

“Wow” By Lennie Tristano

“Tristano extended harmonies and melodic lines from standard tunes in a direction different than the prevailing bebop of the early 1950’s, and became a cult figure doing so.”¹

Like any genre of music, jazz encompasses several more specific sub-genres. During the 1940s, the language pioneered by Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie called bebop was beginning to make its case for immortality. While many of the performers steeped in this style were seeking high energy and interactive performances, a small but influential collection of “cool style” players was also emerging. Led by a blind pianist Lennie Tristano, this new sub-genre of jazz known as “cool jazz” (or “third stream” jazz) stressed more compositional improvisation, less interaction, pure tone, and a variety of progressive rhythmic and harmonic devices. The concept of organized jazz pedagogy can trace some of its origins to the work Tristano did with his many successful students.

Background

Lee Konitz and Warne Marsh were two Tristano students that went on to have extremely successful careers in jazz. Unlike many of their contemporaries, these two saxophonists were rigorously trained in what could be considered a highly organized setting, allowing them to go beyond what was considered the convention at the time.

¹ “Final Bar”, *Down Beat*, January II, 1979, 10.

Tristano required all of his students to adhere to his well-organized concept of jazz education. Ear training, keyboard harmony, rhythmic subdivision/superimposition, and rigorous exercises for developing technique were hallmarks of Tristano's approach.⁴⁹ Many of his concepts can be analyzed and displayed using the plethora of sophisticated compositions Tristano and his followers produced.

Lennie Tristano recorded two sessions for Capital Records in March and May of 1949, a time that is now generally considered the height of his influential output. His composition "Wow," from the album *Intuition*, is a tortuous yet playful contrafact on the Tin Pan Alley song "You Can Depend on Me."⁵⁰

Composition Analysis

"Wow" maintains the basic AABA harmonic form of "You Can Depend on Me" however, the harmony features more exotic chord tensions, such as bIII Major 7, II Maj7, and bII-7, bV7 leading to I. Uncharacteristic of the title, the first two sections of "Wow" are quite subdued, especially rhythmically. It is not until the third section, or bridge, that the title's meaning becomes apparent. Tristano's saxophonist Lee Konitz states, "you're supposed to say 'wow' at the end of the bridge."⁵¹ The melody of "Wow" is through-composed through the first 16 measures. The bridge is rhythmically more active,

⁴⁹ Eunmi Shim. "Musical Analysis". *Lennie Tristano (1919-1978): His life, Music, and Teaching*, [Ann Arbor: UMI, 200], 128.

⁵⁰ *You Can Depend On Me*, Carpenter/Dunlap/Hines. 1932.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 487.

featuring polyrhythmic phrasing and harmonization. The final eight measure A section is identical to the first.

Motivic development and polyrhythmic devices are apparent from the first measure. The composition begins with a sequence of two five beat phrases superimposed against the 4/4 beat, the second five beat phrase being a major second higher. The accents actually disguise this displacement. This concept of rhythmic displacement is a common characteristic of Tristano's composing and improvising, and carried through to the styles of his students and followers.²

Example 2.1 Lennie Tristano, “Wow.” Melody mm. 1-4

Curiously, the last eighth note of beat four in measure two (B natural) clashes with the C dominant chord change. However, it also anticipates the raised eleventh on the following measure's F major chord. This type of juxtaposition is typical of Tristano's style. The down/up sequences in mm. 5-9 are also typical of Tristano's compositional style and add direction to his displaced figures. In the second sequence Tristano uses triplets to speed

² Eunmi Shim. "Musical Analysis". *Lennie Tristano (1919-1978): His life, Music, and Teaching*, [Ann Arbor: UMI, 200], 128.

up the melodic rhythm. Rapidly ascending and descending lines such as this are found in many of his and his follower's compositions:⁵³

Example 2.2 Lennie Tristano, "Wow." Melody mm. 4-9

In mm. 10-13, Tristano continues the technique of rhythmic displacement by starting his phrases on the second beat of each measure, jumping to the fourth beat in the end of measure thirteen. The highest note of the composition, G# above middle C, occurs over the G major seven raised eleven. This raised tonic seems to fit as the raised eleven. A possible reason for the relative lack of tension in this unusual dissonance is the fact that it could be heard as the thirteenth of a B minor chord a third above.

