

# Wynton Kelly: A Model for Soloing, Comping, and Rhythm Section Interplay

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## Wynton Kelly: A Model for Soloing, Comping, and Rhythm Section Interplay

Jazz critics, musicians, and educators have praised the artistry of pianist Wynton Kelly unanimously. However, Kelly's stylistic traits are yet to receive a diligent and thorough study in an academic setting. This article examines Kelly's abilities for soloing, comping, as well as rhythm section interplay through transcription and analysis. The results of this research have pedagogical significance for jazz pianists, guiding their study of this artist and ultimately strengthening their abilities as sidemen.

**Keywords:** Wynton Kelly, jazz piano comping, rhythm section interplay, jazz piano pedagogy, jazz improvisation.

## Wynton Kelly: un modelo como improvisador, acompañante y de interacción en la sección rítmica

La figura del pianista Wynton Kelly ha sido alabada por críticos, músicos y docentes de jazz por unanimidad. Sin embargo, los rasgos estilísticos de Kelly aún no han sido objeto de un estudio exhaustivo en el ámbito académico. Este artículo examina las habilidades de Kelly como improvisador, acompañante, así como su capacidad de interacción en la sección rítmica a través de transcripciones y análisis. Los resultados de esta investigación tienen un significado pedagógico para pianistas de jazz, orientando su estudio de este artista, y en última instancia, fortaleciendo sus habilidades como acompañantes.

**Palabras clave:** Wynton Kelly, acompañamiento de piano jazz, interacción en la sección rítmica, pedagogía del piano jazz, improvisación en el jazz.

## Wynton Kelly: inprobisazioan, akonpainamenduan eta sekzio erritmikoaren baitako interakzioan eredu

Jazz kritikari, musikari eta irakasleek aho batez goratu dute Wynton Kelly pianista. Hala ere, Kellyren bereizgarri estilistikoak ez dira oraindik esparru akademikoan sakon aztertu. Artikulu honetan Kellyren trebetasunak aztertzen dira inprobisatzaile eta laguntzaile gisa, bai eta sekzio erritmikoan interakziorako gaitasuna ere, transkripzio eta analisiaren bitartez. Ikerketa honen emaitzak jazzeko pianistentzat esanahi pedagogikoa dute, artista honen inguruko ikasketa bideratuz eta, azkenik, laguntzaile gisa trebetasunak sendotuz.

**Gako-hitzak:** Wynton Kelly, jazz pianoaren akonpainamendua, sekzio erritmikoaren interakzioa, jazz pianoaren pedagogia, jazzean inprobisazioa.



Jazz scholars, critics, musicians, and educators have praised pianist Wynton Kelly's skills, unique traits, and creativity unanimously. Some writers think that the pianist's accomplishments during his career have not been recognized with fairness (Hentoff, 1960; Gardner, 1961; Horricks, 1983; Rosenthal, 1992; Priestley, 1995, p. 352), and that none of his recordings as a leader achieved the classic status (Mathieson, 2000, p. 320). Others would go further, asserting he became "almost a forgotten figure" (Nisenson, 2000, p. 132). On the other hand, his fellow jazz musicians (all of them major figures in the development of this music, such as Miles Davis, Bill Evans, Cannonball Adderley, Philly Joe Jones, Hank Mobley, and J. J. Johnson, among others) admired his abilities both as a soloist and as an accompanist categorically. Jazz educators and students have devoted their time and passion to study Kelly's recordings and musical legacy, validating the importance of his contributions. However, Kelly's stylistic traits and unique techniques are yet to receive a diligent and thorough study in an academic setting. This article examines Kelly's approaches to soloing, comping, as well as rhythm section interplay through transcription and analysis.

In this exploration, I will critically analyze interesting quotes by critics and musicians about Kelly's playing, and then relate them to specific musical examples within his discography. These musical examples are discussed using my own transcriptions and analytical tools. The arguments about the pianist presented in this article will help jazz educators and students (pianists specifically) to better understand the factors which made Kelly one of the most in demand and successful sidemen during the late 50s and early 60s. The results of this research will have pedagogical significance for jazz pianists in guiding their study of this artist and ultimately strengthening their abilities as sidemen.

## 1. Critics and Wynton Kelly

Critics and authors have assessed Kelly's career from different perspectives, but there seems to be a consensus about the strength of certain aspects of his playing: lyricism, an exciting rhythmic approach, a unique way to use the blues and the bebop languages, and especially his exceptional role as accompanist. Nisenson observes that "in addition to being funky, Kelly was also a highly lyrical player who combined his blues with a songlike character that made him unique" (2000, p. 132). Priestley states that "He combined bebopish lines and bluesy interpolations, but with a sense of timing quite unlike anyone else except his many imitators" (Carr, Fairweather, and Priestley, 1995, p. 352). In his review to Miles Davis' album *Someday My Prince Will Come* (1961), critic Ira Gitler writes that "Kelly is both melodically and rhythmically stimulating (...) Kelly is excellent throughout the album, both in solo and

