

Gunther Schuller and the Challenge of Sonny Rollins: Stylistic Context, Intentionality, and Jazz Analysis

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Few works of jazz scholarship have been more influential—or controversial—than Gunther Schuller's 1958 article “Sonny Rollins and the Challenge of Thematic Improvisation.”¹ Jazz theorists typically view its “illuminating”² close analysis of Rollins's 1956 tenor saxophone solo on “Blue 7” as one of their discipline's founding statements, even if its ad hoc methodology has been largely superseded by more sophisticated and rigorous interpretative models.³ The essay also shaped public perceptions of the saxophonist as an archetypal exponent of thematic improvisation—in which a solo is based on its theme's melodic motives—and it led the “Blue 7” recording to be canonized in many jazz history texts. Music historians and ethnomusicologists nevertheless tend to regard Schuller's near-total exclusion of cultural considerations, and his uncritical presentation of this approach as neutrally empirical, as epitomizing the ideological follies of formalism. In their eyes, he commits the cardinal error of evaluating Rollins's music by Eurocentric criteria that efface or distort the meanings it would have held for the saxophonist himself as a postwar African-American musician.⁴

The principal point of contention, in short, has been the essay's methodological validity. However frequently analytically disposed readers have questioned whether the technique of thematic improvisation is typical of Rollins's playing, whether it is applicable to more than a few selected passages of the

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1. Schuller, “Sonny Rollins and the Challenge of Thematic Improvisation.” Subsequent citations herein will refer to the reprint in Walser, *Keeping Time*, 212–22.

2. Owens, “Analysing Jazz,” 289.

3. Rollins, “Blue 7,” *Saxophone Colossus* (Prestige 7079, 1957), rec. June 22, 1956; currently available on a compact disc reissue (Prestige PRCD 8105-25). Henry Martin calls Schuller's article “possibly the first piece of jazz writing to analyze a work in musical detail for the sole purpose of showing its structural depth and, by implication, the depth of fine jazz improvisation more generally”; “Jazz Theory: An Overview,” 10.

4. See, for example, Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction*, 133–37; Walser, “Deep Jazz,” 285–89; and Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool*, 181, 195–96.

performance,⁵ whether it was unprecedented in jazz,⁶ or whether it is even a positive attribute *per se*,⁷ they have seldom doubted Schuller's basic claim that the saxophonist took this approach on the twelve-bar-blues improvisation entitled "Blue 7." Culturally attuned scholars have also generally accepted that Schuller's interpretation is internally consistent—that his vision is clear even if he gazes at jazz from the wrong angle.⁸ In either case the details of his analysis and of Rollins's music have not been granted the close consideration they deserve, given the article's enduring influence, positive or negative, upon jazz research, jazz history pedagogy, and prevailing conceptions of the saxophonist's artistry.

This state of affairs is more than a little unfortunate because there is substantial evidence that Rollins did not in fact derive his solo from the motives of "Blue 7" and that the music in question is not thematically unified, at least not in the way that Schuller claims. The evidence has gone unnoticed by all but a few commentators, largely because it resides in the realm of the saxophonist's general musical language and that of his peers, rather than within the 1956 performance itself. Indeed, the most comprehensive lesson to be learned from revisiting this familiar recording is that stylistic context is crucial. Though jazz solos can of course be productively analyzed in isolation from a purely listener-oriented standpoint, we can generally gain richer insights by interpreting them as spontaneous hypostatizations of their creators' stylistic idioms rather than as discrete onetime events. In the case of "Blue 7," longstanding misapprehensions begin to recede once we also consider the broader historical context of the recording's creation and reception, beginning with the figures of Schuller and Rollins themselves.

In 1957, when Prestige Records first released Rollins's "Blue 7" on the album *Saxophone Colossus*, Schuller (b. 1925) was serving as principal French

5. Wilson, *Sonny Rollins*, 65.

6. Collier argues that similar structural features can be heard on earlier recordings, such as Joe "King" Oliver's 1923 cornet solo on "Dippermouth Blues" (Gennett 5132-A, rec. April 6, 1923); *Making of Jazz*, 451. See also Gioia, *History of Jazz*, 283; and Palmer, *Sonny Rollins*, 41–42.

7. André Hodeir deems thematic improvisation "a delusion to be avoided" on the grounds that it can "only sterilize jazzmen's sense of improvisation. . . . Many will probably regard the thematic approach as a mere recipe with which to fill the gaps in their imagination"; "Monk or the Misunderstanding," 173–74.

