

## Unity and Form in Miles Davis' "Blue In Green"

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We are only as pure/As the blue inside green  
- George Elliot Clarke, *Bluing Green*, 2005

Widely recognised as a pivotal recording in the history of Jazz, Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue* (1959) has provided several modern "standards" of the Jazz repertoire. The lilting ballad "Blue In Green" is one of these standards. Compositional credit is traditionally attributed to Miles Davis, although there is considerable controversy surrounding the authorship of the piece. It is widely believed that the pianist on the recording sessions, the legendary Bill Evans, was in fact responsible for "Blue In Green". Though the liner notes to *Kind of Blue*, written by Evans, suggest that Davis was the sole contributor, those close to Evans "have spoken of the bitterness he showed when talking of his claim."<sup>1</sup> Typically enigmatic, Davis himself was less than consistent in his own attributions of responsibility, stating, "Evans' approach to the piano brought that piece [*Kind of Blue*] out," and conversely, "[s]ome people went around saying that Bill was the co-composer of the music on *Kind of Blue*. That wasn't true; it's all mine..."<sup>2</sup>

Despite the contested origins of "Blue In Green" the focus of this paper is the structural role played by variation in the formation of the piece. It could be argued that Jazz of the be-bop and hard-bop eras can be seen as "Theme and Variations" of a sort: a melody (the theme) is stated and then each soloist in the group takes a turn playing a solo (the variations) on the harmonic structure of that theme. However, in this sense the relationships between "variations" are often tenuous at best, and certainly, with the exception of the re-voicing of harmonies in the accompaniment (a stylistic attribute of Jazz accompaniment), there is little, if any other variation. I am focussing on "Blue In Green" because, while the theme-plus-solos format is retained, consideration has been given to an overall formal plan expressed through both the shifting harmonic rhythm and the *palindromic* organisation of the soloists. Additionally, there is a commitment to an overall melodic conception on behalf of the soloists. It is this attention to a unified concept that makes "Blue In Green" an excellent candidate for consideration under the "Theme and Variations" rubric. Of particular interest are the fixed element of the harmony – the harmonic rhythm fluctuates but the sequence remains – and melodic elements of the solos as they relate to the theme as it is understood. My goal is not to

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<sup>1</sup> Ashley Kahn, *Kind of Blue: The Making of the Miles Davis Masterpiece* (New York, NY: Da Capo, 2000), 98.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, 98.

ultimately establish "Blue In Green" as somehow belonging to the category of "Theme and Variations" but rather to provide a useful analytical paradigm through which to understand the compositional and improvisatory elements of the piece.

An analysis of this sort cannot help addressing some of the tension that exists in applying what is conventionally understood as a formal structure of Western European art music to Jazz. Historical information about the *Kind of Blue* recording sessions makes clear that the pieces presented to the musicians were often only sketches in the form of a chord structure or small melodic fragments, or had been "worked out" in a performance setting; they were not fully realised scores.<sup>3</sup> Yet, the improvisational processes at work in "Blue In Green" are strongly allied with the notion of a sub-structure which determines the musical elements of the piece.

As there is no conventional score, the theme can be understood as the first full iteration of a melody over the chord sequence. However, this too can be contested, as the theme may also be present in the introductory piano passage. In addition, one could also consider the harmonic sequence, an ostinato of sorts, as the thematic material common to each variation. In this paper, I consider the theme in a more abstract sense, but one that is inclusive of both the introductory melody and the repeated harmonic sequence: the theme is the pitch material suggested by the chord progression, realised in one form by the opening melodic passage. My analyses of the variations establish the melodic strategy of each solo through consideration of how each soloist negotiates different melodic possibilities provided by the harmony. Additionally, my analyses identify unifying rhythmic and melodic elements between each solo.

Amidst the five-song collection of largely blues-based or modal numbers, "Blue In Green" stands out as a composition that does not strictly adhere to traditional Jazz conventions nor to the formal concepts expressed on the rest of the recording. The ten-measure form is atypical in the Jazz tradition, which commonly favours evenly distributed formal sections comprising twelve, twenty-four, or thirty-two measures. Miles Davis' statement "[y]ou can tell where it starts [but] you can't tell where it stops...I love that suspense. Not only does it sound good – it's unpredictable,"<sup>4</sup> is clarified by Bill Evans' liner notes: "'Blue In Green' is a 10-measure circular form following a 4-measure introduction, and played by soloists in various augmentation and diminution of time values."<sup>5</sup>

Evans is describing one of "Blue In Green's" most characteristic features, the harmonic rhythm of the accompaniment that changes with each soloist (Table 1): a four-measure piano introduction at two beats per chord; two cycles of the chord progression at four beats per chord for Davis' first solo; two cycles at two beats per chord for Bill Evans' first piano solo; two cycles at two beats per chord for John Coltrane's tenor saxophone solo; two cycles at one beat per chord for Evans' second piano solo; two cycles at four beats

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<sup>3</sup> Kahn, 96-99.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, 118.

