

**Thomas Owens. *Bebop: The Music and the Players*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. xvi, 323 pp.**

*Reviewed by Robert Rawlins*

The past 50 years have witnessed the publication of a large and growing body of jazz literature. Numerous books and articles have appeared in the areas of jazz biography, discography, history, and sociology. Generations of famous jazz writers have come and gone, some having achieved greater recognition than many jazz musicians themselves. Certainly, anyone with a rudimentary knowledge of jazz is familiar with names such as Leonard Feather, Ira Gitler, Gunther Schuller, and Nat Shapiro. Yet, in this vast collection of literature, the realm of jazz theory and analysis has, until recent years, been under-represented. Comparatively little had been written that directly addressed the concrete musical elements and theoretical underpinnings of the music. It was as if the mysteries of improvisation were deemed impenetrable, or perhaps too sacred to be reduced to formulae and convention. In recent years this situation has changed, as an increasing number of scholars have begun to examine the improvisations of jazz masters at close range in order to discern their methods and define in concrete terms the parameters that differentiate the various jazz styles.

Thomas Owens's *Bebop: The Music and the Players* attempts to explicate the improvisatory style that many feel lies at the very core of the jazz tradition. Observing that bebop is alive and well in the 1990s, having flourished in each of the past five decades, he deems it "the *lingua franca* of jazz, serving as the principal musical language of thousands of jazz musicians" (4). As Owens observes, the bebop style, far from a mannered expression of a particular period, is an ongoing force in the jazz world, influencing the continuing evolution of the music, as well as the way many present-day musicians reinterpret pre-bebop idioms. In short, it is the parent language of jazz, a mother tongue whose grammar is familiar to jazz musicians around the world, even when their chosen modes of expression outwardly suggest other jazz styles.

Historically, the term "bebop" generally refers to the jazz style that thrived in New York City during the late 1940s and early 1950s. The style grew out of the experiments of a small group of musicians led by Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie and provided the springboard for several other styles that quickly evolved from it, such as cool jazz, Afro-Cuban jazz, and hard bop. Understood in this light, the style was short-lived, holding pre-eminence in the jazz world for less than a decade. But Owens's concept of bebop, which is in accord with how present-day musicians generally use

the term, implies something more than a historical style period, for bebop also refers to a general approach to the basic materials of jazz that has not been substantially altered since Charlie Parker. The word "bebop" has become synonymous with the jazz musician's concept of playing "straight-ahead."

For example, Owens has no qualms about including a substantial discussion of Stan Getz in a book that purportedly concerns bebop. Yet at the time of Getz's emergence as a young jazz star, he was considered a prominent figure in the cool jazz movement, which was seen as a reaction to bebop. From the vantage point of the 1990s, it is now clear that the harmonic language of classic recordings such as Getz's Storyville sessions of 1951 differs little from the work of Parker and Gillespie, no matter how much superficial characteristics may suggest otherwise. When a jazz musician of today improvises in a similar fashion, the result is called bebop, regardless of the prevailing stylistic setting.

Two elements that have characterized bebop since its inception are the direct quotation of recognizable material and strict dependence of the improvised line on the underlying harmony.<sup>1</sup> The inclusion of highly recognizable excerpts from various sources was very much a part of Charlie Parker's improvisational style. Once his classic recordings became well known among jazz fans, his own tunes and solos in turn became prime material for quotation by himself and others. Likewise, linear constructions that strongly imply specific harmonies characterized much of Charlie Parker's work. His technique of specifying substitute harmonies and "turn-arounds" via the improvised line was revolutionary indeed. Documented accounts reveal that piano and bass players were accustomed to listening intently to Parker's improvisations in order to discern the harmonies suggested by his lines. Surprisingly, however, Parker and other bebop improvisers seldom stated chords in a direct fashion. "Running the changes," does not imply direct arpeggiation of the chords. The essence of what Parker had discovered was a means of conveying clear harmonic implications via a rapidly moving, well-contoured melodic line. It was inevitable that others who adopted this approach would create improvisations that bore a superficial resemblance to Parker's. Yet those who mastered and applied this method after Parker should be viewed as adhering to the tenets of a valid style system, not merely imitating Parker.

