An Analysis of the Improvisational Techniques of Gene Harris

Gianni Bianchini

Universidad San Francisco de Quito

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By

Dr. Gianni Bianchini
“Don’t Be That Way”

• From the 1989 record *Listen Here!*.
Why I wrote this document

• Harris’s use of diatonic language in his improvisation

• The innate ability to generate energy throughout Harris’s solo

• Harris’s largely forgotten presence by many jazz fans and some jazz musicians.
Analyzed Solo Transcriptions

• With The Three Sounds
  – “My Heart Stood Still,” from the 1962 record *Anita O’Day And The Three Sounds*. 
Analyzed Solo Transcriptions (continued)

• With Ray Brown
  – “Exactly Like You,” from the 1984 record *Soular Energy*.
  – “Don’t Be That Way,” and “Blues For Jezebel” both from the 1989 record *Listen Here!*.
Musical Characteristics identified in Transcriptions

1. Melody:
   - Major Blues Scale
   - Minor Blues Scale
   - Combination Blues scale
   - Turn Down Figure
Musical Characteristics identified in Transcriptions (continued)

2. Texture:
   – Octaves
   – Constant Note Figure
   – Tremolos
   – Glissandos
Musical Characteristics identified in Transcriptions (continued)

3. Harmony:

- Suspensions
- Dominant Quality for the Tonic
- Scale Tone Dyads and Triads*

*Musical characteristics with asterisks will not be discussed in the lecture.
Musical Characteristics identified in Transcriptions (continued)

4. Rhythm:

– Repeated Triplet Motives
– Placement Of Offbeat Eighth Note
– Repeated Groups Of Eighth Notes*

*Musical characteristics with asterisks will not be discussed in the lecture.
Biographical Sketch

Gene Harris (September 1st 1933 – January 16th 2000)
Early Life and Influences

• Originally born Eugene Haire
• From Benton Harbor Michigan
• Attributes his upstairs neighbor, Baptist Church, the Blues and Boogie Woogie as early musical influences.
Time in the Military
1951-1953

- Served in the 82nd Airborne Band
- Learned to read music from Wynton Kelly
Forming The Three Sounds

- Harris and Dowdy were honorably discharged in 1954
- Both moved back to the Midwest
- Formed The Three Sounds in 1956
The Three Sounds
1956-1970

The Three Sounds:
• Gene Harris-Piano
• Andy Simpkins-Bass
• Bill Dowdy-Drums
The Three Sounds
1956-1970

- Moved to Washington D.C. in 1957
- Moved to NYC in 1958 and signed with Blue Note
- Recorded 15 albums with Blue Note from 1958-1962
The Three Sounds
1956-1970

• Popular with the public, but did receive negative press

“Gene Harris is a rather superior cocktail pianist (although I’d rather hear Tommy Flanagan or Hank Jones playing cocktail piano), a tinkler who resembles Les McCann with a marginally lighter touch. He’s just as boring.”

-Robert Wyatt

Three Sounds, Melody Maker, October 24th, 1970,

34.
The Three Sounds
1956-1970

- Dowdy left the group in 1966
- Simpkins left the group in 1968
- The Three Sounds officially disbanded in 1970
Solo Career
(1970-1976)

• Largely unsuccessful
• Experimented with electronic instruments and R&B/fusion grooves.
• Lived in California and Denver before retiring to Boise, Idaho in 1977.
Retirement
1977-1981

• Brought out of retirement by Ray Brown and his experience playing at the Otter Crest Inn
Work with Ray Brown
1983-1992

- Toured and recorded as a member of the Ray Brown Trio
- Led the Philip Morris Superband
- Nominated for a Grammy in 1989 for *The Gene Harris All Star Big Band Tribute to Count Basie*
Late Career

• Left The Ray Brown Trio in 1992
• Recorded mostly as leader until his death from diabetes in 2000
• 43 years of recording
• Appeared on 88 albums as a leader or a sideman
Musical Characteristics: Melody

1. Major Blues Scale
2. Minor Blues Scale
3. Combination Blues Scale
4. The Turn Down Figure
Major Blues Scale

• The major blues scale - a hexatonic scale that consists of a major pentatonic scale with the addition of a flatted third scale degree.

