

The Jazz Scene

Frank Kofsky

1967

Every revolution in jazz is fundamentally a revolution in the mode of sensing jazz rhythms and that is of course as true of the jazz revolution of today as it was of the bebop revolution of some two decades past.

The first thing that one does in striving to grasp the essence of a revolution—social or aesthetic—is to compare the new synthesis with the one it replaced. With respect to jazz rhythm, the transition is from the unvarying 4/4 pulse of bebop to a fragmented and polyrhythmic fabric which juxtaposes patterns of three beats, four beats, and beats of other bases against one another.

To be more detailed: the bebop drummer generally kept time with his right hand and left foot. The right hand played a modified 4/4 on the cymbals (ONE... two-and-THREE... four-and ONE, etc.), while the left foot squished the high-hat cymbal closed on every even beat. The drummer could also, if he chose, use his right foot on the bass drum on every beat; but since the bass ordinarily played a steady four quarter-notes per measure, most bebop drummers preferred to leave the bass drum free for irregular accents (the function of the left hand as well).

But as audiences and musicians became more skilled in responding to this basic pulse, the pulse itself became monotonous and even obtrusive, until the logical question finally dawned: since everyone can now sense 4/4, why is it necessary to be stating it continually?

Soon numerous musicians began asking this question and arriving at the same answer simultaneously. The most effective solution, if not necessarily the first in time, was arrived at early in the 1960s by saxophonist John Coltrane and drummer Elvin Jones. The essence of the Coltrane-Jones innovation was to shatter the hegemony of the single quarter-note beat and supplant it with two different but complementary kinds of rhythmic organization. On the one hand, Elvin Jones, while still maintaining the basic 4/4 pulse on his cymbal, introduced a counter-rhythm by playing patterns based on eighth-note triplets on his drums. At once this invention served to heighten the interest of the music by the Coltrane group, since the listener could respond not only to the four-based meter or the three-based (or six-based) meter, but to the creative tension produced by their interaction.

At one point, Coltrane seemed to feel that two basses, each in a different meter, were necessary to create this rhythmic tension, and he has continued using two basses (and frequently two or more drummers) both “live” and on records, to the present. And as if the added complexity in the “rhythm section”; were not enough, Coltrane was broadening the rhythmic palette in a different direction by changing the phraseology of the jazz horn player. This he accomplished by shaping the bulk of his phrases to fall within a space of four, eight, etc. beats, establishing yet a third pulse beside the two or more projected by the rhythm section.

The hesitant beginnings of this post-bebop approach to rhythm were initiated by Coltrane on soprano saxophone—notable on his Atlantic album *My Favorite Things* (Atlantic 1361)—as he was perfectly his aesthetic on that instrument; but they were soon extended to Coltrane’s tenor saxophone even before he cut his first sides for Impulse records: *Africa/Brass* (A-6); *‘Live’ at the Village Vanguard* (A-10); *Coltrane* (A-21); *Impressions* (A-24), and they still form the foundation for his more recent improvisations on that label: *A Love Supreme* (A-77); *Ascension* (A-95); *Meditations* (A-9110). For early versions of this stylistic departure, hear Coltrane’s extended coda on “Summertime” and his second solo on “But Not for Me,” both on the *My Favorite Things* LP.)

By now several drummers have taken Elvin's practices one or more steps beyond where he left them. The remarkable Pittsburgh product, Beaver Harris, for example, has dispensed almost entirely with the cymbals as time-keeping instruments (as has Cecil Taylor's drummer, Andrew Cyrille, and such others as Sunny Murray, Milford Graves, and their followers). In his playing with Archie Shepp's quartet (e.g. on *Archie Shepp in San Francisco*, Impulse A-9124), Harris, who is clearly inspired by Elvin's work even as he transcends it, lays down a steady fusilade of drum beats that always implies but never directly states the underlying 4/4 pulse, making for an exhilarating musical and emotional experience for his more open listeners.

How has the jazz listener been able to keep pace with the new rhythmic developments? While some die-hard spirits still attempt to maintain a regular 1-2-3-4 beat by tapping their feet, the furious tempos favored in the new music and the limited stamina of the onlookers has made this impractical for most. Instead, what promises to become the conventional response consists in moving the upper half of the body forward and back in periods of four beats (or multiples thereof). As the horn players, particularly the saxophonists, tend, following Coltrane, to develop their phrases in units of this length, such a body movement jibes perfectly with the music. The horn-men, themselves, moreover, often sway in precisely this manner, so there is a certain empathic quality manifested when the audience gets moving in phase with the musicians. Thus the music finds its response precisely where it wants it—in the listener's body. in his feelings.

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