

***THE INFLUENCE OF JOHN COLTRANE'S MUSIC ON IMPROVISING SAXOPHONISTS: Comparing selective improvisations of Coltrane, Jerry Bergonzi, and David Liebman***, by Andrew Sugg. Published by the Edwin Mellen Press, Lampeter, Ceredigion, Wales, UK; New York, USA. 2014. ISBN-13: 978-0-7734-4281-8 (hardcover); ISBN-10: 0-7734-4281-2 (hardcover); 429 pp.

**Reviewed by Ted Nettelbeck\* on October 1, 2022**

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*Andrew (Andy) Sugg... PHOTO CREDIT KEVIN PETERSON*

**A**ndrew Sugg is an Australian jazz saxophonist, composer, musicologist and educator, widely acknowledged to be one of the most outstanding of his generation. Although long based in Melbourne, from where he has established a strong national and international reputation, he was for several years during the 1990s resident in Adelaide, during which time he completed the PhD degree at the University of Adelaide (awarded 2002), from which this book derives.

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*\*Ted Nettelbeck is a professional jazz pianist and academic. He retired as paid staff at the University of Adelaide in 2017, where he is now Emeritus Professor in Psychology, and relocated to Melbourne.*

It is necessary at this point that I disclose a long-term friendship with Andy. During his time in Adelaide, we rehearsed and performed together on countless occasions and, since my relocation to Melbourne more than five years ago, I have often rehearsed and played with him. Moreover, his acknowledgement in his thesis of my feedback, about his work during the write-up of the thesis, has been reproduced in part in the book. I do not therefore intend to claim that the objectivity of this review is unaffected by these facts.



*Ted Nettelbeck at the piano: he asserts that Sugg's book is a first-rate example of high-quality jazz scholarship...*

Nonetheless, having now re-read this account some 20 years following my first reading, I continue to assert that the book is a first-rate example of high-quality jazz scholarship and, importantly, I am confident that its lessons remain of immediate value to anybody interested in post-bebop improvisation. I am pleased also to find that my opinion is consistent with those expressed in a number of highly favourable reviews, which accompanied publication of the book almost a decade ago.

Sugg's aim was to plug a perceived gap in knowledge. Although John Coltrane had been widely recognised as the next pre-eminent influence on jazz saxophone playing, following Charlie Parker, little detailed attention had been given to just how Coltrane's improvising practices had influenced the approaches of major figures in the following generation of jazz saxophonists. The method that Sugg devised to

address this question was to make a detailed analysis of similarities and differences in vocabulary and style within improvised passages, selected from versions of the same standard *On Green Dolphin Street (OGDS)*, recorded by Coltrane (three versions, 1958-60, as a member of Miles Davis's groups), by Jerry Bergonzi (two versions, 1989), and by Dave Liebman (four versions, 1978-91).

Bergonzi and Liebman were highly successful saxophonists, particularly prominent during the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who had acknowledged Coltrane's influence on their styles. By comparing their improvisations with Coltrane's on the same tune, Sugg reasoned that it should be possible to define more clearly those aspects of Coltrane's playing that marked him as setting new directions, acknowledged by Bergonzi and Liebman as influential to their improvisational practices; but also then additionally, to clarify the unique contributions to improvisational practices of the younger musicians.



*Both Jerry Bergonzi (above) and Dave Liebman (below) were highly successful saxophonists, prominent during the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who had acknowledged Coltrane's influence on their styles... BERGONZI PHOTO COURTESY JAZZTIMES; LIEBMAN PHOTO CREDIT OHWEH*



The first two chapters are introductory, designed to inform the reader about the historical and theoretical backgrounds from which the OGDS materials have been drawn. The first chapter provides a closely argued justification for the method followed, together with an informative account of terms used to define different criteria by which comparisons have been made. Chapter 2 traces the development of Coltrane's improvisatory language, from an essentially bebop style, but marked by expanding chromaticism, through his early experimentation with thirds-cycle chord superimposition (derived from tripartite subdivision of the octave), the use of recurring musical ideas ("motives" or "motifs") drawn from pentatonic patterns, to the new, idiosyncratic, highly chromatic so-called "modal" style, which was emerging, particularly around the time when his 1960 performances of OGDS were recorded. These are the examples used subsequently by Sugg for the comparisons he has drawn with Bergonzi and Liebman. Following Sugg's account of these different style periods has been greatly aided by more than 20 pages of illustrative transcriptions. Moreover, transcriptions of the full versions of these nine solos have been included as an Appendix.