<sup>5</sup> *Kind of Blue*, liner notes.

per chord for Davis' second solo; culminating with a rubato piano and bass ending at roughly one beat per chord.

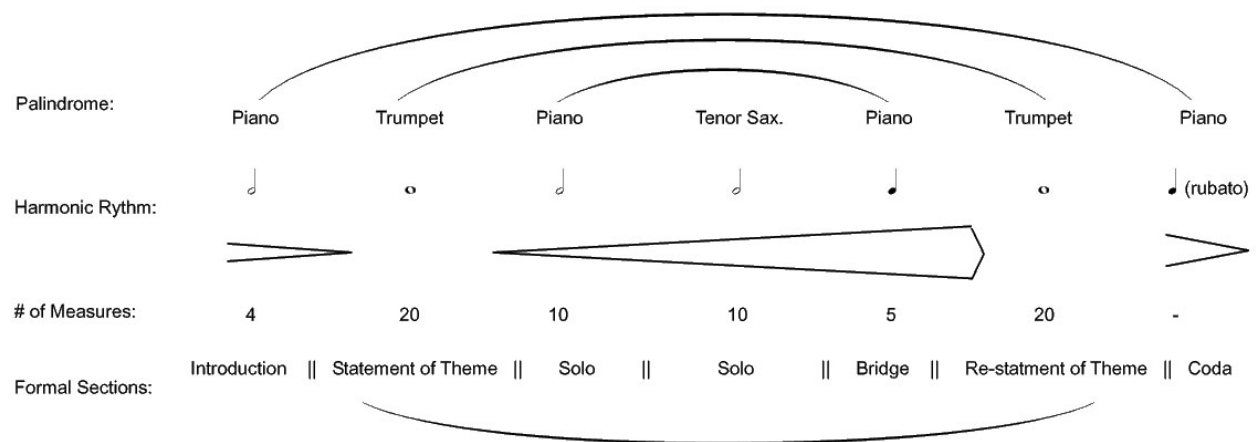
Table 1: Harmonic rhythm for each soloist.

Soloist	Harmonic Rhythm	Repetitions of Harmonic Sequence	Measures
Evans		Intro	4
Davis		2	20
Evans		2	10
Coltrane		2	10
Evans		2	5
Davis		2	20
Evans	 (rubato)	Coda	-

The sense of rhythmic acceleration in the middle of the piece, book-ended by the broader sections, coupled with the palindromic order of the soloists reinforces the "circular" nature of the piece.

We can understand the formal organisation of "Blue In Green" in even greater detail. Consider that the piano introduction and coda, both of which abbreviate or elongate the harmonic progression, frame those sections of the piece where the *entire* harmonic sequence is repeated. Through the return to the whole note harmonic rhythm and the re-assertion of the target pitches of his first solo (discussed later), there is a clear sense that Davis' second solo is a restatement. This is further reinforced in that the progressively accelerating harmonic rhythm – from the whole note level of Davis' first solo, through Evans' and Coltrane's at the half note level – reaches its apex the in quarter note level of Evans' second solo, which functions as a bridge to Davis' restatement. Aspects of "Blue In Green's" formal structure are understood thus (fig. 1):

Fig. 1: "Blue In Green", formal structure.



“Blue In Green’s” harmonic sequence is in itself an exercise in simplicity. The sequence is in D minor, with momentary modal tonicisations of IV (Lydian), vi (Dorian), and iii (Dorian). Contributing to the notion of circularity is the existence of several overlapping functional and modal subdominant/dominant/tonic cadences often concealed through chromatic alteration (ex. 1).

Ex. 1: “Blue In Green”, harmonic sequence and overlapping cadences.

At the slower harmonic rhythm (tempo is ♩=58), these overlaps create a sense of suspension that is similarly articulated in the melodic lines established by each soloist. At the quicker pace, the progression sounds unresolved, constantly tumbling towards a tonic that never seems to arrive. One could almost hear “bar one” anywhere; theoretically the piece could begin at any point in the sequence. In fact, Bill Evans’ piano introduction (or theme) does just that.

Evans’ intro sets up the mood of Blue in Green establishing the primary pitch content and the importance of melodic suspension in the melody. It begins on the third chord (the tonic, Dm7) of the sequence and plays out the remaining chords. The melodic content is simple: an arpeggiated FM7 chord (ex. 2).

