like most jazz improvisations, fluctuates through varying degrees of compliance with the theme's melodic outline, harmonic framework, and the diatonic scale or mode of its tonic key as well as with the contributions of the other players.

The pianist derives the opening measures of his solo from Coltrane's melody, whose first eight bars are based on a motivic cell consisting of the underlying harmony's third, root, and seventh: G–E-flat–D-flat over the tonic of E-flat and

Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 643–44.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196307070095 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Example 1. Continued.

C–A-flat–G-flat over the subdominant, A-flat.[27] Example 2 shows that the solo's incipit motive in m. 25 transforms the original melody through inversion and transposition. Tyner inverts the theme's initial dyad—the descending major third, G–E-flat—to produce an ascending minor sixth that he then transposes downward by a whole step, creating a descending minor sixth, D-flat–F; this transposition corresponds to the whole step between the head's second and third pitches, E-flat and D-flat. In m. 26, he replicates the melodic content of his solo's opening measure, transposing it a perfect fourth upward just like the equivalent measures of the head. Tyner's gloss on the theme's basic motive has a distinctive rhythmic profile, with its third and fourth notes (D-flat and F in m. 25) falling squarely on the third and fourth beats of the measure. Motives or phrases ending with a pair of quarter notes on either the first two, or the final two, beats of a bar pervade the entire solo, particularly around the top of the pianist's second solo chorus and midway through the third.

[27] The theme's motivic profile is discussed in Roger T. Dean, *New Structures in Jazz and Improvised Music Since 1960* (Milton Keynes, UK: Open University Press, 1992), 196–97.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196307070095 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Example 1. Continued.

Much of Tyner's improvisation alternates between motives derived from Coltrane's melody and figures associated with the blues idiom in general. Blues-based material emphasizes the E-flat-minor pentatonic scale (E-flat–G-flat–A-flat–B-flat–D-flat), a scale that Tyner has described (somewhat equivocally) as a link to jazz's African origins: "The blues originally came from Africa. The blues is really based on a five-note scale which is African, or Eastern and Middle-Eastern. . . . It was just black people's concept of music before they came here. . . . There's some talk about the American or European influence on our music, but again, the five-note scale is African."[28] Many of the blues-based figures in Tyner's "Bessie's Blues" solo begin with a melodic ascent from the tonic E-flat (examples are in mm. 30, 35, 37–38, and 41–42). Sometimes he inflects the E-flat-minor pentatonic scale by substituting G-natural for G-flat, as in mm. 55–56.[29] Tyner's view of these sorts of major-minor

[28] Al McFarlane, "The Black Scholar Interviews: McCoy Tyner," *The Black Scholar* 2/2 (October 1970): 40.

[29] The interchangeability of scale degrees 3 and flat-3 is a hallmark of the blues, as is the production of pitches lying somewhere between the two.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196307070095 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Example 1. Continued.

chromatic inflections is that "when you're playing a blues it doesn't matter if you play a B flat seven or a B flat minor, you know? It's the *scale* that counts. You know, you're really playing off of a *sound*, rather than just defining what notes they are."[30] His comments suggest a harmonic conception based less on conventional chords or ordered scales than on scales as unordered pitch-class collections—typically five or seven principal pitches with additional notes sometimes arising from chromatic inflections. In other words, pitch hierarchies privileging certain scale degrees or chord members are of lesser concern to Tyner than the total pitch content determining each large collection's sound. And for him, the blues scale's sound evidently has specific connotations based on the blues' historic status as jazz's stylistic antecedent with closer ties to pre-diasporic African music.

As Tyner integrates generic blues-based material with motives drawn from the original melody, his solo fluctuates through varying degrees of apartness from

[30] Ben Sidran, *Talking Jazz: An Oral History* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995), 233.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196307070095 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Example 1. Continued.

his fellow performers. The most consistent type of harmonic apartness involves chordal substitutions and the principal substitution Tyner uses is the tritone substitution of a sharp-IV7 (or flat-V7) harmony for I7 (that is, A7 for E-flat7) in the fourth measure of a twelve-bar chorus, a standard technique in blues improvisations since the bebop era.[31] The fourth bar of Coltrane's theme strongly suggests an E-flat7

[31] For more on this specific use of tritone substitution, see Mark Levine, *The Jazz Theory Book* (Petaluma, Calif.: Sher Music, 1995), 222; Barry Kernfeld, "Two Coltranes," *Annual Review of Jazz*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196307070095 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Example 1. Continued.

