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My Funny Valentine, Miles Davis, and improvisation

David J. Hargreaves ¹ 

Abstract

This article uses the well-known popular song *My Funny Valentine* and a particular recording of it by Miles Davis as the basis for an analysis of some psychological processes in musical improvisation and composition. It develops four main themes, including the ways in which improvising musicians are able to completely reinterpret the structure of a piece, and examines the implications of this for education and musical creativity. It also explores some of the processes underlying improvisation and assesses their educational implications.

Keywords: improvisation, mentoring, creativity, social collaboration, education



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***My Funny Valentine*, Miles Davis y la improvisación**

Resumen

Este artículo utiliza la conocida canción popular *My Funny Valentine* y una grabación particular de esta realizada por Miles Davis como base para analizar algunos procesos psicológicos en la improvisación y en la composición musical. Se desarrollan cuatro temas principales, entre ellos las formas en que los músicos que improvisan son capaces de reinterpretar completamente la estructura de una pieza, y se examinan las implicaciones de esto para la educación y la creatividad musical. También se exploran algunos de los procesos que permite la improvisación y se evalúan sus implicaciones educativas.

Palabras clave: improvisación, tutoría, creatividad, colaboración social, educación

***My Funny Valentine*, Miles Davis e improvisação**

Resumo

Este artigo utiliza a famosa canção popular *My Funny Valentine* e uma gravação particular desta feita por Miles Davis, como base para uma análise de alguns processos psicológicos na improvisação e composição musical. Desenvolvem-se quatro temas principais, incluindo as formas como os músicos de improvisação são capazes de reinterpretar completamente a estrutura de uma peça, e examinam-se as implicações disto para a educação e a criatividade musical. Exploram-se também alguns dos processos fundamentais da improvisação e avaliam-se as suas implicações educativas.

Palavras-chave: improvisação, mentoria, criatividade, colaboração social, educação

I have a long and complex relationship with the well-known jazz standard by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart. This is almost certainly because the very first version of it that I heard—the famous 1964 recording by the Miles Davis quintet in New York’s Philharmonic Hall, in the Lincoln Center—turns out to be one of its most complex and radical reworkings, as we shall see later in this article. Since my first hearing, early in the 1970s, I have played the song in many different settings, constantly trying to reconcile the original chord sequence with the famous Davis’ version, and subsequently collecting many different recordings of performances by different artists.

It is estimated that *My Funny Valentine* (MFV) has been recorded by over 600 artists and has featured on more than 1300 albums, in styles that might be described as jazz, pop, rock, R&B, and classical. The artists include such disparate names as Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Bing Crosby, Van Morrison, Michelle Pfeiffer, Wynton Marsalis, Chris Botti, Sting, Joshua Bell, Linda Ronstadt, Elvis Costello, The Kronos Quartet, Chaka Khan, Rod Stewart, Michael Bublé and many others. In his book *Stardust melodies* (2002), Friedwald selects it as one of America’s twelve most popular songs, citing still more artists, including Charlie Parker and the Stan Kenton Orchestra, Milt Jackson and Horace Silver, Sarah Vaughan, Dakota Staton, Philip Catherine, and Ruby Braff with Ellis Larkins.

In this article I would like to develop four main inter-related themes. The first is to examine the origin and lyrics of MFV, as well as its musical structure, both harmonic and melodic. I will also describe some of most notable recordings of the song by other artists, illustrating various stylistic and musical features of each. My second theme is an account of the Miles Davis quintet’s famous 1964 performance, drawing on Carr (1999) detailed description, alongside an account of the musicological analysis of the performance by the Italian scholar Luca Bragalini (1997). He describes how the musicians, in particular Davis himself and pianist Herbie Hancock, completely reinterpret the chord structure of the original and “expand” the sequence, or “prise it apart”, which leads him to describe this as “the disintegration of the standard”. My third theme is an examination of the genius and unparalleled influence of Davis over the five decades of his career, with a focus on some of his seminal recordings, on the influences upon his own playing, and on the influences that he had upon others. My fourth and final theme is a brief description of some of the more general psychological processes of social collaboration and musical creativity, and of the ways in which psychologists have described improvisation.

Origin, lyrics, musical structure, and notable recordings by other artists

The song was originally written in 1937 by the Broadway team Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart. It was written for a show called *Babes in Arms*, which opened at the Shubert Theatre on Broadway, New York City, on April 14, 1937, and ran for 289 performances. In the show, a smart and self-possessed character called Billie Smith—played by former child star Mitzi Green—sings the song to Valentine, “Val”, LaMar—played by Ray Heatherton. Valentine is a dope who has not noticed her affection for him. In the song, although Billie pokes fun at some of his characteristics, she nevertheless admits that he makes her smile and

that she does not want him to change. When *Babes in Arms* was made into a movie (Berkeley, 1939), the song was cut out, but it was later brought into another movie, *Gentlemen Marry Brunettes* (Sale, 1955).