accompaniment” (in Alkyer, 2017, pp. 237-238). According to Slater, the pianist was “an accompanist of peerless elegance and lithe authority, Kelly seemed poised to put together a corpus of work, both as a soloist and as a group pianist, that would place him among the undisputed heavyweights of the keyboard” (1986, p. 15). Critic Scott Yanow emphasizes Kelly’s abilities both as a soloist and as an accompanist as well: “A superb accompanist loved by Miles Davis, and Cannonball Adderley, Wynton Kelly was also a distinctive soloist who decades later would be a strong influence on Benny Green” (in Bogdanov, Erlewine, & Woodstra, 2002, p. 704). However, jazz pianist, educator, and scholar Bill Dobbins introduces a shade of meaning: “A consistent and sometimes brilliant improviser, Kelly had exceptional skill as an accompanist, though this often overshadowed his rhythmically infectious solo style [approach to improvisation]” (2002, p. 647). This may explain why he seemed to be “unable to escape the typecast role of a sideman” (Rosenthal, 1992, p. 53).

These statements, although they may be intangible to some degree, are relevant to this discussion since there are some research questions for the jazz performer that may arise after analyzing them critically: What makes Kelly’s improvised lines lyrical or his playing elegant? What gives a songlike character to his use of the blues language? How is he rhythmically stimulating? What makes him a great accompanist? Some of his fellow musicians, such as Philly Joe Jones and Miles Davis, have also described Kelly’s strengths in a metaphorical manner. In the liner notes to *Kelly at Midnight* (1960), Nat Hentoff explains how Miles Davis used to describe him as “the light of a cigarette. Without him, there’s no smoking” (1960). Philly Joe Jones said Kelly “puts down flowers behind a soloist. He never wanted to steal in. He just put the right things” (in Horricks, 1991, p. 171). On the other hand, there are other testimonies by fellow musicians that shed light on the artistry and strengths of the pianist. The following musical examples have been selected by tracing both abstract and more descriptive statements from critics, scholars, and musicians, in order to find more tangible elements in Kelly’s playing that can be studied, assimilated, internalized, and reproduced by jazz piano students.

## 2. Kelly as a soloist

Kelly spoke about some of his early influences in an interview for an article published in 1963 for *DownBeat*, citing bebop pianists Bud Powell, Phineas Newborn, and Walter Bishop Jr., among others. He gives credit to Bud Powell for being “one of the main figures in starting modern jazz piano” (in Lees, 1963, p. 16). Kelly’s improvisations are rooted in the bebop language, but there are other elements that make him unique. Dobbins states that “by fusing earthy blues elements with those of the

bop style as exemplified by Bud Powell, he developed a highly accessible and personal approach to jazz piano playing which influenced many subsequent performers” (2002, p. 647). In Perry’s appreciation, the pianist combines bebop-oriented devices in the style of Bud Powell with motivic development (2006, p. 107). In order to reach a deeper understanding of Kelly’s resources as an improviser I will analyze various techniques that he used and divide them into the following categories: melodic devices, rhythmic devices, harmonic strategies and chord substitution, and pianistic devices.

## 2.1. Melodic devices

Regarding his use of the bebop language, my observation is that although he utilizes the same elements most bebop musicians, and specifically pianists do (arpeggiated figures, passing chromatic notes, neighbor tones, enclosures), he spaces out the use of these devices by utilizing diatonicism as a neutralizing element. His combination of bebop with diatonicism, blues, and motivic development sometimes results in lyrical and cohesive passages such as the beginning statement in his improvised solo on Hank Mobley’s “This I Dig of You” (figure 1)<sup>1</sup>. Kelly starts his solo with a simple diatonic pick up outlining the V7 chord (F7), followed by a bluesy phrase over the I chord (Bb Major)<sup>2</sup>. This bluesy phrase is followed by a couple of diatonic descending 6ths (a consonant interval), providing some lyricism to the line that creates a contrast with the previous chromatic gesture. Then we hear Kelly’s ability to develop a simple motif based on Bb and Cm diatonic triads. In contrast, he chooses to navigate the next chromatic chords (Fm7-Bb7, the ii-V of IV) in a bebop manner, outlining the Fm7 with an arpeggiated figure, and enclosing the 3rd of the target chord (EbMaj7, IV). He continues developing the same triadic motif over the next four measures, and it is this persistence on that motif what provides a cohesive unity to his improvisation and a story-telling character:

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1. On Mobley, H. (1960). *Soul Station*. [CD]. Los Angeles: Blue Note. This example can be associated with Nisenson’s appreciation about Kelly being a “lyrical player” (2000, p. 132).

2. This phrase needs some analysis in order to clarify his placement of chord tones and passing chromatic tones; the Db is on beat 2 (a downbeat), therefore it does not sound as a passing chromatic note, but the characteristic b3 from the minor blues sound. The Eb on beat 3, a downbeat as well, so it is part of the minor blues sound as well. The pianist uses the notes D and E as connecting passing notes within the minor blues sound.