harmony (I7, or V7 of IV), even though the tonic chord's flattened seventh (D-flat)—the melodic pitch that, enharmonically reinterpreted, is also the third of its tritone substitute, A7—is emphasized as the phrase's final and longest note. Garrison furthermore plays the root of an E-flat7 harmony on the third beat of the fourth measure during both of the two opening statements of the theme. But even during the head, Tyner's comping suggests a tritone substitution in these

Studies 2 (1983): 14; and Lewis Porter, *John Coltrane: His Life and Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 190.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196307070095 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Example 1. Continued.

same measures because he plays the pitches A-natural and E-natural along with the D-flat and G-natural that A7 shares with E-flat7.[32] This harmonic "apartness" between pianist and bassist recurs at the equivalent location in all but one of Tyner's subsequent solo choruses. The exception is Tyner's final chorus, in which Garrison suggests the same tritone substitution in mm. 63–64, so that both players shift in tandem "apart" from the theme's normative harmony only to return on the downbeat of m. 65, where they firmly reestablish the IV7 (A-flat7) harmony.

[32] Mark Levine notes the Coltrane Quartet's frequent simultaneous use of different harmonic substitutions in *The Jazz Theory Book,* 297.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196307070095 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Example 1. Continued.

The two instrumentalists take different stylistic approaches to tritone substitution, however. Garrison suggests a typical bebop-era technique of combining notes from the original dominant-seventh harmony with those of its tritone substitute: on the downbeat of m. 63, he replicates Tyner's previous substitutions by outlining an A7 harmony, but he begins m. 64 with the original root E-flat, now suggesting the A7 chord's raised fourth.[33] Tyner, meanwhile, departs even further from the

[33] This approach to tritone substitution is discussed in Scott DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 104–10. I would like to thank one of this journal's anonymous reviewers for helping to clarify this point.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196307070095 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Example 1. Continued.

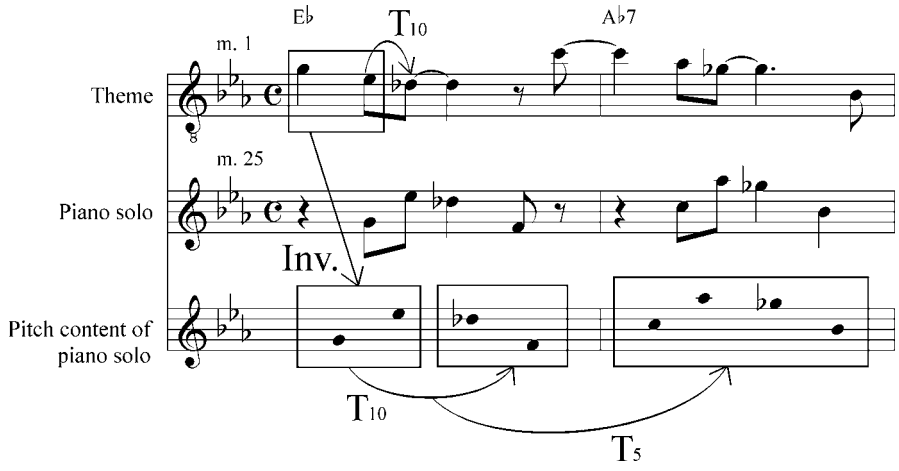
original harmonic progression and from Garrison's bebop variant. First, in m. 63, the pianist plays an E-major triad in first inversion followed by A-flat over an A–E-flat dyad—the same tritone outlined by Garrison. Then he begins m. 64 with a G-major-seventh harmony with added ninth, which could alternatively be interpreted as an extended E-minor seventh chord, or even a suspended fourth harmony on A, though A-natural is only sounded in the uppermost register.[34]

[34] Andy Jaffe interprets this passage as an implied descending fifths progression towards A7: F-sharp minor seventh, B7, E minor seventh, A7. See Jaffe's *Jazz Harmony*, 2nd edn. (Tübingen, Ger.: Advance Music, 1996), 139–40.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196307070095 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Example 1. Continued.



Example 2. Derivation of piano improvisation from the original melody.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196307070095 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Regardless of how this passage's rapidly changing harmonies are labeled, the overall situation can be described as one in which both instruments "play apart" from the established theme, but with Tyner venturing further afield harmonically—and thus stylistically—than Garrison.