Example 2.3 Lennie Tristano, "Wow." Melody mm. 10-13

The second "A" section concludes with a line descending downward in fourths, utilizing the upper chord tensions of the F major chord, ending on the raised eleven. This type of

⁵³ Eunmi Shim. "Musical Analysis". *Lennie Tristano (1919-1978): His life, Music, and Teaching*, [Ann Arbor: UMI, 200], 128.

line is very indicative of the intellectual "cool style" and not at all typical of the prevailing style of the period (bebop):

Example 2.4 Lennie Tristano, "Wow." Melody mm. 14, 15

The bridge creates a stark contrast to the previous sections by speeding up the melodic rhythm even more.⁵⁴ Tristano employs rapid sixteenth notes grouped in 3/8 phrases (shown by brackets) repeated six times.⁵⁵ Typical of his style, the figure changes direction unpredictably. By adding a second voice a third below, Tristano creates a thicker melodic texture. At times, a third voice can be heard when the piano or guitar doubles the saxophone line.⁵⁶

Example 2.5 Lennie Tristano, "Wow." Bridge/Melody mm. 17-20

⁵⁴ Eunmi Shim. "Musical Analysis". *Lennie Tristano (1919-1978): His life, Music, and Teaching*, [Ann Arbor: UMI, 200], 494-495.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 495-496.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 495.

Lee Konitz expresses the intent behind “Wow” with the statement,

[Wow] was supposed to elicit an improvised chorus at least starting on that level—rather than starting on level two, you were starting on level nine, and you were supposed to go to level 10 on the next chorus.⁵⁷

Lennie Tristano’s pioneering techniques help to set his compositions apart from the main stream and cement his position as one of the most influential jazz musicians of both "cool jazz" and jazz history to date. “Wow” provides a prime example of the stylistic and artistic considerations that these musicians were attempting to convey.

Performance Practice

Warne Marsh stated, “We worked our butts off. Lennie was strong on competence in individuals and groups. Discipline. So a lot of work went into those Capital dates. About four months.”⁵⁸ This group discipline was uncommon at the time, especially considering many recording sessions done during this period were impromptu or done with one or two rehearsals. Tristano was well known for his insistence on specific methodology that he considered important for all of his students. For example:

In defense of Tristano, Marsh explained that the notion of his domineering personality stemmed from people misunderstanding his insistence on strict

⁵⁷ Eunmi Shim. “Musical Analysis”. *Lennie Tristano (1919-1978): His life, Music, and Teaching*, [Ann Arbor: UMI, 200], 497, 498.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 498.

discipline: In fact, he's so insistent on a student mastering the rudiments of music that he's often understood as being domineering and dominating and creating all the misunderstanding that's he's managed to create. But it means nothing to him.⁵⁹

"This methodology was also reflected in the development of Tristano's students' individual styles, especially Marsh and Konitz. It is the foundation in which to practice the material and style needed to play the composition "Wow."

Tristano was a stickler for rhythmic mastery and precise articulation. In teaching bassist Jeff Brown, Tristano demanded that specific exercises be mastered:

"For example, Jeff Brown worked on triads articulated in groups of five notes, which he had to play as fast as he could and articulate well; he felt that this exercise opened his ear to 'what's possible of these sequences of notes, different groups.'"⁶⁰

Example 2.6 "Patterns derived from triads in C major articulated in groups of five notes."⁶¹



In my own practice for this piece, I employed the technique of placing limitations to develop specific musical concepts. An example of specific limitations within a phrase

⁵⁹ Eunmi Shim. "Tristano As A Teacher". *Lennie Tristano (1919-1978): His life, Music, and Teaching*, [Ann Arbor: UMI, 200], 161.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 498.