Figure 2: Kelly's combination of diatonic motivic development, bebop devices and blues language on "Temperance" (1:29 - 1:38).

At times Kelly approaches the blues language as modal soloing. There are moments where he appears to be intentionally ignoring the changes<sup>5</sup> and simply playing bluesy motifs with strong conviction, disregarding any harmonic discrepancies that may occur with the chord progression (figure 3). This technique allows him to use the blues language as a tool for motivic development as well (figures 4 and 5).

Figure 3: Kelly's use of the blues language ignoring the changes on "This I Dig of You" (1:03 - 1:10).

5. Jazz musicians commonly refer to the basic chord progression of a song as "the changes".

♩=183

motif (antecedent)  
Eb major blues sound

variation using the blue note as b3

consequent  
(using Eb minor blues sound)

bebop phrase

Figure 4: Kelly's motivic development using the major blues and minor blues sounds on "On Green Dolphin Street"<sup>6</sup> (8:12 - 8:24).

motif using the major blues sound

variation using the blue note as b3

fragmentation

variation using passing chrom. notes

Figure 5: Kelly's motivic development using the major blues and minor blues sounds on "On Green Dolphin Street" (8:55 - 9:05)<sup>7</sup>.

6. Davis, M. (1961). *In Person Friday and Saturday Night at the Blackhawk*. [CD]. New York: Columbia.

7. On Davis, M. (1961). *In Person Friday and Saturday Night at the Blackhawk*. [CD]. New York: Columbia.

When navigating static dominant chords (usually secondary dominants that would last more than one measure), as in “Come Rain or Come Shine”<sup>8</sup>, Kelly’s use of the blues language is unique. He builds a blues sound on the root of that secondary dominant and thus tonicizes that secondary dominant as a temporary I chord with a bluesy quality, as shown in figure 6:

The musical score is in F major. It consists of two systems of two measures each. The first system is for the D7 (V7/ii) chord, and the second system is for the G7 (V7/V) chord. The melody in the right hand features a bluesy phrase in D for the first measure, which is then transposed to G for the second measure. The bass line shows rootless voicings for D7(#9) and G7(13). The key signature is one flat (F major).

Figure 6: Kelly’s use of the blues language tonicizing secondary dominants (2:59 - 3:06)<sup>9</sup>.

Another scenario where Kelly makes effective use of the bebop language is when he improvises double-time lines on medium tempos. It is in this context where his lines more clearly recall Bud Powell’s style, similarly to other pianists from the 50s who were also influenced by Powell, such as Horace Silver, and Sonny Clark. The fact that improvisers need to find more notes per chord when creating double-time lines may explain why Powell and Kelly both use arpeggiated figures and passing chromatic notes in order to have more resources than just the seven notes on the diatonic scale<sup>10</sup>.

8. On Kelly, W. (1961). *Wynton Kelly!* [CD]. Chicago: Vee-Jay.

9. Oscar Peterson and Gene Harris make extensive use of this technique, among others.

10. Notice the similarities between Powell’s and Kelly’s double-time lines, specifically in their use of the blues sound with passing chromatic notes, implying a b3 and a 4 on the downbeats, and their use of arpeggiated figures (figures 7 and 8).



Figure 7: Powell's double-time soloing example on "Celia" (1:09 - 1:12)<sup>11</sup>.

Figure 8: Kelly's double-time soloing example on "Come Rain or Come Shine" (2:20 - 2:25).

## 2.2. Rhythmic devices

In his dissertation *Fundamental rhythmic characteristics of improvised straight-ahead jazz*, Anthony Belfiglio does a comparative rhythmic analysis of Wynton Kelly's and Oscar Peterson's recordings of "Autumn Leaves". Belfiglio summarizes some of the most important characteristics in Kelly's rhythmic approach: a tendency to "favor off-beats for dynamic accent" placement and left-hand comping, a detached eighth note articulation (specially at faster tempos or using fast note values), use of ghost notes, a well-balanced level between both hands (the left hand being softer than the right hand), and a great capacity for crossing the bar lines with his phrasing (2008, pp. 84-88). We find a great example of this latter technique in his improvisation on "On Stage", where Kelly plays a short rhythmic motif that implies an accent every three beats, which creates this effect of crossing the bar lines in the 4x4 meter of the tune (implied in Paul Chambers' bass line and Philly Joe Jones' comping) with these new groupings of three beats:

11. On Powell, B. (1950). *Jazz Giant*. [CD]. New York: Verve.

Figure 9: Kelly's crossing the 4x4 meter bar lines using 3x4 groupings on "On Stage" (3:08 - 3:12).

Belfiglio takes note of the pianist's preference for short phrases (p. 88). This rhythmic choice is what differentiates his approach to improvisation from some of his contemporaries such as Bill Evans or Oscar Peterson, and more specifically, from Bud Powell, all who favored longer lines. It is also the reason why the listener can more easily identify the variety of melodic approaches Kelly uses in his improvisations; it helps Kelly punctuate his statements, and it is clear when he starts and resolves his phrases.

