Improvisation strategies for navigating contemporary jazz compositions:

A case study of Jamie Oehlers, Walter Smith III and Will Vinson

Tom Walsh

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of requirements for the degree of

Master of Music (Performance)

Sydney Conservatorium of Music

The University of Sydney

2024

Statement of Originality

This is to certify that, to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

Tom Walsh

_____

December 20th, 2024

Abstract

Contemporary jazz compositions frequently feature uniquely complex forms and abstract harmonic environments that present challenges to improvisers attempting to navigate them. These unique features are often far removed from those found in the lexicon of jazz standards and American songbook repertoire jazz musicians devote hundreds of hours familiarizing themselves with. A survey of research concerning improvisational strategy shows that as the parameters of jazz compositions have broadened since the emergence of bebop in the 1940s, improvisational approaches have in turn become more diverse, arising in particular ways to meet particular challenges (Kernfeld 1981; White 2008; Waters 2011). This study contributes to an emerging field of scholarship concerned with mapping the improvisatory strategies of high-level jazz practitioners in order to assimilate new improvisatory systems into creative practice (Baynes 2015; Williams 2017; Robertson 2017). Drawing on interviews with preeminent contemporary saxophonists Jamie Oehlers, Walter Smith III and Will Vinson and a range of practice-based strategies for weaving together bespoke improvisatory strategies, this thesis documents the emergence of a portfolio of creative works comprised of original compositions and new realisations of works composed by Oehlers, Smith and Vinson.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Christopher Coady, for his invaluable guidance, expert advice, and unwavering support throughout the planning, development, and completion of this project. His insight has been indispensable.

A special thanks to Jamie, Walter, and Will for generously sharing their time and contributing to the study—without their participation, this project would not have been possible.

I am also incredibly grateful to all my saxophone teachers over the years, including Chase Baird, Graeme Lyall, Carl Mackey, John Mackey and Jamie Oehlers. The insights, approaches, and wisdom they have shared with me have profoundly shaped my connection to the saxophone and my musical journey.

Thanks to the University of Sydney, the research conducted in this thesis was supported by the Research Training Program and the award of the Henderson Postgraduate Scholarship.

Finally, I wish to extend my heartfelt thanks to my partner, Helen Douglas, and my family for their steadfast love, encouragement, and patience throughout this entire process. This project would not have been possible without their constant support.

Contents

List of Figures

Introduction

Jazz scholarship has long acknowledged an increase in the diversity of modern jazz composition in terms of both formal design and harmonic structure during the 1960s (Kernfeld 1981; White 2008; Waters 2011)[1]. Keith Waters' work highlights how the music of this period marked the dawn of a new age, in which university educated young composers began corralling the harmonic principles commonly found in the works of Ravel, Bartok and Stravinsky into asymmetric, extended, free form jazz practice (Waters 2011). Miles Boothroyd has argued that a true appreciation of this aesthetic turn requires not only a survey of new compositional techniques but also an exploration of how improvisers negotiated the new compositional landscapes they faced (Boothroyd 2010). Recent activity in the realm of jazz composition that has extended the innovations introduced by post-bop composers of the 1960s requires a similar interrogation of the improvisatory strategies jazz practitioners utilize when performing these works[2].

Recent scholarship increasingly reflects a turn toward the domain of practice-based/artistic research (Baynes 2015; Robertson 2016; T. Williams 2017). Mark Baynes' (2015) analysis of the toggling between consonance and dissonance (C/D) in pianist Brad Mehldau's

[1] In this study, the terms *modern jazz composition* and *contemporary jazz composition* are used interchangeably to describe works created after the post-bop period, often characterized by non-functional harmony, irregular forms, mixed meters, and a departure from standard songbook conventions. This includes compositions by artists such as Walter Smith III, Will Vinson, and Jamie Oehlers that resist traditional harmonic and formal structures.

[2] See the following recordings of original works composed by Oehlers, Smith and Vinson (Oehlers 2012; Smith III 2010, 2014; Vinson 2008, 2016).

improvisational approach, the development of a C/D practice framework and the delivery of a series of recitals utilizing this framework serves as one example of an intervention in the field. Thomas Williams' (2017) analysis of saxophonist Michael Brecker's improvisational approach, his mining of heuristic "vocabulary seeds" (VS) from this analysis, and his internalization of these seeds through a four-stage process of imitation, harmonic modulation, variation and recombination provides another (T. Williams 2017, 169). Benjamin Robertson's (2016) study of saxophonist Lee Konitz and bassist Gary Peacock provides yet one more example of this kind of practice-based research in jazz in action. Robertson's work seeks to develop a divergent field (DF) of possibilities in which Konitz and Peacock's improvisational choices are mapped out and then internalised and synthesised in practice sessions (Robertson 2016, 65). Viewed collectively, Baynes, Williams, and Peacock each unfold analyses of post-bop improvisation and strategies for performing in a post-bop compositional landscape that take important steps towards meeting the needs of our current moment.

This Master of Music (Performance) study builds on this body of work by conducting interviews with modern jazz practitioners about their improvisational approach to new compositional landscapes. This study is conducted within a practice-led research framework, as defined by Smith and Dean, wherein creative practice generates the central research questions and drives the methodology (Smith and Dean 2009). Open-ended interviews about improvisational approach were conducted for this study with saxophonists Jamie Oehlers, Walter Smith III and Will Vinson. The strategies gleaned from these interviews were applied both to existing works composed by the interviewees and to new works I composed specifically to test and reflect these improvisatory approaches. While composition played a role in shaping the creative context, the

primary focus of this research remains the development and application of improvisational strategies. The recording of this creative work is presented as seven tracks from a one-day recording project that took place on the 11th of December 2024. While this study focuses on three practitioners, it contributes to a broader understanding of how elite improvisers are negotiating the increasingly complex terrain of contemporary jazz composition. These cases studies serve as representative examples of a larger, rapidly evolving field.

Chapter 1: Overview of Improvisation Strategies

In this literature review, I establish a context for this study by surveying the musicological literature that has parsed the mid-century turn in jazz's compositional complexity and the new improvisatory approaches bound to these shifts in practice. While the methodological focus of this thesis is practice-led, it is informed by relevant musicological literature that contextualizes historical improvisatory systems and compositional trends. This conceptual framework supports the reflective component of my creative process and grounds my findings in scholarly discourse. The bebop era, for instance, saw transformations in both jazz composition, in which more complex harmonic structures and faster tempos developed, —and in improvisation, which adopted a now well-known chromatic vocabulary. Modal and post-bop compositional innovations that favoured slower harmonic rhythm and intersectionally weakened harmonic function required new paradigms of melodic logic in order to sustain performer and listener interest. In this chapter, I discuss the musicological work that has sought to illuminate the connective tissue between new mid-century compositional designs and new mid-century improvisatory practices.

Bebop

The innovations of 'bebop' musicians in the 1940's realised a complex design in jazz composition anchored in dissonant chords, faster harmonic patterns, and quicker tempos. James Kent Williams maps out the dimensions of this compositional turn in the following way:

> [T]he term "bebop" … now refers to a… range of styles of the forties and fifties which are characterized by functional chromatic harmony, standard tonal forms (e.g., 12-measure blues and various 32-measure schemes, notably AABA and ABAC), and a steady, swinging pulse (J.K. Williams 1982, 4).

Multiple improvisational approaches can be linked directly to this compositional landscape. Thomas Owens' comprehensive study of Charlie Parker's improvisational approach documents, perhaps, the most famous of these. Through the analysis of approximately two hundred and fifty of Parker's improvisations, Owens' reveals a total of approximately one hundred melodic formulae that comprise a musical 'vocabulary' (Owens 1974, 269-270). Shorter formulae of only a few notes occur more frequently and may be adapted to suit a variety of harmonic situations. This means they are rhythmically and melodically flexible enough to be reinterpreted over different chords or harmonic progressions, depending on the improviser's goals and the surrounding musical context. In contrast, longer formulae occur rarely and may comprise a whole phrase, outlining a specific harmony. While these formulae are often stated verbatim in Parker's improvisations, they are also subjected to transformative processes of "metric displacement, augmentation and diminution, addition and subtraction of notes, and altered phrasing and articulation" (Owens 1974, ix)[3]. Additionally, descending scalic passages are a basic organisational device that emerge in the great majority of Parker's improvisations. Owens' analysis reveals that the repertoire of formulae drawn from varies based on key and the harmonic

[3] These terms describe Parker's manipulation of rhythmic placement and phrase shape—for example, shifting a phrase by a beat (metric displacement), stretching or compressing its rhythm (augmentation/diminution), and adjusting note content or articulation to fit varying harmonic contexts

plan, “his typical melodies for the blues in C major are not simply transpositions of his typical melodies for the blues in B flat, but are distinctively different” (Owens 1974, 269).

Stefan Love (2012) affirms Owens’ observations that much of Parker’s improvisational approach utilised predetermined, but malleable formulae. Love proposes that the construction of thirty-nine of Parker’s recorded blues improvisations can be understood through the lens of two types of schemata; phrasing schemata, which are metric templates for the chorus level organisation of phrases, and melodic schemata that offer stepwise paths through a song’s harmonic structure. Love defines phrase broadly in a “deliberately colloquial sense” as “a continuous musical gesture, surrounded by rests” (Love 2012, 3). Phrasing schemata are described as the “highest level of phrase structure within the chorus” (Love 2012, 3). Melodic schemata are defined as “recurring stepwise paths, spanning around one to eight measures, which a melody seems to follow” (Love 2012, 6). Love acknowledges that melodic schemata are distinct from the formulae Owens’ observes in that melodic schemata consider more abstract melodic connections and are not key specific aspects of Parker’s improvisation. From Love’s perspective, melodic schemata can be realised through one or more of the formulae Owens’ describes.

Love’s analysis of Parker’s three chorus solo on *Perhaps* demonstrates how even a limited number of schemata can afford an improviser multiple pathways through the chordal framework of a song, with melodic and phrasing schemata intertwining to avoid obvious repetition. Observing Parker’s first chorus sees a descent from scale degree one occur across measures one to five with a recovery to b7 in measure four before descending again from scale degree one and arriving at a consonant placement of scale degree six on beat one of measure five resolving from

b7 (Love 2012, 8). Parker again employs this schemata when beginning his third chorus (descent from scale degree one, arriving at six) in measure four leading into measure five (the harmonic movement from I to IV) (Love 2012, 9). In contrast to the first chorus however the arrival of scale degree six in measure five is delayed until beat three, when this schemata is repeated. Love's work thus reveals another layer of depth in Parker's formulaic approach. The array of options schemata afforded Parker allowed Parker to avoid obvious kinds of repetition within the new harmonic patterns that structured the bebop compositional landscape.

Max W Stehr's analysis of improvisational approaches in bebop highlights an additional salient strategy: the melodic spontaneity and rejection of imitation at the core of Lee Konitz and Warne Marsh's playing. Strehr's study begins by reaffirming Owens' observations about Parker's use of formula and then proceeds to reveal a distinct absence of such patterns in the improvisations of Marsh and Konitz. AntConc linguistic concordance analysis is used in Stehr's study to reveal the degree to which patterns manifest in improvisations[4]. While a high level of patterning is evident in Stehr's analysis of Parker's oeuvre (2660 identified patterns of a minimum of nine pitches across Parker's recordings), Konitz and Marsh use patterns at a significantly lower rate (223 across Konitz' output and 39 across Marsh's) (Stehr 2016, 83).

Ben Robertson's analysis of Konitz solo on Kenny's Wheeler's tune *Everybody's Song But My Own* (Konitz 1988) highlights the significant role of motivic development as a tool for

[4] AntConc is a free corpus analysis software used to identify how words and phrases are used across large collections of texts. Stehr uses AntConc to analyse transcriptions of Charlie Parker's improvisations as a searchable corpus. By running concordance and frequency analyses, he identifies recurring phrases and motifs, showing how Parker reuses and transforms musical ideas across performances. This method provides a systematic way to quantify Parker's improvisational vocabulary and stylistic patterns.

navigating the bebop compositional landscape. Konitz's solo opens with a two-note motif that relates closely to the two-note motif of the original melody (Robertson 2016, 50). Notably as Konitz develops this motif it is never repeated verbatim. Rather, each repetition is an inventive variation that preserves the melodic contour of the original (Robertson 2016, 50). Konitz continues working with this motif, moving it sequentially down a tone and putting it through rhythmic variations, contracting and truncating the melody (Robertson 2016, 51). Robertson makes the observation that "Konitz's improvising here presents a commentary on the melody and chord changes of Wheeler's *Everybody's Song but My Own*, rather than a description" (Robertson 2016, 55).

Michael Gold's study of Warne Marsh's improvisatory approach takes the discussion of improvisatory approach in bebop in yet another direction. Gold's study illuminates Marsh's improvisatory practice of drawing out a tension between improvised lines and the underlying harmonic or metric framework of the compositions he performed. A key piece of Gold's evidence can be found in his analysis of Marsh's solo on *Scrapple from the Apple* (Marsh 1959). In contrast to Parker's earlier example of displacing chord resolutions with large scale schemata, Marsh uses large passages of chromaticism to create harmonic ambiguity before delaying the resolution to his target note as a point of stable arrival on beat three (Gold 1995, 83). Marsh's method of chord displacement differs from Parker's in that tension and ambiguity is established through chromaticism prior to resolving to the chord, whereas Parker was subverting expectations established by broader schemata. Robertson observes how Konitz creates ambiguity in regard to the meter as well. In Konitz's improvisation over *Everybody's Song but My Own* (Konitz 1988) there are multiple instances where Konitz plays intricate chromatic lines in a

quaver triplet subdivision. The pitch groupings of these phrases suggest groupings of four notes. As these phrases extend over the bar line, Konitz's approach establishes an engaging rhythmic tension with the underlying 3/4 jazz waltz meter.

Bebop improvisation strategies were deeply tied to the harmonic and formal innovations of the era. Musicians like Charlie Parker developed and deployed adaptable melodic formulae and schemata to navigate increasingly complex chord changes, while others like Lee Konitz and Warne Marsh focused on motivic development and rhythmic ambiguity to resist formulaic improvisation. These early improvisatory systems laid the groundwork for the more divergent and personalised approaches that would arise in modal and post-bop jazz, as explored in the following sections.

Modal

A similar mapping of improvisation strategies against new compositional approaches in jazz can be found in musicological discussions of mid-century modal jazz. Barry Kernfeld's study of this compositional turn maps out the features of Miles Davis' modal pieces *So What* (Davis 1959), *Flamenco Sketches* (Davis 1959) and *Milestones* (Davis 1958) and demonstrates how these frameworks opened up new improvisatory possibilities for saxophonist John Coltrane. Kernfeld asserts that the following four features are consistent and indicative of the Davis quintet's modal works (Kernfeld 1981, 158):

1. Slow harmonic rhythms
2. Intra-sectional chord parallelism

3. Bass ostinato stressing local tonic and fifth relationships
4. Intersectionally weakened harmonic function

Kernfeld then argues that the presence of these compositional features created space for the pursuit of new kinds of melodic referencing in Coltrane's improvisatory practice (Kernfeld 1981, 158). In an assessment of Coltrane's earlier performances of 'F' blues solos, Kernfeld identifies an inflexible melodic approach reliant on the duplication of melodic cells and lengthy eighth or sixteenth note melodies (Kernfeld 1981, 38-58). A different Coltrane is uncovered on *Kind of Blue,* with Kernfeld observing the use of shorter phrases that evolve over time. For example, Kernfeld's analysis of *So What* (Davis 1959) reveals how Coltrane's opening statement, built around the tonic minor triad, expands, contracts and takes on ornamentation over the course of the improvisation (Kernfeld 1981, 58-59). Such an approach, in Kernfeld's view, presents a marked departure from Coltrane's blues improvisations in F and suggests that the new modal compositional frameworks required, or at least suggested, new and different kinds of improvisatory strategies.

Keith Waters' book *The studio recordings of the Miles Davis quintet, 1965-68* echoes Kernfeld's assessment of both an aesthetic turn in the compositional landscape of 1960s jazz and a diversification of improvisatory approach. In assessing this aesthetic turn, Waters develops the following set of characteristics as hallmarks of the era (Waters 2011, 46):

1. Modal scales for improvisation (or as a source for accompaniment)
2. Slow harmonic rhythm (single chord for 4, 8, 16, or more bars)

3. Pedal point harmonies (focal bass pitch or shifting harmonies over a primary bass pitch)
4. Absence or limited use of functional harmonic progressions (such as V–I or ii–V–I) in accompaniment or improvisation
5. Harmonies characteristic of jazz after 1959 (Suspended fourth—"sus"—chords, slash chords, harmonies named for modes: i.e., phrygian, aeolian harmonies)
6. Prominent use of melodic and/or harmonic perfect fourths

Crucially, Waters' highlights that these common characteristics did not yield a universal improvisatory approach. To illustrate this point, Waters' draws attention to the differences between Wayne Shorter's improvisatory navigations of modal compositions and the improvisatory approaches Lewis Porter observes John Coltrane using (Waters 2011, 55-56). One point of Waters' comparison involves the treatments of motivic cells. To this end, Waters' paints Coltrane as a performer with a fairly conservative approach. In Coltrane's solo on *Acknowledgement* (Coltrane 1964) from the album *A Love Supreme*, Coltrane uses melodic material from the four note bass ostinato (based on the pitches F-Ab-Bb-C) as a resource for improvisation, freely transposing this cell through twelve keys whilst maintaining the rhythm, intervallic structure and contour of the original statement (Waters 2011, 56). Waters' analysis of Shorter's use of motivic cells in his improvisation on *Pinocchio* (Davis 1968) reveals a bolder approach to development, whereby the rhythmic and intervallic structure of the cells isn't strictly maintained or transposed.

Unlike Coltrane's solo from *Acknowledgement*, Shorter does not preserve the rhythm and intervals consistently. Instead, he preserves the contour from the head's opening motive,

> and transposes the motivic cell freely during those measures. Yet, even while Shorter abandons the precise rhythmic and intervallic relationships, the relationship with the motive from the head is unmistakable (Waters 2011, 57).

Waters' comparison of Coltrane and Shorter's development of motivic cells reveals more than just the difference between their applications of this device. Coltrane's motivic cells on *Acknowledgement* (Coltrane 1964) are distinct from his playing on *So What* (Davis 1959), where Kernfeld observes how motifs are ornamented and transformed, evolving over the course of an improvisation (Kernfeld 1981, 58-59). This comparison reveals that even within a single practitioner's improvisation, different improvisatory solutions emerge.

Arthur Lynn White's (2008) work in turn demonstrates how post-bop jazz artists such as tenor saxophonist Joe Henderson assimilated and expanded upon these modal innovations. White identifies three of Henderson's best-known compositions, *Recordame* (Henderson 1963), *Inner Urge* (Henderson 1966) and *Black Narcissus* (Henderson 1969) and puts forth an analysis of these works that reveals how Henderson's compositions feature unconventional form lengths, unusual harmonies and rapidly changing major seventh chords, in tandem with static, vamp progressions very similar to those described by Kernfeld and Waters (White 2008, 24-33). Whites' analysis of Henderson's solos reveals a particularly adventurous approach to the slow harmonic motion of these compositions in which arpeggios are strung together rapidly to create a sound that that is fluid and open (White 2008, 57, 61, 75).