Ex. 2: “Blue In Green”, introduction.

Importantly, the interpolation of this chord over the harmonic progression sets up a series of unresolved suspensions (rationalised as upper partials in the chord but not fundamental to the harmony as such) which are in turn utilised throughout each solo section. This establishes “Blue In Green” as a *modal* work, one unconcerned with standard resolutions of suspended notes or “non-chord tones”. Notice also that those pitches not in FM7 appearing on strong beats (\*) are suspensions themselves. The rhythmic mixture of triplets, dotted rhythms on downbeats, and rhythmic “pick-ups” into each measure will feature heavily throughout each solo variation.

Taking his cues from the suspensions of Evans' introduction, Davis' plays a suspension to begin his solo (E on the Gm7, its 13<sup>th</sup>). Excepting the A (a 9<sup>th</sup>) that begins his second chorus, this suspension sets up a pattern of target notes, almost exclusively suspensions, that is identical in both choruses of his first solo (ex. 3).

Ex. 3: "Blue In Green", Miles Davis, first solo, target notes.

Chord sequence: G m7, A 7<sup>b</sup>9, D m7, C m7, F 7, B<sup>b</sup>M7(#11), A 7<sup>b</sup>9, D m7, E 7<sup>#</sup>9, A m7, D m7

Scale degrees: 13, #9, 5, 9, 13, #9, 11, b13, 9, 9

The opening sequence of descending thirds is broken by a leap of a fourth between mm. 3 and 4, a gesture that forms the basis for the closing measures of the sequence. Davis introduces D harmonic-minor in mm. 5-6 to negotiate the change from B<sup>b</sup>M7(#11) to A7<sup>b</sup>9 (ex. 4)

Ex. 4: "Blue In Green", Miles Davis, first solo, mm. 5, 6.

Chords: B<sup>b</sup>M7(#11), A 7<sup>b</sup>9

Label: D Harmonic Min.

Where both choruses of Davis' solo began with a similar descending gesture as in the introduction (see ex. 2), Bill Evans' piano solo begins with an ascending line to a ninth suspension on Dm7 (ex. 5 & 6).

Ex. 5: "Blue In Green", Miles Davis, first solo, m. 1, m. 11.

Chords: G m7, A 7<sup>b</sup>9

Ex. 6: "Blue In Green", Bill Evans, first solo, m. 1.

Longer-duration melodic suspensions (commonly dotted quarter and half-note), interrupted occasionally by rhythmic pick-ups characterise Davis' first solo. Evans, by contrast, creates longer phrases inspired in part by the new harmonic rhythm. Furthermore, Evans favours an arpeggiated seventh chord approach and develops self-contained rhythmic motives. The first motive,  $\text{♩} \text{♩} \text{♩} \text{♩}$ , is established in m. 3 and pseudo-inverted in m. 4 (ex. 7).

Ex. 7: "Blue in Green", Bill Evans, first solo, rhythmic motive 1, mm. 3-4.

A triplet motive moving through fourths, anticipated by the push of the last two beats of m. 4, appears in mm. 5-6 and returns to the beginning of the harmonic sequence (ex. 8).

Ex. 8: "Blue in Green", Bill Evans, first solo, rhythmic motive 2, mm. 4-5.

Evans breaks up the triplet motive in his concluding gesture (ex. 9).

Ex. 9: "Blue In Green", Bill Evans, first solo, mm. 9-10.

Evans' final descending line finds completion in John Coltrane's articulation of the root of the Dm7 chord as a rhythmic pick up to his solo.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, Coltrane targets

<sup>6</sup> For a thorough, note-by-note, analysis of Coltrane's solo see Bert Ligon, *Jazz Theory Resources: tonal, harmonic, melodic, & rhythmic organization of Jazz* (Lebanon, IN: Houston, 2001), 426-27.

similar pitches (particularly C and A) in his first measure as Evans did in his last two. He also introduces two descending lines, the first beginning on C, and a second brief line that begins via a descending seventh leap to the A in beat 4 of m. 1. Also, note the rhythmic displacement of the internal motive developed between the two descending lines (ex. 10).

Ex. 10: “Blue In Green”, John Coltrane, solo, mm. 1-2.