When playing a tritone substitution in a chorus's fourth bar, Tyner consistently uses strict melodic transpositions as he shifts back towards the normative thematic model. In contrast to the blues-scale-based improvisational approach discussed above, which is generally oriented towards the music's linear dimension, these transpositional procedures tend to be more harmonically oriented. Coltrane's theme itself contains several exact melodic transpositions corresponding to underlying harmonic shifts, such as the transposition of the opening thematic motive (G–E-flat–D-flat) upward by a perfect fourth as the harmony changes from E-flat major to A-flat major—an operation that, as noted, recurs in Tyner's gloss on this melody as he begins his solo. Similarly, mm. 9 and 10 of Coltrane's melody arpeggiate the underlying dominant-subdominant harmonic progression (F–D–B-flat followed by E-flat–C–A-flat), a transposition technique replicated in the equivalent location of Tyner's solo in mm. 33–34 and in his final chorus, at mm. 69–70. But most of Tyner's exact transpositions occur in connection with apart playing.

One instance in which the pianist uses transposition as a means of returning from a state of apartness towards one of comparative togetherness is in mm. 28–29, where he transposes the pitches B–D–C-sharp–A—which imply a tritone substitution of an A-major harmony for the original E-flat (B and D act as upper neighbors to A and C-sharp respectively)—downward by a half step across the bar line. (The transposed pitches D-flat–B-flat–C–A-flat are prefixed by an another pitch, E-flat, that is not involved in the transposition process.) As a result, the improvised melody in m. 29 once again conforms to the normative (subdominant) harmony. The same procedure recurs exactly one chorus later, when the final four pitches in m. 40 (the eighth notes A–B–C-sharp–E) are immediately transposed downward by a semitone in the first half of the next measure. In the previously discussed passage at mm. 63–65, explicit transpositional operations are less evident as a means of reestablishing compliance with the underlying harmonic scheme. Yet even in these measures, strict transposition occurs as the melodic descending minor third B–A-flat (notated in m. 63 as an augmented second) is shifted a whole step downward, to A–F-sharp.

It is certainly possible to interpret Tyner's techniques of playing "inside" and "outside" a given mode or pentatonic scale in purely musical terms, as Paul Rinzler does in his syntactically oriented analysis of the pianist's playing.[35] Viewing these same formal techniques as manifestations of apart playing, however, contextualizes them within the broader realm of Afrodiasporic expressive culture, specifically emphasizing their commonalities with the aesthetic principles of black dance.[36]

[35] Paul Rinzler, "McCoy Tyner: Style and Syntax," *Annual Review of Jazz Studies* 2 (1983): 109–49. Also see Rinzler, "Quartal and Pentatonic Harmony."

[36] The commonalities between music and dance may also resonate at a psychological level, as has been theorized by scholars of African music such as Richard Waterman, who proposes that almost all African music "is to be regarded as music for the dance, although the 'dance' involved may be entirely

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196307070095 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"Inside" and "outside" improvisatory techniques can, in addition, function symbolically by invoking various different subgenres of jazz. For instance, Tyner's pentatonic and blues-scale-based procedures in "Bessie's Blues" are strongly associated with the blues idiom and its diasporic origins, whereas his chordal substitutions are identified with jazz of the post–World War II era. His continual shifts between these two historically situated styles throughout his piano solo are in keeping with Coltrane's own synthesis of traditional blues and modern jazz in the theme itself.

Tyner's stylistic shifts amount to a process of "code-switching," a concept that Mark Slobin has drawn from the discipline of sociolinguistics.[37] Slobin cites definitions of code-switching as "moving from one consistent set of co-occurring rules to another,"[38] and as "a conversational strategy used to establish, cross, or destroy group boundaries."[39] In a musical setting, code-switching occurs when players utilize the conventions or techniques of more than one style in immediate juxtaposition during a given performance. Slobin further theorizes that "a band playing a song can pull together . . . timbre, rhythm, and instrumentation for several performers simultaneously in a stratified system I call code-layering, style upon style upon style"[40]—an apt description of Tyner's and Garrison's interaction in mm. 63–65 of "Bessie's Blues." Slobin continues: "It can then shift any number of the variables in the next section to produce a new kaleidoscopic combination."[41] One such variable that underlies the historically based stylistic codes in Tyner's solo is the apartness he creates by using harmonic substitutions. Since jazz's stylistic evolution over its first few decades saw improvisations grow increasingly remote from their themes, harmonic apartness, from the vantage point of 1964, suggests comparative chronological proximity while harmonic togetherness connotes historic distance. That is, Tyner's use of the codes of harmonic substitution draw him further from the underlying chord structure and towards the stylistic present. Conversely, the older code of the blues arises when he remains closer to the scale or mode established by Coltrane's theme, his pitch selections falling within the E-flat major scale with its pentatonic-minor flat-3 and flat-7 scale-degree inflections.