While parts of Henderson's improvisations adhere to the modal framework of the underlying harmony, the way Henderson navigates the modes themselves is worthy of discussion. White describes how sequencing melodies diatonically through modes is a hallmark of Henderson's improvisational approach (White 2008, 3). However, it should be noted that White misses an important facet of these sequences. Henderson's sequences often utilise repeated rhythmic motifs that imply alternate meters. Multiple examples of this can found on *Inner Urge* (Henderson 1966) where a four-note melodic cell is played within a consistent quaver triplet pulse, while other examples show Henderson imposing repeated groups of five note melodic cells (White 2008, 72-73).

This chapter has demonstrated how the shifting compositional landscapes of mid-century jazz, marked by the harmonic complexity of bebop and the modal and post-bop innovations of the 1960s, required new improvisatory approaches. Scholars, through varied lenses and methodologies, have highlighted how these compositional changes forced musicians to adapt, innovate, and invent new ways of navigating musical structures. From Parker's use of formulae and schemata, to Henderson's fluid approaches to harmony and rhythm and Coltrane's and Shorter's use of motivic cells, the literature consistently underscores the dynamic interplay between composition and improvisation. Despite differences in analytical focus, scholars converge on the idea that the structural shifts in jazz provided fertile ground for new improvisatory possibilities, with each era's innovations pushing the boundaries of what was musically possible. This underscores a key premise of the current research: that the strategies improvisers use are inseparable from the compositional challenges they face. As such, understanding improvisatory systems requires close attention to the nature of the works being

performed. This historical survey clarifies that improvisational approaches must evolve alongside compositional innovations, reinforcing the need for a flexible, context-responsive set of strategies.

Chapter 2: Surveying elite performers as a method for developing personal artistic practice

An important methodological turn in the examination of post-bop improvisatory approaches has been the incorporation of practice-based manoeuvres for processing and transforming findings. Thomas Williams' (2017) study of saxophonist Michael Brecker, for instance shows how a bespoke harmonic strategy for improvising can be pieced together by repurposing Brecker's various kinds of harmonic "shifts" (T. Williams 2017, 84-110). In studying pianist Brad Mehldau's improvisational style, Mark Edward Baynes in turn devises a new analytical model for understanding Mehldau's work built around the concepts of consonance and dissonance (C/D) that ultimately informs his own improvisational and compositional practice (Baynes 2015). And finally, Benjamin Robertson's examination of bassist Gary Peacock's intuitive improvisational process outlines methods that allow improvisers to negotiate challenges and unpredictable events that emerge from what he calls the "divergent field" in real time without relying on pre-learnt mechanisms (Robertson 2016).

This chapter examines the methods of these three studies to develop an understanding of the array of practice-based methodologies that bridge the analysis of improvisatory strategies with the development of new and personal improvisatory strategies discussed in subsequent chapters[5].

[5] *Practice-based* research refers to investigations where creative practice constitutes both the method of inquiry and the site of knowledge production (Smith and Dean 2009). This differs slightly from *practice-led* research, which positions creative practice as the driving force behind research questions and processes.

Michael Brecker

Thomas William's study of Michael Brecker's[6] improvisatory approach identifies how much of Brecker's improvising in 'vamp style' harmonic environments is guided by a strategy of harmonic super imposition widely used to create tension through bitonality (T. Williams 2017, 85-86). Williams maps out a hierarchy of superimpositions as well as a taxonomy of harmonic strategies that have been synthesised in the table below (T. Williams 2017, 104-105, 107-109):

Table 1: William's Hierarchy of Superimpositions

Tier 1 – Sidestepping shifts	Sidestepping is one of the most basic mechanisms for harmonic superimposition. It typically involves playing a semitone above, or below the accompaniment. Typically, the superimposed harmony would be parallel to the accompaniment however concerning Brecker's application, this is often not the case and major and minor sidesteps are interchangeable.
Tier 2 – Singular harmonic shifts of more than a semitone	This tier encompasses any single harmonic movement other than those generated through sidestepping. It is important to recognise that harmonic delineation achieved through superimposition is not directly related to the distance of superimposition movement away from the tonic.
Tier 3 – Multiple shifts of symmetrical nature	This relates to any set of superimpositions that contains movements of equal intervallic distance. i.e. consecutive shifts of minor or major 3rds.

[6] Note: Williams study also examines the improvisational strategies of contemporary jazz fusion guitarist Wayne Krantz.

Tier 4 – Multiple shifts using two-part symmetry	This refers to pairs of fixed interval symmetrical harmonic superimpositions. i.e. minor 2nd shift, minor 3rd shift, minor 2nd shift, minor 3rd shift. It's worth noting that this tier of superimpositions is utilised by Brecker less frequently.
Tier 5 – Other harmonic shifts	This tier considers any combination or permutation of superimposition from the previous four tiers or any other non-symmetrical shift.
Functional Momentum Orientation	Functional momentum orientation is identified by Williams as a secondary superimposition technique whereby A secondary technique whereby a "harmonic superimposition can be made stronger by the use of diatonic chord progressions within the superimposed key"(T. Williams 2017, 95). This enhances the perception of bitonality and increases the harmonic momentum of the superimposition, further abstracting the underlying harmony.

Williams then develops a practice methodology designed to assimilate vocabulary identified in his case studies by synthesizing Mark McKnight's (2012) creative methodology for contemporary jazz guitar improvisation with elements of Aaron Berkowitz's (2012) work *The Improvising Mind* (T. Williams 2017). Vocabulary Seeds (VS) were identified using an eleven-step extraction method inspired by McKnight's identification and development of melodic cells (McKnight 2012). Berkowitz advocates for the existence of two forms of memory and knowledge, explicit and implicit. Where explicit knowledge is conscious and directed, implicit knowledge is grounded in the experiential and non-conscious. To assimilate this VS material into

Williams' bank of implicit melodic vocabulary, an augmented iteration of Berkowitz's four stage model of transposition, variation, recombination and contextualization was applied. The five stages of Williams final model are synthesised below (T. Williams 2017, 170):

Table 2: Williams' Five Stage Assimilation Methodology

1. Imitation	This step is concerned with the rote learning of the phrase, in its original form and context. This potentially required development of instrumental technique in certain areas to map unfamiliar pathways.
2. Harmonic Modulation	This stage sees a VS modulated and practiced through a variety of modalities. The main focus of this stage was to acclimatise the VS to a variety of harmonic settings common practice to standard jazz practice, as well as contemporary settings. This step was not applied to harmonic VS due to the implicit relationship between pitch and harmony.
3. Variation	In this stage the VS material is re-worked while still adhering to the overall strategy and stylistic features. The aim being to produce multiple related variations of practice use, interest and value that were still connected to the strategy being deployed. Varying the VS allowed the material to begin integrating with Williams' own knowledge base and current improvisatory vocabulary.

4. Recombination	For this stage, combinational improvisation strategy etudes were composed and practiced. These etudes focus on less specific practice and rather let strategy guide improvised practice.
5. Contextualisation	While the previous four stages were primarily concerned with the assimilation a development of VS material. The 'contextualisation' stage aims to completely integrate this material with Williams' implicit knowledge base, able to be used free of constraint in a variety of typical improvisatory settings.

Williams' reflection on this practice methodology reveals that not all strategies achieved the same level of sophistication. While these harmonic strategies, mined from the study of Brecker, emerged regularly, they often manifested in rudimentary forms warranting further development. Williams notes that his use of one of Brecker's harmonic strategies yielded music that was "for the most part quite static in construction and tends to follow the same starting point, following a physically led pattern for the most part, and is in all instances descending and similar sounding" (T. Williams 2017, 223). Williams notes that other unique devices such as Krantz's idiosyncratic use of open strings were adopted heavily, emerging within both linear and chordal playing.

Brad Mehldau

In studying pianist Brad Mehldau's improvisational style, Mark Edward Baynes devises a new analytical model built around the concepts of consonance and dissonance (C/D) as defined by Parncutt and Hair (Parncutt 2011). Baynes' framework is built around the premise that principles

of consonance and dissonance commonly associated with harmonic musical events logically apply to other fundamental aspects of music. Parncutt and Hair's discussion of the variety of ways consonance and dissonance can be interpreted supports this possibility of a holistic, multidisciplinary lens through which the emergence of C/D in improvisation could be viewed. Vonfoerster and Yorgason have already provided accounts investigating rhythmic C/D, further lending weight to a holistic C/D framework, whilst also providing models to work from (Vonfoerster 2012; Yorgason 2009).

Baynes' analysis of Mehldau covers two chapters, the first of which is an analytical trial that consists of transcription analysis of ten piano improvisations that demonstrates the C/D analysis model. The second is a case study of eight piano improvisations that demonstrate more holistically how Mehldau manipulates C/D in his improvisations. These analyses reveal several types of C/D found in Brad Mehldau's music and explores how Mehldau uses C/D as a whole, creating improvisations that satisfies psychological expectations of consonance and dissonance as theorized by David Huron (Huron 2006). C/D relationships are divided into five categories: vertical, horizontal, rhythmic, organic and cultural. These are synthesised and summarised in the table below (Baynes 2015, 51-108):

Table 3: Summary of Baynes five categories of C/D

Vertical	Vertical C/D describes sonorities comprising at least two pitches occurring simultaneously and have been defined and classified using the terms single-

	note, intervallic, chordal and diagonal. Diagonal harmony can be considered analogous to an arpeggio that spells out a vertical sonority.
Horizontal	Horizontal C/D is concerned with tonal musical events that play out on a temporal scale including aspects of melody and phrase structure. Horizontal C/D have been categorised as one of the following: consonant 'marked' melodicism, dissonant melodicism, motif and call and response, chromaticism, linear tonality, and perceptual dissonance.
Rhythmic	Rhythmic C/D encompasses both rhythm and meter. Meter is related to the anticipation of re-occurring rhythmic events and being able to predict future rhythmic events, while rhythm is used to describe any re-occurring motion regardless of whether the re-occurrence establishes a sense of metric predictability. Five types of Rhythmic C/D are identified: diminishing dispersal, metric asynchronicity, metric shift, temporal density, and expressive variation.
Organic	Organic C/D can be considered broadly as interacting with the underlying framework or harmonic structure being used as a platform for improvising. Elements of dissonance would violate this underlying structure, while consonances would support it. The following forms of organic C/D are outlined: Melodic quotes, phrase rhythm/hypermetric dissonance, harmonic destabilisation and harmonic repetition.

Cultural	Cultural C/D is defined as an activity that adheres to normative idiomatic jazz practices which is defined by Baynes as having an "acoustically stylistic familiarity pertaining to 1940s bop and 1950s post-bop jazz"(Baynes 2015, 85). This section has categorised cultural C/D into five types: blues, quotations, crips, formulaic improvisation, and cultural dissonance.

Baynes' study offers no strict methodology for assimilating Mehldau's improvisational material but usefully points to Gary Burton's comments on "internalisation" when transitioning to a discussion of how he has utilised the findings of his study in practice:

> Internalisation is essential when learning improvisational tools, as elements of language must be transferred from the conscious to the unconscious mind via repetition. The unconscious mind is much quicker than the conscious one and therefore it is necessary to internalise (via rote) autodidactically driven musical concepts (Baynes 2015, 49).

Baynes' integration of Mehladau's approach begins with the composition of a prepared solo. The composed solo follows Mehldau's normative model for constructing an improvisation as outlined below (Baynes 2015, 208):

1) Introduction to solo via mainly consonant material.
2) Gradual introduction of new dissonant elements.
3) Gradual build to musical climax.
4) Elongation of music climax predominantly via repetition of motif, blues, crips, melody and other consonances.

In assessing his assimilation of the C/D concept beyond the composed solo, Baynes applies the same novel analytical framework of C/D used to investigate Melhdau's improvisational practice to his own performances. Although inspired by Mehldau's work Baynes states that he "avoids exact modelling of Mehldau's improvisational style" (Baynes 2015, 193). Baynes states:

> For example, I might combine temporal density, metric asynchronicity, harmonic destabilisation, perceptual dissonance, and linear tonality in a personal way, forming phrases that are directly related to me as an improvising musician. Some of the devices that I have within my employ are copies of Mehldau's, and others are derived from my concept of C/D in general (Baynes 2015, 193).

Gary Peacock

Benjamin Robertson's examination of bassist Gary Peacock's intuitive improvisational process utilises a methodology that combines transcription analysis with an analysis of published interviews and auto-ethnographic reflection on the process of trying to bring Robertson's creative practice into dialogue with Peacock's. In Robertson's view, Peacock champions intuitive musical responses when improvising rather than the mechanical pre-preparation of ideas that's sees improvisers use "intellectual constructions, pattern learning and other approaches to negotiate a set of harmonic changes or to construct an improvisation" (Robertson 2016, 16). Peacock defines the mechanical as knowing what to play, while the intuitive is hearing or imagining what to play. Robertson describes how this mechanical approach would be analogous to Berkowitz's 'reconstitution' model, in which already known elements are being employed

(Peacock 1993, 58) and (Berkowitz 2012). This method is distinct from the process of imagining the 'pure' sound and playing it from that impulse. While the two methods may yield similar outcomes, the derivation, intentionality and meaningful result of the two ideas is quite distinct.

Robertson's practice led model for developing the audiated melodic concept central to Peacock's improvisational approach was informed by Peacock's notion that improvisation is led by ideas and imagination rather than technique. In contrast to the Baynes' and Williams' studies, transcribed material was internalised away from the instrument by hearing and imagining the phrases. Only once whole solos could be sung, unassisted by the recording were these solos approached on the instrument. This internal approach bypasses the need to label these devices allowing an "intuitive grasp of musical elements: melody, phrasing, note duration and dynamics" (Robertson 2016, 64).

The divergent field describes a musically ambiguous state that leaves 'what happens next' up to the improviser (Robertson 2016, 63). This identifies a type of indeterminacy that can be used as the engine for change in the process of improvising. Robertson suggests the term divergent field refers to simultaneous coexisting possibilities that are present at rhythmic, melodic and harmonic points of bifurcation.

> The pathway proceeds along these lines. Instead of predicating all improvisation preparation on the idea that audiation, pre-hearing and general aural skills are only about predicting or already knowing what will happen, these same skills can also allow one to make music out of the things that do happen, or emerge, rather than just predicting the outcome (Robertson 2016, 65).

Robertson identifies the process of note reorientation as a strategy available to improvisers when having the acclimatise to the unpredictable events of the divergent field. Robertson observes that "In the act of improvising, un-oriented notes can become productive—after the fact—by one's acceptance of them and adjustment of subsequent material by note reorientation or other processes so as to accommodate the idea creatively" (Robertson 2016, 68). Robertson demonstrates how this emerged in his creative practice, in which misplaced notes can be shifted by semitone to a note that usually falls within the harmony. This provides a way of abstaining from formulaic playing while addressing challenging harmonic progressions or unpredictable relationships. Robertson argues this kind of intentional reorientation of an idea is musically justified, for instance, in a phrase that resolves later in the music.

Williams, Baynes, and Robertson all propose different mechanisms for internalising improvisational strategies before being able to freely deploy them in practice. Baynes method for assimilating Mehldau's various C/D strategies follows Burton's assertion that autodidactically driven improvisatory material be internalised by rote. Baynes reflects on how his study of Mehldau's music has informed his own practice by applying the same analytical framework of C/D to his own playing (across five recitals). In contrast to Baynes, Williams (in the 'recombination' stage of his four stage VS development model) develops a series of practice etudes that serve as exercises for developing fluency in specific strategies for improvisation. These 'etudes' "do not prescribe specific pitches, rhythms or otherwise but instead instruct the improviser to improvise in a particular way using controls and variants around strategies" (T. Williams 2017, 176). Williams' etudes are designed instead to allow the improviser to focus on

strategy rather than deploying explicit note content. Robertson, in turn, advocates that improvisatory material be internalised away from the instrument in the initial stages of developing a new improvisatory approach. Robertson describes a process that adheres to Peacock's ideology that when improvising, technique and theory exist to serve the musical idea:

> I worked with hearing and imagining the phrases I was learning, then later went to the instrument to work out how to get those sounds. Learning the musical ideas in these solos by ear was vital, as it is a way of internalising them. I could then practice the process of moving from an internally held part to its musical articulation. Once I could sing entire solos from memory, without relying on the recording, I then worked with playing them, grappling with musical ideas that had already become memorised, rather than playing them by referring to notation (Robertson 2016, 64).

Working with the melodic ideas in the improvisations of Konitz and Peacock in this way allowed Robertson to develop an intuitive grasp of their musical elements, without the need to label any devices or perform critical or theoretical analysis (this occurred after material had been internalised). Robertson's model does not seek to imitate improvisation, instead aiming to understand the processes at play in how these artists arrived at the music they made (Robertson 2016, 63).

Surveying the practice-based methodologies above for developing new improvisational strategies for contemporary jazz composition highlights a range of useful approaches for incorporating transcription analysis and archival data into practice regimes. In the following chapter, I unpack data gathered from interviews with three contemporary jazz improvisers who regularly work

within novel compositional contexts in order to drill down into the aspects of conceptualising improvisatory approach that cannot be gleaned from transcription and archival data alone. This review of elite performer-based methodologies illustrates how practice-led research can reveal adaptable, artist-specific improvisatory strategies, demonstrating the value of compiling a similar repository of strategies by engaging with contemporary practitioners.

Chapter 3: Interview Data

The survey of literature laid out in the previous two chapters indicates that throughout the development of jazz as an artform, as compositional frameworks have evolved, so too have the strategies utilised by improvisers. As such, a key goal of this thesis is to grapple with the improvisatory strategies contemporary improvisers are deploying to negotiate new compositional challenges.

Three contemporary saxophonists—Jamie Oehlers, Walter Smith III, and Will Vinson—were selected as the central figures for this study based on their demonstrated expertise in navigating the complex improvisational demands of contemporary jazz. Each artist is internationally recognised for their technical proficiency, compositional fluency, and creative originality within the modern jazz idiom. Their frequent engagement with advanced harmonic frameworks, extended forms, and idiosyncratic rhythmic designs makes their work particularly relevant to the objectives of this research. By consistently performing original works, both their own and those of other composers, these musicians exhibit a high degree of adaptability and innovation. Their ability to engage fluently with abstract harmonic environments closely mirrors the kinds of improvisational challenges this study seeks to address, positioning them as ideal case studies for practice-led inquiry into modern jazz improvisation.

A further rationale for the inclusion of these artists lies in their significant roles as sidemen and collaborators within a wide array of ensemble contexts. Each has an extensive performance history as an interpreter of diverse compositional voices across the global jazz community,

offering insights into how contemporary improvisers adapt to novel musical situations in real time. Their versatility and responsiveness in ensemble settings reflect the dynamic and dialogic nature of improvisation as a collaborative act. Observing and analysing their improvisational choices provides an opportunity to examine how elite performers negotiate the unpredictable variables inherent in new compositions. In doing so, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the strategies employed by improvisers in maintaining both coherence and spontaneity under complex musical conditions.

Equally important to their technical and professional credentials is the relevance of their practice to my own work as a saxophonist. The shared instrumental context ensures a high degree of translational value between their recorded outputs and my own creative explorations. Having followed the development of their musical voices over an extended period, I have come to view their work not only as artistically compelling, but also as pedagogically instructive. Their recorded solos and live performances have served as long-standing sources of inspiration, shaping my own approach to tone, phrasing, and improvisational language. The decision to base this research around their work is thus grounded in both an analytical interest in their musical strategies and a personal engagement with their artistry that aligns with the broader aims of this practice-led study.