8. Monson writes—referring to Schuller's remarks elsewhere on Louis Armstrong—that "there are many aspects of this Western aesthetic ideal that jazz improvisation and composition have embodied very well, as Schuller's praise indicates"; *Saying Something*, 135; and Walser contends that "when [Rollins] composed his [1958] *Freedom Suite*, he used a single melodic figure as the basis for development and improvisation, and something of the same cohesion and economy of means clearly is present in 'Blue 7.' But I differ from Schuller in thinking that this is by no means the most significant aspect of the piece"; "Deep Jazz," 288. Lawrence Gushee likewise does not contest Schuller's findings but simply argues that the article gives short shrift to other facets of Rollins's playing such as its "power to capture the imagination" and "glory of the imperfect"; "Review: *Sonny Rollins and the Big Brass* [Metrojazz E1002]," 75–76.

hornist with New York's Metropolitan Opera Orchestra.⁹ Still in his early thirties, he had also been active for close to a decade in the jazz world, recording with leading musicians such as Miles Davis, John Lewis, and Gigi Gryce.¹⁰ And he was beginning to make his mark as a critic: in a lecture at Brandeis University that same year, he coined the influential term "third stream" to describe the contemporary school of composition that sought to integrate jazz with avant-garde art music.¹¹ In the decades since, as his career grew to include further accomplishments as a composer, conductor, writer, educator, and administrator, Schuller's reputation as a jazz scholar has principally remained that of a staunchly formalist critic and historian. In actuality, his publications encompass a range of interpretative perspectives that is rather more nuanced, balanced, and multidimensional than some of his critics have allowed. He is acutely attuned to the music's cultural significance, attentive to its social milieu and communicative social functions, deeply cognizant of its African roots, and willing to acknowledge with humility that it encompasses realms of meaning that defy analytical explanation.¹²

Nonetheless, classical music's standard practices and conceptual orthodoxies have always been Schuller's point of reference. He recalls, for instance, that his years performing under many of the twentieth century's greatest conductors at the Met instilled in him an enduring reverence for notated musical scores, which he eventually came to regard as "sacred document[s]."¹³ And he takes for granted that a jazz instrumentalist improvises in much the same way that a classical composer crafts a score, insofar as both processes involve materializing abstract musical ideas. Presupposing a strict dichotomy between any piece of music's abstract form—chiefly its pitches and rhythms—and its concrete realization as a score or as sound, Schuller writes that "part of the composer's ability to know that which makes him a composer, is his ability to make his 'best' choice at a given moment of time and to commit it to paper (or if he is a jazz improviser to instantly commit it to his instrument)."¹⁴ Jazz, he believes, is distinguished by performance techniques such as swing rhythms and "individualization of timbre,"¹⁵ whereas its abstract

9. The album was reviewed in *Down Beat* magazine in mid-1957; Gleason, "Sonny Rollins: *Saxophone Colossus*."

10. Davis, *Birth of the Cool*; Schuller, Lewis, Giuffre, and Johnson, *Music for Brass*; Gryce, *Nica's Tempo*.

11. Schuller, "Third Stream," 3:745.

12. On jazz's African roots, see Schuller, *Early Jazz*, 3–62. For examples of Schuller's writings on jazz's social and meanings and the limitations of analysis, see his comments on Lester Young and Charlie Christian; Schuller, *Swing Era*, 555, 562, and 564; and on Young and Billie Holiday; Schuller, *Gunther Schuller: A Life in Pursuit of Music and Beauty*, 497–98.

13. Schuller, *Compleat Conductor*, vii. Schuller played under conductors such as Arturo Toscanini, Fritz Reiner, Pierre Monteux, George Szell, and Bruno Walter; *ibid.*, viii.

14. Schuller, "Qualitative Evaluation in the Arts," 252.

15. Schuller writes, "It seems to me that, except for the swing or rhythmic characteristics of jazz performance, the highly individualized sonority aspects of jazz—the sounds of jazz, as

form is similar enough to classical music's that it can be analyzed and evaluated by identical structural criteria (thus, his concept of "thematic improvisation" in jazz clearly echoes the Schoenbergian notion of "developing variation" in Western art music).¹⁶ He has never wavered from this conviction, asserting as recently as 2006 that "if you analyze one of [Duke] Ellington's hundreds of [jazz] masterpieces with the same criteria that you would analyze a Beethoven string quartet or a Brahms symphony . . . that is to say the melodic invention, the harmonic invention, the form, the structure, the perfect continuity. . . . Ellington did the same thing except that he . . . had to do it in a three-minute timing."¹⁷ His commitment to artistic autonomy and formal integrity ultimately places him within the philosophical orbit of high modernists such as the serial composer Milton Babbitt, a longtime associate whom he first met in 1950.¹⁸ Schuller places the onus on jazz to live up to these aesthetic principles.