Lorenz Hart's lyrics portray Valentine as a lovable but second-rate character:

You're my funny valentine,
 Sweet comic valentine,
 You make me smile with my heart.
 Your looks are laughable,
 Un-photographable,
 Yet, you're my favorite work of art
 Is your figure less than Greek?
 Is your mouth a little weak?
 When you open it to speak, are you smart?
 But, don't change a hair for me.
 Not if you care for me.
 Stay little valentine, stay!
 Each day is Valentine's Day.

The word “funny” is meant in the sense of imperfect or awkward rather than in relation to humour. The idea of Valentine as a second-rate character is echoed in Michelle Pfeiffer's version of the song in the film *The Fabulous Baker Boys* (Kloves, 1989). Smith (1994) describes her portrayal as that of a “half-decent lounge singer with a two-bit piano duo—respectable but no more: second-best” (p. 27).

One well-known early version of the song is that recorded by Frank Sinatra in 1953 for his *Songs for Young Lovers* album. The recording features a rhythm section with flute and alto sax accompaniment, backed by a string orchestra. Sinatra sings the song at a slowish swing tempo, except for the bridge section in one chorus which is taken in 3/4 waltz time. According to Smith (1994), he relaxes the rhythm by taking each line slightly late, such that “the effect is intimate and informal, which is a small step for Frank, but one giant leap for *My Funny Valentine*. The song moves out of the theatre and into the nightclub” (p. 27).

In 1956, Ella Fitzgerald recorded the work of the great American songwriters in a series of *Songbook* albums. One of these was *Ella Fitzgerald Sings The Rodgers & Hart Songbook* (1956). In her version of *MFV* she restores the original opening verse:

Behold the way our fine feathered friend,
 His virtue doth parade
 Thou knowest not, my dim-witted friend
 The picture thou hast made
 Thy vacant brow, and thy tousled hair
 Conceal thy good intent
 Thou noble upright truthful sincere,
 And slightly dopey gent.

Fitzgerald's recording employs an arrangement with lavish strings and woodwind. She

sings slowly and with full attention to the words. Two years later, Davis (1958a) released an instrumental version of the song as part of the *Jazz Innovation* series, along with other tracks by himself, John Coltrane, and Dave Brubeck. He takes it at a slow tempo and uses the harmon mute which became an indelible part of his playing style. He also improvises on the melody of the song and uses silence as an integral part of his improvisation. Some of these characteristics foreshadow the features of Davis' 1964 version, to which we will return.

Let's look next at the musical form of *MFV*. The harmonic structure, which I have based on published sources and decades of performing experience, follows a basic Tin Pan Alley chord sequence, namely AABA. The first A section has the following chord progression—in the key of C minor—(table 1).

Table 1

"A" section

Cm	Cm/B	Cm/B $\flat$	Cm/A	A $\flat$ maj7	Fm7 Fm/E $\flat$	Dm7(b5)	G7(b9)
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The second A section follows a similar progression, but the harmony changes in the last two bars in preparation for the B section (table 2).

Table 2

"A1" section

Cm	Cm/B	Cm/B $\flat$	Cm/A	A $\flat$ maj7	Gm7 C7(b9)	Fm7	E7
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The bridge is in the relative major (table 3).

Table 3

"B" section

E $\flat$ maj7/B $\flat$	Fm7/B $\flat$	Gm7/B $\flat$	A $\flat$ maj7/B $\flat$	Gm7 D $\flat$ 7	Cm B7 B $\flat$ m7 A7	A $\flat$ maj7 Fm7	D7(#9) G7(#5)
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The final A section is extended by 4 bars, which include further harmonic changes (table 4).

Table 4

"A2" section

Cm	Cm/B	Cm/B $\flat$	Cm/A	A $\flat$ maj7	Dm7 (b5) G7	Cm7 B13	B $\flat$ m7 A7
A $\flat$ maj7 Gm7	Fm7 B $\flat$ 7(b9)	E $\flat$		Dm7 $\flat$ 5 G7			

Besides the lyrics, part of the bittersweet affect of the song is brought about by its musical materials, which initially trace a "wedge" shape: as the melody rises at the opening, so the bass line falls. The A section has an ascending melody: the first four bars present a repeated pattern which rises from the tonic overall (C-D-E $\flat$ -D-E $\flat$ -D), followed by an expansive arc in the second four bars—paradoxically, the melodic shape for "You make me smile with my heart" more readily outlines a frown than it does a smile. The whole pattern is repeated at a higher pitch level in A1. This melodic ascent is mirrored by the four-bar chromatic descent in the bass, which leads to a cadential progression—what jazz musicians call a "turnaround"—which completes each A section.

