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An Alternative Temporal Approach to Jazz Improvisation in the Music of Andrew Hill

Many scholars have acknowledged that improvised jazz solos tend to grow in harmonic density and rhythmic complexity as they progress. Typically, improvisers reach a climax in which the escalating tension of the solo finally reaches its apex then dissipates. While this narrative shape is certainly common practice among jazz musicians, I contend that it is not the only temporal model for how to present a solo through time. This article examines such alternative strategies in modern jazz improvisation, focusing on the innovative pianist Andrew Hill. Through an analysis of his solo on the song 'Refuge' (from the 1964 album *Point of Departure*), I aver that Hill's playing represents an organizational process much different from the standard temporal design characterized by linear progression. Hill's improvisatory strategy is one of *modular improvisation*. This means that solos are not constructed linearly over their entirety, but instead use the individual *chorus* as the foundational unit for cyclical development.

In jazz music, most harmonic progression is cyclical. Soloists improvise over a form that typically stays more or less constant, and while a phenomenal amount of change and development can occur in the accompaniment, the chord progression itself stays put. This formal structure causes two temporal concepts to be at play simultaneously: the chord changes and the pulse coming out of the rhythm section, not to mention the compositional architecture itself, supplies a normative substratum that repeats cyclically; the improvisation, on the other hand, can move in any direction the soloist desires, often building towards climax and release. In this article, I am going to propose a different model for how a jazz solo can unfold over time.

Jazz scholar Roger Dean has observed that the principle improvisatory shape in jazz is one of expansion, positing that 'increasing complexity in usage of particular musical elements can be discerned as a dominant force within improvisation'.[1] In this forward-moving conception of a jazz solo, players 'start small and get big'. The big picture of their improvisation can only be recognized at the conclusion, when the balance and proportion of the solo can be cumulatively weighed: how did the players pace themselves? Did their intensity peak too quickly or did it reach climax at just the right moment? A compelling study of this type of improvisation can be found in Steve Larson's analysis of the music of Bill Evans.[2] Larson illustrates that a good deal of Evan's tension-building vocabulary is rhythmic. Over the course of his solo on 'All Of You' on Marian McPartland's *Piano Jazz*, Evans's playing becomes increasingly complex, employing polymetric devices that grow in density until the tension finally spills over and equilibrium is reached. Evans, then, demonstrates the telos behind his improvisational process.

Listening to the recorded jazz literature and reading much of the scholarly writing on the genre, one may ask if there is any other way of soloing besides the model presented above. Is this not the very definition of jazz improvisation? It is patent that rhythmic manipulation plays a huge role in the structuring of a jazz solo, influencing how a solo unfolds over time.

1 Roger Dean, *New Structures in Jazz and Improvised Music Since 1960*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press 1992, p. 9.

2 Steve Larson, 'Rhythmic Displacement in the Music of Bill Evans', in: *Structure and Meaning in Tonal Music*, eds. L. Poundie Burstein and David Gagne. Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press 2006.

However, despite the predominance of the improvisational model presented above, the technique of increasing complexity is not the only way to tell an improvised story.

It is the goal of this study to address one such alternative temporal approach in modern jazz improvisation. For this purpose, the analysis will focus on the music of the recently-deceased master pianist Andrew Hill, a man whose idiosyncratic approach to the jazz solo has yet to be studied with the thoroughness it deserves. Drawing from my transcription of his solo on the song 'Refuge', a unique yet superbly representative example of his playing, this article will address the unconventional temporal architecture of Hill's improvisational style, focusing on his rhythmic language.

The music of pianist Andrew Hill (1937-2007) always stood outside of the jazz mainstream. Born in Chicago in 1937, Hill began performing professionally as a teenager. In the 1960s, he undertook an almost monastic regimen of practice, composition, and reflection: he never accepted gigs as a sideman and deliberately isolated himself from record players and radios. 'In listening to other people, you absorb their thoughts, however unconsciously. . . right now I have to concentrate on finding my own way', he said in an interview with Nat Hentoff.[3] When he launched onto the jazz scene in the middle of the 1960s with a series of four challenging albums for Blue Note Records, it was readily apparent that Hill possessed a *sui generis* compositional and improvisatory talent, especially in the realm of rhythm. His treatment of rhythm departed most significantly from accepted norms and has come to be the most recognizable element of his personal style.