In the first three chapters of the book, Owens attempts to explicate the "rhythmic, melodic, harmonic, textural, and timbral elements" (viii) that make up the bebop vocabulary. Beginning with the historical foundations of the style in chapter 1, he moves on to the early classics in chapter 2, and devotes the entirety of chapter 3 to "The Parker Style," emphasizing the alto saxophonist's position as the central role model of bebop. Chapters 3

through 9 discuss performers—grouped according to instruments—while chapter 10 discusses the great ensembles of bebop history. Finally, chapter 11 discusses young musicians of promise who are likely to become bebop's leading figures in the next century.

Perhaps there is good reason why many jazz commentators have scrupulously avoided concrete descriptions of jazz styles. While there is general agreement on the chronological arrangement of the various style periods, and even on which performers belong to which period, there is no similar consensus concerning the musical parameters that define and characterize the various styles. Thus Owens makes several statements in the early chapters of his book that are bound to raise eyebrows and pose more questions than are answered. He begins with a description of the swing style of the 1930s and 1940s as a take-off point for bebop. This seems a logical approach, but Owens goes on to contrast the swing style of the big bands with the combo style of early bebop. Owens says of swing: "often the arrangements left only short and discontinuous passages for solo improvisations" (though he does cite the Basie band as an exception), while bebop emphasized improvisation at the expense of the arrangements, which were "simpler than the often intricate arrangements of swing bands" (4). One might ask why bebop should not be seen as derivative of the small-band swing style of the 1930s instead of the big-band style. It should be noted that many of the Charlie Parker/Dizzy Gillespie quintet's early bebop arrangements, which are represented by some of the first recordings of the bebop style, were ingeniously conceived and executed, extending well beyond the basic tune-solos-tune scheme that prevailed in so many earlier (and later) small-band recordings. Owens himself comments on the complexity of various early bebop classics, such as *Koko* and *Salt Peanuts*. One might mention that the post-swing (and bebop-influenced) big bands, such as the Woody Herman and Stan Kenton organizations, also emphasized arrangements over solo work, leading to the conclusion that highly-structured arrangements are a characteristic of large-ensemble jazz of any type, not only of swing. In sum, it would be erroneous to assert that bebop musicians employed simpler arrangements than their swing predecessors for aesthetic reasons. Rather, early bebop arrangements displayed a level of structure and intricacy that met or exceeded expectations for a small-group format.

Owens considers Charlie Parker's musical vocabulary the "central point of reference" for his study of bebop. Few would take exception to this approach. Parker's method of phrasing, his conception of harmony, and his repertory of melodic devices and conventions are more closely associated with the bebop style than those of any other musician. In an effort to better understand Parker's improvisational procedures, Owens identifies

and categorizes several of Parker's "favorite figures," which formulate part of his "personal repertory of melodic formulas" (30). These figures contain as few as three to as many as a dozen or more notes and are meticulously grouped into categories based on similarities. The families of patterns do indeed appear to capture the smallest building blocks of Parker's linear constructions, but beyond this, it is not clear what conclusions are to be drawn. While Owens admits that pointing out certain of these figures is "rather like pointing out the frequent use of some common prepositions in literary works," he nevertheless believes they are "important components of the language" (32). Owens is able to trace the origins of some of the figures back to the swing era or to specific jazz or popular compositions. Addressing the issue of why a jazz musician should rely on prepared material, Owens explains that "no one can create fluent, coherent melodies in real time without having a well-rehearsed bag of melodic tricks ready" (30). This may be true, but it does not get at the real reason for the apparent repetitions in Parker's music. The melodic shapes preferred by Parker were largely driven by harmonic requirements, which severely limited his choice of materials. An essential characteristic of the bebop style is that the linear component—the improvisation—drives the harmonic element.