Schuller's outwardly universalist critical perspective, however outmoded in academic circles today, dovetails readily with mid-twentieth-century liberal politics, given the obvious racial subtext to any argument for jazz's artistic legitimacy. At the time of his article's publication, with the national struggle for racial equality in the United States gathering momentum in the wake of the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board* school desegregation ruling, Schuller would likely have found today's prevailing cultural relativism redolent of the recently overturned legal doctrine of "separate but equal."¹⁹ Throughout his career he has remained an ardent musical integrationist, championing third-stream composition and juxtaposing jazz and classical music on concert programs, years before such catholic presentations became common.²⁰ As he harnessed his social capital on behalf of the cause of jazz, Schuller rarely, if ever, overtly acknowledged either his position of relative cultural privilege or his underlying egalitarian political motivations, a reticence that might with hindsight

musicians simply call it—are its most obviously distinguishing and memorable surface features"; "What Makes Jazz Jazz?", 27.

16. Arnold Schoenberg defines developing variation in "Bach," 397. See also Frisch, *Brahms and the Principle of Developing Variation*, 1–6; and Grimes, "Schoenberg/Brahms Critical Tradition Reconsidered," 129–31.

17. Schuller, Public discussion forum at Skidmore College, November 17, 2006.

18. Schuller, *Gunther Schuller*, 507. Richard Taruskin cites Babbitt as an exemplar of the school of "musical autonomists . . . who regard the absolute 'meaning' of a work of art as a matter of abstract internal relationships"; *Text and Act*, 74.

19. Richard Taruskin observes that Schuller likewise advocated for third stream composition "in terms that unabashedly proclaimed the values, and even the slogans, associated with the liberal integrationist moment in American social policy"; *Oxford History of Western Music*, vol. 5: *The Late Twentieth Century*, 337. The integrationist political dimension of 1950s jazz criticism is discussed in Mark Tucker, "Review: Musicology and the New Jazz Studies," 142. Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr. notes that the writings of Schuller and other postwar jazz critics, such as Leonard Feather and Martin Williams, "are usually thought to be anything but overtly 'political'"; *Race Music*, 110.

20. Schuller, *Gunther Schuller*, 58, 451; Wilson, "Jazz Unit Makes Town Hall Debut, 23.

appear to bespeak a naive lack of self-examination but which in its time could be attributed equally to modesty and strategic prudence. Still, as one of just a handful of professional musicians deeply immersed in both the classical and jazz scenes of midcentury New York City, he was well aware that the two idioms, while coexisting geographically, largely remained worlds apart.²¹

Born in Harlem in 1930, Sonny Rollins was still in his teens when he began playing and recording with prominent postwar jazz musicians such as vocalist Babs Gonzales, trombonist J. J. Johnson, and pianist Bud Powell. His nascent career was almost derailed at its outset by drug addiction—he spent most of 1950 and 1952 incarcerated on Rikers Island for armed robbery and narcotic possession—yet, freed on parole, he rapidly regained his professional foothold, making sideman appearances on recordings by Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, and Thelonious Monk.²² In 1955, following several months at the United States Narcotic Farm rehabilitation facility in Lexington, Kentucky, he began a year-long stint with the Clifford Brown–Max Roach Quintet, whose bebop-derived melodic complexity, precision-executed arrangements, high-intensity ensemble interaction, and overtly blues-based musical rhetoric exemplified what became known as the “hard bop” jazz style.²³ A busy performance itinerary and prolific album releases over the next four years secured his standing as one of jazz’s titanic figures.²⁴ Then, upon returning from his first European tour in 1959, he took a two-year hiatus from concertizing and recording, devoting himself to intensive studying and practicing.²⁵

No single album looms larger in Rollins’s discography than *Saxophone Colossus*, recorded at audio engineer Rudy Van Gelder’s Hackensack, New Jersey, home studio on June 22, 1956, with pianist Tommy Flanagan (1930–2001), bassist Doug Watkins (1934–1962), and the saxophonist’s erstwhile employer, drummer Max Roach (1924–2007).²⁶ Besides the eleven-minute leisurely paced “Blue 7,” the disc features another of the saxophonist’s

21. Schuller reflects that “among my many admirers I would guess that at least half of them know me only in regard to one of the six or seven arenas in which I have been active”; *Gunther Schuller*, 420.

22. On this period of Rollins’s career, see Stern, “Sonny Rollins,” 223–24; Nisenson, *Open Sky*, 33–69; and Gross, *All I Did Was Ask*, 215–17.

23. See, for instance, Gioia, *History of Jazz*, 286. For more on Rollins’s involvement with the Brown–Roach Quintet, see Rosenthal, *Hard Bop*, 30–35.

24. By late 1957, New Yorker critic Whitney Balliett declared Rollins “possibly the most courageous improviser since Charlie Parker”; “Jazz: Hot and Cold,” 209.

25. It was during this hiatus that Rollins famously spent many days practicing on the pedestrian walkway of New York’s Williamsburg Bridge. Rollins may have had both artistic and personal reasons for suspending his career; in a 1961 interview he said that “I quit playing professionally . . . so I could: 1) experiment with my music, 2) study my horn, and 3) end a drinking habit which had become serious. I accomplished this and as a result am a much happier man”; “Absent 2 Years, Sonny Rollins Returns to the Jazz Scene,” 60.