Such distinctive lines in the melody and bass evoke baroque counterpoint, with its attendant rhetoric—a culturally-defined symbolic code used by various baroque composers, dating back

to the sixteenth century, and subsequently used by composers including Mozart, Beethoven, Mahler, and Hindemith. The descending minor second has long been associated with feelings of sadness and melancholy. Monelle (2000) explains that “composers heard in the descending semitone the moan of a person weeping; it commonly illustrated words like *pianto*, *lagrime*” (p. 67). One of the most famous instances of this is the 1683 composition by Henry Purcell, *When I am laid in earth*, from his opera *Dido and Aeneas*, of which a fine recording was made by Dame Janet Baker (2000) on her *Baroque Adagios* collection. Monelle (2000) suggests that

the general sentiment of grief is enough to yield the *pianto* motive within the very first gesture; this air is a significant piece, for the chromatic fourth, called *passus duriusculus*, perhaps a derivative of the *pianto*, appears in the ground bass. (p. 68)

The association of the *pianto* with the *passus duriusculus* was made by Bach as well as by Purcell. It is the basis of the wedge shape described above. Returning to our jazz standard, the opening bass line of *MFV* can be heard with reference to the *passus duriusculus*: the similarity is striking. The melancholy of the A sections is briefly punctuated by the major-key bridge, which is underpinned in my harmonisation by a B $\flat$ pedal, itself a baroque device used to build anticipation of a change in harmony—in this case, the return to the minor key in A2.

Of the many notable subsequent recordings by other artists, I have selected the ten that are described next. Two noteworthy versions of *MFV* were made by singer and trumpeter Chet Baker. In a 1956 recording he sang it with the Gerry Mulligan quartet. He also played it on trumpet along with Mulligan’s saxophone within the quartet. In 2015, the vocal version of the song was inducted into the Library of Congress’ National Recording Registry for the song’s “cultural, artistic and/or historical significance to American society and the nation’s audio legacy”.

Two more distinctive recordings of the song from the 1980s are those by Chaka Khan (1983) and Linda Ronstadt (1986). In hers, Chaka Khan is accompanied by a large electric rhythm section playing in a R&B/soul style, with alto sax accompanying and imitating her vocal, as well as with a string section and a vocal backing group. Khan drenches her vocal with melisma and adds some scat singing, producing an extremely lush and rich version of the song. In some ways, this could be thought of as a 1980s equivalent of Ella Fitzgerald’s 1956 recording. Linda Ronstadt’s 1986 version, in contrast, is spare and restrained. Her vocal is accompanied by a string quartet along with acoustic guitar, playing sustained chords in what might be thought of as a neo-baroque style. The performance is reminiscent in some ways of The Beatles’ *Eleanor Rigby* (1966).

One of the most extraordinary and indeed wild recordings of *MFV* is that by Rickie Lee Jones on her 1983 album *Girl at her Volcano*. She accompanies herself on piano in front of a live—and lively—audience at the Roxy in Los Angeles and makes many deviations from the tempo, melody, harmonies, and lyrics of the song, with whoops, pauses, and one notable very high blue note—a flattened 5th, F $\sharp$ in the key of C minor—on the word “please”, which she inserts in front of the line “don’t change a hair for me”. The performance lasts just under four minutes, but nevertheless packs a massive punch. Smith (1994) suggests that Jones has a voice

imitating the arc of Miles Davis’s trumpet, just as [her] understated piano accompaniment seems to have heard Tony Bennett’s version and her phrasing to have caught something

from Fitzgerald. Hers is a portfolio of every *My Funny Valentine* you have heard, though it must resign itself to sounding incomplete eventually. (p. 29)

A few years later, a virtuosic live recording of the song was made by the Keith Jarrett Trio on an album called *Still Live* (1988). Jarrett improvises a stately new introduction to the performance, which includes his trademark vocalisations and a remarkably inventive contrapuntal section including contrary motion in which the left hand figures descend whilst the corresponding right hand figures move upwards. Jarrett's introduction culminates in a statement of the theme which is preceded by alternating 5^{ths} in the left hand with C in the bass and G above, and in which the higher note ascends chromatically. His statement of the theme, in which he is joined by the other two players, contains several deviations from and elaborations of the chord voicings.

The overall shape of the 11-minute recording includes a slow increase in group accompaniment from Jarrett's introduction to a statement of the theme played by the whole trio in half-time. This includes some cymbal swishes and drum punctuations from drummer Jack DeJohnette and gradually builds up into 4/4 swing playing at full speed. Jarrett's subsequent solo is remarkable for its inventiveness and virtuosity, during which De Johnette's drums vary in their complexity and intensity, sometimes dropping out altogether. This solo reaches a climax at which the piano and drums suddenly fall silent for a bass solo by Charlie Haden. This is followed by a much calmer trio section and re-statement of the theme, culminating in a solo closing section which mirrors the introduction, but this time with descending rather than ascending 5^{ths}. The whole recording demonstrates the organic growth of a group improvisation which contains remarkable structural symmetry, played by musicians who know each other extremely well, and who respond to each other's playing almost by reflex. In this respect, it resembles Miles Davis' 1964 recording, as we will see later.

