

Little Bird: An Examination of the Early Alto Saxophone Style of Jimmy Heath

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Introduction

Jimmy Heath has had a 70+ year history as a recording artist and is widely recognized as an outstanding saxophonist, composer, arranger, band leader, and educator. His mastery of the bebop idiom led Dizzy Gillespie to declare, "All I can say is, if you know Jimmy Heath, you know Bop." While primarily thought of as a tenor saxophonist, Heath began his career as an alto saxophonist. The influence of Charlie Parker loomed large during Heath's development to such an extent that he earned the moniker, "Little Bird" from fellow musicians. As Heath describes in an interview with Marc Myers of Jazzwax.com, "By the time I was with Howard [McGhee], I was copying Charlie Parker and sounded so much like him that they called me "Little Bird." Heath also stated, "I felt great about it because he [Parker] was the man."

This presentation examines recordings Heath made with Howard McGhee in the late '40s and traces the influence of Parker on Heath's early alto saxophone playing style. The main source material focuses on several transcriptions of solos based on some of the core bebop repertoire (including the blues, I Got Rhythm changes, Yardbird Suite, and two versions of Donna Lee). Included in the analysis are comparisons of several aspects of Heath's and Parker's style including saxophone sound and timbre, melodic material, harmonic devices, time feel, and phrasing. In cases where Heath explicitly quotes Charlie Parker licks, transcriptions of phrases from both players are presented to show how each player uses and develops a given phrase. Areas of similarity are demonstrated while also highlighting differences between them, particularly in the area of Parker's rhythmic feel and unsurpassed variety of phrasing.

Recording Sessions

The Howard McGhee Sextet With Milt Jackson (December, 1947):

Merry Lee
Down Home

Howard McGhee Sextet (February, 1948):

Hot and Mellow
Messin' With Fire

Howard McGhee Bopset (May, 1948):

Al's Tune	Nicole
How High The Moon	Donna Lee
Bop En Vogue	Big Will

Tonal Comparison to Charlie Parker

Heath's tone bears a close resemblance to Parker's. While differences between the players can be heard, based on similar tonal qualities, it is understandable that Heath's colleagues bestowed the nickname, "Little Bird" upon him. Listen to the supplemental audio files to hear the similarity ("Hot and Mellow" (aka "Yardbird Suite") provides perhaps the best comparison).

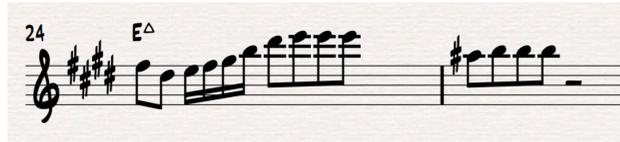
Examples of Vocabulary from Charlie Parker

Examining the 10 transcriptions of Heath's solos shows several examples of him quoting or paraphrasing phrases from Parker's solos. A few representative examples are show below:

Heath's solo on How High The Moon:



Parker's solo on Ornithology:



Heath's opening phrase on How High The Moon (quoting Ornithology) :



Vocabulary Examples Continued

Heath's phrase from Bop En Vogue (paraphrasing Parker's phrase from Buzzy):



Parker's phrase from Buzzy:



Heath's phrase from Messin' With Fire (aka Donna Lee) in d minor:



Parker's Phrase from Bebop in d minor:



Differences

While there are tonal similarities and vocabulary similarities, there are two areas which separate the two players.

1). Examination of the 10 solos shows instances where Heath's time feel is not as consistent as Parker's. There are instances of rushing at times and of hesitation at other times.

Differences Continued

2). Heath's phrases tend to be more regular than Parker's. Heath tends to phrase in 1, 2, or 4 bar phrases. Additionally, these phrases tend to be regular and closely aligned with the underlying harmonic framework. In contrast, what separates Parker from his followers is his complete freedom when creating a phrase. As Charles McPherson stated in an interview with Ethan Iverson, "[Parker] does not care where he stops and most important is he does not care where he starts. That's what is amazing.... he can start from any spot and connect it down the pike. He's like a drunk man who is on a tight rope. He never falls. The accents make you feel like he could never come out right and he does. All the time. He'll start anywhere. It would be the "and of 3" in a preceding bar and make all of the connections seamlessly. He comes out right on chord tones and everything we know for melodic logic to happen. This is what I mean. He is alive. He is not flatlining anywhere. Now that is some real freedom. That is some serious rhythmic freedom and some serious harmonic freedom and some serious melodic freedom."

Given that these are the first recordings of a 21-year old Jimmy Heath, it is not surprising that his phrasing would continue to evolve throughout his long career.

Summary

- This presentation examined 10 early recordings of Jimmy Heath on alto saxophone
- The influence of Charlie Parker on Heath is apparent and the origin of the "Little Bird" nickname is clear.
- Heath provided the following explanation of why he switched to tenor not long after these recordings: "Later I wanted to get my own reputation going, which is still very difficult. When you're an alto player and you come from the Charlie Parker school of playing, it's hard to get away from it regardless of what instrument you change to. I changed to tenor, but I'm still playing some Charlie Parker in there. I [switched to tenor] to get my own thing. I wanted to be Jimmy Heath, not Bird."

More Information

For more information about Jeff Rzepiela, visit his website containing over 75 solo transcriptions, several big band arrangements, and a copy of this presentation (including the 10 transcriptions and edited audio files): www.scooby-sax.com