During the years of Andrew Hill's debut recordings, the structure of jazz improvisation was changing rapidly. Two elements that had defined the genre just ten years earlier – the repetition of set chord changes to delineate the form, and a fixed, steady pulsation – were losing their stability, and new approaches had to be created to deal with the shifting aesthetic tides. Moreover, the abandonment of older forms and conventions by many musicians in the jazz mainstream during the 1960s reflected a more fundamental transformation in the nature of their improvisatory art. These innovations emanated from a radically new sense and experience of *time*.

Jazz musicians in the 1960s began moving away from linear organizational schemes. Linear improvisations tell teleologically driven narratives that, as noted earlier, progress through increasing stages of complexity towards a climax. Regular pulsation, fixed forms, and periodic harmonic patterns all help to, in Jonathan Kramer's words, 'assume the character of a goal by reiteration'.[4] In contrast, the improvisations of innovators such as Thelonious Monk, Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman, and Andrew Hill tell a different sort of story. These artists utilized new improvisational strategies, including a greater use of modality, the destabilization of the chord progression, a move away from regular song forms, textural improvisation, and a more complex rhythmic grid consisting of a multiplicity of different metric divisions. All of these innovations helped erode the more linear style that came before.

Even a casual listening to 'Refuge' reveals that Andrew Hill's improvisational style stands in contrast to traditional, linear jazz storytelling. One important observation is that Hill formally bases his improvisation on the *chorus*, not the whole solo. In the expansion model, a solo grows and changes over the entirety of the player's improvisation, a period that can last many choruses. In contrast, Hill structures each individual chorus as a discrete unit using a consistent developmental scheme that repeats throughout the solo. These elements inform each chorus with a uniformity that impels the listener to resist hearing all four of his choruses as an extended expansion towards a climax. The features outlined above constitute a new model of jazz improvisation. We have already discussed the 'expansion model'; Hill's solo on 'Refuge', on the other hand, is what I will call *modular improvisation*. Like the former

3 Quoted in Nat Hentoff, liner notes for Andrew Hill, *Point of Departure* (Blue Note 84167), 1964.

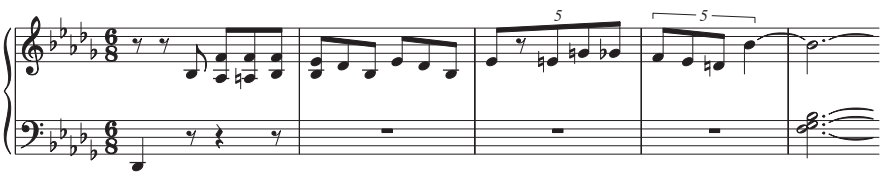
4 Jonathan Kramer, *The Time of Music: New Meanings, New Temporalities, New Listening Strategies*. New York: Schirmer 1988, p. 38.

system, modular improvisation relies upon the principle of tension and release. But where an expansionary solo builds energy and tension linearly through its entirety, a modular solo constructs tension and release around smaller structural units.

Each chorus, or module, of Hill's improvisation consists of a regular ordering of four prominent periodic sections: (1) an opening motive that is based on the song's melody; (2) a series of chromatic gestures; (3) polymetric articulation of irregular rhythmic groupings; and (4) a cadence that brings us into the next chorus, where the cycle begins again. While other components of his solo exhibit isoperiodic characteristics – most notably his left-hand accompaniment patterns – the present analysis will limit itself to these four formal subdivisions of the chorus and how they shape the solo temporally.

'Refuge' is the opening song on *Point of Departure*, a Blue Note release from 1964 featuring Joe Henderson (tenor sax), Eric Dolphy (alto sax, flute, bass clarinet), Kenny Dorham (trumpet), Richard Davis (bass), and Tony Williams (drums). It employs a $\frac{6}{8}$ meter, a feature that is still relatively rare in jazz, and has a 24-bar form that is loosely structured on the blues progression, but is not intuitively felt as such. 'It's built like the blues – two twelve-bar sections – but harmonically it's much different', Hill noted.[5] The piano solo is four choruses long, or 96 measures.

