

Finding the Blues in the Music of Wayne Shorter

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Abstract:

Wayne Shorter is one of the most influential composers of jazz music of the last century, alongside renowned jazz legends such as Duke Ellington and Thelonious Monk. “Shorter’s discography has a wide range of styles, forms, and complexity, and he has been recognized as a saxophonist of elliptical eloquence and a composer of farsighted and revealing imagination” (Nate Chinen, Aug. 25, 2023, NPR). There have been many attempts to explain the quirkiness, oddities, and explorations of his compositions. However, there has been relatively little focus on how the blues interact with his compositions. I will explore the music of Wayne Shorter to uncover the embedded blues in his compositions. Shorter’s music, and playing style, have a heavy influence from the blues and it can be seen in his compositions on a deep level. I will explain recurring blues elements that appear in a few select tunes, including “Infant Eyes” and “Witch Hunt.” These specific tunes highlight Shorter’s strong blues influence in his compositions while showing that blues is not just a style of music but also a form of expression. I will explore how Shorter uses form, melody, harmony, and non-functional harmony to relate back to the main concepts and traditions of the blues, and blues forms.

Introduction

My research is heavily inspired by the research that musicologist Adam Neely has completed in regard to how the blues interacts with the music of Wayne Shorter. I extend Neely's observations by exploring the complexity of the blues in a couple of tunes by Shorter, "Infant Eyes" and "Witch Hunt," both from his 1966 record *Speak No Evil*. There are many clear examples of how the blues have influenced Shorter in these excerpts. This album is also recognized as one of the most influential albums from Shorter's discography. New York Times critic Ben Ratliff included the album in his publication "Jazz: A Critic's Guide to the 100 Most Important Recordings" stating that it offers "the first taste of a gnomic compositional style that would haunt jazz forevermore. [...] Just about everybody playing jazz born in the 1950s and after accepts it as a foundation" (Ratliff). I find this statement interesting because Ratliff proclaims that this album has become a new foundation for the new era of jazz to come, but what is the fundamental foundation of jazz? The blues. The blues is what everything is built from, the glue that holds it together. Blues is the foundation of jazz *and* Shorter's music. Shorter uses a multitude of compositional tools and tricks when composing, including unconventional, nonfunctioning tactics. For instance, musicologists have noted that he often uses bass movements of thirds on embellished chords to divert a listener's expectations (Strunk). In the examples that follow, I will explore and discuss how the concepts of the blues and nonfunctional harmony work together for the music of Wayne Shorter.

Infant Eyes

Shorter's composition "Infant Eyes" is significant due to phrase length, harmonic ambiguity, and melodic structure. "Infant Eyes" is composed of three 9-bar phrases held together by ending points that pull a listener to the next section. "Infant Eyes" is harmonically ambiguous, moving from key center to key center, but I view this song as having a home tonic of Bb due to many reasons I will state later in my argument. I would also categorize the phrase structure of this tune as an A B A format, due to the first 9-bar section being almost identical to the last 9-bar section. Then the middle 9-bar, or "bridge," goes to the IV chord, if we are thinking in the key of Bb, and takes a bit of a harmonic and melodic journey that takes the listener back to the final A section. Going to the IV chord on the bridge is extremely common in the tradition of jazz, and is almost what is to be expected. This is because it comes from the tradition of the blues, and can be heard on Robert Johnson's "Sweet Home Chicago," among many other examples.

Looking at the 9th bar of the tune, there is a very clear V7 (Bb7) to I (Eb⁷) resolution happening, taking the listener to the B section. Or V7/IV to IV⁷ if we are thinking in the home key of Bb. As Neely notes, "The IV chord as a point of modulation is almost a stylistic signifier of the blues" (Neely). It's important to note, though, that there is nothing innately "bluesy" about a V7 to I resolution, a harmonic gesture that was

seen back in the days of Haydn. To find the blues, we must back up and look earlier in the phrase. I look at this tune as being in the key of Bb, largely due to the major resolution points to Bb chords, bars 8 and 9 for example, and added emphasis on Bb's in the melody. But, starting at bar 5 and going to bar 9 at the |Gb[^]7#11 | F7sus | Eb-7 | F-/Bb | Bb7 | The big resolution point of this section is on that F-/Bb in bar 8, this is seen with a big Bb being held in the melody for almost two whole bars. This sustained note invokes a level of stability in the listener, signifying the end of the section and pulling a listener to the next section. Backing up before this there seems to be a minor iv chord (bar 7) and before that a V7 chord (bar 6).

This IV V I motion is seen in blues forms as well. We can look back at Robert Johnson's "Sweet Home Chicago" again to hear this progression happen. Something that may seem out of the ordinary is the Gb[^]7 #11 chord. Especially since it falls on a big resolution point, landing on bar 5. I view this chord functioning as a bVI going to V7 which is a common harmonic motion in minor blues forms. As Neely notes, "There is something interesting in this cadence...this cadence ends on a V iv I root motion, which is the turnaround in classic 12-bar blues pattern. To me, this (V iv I root motion) kinda has a blues feeling embedded into it" (Neely).

Looking back at the resolution point of bar 8 with a big Bb in the melody and F-/Bb, which, in my opinion, feels like tonic or a Bbsus chord as the harmony, there is a slip to a dominant Bb7 #9 b13. To put this chord in Roman numerals, it is a common I7 or V of IV which is extremely prevalent in blues forms going to the second section of the blues. "Going to the IV on the bridge, is a very popular harmonic choice in blues, gospel, and funk music" (Neely). Looking at an example I think shows this motion clearly, is Armstrong's rendition of "West End Blues" in the first 4 bars, the harmony seemingly rests on a simple I chord triad until reaching the 4th bar where the melody note resolves on the b7 in the home key, creating an I7 chord, or alternatively, a V/IV chord that leads to the IV chord. Sometimes there is a little digging involved to find these influences, but it is ever-present if not always obvious. This may speak to who Shorter is as a person: listening through his music and reading through his writing is no simple task. It is almost a rabbit hole in itself. Shorter never says what you think he is going to say or even what he means to say. This makes a listener not take what he says literally and requires a bit of exploration. As another musicologist noted, "It's like he talks in parables or riddles" (Felix).