Belfiglio's observation about Kelly's tendency to "favor off-beats for dynamic accent" (p. 84) needs further consideration<sup>12</sup>. Kelly masterfully balances the placing of dynamic accents on off-beats and downbeats (as in figures 2, 3, 7), which serves to settle and stabilize the groove (accents on the downbeats) while creating a forward momentum in his lines (accents on off-beats, especially at the beginning of phrases). Another rhythmic choice that serves as a groove stabilizer is his use of quarter notes within his lines (figures 1 and 5). Kelly shares this predilection for quarter notes with drummer Jimmy Cobb, his teammate in Miles Davis' Quintet, Dinah Washington's group, Dizzy Gillespie's band, and in his own trio and quartet with Wes Montgomery. Something similar occurs when he plays double-time lines on medium tempos, since he places the accents mostly on the downbeats, which helps him lock-in with the bass player's walkin' and the ride cymbal pattern (figures 10 and 11):

12. Belfiglio's analysis is limited to Kelly's interpretation of "Autumn Leaves" on *Wynton Kelly!*



Figure 10: Kelly's places dynamic accents on the downbeats in a double-time line on "Come Rain Come Shine" (1:18 - 1:25).



Figure 11: Kelly's places dynamic accents on the downbeats in a double-time line on "Come Rain Come Shine" (2:10 - 2:14).

There is another distinctive rhythmic choice that Kelly uses frequently to propel his eight-note lines; he starts some of his phrases with a couple of grace notes leading into a downbeat. He places an accent on the first grace note and sometimes another accent on the eighth note following the downbeat:



Figure 12: Kelly's use of grace notes to propel his lines on "Temperance" (0:59 - 1:03).

In some cases, when he is playing long lines, he would insert this grace notes within the lines, creating rhythmic interest and variety:



Figure 13: Kelly's use of grace notes to create rhythmic interest within his lines on "Temperance" (1:09 - 1:15).

### 2.3. Harmonic strategies and chord substitution

Kelly does not make much use of chord substitution in the way of superimposing a new set of changes over the bass player's implied harmonies. However, there are times where he tweaks some chord qualities, in most cases converting minor chords into dominant chords. He tweaks some  $\text{iim7(b5)}$  in minor keys and converts them into a  $\text{V7/V}$  with natural 13th:

The musical score illustrates Kelly's harmonic approach. The bass line provides rootless voicings for  $\text{A7(13)}$  and  $\text{D7(\#9)}$ . The treble line features a bluesy phrase over a  $\text{D7}$  chord, which is annotated as  $\text{Am7(b5)}$  with an  $\text{F\#}$  upper structure triad over  $\text{A7}$ . The piece concludes with a  $\text{Gm}$  chord. A triplet of eighth notes is marked with a '3'.

Figure 14: Kelly tweaking the quality of a  $\text{iim7(b5)}$  on "Autumn Leaves" (2:42 - 2:49)<sup>13</sup>.

### 2.4. Left-hand comping

Belfiglio points out Kelly's well-balanced dynamic level between both hands, being the left-hand part "much softer than the right-hand part" (p. 87)<sup>14</sup>. This is one of the traits that Kelly shares in common with Bud Powell. Besides this quality, Kelly's left hand helps him propel his lines anticipating harmonies on the "ands" of 2 and 4 (in the same way Ahmad Jamal and Red Garland did before), as shown in figures 3, 4, 5, 6, and 14. He tends to anticipate the chord at the "and" of 4 to set up the phrases he starts at the "and" of 1 (figures 5 and 6). His left-hand comping is seamlessly integrated into his soloing.

13. On Kelly, W. (1961). *Wynton Kelly!* [CD]. Chicago: Vee-Jay.

14. I propose to call this skill dynamic independence between both hands; it requires expertise to be able to play out in the right hand in order to cut through the rhythm section (bass, drums), while playing left-hand chords at a softer volume to avoid overpowering the right-hand part.

## 2.5. Pianistic devices

Kelly makes use of some idiomatic pianistic devices such as chord tremolos and block chords. A good example of his use of chord tremolos to build intensity is the end of his solo on “Wrinkles” (6:59 - 7:15)<sup>15</sup>. He, much like Red Garland, uses block chords at the end of solos to increase dynamic intensity, as in “Pot Luck” (figure 15)<sup>16</sup>. Another example of this technique is at the end of the track “Sassy”, this time playing a riff emulating a big band shout chorus (4:14-5:00)<sup>17</sup>.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for piano accompaniment. The first system is marked with a tempo of 180. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. Above the treble staff, three chords are indicated: Eb7, Eb7, and Bb7. The right hand plays a series of block chords, while the left hand plays a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The second system continues with two staves, showing Eb7 and Bb7 chords. The right hand includes triplet markings (indicated by a '3' over a group of notes) and the left hand continues with rhythmic accompaniment.

Figure 15: Kelly's use of block chords on “Pot Luck” (3:20 - 3:31)<sup>18</sup>.