This research was carried out in accordance with an approved USYD ethics protocol 2020/HE000407. The interview data I present below has been broken down using a general inductive approach (Thomas 2006) that has resulted in two main themes: “What shapes the tune”

– i.e. views on the diverse challenges of contemporary jazz compositions – and the "Improvisational Strategies" designed to meet these challenges.

What shapes the tune?

In the interviews conducted for this thesis, different views emerged about the nature of the modern jazz compositional landscape.

For Will Vinson, a main challenge posed by modern jazz compositions is the rhythmic intricacy of peculiar forms. When asked to reflect on his experience performing modern works, Vinson replied that there are "definitely… situations where I'm like, I can't hang with this… because there's something about it… and that usually comes down to rhythm or form" (Vinson 2021). To illuminate this concept, he discussed the tune *Belvedere* by Adelaide drummer Josh Baldwin – a fast tempo tune that explores alternating meters: two bars of 3/4 followed by one bar of 5/4. As Vinson explained, this compositional approach grinds against the structural expectations he has internalised through his experience performing jazz standards:

> In a blues, for example, you know, you're hearing a chorus. So you're hoping to hear a chorus at a time, like, as one pulse, one part of the pulse, one big thing. And with a standard often, like, you're trying to hear in eight-bar sections, but with a tune that's made of some kind of weird, like, compound time signature, like, you know, mixed meters, whatever, it's really hard to do that (Vinson 2021).

Walter Smith III and Jamie Oehlers in contrast described the unpredictability of new harmonic

frameworks as the major challenge facing improvisers in modern jazz. Outlining the compositions he is most engaged with, Smith stated "most of the music that I end up playing that's original, it moves around, and there's not really a tonal centre" (Smith III 2021). Oehlers essentially agreed, depicting the compositions he performed as breaking dramatically from "your standard harmonic approach in terms of ii-V-Is and I-vi-ii-Vs and things like that" (Oehlers 2021). For Smith, the melodies that weave together unpredictable harmonic progressions are the sonic maps that guide improvisation: "It's all melody... because the way that new compositions are new, by design, they're not familiar to the ear. So… [I try] to play as much melody from the song as possible to reinforce that sound against… the harmonic backdrop" (Smith III 2021). For Oehlers, the harmonies themselves yield a topography of "target points" improvisers must negotiate as they perform tunes. For Vinson, the rhythmic structures that scaffold peculiar forms are the key features of modern compositions with which improvisers must engage.

In the next section, I discuss how these fundamental views of what gives modern jazz compositions their shape and feel anchor the musical strategies and tactics Vinson, Smith and Oehlers deploy in their improvisations.

Improvisational Strategies

Each artists' view of the compositional feature that lies most prominently in the foreground of contemporary jazz composition influences the improvisational strategies they deploy.

Vinson's foregrounding of rhythm, for instance, aligns with an improvisational approach developed around the concept of rhythmic "glue." In reference to the *Belvedere* (Baldwin 2021) example, Vinson describes how the meter of the work can be made to feel familiar through the use of rhythmic patterning:

> I'll try to sort of imagine, like, figures in those pulses, in those time signatures, sort of the equivalent of, like, you know, a riff, like, in 4/4, right? So, if you just did 4/4 and you're going, [sings a melody] sort of between a riff and a clave, right, so just kind of little bits of glue to help you stick to the thing. You know, we can do so many of those without thinking about it in time signatures that we're comfortable in (Vinson 2021).

Once a riff is established the compound unit is internalised by feeling other rhythmic units or note values against the riff, removing the security of an underlying quarter note pulse. Vinson describes a process whereby he layers other rhythmic values such as half-notes and dotted quarter notes under the riff, playing through it with attention to form and making the hemiola rhythms created by this resolve correctly. In Vinson's words this process "increase[s] the angles and the, you know, without the security", presumably of a regular quarter note pulse (Vinson 2021).

By this point in the process the compound meter should be feeling comfortable, and not dissimilar to a regular meter. Vinson notes that despite the newfound familiarity this compound meter is still unique, and considerations must be made in terms of how eighth note lines will flow and resolve. Vinson describes this as such:

> And then, you know, and then it just becomes a pulse like any other, becomes a ... not quite like any other because then you have, you know, then you're aware that you play your lines. You know, if you're playing 8th note lines, obviously, they're not going to resolve in the same way that they would (Vinson 2021).

These "bits of glue" give Vinson numerous points of reference within the compound meter, providing points from which he could start phrases without conscious direction while also being aware of his place within the meter and how this may affect how phrases resolve. Vinson's "bits of glue" closely resemble the "benchmark points" described by Smith below.

For Smith the melody of the composition serves as a benchmark point in songs that are irregular in form or harmony, and as a way of navigating complex harmonic progressions. Smith's view that melodic material is the most useful entry point for navigating complex compositional landscapes yields performance strategies that closely align with Vinson's. Take for instance the similarity of Vinson's concept of rhythmic glue and Smith's description of melodic "benchmarks". Smith cites the George Shearing tune, *Conception* as an example of how targeting "benchmark points" can facilitate the navigation of a complex segment of a composition.

> So you know how it goes [sings "A" section melody of *Conception*], that hit comes on beat four, right? So, like, you can play around with it without playing all the way through that, but you always know that beat four is there, so if I start my solo, like, [sings a melody], like, right on beat four, kind of thing, you have those benchmarks that happen in

> your mind, whether you're playing or not. So you're always, like, connected to that part of the tune (Smith III 2021).

Smith claims that even when these rhythmic aspects aren't particularly challenging, they can still be leveraged to guide improvisation, stating "it's not an issue of, like, turning the beat around or missing that bar in the context of a phrase, but almost, like, aiming for that and making that the most comfortable part of the form" (Smith III 2021).

In Smith's view, the utility of melodic benchmarking becomes increasingly apparent the more irregular a song form becomes. To illuminate this concept, Smith discussed the tune *Milky Pete* (Akinmusire 2017) by Ambrose Akinmusire:

> I don't know how long, it's, like, two pages worth of music, but it's not, like, an even number of measures. It's just, like, notes all the way through. It's just a melody, there are no chords to it. But a lot of stuff is implied. But since there are no chords, when we play, the harmony moves all over the place. So the only marking points are certain little parts of the melody, and it's really fast (Smith III 2021).

In our interview, Smith described how in practice he uses fragments of the composition's melody during his improvisations in *Milky Pete* to activate the form and lock it in his memory. That is, at certain points in *Milky Pete* he plays the melody verbatim and then returns to his nominal practice of a more open-ended exploration of melody. Smith describes this benchmarking strategy as "training myself to hear… the form, no matter what I'm playing" (Smith III 2021).

Melodic strategies also serve as the initial means by which Smith builds familiarity with odd time signatures. Even though the topic of meter seems somewhat removed from melodic strategies, when navigating odd meters the melody is still Smith's first point of call. He describes the process as follows:

> Taking a melody, going back to *All the Things You Are*, putting that in seven, but, like, making sure that all the pickup notes that I've played, like, going into the bridge were exactly in time. So if I'm doing a 4/3, seven, they're, like, [sings melody], they move with the three, or if I'm doing a 3/4, they move with the four portion of it. So it feels unnatural, but training yourself for that to feel normal, then getting the more complicated melodies (Smith III 2021).

The kind of practice Smith describes in this quote is targeted at developing flexibility with phrasing in less common meters and being able to play off and start phrases at any point within the bar. This strategy bears similarity to Vinson's "riff-based" strategy where the "pickups notes" described by Smith mimic Vinson's "bits of glue". Both these strategies are focused on commencing phrases or feeling parts of the meter that may otherwise be foreign or unfamiliar.

While Oehlers and Smith agree that the unpredictable nature of harmonic frameworks is their most challenging feature, they take very different approaches to navigating them. While Smith uses the melody to ground the sound of a composition against its unique harmonic backdrop, Oehlers prefers to engage directly with the harmony. Oehlers' strategy for engaging with these unique harmonic frameworks is an accordion like process that seeks to inform and expand on the range of possibilities available on each chord. Oehlers describes the first stage of this process

"my basic approach initially is just looking for target melodic tones, and trying to develop melodically" (Oehlers 2021). From this point, further harmonic possibilities unfold as chord scale relationships are identified. Oehlers finds that thinking about the harmony in terms of chord/scales relationships elicits a bebop style improvisational approach, which is often contextually at odds with the underlying aesthetic of a contemporary composition, a sentiment echoed by Smith.[7] The final layer of harmonic strategy involves a series of harmonic substitutions applied to every chord. Oehlers outlines this process as such:

> I like to treat each chord as a resolution point, right, as a one (tonic sonority). So any chord can be a one chord, you know, hypothetically speaking, which allows you to tap in then to the dominant chord associated with it, a five chord and then, you know, that winds in. Basically the minute you do that, you've got the whole chromatic scale available, so you can learn to shift between the dissonances and consonances (Oehlers 2021).

After expanding the available harmonic possibilities, the original targeting strategy returns, now augmented by additional chromaticism and tensions. "I feel like I kind of go back to the original process, which is the… melodic target points on each chord, but I try and wind in some of the other, you know, the other scale or chromatic notes into the melodies" (Oehlers 2021). Oehlers'

[7] That's one of the biggest things I work on with students, too, is, you know, having them improvise on something, and then when they inevitably play, like, [sings – bee ba doo ba be dah] it's, like, why? You know, there's nothing wrong with it but, like, think about, like, where did that come from in relation to anything else that this song is about or what you played or just, like, a thing you do And it really ... it works better on standards, but, like, when you get to original music, you know, that same A minor that you played [sings – bee ba doo ba be dah], it's just even less appropriate to do it there (Smith III 2021). [The phrase referenced and sung by Smith is an idiomatic piece of bebop vocabulary]

harmonic view of the tune thus expands from an initial micro perspective to a macro view encompassing multiple possibilities, and then returns to a micro perspective while being aware of the wider range of possibilities available.

For Oehlers, understanding how and when to utilise consonance and dissonance is fundamental to shaping intensity and tension, as an individual improviser and also as an ensemble member. In Oehlers' view "the development and resolution (or not) of tension is required at some level to create music that has a certain sophistication" (Oehlers 2021). Oehlers describes how during improvisation 'offers' presented by ensemble members present opportunities for tension development.

> During the process of performing with a standard small jazz ensemble, there will be improvised 'offers' from various members of the group - usually in the form of some sort of tension development (harmonic variations, rhythmic applications, melodic tension inclusion) (Oehlers 2021).

Prior practice deciphering the spectrum of consonance/dissonance possibilities available over a given chord allows Oehlers to direct the trajectory of the ensemble based on how these 'offers' are responded to.

> When these moments occur, as a monophonic soloist, I can choose to either accept or reject these offers by matching, enhancing, or redirecting the melodic tension through the use of consonant or dissonant note choices (relative to the fundamental harmonic form) (Oehlers 2021).

Oehlers' consonance/dissonance based navigational strategy is informed by his accordion like process of unravelling harmony. Oehlers' mapping of the harmony enables him to "know roughly where the consonance is… [and] where the dissonance is" on each chord (Oehlers 2021). These consonance/dissonance points are arrived at in an intuitive manner whereby, once harmony is decoded, improvising over it begins immediately.

> So, you know, I kind of decipher it, I work out, okay, that's roughly, like, Lydian dominant. And then I'll blow over that chord in an isolated manner, but then I'll try and ... what I do these days anyway, to get myself out of that whole Bebop dynamics is try and use the dissonances as well and incorporate them into lines, just to see how they're functioning (Oehlers 2021).

Oehlers' ideas about consonance/dissonance serves as the primary means by which he navigates a song and shapes an improvisation. However, there are parallels to Smith's focus on melody. While Smith discusses using the melody to stay contextually relevant to the tune as well and be grounded in the form and harmony, Oehlers' use of consonance/dissonance seems to be a way of avoiding deploying bebop vocabulary and staying contextually relevant and aware of the 'offers' being made by other ensemble members. Both these strategies allow for the tune to be navigated without using idiomatic jazz language that would be at odds with the underlying contemporary aesthetic.

While each artist in this study spoke predominantly about improvisation strategies linked to what they viewed to be the core aesthetic challenges of modern jazz composition, other strategies did occasionally emerge in the data.

Vinson, for instance, touched on strategies he uses to navigate difficult harmonic forms. For Vinson, most harmony, regardless of how complicated it is, can be navigated by reverting to a vertical, chord-tone based approach. While this may sustain interest in a solo if the raw material (the harmonic progression itself) is interesting, Vinson ultimately finds this method unsatisfactory in most situations (Vinson 2021). Interestingly, his preferred approach aligns with the approach Oehlers describes above of charting unique paths between harmonic target points. Vinson spoke about mapping these pathways on the piano by experimenting with different kinds of smooth voice leading: "I'll try to play it on the piano, I'll try to play it the way that I would try to play a standard. So again, like, focusing on the smooth voice leading, and just try to hear it and try to have that sound sort of become more and more familiar with me" (Vinson 2021).

In turn, while Smith spoke predominantly of preserving the identity or recognisability of composed melodies, he also explored the importance of generating new themes that operate in counterpoint to the core themes of the compositions he performs. As he explained: "I want to have all these little tangential things that come out of that, like a secondary melody that I start to, you know, juggle, in addition to kind of coming back to that, and just ... it's mostly like a mind game" (Smith III 2021). In this example, Smith refers to using the composed melody to inspire and generate new, related ideas rather than simply using the composed melody as a formal reference point. He claimed that conducting his practice in this manner helped him to "focus and… identify important parts of new melodies, when you hear them for the first time, so you know what's important and what, you know, or at least what your ear is drawn to" (Smith III 2021).

This method serves dual purposes: it expands upon and strengthens the strategies for developing melodic ideas, while also acclimating to the foreign situations likely encountered when improvising over contemporary compositions.

All three artists expressed some degree of affinity for spontaneity in performance and their struggle to avoid performance clichés. Smith spoke mostly to an ongoing battle with what he termed, his "younger self", whereby habits formed during his years as a developing musician continued to loom large over his current improvisatory approach. As a result, Smith stated that he prefers playing in unfamiliar situations and feels that "the less familiar I am, the more thoughtful I feel like I am" (Smith III 2021). Vinson and Oehlers expressed a more generalised avoidance of preconceived ideas when improvising. Vinson claimed that "you don't want to, like, graft too many habits onto the way that you're specifically playing that tune. If you can play it, and if you can enjoy playing it, and if you can make it sound good, then there's no point in, you know, in chipping away at that kind of sort of freshness" (Vinson 2021).

Vinson and Oehlers agreed that "lead sheet" notation poses a number of challenges both in terms of immediately recognising a chord, and also the larger harmonic relationships inferred between chords in a progression. Oehlers cited examples from a lead sheet of *Silverland* (Grabowsky 2004), a composition by pianist Paul Grabowsky. Throughout *Silverland* Grabowsky makes extensive use of slash chords which may well align with how Grabowsky conceives of the voicings at the piano. However, in practice Oehlers describes how this notation can add a layer of difficulty when decoding the harmony of contemporary jazz compositions. Oehlers observes

that these voicings can be alternate ways of depicting common practice chord symbols, citing the following example: “I mean, like, Abmin/B. You know, it’s B freakin’ major. [Laughs] But it’s written as Abmin/B” (Oehlers 2021). While spelling a chord in this manner may elicit a desired interpretation or voicing of the harmony from the perspective of a chordal instrument, as Oehlers comment indicates, when improvising this notation obscures harmony that would be very easily understood. Oehlers goes on to illuminate how the chord structures generated by slash chord notation are abstract enough to function in multiple ways.

> Oh, a really simple one. Let’s say something like ... let me think of one that’s a little bit more complex than, say, D/C, right, which is kind of Lydian ... well, it’s not necessarily Lydian, could be Lydian dominant, or, you know, Cmaj7#11. Something like ... let me think. Well, like, an A/C, right, A/C, which, you know, generally speaking, translates to a dominant 13b9. There’s no seventh in there, but generally speaking, when you hear that, it implies that level of tension (Oehlers 2021).

Oehlers’ statement draws attention to the potential confusion of slash chord notation. The examples Oehlers provides all resemble common practice chords, however with some omitted chord tones. As a result of these omissions, the voicings are vague in terms of harmonic function and could function or be interpreted in multiple ways. Take for instance D/C – this could be Cmaj7#11 with an omitted 7^{th}, an inversion of D7 or as Oehlers points out C lydian dominant (C7#11 again with an omitted 7^{th}). Which of these options is most appropriate will come down to the harmonic context the chord is presented in, and even then, more than one of these may be suitable.

Vinson offers further insight into the difficulties of interpreting lead sheet notation and chord symbols. While Oehlers' assessment focused on the lack of clarity offered by slash chord notation, Vinson deems chord symbol notation wholly inadequate for both jazz standards and contemporary compositions. Vinson states that chord symbol notation is serviceable for performing jazz standards because we "know how they work now because they've been with us for so long" (Vinson 2021). It is likely that Vinson is referring to both the notation and the types of harmony encountered in jazz standards. Internalising repertoire is a priority for jazz musicians and as such the harmony and progressions found in standards, as well as the notation used is intimately familiar. Additionally, many jazz standards share common harmonic progressions that seasoned performers can navigate pathways through. Vinson commented on this in our interview, describing how a larger knowledge of repertoire not only facilitates learning new repertoire, but also informs how it is performed.[8] Vinson observes how further problems arise with lead sheet notation in original compositions and describes how "you might see, like, a progression written there that looks like it's very vertical and angular and not, you know, terribly flowing because you don't know how they [the composer] approach[es] those chords" (Vinson 2021). Vinson's frustration stems from the fact that chord symbols provide limited information to an improviser making it especially difficult to navigate progressions that are unfamiliar.

[8] I don't think about the chords when I'm playing All the Things You Are. I mean, of course, the first, like, 200 times I played it, I was thinking a lot about the chords, but you know, and the more music you ... I mean, the more standards that you learn, the easier it is to learn standards. I mean, it sounds like the most obvious thing, but the easier it is to learn standards and the easier it is to play standards… So for example, you know, like, if you meet somebody who ... if you meet somebody who knows, like, you know, 300 tunes, but for some reason, doesn't know, Autumn Leaves or something, they're going to play Autumn Leaves if someone asks them to play it. They're going to play it much better than someone who knows Autumn Leaves really well but doesn't know any other tunes because they know what those progressions sound and feel like and they can instinctively ... they just need to hear the progression once and then they're off to the races. Whereas the other person is just very much bound to their interpretation of that one progression. I mean, obviously, those two people don't exist, but you get what I mean? (Vinson 2021)

Notating harmony in this way offers improvisers limited insight into relationships between chords, how they function or the voice-leading movements between chords. This would naturally inhibit fluidity with improvisation for Vinson who multiple times expressed a prioritisation of voice-leading and seeking to connect harmony.