26. For an overview of the album’s impact, with particular focus on the original issue’s visual design, see Cawthra, *Blue Notes in Black and White*, 201–2.

most acclaimed recordings, the calypso “St. Thomas,”²⁷ along with a pair of jazz standards and one other original. The album received favorable initial reviews from journalists such as *Down Beat* magazine’s Ralph J. Gleason and *The New Yorker*’s Whitney Balliett, but its long-term reception has been most decisively shaped by Schuller’s article, albeit indirectly.²⁸ For a 1964 reissue, Ira Gitler’s original liner notes were replaced with new annotations by Martin Williams, who had published Schuller’s 1958 article as coeditor of *The Jazz Review*.²⁹ Schooled in the literary New Criticism, Williams was a strong advocate of close analytical readings of jazz, though in practice he deferred the task to others because he lacked formal musical training.³⁰ His new album notes directly reference Schuller’s article, summarize its argument, and conclude with a single-sentence paragraph proclaiming: “‘Blue 7’ is a masterpiece.”³¹ This brief text, which still accompanies the album’s twenty-first-century compact disc reissues, cemented the enduring reputation of Schuller’s analysis, perpetuated the notion of Rollins as a “thematic” improviser, and inevitably played a pivotal role in canonizing “Blue 7” as a vaunted touchstone of recorded jazz. Williams reiterated his comments in his 1970 book, *The Jazz Tradition*, and with even more far-reaching consequences he selected “Blue 7” for inclusion in the 1973 *Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz*, an anthology of recordings that for two decades was a mainstay of academic jazz history curricula.³² A generation of college students heard their first jazz recordings on the *Smithsonian Collection*, whose accompanying booklet reprinted an excerpt from Williams’s 1964 liner notes; many jazz history textbooks followed suit by citing “Blue 7” and Schuller’s article when they came to discuss Rollins’s artistic

27. On “St. Thomas,” see Blancq, *Sonny Rollins*, 68–69; Wilson, *Sonny Rollins*, 68–69; and Kernfeld, *What to Listen For in Jazz*, 132–36, 143–44, 166.

28. Gleason, “Sonny Rollins: Saxophone Colossus”; Balliett, “Musical Events: Jazz Records,” 85–86.

29. Williams’s coeditor was critic Nat Hentoff.

30. On Williams’s intellectual background and critical perspective, see Giddins, *Faces in the Crowd*, 256–60; and Gennari, *Blowin’ Hot and Cool*, 180–92. Friends and colleagues of Williams recollect that his musical literacy was minimal, perhaps even non-existent; Scott DeVeaux, personal conversation, March 2008; Lewis Porter, e-mail communication, June 8, 2011; Dan Morgenstern, e-mail communication, June 8, 2011.

31. Gitler, liner notes for *Saxophone Colossus*, original 1957 release; Williams, liner notes for *Saxophone Colossus*, 1964 rerelease. Both Gitler’s and Williams’s notes are reprinted on the album’s CD reissue.

32. Williams, *Jazz Tradition*, 2nd revised ed., 183–85. Idem, booklet accompanying *The Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz*, 39–40. See also his booklet accompanying the 1987 revised edition of *The Smithsonian Collection*, 84–86. In *Jazz Tradition*, Williams adds an analytical overview of another of Rollins’s recordings, “Blues for Philly Joe” (from the album *Newk’s Time* [Blue Note 4001, 1958]), which, he argues, also utilizes thematic variation techniques (*Jazz Tradition*, 185–86); this analysis was evidently inspired by Chuck Israels’s review, “Sonny Rollins: *Newk’s Time* (Blue Note 4001),” 25. Blancq, heavily indebted to Schuller’s work, provides a thorough overview of Rollins’s improvisational techniques during the 1950s in *Sonny Rollins*, 59–75.

contributions.³³ Over the years, Schuller's analysis became essentially received wisdom, with "Blue 7" perennially appearing on journalists' and critics' lists of classic jazz recordings.³⁴

In a nutshell, Schuller's analysis deals with recurrent melodic patterns. The first twelve bars that Rollins plays, which Schuller calls the theme, or "head," contain figures that reappear later during the saxophone solo; other patterns are replicated solely within the ensuing improvisation without any relationship to the "head" melody (at least, none that Schuller identifies). In his article, Schuller never directly specifies whether both of these sorts of musical relationships—between "head" and solo, and purely within the solo—qualify as "thematic improvisation." He also uses two other related adjectives—"structural," and "motivic"—to characterize the performance's musical coherence: "With Rollins," he writes, "thematic and structural unity have at last achieved [an] importance in pure improvisation,"³⁵ adding elsewhere that "there is now a tendency among a number of jazz musicians to bring thematic (or motivic) and structural unity into improvisation."³⁶ But he never defines these additional terms either, employing them more for rhetorical purposes than as strict theoretical concepts.