15. On Kelly, W. (1959). *Kelly Great*. [CD]. Chicago: Vee-Jay.

16. There are different types of block chords: the “locked hands” technique consists of harmonizing a melody with four notes in closed position while the left hand doubles the melody, imitating the sound of a saxophone soli in a big band arrangement. This technique is associated with Milt Buckner, and other pianists who mastered it, such as Nat “King” Cole, George Shearing, and Oscar Peterson among others. Another technique commonly referred to as “drop 2” passes the second note from the top of the chord to the bottom of the voicing. Pianists such as Bill Evans and Hank Jones mastered this style. In this example, Kelly uses block chords in the style of Red Garland: melodies in octaves plus a perfect fifth in between, and 4-note rootless voicings in the left hand in rhythmic unison. Kelly makes use of the “drop 2” technique in ballads as an orchestrational device.

17. On Kelly, W. (1961). *Wynton Kelly!* [CD]. Chicago: Vee-Jay.

18. On Kelly, W. (1960). *Kelly at Midnight*. [CD]. Chicago: Vee-Jay.

### 3. Kelly as an accompanist

Kelly's fellow jazz musicians have praised him as an accompanist, and he recorded, among others, with Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Cannonball Adderley, Joe Henderson, Wes Montgomery, Milt Jackson, Benny Golson, Lee Morgan, Clark Terry, and Dexter Gordon. King Curtis, the R & B saxophonist, said about Wynton:

I've heard him with Dinah [Washington] and with Miles. What struck me was that wherever Wynton worked, he fitted in. He's not limited to one kind of playing. With Dinah, he had the taste and the supportive power of a superior accompanist. With me, he had the fire and straightaway swinging my bands have to have. And with Miles, he can be as subtle as Miles requires (in Hentoff, 1960).

Therefore, his versatility was one of the reasons for his success as a sideman. Cannonball Adderley's description of Wynton Kelly's comping skills gives us another important insight as to why soloists held Kelly in such high regard:

When Sid McCoy of Vee-Jay Records asked Frank Strozier (phenomenal young saxophonist) who did he wish to play piano on his Vee-Jay record date, Frank immediately said Wynton Kelly [...] It is next to impossible to evaluate the role played by Wynton Kelly in a band, for he has a "take charge" quality in a rhythm section such as Phil Rizzuto or Eddie Stanky had on a baseball team (in Adderley, 1959).

Saying that Kelly had a "take charge" quality in a rhythm section, Adderley implies that Kelly would take meaningful decisions at the piano that affected not only the soloist but also his rhythm section teammates, rather than just playing chords and providing rhythmic support. In fact, Adderley states Kelly was "perhaps the greatest accompanist for instrumental soloists in jazz". Drummer Jimmy Cobb says "with Wynton —though he didn't use him much on *Kind of Blue*—, he [Miles Davis] had two in one, he had Bill Evans and Red Garland in one Man" (Morton and Cook, 2011, p. 233). Davis acknowledged Wynton for this same reason: "in Wynton Kelly we had a combination of Red Garland and Bill Evans, so we could go any way we wanted to" (Davis & Troupe, 1989, p. 241). Musical analysis is necessary in order to understand Kelly's strengths as an accompanist and the reasons behind these important affirmations.

### 3.1. Rhythm, riffs and calls

One of the similarities between Kelly and Red Garland is the way they support a soloist (Patton, 2013, p. 231). They make use of certain rhythmic formulas that contribute to creating an exciting groove in the rhythm section with a quality of forward motion. Along with Horace Silver, both represent the best examples of supportive comping from the 50s. They always emphasize swing. Garland propelled the rhythm section by playing chords in short attacks accenting the “ands” of 2 and 4, or the *charlestone* figure (beat 1, and “and” of 2). Another rhythmic cell Garland plays frequently is an accented chord on the “and” of three followed by another chord on the next 1, in order to emphasize that new downbeat. Kelly seems to play more on beats 1 (followed by a short chord the “and” of 2) and 3 (followed by the “and” of 4). Kelly sometimes emphasizes beat 4 at the end of four-bar phrases.

The rhythm section formed by Garland, Paul Chambers and Philly Joe Jones has always been being praised for achieving a danceable beat. They had coordinated piano/drums comping figures they sometimes played at the cue of a soloist (Conrad, 2021). Kelly demonstrates this same chemistry both with Philly Joe Jones (figure 16) and Jimmy Cobb<sup>19</sup>.

♩=182

bass solo

Paul Chambers

Wynton Kelly

Philly Joe Jones

Bb7

call

F7

Bb7

response in rhythmic unison

19. We find many examples of this approach in the track “No Blues”, included on Montgomery, W., & Kelly, W. (1965). *Smokin’ at the Half Note*. [CD]. New York: Verve.