Oehlers and Vinson both describe how the lack of clarity offered by the chord symbols frequently utilised in jazz standard and original compositions can elicit strategic shifts when improvising. Chord symbol notation can make the function and relationships between chords ambiguous, prompting improvisers to shift strategies rather than grapple with notation (especially in performance situations that do not afford the time to thoroughly decode notation). This ambiguity presents a large challenge when improvising as it can be difficult to figure out available notes other that what's immediately indicated in the chord. This becomes even more important when considering the performance and may prompt an improviser to shift strategies. For Oehlers this could be reverting to a simpler "melodic targeting" strategy. Vinson also mentions adopting a more chromatic strategy in situations like this whereby he attempts to "just try to hear it and just kind of play semi-chromatically" (Vinson 2021).

Although Oehlers' concept is based firmly in a harmonic understanding, this stems from and can fall back on a more horizontal, melodic navigational strategy. This begins by identifying target melodic notes over each chord and using these to navigate horizontal pathways through the harmonic progression of the song. "My basic approach initially is just looking for target melodic tones, and trying to develop melodically" (Oehlers 2021). Oehlers then builds layers of harmonic understanding into this melodic strategy, using the strategy as a reliable starting point and falling

back on it in situations where he hasn't had much preparation time or other strategies aren't successful. Oehlers describes how he approaches these kinds of situations:

> I kind of start at step one and I do that because I don't want to be, you know, you don't want to be sucking. I look for those target points. And then, you know, it depends, if you're winding in rhythmic and kind of rhythmic complexity into that in terms of meter and song form, then again, I'm looking for targets within that, too, without necessarily kind of thumping into beat one on every bar if it's multimeter or odd meter (Oehlers 2021).

The melodic targeting strategy utilised by Oehlers closely resembles the voice-leading approach described by Vinson. Both strategies prioritise finding smooth, horizontal pathways through a chord progression.

Consistent threads emerge from all three interviewees. All three practitioners acknowledge that the unpredictable nature of improvising over original works presents a challenge. A clear preference for melodic solutions is expressed, whether those solutions be related to the written melody of the song (as Smith describes) or be a novel melodic pathway through the changes (as Oehlers and Vinson allude to).

The creative work for this project aims to synthesis this interview data with a folio of contemporary works for jazz ensemble. The diversity of strategies discussed—melodic targeting, motivic referencing, voice leading—suggests that improvisation in contemporary jazz is not governed by one fixed methodology. Instead, it requires a flexible and personalised toolkit,

further supporting the need for a curated repository of improvisational approaches. My thoughts on how the strategies discussed in the interviews might be applied in this project are outlined in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: Creative Work

The creative work for this study is comprised of studio recordings of seven compositions performed by jazz quartet. The pieces performed were written by a variety of composers, including original pieces by myself, Australian guitarist Luke Greenhalgh and the three artists interviewed in this study (Smith, Vinson and Oehlers). One challenge that unites the works in the recorded portfolio is that they all feature harmonic structures and forms not typically found in traditional jazz repertoire. The harmonic content of these compositions includes chordal extensions or slash chord variations outside what would be found on a typical blues or American songbook lead sheet. Additionally, the root movement of the chordal landscape of these compositions is often more melodic or unpredictable than the stepwise and descending fifth movements of more traditional jazz repertoire.

A conscious decision was made to select compositions from a variety of composers for this creative work. This project was inspired by my own experiences trying to decode the logic of contemporary jazz compositions. While writing and performing entirely original works of my own was something I considered for this project, I ultimately decided that it would be more compelling as a creative work if I had to respond to the compositional structures designed by others. This idea of finding ways of productively engaging with the music of other artists crystalised during the interviews undertaken for this study.

In the following pages, I outline the works recorded in my portfolio, the challenges they present, and some possible strategies for meeting those challenges. I then provide an account of the

recording session put forward as my major creative work for examination in which I reflect on how these strategies influenced my playing. One of the seven tunes that featured in this recording session was composed on the morning of the recording, as an approximation of a completely new piece that I could improvise over with no pre-conceived notions. The piece is therefore not discussed in this chapter.

Take Me Away From Here

Take Me Away From Here is a composition by Jamie Oehlers that appears on his album Smoke and Mirrors (Oehlers 2012). Stylistically this composition mirrors a typical jazz waltz. The rhythm section plays a typical jazz waltz accompaniment and comping, catching some of the figures in the melody. The song form is 25 bars in length with four bar melodic phrases, excepting the final phrase in which the final note/chord is extended a measure to make a five bar phrase. The melody is therefore grouped in bars: 4 + 4 + 4 + 4 + 5. The song also features a four-bar vamp that is repeated four times, played first as an intro to the tune before returning as an interlude after each repetition of the form.

The tenor solo on Oehlers' recording occurs over the four-bar vamp that forms the intro/interlude for the piece (Sam Anning also takes a bass solo but plays over the vamp and then the "head" of the form). This "open solo vamp" immediately calls to mind some of the strategies observed in the literature by Waters and Williams and the strategies describes in Oehlers interview for this study. For instance, Waters' comparison of how both Wayne Shorter and John Coltrane employ motivic cells reveals a strategy for freely developing, transposing or altering melodic material

without the harmonic or structural constraints of playing over a traditional solo form that aligns with some of Oehlers strategic maneuvers.

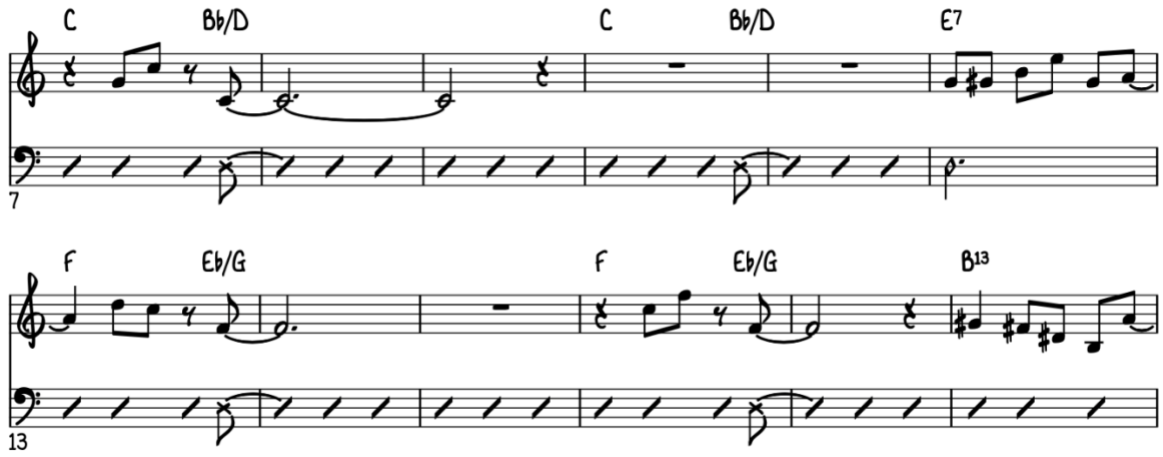
Specifically, Oehlers and Williams both identify strategies for expanding the simple harmonic structure of vamp style settings for improvisation. Williams' taxonomy of Brecker's superimpositions offer an increasingly complex series of strategies to expand a vamp's harmonic palate. Oehlers illuminates a related strategy whereby considering each chord in a given progression as it's own resolution point (functionally a tonic, I chord of a key centre) unlocks the dominant (V chord) possibilities associated with each chord. For the improviser, this yields a full spectrum of chromaticism, allowing their improvisations to shift between consonances and dissonances which allows for further development of colour and tension as the solo develops. While not challenging in the traditional sense (as, perhaps, a form like *Giant Steps* might be), there is ample challenge in building a meaningful improvisation around just two chords. Superimposing alternate harmonic progressions allows improvisers to access chromaticism and colour outside of the written harmony. Williams' taxonomy offers a more structured, systemic approach with clearly defined parameters whereas Oehlers' approach is more open.

The challenge of applying these harmonic strategies to *Take Me Away From Here* is that the vamp differs from more conventional 'modal' vamps in that the harmony shifts between key centres every measure. My intent is to overcome this challenge in my performance by selecting a harmonic resolution point and letting the harmonic momentum of the line carry over the changing harmony, thereby sustaining the dissonance of the substitution until a resolution point is arrived at aurally.

Upside

Upside is a composition by Will Vinson that appears on his album *Perfectly Out of Place* (Vinson 2016). What is most distinctive in this work is how the broad harmonic suggestions of *Upside* embellish and extend a typical 12 bar blues form. Structurally, *Upside* is a 42 bar form in which the melody is grouped in both four and six bar phrases. Where a typical blues consists of three four bar phrases, *Upside* would be broken down as two 12 bar phrases and a 20 bar phrase. Harmonically *Upside* complies with the basic harmonic requirements of a blues – i.e. the piece begins on I, moves to IV, and has a V chord which resolves to I. The I and IV chord both are both built around a three bar vamp which repeats before being transposed (see figure 1 below).

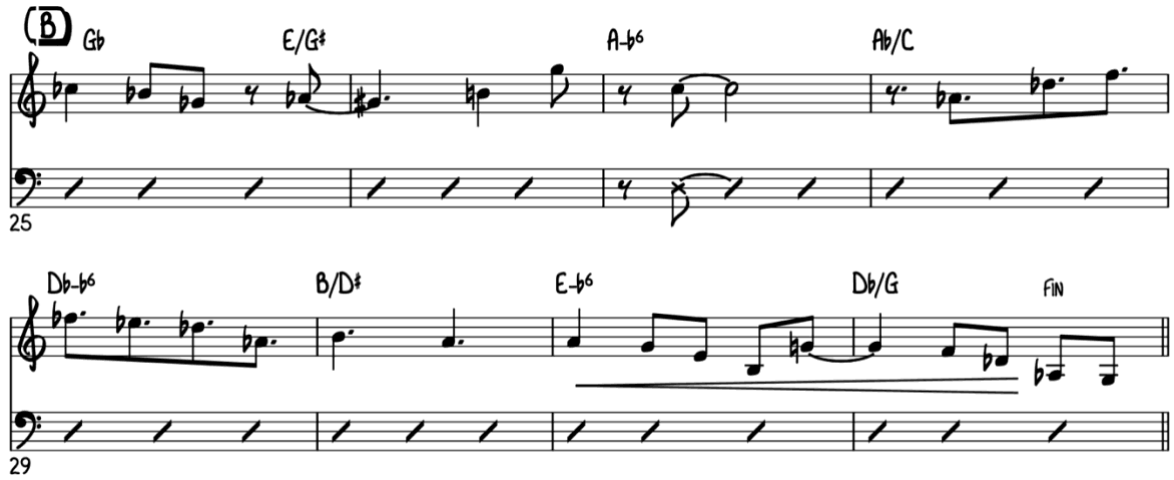
Figure 1: Upside 3-bar vamp



Vinson's reimagining of a blues turnaround sees a simple ii – V progression replaced with a series of first inversion V – I progressions. Other than the first chord (measure 25) the I chords are all replaced by minor b6 chords in a progression that shifts tonalities from Gb to A-b6, Db-

b6, E-b6 before resolving back to C via tritone substitution (Db/G) (see figure 2 below).

Figure 2: Upside 'B' section, re-imagined blues turnaround



The macro blues elements of *Upside* open up the possibilities of playing more idiomatic jazz language that would be out of place on any of the other repertoire in this creative work. Smith, for instance, talks about the importance of improvising using contextually appropriate language depending on the repertoire being performed:

> There's nothing wrong with it but, like, think about, like, where did that come from in relation to anything else that this song is about or what you played or just, like, a thing you do on, you know, like, when you see a person he's, like, "How are you doing?" "Everything's great," whether it is or not, you know, it's just like an automated response. Trying to eliminate that from the game. And it really ... it works better on standards, but, like, when you get to original music, you know, that same A minor that you played [sings – bee ba doo ba be dah], it's just even less appropriate to do it there (Smith 2021).

Smith's comments echo Baynes' discussion of C/D in the improvisation of Brad Mehldau, particularly how Cultural C/D can be applied to improvising. Baynes' describes Cultural C/D as an activity that adheres to normative idiomatic jazz and categorises five types: blues, quotations, crips, formulaic improvisation, and cultural dissonance (Baynes 2015, 85). Smith's statement dismisses this language when it comes to improvising in contemporary settings, which illuminates the core struggle of these settings, resisting the impulse to play the language and vocabulary we spend much time and effort assimilating.

Upside provides an interesting landscape to explore Cultural C/D with its very contemporary twist on blues song form. Smith talks about how melodic material can be fruitfully developed "If you treat it that same way, with that kind of importance, and development, like, retrograde and inversion, and all the stuff that happens, but always kind of coming back to a theme and repeating that theme and treating even the most abstract of melodies with that same care and approach" (Smith 2021). My intent in performance is to embrace this approach but to combine it with some of the blues language and inflection implied by the overall structure of *Upside* in order to highlight the contrast between the traditional and contemporary aspects of the work.

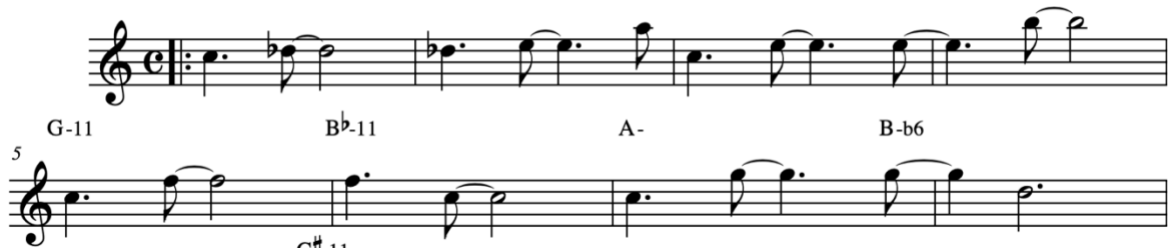
July

July is a composition by Walter Smith III that appears on his album *Still Casual* (Smith III 2014). The first unusual feature of *July* is that the "head" that is used as the solo form by the bass and tenor is 31 bars long (a deviation from conventional 8 bar phrasing structure). This bears immediate similarity to Oehlers' *Take Me Away From Here* where one "phrase" of the melody is extended from a typical four bar phrase to five bars. Smith's extension happens in the middle of

the form (measures 13 – 17 constitute a five bar phrase) as opposed to Oehlers', who extends the final phrase of the melody, letting it linger before returning to the intro vamp.

The harmonic landscape of *July* features several challenges. Smith makes abundant use of parallel motion as well as generally unconventional root movement throughout the harmony. The opening eight measures clearly illustrate one instance of this, whereby the harmony is comprised of exclusively minor chords, either triads or with some variety of alteration or extension (see figure 3 below).

Figure 3: July parallel harmonic motion



An additional challenge present in *July* is that the harmonic rhythm deviates from typical jazz accompaniment patterns. The bass and chordal accompaniment follows the rhythmic figures of the melody, playing in an open one feel. Where the melody anticipates beat one (e.g measures four and eight above) the bass and piano catch, anticipating the harmonic change. While the idea of the rhythm section catching melody figures isn't unusual in jazz performance, what is unusual is that the rhythm section maintains these figures strictly behind the both the soloist and when accompanying the melody.

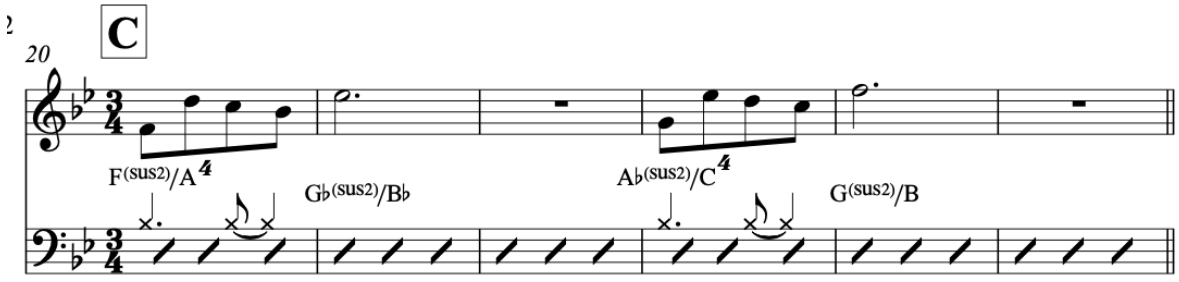
The harmonic density of *July* immediately calls to mind Oehlers' strategy of finding melodic target points. The abundance of parallel motion in the harmony and the unconventional chord structures provide an opportunity to highlight the unique voice leading of this harmony in my performance. Additionally, this strategy might be used to illuminate some of the common tone in the chord, potentially lending a sense of cohesion to a solo. One example of this occurs in bar five through eight, where a G melody note could provide a focal point for improvising over G-11, Bb-11, A- and B-b6. By focusing on this strategy, I hope to avoid the tendency Oehlers' observes for saxophone players to "outline it all. I mean, saxophone players are the worst! We are the worst! You give us a chord sheet like that, right, that's Paul's *Silverland*, right, and you play every chord. You know, you play everything" (Oehlers 2021).

Mostly Three

Mostly Three is an original composition of mine written as a response to the structural challenged presented by *Upside* and other contemporary works that feature sections of irregular length. There are a few notable instances of this in the song, the first being the open piano intro, which is comprised of a three bar vamp. The A and B sections are constructed with more conventional four bar phrases, but change in both time signature and groove, moving between a straight 8^{th} groove (for the A) and a swung 3/4 jazz waltz (for the B). The final C section of the song form features the clearest inspiration from *Upside.* Here the melody phrasing moves to phrases six measures in length (or two three bar phrases), with one phrase being contracted to five bars to comprise a final section 23 bars in length (phrased as 6 + 6 + 5 + 6 bars). This contraction/expansion of melodic phrase is borrowed from *Take Me Away From Here* and *July.* Where Smith and Oehlers both extend phrases, I've done the inverse in *Mostly Three.*

While the formal structure of *Mostly Three* is largely inspired by *Upside*, a lot of the harmony is a response to the challenging chord changes of Smith's *July.* In particular, there is similar use of parallel motion at the start of the C section, with a slash chord voicing shifted by semitones. It's worth mentioning, I first encountered this particular slash chord voicing (Fsus2/A or Fadd2/A) in another composition of Smith's, *Capital Wasteland* (Smith III 2021). Oehlers discusses his strategy for decoding slash chord notation and the drawbacks that approach can have, saying "I work out a kind of scale that works over those chords. But then, one of the issues with that is, all of a sudden you have all this thing, and it becomes like Bebop tune again, you know, where you have all these scales available" (Oehlers 2021). One of the issues with this slash chord shape (Fsus2/A) is how ambiguous it is in terms of function; it could be considered as a voicing for A-b6, a variation of a first inversion F major chord or even as something more obscure, such as A7alt (omit3). This challenge arises frequently with Smith's compositions, and similar works by contemporary composers, even outside of slash chord notations as many of their tunes either move key centres frequently, or don't operate in a clear key centre (see figure 4 below).

Figure 4: Mostly Three slash chords/ambiguous voicing



Mostly Three presents perhaps the largest set of challenges in my creative work portfolio, due to the fact that it is composed of so many distinct sections. Each section will likely warrant its own strategy for tackling the types of harmonic content the composition presents. In order to bring some coherence to these choices, one aim I will take into performance is to routinely bring the focus of improvising back to the melodic content of the song. Smith describes how focusing on the melodic content of a composition can help ground and honour the uniqueness of it, saying "So you really have to honour more of, like, what's actually written there and kind of play specifically to that song. And the melody is usually one of the biggest ways to ground that sound" (Smith III 2021).