In contrast to the Jarrett trio's technical virtuosity, Elvis Costello's 2003 recording, which was made for a film set in ballet school called *The Company* (Altman, 2003), demonstrates only a rudimentary and very basic command of the piece. Costello (as cited in Smith, 1994) comments:

I couldn't say I really arranged it in any way. I just played it on an electric guitar, fed through some kind of electric device. I didn't even fill the chords out, just picked at the guitar with the pads of my fingers, rather than the nails, so that there's no point on the front of the note. What struck people was that it seemed so at odds with the tone of the times. But I've known that song longer than I've known any of my own songs... The performance and the lyrics had a mutual awkwardness, a raw poignance. The song had never sounded so bare, nor so strong. (p. 28)

Another "minimalist" version of *MFV* was recorded in 1993 by the British "art-rock" group Miranda Sex Garden on their *Suspiria* album. This resembles Costello's recording in that the accompaniment is electronic, on keyboard and guitar with echo and other effects, and in that the low-pitched female vocal line and the chords are simplified considerably and sung at a very slow tempo with long pauses between lines and verses.

The violin virtuoso Joshua Bell made both studio and live recordings of the song which

demonstrate yet another approach, which might be regarded as essentially “classical” in style. In one studio recording with vocalist Kristin Chenoweth (Bell & Chenoweth, 2009), accompanied by acoustic bass, harp, and flute, Bell elaborates on the theme in an *obbligato* style, rather than as a jazz solo. The recording opens with flute and piano playing an arrangement of the theme by pianist Lee Musiker, which is soon joined by Joshua Bell and acoustic bass. This leads to the opening vocal by Kristin Chenoweth. As in Ella Fitzgerald’s 1956 recording, Chenoweth restores the original opening verse. The theme is next stated by Chenoweth, along with harp, piano, bass, and Bell’s *obbligato*, leading to an *obbligato*-based solo by Bell, accompanied by piano and bass. Chenoweth finally returns with the theme, but this time raised by a semitone, from the original B minor key up to C minor. Bell also recorded a live version of the piece with jazz singer Jane Monheit in 2010 (Jane Monheit Fans, 2018) and there is a great deal of similarity between the two versions.

Miles Davis in *Concert (Live)* performance (1964)

Troupe’s autobiography of Davis (Davis & Troupe, 1989) quotes his view of this concert which took place at New York’s Philharmonic Hall in the Lincoln Center on the night of February 12, 1964: “We just blew the top off that place that night. It was a motherfucker the way everybody played, and I mean everybody” (p. 256). This was a charity concert sponsored by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Congress of Racial Equality, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, organized to support voter registration in Mississippi and Louisiana. Davis also told the British music paper *Melody Maker* (as cited in Carr, 1999) that

one of the concerts was to be in memory of President Kennedy. The latter had been assassinated the previous year, and his death crushed a lot of hopes for the more speedy attainment of racial equality. Miles had expressed a certain confidence in Kennedy in 1962. [So for him] the concerts were for his own people and also in memory of the president he had admired. (p. 194)

Davis, accompanied by the young rhythm section of Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter, Tony Williams, and the tenor saxophonist George Coleman, gave birth to one of his best LPs and one of the high points in his interpretation of jazz standards. Carr (1999) asserts that

the *My Funny Valentine* album from that concert is one of the very greatest recordings of live concert. The rapport between the large audience and quintet is as close and immediate as if the event were taking place in a small club, and the charged atmosphere enhances the inspired creative act. There is here a kind of complicity between audience and musicians, a unity which is quite rare. (p. 195)

Davis told Troupe (Davis & Troupe, 1989) that

there was a lot of creative tension happening that night that the people out front didn’t know about... Some of the guys didn’t like the fact that they weren’t getting paid... [but nevertheless] everyone decided that they were going to do it, but only this one time. When we came out to play, everybody was madder than a motherfucker with each other and so I think that anger created a fire, a tension that got into everybody’s playing, and that maybe that’s one of the reasons everybody played with such intensity. (p. 256)

Herbie Hancock described the psychological pressure (Carr, 1999):

That was my first time playing at the Philharmonic Hall and that was, like, a big deal, because the new Carnegie Hall was the Philharmonic Hall. Just from the prestige standpoint I really wanted to play good—the whole band really wanted to play good because that was the whole band’s first time playing there... although Miles had played at Carnegie Hall before... but it was really a special concert. Only the New York Philharmonic plays there... and I tell you something... it was really funny... When we walked away from that concert, we were all dejected and disappointed. We thought we had really bombed... but then we listened to the record—it sounded fantastic! (pp. 194-195)

“During this performance, nearly all the up-tempo pieces were taken too fast and played rather scappily, whereas the slow and medium tempo tunes were played with more depth and brilliance than Miles had achieved before” (Carr, 1999, p. 194). Produced by Teo Macero, part of the concert was issued on the Columbia LP—now available as a 2-CD set, *The Complete Concert 1964* (Davis, 1965a).

The fast performances were issued on an album called *Four and More*, and the magnificent slower pieces were released under the title *My Funny Valentine*. It may have been the very importance of the occasion at the Philharmonic Hall which caused both the greatness of the slower things and scrappiness of the fast ones. (Carr, 1999, p. 194)

The remarkable aspect of this performance of *My Funny Valentine* is its reinterpretation of the structure, harmony, and melody of the original chord sequence.