⁶¹ Ibid, 498.

(be they intentional or not) can be found in Warne Marsh's improvisation. In mm. 13-16 Marsh limits himself to a relatively narrow range in the middle register of the tenor saxophone, an octave and a ninth.

Example 2.7 Warne Marsh, “Wow.” Solo mm. 13-16⁶²



In addition to practicing this particular phrase, I both composed and improvised similar phrases within limited ranges of the tenor saxophone.

Example 2.8 Jeff Pipher, Limited range of perfect fifth



In the opening ten measures of his solo Lee Konitz starts phrases on, or accents, all 4 beats in the measure. Such asymmetrical phrasing on downbeats is one of the most noticeable features of his and his style and that of his contemporaries. It is also in contrast to the heavily syncopated bebop popular at the time.

⁶² Eunmi Shim. “Tristano As A Teacher”. *Lennie Tristano (1919-1978): His life, Music, and Teaching*, [Ann Arbor: UMI, 200], 491.

Example 2.9 Lee Konitz, “Wow.” Solo mm. 1-10⁶³

To practice this concept of subdividing and internalizing rhythm, I set the metronome to a very slow quarter note tempo (i.e. 40 beats per minute) and clapped hands or played notes on various beats, striving for extreme accuracy.

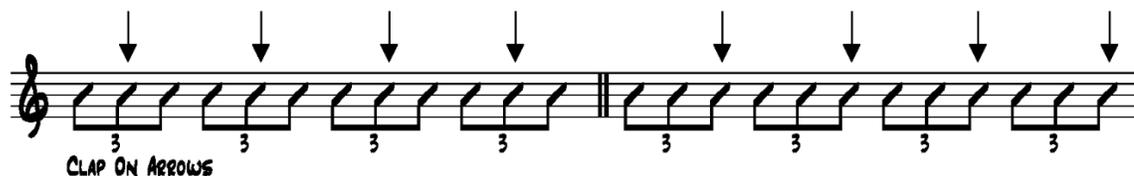
Example 2.10 Downbeat quarter note exercise

When clapping quarter notes on the beat with the metronome at this slow tempo it is easy to hear whether or not the strong sub-division of the beat is internalized. Done correctly,

⁶³ Eunmi Shim. “Musical Analysis”. *Lennie Tristano (1919-1978): His life, Music, and Teaching*, [Ann Arbor: UMI, 200], 490.

the handclap or articulated note will drown out the metronome and become the only audible sound. This same concept can be applied to other parts of the beat such as offbeat quarter notes, triplets, and even smaller sub divisions.

Example 2.11 Sub-division practice techniques



Clapping on smaller and more complex sub-divisions helped me to imagine more interesting possibilities to begin and end phrases, as well as expand potential rhythmic variety. The next step was to begin improvising with this concept in mind.

"Recycling" certain rhythmic and/or melodic shapes is another device found in many of the players' solos on "Wow." In his solo Tristano returns to certain shapes several times in the space of five measures. Note the rhythmic displacement of shapes one and three:

Example 2.12 Lennie Tristano, “Wow.” Solo mm. 21-28⁶⁴

Conclusion

With his consistent attention to detail, discipline, and devotion to creating his own “sound,” Lennie Tristano engineered an entire sub genre of jazz. His pedagogical practices enabled his students to expand the concepts of rhythm, melody, harmony, and phrasing from what was common at the time. Modern players have adopted many of his techniques and stylistic idiosyncrasies as a way to break away from the norm and create a more diverse jazz language.

⁶⁴ Eunmi Shim. “Musical Analysis”. *Lennie Tristano (1919-1978): His life, Music, and Teaching*, [Ann Arbor: UMI, 200], 491.