Whitewall

Whitewall is an original composition I wrote for this study as a practice vessel for developing fluency in odd time signatures, particularly 5/4. To achieve this, I borrowed an idea from Vinson's piece *Albemarle* where the inner subdivision of each bar (clave) moves between 3 + 2 crotchets and 5 + 5 quavers (Vinson 2008). In *Whitewall* the 5/4 clave starts as 3 + 2 but is flipped in the final section of the piece to be 2 + 3. By structuring the tune in this way, I practice feeling and internalising different pulses within the 5/4 meter, developing what Vinson describes as "bits of glue".

Harmonically this composition is a response to the way Vinson shifts functional harmonic progressions to develop and shape his melodic ideas. This contrasts with *Mostly Three* which is inspired by the more ambiguous tonalities in Smith's work. It presents a different challenge, similar to the "B" section of Vinson's *Upside* where the harmony is functional, but frequently

modulates. The clearest example of this is in the 'A' and 'B' section, where the 'B' is a repetition of the 'A' section but transposed up a minor 3rd. Further with the 'A' section the melody occurs almost exclusively over transposed ii – V – i chords in a minor key. In this way *Whitewall* has a similar dichotomy to *Upside* where structures consistent with traditional jazz repertoire are recombined and recontextualised in unfamiliar ways and a more contemporary aesthetic.

The main challenge of *Whitewall* lies in the way the progressions are transposed and sequenced. At the time of this writing, the composition has yet to be performed, but my expectation is that staying attuned to where one is in the form will present as a major challenge. To this end, Smith describes how the melody can provide benchmark points in a form that may otherwise feel quite abstract:

> One thing I practiced was playing, like, there's a benchmark to me, like, in the 11th measure, and then again in the 29th measure, so playing basically a form, which has no chords in it, but I'm just thinking about developing a melody, but in bar 11 and 29, I'm hitting that exact melody from the thing. So just practicing that with a metronome, like, [sings a melody], like, at that tempo, and just kind of [sings a melody], you know, like, that one thing happens every time, just so I'm training myself to hear that in the form, no matter what I'm playing. So then, when you move to the actual performance of it, you can leave space, you could do whatever, but you know where that hit is (Smith III 2021).

Smith's strategy of identifying melodic benchmarks may serve as a productive way to underpin a solo on *Whitewall* while also facilitating the unspoken communication that occurs in an ensemble setting whilst improvising. By employing a strategy like this, ensemble members can

be constantly communicating and signposting the song form. On initial playthroughs of *Whitewall* this is almost certainly a strategy I will heavily rely on, as the form becomes more familiar for myself and the ensemble members. I may rely less on it and potentially use it sparingly when things get "loose".

Tears

Tears is an original composition by Australian guitarist Luke Greenhalgh. Luke is a musical colleague and frequent collaborator who I've performed with numerous times this past year. *Tears* is distinct from the other works in my major creative work portfolio in that it is through composed. That is to say, the solo sections are all written with a specific instrument in mind, and each solo form has its own unique structure. This bears some similarity to *July,* where the bass and saxophone solo over the "head" and the guitar solos over a vamp. In *Tears* the guitar solo occurs over the "head" changes, the bass solo occurs over a brief rhythmic ostinato, before the saxophone takes over a new section leading into the final melody.

As a result of the through composed nature of the tune, each solo section serves a different narrative arc within the composition. As well as addressing the harmony or any rhythmic hits, the improviser has to match the intensity and aesthetic of that section of music rather than having the song form be a "blank canvas" to improvise over. The saxophone solo comes out of the build of the bass solo and stays at a high intensity for the four repeats of its eight bar form. The form alters on the 5th and final repeat, with different rhythmic figures occurring underneath as well as different chord changes. Additionally, the form is extended by a bar (nine bars on the final repeat), a similar structural alteration to what Smith and Oehlers compositions utilise. Where all

the other songs in this recording project have forms that allow open exploration of the form, the form in *Tears* is distinct in its finite length.

The harmony of *Tears* more closely resembles the vamp style form utilised by Oehlers, rather than Vinsons harmonic modulations or Smiths ambiguous tonalities. Greenhalgh keeps the harmony firmly grounded in the key and uses exclusively diatonic harmony. This bears similarity to characteristics Kernfeld and Waters observed in modal compositions; a slower harmonic rhythm (chords change every two bars) and a lack of functional harmonic movements. While the chord changes used by Greenhalgh are all diatonic, there is an absence of functional movements (V – I) and instead Greenhalgh keeps the harmony lingering around the dominant of the key.

Tears poses several performance challenges. The lack of functional harmonic movement in *Tears* recalls the challenges of the modal works Waters analysed and the motivic transposition of motivic cells in Coltrane and Shorter's improvisatory approaches. In the case of *Tears,* I don't think this strategy fits due to the set length of the solo and the narrative implications within the broader context of the song: the saxophone solo comes in at the peak of the song and as a result there's not as much scope to develop ideas. Smith's ideas about melodic development fit the intentions of the solo section well, but the song occurs over a section of the composition that has no pre-composed melody. I'm curious about the possibility of using prior melodic material (from earlier sections of the composition) as launching points for new improvisation. This may be a productive way of surmounting *Tears'* unique narrative challenges.

Internalisation of Strategies

One theme to emerge consistently from both the survey of practice-based research projects in Chapter Two and the interviews conducted for this study is that preparing to improvise over original music is an inherently difficult task. Improvisers are regularly trying to make new and foreign harmonic and structural elements feel and sound as natural as tunes from the lexicon of jazz standards that we may have performed hundreds of times.

The unique nature of original composition makes preparation for improvisation immense and a potentially never-ending task. Each composition has its own identity and requires unique solutions, and due the near infinite number of possible harmonic, rhythmic and structural combinations, universal solutions are not practical. Smith acknowledges this, stating;

> If we're playing *All the Things You Are* or we're playing, rhythm changes, whatever, you can hear the way it's moving around one tonality, and the ear is, like, drawn to that. So you can take more departures from it. But at least for most of the music that I end up playing that's original, it moves around, and there's not really a tonal centre, for the most part. So you really have to honour more of, like, what's actually written there and kind of play specifically to that song (Smith III 2021).

Smith's commentary illuminates the core problem; how do we prepare to improvise in a way that honors the unique elements of a composition if we have never encountered these compositional features?

Vinson succinctly articulates the performance ideal of this creative practice, stating “The ultimate goal is to make one of the progressions someone's given me, you know, to make it as familiar as if I was playing *All the Things You Are* or something, you know” (Vinson 2021). This is a lofty goal to achieve, given that *All The Things You Are* contains standard jazz harmonic progressions shared with hundreds, if not thousands of other songs in the jazz lexicon. Nevertheless, I have taken a number of steps to attempt to prepare for this recording project, as well as generally for the kind of scenarios this study has investigated.

Similar to Baynes’, I used composition as a method of internalising and developing strategies for improvisation. The new works I created for this study all contain structural, rhythmic or harmonic situations that I wanted to be able to explore and develop fluency with. This was informed by themes that emerged from the case study interviews as well as my experiences as a professional performer. This approach has limitations however, and my critique of this process would be ‘am I really internalising these strategies or am I becoming more familiar with compositional structure?’ I think both processes can be occurring simultaneously and the two are difficult to separate in any case.

Much of my practice is focused on, or at least starts with, the open melodic development that Smith describes. In this process, a melody (or melodic fragment) is selected. This could be generated from anywhere, a piece I’m working on, something I heard someone else play or just the first idea that comes out on a given day. It is then freely developed and transposed, not necessarily rigorously (through cycles, or twelve keys) but in an intuitive manner, whereby I’m

trying to hear development possibilities as well as think of harmonic scenarios in which that melodic material may be applicable.

Another key facet of my personal practice has been developing the voice leading ideals that Vinson describes. This is a concept that was described to me in some detail in correspondence with Vinson. Vinson describes improvisation that most closely resembles a chorale, with independent melodies coexisting that decorate and outline the harmony. This process is aurally guided, so that as I'm playing on the horn I'm trying to hear the direction of each line before it's played. This process is applied to both conventional jazz repertoire and the compositions delivered in my creative portfolio. I feel this is a more natural process on standards as it's easier to be aurally guided when there's more of a shared harmonic roadmap across a variety of tunes. Applying this strategy over contemporary compositions becomes a more intellectual form of practice, at least initially, as I'm thinking through voice leading pathways rather than hearing them.

Even though it is not the central focus of this study, I also consistently work on assimilating new vocabulary. My method for doing so borrows from Williams' four stage model; Imitation, Harmonic Modulation, Variation and Recombination with alterations to some stages. In 'Harmonic Modulation,' as well as adapting the melodic material to various chord qualities or modalities I also consider alternate chords that the line may fit over without modification. A very simple example would be how C#, D, F# and A (the notes of Dmaj7) will fit over Dmaj7, Gmaj7, Bmin7 and Emin7. Additionally, for the 'Recombination' stage no specific etudes were composed. I find targeted locations within the form of a song to deploy vocabulary I'm

assimilating and improvise over the rest of the form while aiming to play that vocabulary each time it comes around.

Chapter 5: Creative Work Portfolio

The creative work for this project took the form of a live recording which was conducted over the course of one day at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music on December 11th, 2024. The recording was ultimately comprised of seven tunes: the six outlined in the previous chapter as well as one additional tune, composed by myself on the morning of the recording. The following chapter outlines my thoughts during the recording process, as well as my reflections on our performance of each composition.

A universal approach to all the material we performed emerged out of some of the strategies already discussed. Smith's melodic referencing was used in some way on almost every song we played, especially when the formal structure of the song became more ambiguous. Oehlers' idea of having melodic target points also proved a key way to simplify my ideas and play in a way that foregrounds the uniqueness of any given tune. In particular, I found targeting common tones between chords to be a very effective way to give a sense of cohesion or unity to improvisations, particularly on the more harmonically challenging compositions.

July

https://on.soundcloud.com/rVjinM3g1NfR9XbP9

Smith's composition *July* was perhaps the most challenging work we performed on the day. It took the ensemble five attempts to get a take we were happy with. One major challenge was maintaining the structural integrity of the song through the first set of solos (bass and saxophone) that occur over the "A" section of the song. On initial takes, the ensemble struggled to maintain

the harmonic structure of the song behind the saxophone solo. This confirmed my initial expectation that unconventional root movement, an abundance of parallel motion, and a lack of a clear tonic tonality would make it very hard to hear your place in the form.

I stayed much closer to the melody in the final take to more clearly outline the form. This improved our cohesion as an ensemble and, on listening back to the recording, also yielded several interesting melodic moments within the improvisation. Playing with the melody foregrounded resulted in choices being made that didn't reflect my usual musical tendencies or draw on phrases from my conventional vocabulary. Additionally, as Smiths' melody is so dense, with no written rests, I had to make different phrasing choices.

Upside

https://on.soundcloud.com/Bnoug8YWqPyXWHXj6

Upside was also among the more challenging tunes to record, although not for the same reasons as *July*. The ensemble had no issues following or maintaining the harmonic and formal structures of the piece during the recording, or previously in rehearsals. The improvisation over the 'A' sections and the three-bar phrase never felt like it sat right or locked naturally in to place. We faced this challenge only on *Upside* and had no such issues on other compositions like *July* and *Mostly Three*.

Using blues vocabulary and inflection was an effective way to highlight the contrast between the traditional and contemporary aspects of the overall structure of *Upside.* The open, vamp sections

within the form provided ample opportunity to use blues licks, phrasing and inflection. While the more contemporary facets of the form had enough movement in the harmony that outlining that clearly, usually via an arpeggio or finding a melodic pathway through the chords was enough to evoke a more contemporary sound.

Mostly Three

https://on.soundcloud.com/HLHDFPmuuCMDVRC49

The structural elements of *Mostly Three* presented more challenges in execution than many of the other compositions. With frequent changes in the feel and time signature between the musical sections, there was plenty of opportunity for someone to miss a change. Ensemble errors transitioning between sections ended up requiring three takes when recording.

Improvising on *Mostly Three* proved fewer challenges than executing the formal structure. I mostly relied on melodic targeting to navigate the harmony. I think this was particularly effective for a composition like this for a couple of reasons: First, there's sufficient movement in the harmony that just playing in a way that addresses that aspect of the song is musically compelling. Second, the musical aesthetic of the song is also quite subdued and doesn't require the soloist to build a high level of tension or intensity with the ensemble.

Take Me Away From Here

https://on.soundcloud.com/m3ZrP4mornmVrgTa7

Take Me Away From Here was recorded in one take and ended up taking on a unexpected shape. Rather that mirroring Oehlers original recording as I'd initially envisioned, our interpretation had the bass solo occur over the intro vamp, then the saxophone solo over the melody form before finishing the solo by also playing over the vamp. By contrast, Oehlers' recording has the bass solo over the melody changes and saxophone over the vamp. As a result of this change, I had to decide on the day what strategies I would use to negotiate this section.

For most of my improvisation over the melody changes I used a melodic targeting strategy to navigate the harmony. When doing so I particularly tried to connect chords using both common tones, as well using smooth voice leading to illuminate shifts in the chords or highlight a particular extension.

This ended up carrying over into the improvisation on the vamp section that alternates between Fmaj7 and Amaj7. I found the common tones between these chords could be useful melodic targets as well as departure and resolution points for chord substitutions. For example, A, B and E are the two clearest common tones. I found I could effectively superimpose any chord if I used one of those pitches as pedal point. I might play a series of chord arpeggios with B remaining constant as the highest or lowest pitch of all the arpeggios in that series. In that way, the tension and colour of the alternate harmony implied is always grounded against the harmonic backdrop. Additionally, if I played chord substitutions in more of an 8^{th} note style phrase, I knew I could resolve melodically to a A, B or E at any time.

The Day Of

https://on.soundcloud.com/c3deSxLfkrpdYXJA8

The Day Of is an original composition written by myself on the morning of the recording for this project. Compared to the rest of the repertoire the structure is a fairly simple sixteen bar 3/4 form with slow, straight 8th accompaniment from the rhythm section. Harmonically the piece contains more challenges. Similar to *Mostly Three* much of the harmony is built around slash chord voicings, particularly the Fsus2/A or Fadd2/A shape borrowed from Smith.

It was a conscious choice to include *The Day Of* as a last-minute addition for multiple reasons. First, for me it was as close as I could practically get to sight reading a completely new piece and improvising over a form I had no pre-conceived strategies for. Harmonically there wasn't any particular internal logic to the progression. It was all written very quickly and the harmony came about purely as a harmonisation of the melody. Slash chords were an identified challenge in the interview data that doesn't really apply to *The Day Of* as I have an awareness of how these shapes function, though I'm not necessarily practiced with them the way they have been combined here.

Tears

https://on.soundcloud.com/r5m1KXARvq4njLeq7

Tears required an adjustment of strategy on the day as the shape of the solo sections didn't follow the predetermined arrangement. The narrative arc conventionally builds toward the saxophone solo, which forms the high point of the composition. However, in our recorded

performance the bass solo is much shorter and we move to the saxophone solo before the ensemble builds both dynamically and in intensity. This change caught me off guard on the day and placed the onus on me to start gradually and build the solo.

This new direction for the contour of the tune didn't provide the opportunity to recycle any of the previous melodic material as I'd hypothesised might be effective. Instead, I made use of repeated chord arpeggiations similar to Joe Henderson's strategy (White 2008). This clear repetition was a device the band were able to latch onto and greatly accelerated the development of the solo.

Whitewall

https://on.soundcloud.com/Tmu4yqzZoPRJtiCY8

Whitewall didn't pose as many challenges as I'd initially expected when it came to navigating the form during the improvisation. I'd expected that the nature of the harmony shifts and transposition would make it difficult to keep place within the form, but this was not the case. I found it comfortable to simply hear my way through the changes, without the need for any obvious signposting or tracking of the melodic features, as was necessary with *July*. I suspect this is because the bass motion in *Whitewall* stays closer to common practice. It mostly moves in fourths or fifths and occasionally moves in a stepwise manner, establishing clear distinctions that provide structural clarity that is absent from the harmony of *July*.

Having immediately found myself more comfortable with the form than I expected to be, I was free to be more creative with improvising. A lot of the playing was still informed by the same

primary strategies as the rest of the creative project, melodic referencing and playing around melodic target tones. An unexpected development was that a number of times in the solo more traditional jazz and blues language was evoked. On reflection, this subconscious response makes sense as *Whitewall* contains the same contrast between traditional and contemporary elements as *Upside.*

Conclusion

Research concerning improvisational strategy acknowledges key developments in mid-20th century jazz, focusing on the compositional and improvisational shifts that defined the bebop and modal jazz movements. In the bebop era, musicians like Charlie Parker, Lee Konitz, and Warne Marsh transformed jazz with complex harmonic structures, faster tempos, and innovative approaches to improvisation. Thomas Owens' analysis of Parker reveals a strategy built around formulaic melodic patterns, which could be modified through techniques like metric displacement. Stefan Love extends this analysis by identifying "melodic schemata," more abstract stepwise paths that interweave with phrasing structures, revealing the fluidity and adaptability of Parker's improvisations. In contrast, Max Stehr shows how Konitz and Marsh favoured a more spontaneous, less pattern-driven style, further expanding the diversity of bebop improvisation.

Compositional innovations of the post-bop and modal movements required even more diverse improvisatory solutions. Barry Kernfeld outlines how slower harmonic rhythm and intersectionally weakened harmonic function were among key features of Miles Davis's modal compositions, which opened new possibilities for improvisation. John Coltrane's shift from repetitive blues-based improvisation to more expansive, evolving phrases in works like *So What* marks a significant departure from bebop's dense harmonic structures. Keith Waters compares Coltrane's and Wayne Shorter's modal approaches, showing how each musician navigated modal forms differently, with Coltrane maintaining a more structured approach and Shorter embracing freer variations. Arthur White highlights Joe Henderson's post-bop modal

innovations, which blend rapid arpeggios and modal sequences to create fluid, open-ended improvisations, underscoring the expanding creative freedom in jazz during this period.

An examination of practice-based research that investigates the improvisational practices of elite jazz performers shows that improvisational strategies have continued to evolve and develop. In this thesis, I've focused on three key case studies to illuminate this phenomena: Thomas Williams' analysis of Michael Brecker's harmonic superimpositions, Mark Edward Baynes' exploration of Brad Mehldau's use of consonance and dissonance (C/D), and Benjamin Robertson's study of Gary Peacock's intuitive improvisation. Williams identifies and categorizes Brecker's harmonic shifts into a hierarchy, offering a structured methodology for assimilating these strategies into an improviser's vocabulary. Baynes develops a holistic model for understanding C/D relationships in Mehldau's improvisations, emphasizing how different musical elements like harmony, rhythm, and cultural context interact in real-time improvisation. Robertson contrasts these methods with his focus on intuitive, non-technical improvisation, inspired by Peacock's approach, which prioritizes spontaneous creative response over learned patterns.

These studies all demonstrate how surveying the improvisational practice of elite jazz performers can inform one's own playing through the internalisation and reimagining of improvisational strategies. Williams uses a systematic five-stage process to incorporate Brecker's harmonic vocabulary, blending both explicit and implicit learning techniques. Baynes follows a rote learning approach to internalize Mehldau's C/D techniques, while Robertson advocates for an intuitive process where improvisational ideas are first internalized through audiation before

being translated to the instrument. These studies emphasize the importance of practice-based methodologies in bridging the gap between theoretical analysis and creative application.

