Stretching out: Miles Davis’ “My Funny Valentine” as a model for a dynamic jazz composition process

Mike Fletcher
(Royal Birmingham Conservatoire/BCU)
mikefletcherjazz@gmail.com

BIBLID [2605-2490 (2019), 2; 65-81]
Introduction

In an article published in the 1983 volume of the *Black Music Research Journal*, trumpeter and jazz educator Howard Brofsky posited that, when viewed collectively, a series of performances of a piece undertaken by a jazz musician over the course of a number of years might be understood as contributing to a kind of dynamic composition process — what he described as a “progression from improvisation to composition” (Brofsky, 1983, p. 35). He based his argument on three recordings of trumpeter Miles Davis performing the Rogers and Hart piece “My Funny Valentine” made over eight years between 1956 and 1964. Despite the fact that Brofsky acknowledged the existence of several other recorded versions, he did not include them in his original study, deciding instead to rely on three versions that were commercially available at the time (Brofsky, 1983, p. 25). The result of his decision chronologically located the 1964 New York version as the last of the three, and thus the perceived end point of the progression mentioned above. Consequently, although Brofsky questioned the extent to which European standards of composition should be applied to jazz — ‘Is the last version always the best?’ —, by describing the movement ‘from unique moments in the earlier pieces to the global conception of the 1964 performance’ he implied that something sets the third version apart from the previous two (Brofsky, 1983, p. 35). In other words, an argument might be made that the 1964 version is the best of the three.

I will focus on two themes in this article. I have been able to acquire audio of all ten of the known recordings of Davis playing “My Funny Valentine”, so I will begin by expanding on Brofsky’s study to include the seven that he omitted. By doing so I will be able to examine post-1964 New York versions and assess whether aspects of what Brofsky presented as a ‘global conception’ appear in subsequent versions. My objective is to look for similarities between the 1964 New York version and the seven new ones included here in order to consider how the perceived shift from ‘unique moments’ to ‘global conception’ is manifested in subsequent versions.

Secondly, I will question how Davis’ methodology might be understood in terms of broader understandings of jazz performance practice. One of the most conceptually challenging aspects of Brofsky’s argument is the suggestion that, rather than conceiving of a particular way of interpreting a piece in advance of playing it for the first time, an instrumentalist adopts a more exploratory approach that incorporates performance into the creative process. Thus what Brofsky called the ‘global conception’ of a piece would be established not solely by pre-determination but rather via an extended performative process. Such a reading would give rise to a series of conceptual issues that relate to the relationship between the practices of composition, improvisation and performance. At what point does the ‘global conception’ come into being? Does the artist’s performance methodology change once the ‘global concep-
tion’ has been established? To what extent can the process described by Brofsky be understood as either ‘composition’ or ‘improvisation’? In light of these questions I will conclude with some thoughts on the conceptual implications that Brofsky’s article and Davis’ “My Funny Valentine” present.

The recordings

26th October 1956. (Cookin’ with the Miles Davis Quintet. Prestige.)
9th September 1958. (Jazz at the Plaza. Columbia.)
26th July 1963. (Juan-les-Pins. Unissued radio broadcast.)
12th February 1964. (My Funny Valentine: Miles Davis in Concert. Columbia.)
14th July 1964. (Miles in Tokyo: Miles Davis Live in Concert. Columbia.)
1st October 1964. (Paris. Unissued radio broadcast.)
11th October 1964. (Milan. Television broadcast.)
22nd December 1965. (The Complete Live at the Plugged Nickel 1965. Columbia.)
21st May 1966. (Portland. Unissued.)

As I have already noted, Brofsky restricted his analysis to three of the versions of “My Funny Valentine” that were commercially available at the time of his writing. These are the October 26th 1956 studio recording that was released on the Prestige album Cookin’ with the Miles Davis Quintet, and two live versions from July 28th 1958 (Jazz at the Plaza) and February 12th 1964 (My Funny Valentine — Miles Davis in Concert) that were released on Columbia records. In the interim period three more versions have become widely available via commercial sources; the July 14th 1964 version from Shinjuku Kohseinenkin Hall, Tokyo, and two from the Complete Live at the Plugged Nickel sessions (December 22nd and 23rd 1965). In addition to these six commercially released versions, there are a further four that have long circulated among collectors.

