
International Association for Jazz Education



**Jazz Research
Proceedings Yearbook**

A compilation of research papers presented
at the annual international conference.

**Toronto, Ontario Canada
January 2003**

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Printed in the United States of America.

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Beyond Constant Pulse in Jazz: Expansion of Bass Function in Gil Evans

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For the most part, 1950s jazz featured a constant pulse and did not make use of tempo changes¹. Rhythmic interest and vitality derived from the metrical and accentual patterns created by the soloist, the accompanying chordal instruments, and the drum set against a steady beat stated by the double bass and by the drum set's hi-hat and, to some extent, its ride cymbal. In addition to supplying a steady beat, the bass player had the responsibility of outlining the form and harmonic structure of the tune by playing the roots of the chord progression in the low register, at the point of chord change. This primary pulse would enable the rest of the ensemble and the improviser to layer multiple rhythmic patterns, and play with accents and durations. (Ex.1)

Toronto born pianist, arranger, composer, and bandleader Gil Evans (Ian Ernest Gilmore Green, 1912-88) transformed this practice by reinventing the role of the bass. Selections from Evans's 1957 work for large ensemble *Miles Ahead* will serve as the primary focus for analysis. Following a review of jazz performance practice of the time with an emphasis on the bass and drum set tandem, time-feel hierarchy and embellishment, and time-feel shifts will be surveyed. Then, techniques developed by Evans such as bass line coloring, suppression, substitution, and activation will be examined. Polyrhythmic and melodic use of bass and drums will also be listed. Finally, the impact of these techniques on constant pulse in the tune *Blues for Pablo* will be outlined.

Jazz Rhythm Section Conventions

The Count Basie rhythm section of the late '30s is generally credited for developing the walking bass style, drum set playing innovations, and piano left-hand comping. The development of the walking bass transferred much of the pulse supplied by the stride piano style to the bass, in conjunction with the foot-operated hi-hat closing on beats two and four. The winds or soloist would add their own rhythmic layerings to the rhythm section activity. While all pitched instruments contributed melody, countermelody, harmony, and pulse, only the bass, with the possible exception of the rhythm guitar, stated also most beats. In addition, it sounded the roots of the chords, establishing the foundation of the metric/harmonic architecture. This model remained the main approach to performance for the next two decades. (Ex.2)

Time-feel Hierarchy and Embellishment

Rhythmic activity can be divided into two levels: the primary pulse supplied by the bass and the hi-hat and the derivative level of all other accentual layering found in the ensemble. Time feels range from sustained pedal to quadruple time with the rhythmic activity of the winds/soloist read on one level higher in relation to the bass and drums. (Ex 3a-b) For example, a soloist instructing the bass player to play "in 4" (four quarters to a bar) most likely will be playing a line where the eighth note rather than the quarter note is the predominant value. Both levels are defined as "single time". Half, single, and double time are the most commonly used time-feels.

While the hi-hat hardly ever departs from its pulsations on 2&4, bass time feels are embellished with intermediate durational units. These enliven the basic time feel providing a sense of speeding up or slowing down, depending on their position in the rhythmic hierarchy. (Ex.4) They do not cause a metric departure from the primary pulse, understood as seated in the nuanced yet unchanging bass line, and the hi-hat. (Ex.5)

The perception of an implied constant "time" in most standard jazz is so strong that even in stop-time, and "trading four" an imaginary rhythm section appears to be at work in everyone's collective mind, supplying a palpable steady beat. As Joel Lester, in discussing meter in tonal music, aptly writes " ..once the metric hierarchy has been established we, as listeners, will maintain that organization as long as minimal evidence is present, even in the face of accentual patterns that would give rise to a different metric structure in the absence of such an imposed meter."² Only in unaccompanied solos, occasionally found in introductions and endings of tunes, is the sense of pulse deliberately suspended, to supply a cadential, rubato effect.

