

The Overview Treatment of Odd Meters in The History of Jazz

Sopon Suwannakit¹

Abstract

Odd meters were experimented variously in the album *Time Out* by Dave Brubeck Quartet. The audiences accepted it widely during the launching period especially the tunes “Take Five” composed by Paul Desmond and “Blue Rondo à la Turk” composed by Dave Brubeck. This article discusses how odd meters become more acceptable in jazz which has been nominated by duple and quadruple meters for long. Ranging the musicians from James Fats Waller, Reese Europe, and Stan Kenton to Jonathan Kreisberg, Maria Schneider, and Hiromi Uehara, It shows the history of time signature usage in jazz, development, and the relationship between early and contemporary irregular meter approaches.

Keywords: jazz, odd meter, irregular meter, complex meter

Rhythmic development of jazz has grown in many directions throughout the history. Time signature usage is one of the directions. In 1959, the Dave Brubeck Quartet launched the album *Time Out*, where each tune in the album employs an unusual meter in jazz history (Ward 2000, 412). Two tunes from the album, “Take Five” and “Blue Rondo à la Turk” (Dave Brubeck Quartet 1959), became extremely popular among many groups of listeners. This is the turning point of time signature usage in jazz. After the impact of the album, we have seen that odd meters, keep being employed by later jazz musicians such as Stan Kenton, Maria Schneider, and Jonathan Kreisberg. The question is how were odd meters pushed out into the spotlight as the two popular tunes from *Time Out* did in jazz history, which had been dominated by simple duple and simple quadruple meter for a long time. It also leads to clearer perspective on understanding the development of time signature usage in jazz.

The History and Surviving of Odd Meters in Jazz to The End of 1950s

Before the launching of *Time Out* in 1959, the simplest form of odd meter, simple triple meter or 3/4, had been seen in the jazz history regularly (Lyman 2007). Since pre World War

¹ Graduate student, Master of Music program, University of North Texas; 089.639.1539; ssjokobo@gmail.com

I, 3/4 meter had been employed by New Orleans musicians mostly in the string bands or jug bands. During World War II, solo pianists also employed 3/4 too, “Jitterbug Waltz” (Fats Waller and His Rhythm 1942) for example. In 1950s, there is also “bop waltz” (Kernfeld 2002, 168) such as “Valse Hot” (Rollins 1956).

Derived from the popular dance called waltz, 3/4 meter has a strong precise beat pattern of hard-light-light on three quarter notes in each bar. This repeated pattern helps listeners to follow the pulse and design some movements for their body to dance along with it. In other words, the predictable pulse is accessible.

Compared to the major meters in jazz, simple triple meter shares the same characteristic of rhythm with duple and quadruple meter. Preceding 1959, jazz music in the Swing Era became popular through serving dancers. With strong accents on the second and fourth beat of every bar, the dancers and listeners are able to predict the music and follow or dance with it just like what triple meter does. These predictable accents greatly help the music to become enjoyable and popular.

Although “Take Five” and “Blue Rondo à la Turk” are complex meter tunes and consist of unequal pulses between strong beats, there are still the equality between larger units of the beat. With 5/4 meter, “Take Five” divides its five quarter notes into the group of 3+2, where those numbers are referring to the amount of quarter notes between accents in each bar. Thus, the accents will be on every first and fourth beat of five beats in each bar (see Example 1). In “Blue Rondo à la Turk,” there are two different patterns of accent, which still create the predictable accent effect. With 9/8 meter, “Blue Rondo à la Turk” divides its nine eighth note beats into the group of 2+2+2+3 and 3+3+3, where those numbers are referring to the amount of eighth notes between accents in each bar. Every four bars, “Blue Rondo à la Turk” will have the first group of eighth notes for three times then follow with the second one once. In other words, “Blue Rondo à la Turk” will be accented on the first, third, fifth, and seventh beat of the first three bars; then followed by accenting on the first, fourth, and seventh beat of the fourth bar (see Example 2). These cycles of accents repeat throughout the whole tune of “Take Five” and throughout the whole melody of “Blue Rondo à la Turk.” They are some predictable accents for listeners to follow.