To build upon the knowledge gained from these practice-based studies a series of case study interviews were conducted with pre-eminent contemporary jazz saxophonists, discussing their strategies for navigating contemporary compositions. Jamie Oehlers, Walter Smith III and Will Vinson were selected primarily because they are artists who regularly work within novel compositional frameworks. This interview data enhances our understanding of improvisational approaches by revealing conceptual facets of improvisation that cannot be fully captured through transcription and archival data alone.

The interviews revealed a number of strategies these artists gravitate towards when playing in contemporary settings. Oehlers describes how identifying target melodic notes over each chord and utilising these to navigate horizontal pathways through the harmonic progression of the song forms a central part of his improvisatory concept when improvising on new material. For Smith the melody serves as a way the foreground the unique aspects of contemporary song forms when improvising, while also providing a benchmark point in songs that are irregular in form or harmony. Vinson describes how finding ‘bits of glue’ that fit around the main clave or riff can serve as a method for developing facility when contending with complex or compound meters.

The interview data also provided insight from these artists on some of the challenges that arise when contending with contemporary compositional frameworks. All three artists acknowledged the unpredictability of contemporary works as the major challenge facing improvisers in

contemporary jazz settings. Contemporary compositions are inherently difficult to prepare for as they don't contain universal harmonic structures and forms in the same way jazz standard repertoire does (i.e. *Autumn Leaves* or *All The Things You Are*). Vinson and Oehlers agreed that "lead sheet" notation poses a number of challenges both in terms of immediately recognizing a chord, and also the larger harmonic relationships inferred between chords in a progression.

Improvisational strategies were internalised through a combination of composition, melodic development, and voice leading practice. By composing original works, I explored unique harmonic, rhythmic, and structural challenges, which helped build facility deploying strategies to address this unfamiliar musical material. My melodic development process involved intuitively transposing and exploring melodies in various harmonic contexts, while voice leading became a key focus, especially in creating independent, chorale-like lines. I also worked on assimilating new vocabulary using a modified version of Williams' four-stage model, integrating new material into my improvisation within specific sections of a song. These strategies collectively helped me prepare for the challenges of improvising over original music.

This research culminates in a recording project that sees strategies gleaned from the interview data applied to a folio of contemporary compositions. Prior to the recording, each composition within the work is discussed regarding the challenges they present, and some possible strategies for meeting those challenges. The recordings are reflected upon, with commentary made on how strategy utilisation may have shifted due to changes with arrangements, or just shifts in performance dynamics in the ensemble on the day. In the end, the major creative work for this project demonstrates how the negotiation of contemporary jazz forms might leverage a range of

improvisatory strategies and the usefulness in weaving existing improvisatory strategies together when seeking out new improvisatory possibilities.

Appendix A: Jamie Oehlers Interview

So, just very broadly to start off, can you talk a bit about how you think about playing original jazz compositions versus say, like, jazz standards?

I guess, playing an original composition, it depends on the harmony. You know, if you're talking about modern harmony, I guess, you know, not your standard harmonic approach in terms of ii – V – Is and I – vi – ii - Vs and things like that.

I guess my first strategy is just looking for target points across the harmony and developing melodically from there. I have this thing, I kind of find it easier ... it's almost easier playing modern compositions the first time because, you know, I'm really aware of trying to find these melodic target points and kind of trying to be, you know, relatively melodic and simple to a certain degree through it. And then I start sucking on them because I start going, “Okay, now I can do all this,” and I start putting all this other stuff in there and kind of lose the essence of the changes to a certain degree. And then I find myself paring back again.

I actually said that to Paul Grabowski a number of times, like, his tunes are easiest to play the first time, and then they get harder [laughs] because you start trying to apply other things.

So yeah, look, my basic approach initially is just looking for target melodic tones, and trying to develop melodically.

Can you talk maybe a little bit about what those target tones might be? Are you looking for something in the chord or something in the melody, or is it like a rhythmic kind of landing point or something?

It's definitely melody related to harmony. So, I mean, it's a pretty broad definition, like, modern tunes.

Yeah. And just to briefly jump in, like, for the sake of it, modern tunes is so broad, right, but I am kind of ... I'm more interested in things with, like, unconventional or non-functional harmony, something that moves a little bit away from kind of, like, standard functional, you know, jazz ... like, jazz vocab, kind of thing.

Yeah. So I guess I was considering the same type of thing, and a certain level of complexity within the harmony. But I guess I'm looking to outline the harmony. So, you know, a lot of the time, if you're using slash chords, or compound chords, then look into those upper structures for a bit of melodic guidance, you know, colour tones on the more standard harmonic ideas, like, you know, if there's a major seven chord that comes after a, you know, a major chord with the third in the bass or something, then looking for more kind of colourful tones on the standard chord structures.

One thing I do, which I don't think helps me initially, but it helps me a bit further down the track is I usually translate, especially piano players, because piano players write those chords that, you know, they write the voicing, and it could be commonly known as something else to us. [Laughs]

Yeah. Can you think of an example off the top of your head, because I think I know what you're talking about?

Oh, a really simple one. Let's say something like ... let me think of one that's a little bit more complex than, say, D on C, right, which is kind of Lydian ... well, it's not necessarily Lydian, could be Lydian dominant, or, you know, Cmaj7#11. Something like ... let me think. Well, like, an A on C, right, A on C, which, you know, generally speaking, translates to a dominant 13b9. There's no seventh in there, but generally speaking, when you hear that, it implies that level of tension. That's one.

Actually, the 13#11. So like ... okay, so something like F#... F#min/C. So, yeah, so I quite often see those, and some of the piano players I work with, specifically Grabowski, will write these things and I decipher them and go, “Okay, well,” and I play them on the piano, just to make sure that they’re functioning in the way that I'm translating them academically. Because, you know, sometimes a dominant may be more like a secondary dominant, you know, which gives a different relationship when you hear it as opposed to when you look at it on the page.

So then I generally, like, I don't think this is great, though, but I do it. [Laughs] I work out a kind of scale that works over those chords. But then, one of the issues with that is, all of a sudden you have all these things, and it becomes like a bebop tune again, you know, where you have all these scales available. And I don't think that's great.

So even though I like to know roughly where the consonance is, I also want to know where the dissonance is now. So, you know, I kind of decipher it, I work out, okay, that's roughly, like, Lydian dominant. And then I'll blow over that chord in an isolated manner, but then I'll try and ... what I do these days anyway, to get myself out of that whole bebop dynamics is try and use the dissonances as well and incorporate them into lines, just to see how they're functioning.

So then once I've done that, I feel like I kind of go back to the original process, which is the, you know, melodic target points on each chord, but I try and wind in some of the other, you know, the other scale or chromatic notes into the melodies.

Yeah, sure. Can you talk a little bit more about, like, finding those dissonances? What are you kind of looking for in the harmony as far as dissonances?

Not consonances. [Laughs]

Sure. That's huge, right?

Well, it is, yeah. I mean, my general approach, which is not overly common, I guess, is that ... and I've probably said this to you in the past that, you know, I like to treat each chord as a resolution point, right, as a one. So any chord can be a one chord, you know, hypothetically speaking, which allows you to tap in then to the dominant chord associated with it, a five chord and then, you know, that winds in. Basically the minute you do that, you've got the whole chromatic scale available, so you can learn to shift between the dissonances and consonances.

But then there's also just the other, like, chromatic approaches to each consonant point. So just, you know, finding those, and then, I guess, outside of what you're deeming to be diatonic, once you've translated the kind of appropriate diatonic scale, looking for how the notes outside of that diatonic area build in and react against the chord, too. So even choosing to only use the dissonances, how does that, you know, what level of tension are you really building over that particular chord.

And that then kind of feeds itself into, you know, once you start going back to that original, looking for the melodic target points, kind of embeds itself naturally, once you've heard all that stuff, depending on what level of tension you're trying to create, or not.

Yeah, so it's kind of like a big loop that starts at the target point thing and then kind of diverges and goes back there.

Yeah, well, that's what I meant when I ... it gets worse. You start out really clean and you made the changes but you're looking for just really basic points. And then you open up the universe and, you know, falls in a heap, and then you wean yourself back from that. [Laughs] You find a world within it that suits you.

Yeah, it's true. I know what you mean about those kind of piano player chords as well. And, I mean, I've done this as, like, sometimes, like, intentionally writing things, because so many of those maybe, like, slash chords, or poly chords, they're something that we know, right, like, C13#11, but they're just, like, it's missing, like, a third and a seventh or something. So it's just, like, so ambiguous. It can be five different things and it's all about, like, trying to map how it functions within the context of the song.

Yeah, exactly.

How does that kind of work for you? Do you just kind of sit down at the piano and try and work through it or ...

Piano definitely helps. Yeah, hearing each chord in relationship from one to the other. Yeah, I mean, I've got one ... hang on. I was showing a student one of Paul's tunes yesterday, so there's

bound to be one here. I mean, like, Abmin/B. You know, it's B freakin' major. [Laughs] But it's written as Abmin/B.

Here's a good one. D7#9/F. Sorry, Db7#9/F. So, you know, decipher that. It's kind of diminished, right? It's a bit of a weird diminished.

Yeah, that one, I think is a bit of a weird diminished.

Or E/G. Which is that 13b9 kind of vibe. E triad on G.

Yeah. Yeah. So it's, like, all that stuff for you is just kind of sit down at the piano and try and ...

Yeah, and blow some lines [laughs]. Actually, I do try and find a scale and just give myself a diatonic grounding, and then I move away from the scales as quickly as humanly possible these days.

Yeah. So it's just kind of a way of, like, understanding the function of it almost, more than really having things to play on it.

Yeah, it does help you have things to play on it though, too.

Yeah, of course, it's good as a starting point rather than thinking, like, being stuck thinking E major on G, you know.

Yeah, it just helps you understand the kind of scope of the consonance and dissonance within the chord.

I mean, on that topic, maybe, can you talk about some of the ... like, Paul's music was one example that immediately came to mind, but can you talk about maybe some scenarios that you've been in where you've kind of been confronted with music that is just, like, really challenging on the playthrough and kind of how you got through it?

All the time, and I'll just go through the ... basically, you mean, presented with it and have to perform it straight away? Not having the time to sit at the piano and work through it?

Well, yeah, I'm kind of interested in both. I think you've kind of talked about the, like, what would you do if you had something and you had time to work on it, unless there's anything you want to add to that. But yeah, like, you know, what if it's a situation where it's, like, it's a studio thing, and you're visiting, and you have to play the music, or you're in Melbourne for a gig with someone and it's, "Here, play this."

No, no, I kind of start at step one and I do that because I don't want to be, you know, you don't want to be sucking. I look for those target points. And then, you know, it depends, if you're winding in rhythmic … and kind of rhythmic complexity into that in terms of meter and song form, then again, I'm looking for targets within that, too, without necessarily kind of thumping into beat one on every bar if it's multimeter or odd meter.

Yeah, so that opens up, like, a whole other bag, right? Because we've kind of only talked about harmony so far, like, where do you go when it gets rhythmically kind of weird?

Yeah, well, unfortunately I don't reckon I'm great at it, and one of the reasons is because I try and play it all. But the older I get, the wiser I get, and the more mistakes I make in practice, the more I understand what not to do, I think. You know, that's an important part of just, you know, living a musician's life. You've got to fail a bunch of times.

What do you mean exactly when you say, like, play it all? Do you mean, like, kind of outline every change?

Yeah, outline it all. I mean, saxophone players are the worst! We are the worst! You give us a chord sheet like that, right, that's Paul's *Silverland* (Grabowsky 2004), right, and you play every chord. You know, you play everything. And it's the same with meter, I find, that we always just

try and play the meter all the time, especially those multimeter tunes. You know, if you're in 4/4 and then you've got a 3/8 and a 7/4 and a 5/8, you know, ...

Actually, I just did Linda's (Oh) gig and her and Fabian's (Almazan) music is nuts. Like, it's really hard. And we had bugger all rehearsal time. And I found it was better for me to play across it than try and get into it and hit it all the time. You know, if I'd had a whole pile of preparation time, it might be a different story, and, you know, kind of in the heat of the moment, and I've actually heard people do this really well. I've heard Bernie McGann play on complex tunes where he just floated over it, he sounded freakin' amazing! It was incredible. And I've heard a lot of other players kind of float. You know, I'm not saying that's the only way to do it, but I think in that moment where you're pretty sure you're not going to nail it every time, you know, and we've all been there where something just feels so unnatural to you that you know there's a great chance you're going to screw it up, then working on some strategy for playing either across it.

Or the other thing I noticed in, you know, some players that I admire playing on this stuff is that they don't always play over the complex areas. It's like *Giant Steps*, right, going back to harmony for a second, you don't always have to shred the first eight bars and then do your melodic stuff in the second half on first ... yeah, first eight bars. You know, you can not play over those first two bars. [Laughs] It's actually possible. So I think, yeah, playing less is definitely beneficial at times as well.

Yeah, just kind of simplifying things. And, like, letting the complexity in the music kind of take care of itself.

Yeah. I mean, sometimes that complexity itself can be the dynamic point. Doesn't always have to be the soloist.

Another thing, because, I mean, that's just like a real-world scenario, right? Kind of what you're talking about with, like, Linda and Fabian's music. Is there any stuff that you've worked on to try and, I guess, like, prepare for situations like that?

Yeah, just doing it, coming up with stupid ideas and ... I'm not saying they're stupid but, you know, I've got plenty of arrangements that I've, you know, I've written to try and get used to playing in different meters, odd meters or multimeter forms. Yeah, doing it is really important because it's one thing to practice, you know, practice a chart, right? some of Linda's stuff with Fabian, you know, you get sent the chart and you, you know, practice it against the chart, but then when you put it with a band and someone's playing something completely different across it, and it doesn't, you know, you're not going 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, dah, dah, dah, dah, you know, then it can throw you really, really quickly.

So I think just doing it a lot in different ways. I mean, you can never prepare yourself for a tune that goes 7/8, 3/4, 5/8, you know, four bars of 5/4, 7/4, 3/8 and then improvising on the form.

You can't prepare for the specific, but you can prepare for, I guess, the situation and have strategies for how to deal with it.

Yeah, that's fair. And that for you, it's just been, like, writing and arranging stuff that is ...

Yeah, well, playing other people's ...

... kind of the wheelhouse of it.

Yeah. Or just playing with people that you know will go, "Oh, let's just try this". So Ben Vanderwall's great for that. You line up by hit for an hour or two and Ben'll say, "Oh, why don't we do, you know, *Moment's Notice*, but do it in, you know, 7/8, but every four bars we'll do it in 3/4," you know, some crazy thing like that.

We used to do it at my house when I was living in Melbourne, and we'd always play tunes, we'd say, "Okay, let's do, you know, bar of four, bar of three, bar of two, bar of three," and then just pick a tune and do that on it. So I guess all of those things helped.

Cool. Well, yeah, I actually think that pretty much answers that. I mean, I haven't asked everything I've got written but we've, you know, I'm having a look at my list of stuff, and

we've definitely covered it all. So like, yeah, unless there's anything else you want to ... you feel like you kind of want to add on in there?

Not really, I mean, having time to work on pieces like this, I would just suggest, you know, making a Sibelius track or some kind of something to play against. Not always relying on yourself to get it right, and practicing it really slowly, as well. So really slowly is beneficial is another thing that us saxophone players never do enough. Best advice I always try and remember is from Garzone who was just always saying, "Slow the shit down." [Laughs]

Yeah, yeah, I do remember that being a mantra of his. Play it again but do it slower. Slower and quieter.

Exactly. Without tongue. [Laughs]

Yeah, no articulation and slow it down. Cool. Well, thanks so much, Jamie.

No worries, mate.

<u>26/8/21 Email Follow up question on "Consonance/Dissonance"</u>

So in our interview the idea of being aware of consonances and dissonances came up. Could you elaborate a bit on how this informs improvising for you?

Consonances and dissonances, or more so the levels of each within a phrase or whole solo, and how they work together inform my approach to developing improvised melodies. Understanding that the development and resolution (or not) of tension is required at some level to create music that has a certain sophistication, it's important for us to recognise when and where it is required. During the process of performing with a standard small jazz ensemble, there will be improvised 'offers' from various members of the group - usually in the form of some sort of tension development (harmonic variations, rhythmic applications, melodic tension inclusion). When these moments occur, as a monophonic soloist, I can choose to either accept or reject these offers by matching, enhancing, or redirecting the melodic tension through the use of consonant or dissonant note choices (relative to the fundamental harmonic form). This aids then in developing a tension arc across a piece, that shapes the intensity of the music and brings it to life.

Appendix B: Walter Smith III Interview

So can you talk a bit about how you think about playing, like, contemporary compositions versus jazz standards?

Hell yeah! So I've got to remember exactly what I said last time. I mean, usually, I mean, I guess the answer would be the same though, it's all melody, trying to ... I think we talked about it before but trying to make ... because the way that new compositions are new, by design, they're not familiar to the ear. So trying to play as much melody from the song as possible to reinforce that sound against what the harmonic backdrop is.

And again, you know, going back into that whole thing about functional harmony, and, like, if we're playing *All the Things You Are* or we're playing, rhythm changes, whatever, you can hear the way it's moving around one tonality, and the ear is, like, drawn to that. So you can take more departures from it. But at least for most of the music that I end up playing that's original, it moves around, and there's not really a tonal centre, for the most part. So you really have to honour more of, like, what's actually written there and kind of play specifically to that song. And the melody is usually one of the biggest ways to ground that sound.

Cool. That makes sense. Are there any particular, like, strategies that you've developed for practicing playing like that? Or can you talk about maybe how you practice playing in that way?

Yeah, I think I've mentioned this, but I don't remember, something about, like, practicing with a timer is, like, a big thing for me, like, on my phone, just playing for an amount of time and developing one idea. The theory being that whatever a given melody is, at this point, can be pretty abstract, you know, [sings - dee dee], it could be, like, a melody, which is not necessarily something that your ear is going to be drawn to as a melody, but if you treat it the same way as, you know, [sings the melody to *London Bridge is Falling Down*] oh, that was nice.

But if you treat it that same way, with that kind of importance, and development, like, retrograde and inversion, and all the stuff that happens, but always kind of coming back to a theme and repeating that theme and treating even the most abstract of melodies with that same care and approach. I feel like practicing that way helps you focus and, like, identify important parts of new melodies, when you hear them for the first time, so you know what's important and what, you know, or at least what your ear is drawn to.

So I do practice with a timer, and I'll start with some idea. It will literally be the first thing I play, or I'll think about a shape or something and just play it. And then I try to develop that one idea for the duration of the timer. So I'll do it for different, you know, five minutes, 10 minutes, 15 minutes, sometimes I'll record it. But the thing is, I want to, from the first thing that I play, when

the timer goes off, I want it to be almost the same thing. But I want to have all these little tangential things that come out of that, like a secondary melody that I start to, you know, juggle, in addition to kind of coming back to that, and just ... it's mostly like a mind game.