For example, in discussing one of Parker's simpler formulas, three notes descending chromatically, Owens mentions that the figure is part of the "bebop dominant scale" as well as the "bebop major scale" (32), but fails to suggest any reason why Parker gravitated toward this device, other than to imply that he liked its characteristic sound. The bebop dominant scale is a descending Mixolydian mode with a half-step inserted between the root and the seventh. The bebop major scale is a descending major scale with a half step inserted between the sixth and fifth.<sup>2</sup> In each instance the inserted chromatic tone serves a specific purpose. When constructing a descending linear passage on a dominant seventh chord it is necessary that the improviser insert the extra note in order to throw the metrical stress on the seventh, fifth, and third of the chord. To simply play a descending Mixolydian mode on a dominant chord stresses all the wrong notes (6̂, 4̂, and 2̂). Likewise, inserting a b6̂ into a descending major scale stresses the sixth, fifth, and third. If the line is to imply the harmony (not just conform to it) these changes are necessary. Certainly there are other ways to imply the same chords with descending lines, but these straightforward approaches were discovered by Parker early on, and he continued to use them because they implied the harmony in a simple and direct way.

A statistical compilation of musical figures with comments on frequency of occurrence, origins, and placement offers a tantalizing presentation of the building blocks of Parker's music but does not go far enough in

explaining Parker's improvisational choices. A discussion of bebop harmony, the constraints it placed on Parker's choices, and the harmonic implications suggested by Parker's typical phrases would have been helpful. Perhaps a smaller number of figures presented in actual context would have facilitated such a discussion.

A nagging issue throughout the book is Owens's frequent reference to players who "copied Parker's style." Owens is not just talking about second-rate artists who failed to fully master the bebop idiom. A statement such as "the recorded evidence suggests that [Sonny] Stitt copied Parker" (46) is bound to invite controversy. Disregarding the issue, for the moment, of which performer captured the style first, there is no justification for viewing stylistic conformity as "copying." It is true that Stitt's 1946 recordings "contained very little that Parker had not already played" (46), but a myopic view of musical fragments is bound to lead to such a conclusion. In 1946, the nascent bebop style was still in its earliest stage of development, with a mere handful of participants. The repertory of bebop conventions and norms was extremely small at this time. Parker and Stitt were two of the first saxophone players to master a style system that was still confined to a limited supply of gestures. It was inevitable that they should sound alike.

At times Owens seems to share the view that the act of creative improvisation resides in assembling musical figures, not inventing them. At other times he suggests that the repetition of common devices is "copying" and therefore contrary to the intentions of improvisation:

In his earliest recordings Stitt did not copy any of Parker's solos, or even any complete phrases from Parker's solos. Instead, he internalized the components of Parker's vocabulary and used them spontaneously to meet the improvising challenges of each piece. But in his 1949 recording of *Hot House*, Stitt quotes verbatim from Parker's famous recording of 1945. And his 1964 recording of *Koko* on the album *Stitt Plays Bird* shows clearly that he had studied his role model's work—a fact that is hardly surprising, in view of the album's premise (47).

That Stitt studied Parker's work diligently is a certainty. Although it happens, it is highly unusual for musicians to ignore the work of predecessors and contemporaries working within the same style system. Furthermore, it is not surprising that Stitt should quote verbatim from Parker's work. He (and every bebop musician) quoted verbatim from many sources. Bebop thrives on a common language of shared conventions and common devices. A good deal of the material of bebop is referential in nature,

alluding to past recordings, popular songs, classical compositions, and other sources. As specific devices and phrases were repeated through the years, their tendency to be recognized—and therefore their expressive potential—increased. Phrases such as the opening line of Parker's *Cool Blues*, the beginning of Grainger's *Country Gardens*, and "Evening Star" from *Tannhäuser* became, apparently for arbitrary reasons, staples of the bebop vocabulary. Improvisers resorted to them on countless occasions, not out of desperation or lack of fresh ideas, but for their referential value. Of course Stitt's solos are interlarded with direct quotations from Charlie Parker's solos, for Parker's solos established the core of the common language. Much of the richness of bebop lies in the quotation of recognizable material. If Stitt had chosen to omit the Parker quotations from his solos, an important element of the expressive content would have been removed.