Despite the very occasional and oblique references to the original melody, and the very free harmonic approach (Miles once said: ‘We play “Funny Valentine” like with a scale all the way through’), the thirty-six bar structure of the song is always there. Miles plays open trumpet on this version (he used harmon mute on the earlier one), and even in the extreme upper register, where most trumpeters sound strained and brash, he is still able to project his unique, lyrical sound and to bend his notes expressively. He plays the first eight bars *colla voce* with Hancock’s piano accompaniment, then the bass and drums pick up the pulse. The whole ensuing trumpet solo is a dialogue with the piano and rhythm section, and the internal movement is realised with great subtlety. Alternations between the slow pulse and the double-tempo feel enhance the dramatic inner logic of Miles’s solo which moves to a blistering climax in his second chorus when he suddenly rises on the last quaver of the twenty-ninth bar, ascends for three more bars above trumpet top C to F, G, G sharp and A, and then descends, bending his high F superbly on the way down. After the dazzling power of this solo, the listener needs the relief, the simple romanticism of George Coleman’s tenor solo which follows. The rhythm section also reassures us by playing a steady double-tempo feel. This familiarity and continuity, this everyday grooving done supremely well, is necessary after the disquieting areas into which Miles’s solo took us. In the performances on this album, Miles Davis had taken the technical and emotional exploration of the standard song structures as far as was possible before they disintegrated completely and metamorphosed into something else. (Carr, 1999, pp. 195-196).

There was still a soloist, but the “accompanists” took a far freer role, liberated to comment from whatever angle they chose... The tempo could be halved, doubled, redoubled, abandoned altogether; the chord sequence could be extended, compressed, suspended,

ignored. Before this, drummers had always pedalled their hi-hat cymbals on the backbeat—the second and fourth beats of the bar; but if Williams felt like mashing it down on 1 and 3, that was what he did—and made it sound exquisitely hip. (Williams, 1993, pp. 107-108)

I mentioned earlier that Bragalini (1997) followed the same line of argument by undertaking a detailed analysis of how the Davis quintet's musicians completely restructure the original song, which leads him to describe it as “the disintegration of the standard” (p.). I will trace the main elements of his argument in this next section. Bragalini (1997) starts by observing that the musicians, in particular Davis himself, use what he calls two kinds of “sound signal” to indicate to each other that they want a change of direction or mood. Firstly, Davis uses

short diatonic phrases of crotchets or quavers played in half time for one or two beats; these are full of swing, and their dynamic tends to the forte. Throughout the sound signal the rhythm section plays an accompaniment in 2 or 4 with a feeling of double-time. (p. 52)

The second type of sound signals are:

Short chromatic ascending (and sometimes descending) phrases in irregular ternary groups. These signals are typically used to change a basic pulse into double-time. If the music is already in double time, they mark a transition into a section of 4 beats accompaniment supported by a strong walking bass. (Bragalini, 1997, p. 52)

This can be seen in Ron Carter's accompaniment to the B section of the first chorus of George Coleman's solo, in which he invents a new *ostinato* pattern in the first 4 bars (figure 1).

Figure 1

Ron Carter ostinato



Note. Adapted by permission of Bragalini (1997).

The next main change made by Davis' musicians is that the traditional AABA structure with eight bars in each section is completely ignored. Davis recomposes them into sections of different lengths and Tony Williams frequently “suspends” the time by doubling up, halving, dropping out, and changing the rhythmic patterns underlying the improvisation to Latin rhythms such as *bossa novas*. Bragalini (1997) points out that:

The continual changing of the rhythms, accompaniment, dynamics, and moods, as well as the sound signals just mentioned, show the great interplay of the musicians and their careful reciprocal listening. Davis always demanded that his musicians be able to play spontaneously and creatively following an open-ended project (p. 53).

The intuitive understanding shown by each member of the group means that the five musicians form a coherent and integral musical unit in which the musical creation as a whole is far greater than the sum of its individual parts.

Bragalini (1997) next points out that one key factor in this radical restructuring of the original chord sequence was the role played by drummer Tony Williams, who was just 18 years old at the time of this performance. Williams had the ability to restructure time into new sub-

divisions, sometimes leading the soloist to take new directions. Davis “loved the new drummer above all... As far as percussion technique went, at 17 he literally had nothing further to learn; already he knew more than Kenny Clarke or Max Roach or Art Blakey or Philly Joe Jones” (Williams, 1993, p. 107). Davis was to say fondly: “to play with Tony Williams you had to be real alert and pay attention to everything he did, or he’d lose you in a second, and you’d be out of tempo and time and sound real bad” (p. 107). Davis added that Williams was the centre that the group’s sound revolved around: “I loved him like a son” (p. 107). Tony Williams remained with Davis until 1969, by which time he had made 17 records with the trumpeter, as well as appearing with other eminent jazz musicians including saxophonist and bass clarinetist Eric Dolphy. In 1969 he formed his own group *Lifetime* with organist Larry Young and British guitarist John McLaughlin. This was followed by the VSOP band, which was assembled to celebrate the sound of the acoustic Miles Davis quintet of a decade earlier. Williams sadly died of a heart attack in 1997, at the age of 51.