But also practicing that way, I find helps me to eliminate, like, the finger pattern stuff and the vocabulary that's memorised because, like, a Charlie Parker line that I might play over Emin, A7 doesn't have anything to do with, you know, developing this melody. And just eliminating that whole part of your playing that all the years of, you know, building vocabulary, if you just eliminate that and you're just left to, like, well, what can I do with this one idea, it's just more practice towards actually improvising when you're in the moment and you're trying to do something.

That's one of the biggest things I work on with students, too, is, you know, having them improvise on something, and then when they inevitably play, like, [sings – bee ba doo ba be dah] it's, like, why? You know, there's nothing wrong with it but, like, think about, like, where did that come from in relation to anything else that this song is about or what you played or just, like, a thing you do on, you know, like, when you see a person he's, like, "How are you doing?" "Everything's great," whether it is or not, you know, it's just like an automated response. Trying to eliminate that from the game.

And it really ... it works better on standards, but, like, when you get to original music, you know, that same Amin that you played [sings – bee ba doo ba be dah], it's just even less appropriate to do it there.

Yeah, it's, like, even one more, like, layer of context removed.

Absolutely.

Cool. So it sounds like, like, what you're just talking about with practicing that, you're not starting your practice with, like, a specific melody in mind, you're just starting with whatever the first thing you play is. Do I have that right?

Yeah, a lot of times ... no, you're right, a lot of times that's what I do because ... just to kind of, you know, start from an unknown, but I'm not saying that I haven't even done the same thing with, like, a standard melody. So I mentioned *All the Things You Are* before, like, not playing the whole form, in a way, like, I'm trying to develop more of this melody, but just, like, [sings – boo bee, bo do bo do bee] could be a segment that I'm now going to develop into something different. And, you know, so it can be the same thing, and I have absolutely done that. It's not only just, like, randomness. [Laughs] That's more fun.

Yeah, it's not about, like, a randomness thing, or how structured it is. Do you have any things you do specifically to prepare to play on improvised music that might be challenging? Like, if you've got to play a solo on a tune by someone and it's just hard to get through. Is this a process you practice with, like, the melody for that song or other melodies that you might come up with, or do you have other things that maybe you're checking out, as well?

Well, yeah, I mean, every song has its own set of challenges. For me, the things that usually end up being something I'm actually going to practice is if it's a tempo, or if it is a meter thing. And when I'm talking meters, we're talking, like, mixed meter, so where it's constantly shifting, where it's not an issue of, like, being able to go from, like, just in a simple way. If the whole thing's in four and then a bar of 5/8 it's not an issue of, like, turning the beat around or missing that bar in the context of a phrase, but almost, like, aiming for that and making that the most comfortable part of the form. So I practice those little sections.

I remember there was this one song, and I don't know why this popped in my head, but there's a song that Ambrose (Akinmusire) had called *Milky Pete* (Akinmusire 2017), which is ... it's just like ... I don't know how long, it's, like, two pages worth of music, but it's not, like, an even number of measures. It's just, like, notes all the way through. It's just a melody, there are no chords to it. But a lot of stuff is implied. But since there are no chords, when we play, the harmony moves all over the place. So the only marking points are certain little parts of the melody, and it's really fast.

So like, in that scenario, for instance, one thing I practiced was playing, like, there's a benchmark to me, like, in the 11th measure, and then again in the 29th measure, so playing basically a form, which has no chords in it, but I'm just thinking about developing a melody, but in bar 11 and 29, I'm hitting that exact melody from the thing. So just practicing that with a metronome, like, [sings a melody], like, at that tempo, and just kind of [sings a melody], you know, like, that one thing happens every time, just so I'm training myself to hear that in the form, no matter what I'm playing. So then, when you move to the actual performance of it, you can leave space, you could do whatever, but you know where that hit is.

Kind of like if ... I'm trying to think of a tune, like a, you know, *Conception*, that George Shearing tune?

Yeah, yeah.

So you know how it goes [sings "A" section melody of *Conception*], that hit comes on beat four, right? So, like, you can play around with it without playing all the way through that, but you always know that beat four is there, so if I start my solo, like, [sings a melody], like, right on beat four, kind of thing, you have those benchmarks that happen in your mind, whether you're playing or not. So you're always, like, connected to that part of the tune.

And it's great when, at least for me, the rhythm section players I get to play with a lot also think that way. So it makes that, like, magic stuff happen where you're not playing and then you connect on something out of the blue. It's kind of fun.

Cool. Is that something, like, the melody-based improvising that you were talking about and developing an idea sounds to me like it's ... like, obviously that's one pathway for getting through, like, harmonic contexts. But, like, going back to what you were talking about, about, like, mixed meter things, or really challenging rhythmic stuff. Is there stuff you've done to try and tackle that, or is it kind of ... does it all come back to what you were just talking about, about finding bits in the form to kind of, like, hook on and have, like, a glue to hold everything together?

Well, you know, as with anything, depending on when you talk to somebody in their journey, the answer is different. So, like, if I'm telling you now, like, you could put a piece of music in front of me, and I'm not saying that I can play anything, but, like, if it changes a lot, it's not going to be something where, you know, 15 years ago, if you did that, it would be, like, for the next month, all I need to do is just, like, try to play the melody correctly, you know what I mean? There's still moments where that is the case.

But, like, there was absolutely a time, you know, like, I remember being in college and wanting to work on seven. So all I did was, rather than just sit and try to improvise in seven, I would take things that were tangible and move them there so I could kind of see what it would feel like in a

different context. So, like, taking a melody, going back to *All the Things You Are*, putting that in seven, but, like, making sure that all the pickup notes that I've played, like, going into the bridge were exactly in time. So if I'm doing a 4 + 3, seven, they're, like, [sings melody], they move with the three, or if I'm doing a 3 + 4, they move with the four portion of it. So it feels unnatural, but training yourself for that to feel normal, then getting the more complicated melodies.

Confirmation is one that I did in all kinds of different time signatures. Because the bridge alone, which is hard to play in four, you move that around, it's ridiculous. And then songs that are A, A, B, A are really great vehicles for practice, because you can do the A section in one time signature, and then the B in a different time signature. So, like, *Confirmation*, the A's in five, the B in seven, and then the last A's in five again. So you're having to shift in real time and reappropriate the melody to fit that kind of thing.

So that kind of practice of doing that was, like, prior to ever being able to improvise in those times signatures, but it, like, instilled pick-up notes, it instilled phrasing, and all that kind of stuff. So then moving to improvising and all that, and then kind of continuing to mess around with that stuff. But, you know, if you don't practice it, it goes away.

Like, right now, I'm kind of in that world where I haven't been playing. So I did a recording last week, and there was a tune that was ... it was in five, but it went to, like, 5/8 for a little bit and then it came out of that in three. And when I was playing it, I was just playing the melody first

and I was, like, oh, okay, let me go back and check this out. [Laughs] You know, like, it happens. And if you're not in there, you got to work on it.

So hearing the melody, just to get back to the original part of the question, hearing the melody as it moves through, whatever's happening rhythmically in the song always helps me. So getting ... just singing that melody, apart from the, like, the complicated portion of, like, learning how to play over it has always just felt natural.

That makes sense. Do you think there's ... like, you've obviously recorded it as a sideman quite a lot throughout your career. Do you think there's things or skills you've developed that have kind of allowed you to do that maybe more easily and work on that many people's music? Because a lot of their original music you played is, like, not straightforward. I would say anyway. Like, the Ambrose stuff immediately comes to mind. That's, like, very complicated as one example. Maybe you can talk a bit about what it was like to kind of try and play that music. Or if there's other examples that come to mind?

Yeah, no, anything having to do with the sideman stuff has always been my top interest. You know, a lot of my early, like, going back to high school, the stuff that I wanted to do professionally. You know, my favourite saxophone players were, like, Josh Redman and Branford, Kenny Garrett, those guys that were around and really popular during that time, but my goals were to, like, I wanted to be in Roy Hargrove's band, I wanted to be, like, Ron Blake

with Roy, I wanted to be Tim Warfield with Nicholas Payton. Like, that kind of stuff. I wanted to be in Terence Blanchard's band. So I always ... I don't know, maybe paid more attention to that.

And some of my first experiences in college were playing with a trumpet player, Darren Barrett, who really taught me about phrasing, and, like, just copying what he would do. He's like, "Man, if I do a trill here, you got to do it, and if I bend this note, you got to do it." So I remember, like, actually getting into Terence Blanchard's band and his whole, you know, if you're familiar with his playing at all, it's like, oh, there's a lot of, like, half valve stuff and bends or notes that some ... depending on what key the song is, or what octave the melody is in, they can be really challenging to bend on saxophone.

Yeah, on saxophone it's pretty rough, depending on what register you're actually in.

Yeah, it's not easy. So just paying attention to those kind of details, and, like, you know, practicing stuff like that, that is really so specific to, like, one little pocket of playing an otherwise, very easy melody, you know, just, like, I've got to get this bend right without the note cracking, you know, like, that kind of stuff has always been fun to me.

So just from a musical standpoint, picking up on those kind of details is cool. And then going towards, like, playing the person's … I've always thought about it from that ... the melody and,

like, what the feeling is behind it and just tried to kind of move in that direction without any kind of, I guess, you know, I've always tried to trust my instincts as far as all those things go.

If the song has, like, a tripletty feel, which some people would even write on a lead sheet and say, like, ‘Elvin feel’ or something, like, I would never want to call it that, because then it makes everyone do a certain thing, right? Like, then the piano player wants to play like McCoy, and then I need to play like Trane. There are all these things that are called for.

So trying to separate my first thought when I hear something, like, the instinct, trying to separate that and impose my own instincts of things that I think would work rather than, like, always basing it off of what I've learned from other people. So that's been a big part of approaching sideman work, for me.

Yeah. Cool. Well, I think that's pretty much all the stuff I wanted to ask. And that's probably about when you have to split. Or you ...

Yeah, soon. I’ll pop in if there's anything else but ...

I mean, I don't think so. That's everything I wanted to ask. Maybe one more thing that's, like, interesting. How do you feel if you're playing changes if you're playing on … like, a

form that is unfamiliar, or like, is unfamiliar, and still in that stage of, like, not feeling comfortable?

Usually for me, I prefer my playing in those scenarios. I'm always fighting against my younger self, I guess, as far as, like, playing with my tendency, as I mentioned, like, loving Kenny Garrett, Branford, all that stuff. Like, I spent so much time working on playing, like, burnout. Like, I think I played in C minor enough in my high school years to, like, last me for a lifetime. So, you know, building and holding a high note and, like, playing fast is, like, my default thing, if I'm not careful. So I'm always trying to keep that at bay. And the less familiar I am, the more thoughtful I feel like I am.

But sometimes if it's too comfortable, you know, like, on a tour, like, by day ten, that's usually my low point, and then it has to happen. And then I'm, like, okay, I can't do that anymore. And then get back to, like, the, you know, but it's ... that's part of the maturation process, learning, it goes and then it gets really, like, too much and then it's, like, okay, let's settle into getting back to what music is about.

Yeah. Well, that pretty much answers that one, I think.

Perfect. [Laughs]

Thanks a heap, Walter.

No problem.

Appendix C: Will Vinson Interview

So, to start with, can you talk a little bit about how you think about playing jazz standards as compared to, like, contemporary compositions?

Like, just broadly?

As broadly as you would like.

I'm not sure that I really have, like, a philosophy about that, because I sort of try to ... I mean, because obviously, people's contemporary compositions are different. Some of them aren't that different from, you know, something that resembles the, like standard repertoire, and obviously, a lot of them are.

I mean, I do think that ... I mean, okay, well, I'd say just on a practical level, I'd be much less likely to memorise somebody's original composition, unless it's something that I'm going to play, you know, every night for two weeks or something. So, that makes a difference, that makes a big difference to the way that you play something. If you don't need to read it, then you are thinking about it differently, and you're much more able to kind of, well, to be able to hear it.

Also standard repertoire. I mean, like, you know, it's written in a language where I feel like I have a strong feeling for the way the internal harmony, the voice leading works. Whereas, you know, again, like, depending on the composition ... but talking about contemporary compositions, we're casting a very wide net. So some people ...

If it's helpful to maybe narrow that net slightly from the get-go, let's kind of limit ... obviously, contemporary compositions could be enormously broad, but let's kind of keep it centred around things that would be distinct from standard jazz repertoire.

Such as?

Such as, I guess, like, things that have potentially, like, less functional harmony? Maybe rhythmically, organised a little bit differently?

Yeah. So that stuff, you know, like, the harmony stuff, you know, when somebody writes music that, you know, harmonically is a lot more vertical, let’s say, in some ways it's, you know, it doesn't necessarily present a challenge, because you just kind of revert to that chord tone approach where you just, like, you know, play through the stuff vertically. And sometimes it sort of contains enough interest in and of itself that if you just do that, then you're kind of fulfilling something and you're playing something somewhat original, just because you haven't played the music before.

But it can get ... yeah, I mean, it can get ... it takes a while to kind of necessarily get where someone is coming from harmonically. It also takes a while to get where they're coming from and get whether there's anything there really for you to even get, you know. [Laughs]

Can you maybe talk about that a fraction more, like, what do you mean by to get it where they're coming from harmonically?

Well, to get whether there is any kind of, like, fluidity or any sort of, like, implied voice leading that's in the harmony that you're just not hearing because, you know, they ... because most people write music as in, like, lead sheet, real book lead sheet format, right, so you might see ... you might see, like, a progression written there that looks like it's very vertical and angular and not, you know, terribly flowing because you don't know how they approach those chords.

I mean, like, chord symbols are sort of unsatisfactory in standard repertoire, but we kind of know how they work now because they've been with us for so long. But, I mean, I've had plenty of situations where I bring my music to good musicians. I mean, often, like, really super killing musicians, and the stuff is written in chord symbols as best as I can, like, trying to avoid too many slashes and that kind of thing. And it just doesn't make any sense when they play it because there's just something that hasn't been unlocked about, you know, how the harmony works, right?

Like, the actual logic to it.

Yeah. And just what it's supposed to sound like, how it's supposed to ... the fluidity of it and everything. So if you look at a lead sheet ... yeah, I mean, I've had situations where I've had people's ... I can't think of any specific examples, but I know the feeling of, like, sitting with someone's music. Like, at the saxophone or even at the piano, I'm trying to work my way through it and just being like, “This doesn't make any sense”. I mean, with good enough musicians, you can make anything sound like it's okay. But in terms of how I'm going to approach it, yeah, it'll be very disjointed and very vertical.

So it then takes a while of, like, playing that music with that person, hearing how other people play it and, you know, maybe hearing how they conceive of it. So sometimes they'll play it to you on the piano or something and you'll realise, okay, so there's this sort of route through this that does actually flow harmonically. And then that unlocks something when you're listening to it.

And then other times, you'd just be like, oh, no, this doesn't have it. Which doesn't mean ... it doesn't necessarily mean it sucks, but it does kind of mean that, like, it's not ever going to be that good as long as I'm playing it, let's say.

That’s really interesting to me. That’s one of the things you feel like you need to understand, you need to understand the logic of a harmony in order to be able to play it well.

Yeah, if I want to get beyond just, like, okay, I'm playing notes from this scale for two bars, and then I'm doing this, you know, I mean, because I can do that, and I can make it sound passable, but I don't really like to play that way. I'm trying to get beyond that.

Yeah, but maybe the tune will have enough of something else going on, you know, maybe it doesn't have any harmony at all, and, you know, maybe most of the kind of thematic stuff that's material that's in there is rhythmic, or something else. And then you can kind of maybe get stuck into that, but I do like harmony. So I like to understand why somebody has ... I mean, not on a really deep level, but on some just functional level, like, why. I need to be able to hear a chord and think, I get why that chord is there, rather than, you know, ...

Where the song goes.

Yeah, maybe I like it, maybe I don't like it, but I want at least to be able to ... I want it to make some sense to me.

Cool. I guess that kind of leads into what I was going to ask next, and maybe this is a part of it for you, but do you have any things that you do when you're preparing to play new music? Things that you haven't kind of seen before? Say you're going into a session with someone and you're playing a bunch of their original music, are there things that you like to do, or things that you want to do to prepare yourself to improvise specifically?

I mean, if it's been recorded, I want to listen to it. Unless they specifically ask me not to listen to it. Sometimes that happens, because somebody wants, you know, they don't want you to try to sound like somebody else. But I do want to, you know, for the same reason that, you know, what I was just talking about, I need to ... the music needs to make sense to me aurally, right? I need to be able to hear it. Which, you know, some music you see it on a lead sheet and it's, like, yeah, it goes like that. I can hear it in my head even, and not just hear the individual notes, but I can hear what the sense of the music is.

And other music, I'd see it written down, I'm like, "I don't really know what this is supposed to do. I can see what those notes ... what happens with those notes, but what's it supposed to feel like?" And sometimes it's because the lead sheet is, like, super vague, or very little information on it. It's like, "Oh, well, what do they want, like, in terms of density?" So I want to listen to a recording for that reason.

Usually, if somebody's got anything specific to say, then they'll say it when they send you the music or whatever. If they don't send the music, then there's nothing to do. I actually kind of like

it when people don't send music, as long as it's not ... as long as the actual part that I have to play isn't too technically, you know, demanding, because sometimes you will, for some of the reasons that I was just talking about, sometimes you'll get some music, and you'll look at it and you'll build up your own kind of sense of what it's supposed to sound like. And then you get to the session, it turns out that that's not the way they want it. But you've already somewhat ingrained that in the way that you process it.

So unless it's, like, really complicated. I mean, unless I actually have to practice to get the notes happening, then some ... I'm quite into not seeing it before we play it.

Just kind of coming in and playing it with ...

Yeah, and then the first time I hear myself playing it, I'm also hearing everyone else play it. So, you know, everything's already instantly falling into place. I'm a sort of moderate ... moderately good sight reader and stuff. I'm not great so if it's complicated, I need to get my teeth into it.

When you say if it's complicated, do you mean, like, the written part?

Yeah, I mean the actual thing that I have to play. Like, if I need to time on the instrument to work out how to do it.

Have you had situations where maybe the blowing or the improvising section is something that you felt like you needed to spend time with? Or is that ... are you kind of more okay going into the session and kind of figuring that out?

Generally, yes, that's okay, but yeah, I have had some, yeah, definitely had situations where I'm, like, "I can't hang with this, you know, at this moment, because there's something about it." You know, and that usually comes down to rhythm or form ...

Rather than harmony?

Yeah. I mean, sometimes if there's ... I mean, harmonically, if something's just ... if a chord is just spelled really weird, then that might be an issue. But yeah, there isn't really ... yeah, if it's a harmonic issue it's not really something that time spent with it is really going to ... on my own, is really going to help with, it's more, you know, time spent rehearsing it, actually.

I mean, in my life, rehearsals don't usually last very long. So you don't get much of a ... I mean, I don't really like to rehearse too ... I don't like to rehearse people too much. I mean, with my music, you know, I don't really feel like I want to waste people's time, and my music is, like, not that precise so I can get away with it. But sometimes, you know, in some situations, it's good to be able to spend some time really, you know, playing, just to get a feel for what the form feels like. And if there's any kind of rhythmic issues in there that really, you know, things in there that

I haven't done before that I need to be able to get my head around. So that definitely happens. Yeah.

Yeah. And do you feel like you can kind of work through most of those rhythmic things?