It is disconcerting that in a book that champions bebop as the *lingua franca* of the jazz world, the author should invite rather than ward off the tiresome charge that the style is laden with cliché and hackneyed formulae. The bebop musician relies heavily on the listener's expectation system. He knows through experience what the listener has heard, what the listener will expect, and what the listener will recognize. This knowledge on the part of the improviser is made more acute through the environment in which most jazz is performed. Jazz often takes place in small clubs where the audience is physically close to the performer and not at all reticent in its reactions to the music. A performer who quotes a conspicuous passage from a recorded jazz classic expects it to be identified. If Stitt quotes a complete phrase from a Parker solo in one of his own improvisations, it must be viewed as a deliberate and overt reference to a well-known work, not a furtive attempt to borrow without attribution.

The large central portion of Owens's book consists of discussions of bebop musicians grouped by instrument, and throughout these discussions it is apparent that he is highly suspicious of "recycled material" in jazz. Nowhere is this more obvious than in his discussion of John Coltrane. Borrowing a phrase from Barry Kernfeld, Owens believes that Coltrane's late 1950s work, which some musicians believe to be the height of his achievement, followed a "mechanical formulaic" approach to improvisation (95). He refers to, among other things, Coltrane's incessant use of the  $\hat{1}-\hat{2}-\hat{3}-\hat{5}$  scale pattern in his improvisations. Unfortunately, Owens does not attempt to explain why this figure (which is surely too brief to be called a cliché) was so integral to Coltrane's work. The figure is nothing more than the beginning of a major scale with the fourth omitted. Coltrane was capitalizing on the fact that this figure, when begun on the root of a major chord, places the first and third of the chord on the downbeat,

while omitting the active fourth degree from the line. From a harmonic point of view, a four-note pattern that proceeds  $\hat{1}-\hat{2}-\hat{3}-\hat{4}$  has its forward momentum checked by the tendency for the fourth to reverse direction and return to the third. The  $\hat{1}-\hat{2}-\hat{3}-\hat{5}$  pattern avoids this tendency, leaving open more possibilities for continuation. In 1959, Coltrane recorded *Giant Steps* and *Countdown*, two numbers that exploited this figure extensively, demonstrating new possibilities in spelling rapidly moving harmonies via the improvised line. (Owens refers to these solos as “masterfully-presented, well-planned etudes” [98], an appellation taken from Ekkehard Jost’s *Free Jazz*.) Since that time, this pattern has become one of the central approaches to ascending bebop linear constructions, as well as a corollary to the descending bebop scale.

Owens’s discussion of early Coltrane seems to proceed from the assumption that the latter’s early style was merely a precursor to more fully-developed processes that would not blossom until the early 1960s. This may be true. But Coltrane’s later style could hardly be called bebop. So why does Owens hail Coltrane’s abandonment of bebop as a breakthrough in a book that claims bebop as its theme?

The breakthrough piece of this type [i.e., pieces that do not use constantly changing chords] for Coltrane was the famous *So What* from the monumentally important Miles Davis Sextet album, *Kind of Blue*. . . . Here for the first time formulaic improvisation takes a back seat, replaced almost entirely by discrete motives spun out over segments of this piece’s structure (D Dorian for 16 measures, E $\flat$  Dorian for 8, D Dorian for 8) (96).