In a 1975 conversation with Len Lyons, Tyner explains his music as drawing on a variety of historically situated stylistic influences with important expressive functions:

---

a mental one," and Kofi Agawu, who writes that "drumming [in Northern Ewe musical culture] invariably brings on movement, but although movement is normally externalized and more or less patterned, it may also be internalized, a feature of the imagination, not the body." See Richard Alan Waterman, "African Influence on the Music of the Americas," 211, and Kofi Agawu, *African Rhythm: A Northern Ewe Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 185.

[37] Mark Slobin, *Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 85–97.

[38] William Labov, *Sociolinguistic Patterns* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), 134–35, quoted in Slobin, *Subcultural Sounds,* 85.

[39] Susan Gal, "The Political Economy of Code Choice," in *Codeswitching: Anthropological and Sociolinguistic Perspectives,* ed. Monica Heller (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1988), 247, quoted in Slobin, *Subcultural Sounds,* 85.

[40] Slobin, *Subcultural Sounds,* 87.

[41] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196307070095 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> *How do you view your own music historically speaking? Is it derived from bebop, from modal music, or do you think of it as black American music?*
>
> My music is an extension of bebop, but all these other things are interconnected. You really have to be aware of the interrelationships and of the roots of the music in order for it to have its identity. Historically, though, there are different ways to look at this. The music had its roots in the black community. Music played a very important part in self-expression within the black community. The form of the music is very expressive of how black people felt, especially with bebop because it was such a major change in that particular idiom. . . . The thing is that the roots of the music must be felt for it to be truly what it is. If you look at the top of a tree, it can be blowing in many different directions, but once it's broken off from its roots, it's dead.[42]

Stressing the fundamental interconnectedness between different historic cultural and musical currents, Tyner affirms his own piano style's immediate origins in the post–World War II bebop era, as well as its deep rootedness in the African American experience.[43] "Bessie's Blues" vividly illustrates his mediation between the stylistic codes of modern jazz and the more foundational, historically grounded language of the blues.

At one point during his solo Tyner ventures further from the theme than at any other moment. The second half of his second chorus (mm. 43–48) contains a passage evoking not only the post-bebop idiom in general, but the characteristic musical language of the Coltrane Quartet. That language's principal harmonic foundations were on the one hand modal jazz stemming from Coltrane's experience playing with Miles Davis during the late 1950s as well as his study of Indian music and the theoretical writings of George Russell, and on the other, the complex chordal vocabulary whose locus classicus is Coltrane's 1960 album *Giant Steps*.[44] The passage in question begins in the second half of m. 43, where Tyner plays a figure consisting of five eighth-note triplets articulating the pitches E-flat, G-flat, and A-flat. This trichord, here an E-flat-minor pentatonic subset, is a signature of Coltrane's music of this period—it is also the basic thematic cell of the "Acknowledgement" section from *A Love Supreme*, and the incipit motive of "Ascension." In m. 44, Tyner transposes the trichordal motive upward by a perfect fifth to the pitches B-flat, D-flat, and E-flat, the first two of which complement the previous three notes in m. 43, A-flat, E-flat, and G-flat, to produce a complete E-flat-minor pentatonic collection. Next he plays the original E-flat, G-flat, and A-flat an octave higher. Then, having established transposition as a salient transformational operation, at m. 45 Tyner transposes the same motive a major second downward, to C-sharp, E, and F-sharp. Here, where the preestablished harmony is a dominant B-flat7 chord (or, as Garrison more often plays, a pre-dominant supertonic F-minor7), Tyner departs

[42] Len Lyons, *The Great Jazz Pianists* (New York: Da Capo, 1983), 240–41.

[43] Tyner does not always make firm distinctions between the terms "black," "African" and "African (Afro-) American." In the previously cited 1970 interview, he tends towards a pan-Africanist perspective, using these terms somewhat interchangeably. Asked how he labels his own music, the pianist replies, "To me, this is our system of music, the Afro-American system of music. This is the African system of music. . . . A lot of these expressions—jazz, avant-garde—came about because of our environment. As musicians began to think more about our cultural heritage, they began to refer to it more and more as black music" (McFarlane, "The Black Scholar Interviews: McCoy Tyner," 40).