Although this vagueness shrouding the article's key concepts may have afforded Schuller some advantageous interpretive flexibility, it has given rise to terminological inconsistency among writers who draw upon his work in a more exacting analytical vein. Barry Kernfeld mainly uses the adjective "motivic," applying it broadly to improvisations containing melodic development that occurs "either in response to a theme or independently."³⁷

33. Textbooks that cite Schuller's argument uncritically include Tirro, *Jazz: A History*, 309–10; Sales, *Jazz*, 173–74; and Martin, *Enjoying Jazz*, 128–29. Somewhat less deferential to Schuller, though referencing his work nonetheless, are Collier, *Making of Jazz*, 451; and Porter and Ullman, *Jazz*, 264–65.

34. See, for example, Gayford, "100 Best Jazz Recordings"; and "History of Modern Music: Jazz—Download the Playlist."

35. Schuller, "Sonny Rollins," 213.

36. *Ibid.*, 214.

37. Kernfeld, "Improvisation," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*, 2:315. Earlier in his career, Kernfeld used the term "motivic improvisation" slightly differently, applying it primarily to melodic relationships *within* an improvisation—or even between two or more separate improvisations; "Adderley, Coltrane, and Davis at the Twilight of Bebop," 17; see also *idem*, "Two Coltranes," 12. Kernfeld's early usage reflects the influence of Thomas Owens, who at one time used "motive" to describe melodic fragments that jazz improvisers replicate from one performance to another: see his "Charlie Parker: Techniques of Improvisation," 1:17. Owens later substituted the term "formula" for "motive" in his *Bebop: The Music and Its Players*, 30. Further complicating matters, Henry Martin, in summarizing Kernfeld's four-part taxonomy of jazz improvisation types, revises Kernfeld's definition of "motivic improvisation" by limiting it only to relationships between an improvisation and a head melody; *Charlie Parker and Thematic Improvisation*, 34. For a more thorough discussion of these terminological variances, see Givan, "Jazz Taxonomies."

Henry Martin instead adopts the term “thematic,” defining it more restrictively as a solo’s “relationship to the head, which at some times may be clearly discernible, but at other times more abstruse.”³⁸ While Schuller addresses several different aspects of musical unity in Rollins’s solo, his summary remarks unequivocally privilege the “idea of developing and varying a *main* theme, and not just a secondary motive or phrase which the player happens to hit upon in the course of his improvisation and which in itself is unrelated to the ‘head’ of the composition.”³⁹ He has more recently reaffirmed this definition by describing thematic improvisation, with reference to his 1958 article, as “having your improvisation refer to the theme.”⁴⁰

Schuller’s claim that “Blue 7” exhibits thematic improvisation, so defined, rests on just two short passages. The first is Rollins’s opening twelve-bar chorus—the so-called theme. Preceding this chorus is a two-chorus bass solo by Watkins, partially accompanied by Roach, that primes the ensuing performance for maximum creative latitude by skeletally delineating what was, at the time, jazz’s simplest standard formal structure. Schuller singles out a six-note melodic pattern that Rollins plays three times during his first saxophone chorus, calling it “motive A”; the pattern is bracketed at measures 26–27, 30–31, and 34–35 in the transcription displayed in Example 1.⁴¹ Because Schuller’s chosen term, “motive,” has connotations that I believe ought not to be taken for granted in this context, I will here refer to this melodic pattern by a more neutral label: “cell A.” The melodic cell characteristically moves in eighth notes (or sixteenth notes when played in double time), with its first and fifth notes falling in the strongest metrical locations. Its harmonic context varies somewhat, but typically its first two pitches, a falling minor third, are double-neighbor prefixes to the consonant third note, and the fourth note is an ascending passing note to the fifth. (In its very first appearance, asterisked at measures 26–27, cell A’s first pitch occurs a half-step higher relative to the others, a discrepancy whose significance will emerge below.) The final pitch is the same as the second, functioning as a rather quizzical, droll dissonance, neither prepared nor resolved—a tongue-in-cheek, unorthodox rhetorical gesture. In measures 27, 31, and 35 this final dissonant pitch is E \sharp ,

38. Martin, *Charlie Parker and Thematic Improvisation*, 38. Martin also thoroughly airs the underlying question of whether these sorts of melodic relationships are consciously intended by the improviser or simply objectively present; *ibid.*, 36–39. This issue is of no small significance, for some of the most problematic aspects of Schuller’s “Blue 7” analysis are not its empirical findings but its further claims about Rollins’s artistic intent; *ibid.*

39. Schuller, “Sonny Rollins,” 222.

40. Schuller, Public discussion forum at Skidmore College, November 17, 2006.

41. This passage appears in Schuller’s example 1 (“Sonny Rollins,” 215).

Example 1 “Blue 7,” mm. 25–36 (0:44–1:05). A sound recording of this example appears in the online version of the **Journal**.