The musical score is divided into two systems. The first system shows the A. Bass staff with a melodic line. The Pno. staff has two staves with chords Eb7 and Bb7, and a 'call' bracketed over the first two measures. The Dr. staff has a rhythmic pattern with 'x' marks for notes, and a 'drum fills building intensity' bracketed over the first two measures. The second system shows the A. Bass staff with a melodic line. The Pno. staff has two staves with chords Cm7, F7(sus4), F7(b9), Bb, G7(b13), Cm7, and F7, and a 'call' bracketed over the first two measures. The Dr. staff has a rhythmic pattern with 'x' marks for notes, and a 'drum fills setting up next chorus' bracketed over the last two measures, including a triplet of eighth notes.

Figure 16: Kelly's and Jones' calls and riffs during Chambers solo on "Pot Luck".

### 3.2. Spontaneous call & response with the soloist

The previous technique is an example of the interplay that occurs within the rhythm section between the pianist and the drummer. There are other cases where Kelly interacts melodically or harmonically with the soloist. In Kelly's words: "The way you comp varies from group to group. Some guys will leave a lot of space open for you to fill, like Miles. Others won't. And you have to use your discretion. In general, I like



to stay out of a man's way. But you have to judge it by the situation" (in Lees, 1963, p. 16). In his comping behind Miles Davis' solo on "Someday My Prince Will Come"<sup>20</sup>, there are different moments where Kelly would respond to Miles' by inserting some melodic statements between Davis' phrases, starting an engaging conversation for the listener (Appendix 1, mm. 79-72, mm. 85-88). This technique promotes group interplay, and results in very interesting moments during the performance. We can hear another example of how Miles' playing affects Kelly's decisions and vice versa during the extended open turnaround on "All of You"<sup>21</sup>. The simplicity and cyclical nature of a turnaround seems to be the perfect environment to listen to each other and start this kind of musical conversation. Kelly's bluesy melodic fills have an effect on Miles, who then switches from diatonic gestures to bluesy phrases in his improvisation in a contrasting way (Appendix 2)<sup>22</sup>.

At times, Kelly's response to the soloist's approach is harmonic instead of melodic, presenting different degrees of sophistication and density in his voicings; when he is listening and waiting for the soloist to leave space, he shows a preference for simple two to four left-hand voicings (Appendix 1, mm. 78-80), then responding during the space with some ideas that show a linear approach to harmony and a sophisticated use of voice leading (Appendix 1, mm. 82-84). It also appears that he uses more sophisticated voicings (such as modal voicings resulting from pandiatonicism)<sup>23</sup> and with longer rhythmic values when Miles plays diatonically and rhythmically sparse (Appendix 2), and simpler voicings and in short punches when the soloist plays harmonically and rhythmically complex long phrases, such as John Coltrane on "Someday My Prince Will Come" (5:53 - 7:10).

### 3.3. Form and structural markers

Kelly's voicing choices do not depend only on the soloists' activity and the degrees of complexity in their lines; there are examples where he manages the density in his voicings as a structural device to delineate the form of the song. On turnarounds

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20. On Davis, M. (1961) *Someday My Prince Will Come*. [CD]. New York: Columbia.

21. In Davis, M. (1961). *In Person Friday and Saturday Nights at the Blackhawk*.

22. Nisenson makes an important observation in his appreciation of this album that is connected to my analysis of this example: "Miles' playing and Wynton Kelly's accompaniment at times seem to become a running dialogue. Their almost psychic musical relationship has been compared to that of Louis Armstrong and Earl Hines" (2000, p. 172).

23. The use of pandiatonicism and other modal techniques in functional contexts is a characteristic innovation of Post-Bop pianists such as Bill Evans (Pamies, 2021, pp. 76-87) and Kelly as well (p. 103).

approaching the end of an 8-bar phrase, he tends to use thicker voicings in order to emphasize the arrival to the next structural marker or structural downbeat. In the following example, Kelly plays simple rootless left-hand voicings at a *mezzo piano* dynamic level while Hank Mobley outlines the changes with bebop phrases, and then changes his voicing technique, switching to dense Red Garland inspired block chords at a louder dynamic level (figure 17)<sup>24</sup>:

The figure displays a musical score for the jazz standard "On Green Dolphin Street" in B-flat major. It features four staves:

- Mobley:** Saxophone line with bebop phrases. Above the staff, the chord progression is: Gm7, C7, Fm7, Bb7, Ebmaj7, C7, Fm7, Bb7, Ebmaj7. The melody includes triplet eighth notes and accents.
- Kelly:** Piano accompaniment. The left hand plays simple rootless voicings at a *mp* (mezzo piano) dynamic level. The right hand plays chords, including Eb6, F7(#9), Bb7, Bb7(b9), and Eb6. A dynamic shift to *f* (forte) occurs in the final two bars. A "Structural downbeat (top of next chorus)" is marked at the end of the phrase.
- Chambers:** Bass line showing a "linear approach" to the EbMaj7 chord in the final two bars.
- Standard Changes:** A drum staff with a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, with chord symbols Gm7, C7, Fm7, Bb7, Ebmaj7, C7, Fm7, Bb7, and EbMaj7 written below it.

Figure 17: Kelly emphasizes the arrival to the structural downbeat on "On Green Dolphin Street" (4:29 - 4:35).