Swing ♩=170

E♭m B♭m7 E♭m B♭m7 E♭m B♭m7 E♭m B♭m7

Example 1. The first four bars of Paul Desmond’s “Take Five.”

Even 8th ♩=378

Fmaj7 F7 F6 F+ F F+ F6 F7 Fmaj7 F7 F6 F+ F F+ F6

Example 2. The first four bars of Dave Brubeck’s “Blue Rondo à la Turk.”

Prior the Swing Era, there are also some tunes that were written in 5/4. In 1914, there was a set of tunes under the title of *Half And Half* co-written by many composers and arrangers. All the tunes have constant accents and were served as accompanying music for dancers. For instance, “Castles’ Half And Half,” the accompanying music composed by James Reese Europe and Ford Dabney for a dance called *Dance Mad: or The Dances of the Day*, has a pattern of “moving on counts one, four, and five” (Sandke 2012) which is identical to “a waltzy three-step followed by the two hard hits on beats four and five” (Gioia 1992, 68) of “Take Five.” Again, this is also an evidence of predictable accents for people, dancers in this case, to follow.

In addition to the constant accent patterns, melodic material also serves as another catalyst for the music to become more recognizable. Blue notes are a good example. Throughout the history of jazz, blue notes had been participated as a major role of jazz in the pitch perspective. Before World War I, they were infiltrated in many tunes of New Orleans jazz such as “West End Blues” (Louis Armstrong and His Hot Five 1928). During Swing Era, they were still there in many famous big band repertoires such as “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing)” (Duke Ellington and His Orchestra 1932). By Post World War II, they were hiding in some of bebop break neck melodies such as “Confirmation” (Parker 1946). These are evidences that blue notes are always in the ears of both musicians and listeners in jazz history, and help the music become popular.

Blue notes also help popularize “Take Five” and “Blue Rondo à la Turk.” In every A section of “Take Five,” there are only two chords, I and V, in each bar (Farrington 2010, 339). This creates an opportunity for adding blue notes into the melodic line on top of the static chords. The melody in the A section is obviously blues-oriented. In “Blue Rondo à la Turk,” while there are not any blue notes in the melody, there are still blue notes material in another section. Dave Brubeck composed the transitional part that gradually transforms the tune into a 12-bars blues form. By gradually creating the triplet shuffle feel in the transition, the solo section finally appears in completely 12-bars blues form in 4/4. The 12-bars blues solo section, then, gradually changes back to the main melody in 9/8. These blue note evidences in the two tunes are the reason why the two irregular rhythm tunes became popular among vast audiences. These totally make the irregular rhythms become accessible for any group of audiences whether they are professional or amateur.

Odd Meters in Jazz Since 1960s

Three years after the releasing of the album *Time Out*, Stan Kenton released his album, in 1962, called *Adventures in Time: A Concerto for Orchestra*. There was a tune (or movement) called “Quintile” (Stan Kenton Orchestra 1962) which is named after its 5/4 meter (Grim 2003). In spite of the same meter as in “Take Five,” Kenton went further than what Paul Desmond, who “[brought] 5/4 to the world’s attention” (Ellis 2010, 82), did. Even “Quintile” was named after its 5/4 meter but the tune actually treats its meter as 10/8 which divided into the group of 3+3+2+2 (see Example 3). Kenton added one more accent in the middle of the first rhythmic group of *Take Five* to create a new feeling in 5/4. This is an example of improvement on the meter from the preceding pieces with the preserving of constant accent patterns.

Even 8th ♩=110
Dm⁷ Dm⁷

Example 3. The main rhythmic material in accompanying part of Stan Kenton’s “Quintile.”

Since the 2000s, the treatment of odd meters is still based on integrating some materials that are familiar to listeners in term of pitch. Jazz standard repertoire, a familiar music for vast groups of listeners, is a great material to fit in the irregular meters. In 2006, Jonathan Kreisberg merged a very well-known jazz standard repertoire called “Stella by Starlight” (Kreisberg 2007) with 7/4 meter (see Example 4).