The musical score consists of three staves. The top staff is for Sonny Rollins (Saxophone), the middle for Doug Watkins (Bass), and the bottom for Max Roach (Drums). The tempo is marked as quarter note = 133. The score is divided into three sections: A*, A, and A. The section A* starts at measure 25, section A starts at measure 29, and section A ends at measure 33. The drums play a steady eighth-note pattern throughout.

a tritone away from the root of the underlying tonic B-flat⁷ blues harmony; Rollins reiterates each E after a quarter rest.⁴²

42. This so-called “flatted fifth” relationship, as Robert Walser notes in his own comments on “Blue 7,” has been, since the late 1930s, modern jazz’s signature harmonic emblem of non-conformism; “Deep Jazz,” 288.

The second of the two key saxophone passages occurs some seven minutes later, in measures 248–255 (see Ex. 2, which Schuller partially transcribes in his example 3).⁴³ In Schuller's words, “Rollins gradually evolves a short sixteenth-note run . . . which is based on . . . motive A. He reworks this motive at half the rhythmic value, a musical device called diminution. . . . Rollins plays the run six times: . . . once on the third beat, once on the second, and three times on the first beat.”⁴⁴ The recurrences of cell (motive) A, which also appears at several other points during the solo, are the sole grounds for asserting that “Rollins does a true thematic variation.”⁴⁵ Schuller discusses several other motivic relationships within Rollins's solo and Roach's drum solo but does not relate these to the “head” melody.

In describing Rollins's solo as thematic improvisation, Schuller does not merely characterize it from an external standpoint; he furthermore claims that Rollins deliberately intended to produce the motivic relationships between the “head” of “Blue 7” and the music following it.⁴⁶ He contends that the performance therefore evinces an “intellectuality” involving “the power of reason and comprehension as distinguished from *purely* intuitive emotional outpouring” (original emphasis).⁴⁷ Schuller's rhetorical emphasis on the saxophonist's intellectual intent is notably at odds with the literary New Criticism whose formalism he otherwise basically shares, but which famously treats authorial intention as immaterial to interpretative validity.⁴⁸ It clearly served his integrationist social agenda by implicitly refuting longstanding stereotypes of Afrodisporic music as instinctual and body-oriented rather than consciously intellectual.⁴⁹ His speculation about creative psychology has also been the most controversial aspect of the article. Some decades later, Ingrid Monson countered that, by deeming Rollins's “Blue 7” solo exceptional in this regard, Schuller “insult[s] the intellectual capacities of musicians who choose to play with a different aesthetic.”⁵⁰ For Robert Walser, Schuller's

43. Schuller, “Sonny Rollins,” 217.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid., 222.

46. For an overview of these two sorts of analytical claims, see Haimo, “Atonality, Analysis, and the Intentional Fallacy,” 178.

47. Schuller, “Sonny Rollins,” 220.

48. See, for example, Wimsatt, *Verbal Icon*, 3. Gennari has noted the parallels between Schuller's analysis and the New Criticism; *Blowin' Hot and Cool*, 181.

49. McClary and Walser observe that, historically, a “binary opposition of mind and body [has governed] the condemnation of black music,” based on a misconception that “the mind and culture . . . remain the exclusive property of Eurocentric discourse”; “Theorizing the Body in African-American Music,” 76.

50. Monson, *Saying Something*, 136. Schuller writes that “this [lack of thematic coherence] is not altogether deplorable . . . and we have seen that it is possible to create pure improvisations which are meaningful realizations of a well-sustained over-all feeling. Indeed, the majority of players are perhaps not temperamentally or intellectually suited to do more than that”; “Sonny Rollins,” 214, quoted in Monson, *Saying Something*, 136.

Example 2 “Blue 7,” mm. 248–255 (7:16–7:30). A sound recording of this example appears in the online version of the *Journal*.

248 $\text{♩} = 136$

Sonny Rollins (Saxophone)

Tommy Flanagan (Piano)

Doug Watkins (Bass)

Max Roach (Drums)

A

250

A

Example 2 continued

The musical score consists of two systems of music. System 252 begins with a melodic line in the soprano clef, featuring sixteenth-note patterns and rests. Brackets above the notes group them into measures, with the letter 'A' indicating a specific rhythmic pattern. The piano part provides harmonic support with sustained notes and chords. System 254 continues the melodic line and harmonic progression, maintaining the same structure and instrumentation. The piano part includes bass and treble clef staves.

preoccupation with Rollins's "inner emotional realm"⁵¹ exemplifies formalist critics' tendency to misrepresent jazz improvisations as autonomous products of introspective thought rather than culturally embedded practices.

The question of Rollins's intent is not purely hypothetical, since in recent years the saxophonist has often spoken about his own creative process and about "Blue 7" specifically. His remarks have been illuminating, yet largely inconclusive. In at least one instance he has affirmed Schuller's conception of jazz as a rational cerebral activity, stating that "Jazz is not just joy.