Bragalini (1997) has provided a valuable summary of the way in which the chord sequence was restructured as a result of all of the changes I have just described, which is shown in figure 2. This shows that

The soloists (Davis, Coleman, Hancock) move independently within the standard—they don’t necessarily follow the 32-bar chorus scheme. The extension of the improvisations depends only on the musicians’ taste. Table 5 shows the independence of the extension of the improvisations from the song’s basic structure. Miles’ re-exposition of the theme from the fifth measure of the B section (11:24) is remarkable. This unconventional aesthetic choice further contributes to the disintegration of the song and its reassembly in a new form. Table 5 shows how the standard 32-bar structure finally comes out. It is important to consider the musical form not as a mechanical calculation of measures; otherwise we will misunderstand one of the interesting aspects of the Philharmonic Hall concert. The form is evidently only a scheme on which the musicians build a musical continuum that isn’t limited to the structure of a single 32-bar chorus. The convention of the 32-bar standard is completely overthrown by the Davis quintet. They pay attention to a new overarching form that takes into account the evolution of the piece from the beginning until the final notes. What is important is not the unity of each individual chorus but that all the improvisations contribute to a coherent musical whole. The mood of Davis’ improvisations is worked out by the other musicians—especially by Coleman, who connects his solos to the last notes of Davis’ last phrase. The coherence of the new overarching form is highlighted by the internal contrasts and the segmentation of the structure. (Bragalini, 1997, p. 54)

Figure 2

Restructuring of chord sequence



Note. Adapted from original table 5 by permission of Bragalini (1997).

Finally, Bragalini (1997) analyses Davis' use of "sound signal" phrases, turnarounds, introductions, and codas specifically in the performance of *All of You*, another slow piece from the same concert. The same issues apply to *My Funny Valentine*. Jazz musicians use the term "turnaround" to describe the chord modulations at the end of a sequence—chorus—which enable them to return to the beginning of the sequence for the next chorus. Bragalini's analysis shows, in the case of *All of You*, that the proportion of turnaround bars to those in the chorus itself actually declines over the course of the piece:

The soloists use the sound signal device already discussed to let the others know when they are leaving the turnaround and the end of their improvisation. All of them play a "signal phrase" at the end of their improvisations. This phrase is a free paraphrase of the last measure of the melody of the theme—what remains of the latter is only the rhythmic design and the resolution of the VII to the tonic (I). (p. 55)

In comparison with Davis' use of these elements in his 1950s recordings, Bragalini (1997) concludes that they have become the main structure of the chord sequence rather than being supplementary parts of it:

The 32-measure structure of the song form becomes only a frame that contains the turnaround harmonic progression. The disintegration of the standard is complete. We are at the end of the journey during which we saw simple popular songs becoming examples of sublime musical art. Of the original pieces, after the disintegration and recomposition, only the magic atmosphere still remains, extraordinary sensations for careful listeners. (p. 55)

A live recording by the quintet at the Plugged Nickel in Chicago (Davis, 1965b) includes two more versions of *MFV* which demonstrate even further disintegration of the original song. During the plane ride to Chicago, Tony Williams apparently challenged the rest of the band to play whatever they wished rather than the standard versions of the songs. This contributed to the final recorded outcome, although its acoustic quality does not match that of the Lincoln Center performance, and its impact is thereby diminished.

Miles Davis' recordings and main influences

There can be little doubt that Davis exerted an unparalleled influence on other musicians over the five decades of his career. We look next at some of his seminal recordings, at the influences upon his own playing, and at the influences that he had upon others. By far the best guide to this is Carr's (1999) biography, and I shall attempt no more than a brief outline of the main issues which led to Davis' significance for music, improvisation, and creativity.

He made many recordings between 1945 and the late 1950s, mostly in what was known as the bebop style, along with Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and other eminent figures from that era. This included a silent period between 1949 and 1953, during which he was seriously addicted to heroin. He managed to overcome this habit "cold turkey", following the examples of boxers Sugar Ray Robinson and Jack Johnson. By the late 1950s he had developed his own distinctive identity as a bandleader, forming the famous sextet with John Coltrane and Cannonball Adderley which recorded *Milestones* (1958b). The following year the same group recorded *Kind of Blue* (1959), which is the biggest-selling jazz record of all time. It adopted a

style of improvisation based on modes and scales rather than chords. In this respect, it was strongly influenced by pianist Bill Evans, who may have composed one of the pieces. The late 1950s also brought Davis' orchestral collaborations with arranger Gil Evans, which produced masterpieces including *Porgy and Bess* (1958c) and *Sketches of Spain* (1960). The sextet gradually evolved into the young group which made the famous 1964 recording, as described earlier.