These ten versions span almost a decade from 1956 to 1966 and as such feature some inevitable changes in personnel. The Cookin’ and Plaza versions can be seen as outliers for two reasons. Firstly, they are both quartet performances with Davis’ trumpet accompanied only by the rhythm section, and secondly, pianist Red Garland and drummer Philly Jones (Cookin’) were replaced by Bill Evans and Jimmy Cobb (Plaza), with only double bassist Paul Chambers present in both cases. As of the Juan-les-Pins recording, each performance features a tenor saxophone solo after the trumpet solo, and the rhythm section of Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter and Tony Williams remain present from this point on. Nevertheless, two changes of saxophonist occur — George Coleman in Juan-les-Pins and the ’64 Concert, and then Sam
Rivers at the Tokyo concert — before the appearance of Wayne Shorter at the Salle Pleyel concert completes the formation of Davis’ ‘second classic quintet’ (Waters, 2011, p. 5). The remaining five recordings all feature this unchanged line-up.

Analysis

My approach to analysing the relationship between the ten available versions of “My Funny Valentine” was initially inspired by Brofsky’s suggestion that evidence of a process of creative development could be extrapolated from the recordings. He noted that he “first thought that there was an analogue here to the classical composer’s workshop: sketches, material discarded, modified, or refined...and finally the completed piece” (1983, p. 35). This initial reading — the comparison to the ‘classical composer’ — seems to imply an understanding that Davis worked alone to shape ‘his’ piece. However, in the context of jazz, this model is problematic. As Brofsky went on to observe; “…the soloist is not alone but is subject to influence and inspiration from the rest of the group” (1983, p. 35). Nevertheless, I have decided to limit the focus of this study to Davis alone, and furthermore, to the first sixteen bars of the melody statement in each case. My reasons for doing so are as follows.

There is an ever-growing body of literature that acknowledges the influence of group interaction in jazz performance and consequently the importance of using analytical methods that take this influence into account. As mentioned above, Brofsky recognised that the influence of a jazz soloist’s performance colleagues is significant, and therefore should not be entirely overlooked when analysing improvised jazz. As a general rule I count myself among the advocates of this approach to jazz analysis, and so why should this case be any different? In order to expand on this point, I will return to one of the central themes of my article, which is the nature of the relationship between improvisation and composition.

Much of the previously mentioned on improvised jazz is concerned with the analysis of just that — improvisation. For example, Hodson provided an obvious instance of the way an accompanying pianist (Wynton Kelly) might be argued as exerting an influence on the course of a saxophonist’s (Cannonball Adderley) improvisation by changing the type of accompaniment played (Hodson, 2007, p. 7). Hodson made a strong claim as to the value of analysing the broader musical context of Adderley’s improvised solo as opposed to merely the notes played by the soloist himself. However, my argument in the case of Brofsky’s reading of Miles Davis and “My Funny Valentine” is that the context should dictate a slightly different approach. As I have already noted, a key theme to emerge from Brofsky’s article was the fact that, throughout several performances, certain traits emerged in Davis’ interpretation that should warrant, at
the very least, a reconsideration of the most appropriate terminology to describe the music. Brofsky framed this as a move from improvisation to composition. While I am somewhat hesitant to ascribe a complete understanding of Brofsky’s conception of these practices, I would argue that his use of the two terms indicates an important distinction. On one hand is something that is played without conscious forethought and is unlikely to be repeated (improvisation) and on the other, something that is predetermined and is likely to be repeated — to a greater or lesser extent — on a future occasion (composition). As a consequence of this differentiation — however incomplete — I have chosen to focus my attention on examining the similarities that appear across the ten versions rather than the differences.

Another factor that is of relevance to my study is that Davis remains the only constant presence throughout the ten versions. Despite Brofsky’s having acknowledged that the model of the classical composer is not entirely analogous with that of the jazz bandleader, it should also be noted that Davis was very active in shaping the music that his bands played, both in terms of notated music and elements of performance practice (Waters, 2011). Because of Davis’ proactive style of leadership, a discussion of the role he played in shaping the direction of these performances that pays specific attention to his musical contributions is justified. As a consequence — as well as for further reasons that I will go on to outline shortly — in what follows I will focus solely on his contribution, with a particular emphasis on the similarities that are common across all of the performances, which is to say, those aspects that might be considered ‘compositional’ in nature.

