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Wayne Shorter and the 12-bar blues form

ABSTRACT

Background

The 12 bar blues form has always been an important tool in jazz. However, until now there hasn't been much analysis done as to how this form relates to the original compositions by jazz musicians and composers, among which includes the saxophonist Wayne Shorter (b. 1933). This is especially the case when the characteristic elements of the blues are not clearly perceivable in the foreground.

Aims and repertoire studied

Wayne Shorter's compositions are characterized by stretching conventional forms as well as bending traditional harmony, all bound together by a rhythmical persuasive melody. The standard 12-bar blues form is characterized by its three corresponding phrases and basic harmonic plan. The uncomplicated nature of the blues form seems to contradict with the modernity of Shorter's compositions.

The ternary form is the most important characteristic of the blues. The three phrases of usually four bars can correspond to each other as statement, restatement (with repeat, variation or sequence) and conclusion. This appears most clearly in the riff-style blues in which a relatively short motif is repeated in the second and third phrase to complete the standard 12-bar form. The melody can also be through-composed in a sense that the three phrases are similar because of motivic and rhythmic relationship. The harmony in the statement section is based on the tonic function in the major tonality. The restatement section begins on the subdominant and returns to the tonic function. In the conclusion section the final cadence can be standard or varied, resolving to the tonic function. The use of the traditional three blue notes create tension inside the major harmony and provide the typical 'bluesy' feeling in the melody. The minor third (b3) and minor seventh (b7) can be regarded as an influence of the parallel minor tonality. The third blue note, the flatted fifth, is the only one non-diatonic to major or minor.

The first two blues pieces by Wayne Shorter were recorded in 1961 when he was a member of Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers. The piece *The Backsliders* has a regular structure of twelve bars with a very bluesy riff-like melody. The harmony though displays in the second phrase a different dominant seventh chord in bar 5 and 7 then expected conform to the harmonic function in these bars. This results in four descending parallel dominant 7th chords blurring the main key. The absence of the tonic chord in bars 7-8 and the turn around harmony in bars 11-12 is similar to Benny Golson's *Blues March* (1958). Another characteristic of Shorter's compositional style is the use of a 'false' sequence. The melody in bar 5-6 seems to be sequenced in the next two bars but the melody is not strictly a sequens. The melodic sequence seems to be independent of its harmony. This phenomenon is also described by Steven Strunk (2003).

The piece *Tell it Like it Is* has a regular twelve bar length but with two different melodies played consecutively in the opening theme. The first melody of twelve bars is in the minor tonality and the second starts in the parallel major and ends again in parallel minor tonality. The use of the minor tonality for the blues structure is somewhat problematic. Firstly the traditional blue note tension has disappeared: the flatted third and seventh are scalewise now in minor. Secondly, what chords should be used in order to state the three harmonic functions? Until the mid 1950s the 'minor blues' was a mere curiosity, not a mainstream practice.

The next two blues pieces were recorded in 1964 by Wayne Shorter as a band leader for his first two albums for the Blue Note label. The first piece is *Charcoal Blues*, a twelve bar riff melody merely based on the three-chord blues. To underline the 'old' type of blues, Shorter uses the V-IV-I as a final cadence. The harmony though displays in bar 8 a secondary dominant to go to the II-V-I progression, a feature also known from Coltrane's *Bessie's Blues*, recorded only two days earlier than *Charcoal Blues*. Furthermore, the melody of *Charcoal Blues* displays the perfect fourth as a dissonant on the tonic and dominant chord. This creates a bluesy sound without using the traditional three blues notes. The second blues in 1964 is *Twelve more Bars to go*. This is a regular twelve bar riff-like blues with irregular harmony. The melody is reminiscent of Miles Davis' recording of *Freelander*. The harmony is built on dominant sus4 chords, a feature known from John Coltrane's blues *Mr. Day* (released in 1962). The distinctive 'Wayne Shorter' element is the final cadence, stressing one more time the feeling of 'backward' motion in the harmonic progression.