Most of them. I'm sure there are some that have remained elusive to me, even on a gig and beyond. But for the most part, yeah. I mean, you know, I'm not a rhythm section player. It's not always as essential that I know what's going on. [Laughs]

I guess there is that element to it, like, playing a frontline instrument.

Hmm-hmm.

I'm wondering, like, are there any kind of situations that immediately come to mind of, like, rhythmic things or things with the form that you've had to kind of get through?

Oh, actually, you know what? I've got one harmonic one. The one time when I really kind of ended up stumped by harmony was with David Virelles the pianist, he brought this tune to a ... it was also kind of rhythmically messed up as well. And I thought that was going to be the main challenge, but then he had these solo sections written with this harmony that was kind of his

super-advanced, his own, like, super-advanced, like, sort of figured bass shorthand that was like, ... yeah, and how did it work? I don't remember but you would see, like, a note and then, like, a couple of numbers written above it, a bit like a figured bass. But it wasn't like, you know, like, 4/6 or whatever, which would be a second inversion with figured bass. It was something much more intense than that, like, each one of the corresponding notes also had, like, their own scale, or something that you were supposed to improvise with. And I just was, like, there's no ... I mean, I need, you know, sometimes you need a couple of hours with a tune to try to work out what it meant. With this one, I would have needed, like, six months. [Laughs] Because to be able to read the thing and to be able to instantly convert that into ...

So you know, so I did what probably most other people do, which is to just try to hear it and just kind of play semi-chromatically. You know, which is probably what I would have ended up doing even if I could read the stuff. It's what I end up doing a lot anyway.

Yeah, but in terms of ... yeah, I mean, oh, well, just last week, or the week before I did a gig here with a drummer called Josh Baldwin – do you know who that is?

Yep.

Yeah, so he had a tune called *Belvedere*, which, you know, is really hard. [Laughs] It's like, 3/4, 3/4, 5/4. So it's sort of like, you know, 3 + 3 + 3 + 2. It was a pretty fast tempo. And I found that,

you know, with the way that some of the figures moved, I found that, like, really disorienting for a minute, had to play it a few times. And even then, you know, by the time we got to the gig, we had a rehearsal, and then we got to the gig, and I was fine, I was playing it, I wasn't getting lost or anything, but I didn't feel very fluid.

I have a feeling that having not looked at it since, if I played it now, because, you know, sometimes it just takes time for things to percolate and to find, like, a footing in your mind. I think if I played it now, which I'm not going to because we don't have any other gigs, but I would probably be much better.

Interesting.

I often find that hard music you need to get ... I don't know why, I don't know what it is, but you can rehearse it as much as you want, which, you know, usually again, in my case, usually isn't ... it doesn't end up being that much. But you have to do a gig before you can play it properly.

Interesting. Do you have any theories as to why that is, like, is there something that happens for you?

Maybe it's just ... maybe the memory or something, maybe the experience of actually playing it when it matters, as it were, is just more informative than ... it's not like you can do a gig and then,

like, you then do a ... you keep playing after the gig's over and, like, you can play it ... there needs to be some distance. Yeah, I really don't know why that's the case. I mean, maybe if you didn't do the gig, the same thing would still happen.

You just did the rehearsal?

It's just that usually you don't do a rehearsal and then not do a gig, because why are you doing the rehearsal? So maybe that's what I mean. But maybe it's a bit of both, who knows.

Yeah, there's not really, like, a clear strategy for working it out. It's really just kind of spend some time ...

Spend some time, yeah.

... hear how it goes, and figure it out from there.

Yeah. But then with some other music, with music that doesn't necessarily pose any real technical challenges, then the way to prepare for it is just not to play it until the gig because you don't want to ... you don't want to, like, graft too many habits onto the way that you're specifically playing that tune. If you can play it, and if you can enjoy playing it, and if you can

make it sound good, then there's no point in, you know, in chipping away at that kind of sort of freshness, you know. Does that make sense?

That does make sense. Yeah. I'm wondering, like, getting away from that rhythmic thing a little, when we were talking before, you said you really like harmony, and that was something that you're really interested in. I'm wondering if maybe you have any strategies or ideas or things that you ... things that you do to, like, link up harmonies that aren't as familiar or aren't as maybe logical?

Yeah, I mean, I try to play them at the piano, and I try to ... well, first of all, if they're really puzzling me, I'll ask the composer, like, “How do you hear this because right now it just sounds really random to me. How can you help me hear what, you know, the way that it's supposed to work?” And that's usually sort of a voice leading thing. But I'll try to play it on the piano, I'll try to play it the way that I would try to play a standard. So again, like, focusing on the smooth voice leading, and just try to hear it and try to have that sound sort of become more and more familiar with me so that when I'm improvising, I don't have to be thinking chord tones. I can just think sounds instead, right?

When you say sounds, what do you mean?

Well, you know what a ii – V – I sounds like, right?

Yeah.

So when I play a ii – V – I … I mean, you will hear some chord tone-based stuff come out some of the time, maybe 50 percent of the time, maybe 25, maybe 75, I don't know. But, you know, like, sort of arpeggios and approach tones and stuff like that, you will hear that stuff from me. But a lot of the time, I'm not thinking about the chords, I'm not thinking about the chord tones, because it's just such a familiar sound that I don't need to. And I'm trying to think horizontally, instead of trying to think what's a melody that I can play that works with the sound that I am familiar with and comfortable with. So I'm going to get as close to that point as I can with the, you know, harmony that works in a different way. So, sitting at the piano, playing the chords, and just becoming familiar with the sound

With the sound of the actual chord?

Yeah. Well, with the sound of the progression, yeah.

And then correct me if I'm wrong, but then, from what you just said, it then sounds like when you're actually trying to play and improvise with that, you're maybe thinking about other sounds that work with that?

Well, I'm trying to think about ... I'm trying to internalise and familiarise myself with the progression so that I can then think about not individual sounds or notes or anything that works with that chord, but instead think about a linear melody. And I know, you know, like, I know from my ear, where the melody has to go to complement the harmony or comply with the harmony or whatever.

But instead of, like, just building every chord that you get to just, like, building something from the ground up on that chord, instead of trying to, you know, instead of doing that, try to find something that navigates you through, which is hard to do if you can't, you know, if you can't hear it. So the goal is to be able ... I mean, the ultimate goal is to make one of the progressions someone's given me, you know, to make it as familiar as if I was playing *All the Things You Are* or something, you know.

And I don't think about the chords when I'm playing *All the Things You* Are. I mean, of course, the first, like, 200 times I played it, I was thinking a lot about the chords, but you know, and the more music you ... I mean, the more standards that you learn, the easier it is to learn standards. I mean, it sounds like the most obvious thing, but the easier it is to learn standards and the easier it is to play standards.

So for example, you know, like, if you meet somebody who ... if you meet somebody who knows, like, you know, 300 tunes, but for some reason, doesn't know, *Autumn Leaves* or something, they're going to play *Autumn Leaves* if someone asks them to play it. They’re going

to play it much better than someone who knows *Autumn Leaves* really well but doesn't know any other tunes because they know what those progressions sound and feel like and they can instinctively ... they just need to hear the progression once and then they're off to the races. Whereas the other person is just very much bound to their interpretation of that one progression. I mean, obviously, those two people don't exist, but you get what I mean?

Yeah, it's a relevant hypothetical.

Yeah.

So it sounds like a lot of that harmonic logic for you comes through playing the piano?

Yeah.

Is there any specific stuff you've done on the saxophone or not so much?

Saxophone's not a good instrument for working on harmony. Because the only way you can ... well, not the only way, of course, there are ways, and I'm trying to work out what they are all the time. But, you know, the most obvious way to do that is to go for the vertical.

Yeah, build from the bottom up. Or vice versa.

Or top down or, like, middle out or whatever. But you know, still it's ... in order to be able to hear the harmony explicitly in what you're playing, especially if it's something that you're playing for the first time, you really need to, like, outline that stuff. And it can be done. But when you have a piano, like, why would you bother? [Laughs] I mean, I actually don't have a piano, I'm borrowing a keyboard, but you know what I mean. Yeah. So without being able to play piano, my saxophone playing would be just unrecognisable, I think.

Cool. Moving away from the harmonic stuff for a bit, then, can we come back to the rhythmic stuff? And I'm wondering, like, so you kind of said that the rhythmic things or kind of peculiar forms, generally, are more challenging than harmonic situations?

Yeah.

When you're playing through something like that ...

Let me just clarify, they're more likely to present a challenge that's going to require some, you know, some homework.

Sure. Yeah. That makes sense. That's an important distinction. Are there any things that you're thinking about or that you're trying to do while you're playing something like that that is quite challenging?

Well, look, I mean, it depends a lot on what the thing is. I mean, I'm trying to, you know, I'm trying to get to the point, right, where I can think in as large units of time as possible. So, in a blues, for example, you know, you're hearing a chorus. So you're hoping to hear a chorus at a time, like, as one pulse, one part of the pulse, one big thing. And with a standard often, like, you're trying to hear in eight-bar sections, but with a tune that's made of some kind of weird, like, compound time signature, like, you know, mixed meters, whatever, it's really hard to do that.

Yeah, the example from before, like, the 3 + 3 + 5 or something.

Yeah, so the example before, you know, at least you can think in, like, alternating things. So think of a six and think of a five. And then you want to play that enough so that you can then just think of the whole compound thing. And there's this weird sort of area that you inhabit between having to completely separate it and having it down, which is that there's a lot of second-guessing. Because it starts to get easier, and when it starts to get easier, that's when you start to think, oh, well, I must be doing it right because this was hard. And that's when you sort of, like, start to balls up again. And then hopefully at the point where you can just feel the whole measure of whatever that'll be, 11, and you don't want to be counting anymore because if you do, then you're getting too into the weeds again.

So that's what I'm trying to do. So sorry, what was the question?

The question was about just how you try and get through that. The thing I'm interested in is, like, getting from that point of unfamiliarity, and then how you try and get to the point where you feel like you can feel these units in bigger ...

Yeah, and then I'll try to feel ... then I'll try to sort of imagine, like, figures in those pulses, in those time signatures, sort of the equivalent of, like, you know, a riff, like, in 4/4, right? So, if you just did 4/4 and you're going, [sings a melody] sort of between a riff and a clave, right, so just kind of little bits of glue to help you stick to the thing. You know, we can do so many of those without thinking about it in time signatures that we're comfortable in. So you have to then try to ... so one, two, three, two, two, [sings a melody], something like that. But try to make them have as little detail in them as possible so that they can be longer and you don't get, you know, again, like, you can put the magnifying glass away and pan out.

Kind of, like, deliberately make them obscure so they don't outline ...

No, not obscure.

No?

No, just sort of open.

Sure. Not too much stuff going on.

Yeah, exactly. And then maybe I'll try to feel other note values. So [sings a melody]. Sorry, first I did five. [Sings a melody]. So I'm just doing half notes over that whole thing, or dotted quarter notes [sings a melody]. That resolved properly. So that kind of thing. Yeah, just to, like, increase the angles and the, you know, without the security.

And then, you know, and then it just becomes a pulse like any other, becomes a ... not quite like any other because then you have, you know, then you're aware that you play your lines. You know, if you're playing 8th note lines, obviously, they're not going to resolve in the same way that they would but, you know, in this tune, this particular tune, the harmony was really fiddly as well. So it's like, you know, there's ... you sort of have to kind of cut your losses and just be, like, [laughs], "Okay, I'm not going to play the greatest solo I've ever played on this tune but I'm going to get through it," and that, just getting through, it's going to have enough interest, because it's kind of unusual enough to add up to something cool.

Yeah, you've got this, like, interesting harmony, and you've got this rhythmic stuff going on. So just kind of getting through it is enough, in some cases.

Yeah.

Cool. I think the last thing I want to ask before we wrap up is, like, obviously, throughout your career, you've recorded a lot of music with a lot of people, and a lot of original music, like, a fairly broad array of things. Do you feel like there's any things that you've done or any particular skills that helped prepare you for that diversity of situations?

I mean, honestly, I would love to say something profound right now, but honestly, like, just doing it as much as possible, like, playing people's music, and dealing with, you know, the way ... dealing with the idiosyncrasies of the way that people write things, and coping with that, you know, and the fact that it's not necessarily the way that you would have done it.

But, I mean, I think ... yeah, I would say this, it's really helpful if you're a sideman playing other people's music, it's really helpful if you have also written music and had other sidemen play your music so that you have the perspective of what that's like, and vice versa. I mean, it's actually much more common, I guess, that you'll have ... well, maybe not, but, you know, there are people who write music and have people perform it who don't really work as sidemen. And that can be ... that can, you know, create issues, I would say. You know, if you don't really understand what it's like to be trying to play someone else's music and make it sound good, then you don't ... maybe don't have the vocabulary or the patience or whatever it is that it takes to help people do that.

But, yeah, I mean, just, you know, a bit like the sort of silly analogy with the two people, you know, and the amount of standards that they know, the more original music you're going to play, you play, the more ready you'll be for whatever comes to you next.

Yeah, I mean, that's a good comparison. It makes a lot of sense to me. That's what I've personally found challenging about it. It's, like, you can prepare to play standards, and lots of lots of things kind of look the same between tunes, lots of shared material, and then within the realm of what people write, it all can look kind of radically different.

Yeah. Yeah.

But by the sounds of it, it's just ... or what's worked for you is just kind of as much exposure to it as you can possibly have.

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, and, you know, the more you do it, the more ... the higher your comfort level when you're doing it, too, because, like, nothing is going to be a hundred percent familiar, and you're always going to do things that you wish had come out differently, whatever, but you need to have a certain kind of equilibrium. And, you know, you need to be relaxed to an extent when you're dealing with difficult music, and the more you've done it, the easier that is, I guess.

Yeah, yeah, that definitely makes sense. That's kind of how it works, hey?

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, there's no secrets in there really.

Cool. Well, that's all I kind of wanted to ask. Is there anything you felt you wanted to add on to anything or ...

I don't think so.

Reference List

Baynes, Mark Edward. 2015. "Analytic, decriptive, and prescriptive components of evolving jazz: A new model based on the works of Brad Mehldau." Doctor of Musical Arts, The University of Auckland.

Berkowitz, Aaron L. 2012. "The improvising mind: Cognition and creativity in the musical moment." *Empirical Musicological Review* 7: 164-166.

Gold, Michael J. 1995. "The jazz improvisations of the tenor saxophonist Warne Marsh: An eclectic analysis." Doctor of Philosophy, Department of Jazz and Contemporary Music, New York University.

Huron, David. 2006. *Sweet Anticipation, Music and the Psycology of Expectation*. The MIT Press.

Kernfeld, Barry Dean. 1981. "Adderley, Coltrane, and Davis at the twilight of bebop: the search for melodic coherence (1958-59)." volumes I and II doctor of philosophy, Faculty of Graduate School, Cornell University.

Love, Stefan C. 2012. "“Possible Paths”: Schemata of Phrasing and Melody in Charlie Parker’s Blues." *Society for Music Theory* 18 (Number 3).

McKnight, Mark. 2012. "Contemporary jazz guitar performance: perspectives on the development of improvisational language." PhD, University of Ulster.

Oehlers, Jamie. 2012. Take Me Away From Here. In *Smoke and Mirrors*: Jazzhead.

---. 2021. Interview. edited by Tom Walsh.

Owens, Thomas. 1974. "Charlie Parker: Techniques of Improvisation." Doctor of Philosophy in Music, University of California.

Parncutt, Robert & Hair, Graham. 2011. "Consonance and dissonance in theory and psychology: Disentangling dissonant dichotomies." *Journal of Interdisciplinary Music Studies* 5: 119-166.

Robertson, Benjamin I R. 2016. "What happens next? Imaginative presence in Gary Peacock and Lee

Konitz: Divergent fields, audiation, and the unexpected." Doctor of Philosophy, Australian National University.

Smith, Hazel, and Roger T. Dean. 2009. *Practice-led research, research-led practice in the creative arts*.*Research Methods for the Arts and Humanities.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Smith III, Walter. 2010. Capital Wasteland. In *III*: Criss Cross Jazz.

---. 2014. July. In *Still Casual*: Whirlwind Recordings.

---. 2021. Interview. edited by Tom Walsh. Appendix B.

Stehr, Max W. 2016. "Birds's words and Lennie's lessons:

using or avoiding patterns in bebop." Doctor of Musical Arts, Grafuate College, University of Nebraska.

Thomas, David R. 2006. "A General Inductive Approach for Analyzing Qualitative Evaluation Data." *American Journal of Evaluation* Vol. 27 (No. 2).

Vinson, Will. 2008. Albemarle. In *Promises*: Nineteen-Eight Records.

---. 2016. Upside. In *Perfectly Out Of Place*: 5Passion.

---. 2021. Interview. edited by Tom Walsh. Appendix C.

Vonfoerster, R. 2012. "Metric dissonance and hypermeter in the chamber music of Gabriel Faure." PhD, University of Colorado.

Waters, Keith. 2011. *The studio recordings of the Miles Davis Quintet, 1965-68.Oxford studies in recorded jazz*. New York City: Oxford University Press.

White, Arthur Lynn. 2008. "Joe Henderson: An Analysis of Harmony in Selected Compositions and Improvisations." Doctor of Musical Arts, Graduate School, University of North Carolina.

Williams, James Kent. 1982. "Themes composed by jazz musicians of the bebop era: A study of harmony, rhythm and melody. (volumes I and II)." Doctor of Philosophy, School of Music, Indianna University.

Williams, Thomas. 2017. "Strategy in contemporary jazz improvisation: Theory and practice." Doctor of Philosophy, Department of Music and Media, University of Surrey.

Yorgason, B. 2009. "Expressive asynchrony and meter: A study of dispersal, downbeat space, and metric drift." PhD, Indiana University.

Discography

Akinmusire. Ambrose. 2017. Milky Pete. On *A Rift in Decorum: Live at the Village Vanguard*: Blue Note.

Baldwin, Joshua. 2021. Belvedere. On *Rockpools*: Utopian State.

Coltrane, John. 1964. Acknowledgement. On *A Love Supreme*: Impulse.

Davis, Miles. 1958. Milestones. On *Milestones*: Columbia.

Davis, Miles. 1959. Flamenco Sketches. On *Kind of Blue*: Columbia.

Davis, Miles. 1959. So What. On *Kind of Blue*: Columbia.

Davis, Miles. 1968. Pinocchio. On *Nefertiti*: Columbia.

Grabowsky, Paul. 2004. Silverland. On *Tales of Time and Space*: Besant Hall Records.

Henderson, Joe. 1963. Recordame. On *Page One*: Blue Note.

Henderson, Joe. 1966. Inner Urge. On *Inner Urge*: Blue Note.

Henderson, Joe. 1969. Black Narcissus. On *Power to the People*: Milestone.

Konitz, L. 1988. Everybody's Song But My Own. On *The New York Album*: Soul Note.

Oehlers, J. 2012. Take Me Away From Here. On *Smoke and Mirrors*: Jazzhead.

Parker, C. 1948. Perhaps. On *Charlie Parker's All Stars*: Savoy Records.

Vinson, W. 2008. Albemarle. On *Promises*: Nineteen-Eight Records.

Vinson, W. 2016. Upside. On *Perfectly Out Of Place*: 5Passion.

Smith III, W. 2010. Capital Wasteland. On *III*: Criss Cross Jazz.

Smith III, W. 2014. July. On *Still Casual*: Whirlwind Recordings.