I will make one final caveat before moving on to the analysis proper. Partly as a result of my having prioritised study of the aforementioned similarities and partly for reasons of brevity I will concentrate only on the first sixteen bars of the melody statement of each recording, which coincide with the first two ‘A’ sections of the Rogers and Hart piece (See Appendix 2). Beyond this point Davis’s solos differ from one version to the next to the extent that all the aspects that can justifiably be interpreted as ‘composed’ are contained within the first sixteen bars of each version. Beyond this point they diverge so that, while still bearing some reference to the original melody, the evidence of a repeated framework diminishes. This is not to say that there is nothing of analytical interest about what Davis goes on to play, the way he and the rest of the band interact, or the relationships between the improvised elements of previous and subsequent performances. Nevertheless, the degree of variation suggests that the compositional factors of Davis’ practice can be understood as ceding to improvisation as it is more commonly understood. As I stated above, my objective is to consider possible aspects of Davis’ ‘global conception’ of “My Funny Valentine” — which is to say, moments of ‘composition’. Consequently, a more expansive analysis of Davis’ improvisations across the ten versions would fall outside the remit of this article.
Notes on the transcriptions

Appendix 2 collates what Davis plays during the first 16 bars of the first chorus of all ten versions. I have laid out the transcriptions in this way to facilitate visual comparison of the relationship between each melody statement and Rogers and Hart’s original melody. This allows the reader to easily see the structural similarities across the collected versions. However, in order to achieve this visual clarity I had to make some slight modifications to the accuracy of each transcription. In the majority of cases, the first theme statement is preceded by a piano introduction — the exceptions being the Juan-les-Pins recording, the opening bars of which are missing from the audio, and the 23rd December Plugged Nickel recording, in which Davis himself starts. However, for the reasons I have laid out in the previous paragraph I have omitted these introductions here. As a result, what can be seen is what Davis plays from the moment he enters. I have presented the transcriptions so that bars 1 to 16 in each version correspond to the equivalent bar of the original melody. In reality, as of the Juan-les-Pins recording, the first eight bars of the melody are performed out of tempo. Consequently what is represented is not temporally accurate, and instead prioritises the most effective visual representation of the way that Davis developed his relationship with “My Funny Valentine”.

Similarities

In his analysis of the Cookin’ version, Brofsky observed that, while “Davis’s statement of the melody is fairly straightforward in the first eight measures”, he “begins each of the three phrases (2+2+4) far into the measure” and “compresses the second phrase” (Brofsky 1983, p. 28). The same delayed entry is found in the Plaza version, although this time Davis, in bar 1, waits until almost the last beat before entering, the pattern then being repeated in bar 3 (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1.
Appendix 2 shows how this late entry became a regular feature of Davis “My Funny Valentine”, with every subsequent performance beginning in the same way. Furthermore, as of the ’64 Concert version, Davis follows the rapidly stated opening phrase — “my funny valentine” — by a long pause before proceeding. The answering phrase — “sweet, comic valentine” — is subject to more variation. In Juan-les-Pins and the ’64 Concert, and later in Salle Pleyel and Milan, the same delay occurs with only very minor rhythmic variation to the phrase, but in Tokyo as well as both of the Plugged Nickel takes and Portland, Davis extends the upward run to an elongated F natural — the fourth degree of the C minor tonality.

A second common feature is the upward run that appears in bar 5 in the Plaza version and that, as Brofsky pointed out, “recurs, though varied, at the analogous place in the second A (m. 13) and reappears in the 1964 [’64 Concert] performance” (Brofsky, 1983, p. 30). The same phrase appears with minimal variation in bar 5 of every subsequent performance and the uppermost note of the phrase — an A-flat —, although occasionally delayed until bar 6, is always present (See Appendix 2). The relationship this phrase has to the original melody is relevant at this point. In bar 6 of the Rogers and Hart piece reaches the first ‘A’ section’s highest note — the B-flat a minor seventh above the starting note — and so the melody in bar 5 can be interpreted as leading up to this. Davis exaggerates this contrast. In the Cookin’ version, he follows the B-flat of the melody with an E-flat a fourth higher, and in subsequent versions, the highest note he reaches is consistently the A-flat above that.