The evolution and increasing importance of Davis' small group continued between 1964 and 1969, introducing new musicians including Wayne Shorter, Chick Corea, and Dave Holland. He made notable records including *E. S. P.* (1965c), *Miles Smiles* (1966), *Nefertiti* (1967), *Miles in the Sky* (1968a), and *Filles de Kilimanjaro* (1968b). In 1969 an expanded version of this group made the landmark recording *In a Silent Way* (1969a), which included keyboard players Josef Zawinul and Herbie Hancock alongside Chick Corea, and which introduced British guitarist John McLaughlin. *In a Silent Way* (1969a) was a seminal performance which could be seen as introducing what became known as jazz-rock or fusion music. The years 1969 and 1970 are described as a period of "furious activity" by Carr (1999, p. 560). Then Davis produced enough material for ten or more albums. Of these some of the most notable are *Bitches Brew* (1969b), *Jack Johnson* (1970a), and *Live-Evil* (1970b). This activity continued at a slower pace in the early 1970s but came to a standstill in 1976 when Davis' private demons took over for the second time in his career. The period between 1976 and 1980 were the "silent years" in which Davis told Troupe: "Sex and drugs took the place that music had occupied in my life until then and I did both of them round the clock" (Davis & Troupe, 1989, p. 336).

By 1981, however, with support from his family, Davis began to make a tentative new beginning. He started to practice the trumpet again "by playing with relatives and friends—and his twenty-two-year-old nephew, Vincent Wilburn, was the key to Miles's new beginning" (Carr, 1999, p. 347). This gradually led to several recordings over the next few years including *We Want Miles* (1981), and *You're Under Arrest* (1985). A significant boost to Miles' selfconfidence and musical knowledge was the award in 1984 of the Leonie Sonning Music Foundation Music Prize, based in Denmark.

This was to be a prize for outstanding contributions by classical composers and classical music performers and the recipients so far had included Igor Stravinsky, Olivier Messiaen, Leonard Bernstein and Isaac Stern, amongst others. In 1984, the Sonning Prize committee decided that the first non-classical musician to get the prize should be Miles Davis, for his monumental contribution over five decades to twentieth-century music. (Carr, 1999, p. 424).

As part of this award, Davis was asked to play for five minutes in a composition by the Danish trumpeter Palle Mikkelborg, who proved to be an ideal match for Davis as he was an excellent trumpet player as well as an exponent of the electric trumpet, and also very knowledgeable about the work of contemporary composers including Charles Ives and Olivier Messiaen, which was of great interest to Davis. He composed a piece called *Aura*, based on the prime colours of the spectrum and Davis played part of this in a concert for the Sonning awards ceremony. He also recorded the whole piece at a later date, along with John McLaughlin, who

happened to be in Copenhagen at the time. In the latter part of the 1980s, Davis worked closely with the multi-instrumentalist, composer/arranger, and record producer Marcus Miller, who had worked with many American musicians including Roberta Flack, Luther Vandross, Aretha Franklin, and David Sanborn. This gave rise to a whole new stream of albums based on electronics, synthesisers, and drum machines. Notable amongst them is *Tutu* (1986)—named after Desmond Tutu, the South African priest who was Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town at that time and who is still a leading figure in the struggle for human rights.

A final assessment of Davis' immense contribution to music and to other musicians can be gained by considering the main influences upon him, as well as the influences that he had upon others. Early in his career, he was strongly influenced by the style of trumpeter Clark Terry, who was six years older than him. He also had classical music training in St. Louis, and briefly at the Juillard School in New York. Other powerful influences at this time, also based in New York, were saxophonist Charlie Parker and trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie. Davis joined their group and his playing provided an understated contrast to their dazzling and virtuosic styles. In his obituary of Davis, published on 30 September 1991, Carr (1999) wrote:

Davis certainly had something of the universality of all great artists. Because he was never content to rest on his laurels, but searched incessantly for new modes of musicmaking, he confounded critics and his career was dogged by controversy. But this very vitality was part and parcel of his greatness—he was a central figure in virtually every new movement in jazz from the 1940s to the 1990s. (p. 555)

In the later part of his career, when Davis started to record new music again in 1981, he recognised the talent of a young musician from Minneapolis named Prince Rogers Nelson. Like Davis, Prince always wanted to push his music into new and challenging directions despite what others expected of him, and despite the musical labels such as “jazz”, “pop”, “funk”, or “R&B”, which audiences gave to the music. Davis was gratified to learn that Prince also had a high regard for his own work and considered him amongst his musical heroes. The two musicians met in 1986 at Prince's studio in Paisley Park, Minneapolis, at what was called the “Rubberband” recording session. Very little of this is available, although there was a YouTube clip of the two musicians playing together probably in 1986, as well as a recording of *Auld Lang Syne* on New Year's Eve, 1987¹.