Unquestionably, *Kind of Blue* stands as a hallmark in the history of jazz. The importance of this album cannot be overstated, since it opened the way for an entirely new approach to jazz improvisation, *and one that clearly departed from the bebop style*. It would be futile to argue that a tune that employs modal harmonies for eight to sixteen measures at a stretch is somehow an extension of bebop, no matter how steeped in the bebop tradition the performers were. This recording clearly looks toward the future. A few years later, Coltrane “became a post-bebop player, as he grew increasingly interested and involved in the harmonic freedom, flexible rhythms, and intense collective improvisation used by Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman, Archie Shepp, Eric Dolphy, Pharoah Sanders, and others” (99). Yet Coltrane’s bebop period, which by Owens’s own admission “added significantly to the possibilities open to bebop soloists” (88), contains a monumental contribution to the recorded jazz literature. From this vantage point, it is puzzling that Owens denigrates Coltrane’s early approach

to improvisation as "mechanical formulaic" and applauds his ultimate rejection of bebop.

Owens, at times, seems reluctant to accept bebop on its own terms. His discussion of Stitt, one of the most fluent of saxophone players after Parker who remained rooted in the bebop tradition, clearly implies that his work is derivative of, and therefore inferior to, Parker's. Bud Powell, colleague of Parker and father of bebop piano, is quixotically called "one of Bird's children" with the accusation that he copied Parker and "borrowed heavily" from Art Tatum (146). Clifford Brown discovered ingenious ways to reduce bebop lines to tight, compact figures suitable to the trumpet and executed them with amazing speed and agility. However, Owens seems embarrassed that "Brown based his melodic ideas on the common stock of bebop figures," and insists that "his genius lay more in how he played, than in what he played" (131). Tenor saxophonist Dexter Gordon, with his uncanny knack for playing just what the listener wants to hear when it is least expected, is criticized for imbuing some of his solos with "too many tune quotations and predictable phrases" (77).

In spite of Owens's readiness to depreciate recordings or approaches that do not conform to his conception of jazz improvisation, his discussion of the dozens of musicians who have contributed to the bebop style is thorough and well-documented. Individual chapters give historical overviews grouped by instrument, typically beginning with a contemporary of Parker's and ending with a performer who remains active today. For example, the chapter on trumpet players begins with Gillespie and ends with Freddie Hubbard and discusses a dozen or so trumpet players, with particular attention given to Miles Davis and Clifford Brown. The book is well-stocked with musical examples, generally one- or two-measure figures that are meant to reveal some of the musicians' favorite devices or patterns. Unfortunately, many of these are presented without harmony or surrounding context, offering little insight into the improviser's linear/harmonic intentions.

That Owens has provided a well-researched and informative survey of the bebop style is beyond question. My reservations stem from the author's patent misgivings regarding the conventional formulae and utilitarian devices that constitute in part the very fabric of the style. One cannot expect from bebop that which it cannot offer, and as much as the word "improvisation" may suggest otherwise, *this* style of jazz thrives on the recycling, repetition, and reorganization of a wealth of devices. In the last analysis, bebop must be accepted on its own terms, but perhaps Owens's study should also be accepted on its own terms. His idealistic view of jazz improvisation merely reflects a common opinion that has held sway among jazz audiences and performers alike, despite the recorded evidence. In the

end, he has succeeded in compiling a wealth of material on bebop and its major performers, and in so doing he has made a significant contribution to the jazz literature.

*Notes*

1. For a systematic study of the basic materials of the bebop language, see Baker, who observes that jazz styles predating bebop can be distinguished by a "lack of unanimity with regard to the use of melodic chromaticism" (1985:1). A thorough discussion of the use of prepared material in jazz can be found in Berliner (1994:227-30).

2. My use of these terms is in accord with the descriptions given in Baker (1985: 1-2, 12-14).

*References*

- Baker, David. 1985. *How to Play Bebop*. Vol. 1. Van Nuys, California: Alfred Publishing Co.
- Berliner, Paul F. 1994. *Thinking in Jazz*. The University of Chicago Press.