In respect of Brofsky’s understanding of the ’64 Concert version, it is also interesting to note the similarity between the phrase as played by Davis in Juan-les-Pins and then again in New York (Fig. 2). For sure, Brofsky commented that having an interim recording would have proved of interest and, although he speculated that a version from 1960 or 1961 would have been revealing, what we can see is that in the year before the ’64 Concert version was recorded, this defining characteristic of the piece was already in place (Brofsky, 1983, p. 32). While the chronology of the phrase’s first appearance predates 1964, its subsequent ubiquity supports the idea of a framework that formed the basis of Davis’ ‘global conception’.

Fig. 2.
If we look at the bar 5 phrase in its `analogous place' — i.e. bar 13 — again we see a pattern start to emerge. In this instance, much more variation occurs from one version to the next, but the link remains obvious. In the simplest of terms, the motif consists of a scalar upwards run followed by a descending arpeggiated phrase. On *Cookin*', he run moves chromatically between A-flat up to D-natural before descending to A-flat. In this case, the *Plaza* version is something of an anomaly as the run is diatonic and the corresponding descending phrase omits the upper approach notes that are found in the *Cookin'* version. However, from Juan-les-Pins onwards, a more evident pattern can be found. Furthermore, Davis always employs some degree of chromaticism within the C minor key centre. In bar 12 of the Juan-les-Pins recording, he adds an A-natural and in bar 14 of the `64 Concert version a D-flat (Fig. 3). In all of the subsequent recordings, he incorporates both of these notes — in effect a C aeolian mode with added natural sixth and flattened ninth.

![Fig. 3.](image)

The subsequent descending line also appears in what we could call its `final' form in bar 13 of Juan-les-Pins (Fig. 3). While once again the variations from performance to performance differ the essence of the phrase is retained — the principal motifs being an upward jump of a perfect fourth between B-flat and E-flat followed by a downward semi-tone movement from A-flat to G natural. Here it is also important to acknowledge the relationship with the original melody, which in bar 14 rises to a D-natural before descending to an A-flat in the following bar. As the broad spectrum of melodic variations on these bars indicate — and despite the apparent use of a preconceived schema — Davis continued to explore the musical and expressive possibilities presented by the Rogers and Hart piece. I would argue that this is what Ian Carr referred to when he claimed that in later versions of “My Funny Valentine” Miles probes more deeply both into the song’s structure and his own emotional and technical resources” (1999, p. 195).
Interpretations

My first objective with this article was to revisit Brofsky’s ‘global conception’ reading of the ‘64 Concert version in order to examine its relationship with seven new versions of Davis’ “My Funny Valentine”. The collated score in Appendix 2 shows that, at least in respect of the first sixteen bars of the melody statement, at some point around 1963/1964 Davis settled on a framework on which he based each performance. Furthermore — allowing for some degree of interpretive variation — in each subsequent performance Davis adhered to this model. Of course, the extent to which this was a conscious decision of Davis’ part cannot be known, but the evidence certainly suggests this to be the case. In terms of offering new insight into the nature of jazz performance, it is undoubtedly valuable. However, I believe that there are several other benefits to be gained from this type of study, and that encompass both theoretical and conceptual areas.

