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Fidelity and Freedom

Is it the mark of a novice player to stay close to the melody during an improvisation? Or does it, in fact, show a sort of wisdom and understanding? Must one stray far from the original structure of a tune in order to create something new and worth listening to? These questions and others have inspired me to consider how adherence to form and structure fits into the world of jazz and improvised music in general. To explore this notion, I'd like to introduce two particular recordings.

While it was not included on the original album, the standard Stella by Starlight can be found as a bonus track on Miles Davis' 1959 *Kind of Blue*, the modal masterpiece featuring Julian "Cannonball" Adderley (as), John Coltrane (ts), Bill Evans (p), Wynton Kelly (p), Paul Chambers (b), and Jimmy Cobb (d) [1]. After a short piano intro, Davis plays the melody once through the entire form, adding ornamentation sparingly and bringing out the richness of the tune's many sustained whole notes with his vulnerable tone. Building up to one of said held notes at the end of the first chorus, one might think Davis is about to take a solo, but Coltrane joins him on the same note and leads into his own improvisation that gives recognition to the depth and beauty of the tune's melody. Coltrane's incorporation of the melody line (in particular the longer holds) is so prominent that one can almost sing the melody alongside his solo and match up with him on most occasions. Such preservation of the piece's original sound carries significant weight, as Coltrane is hindered neither by the ability to play outside nor the fear of doing so. This theme of reference to the melody is continued in Evans' 16-bar solo, especially in his use of the descending lines from bars

9 and 13. As Davis comes back in halfway through the chorus to finish out the tune, we hear once again those closing 16 bars of melody. Looking back, I am surprised to realize that only three choruses are played in total, 1.5 of which are dedicated solely to the melody, and the other 1.5 of which are filled with solos that draw heavily from those same melodic ideas. This attention to and respect for the composition is striking, considering that these musicians are fully capable of improvising an equally compelling melodic statement, yet they have chosen not to. Overall, the structure of the tune is clear, the form easily followable, and the listener is left with a profound impression of the standard's strong melodic content.

In a separate vein, I'd like to consider Robert Glasper's rendition of Stella by Starlight from his 2015 studio album *Covered*, on which he plays alongside Vicente Archer (b) and Damion Reid (d) [2]. On this cut, Glasper explores the standard by modifying its structure and giving the tune a distinctly hip-hop flavor. After playing through most of the first 16-bars in an almost cadenza-like piano intro, Glasper enters into an 8-bar vamp that he solos over for the remainder of the tune. This vamp references the melody from bars 17-24, but uses rich chord substitutions that are grounded in a chromatic bass line descending from Ab to Db. Throughout the soloing, Reid backs up Glasper with fast brushwork, playing a groove rich with sixteenth notes that adds an element of urgency to the group's vibe and contrasts sharply and appropriately with Glasper's laid-back approach. To finish out, Glasper finally continues on to the final eight bars of the tune, once again entering a vamp in the last four as an outro.

Due to these significant changes in the form of the tune, together with the complex changes in harmony, a listener might find it difficult to even identify the standard that underpins Glasper's experimentation. Regardless, I find this cut to be one of the most expressive and inventive

renditions of the tune, and I do not hesitate to place it on par with Davis' 1959 interpretation. In fact, I believe that these two recordings of the same tune yield two very important lessons for musicians and students of jazz. The first is this: It is valid to honor the melody and to pay respect to it; doing so does not reduce the creativity or artistry of a solo. We learn this through Coltrane's careful use of the head as a beacon, a story to return to and build upon, but also to simply appreciate and settle into. The second lesson to be learned is that one must not cultivate a rigid idea of what it means to play a piece of music. Perhaps, if we could learn to think more like Glasper and uncover the niches of a tune (such as bars 17-24), which can offer so much depth, we would find ourselves creating new ways to hear the same piece of music. With this view, a tune could become something much more than a sequence to be played from start to finish. In short, I find it crucial that we not let our fidelity tie down our freedom, but just as important that we not let the beckoning call of freedom keep us from expressing faithfulness to a composition.

References

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kind_of_Blue

[2] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Covered_\(Robert_Glasper_album\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Covered_(Robert_Glasper_album))