[44] John Coltrane, *Giant Steps,* Atlantic 1311-2, 1960.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196307070095 Published online by Cambridge University Press

from the given framework. In the second half of m. 45 he transposes the motive again so that it starts on F-sharp, though this time he alters it by adding the pitch C-sharp. Nonetheless, all five different pitches that Tyner plays with his right hand in m. 45—C-sharp, E, F-sharp, A, and B—constitute a complete F-sharp-minor pentatonic collection.[45]

Tyner himself sees these sorts of harmonic superimpositions over the dominant as identifiable elements of his personal style: "I think that one of the characteristics of my style is I can take a dominant chord and do a lot of different things with it, and utilizing suspensions and moving around that particular sound."[46] Interviewed in 1983 by Marian McPartland for her National Public Radio program *Piano Jazz*, he further explains that "by the way I voice the chord I can move, generally, in any direction," and "you can move diatonically, or in terms of skipping notes and using thirds and fourths and mixing them up like that. . . . The music has more flexibility" (a transcription from this interview appears in the Appendix). Tyner's remarks suggest that apart playing—outside of a given chord structure—helps him establish his individual musical identity by freeing him from the constraints necessitated by mutual collaboration.[47] Indeed, to any listener familiar with his playing, the end of his second chorus is probably where his style is most immediately recognizable.[48] The apartness that facilitates an improviser's expression of his or her musical identity is analogous to the broader social processes whereby subjective identities are dependent upon "dialogical relations with others."[49]

In the course of his series of pentatonic motives, Tyner uses transposition as a means of shifting *away* from the underlying harmonic framework, rather than as a means of *returning* from a state of apartness as in the tritone substitutions noted earlier. He also highlights his modern stylistic language's rootedness in the blues by first presenting both his musical material—the trichordal cell—and its

[45] To the eye, the shift in melodic pitch content between mm. 44 and 45 is exaggerated in the transcription shown in Example 1 owing to the enharmonic respelling of the invariant pitch classes D-flat/C-sharp and G-flat/F-sharp. The shift in m. 45 outside of the E-flat-minor pentatonic collection is also reinforced by Tyner's introduction of the pitches C, F, and A in his left hand. The melodic material that Tyner plays in m. 45 is a musical formula that he uses elsewhere—for example, in his solo on "Homestretch," from Joe Henderson's album *Page One* (Blue Note 7243 4 98795 2 2, 1963), he plays the same formula at 2:43.

[46] Quoted in Sidran, *Talking Jazz,* 233.

[47] This scenario calls to mind Leonard Meyer's definition of style as "a replication of patterning . . . that results from a series of choices made within some set of constraints." See his *Style and Music: Theory, History, and Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 3.

[48] Note that the chorus following this one is the only chorus in which Tyner does not use the tritone substitution in m. 52, the fourth measure of the blues form. Having recently strayed so far away from the harmonic model, he instead opts to remain in E-flat-minor pentatonic territory, accentuating the apartness of the previous harmonic foray.

[49] Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition,* ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 34, quoted in Ajay Heble, *Landing on the Wrong Note: Jazz, Dissonance, and Critical Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 95. On the same point, also see Deborah E. McDowell, "Boundaries: Or Distant Relations and Close Kin," in *Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s,* ed. Houston A. Baker Jr. and Patricia Redmond (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 56, quoted in Gary Tomlinson, "Cultural Dialogics and Jazz: A White Historian Signifies," in *Disciplining Music: Musicology and Its Canons,* ed. Katherine Bergeron and Philip V. Bohlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 73.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196307070095 Published online by Cambridge University Press

means of transformation—strict transposition—in a blues-oriented context and then re-presenting them as elements of the contemporary jazz idiom. Conversely, by initially employing strict motivic transpositions while remaining within the minor pentatonic blues scale, Tyner uses a technique more often associated with post-tonal musical environments, but in a comparatively traditional tonal, or modal, context,[50] recalling his conviction that all phases in the history of black music should be viewed as "interconnected. You really have to be aware of the interrelationships."[51] Notably, with regard to code-switching, in this passage the musical code itself does not change. Rather, Tyner alters the pentatonic code's symbolism by placing it in a new context involving greater apartness from the theme's normative harmonic and scalar elements.

