

An Examination of Oliver Nelson's "Patterns for Improvisation"

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Oliver Nelson published "Patterns for Improvisation" in 1966. It is a collection of 81 exercises designed to build technique as well as fundamental vocabulary used in jazz improvisation. As the original promotional material states, "This tremendous resource helps spell out some of the basic building blocks of the jazz language" Nelson goes on to state in his introductory notes to the exercises that, "the patterns in this book ... will give the player flexibility in all keys and the confidence to cope with almost any musical situation." This presentation will examine this work from 3 different perspectives.

In the first perspective, the work is examined to show the logic behind each exercise. Understanding the structure of an exercise leads to an understanding of its application. For example, exercise #2 is based on scale degrees 1-2-3-5 of a major scale ascending in minor seconds. This particular pattern is featured prominently in John Coltrane's "Giant Steps" solo. Knowing the structure of the exercise, one can extend the idea behind it to develop new material. For example, exercise #2 could use the same scale degrees but ascend in minor thirds, or descend in major thirds, or use scale degrees 1-2-3-5 from a minor scale, etc.

In another perspective, excerpts of transcriptions of Oliver Nelson's solos will be presented to show how the material informed his improvised solos. In some cases, there are direct quotations of patterns from this work. In other cases, an improvised idea may draw upon the logic of a particular pattern (e.g. a phrase based on sequencing an idea in perfect fourths). In addition, transcriptions of other artists (e.g. Phil Woods) are presented to show the impact of this resource had on other players.

Finally, certain patterns will be shown to be used in Nelson's big band compositions and arrangements. For example, exercise 77 is used in "Patterns for Orchestra" while exercise 81 forms the basis for "Blues and the Abstract Truth." An analysis is presented to show how the ideas contained in the original exercise are developed and expanded into a full-length big band arrangement.