• F Major Blues Scale:
Major Blues Scale (continued)

- Both Examples are from the solo “Exactly Like You”
Major Blues Scale (continued)

The opening line from “Blues For Jezebel”
Minor Blues Scale

• The minor blues scale - a hexatonic scale that consists of the minor pentatonic scale along with a raised fourth scale degree.

• Eb Minor Blues Scale
Minor Blues Scale (continued)

Solo break from “Exactly Like You”
Minor Blues Scale (continued)

• Blanketing- An improvisational technique by using one scale over multiple harmonies.
Minor Blues Scale (continued)

“My Heart Stood Still”
Combination Blues Scale

major blues scale + minor blues scale = combination blues scale
Combination Blues Scale (continued)

“Between The Devil And The Deep Blue Sea”

[Sheet music diagram showing musical notation for the Combination Blues Scale]
Combination Blues Scale (continued)

“Don’t Be That Way”
Turn Down Figure

• Example of the “Turn Down Figure:”
Turn Down Figure (continued)

- From the solo “Exactly Like You”
Turn Down Figure (continued)

• From the solo “Don’t Be That Way”
Musical Characteristic: Texture

1. Octaves
2. Constant Note Figure
3. Tremolo
4. Glissando
Octaves

- Most common texture
- Found in all five transcriptions
- Often uses the major, minor or combination blues scale in this texture
Octaves (continued)

- Octave texture deriving the major blues scale.

“Exactly Like You”
Octaves (continued)

- Octave texture using the minor blues scale

“Don’t Be That Way”
Constant Note Figure
Constant Note Figure (continued)

- All three examples are from “Exactly Like You”
Constant Note Figure (continued)

- Measure 6 derived from the major blues scale
- Measure 8 derived from the minor blues scale

From the solo “Don’t Be That Way”
Tremolo

Tremolo- A rapid alteration between two notes
Tremolo (continued)

“Exactly Like You”
Tremolo (continued)

“Blues For Jezebel”
Tremolo (continued)

“Between The Devil And The Deep Blue Sea”
Glissandi

- Not a common device used by pianist during improvisation.
- Used to generate momentum
Glissandi (continued)

- From the trading on “My Heart Stood Still”
Glissandi (continued)

• From the solo on “Exactly Like You”
Musical Characteristics: Harmony

1. Suspended Chords
2. Dominant Quality for the Tonic
Suspended Chords
Suspended Chords (continued)

From the solo “Don’t Be That Way”
Suspended Chords (continued)

- Original ending on “Between The Devil And The Deep Blue Sea”

- Harris’s Ending on “Between The Devil And The Deep Blue Sea”
Dominant Quality for the Tonic
Dominant Quality for the Tonic
(continued)

From the solo “Exactly Like You”
Dominant Quality for the Tonic (continued)

“Between The Devil And The Deep Blue Sea”
Musical Characteristics: Rhythm

1. Repeated Triplet Motives
2. Placement of Offbeat Eighth Note
Repeated Triplet Motives
Repeated Triplet Motives (continued)

From the solo “Don’t Be That Way”
Repeated Triplet Motives (continued)

From the solo “Blues For Jezebel”
Placement Of The Offbeat Eighth Note

Harris has three general placements of the offbeat eighth note:
1. 2:1 swing ratio
2. 3:1 swing ratio
3. 1:1 ratio (even)
Placement Of The Offbeat Eighth Note
2:1 swing ratio

2:1 swing ratio:
Placement Of The Offbeat Eighth Note

2:1 swing ratio (continued)

- 2:1 swing feel ratio. “Exactly Like You”
Placement Of The Offbeat Eighth Note

3:1 swing ratio:

3:1 swing ratio:
Placement Of The Offbeat Eighth Note
3:1 swing ratio (continued)

“My Heart Stood Still”
Placement Of The Offbeat Eighth Note
1:1 ratio (even)

From the solo “Don’t Be That Way”
Conclusion
“He plays textbooks runs, using flatted seventh and fifths, and ripples triplets on the high keys against a smoky low-tempo drag. It’s completely predictable, yet Harris makes it impossible to resist. He doesn’t pretend to seek new ground; rather, he trots out all the clichés.”

-Robert L. Doershuk

88: The Giants of Jazz Piano
“If you leave here with a smile on your face, remember that Gene Harris put it there.”

-Gene Harris