The image shows the first eight bars of the jazz standard "Stella by Starlight" in 7/4 time, played by Jonathan Kreisberg. The music is in G minor and has a swing feel with a tempo of 270. The notation is presented in two staves. The first staff contains the first four bars, and the second staff contains the last four bars. Chords are indicated above the notes. The first staff has chords: E \emptyset 7, A7, Cm7, F7, Fm7, Bb7, Ebmaj7, and Ab7. The second staff has chords: Bb, E \emptyset 7, A7, Dm7, Bbm7, E7, F, E \emptyset 7, A7, A \emptyset 7, and D7. The notation includes various note values and rests, with a double bar line at the end of the eighth bar.

Example 4. The first eight bars of “Stella by Starlight” played by Jonathan Kreisberg.

Not only preserving the familiar pitch treatment, but Kreisberg also preserves and goes further on the method to create some constant accents to be predictable for the listeners. He divide 7/4 into 4/4+3/4 with accents on (2+2)+(1.5+1.5). In other words, he accents on the first, third, and fifth beat, then follows them with the up-beat of the sixth. Although Kreisberg’s idea of rhythmic grouping in this tune is more complicated than *Time Out*, it still can be followed by hearing it over and over again throughout the whole tune.

Moreover, Kreisberg’s idea also serves as an example of the development of odd meter usage. Kreisberg treats 3/4 as a tool for superimposing the simple duple meter, 2/4, over the 3/4. He used 2/4 in different tempo over the second big pulse of 7/4. The group of (2+2)+(1.5+1.5) totally shows 2/4 against 3/4 on the second parenthesis. This also can be considered that Kreisberg treats 7/4 as a 4/4 meter with faster tempo on the first two beats and slower tempo on the last two.

The development of time signature usage in jazz was also stretched out to another direction. Maria Schneider uses odd meter as a tool for creating some expression to the melody. In order to create irregular phrases, she needs to employ odd meter to let the irregular phrase become functional. In “Last Season” (Maria Schneider Jazz Orchestra 1994), Schneider employed some various meters including 5/4 to create some extra beats or shorten some beats in particular phrases to express their mood in certain ways (see Example

5). This method does not treat the whole tune as an odd meter tune. Thus, this evidence tell us that the usage of time signature has also developed into a tool for composers or arrangers to create some interest or surprise in their works.

30 Even 8th ♩ = 126

Example 5. Piano reduction of an excerpt from Maria Schneider’s “Last Season.”

Nowadays, the development of time signature usage in jazz has become a major role in the evolution of jazz composition and arranging. As people become more familiar with these strange rhythms, composers and arrangers may not worry much about their tunes to be too strange in term of rhythm. This makes the boundary of jazz music to become broader and reaching to some unacquainted zone of rhythmic concepts. In both a preserving material way and an innovative way, there are many musicians that are playing with these concepts of odd meters usage. Hiromi Uehara, for example, not only uses complex time signature, 7/4, on “Softly as in a Morning Sunrise” (Hiromi’s *Sonicbloom* 2008), to preserve both

rhythmically and melodically predictability; but she also employs 10/8 and 11/8 as a tool to create some interest and surprise in the middle of 6/8 of “Flashback” (Uehara 2011) (see Example 6).

Straight 8th ♩ = 100

21 (3+3+2+2) (3+3+2+3)

23 (2+3) (5+7)

Example 6. The use of 10/8 and 11/8 in Hiromi Uehara’s “Flashback.”

Straight 8th ♩ = 100

49

53

57

Example 7. Piano reduction of an excerpt from Hiromi Uehara’s “Flashback.”

Hiromi Uehara also grew a further innovation out from Kreisberg's idea of rhythmic grouping. With 3/4 meter in "Flashback," she superimposed almost all possible subdivisions, including 2/4, 4/4, 6/8, and 12/16 (5+7), over 3/4 (see Example 7). The result is those different time signatures are playing at the same time with different tempos but finish their bar within the same length of time. This is an evidence of another step of the treatment of 3/4 as a fundamental subdivision to put other things on which can be considered as the development of time signature usage in jazz.

Conclusion

There are two reasons why odd meter tunes like "Take Five" and "Blue Rondo à la Turk" were surviving in the spotlight of jazz. The reasons are that those two tunes are rhythmically predictable and melodically familiar. These are the trunks that led to the development of time signature usage in jazz. While the trunks are still going on, they also split into the branch of becoming a tool for composers and arrangers to create some interest or surprise in some spot of their music. Thus, predictable musical ingredients help odd meter tunes survive in listeners' ears, while odd meters sometimes also assist other duple and quadruple meter tunes to become more interesting.