Another example of using voicings as a resource to portray structural units is found in the pedal point during the "A" sections of this same recording of "On Green Dolphin Street" (ABAC form), where Kelly makes use of "So What" voicings in two

24. For more information on structural markers and structural downbeat, read Berliner (1994, p. 334), and Hodson (2007, p. 78).

variants<sup>25</sup>. The consistency in using this particular voicing during the “A” sections creates a contrasting texture with the “B” and “C” sections of the song (figures 18 and 19):

Figure 18: Kelly’s use of “So What” voicings on “On Green Dolphin Street” (3:58 - 4:03).

Figure 19: Kelly’s denser variation of “So What” voicings on “On Green Dolphin Street” (4:19 - 4:24).

Besides switching chord voicing techniques, Kelly makes a clever use of rhythm to delineate the form (ABAC) of “Someday My Prince Will Come” (see Appendix 1 for the following measures references). During the A sections (mm. 37-44, and 53-60), Kelly plays a punctuated short chord every two beats, implying a 4x4 meter on top of the original 3x4 meter that we hear in Cobb’s brush pattern and Davis’ interpretation of the melody. In addition to the tension created by this polyrhythm, Kelly uses dense

25. Bill Evans uses “So What” voicings on this same tune playing with Miles Davis’ group in 1958 (Pamies, 2021, pp. 79-81). Evans recognized he was a fan of Davis before joining his group, and therefore “was familiar with the things they did” (Gleason, 2016, p. 201). Kelly may have inherited the use of these voicings and other techniques from Evans, his predecessor in Davis’ group.

upper structure triad voicings. All this tension is resolved at the arrival to the B (m. 45) and C (m. 61) sections. These texture changes, together with the modal treatment of the F pedal point during the introduction, invigorate the tune, manipulating tension and release underneath its lyrical melody.

## Conclusions

According to Mathieson, Wynton Kelly is best known for his work with other leaders, as he is featured in some of the most canonical jazz albums, such as *Kind of Blue*, *Giant Steps*, and *Soul Station* (2000, pp. 316-321). I would add *Smokin' at the Half Note*, and *Someday My prince Will Come* to that list. Giddins believes that even though he was close to reaching success throughout his collaboration with Wes Montgomery, his early and untimely death may have prevented him from doing so (2004, p. 93). Slater agrees that Kelly's early death prevented him from being "a major and significant force in jazz". On the other hand, Lees points to a different direction: "If they gave awards for unpretentiousness, Wynton Kelly would win a large loving cup" (1963, p. 16). When Lees asked the pianist about forming his own group, he did not show any pressing urge: "It's in the back of my mind, but not now". He recognized that he loved to accompany: "In fact, at one point, I didn't like to solo. I'd just like to get a groove going and never solo".

In an academic setting, Kelly's career needs to be evaluated from an objective study of his strengths and contributions, and not on his commercial success. The analyses presented in this article have revealed some of the pianist's strengths as a soloist and as an accompanist. He reworked the bebop language by balancing bebop elements with diatonic oriented motivic development and a modal use of the blues. His modal approach to the blues language avoids the redundancy of his lines outlining the same harmonies that the bass player and the left-hand comping suggest. His improvisations are rhythmically varied because of his use of grace notes which propel the beginning of his lines or create interest within long eighth note motion. His predilection for quarter notes and thoughtful placement of dynamic accents also contribute to his rhythmic variety. As an accompanist, he displays an outstanding capacity to understand, create, and use space, an ability to emphasize structural markers, and a sophisticated use of different voicing techniques.

Kelly represents the bridge between the supportive comping of Red Garland and the conversational comping of Bill Evans, and had a direct influence on Herbie Hancock and McCoy Tyner (Pekar, in Alkyer 2017, p. 252; Lyons 1989, p. 273; Dobbins 2002, p. 647). Jazz pianists need to study Kelly's contributions in order to reach a deeper understanding of the aesthetics of Post-Bop rhythm section interplay.

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## Appendix 1

### "Someday My Prince Will Come" As played by Miles Davis on *Someday My Prince Will Come* (Columbia, 1961)

Frank Churchill, Larry Morey  
Transcription and analysis: Sergio Farnies

**Introduction**

♩ = 168

The score is divided into two systems. The first system includes staves for Miles Davis (trumpet), Wynton Kelly (piano), and Paul Chambers (bass). Miles Davis has a melodic line starting with a quarter rest, followed by a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. Wynton Kelly has a bass line with a quarter note G2, a quarter note A2, and a quarter note B2. Paul Chambers has a bass line with a quarter note G2, a quarter note A2, and a quarter note B2. The second system includes staves for Tpt., Pno., and A. Bass. Miles Davis has a melodic line starting with a quarter rest, followed by a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. Wynton Kelly has a bass line with a quarter note G2, a quarter note A2, and a quarter note B2. Paul Chambers has a bass line with a quarter note G2, a quarter note A2, and a quarter note B2. The score includes various annotations such as 'Pedal point over the dominant (V) throughout the entire introduction', 'Ambiguous modal voicing', and 'Rootless voicing in open position implies F7(b9,13)'. The score is marked with a '5' and a '6' at the beginning of the second system.