Every chorus of Hill's solo begins with an opening motive (approximately measures 1-4), a blues-derived figure that is taken directly from the melody of the composition. Besides this resemblance, the opening motive consists of two prominent features: the use of longer note values than are found in the interior sections, and the prevalence of the interval of a major sixth. While this interval is never accorded the continual spotlight throughout the opening phrase, the dyad of a sixth is consistently placed in moments of strong metric accent, enhancing the perception of periodicity across all four choruses. Because each subdivision resembles like sections, only one representative example will be given for each of the four elements. The first section, taken from the first chorus, can be seen in Example 1.

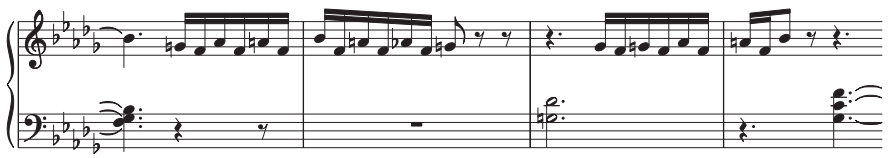


Example 1
Opening Motive, from first chorus (mm.1-5).

Following a brief transition (mm. 4-6), Hill arrives at the next major motivic element that enters the solo in all four choruses, chromatic motion (mm. 6-9). This designation is deliberately vague due to the very different manifestations of Hill's chromatic material in each chorus. Perhaps the most normative of these chromatic motives is the initial passage that occurs in the first chorus (as seen in Example 2). Hill returns to this improvisational idea – rapid chromatic alternation between one base pitch and another note – often throughout the chromatic motion sections of the solo. This phase in Hill's solo often has a palpable sense of expansion and contraction, of growing and shrinking, as the contour of the line suggests. Furthermore, the section is characterized by a greater brevity of note values than the sections before and after.

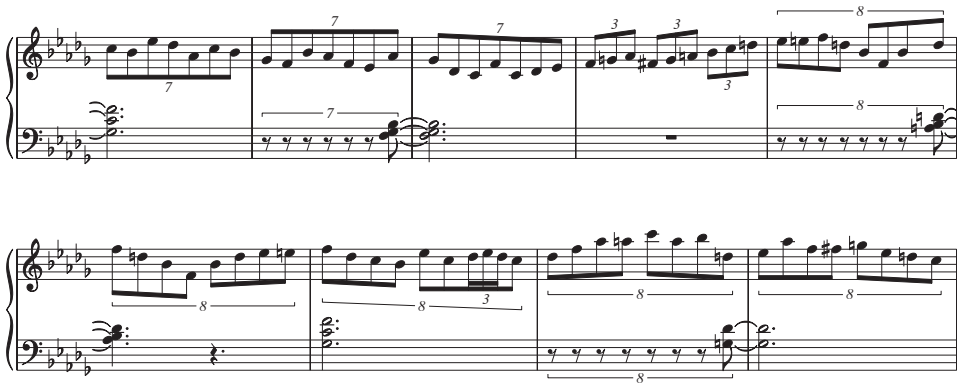
Coming after another brief transitional phrase (mm. 9-11) is the next section of the improvisation, which features irregular metric groupings. This device comes into play during

5 Quoted in Nat Hentoff, liner notes for Andrew Hill, *Point of Departure* (Blue Note 84167). 'Refuge' is harmonically unrelated to the formal 12-bar blues model which consists of the standard harmonic motion of I-(IV-I)-V-IV-I.



Example 2
Chromatic Motion, from first chorus (mm.6-9).

the third quarter of each chorus. Hill's technique of irregular metric groupings employs a complex rhythmic formula whereby durationally even notes are superimposed over the $\frac{6}{8}$ of the form. Such groupings are always in irregular, contrasting patterns, with rhythmic divisions represented by the metric ratios 4:6, 5:6, 7:6, and so on. His ability to juxtapose patterns of equal rhythmic values against the standard metrical framework comprises perhaps the most striking feature of Andrew Hill's improvisational style. Dean, in a rare piece of analytical commentary on Hill's music, writes that he has 'a capacity to subdivide bars into any number of notes, equally or unequally, and particularly to group unequal patterns over several bars'.[6] He goes on to indicate that Hill's rhythmic techniques 'reveal a pianist who could play in strongly pulsed music almost as if without regard for the pulse, while yet remaining acutely aware of its status and position'.[7] For example, we can see this technique at work in the second chorus reproduced as Example 3.