It is interesting to note that the palindromic organisation of the soloists is not reflected in the form of the harmonic rhythm. Perhaps this is in order to destabilise the traditional dominance of the tenor saxophone in modern Jazz. Surely a one-beat harmonic rhythm (a chord change on every beat) would inspire the ornamented, fast paced lines we are familiar with in Coltrane’s work, but here there is a concern with restraint, both on behalf of the soloists themselves, and in the formal organisation of the piece. This restraint is also evident in that Julian “Cannonball” Adderly, alto saxophonist and sixth member of the *Kind of Blue* ensemble was asked not to play on “Blue In Green”. Eric Nisenson suggests that “[i]t is such a subtle, delicately constructed and lyrical piece [...]” and “Adderly’s bold funk simply did not fit the mood.”<sup>7</sup>

Coltrane also evokes the scalar passage of Davis’ solo, on a similar harmony, but through a different chord change and instead favours D melodic-minor ascending. Coltrane recontextualises the descending intervallic leaps he introduced in mm.1 and 2, using them to support the ascending scalar passages (ex. 11).

Ex. 11: “Blue In Green”, John Coltrane, solo, m. 6, mm. 8-9.

<sup>7</sup> Eric Nisenson, *The Making of Kind of Blue: Miles Davis and his Masterpiece* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s, 2000), 155.

Coltrane's solo fades away and is followed by another change in the harmonic rhythm (to the quarter note level) for Bill Evans' second piano solo. Accentuating this change, bassist Paul Chambers anticipates each downbeat, creating the characteristic Jazz swing feel that has been subdued thus far. Evans' solo is only five measures long and acts as a bridge between Coltrane's solo and the return to the slowest harmonic rhythm (whole note level) for Davis' final solo. As expected at this rhythmic level, the harmonic sequence repeats itself in the middle of a measure. Evans makes no gesture to suggest that the progression has repeated, instead developing a motive that plays through the repeat (ex. 12).

Ex. 12: "Blue In Green", Bill Evans, second solo, m. 3.

Evans recalls the triplet rhythm from his prior solo, descending chromatically in his last measure (ex. 13).

Ex. 13: "Blue In Green", Bill Evans, second solo, m. 5.

Davis begins his final solo with a long held note (C, the 11<sup>th</sup> of Gm7) in much the same way as began his first. This introduces another set of target suspensions that form the melodic basis of this solo. It is interesting to note that in the last five measures of each of his final two choruses the pitches are almost identical to those found in the same measures in his first solo (ex. 14, see also ex. 3).

Ex. 14: "Blue In Green", Miles Davis, second solo, target notes, mm. 6-10 and mm. 16-20.

Davis also recalls the scalar passages of his previous solo and those of Coltrane's by rhythmically and chromatically varying D minor. There are several more instances of this linear motion however, making this solo seem like a culminating gesture (ex. 15).

Ex. 15: "Blue In Green", Miles Davis, second solo, mm. 3, 5, 13, 16.

3 Dm7  
D min. (harmonic or melodic)

5 B $\flat$ M7(#11)  
D min. (harmonic or melodic)  
(Also, D minor "be-bop" scale)

13 Dm7  
D min. (harmonic or melodic)

16 A7 $\flat$ 9  
D harmonic min.

The perceived increase in rhythmic intensity (though slight) that was experienced through earlier sections is reigned in as Miles concluding choruses are performed at the same harmonic rhythm and with the same restraint as his original solo.

As "Blue In Green" concludes, Bill Evans coda, not only balances the palindrome, effectively framing the piece, along with the introduction, but also provides the only textural change in "Blue In Green". Accompanied sparsely by Paul Chambers' bowed double bass, Evans plays pianistically, exploring the harmonic materials of "Blue in Green's" chord progression. The coda provides a clear sense of "ending" as the free rhythm of the section underscores the change in instrumental texture.

This paper has presented salient features of the solos in "Blue In Green" that indicate unification on a melodic level. I have engaged with the piece in this manner in order to explore the potential of understanding it through elements of the "Theme and Variations" genre commonly associated with Western European art music. A key issue

that arose in applying this analytic paradigm was the lack of a score for the piece. The absence of the score, which is too-often errantly associated with lack of compositional thought, certainly did not prevent these musicians from creating a unified statement. It is conceivable that during the four aborted takes prior to this complete one, the musicians were able to work out ideas for their own solos, and, importantly, *hear* what melodic and rhythmic ideas the other soloists were working out. And though the compositional process was most certainly "in the moment", these takes, however subconsciously, would have provided ideas for the development of the piece through each solo. In order to realise the analysis in this paper it was necessary to transcribe "Blue In Green's" melodic elements. Transcription is historically considered one of the most useful skills in developing a Jazz musical vocabulary. In the days before mass marketed "fake books" artist were obliged to transcribe from recordings (or even at the gig!) if they wanted to learn a tune. It is through the act of transcribing for this paper that the key points of the analyses were made clear to me. It was an active process that generated the ideas, and brought forth those unifying elements of the piece. Coupled with the act of transcribing, the application of analytical techniques associated with "Theme and Variations", have proven valuable in understanding the coherency of the "Blue In Green".

### **Bibliography**

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