I would argue that the methodology that Davis used in these opening bars could be understood as having a basis in jazz performance in more general terms. In order to illustrate this, I will give two examples of usual jazz practices that I believe resonate strongly with the present subject of study. The first is connected to Davis’ use of key melody notes as a framework for melodic variation. Pianist and educator Hal Galper referred to this technique as “melody and embellishment” (Galper, 2003, p. 29). He explained that, in the early days of jazz improvisation, the embellishments added to a song’s melody by a soloist were relatively simple, but that as jazz has evolved in complexity, “the melodic content of solos has decreased and the embellishments have increased to the point that melodic content would seem to have disappeared” (Galper, 2003, p. 32). However, as Galper went on to claim and Davis’ use of key melody notes as a framework suggests, this is not entirely the case. Perhaps it is true that the familiar melody is more obscured, but it remains present. Walser referred to this fact when he wrote that “Davis is in dialogue with the basic features of the song itself, as jazz musicians would understand them and as listeners would recognize them” (Walser, 1993, p. 351). Davis’ relationship with the original melody a significant factor here because it shows that, although he never played it in its entirety, it remains present to any listener with knowledge of the piece. In other words, what “is played is played up against Davis’ intertextual experience, and what is heard is heard up against the listeners’ experience” (Walser 1993, p. 351). This type of intertextuality is connected to what Tirro (1967) called the ‘silent theme’ tradition of jazz composition, and refers to the use of existing harmonic structures as the basis for new compositions — e.g. the innumerable rhythm changes compositions that use Gershwin’s “I Got Rhythm” as a starting point. In this respect, the practices that Walser and Tirro referenced are not dissimilar, and in the simplest of
terms might be understood as being, respectively, the improvisation and composition equivalents of the same thing — creating a new melody based on a pre-existing chord sequence. Of course, none of this is new research and has been accepted as a standard part of jazz practice for decades. However, I would argue the example of Davis’ “My Funny Valentine” provides me with a model to begin questioning the extent to which these two practices can be understood as being independent, and consequently to open up further avenues of analytical and conceptual research.

Furthermore, I would also argue that the concept of familiarity should be seen as an influencing factor on the way Davis shaped his melody statements. I do not think it is a coincidence that every performance begins with a brief but unmistakable iteration of the song’s opening phrase — “My funny valentine’. Davis knew that with those six notes he could establish the musical context for the subsequent performance — a fact borne out by the spontaneous applause of recognition that can be heard on a number of the live recordings. As Walser pointed out “the melody...was so familiar to his audience that Davis did not need to state it...two brief phrases serve to establish the tune” (Walser, 1993, p. 352).

Nevertheless, what we can see in Appendix 2 is that, although it is true that the melody is never stated explicitly beyond the first two phrases, its influence over the ensuing music remains. It is also interesting to consider that, while the audience might not have been aware of this fact, Davis was also referencing his previous versions of “My Funny Valentine” in addition to the Rogers and Hart melody. In this respect, I find a resonance with the way that Brofsky described Davis’ process in terms of composer’s ‘sketches’. While I am reticent to ascribe intention on the Davis’ part in this regard, the model of the creative process in which the artist shapes their work about earlier versions is certainly relevant here.

**Conclusion**

In the opening paragraphs of this article, I set out a series of questions inspired by Brofsky’s work. Firstly I asked at what point does the ‘global conception’ come into being?” Of course, several factors would make it impossible to identify the exact moment in time or music at which this happened. On one level the sheer lack of recorded evidence of Davis’ performance relationship with the piece between 1958 and 1963 prevents this. On another level, the fact that I am not Miles Davis precludes me from ever knowing if and when the piece was considered ‘finished’. On yet another one could argue that until it has been repeated, a version does not become definitive, or even that no two performances can ever be the same. Although it is likely that he played it on many more occasions than the ten that were recorded for
posterity, at some point Davis ceased to include the piece in his performance repertoire. Therefore, one might argue that, while the ‘global conception’ was established around 1963/1964, perhaps Davis continued to perform the piece beyond this point until he felt that there was no finer version to be played. Of course we can never know this for sure.

In fact, I would go so far as to argue that the very idea of a ‘definitive’ version is a misnomer, not least in terms of the challenge to the composition/improvisation binary that I am presenting here. Nevertheless, asking the question has served a fundamental purpose. In albeit conceptually loose terms I have been able to establish that evidence exists that Davis used a framework for all of his post-1963 performances of “My Funny Valentine” and that the evidence suggests that he arrived at this framework throughout numerous performances. Understanding the framework as a ‘global conception’ that represents a dynamic process that moves between improvisation and composition is valuable. It can serve as an invitation to critique how we understand the concept of intertextuality regarding jazz musicians, their “own past performances”, and the effects this can have on our understanding of their practice (Walser, 1993, p. 351).