Example 3
Irregular Metric Groupings, from the second chorus (mm.11-19).

Many authors have written on the subject of 'rhythmic dissonance'.[8] John Roeder calls the coexistence of multiple even rhythmic levels 'pulse streams'.[9] He contends that the

6 Dean, *New Structures*, 113.

7 Dean, *New Structures*, 116.

8 Important publications on the topic include Christopher Hasty, *Meter as Rhythm*. Oxford etc.: Oxford University Press 1997; Harald Krebs, 'Some Extensions of the Concepts of Metrical Consonance and Dissonance', *Journal of Music Theory* 31/1 (1987), pp. 99-120; and Maury Yeston, *The Stratification of Musical Rhythm*. New Haven etc.: Yale University Press 1976. The term 'rhythmic dissonance' was coined by Joseph Schillinger in *The Schillinger System of Musical Composition*. New York: Carl Fischer 1941.

9 John Roeder, 'Pulse Streams and Problems of Groupings and Metrical Dissonance in Bartók's "With Drums and Pipes"', in: *Music Theory Online* 7/1 (2007), http://mto.societymusictheory.org/issues /mto.01.7.1/ mto.01.7.1.roeder.html.

superimposition of one regular pattern of pulsation over another results in the misalignment of phenomenal accents, leading to a situation in which two or more independent rhythmic 'streams' run side by side. In other words, the listener is hearing multiple 'beats' simultaneously. In his analysis, Roeder focuses on patterns of grouping and accent to derive different pulse levels. Hill's use of parallel 'pulse streams', on the other hand, is far more immediately apparent, as these new metric patterns emerge not only from grouping dissonances, but from the contrasting tempo of his playing in relation to the normative pulsation of the rhythm section, a level that could be considered the most basic phenomenal accent class.

This rhythmic phenomenon can be clearly seen (and heard) in the previous excerpt. After a 6:4 introductory phrase (omitted here), Hill plays a pulse stream of 7:6 for three measures. His polymetric structure here is 'meter-preserving' (Keith Waters's terminology)[10]: the bar line is present, despite the rhythmic contortions around it. The creation of a new pulse at this point sounds as if he is playing in a different tempo and, indeed, these two distinct streams of time are not merely a figment of the analyst's imagination – the metric dissonance brought about by such a superimposition can be clearly heard. Moreover, it can be clearly calculated. Against the tempo of the rhythm section, which settles on dotted quarter-note = 95 beats per minute, Hill's new pulse stream at m. 11 runs at the speed of dotted quarter-note = 112 beats per minute. The ratio between these two tempi, 112:95, is nearly identical to the ratio 7:6. In m. 38, Hill accelerates into yet another even pulse stream, this one 8:6. The mathematical precision of this rhythmic grouping is just as accurate as his execution of 7:6.

Manipulation of parallel pulse streams is not the only complexity to Hill's creation of metric dissonance, however. As Larson, Roeder, and Cynthia Folio have all observed,[11] note grouping is an important element in the perception of rhythmic patterns and accentuation. Roeder points out that a peak in the register of a melody can produce a phenomenal accent, and can thus supply the basis for new rhythmic structures.[12] In the previous excerpt, we can see numerous instances of grouping dictating rhythmic texture, such as the four-note descending patterns that are displaced across the bar lines in the first three measures of the example. This motive consists of one group of three notes followed by four groups of four notes. Besides the aberrant three-note group – an imbalance that allows him to land his eighth-note triplets on beat one two measures later – Hill's irregular rhythmic grouping of 7 against 6 is characterized by note groupings that accentuate every fourth eighth-note. The density of this rhythmic texture is further multiplied by the rhythm-section accompaniment, which, unfortunately, space does not permit us to analyze here.[13]

The previous excerpt (Example 3) contains additional nuggets of rhythmic interest. In Folio's classification of rhythmic dissonance, she acknowledges a phenomenon that she calls 'polytempo', referring to the fluctuation of one pulse stream against the steady beat.[14] In other words, polytempo is irregular – it does not prescribe to precise ratios, as do pulse streams. Andrew Hill often employs this technique in his improvisations. A fine example can be found in measure 4, an ascending gesture that I have approximated as eighth-note triplets (return to Example 1). Here, Hill moves fluidly between two pulse streams in a motion that is too fleeting to clearly establish another stream. Rather than three eighth-note triplets, this measure is heard as an accelerando against the unmoving accompaniment, an ascending line

10 Keith Waters, 'Blurring the Barline: Metric Displacement in the Piano Solos of Herbie Hancock', in: *Annual Review of Jazz Studies* 8 (1996), p. 25.