51. Walser, "Deep Jazz," 272.

It's intellectual, makes you use your mind. Yeah, you can dance to it, but it's also intellectual."⁵² But when reflecting upon his own improvisational process, Rollins claims that conscious thought plays only a preliminary role: "Often, when you begin playing, you have to begin thinking about things—what you are trying to do and so on. Early on, I often play well-known licks and riffs. I don't like playing licks and riffs. But just doing that gets me into it, gets me going."⁵³ Once the saxophonist reaches his desired creative state, "the optimum condition is not to think. I just want the music to play itself. . . . If I have to think about what I'm doing, then the moment is already gone."⁵⁴ Improvising musicians often experience this sense of automaticity while undertaking more perceptual, mental, and physical tasks than can be consciously executed all at once.⁵⁵

It is hardly surprising, then, that Rollins has shied away from others' attempts to analyze his music. "I read all the magazines when they were writing about me," he told the journalist Joe Goldberg in 1961, shortly before resuming concertizing after his hiatus. "People said I did a certain kind of thing and I began to believe them, and by the time I figured out how I did it, I was unable to achieve the effect any more."⁵⁶ Years later, he recalled that Schuller's article in particular caused him to be

sort of taken aback, because I didn't know what I was doing! . . . It made me self-conscious about playing. It took me a while to get over that. It's almost superstitious, where you don't want to investigate too much (for fear of) losing your soul. It's something very personal. People like Gunther Schuller are analytical, which is fine, but I'm a little bit more of a primitive!⁵⁷

Some writers even claimed that Schuller's article was the direct cause of Rollins's decision, in the early 1960s, to stop reading reviews of his own playing, though the saxophonist himself appears never to have verified this on the record.⁵⁸ In any event, there is scant evidence that Schuller's analysis

52. Gitler, "Sonny Rollins Tells His Story at the IAJE Conference," 14.

53. Quoted in Nisenson, *Open Sky*, 13.

54. Quoted in Gross, *All I Did Was Ask*, 214. Commenting recently in response to Rollins's first-person account, Schuller counters: "You can put it the way Sonny put it very simply—'I don't like to think when I play,' [but] by God he *is* thinking. That's simply not true. Now, what *kind* of thinking that is, . . . is interesting. [It is] the thinking that occurs . . . out of a vast accumulation of experience, where you don't have to think like, 'What am I gonna do next?' You think about what you've already done a thousand times, and you now do it again but only in a slightly different version perhaps. . . . So it's simply erroneous to say 'I don't like to think.' That's one of those sort of cute little responses" Schuller, interviewed by Steve Paulson on *To the Best of Our Knowledge*, Wisconsin Public Radio (broadcast on May 12, 2004).

55. Pressing, "Improvisation: Methods and Models," 139–40; Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*, 218.

56. Goldberg, *Jazz Masters of the Fifties*, 102.

57. Rodriguez, "Improvisational Virtuoso," partially quoted in Gioia, *History of Jazz*, 283. Parentheses in the original. See also Reed, "Sonny Rollins: Three Takes," 67.

58. Goldberg, *Jazz Masters of the Fifties*, 102; Balliett, "Sabbatical," 42; Williams, *Jazz Panorama*, 239; Davis, "An Improviser Prepares," 124–25.

significantly disconcerted Rollins in the long run.⁵⁹ While acknowledging that “playing themes and developing them was natural to my style from the get-go,”⁶⁰ he has recently averred that he “never really thought about”⁶¹ thematic improvisation. Asked to comment on Schuller’s analysis directly, he remains noncommittal about his own intent and, speaking in the third person plural, distances himself from the article’s claims: “That solo on ‘Blue 7,’ or that song—I guess it exemplified the logical devel— having a solo which makes sense. . . . It asks a question, it answers a question—it discusses, it resolves. I guess that’s what they mean. It just exemplified a solo with logic.”⁶² Never inclined to dwell on technical minutiae, he prefers to speak more metaphorically, musing that “it’s like holding the melody up to the light and rotating it, like a jeweler, to create new melodies.”⁶³ All told, he remains “puzzled” by the attention “Blue 7” has drawn.⁶⁴

Though they provide an informative first-person perspective, Rollins’s remarks on his creative process and on “Blue 7” are too inconsistent to verify or refute definitively Schuller’s conviction that the saxophonist intentionally generated parts of his improvisation from the opening melodic figures. There is, however, no shortage of evidence conclusively invalidating Schuller’s inference that, on the recording, Rollins begins by stating a composed theme and then manipulates its motives extemporaneously. This evidence lies not only in Rollins’s own recollection of the recording session, but above all in the “Blue 7” performance itself, as well as in the saxophonist’s other recordings of the 1950s.