The concept of apart playing helps to establish a cultural context for the ways that jazz musicians relate their improvisations to their thematic models and their fellow players as they seek personal creative freedom during a group performance. Because apart playing is inherently relational—it is apartness *from* something—it necessitates communality and interpersonal awareness, and consequently, during Tyner's improvisation on "Bessie's Blues," those moments when the music reaches its greatest level of apartness are the same moments at which the players must be most strongly attuned psychologically to one another. Their musical divergence requires that they be in especially close agreement as to the theme's basic structure; otherwise they risk getting lost in the underlying form. (By contrast, it is far easier for ensemble musicians to remain coordinated if, at the opposite extreme, they are playing in unison, in which case the sounding music is maximally together.) This need for intersubjective psychological concurrence means that the greater the performers' familiarity with one another's ways of playing, the deeper their potential mutual trust and hence the greater their attainable level of apartness.[52] John Miller Chernoff has written that in West African music a principal goal of apart playing is a state of "connectedness."[53] In jazz, too, this practice is inherently social, facilitating both personal expression and collective engagement—a mode of individual creativity that extends beyond the music itself to the realm of human relationships. Tyner's own thoughts on jazz ensemble performance affirm the inseparability of its social and structural dimensions: "In playing jazz you learn to respect the other musicians on stage; it's not about the individual. You learn to deal with other people and

[50] The asymmetry of diatonic systems generally favors non-strict motivic transpositions, with minor intervals becoming major and vice versa. A famous example of strict transposition in a post-tonal context is the continual transposition of this same pentatonic subset that Coltrane plays towards the end of the "Acknowledgement" section of *A Love Supreme* (see Porter, *John Coltrane,* 242). Bassist Chuck Israels has described how an improviser may rectify a "wrong note" that appears not to fit a given underlying harmony by following it with a melodic pattern generated from strict reiterations of a single musical interval, thereby endowing it with a self-contained logical basis (Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz,* 211).

[51] Lyons, *The Great Jazz Pianists,* 240–41.

[52] On the role of musical trust in jazz ensemble improvisation, see Monson, *Saying Something,* 174–77.

[53] Chernoff, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility,* 167.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196307070095 Published online by Cambridge University Press

understand that the group can make music collectively. The goal is to do things in an organized way and still bring individuality to the music without disrupting the collective sound. Everybody plays something different but they play together."[54]

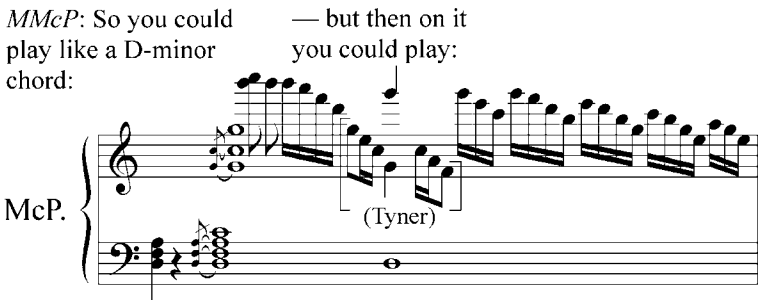
Appendix

In 1983, the pianist Marian McPartland recorded an interview with McCoy Tyner for her National Public Radio program, "Piano Jazz." In the following transcript from their conversation, they discuss some of Tyner's stylistic signature techniques.

Marian McPartland: You've got a special thing that you do in your right hand that, you know, I always know it's you when I hear a record. Those—let's see, well I can't begin to do it:



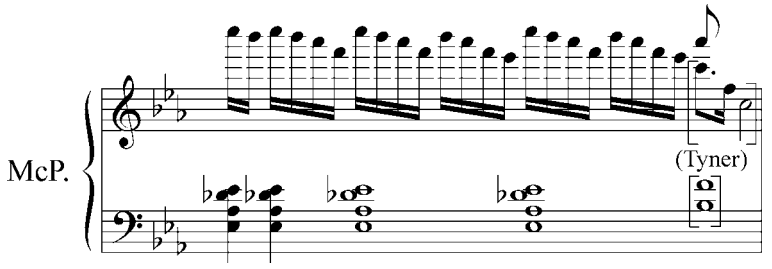
MMcP: What chords are you playing there?
McCoy Tyner: Yeah, well actually a lot of them are really superimposed on—you know, I use a lot of substitutions, you know. But by the way I voice the chord I can move, generally, in any direction. And I think that that's the reason why I was able to play with John [Coltrane] so well; because I never . . . You know, it's a matter of what you don't play sometimes is as important as what you do play.
MMcP: Yes.
MT: So I would leave space which wouldn't identify the chord so definitely to the point where it inhibited your other voicings, the things that you would use as substitutions. So I left the chord open for that. It's almost—



MT: Right.
MMcP: I'm not doing it right.
MT: That's all right.

[54] Quoted in Alain Drouot, "From Jazz Halls to Piano Festivals: An Interview with McCoy Tyner," *Clavier* (May/June 2002): 14.