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This method of analysis – detailed description of transcribed passages of improvisations in terms of rhythmic arrangements of scalar runs, patterns and motifs set against harmonic structures – is followed throughout the chapters that follow. The purpose of Chapters 3 and 4 is to provide the baseline materials with which the later performances of Bergonzi and Liebman have subsequently been compared. The first of these presents very specific examples of the general trends described in Chapter 2; how Coltrane built on an essentially bebop style by expanding his employment of motifs drawn from pentatonics, by his increasing use of chromaticism, derived principally from overlaying conventional “cycle of fourths” harmonies with “thirds cycle” chords (the so-called *Giant Steps* changes), and by a delivery based on semiquaver rhythmic conception, instead of the earlier quaver approach.

These same examples are then revisited in chapter 4 but now considering the musical interactions occurring between Coltrane and the members of the rhythm sections. Sugg’s transcriptions clearly illustrate that, whereas during the period 1958-60 Coltrane increasingly deviated from a strict strategy of “spelling the changes”, first by motivic experimentation across the changes and then by the imposition of thirds-cycle substitutions for the prescribed chords, his accompanying rhythm sections did not attempt to follow these deviations. Throughout, pianists Bill Evans and Wynton Kelly and bassist Paul Chambers continued to accompany Coltrane with very little deviation from the prescribed harmonies. Kelly, who was the pianist for the two 1960 recordings, dealt with Coltrane’s practices, either by increasing the chromatic colouration of the prescribed chords, which seldom restored harmonic convergence, or he ceased playing for long passages (“laying out”) when he perceived that Coltrane was pursuing substitute thirds-cycle harmonies.



*Wynton Kelly (above) was the pianist for the two 1960 recordings. He dealt with Coltrane’s practices, either by increasing the chromatic colouration of the prescribed chords... or he ceased playing for long passages (“laying out”) when he perceived that Coltrane was pursuing substitute thirds-cycle harmonies...*

This practice of laying out avoided the clash between a traditional bebop approach and Coltrane's increasing employment of linear chromaticism. However, it was only by Coltrane's subsequent decision to replace bebop practices with so-called modal compositional forms, that a new form of converging ensemble interaction could begin to emerge. This approach replaced more rapidly changing harmonies with longer passages of relatively stable harmonies, which encouraged his piano and bass accompaniments to "go free".



*Andy Sugg (above left), pictured with one of his longtime colleagues, pianist Andy Vance: Sugg's insight about the limits to converging harmonic agreement between improving soloist and piano and bass accompaniment under real time constraints is useful...*

Sugg's insight about the limits to converging harmonic agreement between improving soloist and piano and bass accompaniment under real time constraints is useful. Tales about the legendary capacity of jazz players to adapt instantly to unpredictable deviations from a prescribed structure are part and parcel of jazz folklore but, as Sugg's analyses clearly demonstrate, instant accommodation to something as divergent – and moving quickly -- as thirds-cycle changes is not possible unless these are familiar, which was certainly not the case in 1960. Indeed, although these changes were quickly adopted far and wide and are now familiar to students of jazz, they can still be difficult to accommodate if used spontaneously, even by the most accomplished artists.

I recently noted an example that underscored Sugg's point when watching Bertrand Tavernier's 1986 film *Round Midnight*. During *Body and Soul*, played very slowly, Herbie Hancock reharmonised part of the bridge with *Giant Steps* changes, but neither Dexter Gordon nor John McLaughlin negotiated these successfully.