Time-feel Shifts

Both bass and drums and the winds/soloist display varied rhythmic profiles while remaining seated in one primary pulse or attempt to inaugurate shifts to a higher or lower time-feel by adopting a new predominant rhythmic unit. For an actual time feel shift to take place the whole ensemble needs to move one level up or down the metric scale (with the rhythm section matching the winds/solo as always, on one level lower). (Ex.6)

Shifts in time feel occur in accordance to main divisions in the form such as the top of the form or the beginning of the bridge. A one or two bar set-up often signals transitions and retransitions between time feels. The range of faster and slower time-feel levels challenges both players and listeners, creating a sense of expectation in regards as to when the return to a particular rhythmic plateau is going to occur. Some of the most common navigations through different time feel levels are the statement of the tune in a "2" feel, followed by solos in "4" and the activation of double time during portions of a solo. (Ex.7) Most often than not these techniques retain the harmonic rhythm, underscoring the importance of constant harmonic rhythm and a steady beat, for the effectiveness of these shifts.

While working in close tandem with the drum set's hi-hat and ride cymbal, the time feel shift's final determination is the bass's domain because of the additional pitch component it delivers, specifically in the low register, where it governs the harmonic structure.

GIL EVANS'S BASS TECHNIQUES

While some of Gil Evans's harmonic and orchestrational devices can be partly traced to classical authors that Evans studied, his innovations in the realm of the rhythm section brought a new level of sophistication to this musical component unique to jazz. In discussing the arrangement of a familiar tune with Brian Priestly, Evans says "...often ... the rhythm section is neglected. When you have a recreation ... you can't use the same rhythm section that they had at the time when it was originated ...you got to have some living element in a recreation, and that is where it is first, in the bass and drums."³ To create music that "...temporarily obscures the notated bar lines, generating a highly flexible, fluid metrical universe,"⁴ Evans developed the following bass techniques: bass line coloring, suppression, substitution, and activation. He also made polyrhythmic use of bass and drums and used the bass for melodic statements.

Bass Line Coloring

To weaken the bass's hegemony as sole keeper of time and pulse Evans coupled the bass with other instruments capable of low range production: bass clarinet, bass trombone, tuba, and occasionally piano. This accustomed the listener to rely on other instrumental colors, in addition to the bass, to supply bass function. The resulting bass lines feature changing instrumental combinations playing segments or entire passages. These *Klangfarben* bass lines in unison or octaves are rhythmically concerted, or have the bass reiterating some pitches for pulse stating purpose. (Ex.8a-b) In addition to bass lines Evans scored also pedals with bass line coloring. Where another writer might have used the same instrumentation throughout, he employs this technique to subtly vary instrumental color. (Ex.8c)

Bass Suppression and Substitution

Bass suppression in jazz dramatically signals a cadenza, drum solo, stop time, or break. It yields two possibilities: absence of bass function, if no other instrument sounds bass notes, and substitute bass function, when other instruments take over the sounding of the lowest pitch. Evans expanded the scope of both: the first enabled him to produce a sort of bottomless sounding texture (Ex.9a), and to introduce time feel changes. The second allowed him to blur the sense of barline.

During bass suppression, pulse delivery is transferred to the ensemble. With the bass no longer determining the time-feel hierarchy by stating the primary pulse, the ensemble is free to introduce new time feels. (Ex.9b) New time feels are confirmed or contradicted by the bass's reentry because of the identification of the bass as the harmony and pulse keeper. Bass suppression and reinstatement allows then for departures from a single pulse. With substitute bass function the ear is both unsettled by the absence of the bass providing the traditional underpinning, and satisfied by the harmonic orientation provided by a bass note played by a low range instrument other than the bass. Blurring the sense of bar line becomes then viable. Substitute bass function occurs also when the bass is present, but other instruments are sounding the lowest pitch. (Ex.9c)

Bass Line Activation

Bass line activation is a process where the bass colored line emerges with a clearly heard foreground statement. Activated bass lines are countermelodies that develop from the walking bass. They are generated by the bass line instruments adopting a higher metric profile than the winds/soloist, often extending their customary playing range. Bass line activation ranges from brief (less than a measure), to longer (two to three measure phrases). It attracts attention to harmonic or structural events and foreshadows or initiates time feel shifts.

