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pro session

MILES DAVIS' SOLO ON SO WHAT —BIG BAND VERSION

by Bart Marantz

Bart Marantz is Director of Jazz Studies at the Dallas Arts Magnet High School. He is the co-author of Figure Reading Studies with Jerry and Patty Coker, and a Selmer clinician. In the four years of Marantz' tenure at Arts Magnet, the school has won a total of 40 "deebies."

Miles Davis first recorded *So What* in 1959 for *Kind Of Blue* (Columbia 8163) with the quintet that featured John Coltrane and Cannonball Adderley. It was subsequently recorded by Davis in 1961 with the musical genius Gil Evans and his 21-piece orchestra and released on *At Carnegie Hall* (Columbia 8612). While there exists a number of similarities between the two solos, there are also notable differences. What was a quintet is now a big band, and the quiet control of a studio setting has been replaced by an audience-charged scene at Carnegie Hall. The conservative tempo of the quintet rendition lends itself to the cool, icy-blue sound of Davis' playing and to the smooth simplicity of statement he observes. In the later improvisation the tempo is almost doubled to $\text{♩} = 240$ and the key has been moved down one step from Em to Dm. All these factors, along with the radically different textural and rhythmic style of the Gil Evans approach, serve to make this a more energetic and intense solo.

Chorus One begins on pick-up notes with an insistent repetition of middle-register tonic D, which continues for five measures. Measure 6 gives us the first hint of the chromaticism to come, and consciously or unconsciously, the descending minor 3rd in measure 7—to be heard again in measure 8 and measures 18-20, and which changes to an ascending minor 3rd in measures 25, 51, and 53—becomes the melodic motif that lends cohesiveness to the entire solo. Measures 8-10 make a brief sidestep into C major over Dm polytonality and then, following $6\frac{1}{2}$ beats of rest, launch into an E phrygian scale run that ends on A.

As holds true throughout this solo, there is an absence of the many obvious key-change anticipations used in the quintet solo. Instead, the final note before a key change tends to become a pivotal-chromatic tone in the new key, as evidenced by the appearance of the above-noted A in the B-section, measures 22-23. And, in a more ambiguous use of the anticipation, measure 24 uses a chromatic ascending line to approach the E, which he employs as the 9th in the return to D dorian at measure 25.

As in the first A-section of Chorus One, Miles' use of the 9th and 11th in measure 25, and his subsequent C major scale run in measure 29-30, establishes a major over minor polytonality. However, with the beginning of Chorus Two, set up by nine beats of silence, there is a return to D tonic. The second chorus, as was the case in the quintet solo, is distinguished at the beginning by its rhythmic change from running 8th note lines to long, sustained-tone phrases. Measures 41-46 are similar in nature to measures 13-16, which seem to utilize an E phrygian scale to chromatically set up the key change to E \flat dorian at the B-section.

Measures 49-50 see a return to the chromaticism evidenced in Chorus One's B-section. This continued chromaticism adds its own sense of daring to the overall intense nature of this solo. Note again the continuity attained by the repeated use of the minor 3rd in measure 50 (descending) and measures 51 and 53 (ascending). The C common tone between the two keys could be considered the transitional tone that anticipates a return to D dorian for the last A-section of Chorus Two. The C ascends to E which begins a descending then ascending scale pattern that concludes the chorus on the minor 7th of the key (C). The solo continues for four more choruses for a total of six.

Both solos use repetition of the tonic note to state the improvised line and to establish the key center. Both are contained within a two-octave range (quintet, B \flat -B \flat) (big band, E-E), although the 1961 solo maintains a continued higher register throughout. Each solo begins Chorus Two with a rhythmic change to sustained half and whole notes from the preceding moving 8th note lines.

Both evidence Miles' preference for simple lines, with patterns lasting more than one measure. The lines, which are somewhat understated and dotted with large dramatic periods of silence, demonstrate a mastery of melodic and rhythmic cohesion, tension and release. Also noted in the transcription are the unique Miles devices of using half-valve notes to give a nasal texture to the sound (+), falling off notes at the ends of phrases or measures (˘), and the use of glisses to approach notes (˘). Miles Davis, the author of the Cool Period and responsible for the profuse use of modes during that time, demonstrates with these two solos his command of the jazz language and a style that is recognizable and unique despite the differences of setting.

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(♩=24(♩)) (CHORUS ONE) Dm

(4)

(9)

Ebm

(17)

Dm

(25)

(28)

(CHORUS TWO) Dm

(41)

Ebm

(49)

Dm

(57)

end.

db