*Pianist Herbie Hancock, at the piano in the film "Round Midnight": during "Body and Soul", played very slowly, he reharmonised part of the bridge with "Giant Steps" changes... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

In chapters 5 and 6 the same method of detailed analysis of transcriptions has been applied to OGDS, played at two Australian concerts (Melbourne, Adelaide) by Jerry Bergonzi's quartet. These analyses have yielded clear descriptions of Bergonzi's improvisational style, drawing on both the Melbourne and Adelaide concerts; and the collective approach of the band, as drawn from the Adelaide concert. Bergonzi is shown to blend successfully several characteristics of Coltrane's later practices (modal elaboration, alterations to timbre, thirds-cycle harmonies, pentatonic sideslipping) with an essentially bebop vocabulary, thereby producing a personally distinctive, more modern, bebop style. As was the case with Coltrane's later quartet, the approach of members of Bergonzi's accompanying rhythm section is markedly more improvisational. Rather than filling the more traditional role of laying down a groove, individual members do interject and share ideas to which others, including the soloist, can respond. The result is a more "conversational", interactive and therefore collective approach, so that improvisation is not entirely driven by the primacy of the soloist.

The last two analytical chapters follow the template set in the preceding chapters. Chapter 7 has compared Liebman's OGDS performances with those of Coltrane and of Bergonzi, drawing attention to similarities and differences. While Sugg identifies aspects of Liebman's improvisations that confirm a thorough knowledge of bebop traditions and a direct influence of Coltrane (extensive exploration of modal options

derived from pentatonics and chromaticism, exploitation of timbral effects, motives drawn from paraphrasing written melody), his main conclusion here is that Liebman has made a novel contribution to the language of modern jazz saxophone, in a way that extended Coltrane's legacy differently than did Bergonzi. Thus, Sugg's analyses strongly suggest that, whereas Bergonzi's style was essentially grounded in bebop, although infused by a modal approach drawn from Coltrane, Liebman's approach was predominantly modal, influenced by Coltrane but marked by a novel approach to chromaticism so thoroughly accommodated as to be integral to his style. In the solos that Sugg considers, Liebman's chromaticism often takes the form of polytonal reharmonisations of prescribed harmonies. This approach, and the deep engagement with the chromatically complex harmony of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that underlies it, was therefore a new direction – post-Coltrane – for jazz improvisation.



*Long-term collaborators Dave Liebman (left) and Richie Beirach: their improvisations have been characterised by polytonality...*

Chapter 8 tracks the important contribution of the ensemble context to Liebman's chromaticism. Particular emphasis is given to Liebman's long-term collaboration with the pianist Richie Beirach, whose improvisations have been characterised by polytonality – what Beirach has described as “pan-diatonic chromaticism”. The central idea in its simplest instance is to reharmonise a selected melody note, or pedal point, by exploiting the multiple possibilities for relocating that note within alternative chords. Thus, a C can be the tonic, or the third within an Ab triad, the fifth within an F triad, the major seventh within a Db major or minor, the thirteenth



within an Eb7, etc, etc. Moreover, this approach can be extended to the superimposition of different chords, creating polychords. Such modifications can be planned beforehand or made spontaneously; and, of course, success in the latter case clearly depends on the abilities of all involved to respond appropriately to such alterations. But, as Sugg's analyses have demonstrated, Liebman and Beirach are masters of this approach; and Liebman's successful inclusion of this approach to chromaticism has produced a new modal vocabulary.

Sugg's approach is scholarly, with liberal use of detailed footnotes. Throughout, the generous provision of transcriptions has provided the means by which the reader can follow the details of the analyses that have underpinned all conclusions. The final chapter provides a succinct summary of his analyses and the conclusions drawn from them, as described above. There is an extensive and up-to-date (to the time of publication) bibliography, and a well organised and comprehensive index, principally of names cited. Priced at \$288 for a paper copy, this version of the book is probably too expensive to attract many individual readers. (In fact, the high cost probably reflects a process whereby a copy is only printed following receipt of an order). An e-version is also available but I did not investigate this possibility further. In any case, the price for a paper copy is well within the budget of any university library and I hope that by such means this book has been made available to the legions of music students enrolled in the many tertiary jazz studies programs now available within and beyond Australia.

Although it is now eight years since this book was published, the lessons that it imparts will be of significant value to most students of jazz music. If it is not already a standard text for courses in jazz saxophone, it should be. And, insofar as the saxophone's vocabulary is so central to the language of modern jazz, any musician in jazz, independent of instrument, will find much of interest in this book. As an example of what can be learned from the in-depth study of transcription, it is outstanding.

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