

Jazz Transcriptions Will
Blow Your Mind!

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Jazz, I believe, is America's greatest contribution to the arts. It is a distinct genre in music, and has its roots in the blues and gospel rhythms of Black Americans. In the past seventy-five years, however, despite the enormous outpouring of jazz and its worldwide popularity, the amount of material available in transcribed form--that is, in written musical notation--has been pitifully small. It is a tragedy that documentation of American jazz is almost completely nonexistent.

Suppose some catastrophe were to destroy every jazz recording ever made. We could do very little to recreate the music, and much great art would die with our fading memory of it. The small group of living jazz artists could reproduce only a fraction of what would be lost, because the improvisations of the great jazz artists have been neither memorized nor systematically transcribed. In the case of classical music, many instrumentalists memorize their parts, but they need not. The scores are there. In the case of jazz, the best that living musicians could do would be to imitate the style of the great jazz artists, but specific improvisations would be lost.

Lovers of classical music have suffered a similar loss, but many don't know it. Many classical composers would be sadly disappointed to hear present-day performances of their music, particularly passages for solo voice or instrument. The soloist was *expected* to 'embellish' the composer's written line. This was particularly true of Baroque music. But what would any classic music lover give to hear the cadenzas that Mozart improvised when he played his own concerti! Those

cadenzas were never transcribed. They are lost forever, like too much of classic jazz.

For the very substance of jazz is *extempore* elaboration and variation. It is improvised composition. Duke Ellington composed more than 1000 pieces of music, but the sheet music for most of his compositions shouldn't be expected to give much of what Ellington actually played when he himself performed and improvised on his own themes. Sometimes scores were written out as an aid in timing recording sessions, but most disappeared soon after the sessions were completed. Compared with what has been composed and played, the small collection of popular jazz scores that has been published represents little of the jazz we hear and know. It is the bare bones.

I became interested in jazz only a few years ago. My knowledge of music was strictly amateurish. With my saxophone I was able to play the melodic line of most sheet music and method book scores. If the tune was familiar, I was even able to 'sing' the melody through my sax. With the help of a classical music teacher, I studied through the Rubank series of instructional books and developed some technical proficiency. I began to buy saxophone records by great jazz artists like Charlie Parker, Stan Getz, Sonny Stitt, Johnny Hodges, Coleman Hawkins, Jimmy Dorsey, Lee Konitz, Stanley Turrentine, Paul Desmond, Dave Newman, Gerry Mulligan, Eddie Miller, Boots Randolph and, my two favorites, King Curtis and Gene Ammons.

I played my King Curtis records dozens of times in an unsuccessful attempt to memorize the notes Curtis played. Why,

STRUTTIN' WITH SOME BARBECUE

as performed by Paul Desmond
transcribed by Neal S. Williams

Music by Don Ray

The musical score consists of six staves of music, each containing a single melodic line. The notation is written in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B♭) and a 4/4 time signature. The music features a variety of rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. Slurs are used to group notes across measures, and accents are placed over specific notes. The overall style is characteristic of mid-20th-century jazz saxophone music.

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I wondered, isn't there sheet music for these records--not only for the original tunes he played, but also for his own improvisation on them when he played.

Not long ago, I was fortunate enough to discover John Mehegan's four-volume work entitled *Jazz Improvisations*.¹ Among other gems, I found in it Mehegan's transcription of Dizzy Gillespie's "I Can't Get Started". I had recently had the pleasure of hearing Gillespie in person on a jazz cruise to Nassau, and I was delighted to find that even with my limited knowledge of notation and technique, I could play "I Can't Get Started" in the Gillespie style. At first, I could only maintain a tempo as slow as a Bessie Smith blues, but, after playing it dozens of times, I began to remember some of the riffs and managed to keep the tempo more lively. I found that whenever I played Gillespie's "I Can't Get Started", I too would vary it slightly, but the basic style was still Gillespie. Surprisingly, there were times while playing other tunes that I felt the appropriateness of a Gillespie riff, and inadvertently slipped it in. It was quite a thrill to realize that I was suddenly playing real jazz.

Later, I commissioned a number of transcriptions of famous saxophone solos. When I showed them to professional musicians they were ecstatic. Most jazz musicians, contrary to general belief, can read music, and all of these professionals greatly enjoyed playing the arrangements. Yet, when I asked them why there were so few similar transcriptions to be had, most of them seemed to wonder why anyone would need them--especially those whom they mistakenly thought "can barely read music." And they would add something like, "But Stan Getz doesn't play it the same even if he plays it twice the same night!" It appears to be true that if you transcribed two succeeding sessions, not every note would be identical, as one expects in a performance of classical music. Nevertheless, it is as much pleasure for a jazz musician to play a great arrangement by Gene Ammons or

Sonny Stitt as it is for a member of the Philadelphia Orchestra to play Debussy's *Saxophone Rhapsody*.

I decided to play these jazz transcriptions for my classical music teacher. He loved them! He had never before played jazz, but as he is an experienced sight reader, after some practice he got the idea. He enthusiastically agreed with me that jazz transcriptions would be ideal in helping young music students maintain their interest when bored with the staple practice materials of classical music. It would also serve as a perfect introduction to what is now classic jazz.

In July 1975, my ISI[®] colleague Neal S. Williams transcribed for me Don Ray's (alias Louis Armstrong) "Struttin' with Some Barbecue", as played by Paul Desmond, and David Fathead Newman's performance of his own "Baby Rae". A brief passage of Williams' transcription of "Struttin'" appears on page 6. I predict that once our transcriptions become more widely known, record companies and music publishers will do what I wish they had done from the outset--provide transcriptions along with records. Perhaps an effective law might require all record companies to issue the lyrics and a musical transcription before granting record copyrights, and the copyright law needs to be modified to provide jazz musicians the protection their improvisations deserve. A musical transcription, with every record, ought to be deposited with the Library of Congress. When that happens, I can forget about the business of publishing jazz, and will thankfully spend the time saved playing jazz.

In a subsequent essay I hope to give some history about America's great jazz saxophonists, and also to include a list of transcriptions that are available from various sources, including ISI.

1. Mehegan J. *Jazz improvisation*. 4 vols. (I. *Tonal and rhythmic principles*. II. *Jazz rhythm and the improvised line*. III. *Swing and early progressive piano styles*. IV. *Contemporary piano styles*.) New York: Watson-Guptil Publications, 1959-1965.