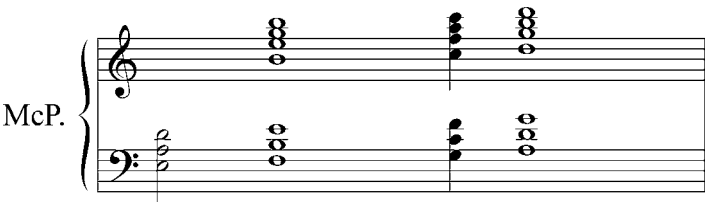
https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196307070095 Published online by Cambridge University Press



MMcP: It's that kind of thing, isn't it?
MT: Certain notes you pick out—
MMcP: Boy, I'll have to go home and practice! [laughter]
MT: No, you got it! The main thing is the sound—that's the most important thing.
MMcP: But it's exciting, you know!
MT: Yeah!
MMcP: It's a nice sounding thing. I love that. I love those.
MT: Yeah, well I try to move around a little bit this way:

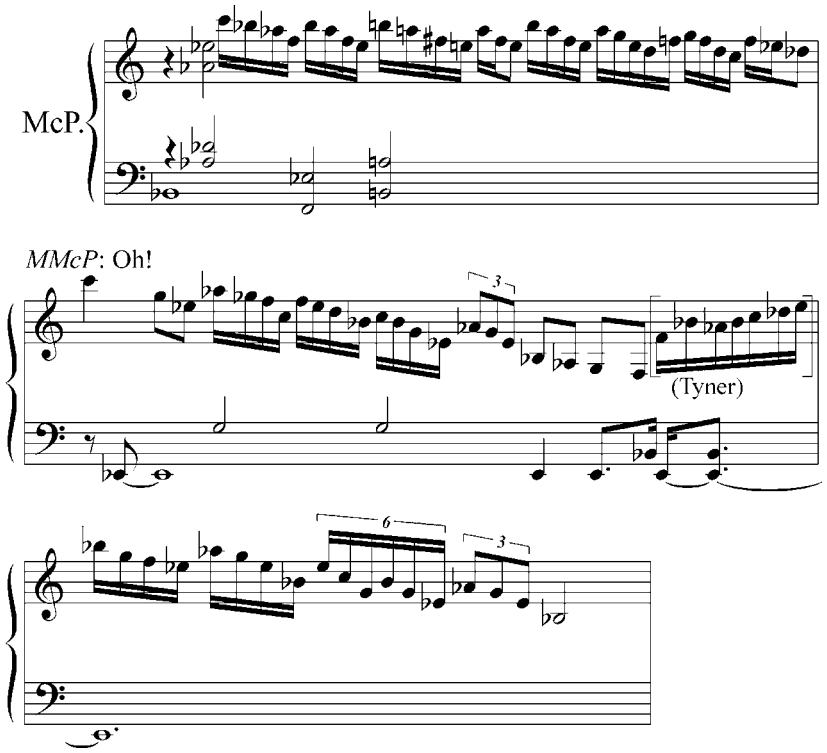


MMcP: Do you base your tunes, or your approach, on a whole lot of these kind of chords, whatever they are? I'm not very good technically.



MT: You can do it with anything. Even with a standard—it doesn't matter.
MMcP: Can you?
MT: Yes, you can do it with any—

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196307070095 Published online by Cambridge University Press



MT: You know, like you can move diatonically, or in terms of skipping notes and using thirds and fourths and mixing them up like that.
MMcP: That's great! It makes for a lot of freedom.
MT: Yeah it does. Exactly. And the music has more flexibility, I've found out, you know. And working with him [Coltrane] I had to move quite a bit, because he was constantly moving around.

References

Abrahams, Roger D., et al. *Blues for New Orleans: Mardi Gras and America's Creole Soul.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006.

Agawu, Kofi. *African Rhythm: A Northern Ewe Perspective.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Berliner, Paul. *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Brothers, Thomas. "Solo and Cycle in African-American Jazz." *Musical Quarterly* 78/3 (1994): 479–509.

———. *Louis Armstrong's New Orleans.* New York: W. W. Norton, 2006.

Caponi, Gena Dagel, ed. *Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin', & Slam Dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999.