Understanding the framework in this way leads on to my second question ‘Does the artist’s performance methodology change once the ‘global conception’ has been established?’ The short answer in the case of Davis’ “My Funny Valentine” would be ‘yes’. Although there are only two recordings before Juan-les-Pins, it is clear that from that point on Davis continued to use the same framework when introducing the theme. Of course, other elements may well have played a part. The stabilisation of the rhythm section personnel and relative frequency of performance from Juan-les-Pins onwards would no doubt have been significant factors. Nevertheless, there remain certain aspects of Davis’ performances that suggest that he found a framework that he liked and continued to develop it.

Regarding my final question ‘To what extent can the process described by Brofsky be understood as either ‘composition’ or ‘improvisation’?’ I would say that, at least in this case, the two terms are not so easily separated. In his closing remarks, Brofsky posited two possible models for interpreting Davis’ practice. Firstly of a classical composer preparing preliminary sketches, and then of ‘spontaneous event’ — an improvised moment in time, never to be repeated. However, he also implied that alone neither would be sufficient to fully describe Davis’ methodology (Brofsky, 1983, p. 35). My feeling is that it displays elements of both.

I will conclude by returning to the concept of a dynamic model of the jazz composition process. I believe that this accounts for the imprecision and flexibility of jazz performance — that composition and improvisation can occur simultaneously, and to differing degrees from moment to moment. As Davis’ “My Funny Valentine” shows,
multiple factors can combine to influence what and how a jazz musician plays — fellow musicians, choice of material, relationships with past and future performances. As a consequence, I am inclined to posit a definition of a type of jazz performance practice that consists of a dynamic process of trial-and-error and refinement. It is one that results not in a 'work', but rather a methodology that represents a 'global conception' of a given piece that, while retaining key structural elements across numerous versions, allows creative and innovative music to be made.

References


Appendix 1 - The recordings

26th October 1956 (Cookin’ with the Miles Davis Quintet). Rudy Van Gelder Studio, Hackensack, New Jersey
Miles Davis (tpt); William “Red” Garland (p); Paul Chambers (b); Philly Joe Jones (d)

9th September 1958 (Jazz at the Plaza). Persian Room, Plaza Hotel, New York
Miles Davis (tpt); Bill Evans (p); Paul Chambers (b); Jimmy Cobb (d)

26th July 1963 (Unreleased private recording) La Pinède, Juan-les-Pins
Miles Davis (tpt); George Coleman (ts); Herbie Hancock (p); Ron Carter (b); Tony Williams (d)

12th February 1964 (My Funny Valentine - Miles Davis in Concert). Lincoln Center, New York
Miles Davis (tpt); George Coleman (ts); Herbie Hancock (p); Ron Carter (b); Tony Williams (d)

14th July 1964 (Miles in Tokyo). Shinjuku Kohseinenkin Hall, Tokyo
Miles Davis (tpt); Sam Rivers (ts); Herbie Hancock (p); Ron Carter (b); Tony Williams (d)

1st October 1964 (Unreleased private recording). Salle Pleyel, Paris
Miles Davis (tpt); Wayne Shorter (ts); Herbie Hancock (p); Ron Carter (b); Tony Williams (d)

11th October 1964 (Unreleased private recording). Teatro dell’ Arte, Milan
Miles Davis (tpt); Wayne Shorter (ts); Herbie Hancock (p); Ron Carter (b); Tony Williams (d)

22nd December 1965 (The Complete Live at the Plugged Nickel 1965). Plugged Nickel, Chicago
Miles Davis (tpt); Wayne Shorter (ts); Herbie Hancock (p); Ron Carter (b); Tony Williams (d)

23rd December 1965 (The Complete Live at the Plugged Nickel 1965). Plugged Nickel, Chicago
Miles Davis (tpt); Wayne Shorter (ts); Herbie Hancock (p); Ron Carter (b); Tony Williams (d)

21st May 1966 (Unreleased private recording). Oriental Theater, Portland
Miles Davis (tpt); Wayne Shorter (ts); Herbie Hancock (p); Ron Carter (b); Tony Williams (d)
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