In 1966 Wayne Shorter recorded two blues pieces for the same album, *Adam's Apple* (the title track) and *Footprints*. The latter was again recorded by Miles Davis' Quintet (including Shorter) in the same year. *Adam's Apple* features a new rhythm feel ('boogaloo') in combination with a 24-bar length in which every phrase is doubled to eight bars ('double blues'). The atmosphere of *Adam's Apple* resembles Lee Morgan's blues piece *The Sidewinder* (released in 1964) which became a hit among a broader audience. The melody of *Adam's Apple* is based on a strict AAB riff. The second phrase is harmonized with an alternative subdominant chord, enhancing the boogaloo feel with smooth parallel progression. The final cadence begins with a minor seventh on I, starting a II-V sequence to return again to the major tonic. The second one is the minor blues *Footprints*, probably the most known of Wayne Shorter's blues pieces because of the rendition on the album *Miles Smiles* (released in 1967). The bass line creates a vampy feeling in the first eight bars, hinting at the subdominant IV because of the pedal on the tonic. The melody establishes a dorian quality, contrasted by the second voice played by Shorter on tenor saxophone. The static character of the harmony in bars 1-8 is opened up by an unconventional final

borrowed from the key of D major. The alternation of a static harmonic section, for instance a vamp or dominant sus4 chords, and a dynamic section with chord progressions is a feature that Shorter frequently uses in non-blues compositions. The vocal blues tradition of the Mississippi Delta displays a similar procedure in the ‘two-chord’ blues songs. The first two phrases are accompanied by one chord expressing tonic harmony, the movement to the subdominant function is only optional. The cadence is the ‘active’ part of the blues with its V-I or V-IV-I progression.

Wayne Shorter recorded a third album (*Speak no Evil*) for Blue Note in 1964. The opening track is *Witch Hunt*, a 24-bar C minor melody structured in three riff-like phrases. The modern sound is created by the predominant use of fourth intervals in the melody as well as its unusual progressions. The question emerges here: is this piece based on the 24-bar (double) blues structure, as in for instance *Adam’s Apple*? Most elements of the blues form are present in *Witch Hunt*, except for one, a return to the C minor tonality after the final cadence. The subdominant section displays a different chord than in *Footprints*, not from C minor itself but borrowed from the key of B-flat major.

At first sight the 16-bar minor piece *Deluge* (1964) is divided into two groups of 8 bars with harmonic and melodic characteristics of the blues. The melody is riff-like and mainly built on the minor pentatonic scale but doesn’t contain the three part division of the blues form. Could *Deluge* be perceived as a 16-bar blues in which the first four bars are doubled in length and the second phrase is repeated sharing the same plagal progression? One harmonic device Wayne Shorter frequently uses in his compositions is the bII as major seventh chord progressing stepwise back to a minor seventh chord, usually I. This plagal progression has the feature that it contains up to five common tones with its minor goal chord. Like in *Deluge*, the five melody notes from the E-flat minor pentatonic scale fits equally well on I and bII. This harmonic feature, also described by Strunk (2005) as semitonal transformation, isn’t present in the first six blues pieces discussed in this paper. In *Witch Hunt* it occurs only briefly as a neighbour chord in the final phrase, not as prominently as in *Deluge*. This could be another reason to assume that *Deluge* is not based on the 12-bar blues form but a binary divided piece with blues elements.

Methods

In previous research I examined the traditional criteria associated with the blues and applied them to blues pieces from the early jazz period until today. These criteria encompass form, harmonic variation and the presence of blues markers such as the so-called blues notes. I transcribed the discussed pieces of the original recordings by Wayne Shorter, completely or partially, and checked the common published lead sheets as reference. The harmonic analysis is based on the functional harmony described by Louis and Thuille (1907). This book on classical harmony has been an important tool for me understanding and teaching jazz harmony, as well as the understanding of Wayne Shorter’s expansion of the jazz harmony.

Implications

The blues pieces by Wayne Shorter are based on the standard 12-bar form (or the double length) with a clear three part division of the riff-like melody. Unlike other compositions in

which the melody seems to cause an irregular form, Shorter stays close to the traditional practice of the blues form. His distinctive harmonic approach is the most important feature. Like his contemporaries Wayne Shorter modernizes the sound of the blues by using unexpected chord substitutions, suspended dominant seventh chords, progressions borrowed from other scales, constant parallel structures, minor tonality as a key center and unusual final cadences to conclude the blues form.

Not only *Deluge* but more compositions by Wayne Shorter contain blues elements. One interesting question emerged from my former study on the transformations of the instrumental jazz blues: at what point does the malleability of the blues form stop?

Keywords

Jazz Harmony, 12-bar Blues Form, Analysis.

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