In "My Ship" (Ex.10a,b) the first statement of the melody by concerted winds (no rhythm section) is ruffled only by a couple of brief bass line activations in tuba and bass clarinet, and tuba and bass trombone respectively. The first underscores the arrival on the dominant on measure 9, beat 3 (the tonic has yet to be sounded), the second provides motion at the end of the first section (measure 15) leading to the repeat. Within the context of a quarter note pulse, both

show a more active rhythmic profile, the first being an eighth note quintuplet, the second a sixteenth note figure. The line is always doubled.

In "Blues for Pablo" (Ex. 10c) the first bass line activation foreshadows the second, longer one. On first appearance it jolts the half time ballad, quickly reinstated after two measures, by playing double time against the sustained ensemble. On second appearance, after a measure and a half suppression, it reenters in the middle of the measure powerfully confirming the double time aptly introduced by the ensemble during the suppression. A second suppression then initiates a transition to single time. During this suppression the ensemble states single time with a three against four cross accentuation. The bass reenters to confirm the new time feel, with the solo trumpet now improvising. In just thirteen bars the two bass line activations have steered the ensemble through four time feels.

Polyrhythmic use of bass and drums

In "Chant of the Weed" Evans distracts the listener with a powerful, sustained chord while switching the bass and drums to quarter note triplets. This quarter note pulse wrestles with the previous "two feel" to establish itself as the new beat. The original tempo returns after four measures, bringing a sense of rhythmic resolution. (Ex. 11a) Another instance of this technique occurs in "It Ain't Necessarily So." (Ex. 11b)

Use of the bass for melodic statements

Early use of bass for primary melodic statements can be found in the work of Duke Ellington with Jimmy Blanton (Jack the Bear, 1940). Evans developed further the potential of the bass as an independent melodic instrument, both solo and coupled with other instruments. Examples of solo melodic bass, improvised as well as written, can be found (Ex. 12a, b). In example 12c the bass is doubled with tuba. Evans's interest in the melodic use of rhythm section instruments can be seen in his scoring of the main tune for drums (Ex. 12d), and tuba (Ex. 12e).

Time-feel manipulation in Blues for Pablo

Conventional performance practice had the ensemble and soloist maintain the same time feel with the occasional double-timing or activation one level up, followed by a return to the initial time-feel. Evans's pervasive bass manipulation brings widespread time feel modifications, often every couple of bars, making navigation of multiple rhythmic/metric layers a central feature of the music. Example 13a charts the tune's profile.

The four main background rhythmic plateaus (sustained, half, single, double time) contain systematic bass line activations that jolt the time by navigating through time feels without shifting, in a sort of tidal fashion. As seen in example 10c, the half time at letter A displays progressive activations that brush four time feel levels before establishing single time at letter B. At the first statement of the blues tune (m.23) the bass spans four time feels in four measures: half, single, double, quadruple, and back to the prevailing single (Ex. 13b). The rhythmic foundation becomes extremely mobile at a point of articulation, such as the beginning of the form, where stability is the norm.

A gradual build up to the next shift follows: a concerted double time pedal in ensemble and rhythm section appears periodically within the prevailing single time until it releases into actual double time at letter C. (Ex. 13c) This represents a sort of rhythmic climax where form and time feel align, with the ensemble and bass matching time feel (quadruple and double respectively, for only a measure). At this point the build up to the highest metric level is complete and the music can relax a little, shifting its focus to the trumpet solo. This process is repeated at letter C2.







Not only the constant pulse and the sense of bar line are deliberately obfuscated, but also the form. Time feels and formal divisions overlap, coinciding only at selected points. At letter A the tune begins at m.3, after the half time is established. Similarly the blues tune begins at m.5 of B. The second and fourth choruses of the blues (C and G) coincide with the climactic shift to double time. Formal division at letter F is glossed over by having the double time pedal continue through the first three measures of the blues instead of releasing.