Bibliography

Articles

- Ellis, Andy. "Exploring Odd Meters." *Guitar Player* 44 (4, 2010): 82-83.
- Farrington, Jim. "Dave Brubeck Quartet: Time Out (Legacy Edition)." *ARSC Journal* 41 (2, 2010): 338-340.
- Grim, William. "Stan Kenton: Adventures in Time (1962)" *All About Jazz*. Accessed September 29, 2013. <http://www.allaboutjazz.com/php/article.php?id=11195>.
- Lyman, Darryl. "Jazz Waltzes, 1900s to 1960s" *Yahoo Voices*. Accessed September 22, 2013. <http://voices.yahoo.com/jazz-waltzes-1900s-1960s-601591.html>.
- Sandke, Randy. "Roads Not Taken: Jazz Innovation Anachronisms." *Current Research in Jazz* 4. <http://crj-online.org/v4/CRJ-RoadsNotTaken.php>.

Books

- Gioia, Ted. "Dave Brubeck and Modern Jazz in San Francisco" in *West Coast Jazz: Modern Jazz in California, 1945-1960*, 60-85. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Kernfeld, Barry. "Beat." *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*, 167-171. New York: Grove's Dictionaries Inc; London: Macmillan, 2002.

Ward, Geoffrey C. "The Adventure: 1950-1960" *Jazz: A History of America's Music*, 369-425. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000.

Recordings

Dave Brubeck Quartet. 1959. "Blue Rondo à la Turk." By Dave Brubeck. Recorded July 1, with Teo Macero. On *Time Out*, Columbia CL 1397, 1997, compact disc.

_____. 1959. "Take Five." By Paul Desmond. Recorded July 1, with Teo Macero. On *Time Out*, Columbia CL 1397, 1997, compact disc.

Duke Ellington and His Orchestra. 1932. "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)." by Duke Ellington. Recorded August, 1931. On *The Complete 1932-1940 Brunswick, Columbia and Master Recordings of Duke Ellington and His Famous Orchestra*, Mosaic MD11-248, 2010, compact disc.

Fats Waller and His Rhythm. 1942. "Jitterbug Waltz." By Fats Waller. On *A Handful of Fats: Original Recordings 1929-1942*, Naxos 8.120760, 2004, compact disc.

Hiromi's Sonicbloom. 2008. "Softly As In A Morning Sunrise." By Sigmund Romberg and Oscar Hammerstein II. Recorded January 9-12, 2008, with David Fiuczynski, Tony Grey, and Martin Vailhora. On *Beyond Standard*, Telarc Digital OH, compact disc.

Kreisberg, Jonathan. 2007. "Stella by Starlight." By Victor Young. On *South of Everywhere*, MelBay Records, compact disc.

Louis Armstrong and His Hot Five. 1928. "West End Blues." By Joe "King" Oliver. Recorded June 28, 1928. On *Jazz: The Smithsonian Anthology*, Smithsonian Folkways SFW CD 40820, 2010, compact disc.

Maria Schneider Jazz Orchestra. 1994. "Last Season." By Maria Schneider. Recorded 1992. On *Evanescence*, Enja Records ENJ-8048 2, Germany, compact disc.

Parker, Charlie. 1946. "Confirmation." By Charlie Parker. On *Confirmation: Best of the Verve Years*, Verve 314 527 815-2, 1995, compact disc.

Rollins, Sonny. 1956. "Carolina Moon." By Sonny Rollins. Recorded March 22, 1956. On *Sonny Rollins Plus 4*, Naxos Music Library OJCCD-243-2, 2008, compact disc.

Stan Kenton Orchestra. 1962. "Quintile." By Johnny Richards. Recorded September 24-28. On *Adventures in Time: A Concerto for Orchestra*, Capital CDP 7243 8 55454 2 9, 1997, compact disc.

Uehara, Hiromi. 2011. "Flashback." By Hiromi Uehara. Recorded November 9-11, 2010, with Anthony Jackson and Simon Phillips. On *Voice*, Telarc Digital OH, compact disc.