Miles Davis

Wynton Kelly

Paul Chambers

Pedal point over the dominant (V) throughout the entire introduction

8va

5

Tpt.

Pno.

A. Bass

Ambiguous modal voicing

Ambiguous modal voicing

Rootless voicing in closed lock-hands position implies F7(sus4)

Rootless voicing in open position implies F7(b9,13)

(6)

13

Tpt.

Pno.

A. Bass

F phrygian voicing approaching F7(b9,13)

Ambiguous modal voicing

F7(sus4)

F7(b9,13)

F7(b9, #11, 13)

8va

21

Tpt.

Pno.

A. Bass

Improvised lines

Cm bebop phrase

Diatonic lyrical gesture

8va



29

Tpt.

Pno.

A. Bass

Motivic development using leaps in consonant intervals

gtr

Head In

A (0:40)

37 Harmon mute

Tpt.

Pno.

A. Bass

Kelly plays a short punctuated chord every two beats, implying a 4x4 meter on the top of the rhythm section's 3x4, building tension

4x4

4x4

4x4

4x4

4x4

4x4

gtr

Pedal point over the dominant (V) continues

45

Tpt.

Pno.

A. Bass

Tension released

Pandiatonicism (modal technique in a functional context)

Pandiatonicism (modal voicing)

Kelly plays at a louder dynamic to emphasize the end of the 8 bar phrase

Chambers starts playing a long root every downbeat

**B** (0:58)

53

Tpt.

Pno.

A. Bass

Kelly repeats the same device, building tension again

61

Tpt.

Pno.

A. Bass

Tension released

Higher and more dense voicings (upper structure triads) to emphasize the arrival to the next structural downbeat

F triad over Bb7(b9,13)

Bb triad over Cm7

Eb triad over C7

D triad over F7

Bb6/9

Bb7(b13)

Eb6/9

Eo7

Bbmaj7/F

G7(b9,13)

Cm7

The B on the root makes Kelly's voicing sound as a Bb7(b9), the tritone substitute for F7

Davis' solo

C (1:16)

69

Tpt.

Pno.

A. Bass

Structural downbeat

Melodic response

Melodic response

Dense chord voicings to emphasize the end of the 8 bar phrase

upper structure triad

Bbmaj7

Eb6

G7

Cm

G7

Cm7

F7

77

Space (listening)  
L.H. voicings only

Harmonic responses  
using two-handed modal voicings and upper structure triads,  
emphasizing the end of the 8 bar phrase

Tpt.

Pno.

A. Bass

Dm Cm7 F7 Dm Cm7 F7

**D** (1:35)

85

Bluesy melodic responses in the right hand

Tpt.

Pno.

A. Bass

Bbmaj7 D7 Eb6 G7 Cm G7 Cm F7

(track continues...)

93

Tpt.

Pno.

A. Bass

Bbmaj7 Bb7(4b) Eb6 Eo7 F7(sus4) G7 Cm7 B7

Kelly gradually increases the density in his voicings, building tension in order to emphasize the arrival to the next structural downbeat

## Appendix 2

### "All of You" (Excerpt, from 3:22 to 4:18) As played by Miles Davis on *In Person Friday and Saturday Nights at the Blackhawk* (Columbia, 1961)

Transcription and analysis: Sergio Pamies  
Cole Porter

♩ = 135

Harmon mute

Miles Davis

Wynton Kelly

Paul Chambers

Davis

Kelly

Chambers

Kelly gradually increases the density of the voicings building tension, providing contrast to Miles' lyrical statements

Resolves the tension (upper structure) voicing on beat 4

Modal voicings (pandiatonism)

Chambers plays a groovy two feel Jimmy Cobb plays with brushes

Miles' reaction to Kelly's dense voicings

Bluesy melodic fill

tritone substitute subV7/ii

Chord voicings: Fm7, Bb7(sus4), G7, C7(#9), C7(♭9), Fm7(add13), Bb7(sus4), G7, C7, Fm7, Gm, (Ab), Bb7, Gm, C7, Gm7(♭5), Fm7, Gm7(♭9), Bb7, Eb6, C7(♯11), C7(#9), Bb7, Gm, (Ab), (A♭7), Bb7, Fm7, Gm, (Ab), C7, Fm, Gm, Bb7, Gm, Gb7.

Miles' bluesy statements in reaction to Kelly's comping

Bluesy melodic fills

Croovy rhythmic accompaniment emphasizing the "ands" of 2 and 4 in the style of Red Garland, propelling the rhythm section

When Miles comes back to lyrical diatonic statements...

...Kelly plays more sophisticated voicings...

Miles quotes the melody to signal the end of the open turnaround (track continues...)

Consequence: rhythm section break

Resolution of tension on beat 4

Contrapuntal line

13 b13 5 #9 b9

3