In conclusion, Evans's innovative treatment of the bass parts enabled him to create unprecedented time-feel variety. While preserving features unique to jazz such as swing feel and use of a rhythm section, Evans transformed the constant-beat dance jazz band into a fluid, multi-tempoed ensemble that merged the rhythmic flexibility of a symphonic orchestra with the practices of jazz. His pivotal expansion of the bass's role was soon adopted by others: immediately after Miles Ahead major jazz musicians⁵ produced work for small and large groups exploring similar concepts, underlining the impact and scope of Evans's vision.

Example 1 Audio. Sonny Rollins Quartet, *Blue 7*, (1956, Prestige LP 7079)

Example 2 Audio. Count Basie and His Orchestra, *Taxi War Dance* (1939, The Essential Count Basie, vol.1, Columbia 40608): no theme, based on the chord progression of “Willow Weep for Me”. 8 measure introduction, then Lester Young improvising with the rhythm section: Basie changes from a boogie-woogie pattern to comping, Freddie Green plays rhythm guitar on every beat, Walter Page plays walking bass, and Jo Jones plays ride cymbal and hi-hat on 2&4.

Example 3a. Time feel hierarchy

no time (fermata)	
"in 1"	
"in 2" or half time	
"in 4" or single time	
double time	
quadruple time	

Example 3b. Time feel relation between winds/soloist and bass/drums.

	single time	double time
winds/soloist		
bass/drums		

Example 8a. Concerted bass lines. *Springsville* (Miles Ahead), mm. 15-21

Example 8b. Bass reiterating pitches for pulse stating purpose. *Maids of Cadiz* (Miles Ahead), mm. 9-12.

The musical score for Example 8b shows three staves. The top staff is for the string bass (labeled 'str. bass (sounding 8vb)'), the middle for tuba (labeled 'tuba'), and the bottom for trombones 3 and 4 (labeled 'tbn. 3-4'). The music is in 4/4 time and features a steady, reiterated bass line across all instruments, with a 'bass cl.' (bass clarinet) also indicated.

THE MAIDS OF CADIZ

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Example 8c. Bass line coloring on pedal. *My Ship* (Miles Ahead), mm. 1-7.

Muccioli, Joe ed. *The Gil Evans Collection: 15 Study and Sketch Scores From Gil's Manuscripts*. Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard.

Example 9a Audio. Bass suppression: harmonic ambiguity. *Chant of the Weed* (Great Jazz Standards), introduction

Example 9b. Bass suppression/substitute bass function: introduction of time feel changes. *Blues for Pablo* (Miles Ahead), mm. 11-14.

The musical score for Example 9b shows three staves. The top staff is for the string bass (labeled 'str. bass (sounding 8vb)'), the middle for tuba (labeled 'tuba'), and the bottom for trombone 4 (labeled 'tbn. 4'). The music is in 4/4 time and features a concerted bass line across all instruments.

BLUES FOR PABLO by Gil Evans

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Example 9c. Substitute bass function with bass solo. *Maids of Cadiz* (Miles Ahead), mm.1-4.

The image shows a musical score for two instruments: strings and tuba. The top staff is for the strings, labeled "str. bass (sounding 8vb)", and is in a bass clef with a key signature of one flat. It features a melodic line with several triplet markings (indicated by a '3' over a bracket) and a slur. The bottom staff is for the tuba, with a key signature of one flat and a common time signature. It consists of four whole notes, each with a triplet of stems above it, and a slur connecting all four notes.

THE MAIDS OF CADIZ

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Example 10a. Bass Line Activation: attracting attention to harmonic events. *My Ship* (Miles Ahead), mm.8-9.

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Example 10b. Bass Line Activation: attracting attention to structural events. *My Ship* (Miles Ahead), mm.14-15.