Davis' influences on other jazz musicians were immense, including Cannonball Adderley, John Coltrane, Wayne Shorter, Josef Zawinul, and Chick Corea. The British contemporary classical composer Mark-Anthony Turnage and the Swedish trumpet virtuoso Håkan Hardenberger have also cited Davis as amongst their primary influences. I will finish this section with the reflections of three of Davis' most important group members, all of whom have gone on to create their own highly influential bodies of work. The British guitarist John McLaughlin vividly recalls the recording of *In a Silent Way* (1969a). This was a composition by Josef Zawinul and included various complex chord changes. Davis decided that he did not like the original and wanted McLaughlin to play the opening melody. McLaughlin recalls that Davis told him:

¹ Both are unavailable at this time due to copyright infringement claims made by the labels.

Play it like you don't know how to play the guitar... We played it on *one chord*, which is how I started it—E chord, the tune is in E—one simple, really simple chord, open strings, and he really dug it... He transformed it into something that was really special. (Carr, 1999, p. 246)

Pianist and composer Keith Jarrett reported a conversation with Davis whilst he was in the band:

He said “Do you know why I don't play ballads any more? ... Because I like to play ballads so much.” And that was one of the most important statements that anyone with whom I've worked has ever made. You have to want to struggle. And what most leaders are a victim of, is the freedom not to struggle. (Carr, 1999, pp. 334-335)

Finally, pianist and composer Herbie Hancock revealed Davis' powerful influence on him in his six lectures as the 2014 Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard University. In his lecture on *The Wisdom of Miles Davis*, Hancock (Harvard University, 2014) describes how he had got into a rut whilst playing with the quintet, felt very frustrated, and that Davis had noticed this. Davis' advice was “don't play the butter notes”. Herbie was perplexed by this at first, but then worked out that butter perhaps meant fat, and that fat perhaps meant obvious. So, the message was to leave out the obvious notes in his chords. These “obvious” notes are those of the third and the seventh. Therefore, Herbie decided to leave these out and adopt a more open approach to harmony. This was immediately successful and led to very positive audience feedback and to feelings of confidence and trust with Davis and other members of the band. Hancock says that the whole of his career was influenced by this insight and that the advice of a great master was critical in their mentor-apprentice relationship. He subsequently used the same approach himself in advising his own band members.

The psychology of improvisation and creativity

Hancock's description of his relationship as an apprentice with Davis as mentor can be explained in terms of Vygotsky's theory of instruction (Hargreaves & Lamont, 2017), which is the foundation of what has become known as socio-cultural psychology. There are four common features of group collaborative creativity that can be identified in each case. These are, first, the *social and collaborative* aspect in which each of member of the group makes a distinctive contribution, each of which is precisely synchronised into a coherent musical product; second, the issue of *leadership*, in which one member takes the lead and the others accompany, but in which the leadership role can easily and quickly change to another player; third, the *cultural framing* of the activity in its references to other musical forms and traditions—such as the Latin rhythms introduced by Tony Williams on Davis' 1964 recording, mentioned earlier; and finally, the balance between *structure and arbitrariness*, or constraint and freedom, which is vividly illustrated in the Davis quintet's performance.

In a wider frame of reference, MacDonald et al.'s (2012) description of the distinctive features of musical improvisation sets my own analysis in a broader context. They propose four basic features of improvisation, the third of which parallels my own first feature, namely that “improvisation is social”. They suggest: “The creativity in improvisation can, we believe, best be

seen as essentially social, rather than being attributable to or located within a single individual” (p. 247). They next add the three further features of improvisation: *creative*, *spontaneous*, and *accessible*. It is creative in the sense that improvising musicians produce new music that “may be similar to, but have substantive differences from, any previous musical performances” (p. 246). It is spontaneous in that “it is created *as it is being played*. Musicians create improvisations through moment-by-moment responses to immediate musical contexts, and do not seek to replicate exactly what they or others might have played at an earlier date” (p. 246). Finally, improvisation is accessible in that it is “something that everybody can engage in; we are all musical improvisers at some level” (p. 247). This accessibility ranges from the sublime creations of famous improvisors such as Bach, Chopin, Liszt, and Wagner to the untutored songs and outputs of children—and indeed of all of us in performance, educational and therapeutic contexts.

The ramifications of this Tin Pan Alley song from the 1930s, *MFV*, run far and wide. My description of its melodic and harmonic structure show that it opens up divergent possibilities for elaboration and improvisation in many different styles and genres. The song has opened many doors for many artists and there will be undoubtedly more to come in the future.

Educational implications

Having studied the specific case of *MFV*, which provides a specific example of the mentor-mentee relationship, we can open up the discussion to consider how improvisation has many wider implications for education. A recent text by MacDonald and Wilson (2020) is entitled *The art of becoming: How group improvisation works*. This title indicates the broad personal benefits of improvisation. In this book the authors document the different outcomes of improvisation for health and well-being, for establishing and developing a sense of identity, and for working effectively with others. They also point out that these features are accessible to all: they are *universal*. The incorporation of improvisation into classroom activities is clearly a valuable ideal for educators and teachers to pursue, as pupils’ lives are enriched by these outcomes.

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