Chernoff, John Miller. *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Actions in African Musical Idioms.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196307070095 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Dean, Roger T. *New Structures in Jazz and Improvised Music Since 1960.* Milton Keynes, UK: Open University Press, 1992.
DeVeaux, Scott. *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.
Drouot, Alain. "From Jazz Halls to Piano Festivals: An Interview with McCoy Tyner." *Clavier* (May/June 2002): 11–14, 45.
Gal, Susan. "The Political Economy of Code Choice." In *Codeswitching: Anthropological and Sociolinguistic Perspectives,* ed. Monica Heller, 243–61. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1988.
Gottschild, Brenda Dixon. *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts.* Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1996.
Heble, Ajay. *Landing on the Wrong Note: Jazz, Dissonance, and Critical Practice.* New York: Routledge, 2000.
Jaffe, Andy. *Jazz Harmony*. 2nd edn. Tübingen, Ger.: Advance Music, 1996.
Keil, Charles. "Motion and Feeling Through Music." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 24/3 (1966): 337–49. Repr. in Keil and Feld, *Music Grooves,* 53–76.
———. "Participatory Discrepancies and the Power of Music." In Keil and Feld, *Music Grooves*, 96–108.
Keil, Charles, and Steven Feld, eds. *Music Grooves.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
Kernfeld, Barry. "Two Coltranes." *Annual Review of Jazz Studies* 2 (1983): 7–66.
Labov, William. *Sociolinguistic Patterns.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972.
Levine, Mark. *The Jazz Theory Book*. Petaluma, Calif.: Sher Music, 1995.
Malone, Jacqui. *Steppin' on the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Dance.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996.
Martin, Henry. *Charlie Parker and Thematic Improvisation.* Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1996.
McDowell, Deborah E. "Boundaries: Or Distant Relations and Close Kin." In *Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s,* ed. Houston A. Baker Jr. and Patricia Redmond, 51–70. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.
McFarlane, Al. "The Black Scholar Interviews: McCoy Tyner." *The Black Scholar* 2/2 (October 1970): 40–46.
Merriam, Alan P. "The African Idiom in Music." *Journal of American Folklore* 75/296 (1962): 120–30.
Meyer, Leonard. *Style and Music: Theory, History, and Ideology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.
Monson, Ingrid. *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
Porter, Lewis. *John Coltrane: His Life and Music.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998.
Powell, Richard. "Art History and Black Memory: Toward a 'Blues Aesthetic.'" In *History and Memory in African-American Culture,* ed. Geneviève Fabre and Robert O'Meally, 228–43. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
Rinzler, Paul. "McCoy Tyner: Style and Syntax." *Annual Review of Jazz Studies* 2 (1983): 109–49.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196307070095 Published online by Cambridge University Press

———. "The Quartal and Pentatonic Harmony of McCoy Tyner." *Annual Review of Jazz Studies* 10 (1999): 35–87.
Sidran, Ben. *Talking Jazz: An Oral History*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1995.
Slobin, Mark. *Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West*. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1993.
Taylor, Charles. "The Politics of Recognition." In *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition,* ed. Amy Gutmann, 25–73. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994.
Thompson, Robert Farris. "An Aesthetic of the Cool: West African Dance." *African Forum* 2/2 (1966): 85–122. Repr. in Caponi, *Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin', & Slam Dunking*, 72–86.
Tomlinson, Gary. "Cultural Dialogics and Jazz: A White Historian Signifies." In *Disciplining Music: Musicology and Its Canons,* ed. Katherine Bergeron and Philip V. Bohlman, 64–94. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
Waterman, Christopher A. Response to Charles Keil, "The Theory of Participatory Discrepancies: A Progress Report," *Ethnomusicology* 39/1 (1995): 92–94.
Waterman, Richard Alan. "African Influence on the Music of the Americas." In *Acculturation in the Americas*, ed. Sol Tax, 207–18. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952.
Wilson, Olly. "The Heterogeneous Sound Ideal in African-American Music." In *New Perspectives on Music: Essays in Honor of Eileen Southern,* ed. Josephine Wright and Samuel A. Floyd Jr., 327–38. Warren, Mich.: Harmonie Park Press, 1992.

Discography

Coltrane, John. *Giant Steps.* Atlantic 1311-2, 1960.
———. *Crescent.* Impulse! AS-66, 1964.
———. *A Love Supreme.* Impulse! AS-77, 1965.
———. *Ascension.* Impulse! AS-95, 1966.
———. *Coltrane Plays the Blues.* Atlantic 1382-2, 1966.
———. *Coltrane: The Classic Quartet—Complete Impulse! Studio Recordings.* Impulse! IMPD8-280, 1998.
Davis, Miles. *Kind of Blue.* Columbia CL 1355, 1959.
Henderson, Joe. *Page One.* Blue Note 7243 4 98795 2 2, 1963.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196307070095 Published online by Cambridge University Press