Muccioli, Joe ed. *The Gil Evans Collection: 15 Study and Sketch Scores From Gil's Manuscripts*. Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard.

Example 10c. Bass Line Activation: foreshadowing and implementing time feel shifts. *Blues for Pablo* (Miles Ahead), mm.3-18.

The musical score is divided into five systems, each with a treble and bass staff. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The time signature starts as 4/4 and shifts to 2/4 (double time) in the third system, then returns to 4/4 (single time) in the fifth system. Annotations in boxes highlight specific musical events: 'bass activation' (bass line becomes more active), 'bass suppression I' (bass line becomes sparse), 'bass activation II' (bass line becomes active again), and 'bass suppression II' (bass line becomes sparse again). 'Line coloring' refers to melodic phrasing in the bass. 'Double time introduced' and 'single time introduced' mark the changes in tempo feel. 'Solo tpt' and 'tpt solo' indicate trumpet parts. Trills and triplets are marked with a '3'.

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Example 11a Audio. Polyrhythmic use of the bass and drums: *Chant of the Weed* (Great Jazz Standards)

Example 11b Audio. *It Ain't Necessarily So.* (Porgy and Bess), beginning.

Example 12a Audio. Use of the bass for melodic statements: improvised. *Flute Song* (The Individualism of Gil Evans).

Example 12b Audio. Use of the bass for melodic statements: written. *Davenport Blues* (Great Jazz Standards), introduction.

Example 12c Audio. Bass doubling tuba. *Bess, You is My Woman Now* (Porgy and Bess)

Example 12d Audio. Melodic use of rhythm section instruments: drums. *Bird Feathers* (New Bottle Old Wine).

Example 12e Audio. Melodic use of rhythm section instruments: tuba. *Struttin' with Some Barbeque* (New Bottle Old Wine).

Example 13a. Outline: *Blues for Pablo* (Miles Ahead) see appendix 1

Example 13b. Bass spans four time feels in four measures: half, single, double, quadruple, and back to single, *Blues for Pablo* (Miles Ahead), mm.23-27.

The image shows a musical score for the bass line of 'Blues for Pablo' by Gil Evans, measures 23-27. The score is written in 7/8 time and consists of four measures. The first measure is in 2/4 time, the second in 4/4, the third in 8/4, and the fourth in 2/4. The bass line features a variety of rhythmic patterns, including triplets and syncopation. The notation is in bass clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat).

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Example 13c. Rhythmic climax: form and time feel align, with the ensemble and bass matching time feel, *Blues for Pablo* (Miles Ahead), mm.31-40.

ens.

str. bass (sounding 8vb.)

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DISCOGRAPHY

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(a reissue of *Miles Ahead* (1957), *Porgy and Bess* (1958), *Sketches of Spain* (1960), and other material)

Gil Evans. *Old Bottle New Wine*. (1958, EMI Manhattan 7 46855 2)

Gil Evans. *Great Jazz Standards*. (1959, Pacific Jazz 7 46856 2)

Gil Evans. *Out of the Cool*. (1961, MCA/ Impulse 5653)

Gil Evans. *The Individualism of Gil Evans* (1964, Verve 833-804-2)

NOTES

1. I wish to thank John Daverio and Jeremy Yudkin for insightful comments on an earlier version of this article.
2. Joel Lester, *The Rhythms of Tonal Music*. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986).
3. Brian Priestly, "Discourse, Part I," *Jazz Journal International* no. 31 (July, 1978), 37.
4. Walter Frisch, *Brahms and the Principle of Developing Variation*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 139.
5. See Bill Evans Trio with Scott La Faro (1961, *Sunday at the Village Vanguard*, Fantasy OJC-140/Riverside 376) for innovative bass playing; Charles Mingus (1959, *Mingus Ah Um*, Columbia: 40648/CL1370) for time feel manipulation (*Fables of Faubus*); Miles Davis (1966, *Miles Smiles*, Columbia 48849/CS9401-CL2601) for polyrhythmic use of the bass and drums (*Footprints*).