11 Roeder, 'Pulse Streams'; Larson, 'Rhythmic Displacement'; and Cynthia Folio, 'An Analysis of Polyrhythm in Selected Improvised Jazz Solos', in: *Concert Music, Rock, and Jazz Since 1945*, eds. Elizabeth West Marvin and Richard Hermann. Rochester: University of Rochester Press 1995.

12 Roeder, 'Pulse Streams'.

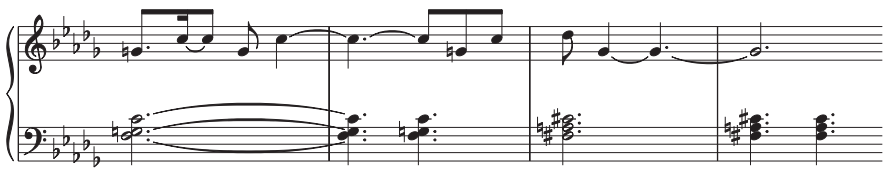
13 For an amazing example of this sort of polyrhythmic interaction, see the cadence of the first chorus: the ride cymbal is playing 6:6, the piano 5:6, and the bass 4:6.

14 Folio, 'Analysis of Polyrhythm', p. 106.

that pushes the solo into a new pulse stream and into the climactic material that follows. Passages of polytempo usually coincide with movement upwards into a higher register of the instrument, a correspondence that strengthens the dramatic quality of the gesture.

In addition to the periodic utilization of unusual rhythmic groupings, Hill repeats a good deal of the melodic material over the course of the solo. The repetition of melodic motives aids in the perception of similarity across all four choruses and contributes greatly to the cyclicity of his improvisational structure.

Returning briefly to our four periodic sections, the last four measures of each chorus consist of a cadence that brings the piano solo back to the top of the form (Example 4).



Example 4
Cadence, from the second chorus (mm. 21-24).

The cadential pattern on 'Refuge' is easily the most identifiable section of the chorus, both rhythmically and harmonically: it is repetitive and remains clearly defined throughout, using long note durations to break the instability that comes before and put the ground back underneath the listener's feet. The two chords of the cadence, sustained by the left-hand and outlined explicitly by the right, are a G7sus (over a C in the bass) followed by a DMA7. Even the chord voicings stay identical throughout, so consistent is the repetition of this phrase.

As we have noted earlier, the strangeness of Andrew Hill's rhythmic constructions are *heard*, they are not mere manifestations of the analytical process. But do listeners actually discern these parallel pulse streams and other rhythmic gambits? Is the ratio of 7:6 experienced, or does it translate into something less concrete in the mind of the listener? Moreover, is the pianist *himself* conscious of the rhythmic complexities at his fingertips?[15] At this point, I will briefly address the issue of perception and its relationship to musical semiotics in 'Refuge'.

How exactly polyrhythm is experienced in Western musics is a highly debatable question. Most theorists agree that it is closely related to the degree of prominence exhibited by both rhythms: if one is more prominent than the other (louder, accentuated), the listener will experience it as a more present texture. Another issue in perception has to do with the alignment of two (or more) rhythmic events. Krebs asserts that the listener continues to feel the *first* rhythmic layer as dominant, even as successive rhythmic levels enter. He goes on to say, however, that the first layer can be quickly overcome by the new rhythm, 'erasing the memory' of the previous layer.[16] Cynthia Folio speaks about the cognition of polyrhythm in general terms: 'The emotional effects of polyrhythm may vary (including uneasiness, humor, freedom), but this rhythmic device invariably creates a general perception of *tension*, an anticipation of resolution, and a sensation of forward momentum.'[17]

15 Interestingly, Andrew Hill answered in the affirmative to this question. In a master class at New York University in October of 2000, Hill articulated this point explicitly, saying that pulse streams of 5 and 7 were always present in his mind as he improvised. To him, irregular metric groupings were a deliberate and entirely conscious improvisatory technique.

