

“Harmonic Bursts” and the Use of Tertial Patterns

So far, I have discussed Shaw’s use of the pentatonic and diatonic scales as well as his use intervallic and motivic development. In the final part of this discussion on Shaw’s improvisational style, I will examine an aspect of Shaw’s playing that has long mystified many trumpet players: one which I will call “harmonic bursts.” More specifically, I am referring to Shaw’s trademark rapid-fire bursts of angular and harmonically complex melodic material. Sometimes these bursts are played in time as sixteenth notes. In other cases, they are deliberately played out of time in order to create rhythmic tension. These lightning-fast, almost frenzied runs are unlike anything played by any other trumpeter in the history of the music. Scott Wendholt, a trumpeter who came into prominence during the 1990s, spoke about these fast, rhythmically free bursts of notes: “He’d play in groups of five all of a sudden, or crush in 11 notes in a space where you’d expect two or three.”¹ In an interview for *Melody Maker*, Shaw himself described these bursts of notes saying, “ I found I had to play all pentatonic scales through all the keys and after a while, I found that I could jumble all these notes up and get a beautiful stream of harmonic color.”²

What is very interesting about these harmonic bursts is the fact that they consist of different melodic material than his more relaxed phrases that are rhythmically based in eighth-notes or quarter-notes. Closer analysis reveals that this “jumble” or “stream of harmonic color,” as Shaw puts it, is in fact a combination of different melodic techniques including both pentatonic and diatonic scales. In examining these combinations, the most frequent melodic device that occurs can be seen in Example 3.12:

¹ Panken, Ted, “Beyond Thursday,” Liner Notes, Doubletime Jazz: 1997.

² Lake, 48.

Example 3.12

TERTIAL PATTERNS

Variation 1 Variation 2

07(49) Variation 1 in F IN A CAPRICORNIAN WAY

Ab7 Variation 2 in E ORGAN GRINDER

These “tertial patterns” (patterns based on thirds) appear in most of Shaw’s solos and are found almost exclusively in the types of harmonic bursts mentioned above. The most common pattern used is Variation 1, while Variation 2 is seen slightly less often.

Example 3.12 contains an example of each variation: Variation 1 in an excerpt from “In a Capricornian Way” and Variation 2 in an excerpt from “The Organ Grinder.” Both excerpts appear as part of a fast sixteenth-note burst. These tertial patterns are *extremely* diatonic in nature as they clearly dictate a tonal center, almost force-feeding it to the listener. The tonal center dictated by each variation may fit or clash with the chord change depending on the level of dissonance Shaw is attempting to achieve. This clear sense of built-in tonality stems from the fact that these tertial patterns consist of every note (or almost every note in the case of Variation 2) of the major scale while both

variations end with the tonic major triad. The tertial nature of these patterns also allowed Shaw to retain the angular feeling of his lines by avoiding the more common practice of running scales.

Example 3.13 provides further evidence as to how prevalent these tertial patterns are in Shaw's harmonic bursts. Because these notes go by very quickly, the listener gets only a fleeting impression of the various tonal centers. Some of these tonal centers are consonant with the chord changes while others deviate from the chord change to create harmonic dissonance. For example, Variation 1 (in the key of F) is played over a Gmin7 chord on beats 1 and 2 of measure 2. In this case, the Variation 1 pattern clearly fits the existing chord note-for-note. However, this is followed by Variation 2 (on beat four of measure 2 through beat 2 of measure 3), which is played down a half step, resulting in an E Major tonality played over a Gmin7 chord. In a way, this is a less obvious form of "side-slipping" down a half step. Next, a partial Bb Major tertial pattern, which could belong to either variation, appears over the Fmin7 chord on beat 4 of measure 3. Shaw is now back "inside" the chord changes. He stays there until the very end when he plays another Variation 1 tertial pattern in E Major, this time over a GbMaj7 (beats 3 and 4 of measure 5). While not as dissonant as before, the pattern creates tension with the notes E and A, which totally undermines the Major quality of the chord.

Example

3.13

ROSEWOOD

Chords: $G7(b9)64$, $A^b7(b9)64$, $Gm7$, $Fm7$, $Gm7$, $Fm7$, $Cm7$, B^bm7 , G^bm7

Patterns: tertial pattern in F (Variation 1), tertial pattern in E (Variation 2), tertial pattern in Bb, tertial pattern in E (Variation 1)

Labels: INSIDE, OUTSIDE

The rest of the material in Example 3.13 is a mixture of chromatic and diatonic runs as well as fragments of pentatonic scales. It is easy to see a parallel between Shaw's approach and that of John Coltrane during the saxophonist's later years. In these flurries of notes, one gets a sense of letting go (or abandonment). Coltrane improvised in a similar fashion on the album *Live at the Village Vanguard*, which featured long pentatonic-based solos with similar bursts of harmonic material that some described as