Witch Hunt

One tune that encapsulates this feeling of originality is Shorter's "Witch Hunt," also off his 1966 album *Speak No Evil*. This tune begins with a driving 9-bar trumpet and sax intro that harbors a flurry of notes that lands on a sustained note. The sustained note allows the rest of the band to come in and establish the groove for the rest of the tune. The tradition of jazz is most commonly built off groupings of fours, so this 9-bar intro may sound jarring or uncertain to a listener. This is just another example of an elongated phrase to give the song time to breathe, this is also seen in "Infant Eyes." To support this, when listening you can hear that when the band starts, the groove is held

out for 4-bars before the melody starts. Then prior to the band converging, the last note of the horn intro is held out for an extended amount of time, which is the extended phrase that lands on the convergence point.

The melody of this tune clearly pays homage to the blues. At first glance, the main melody of the song is 24-bars long, which is exactly double the 12-bar blues form. This is no coincidence, the melody moves the same way as it would if it was a classic 12-bar blues. For example, the melody leaves space at the end of each phrase for what is called the “strum.” The “strum” is an invention from the Delta Blues that, in layman's terms, leaves space at the end of a phrase so that someone else could respond to the initial melody. This historically happens with a singer and guitar player. An example of the strum can be heard in Mississippi Fred McDowell's recording of “Goin' down to the River.” Hear how his rhythmic guitar playing responds to his longing vocals. Shorter uses this shell throughout the entire tune. Another blues invention used is a single-section form with an AAB phrase structure. This is seen in the initial statement of the melody (mm 1-8), and then almost the exact same melody repeated over the next phrase (9-12), and finally the melody responds to itself in the last 8 bars (13-24). This is also an example of how a blues has a call, call, response, format built into it. This has been a stylistic signifier of the blues for generations. This can be heard in the vocal melody of Lonnie Johnson's “Another Night to Cry.” The melodic and lyrical material he is singing follows the call, call, response, format. This format is also seen in the harmonic motion of the blues.

The harmonic motion of a 12-bar blues is as follows, relating back to the call, call, response format: the first call has the function of an I chord, the second call is IV chord function, and the response has V chord function that pulls back to the I chord at the top. The harmonic motion of “Witch Hunt” also moves the same way, with the only major difference being the form is doubled in length. For example, in a classic 12-bar blues the I chord is held for the first 4-bars. While in “Witch Hunt” it is held for 8 bars.

There is also a harmonic change where the IV chord would typically live, but in this case it is not the IV chord. Shorter uses a common musical device that he employs often, he moves the tonic a minor third away. As mentioned earlier, Shorter's bass motion in his compositions has been categorized as a movement in thirds. “Another way that Shorter explores major seventh chords (tonic chords) used in sequence is by moving them in minor thirds...While Shorter explores the same kind of modulation in many songs, most obviously “El Toro,” he also bypasses tonicization of the keys by directly shifting between the tonics” (Reynolds). This is an example of Shorter's originality but the focus on still being rooted in tradition. He makes a change where a change is expected to be made, but he doesn't make the change you would expect. As Shorter said, “Instead of taking the path most tread upon, maybe it's time for me to take the path least tread upon, the road least traveled, is the road many people least travel” (Shorter). The sentiment that Shorter is referring to, is the same sentiment he brings into his compositions, and more specifically, into “Witch Hunt.” The sentiment that I took from this is that he is composing in an authentically original way, doing what no one else has done before. In the quote itself, Shorter took a very common adage and made it his own, but he still kept true to the adage's meaning. This is similar to “Witch Hunt” when he altered the change to the IV chord, which is so commonly heard, to a III7 chord. He

made this common blues form his own but still kept true to the harmonic tradition of the blues.

Witch Hunt is a variation on blues form, style, and expression. This can be seen in the phrase structure, the space in the melody left for the “strum,” and the single section call, call, response format that a traditional 12-bar blues follows. The tune follows the same general chord structure as a blues, though it does not go to the IV or V chord where it would traditionally transition. Alternatively, a change does happen at these markers, to create the same, if not greater, level of tension that the traditional chord structure brings along. “Witch Hunt” is a C-minor blues in which the chorus’s usual I–IV–I opening progression is replaced by Cm7 Eb7 Cm7. Here the embellishing chord Eb7 is also semi-tonally related to the tonic” (Strunk). Shorter has a sophistication about his compositions that somehow pays homage to the blues and other traditional song forms and then twists them into something brand new that takes a listener in a brand new direction.

Conclusion

Both of these examples, “Witch Hunt” and “Infant Eyes,” show how elements of the blues and nonfunctional harmonies are featured in Wayne Shorter’s compositional approach through extensive use of blues harmonic forms, phrasing style, and melodic expression. The blues is what holds these complex tunes together, grounding them to help them be more accessible. “This is the third pillar of Shorter’s compositional approach, a deep use of the blues. Not just the surface level use of the blues scale, but how all elements including, the form and harmony relate back to the style of the blues” (Neely). Shorter’s influence is nearly unmeasurable. With his recent passing, there are bound to be many more attempts to unveil the secrets of his music, but how the blues interacts with his music should be at the forefront of future discussions.

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