16 Harald Krebs, *Fantasy Pieces: Metric Dissonance in the Music of Robert Schumann*. New York etc.: Oxford University Press 1999, p. 45.

17 Folio, 'Analysis of Polyrhythm', 111. Italics mine.

William Rothstein corroborates Folio's conclusions: to him, tension is a matter of divergence from the 'norm' in terms of the structural hierarchy of the piece. As this divergence escalates and the space between the musical surface and the musical norm widens, we perceive this as an apex. He writes that, 'the point of greatest distance, and thus of maximum tension, is what most listeners will intuitively regard as the climax of a passage or a piece'.[18] Both of these writers acknowledge the cognitive effect of musical tension: in linear schema, tension is the climax, and a climax is succeeded by a release of all this tension and a return to the 'norm'.

Returning to the modularly conceived 'Refuge' solo, we can see that over each chorus Hill builds tension through the density of his rhythmic devices. Although the four periodic elements repeat themselves throughout, aiding in the perception of the *whole* solo as isoperiodic, there is a powerful linear drive within each chorus, and rhythm is central to this momentum. The chorus starts fairly close to the rhythmic 'norm' of $\frac{6}{8}$. As rhythmic activity increases, so does the accompanying tension, until we reach the peak of the chorus at the end of the irregular metric grouping section. The climactic energy of the passage gradually cools: by the cadence, a good deal of the tension has been diffused. In this conclusion, most of the rhythmic deviance is coming out of the rhythm section while the piano takes a deep breath and prepares for the next plunge.

Reviewing the previous analysis, one might ask oneself why Hill chose the structures he did during this improvisation. Did he employ complexity for complexity's sake? Divorced from musical context and meaning, this is about all it amounts to – a catalog of novel rhythms and strange temporal designs. However, despite his rich background in university teaching, Andrew Hill was a decidedly non-intellectual player. 'I'm trying to make music a sensual expression, not an academic experiment', he commented in an interview.[19] It is to this 'sensual expression' that we briefly turn now.

While modular structures are a salient characteristic of Hill's musical language and are found in many of his recorded improvisations, 'Refuge' illustrates this structure in a particularly unique and integrated way.[20] For a brief excursion into the semiotic construction of 'Refuge', let us consider Hill's commentary on the piece: 'It's about trying to find a refuge and learning that there isn't any, that there's no place to hide. No matter where you look, *you're* still the one who's looking.'[21] Structurally, this oppressive sense of being lost, of being pursued and seeking release is reflected in his improvisational choices. On the micro level, he employs a number of motives that expand then contract, showing that no real change or motion is occurring; on the macro level, Hill uses cyclicity to conjure claustrophobia. By periodically cycling through the basic musical events, his solo seems to be searching for a way out; yet every chorus, he discovers that relief is futile. Hill's solo never really moves anywhere – instead, it keeps doubling back on itself, going around and around in circles.

In conclusion, this article has explored an alternative improvisational model employed by the pianist Andrew Hill. His periodic temporal architecture – what I have called 'modular improvisation' – and the elaborate rhythmic techniques embedded within this framework comprise the core of his musical style. The temporal dimension of his solo can be best illustrated by the consistent use of four periodic elements (opening motive, chromatic material, irregular rhythmic groupings, and cadence). All these techniques, however, are subservient to the expressive aim of the piece. Behind every improvisatory gesture is a different way of telling a story.

18 William Rothstein, 'Rhythmic Displacement and Rhythmic Normalization', in: *Trends in Schenkerian Research*, ed. Allen Cadwallader. New York: Schirmer 1989, p. 89.

19 Chuck Berg, 'Andrew Hill: Innovative Enigma', in: *Downbeat* 44/5 (1977), p. 16.

20 For a compelling analysis of another Hill performance that utilizes a modular scheme, see Jeffrey Lovell, 'Verona Rag: Old Wine, New Bottles – A Traditional Style Interpreted by Andrew Hill', in: *Annual Review of Jazz Studies* (forthcoming), p. 4-5.

21 Quoted in Hentoff, liner notes for Hill, *Point of Departure*.