Schuller’s article gives the impression that the first twelve bars Rollins plays on the 1956 recording comprise a composed theme.⁶⁵ This is a reasonable

59. Asked recently whether he has ever been perturbed by the ways critics have characterized his playing, Rollins commented that: “There was a time when I felt more intimidated or bothered or upset by—there have been times when I’ve been much more interested in what people say. Sometimes they’re good critiques that you have to accept and other times they’re not, they’re not helpful. It’s hard. There have been times in my career when I was paying too much attention to what people—critics, I should say: Are critics people? [Laughs]”; Redman, “Newk’s Time,” 50.

60. Stryker, “Man of Intuition: Thinking Is the Enemy Once the Music Takes Over, Says Sonny Rollins.”

61. Redman, “Newk’s Time,” 49–50.

62. Rollins, Interview with Bob Jones and Jenni Vinson Trejo, 1440 KEYS Radio, Corpus Christi, Texas. According to Grover Sales, Rollins told Martin Williams, “Until I read Gunther Schuller, I really didn’t understand what I was doing. This thing about the thematic approach, I guess it’s true, but I never thought about it, I was just playing it”; *Jazz*, 174. Schuller claims that, some years after his article was published, Rollins told him “Yeah, Gunther, I know what you’re talking about!”; Public discussion forum at Skidmore College, November 17, 2006.

63. Quoted in Santoro, “Edgy Optimist,” 125.

64. Nisenson, *Open Sky*, 95.

65. Although Schuller tends, throughout much of his article, to label Rollins’s opening twelve bar statement a “theme” without explicitly calling it a *composition*, his concluding remarks, quoted above, clearly distinguish between “the idea of developing and varying a *main* theme”—which he considers the saxophonist’s foremost achievement in this recording—and

assumption—hard bop performances very often begin and end with thematic statements—and it has since been reinforced in the jazz audience's consciousness by various recorded cover versions of “Blue 7” where other musicians restate these twelve measures more or less verbatim.⁶⁶ But the original 1956 recording was in fact improvised in the studio entirely spontaneously from start to finish. Rollins, although not available for an interview, was willing to respond through his publicist to my direct question about the genesis of “Blue 7,” and he stated unequivocally that its so-called theme was not composed in advance; it was “made up” at the session, like the rest of the performance.⁶⁷ He has made the same assertion in a previous interview with journalist Bob Blumenthal.⁶⁸ So if today’s musicians and listeners are inclined to hear the saxophonist’s opening chorus as a conventional composed “head,” they are imposing this perception retrospectively. Rollins apparently created it on the spot.

At the same time, the “Blue 7” recording also clearly illustrates that the distinction between musical composition and improvisation is not always as categorical as Schuller’s article tends to suggest: Rollins appears, in the course of the performance, to have treated some, though not all, of the melodic figures that he improvised during his first twelve bars as if they were a theme in some very loose, informal sense.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, these figures’ conceptual status as a theme, even vaguely, seems mainly to have been a function of their being played at the outset. They were no more fixed or immutable than any other element of the performance inasmuch as the saxophonist did not plan them beforehand and there is no evidence that, once the recording session was over, he ever again treated them as a theme in any later performance. Since on this occasion, with Rollins extemporizing throughout, the

extemporaneous motivic development “which in itself is unrelated to the ‘head’ of the composition”; Schuller, “Sonny Rollins,” 222.

66. Cover versions of “Blue 7” have been recorded by artists such as Shirley Scott on the album *Blue Seven* (Prestige 7376, 1966), rec. 1961; Houston Person and Ron Carter on the album *Something in Common* (Muse 5376, 1994), rec. 1990; Junko Onishi on the album *Cruisin’* (Blue Note 28447, 1994), rec. 1994; and Glen Hall, Lee Ranaldo, and William Hooker on the album *Oasis of Whispers* (Alien8 59, 2005), rec. 2007.

67. In an email message to Rollins’s publicist I wrote that “I’d like to ask Mr. Rollins whether his famous 1956 recording of ‘Blue 7’ was made up completely spontaneously in the studio, or whether he wrote the theme ahead of time.” His publicist wrote in response that “It was made up. (Spoke with him this evening and ran your question by him.)”; Hinte, e-mail communication, October 15, 2012.

68. In a recent book based on interviews with the saxophonist, Bob Blumenthal writes that “Rollins has confirmed that [‘Blue 7’] was created spontaneously”; *Saxophone Colossus: A Portrait of Sonny Rollins*, 134. Blumenthal furthermore recalls that during a prepublication fact-checking phone conversation, he again asked Rollins whether “what we think of as the melody [to “Blue 7”] was spontaneously generated in the studio. Sonny said that this was accurate”; E-mail communication, October 11, 2012. Discographies do not mention any extant alternate takes of “Blue 7” from the June 1956 recording session.

69. As Bruno Nettl noted some years ago, “The lines that different cultures might draw between ‘fixed’ composition and improvisation will appear at different points of a continuum”; “Thoughts on Improvisation,” 7.

distinction between composition and improvisation is not readily applicable, it would seem most apt simply to characterize the *entire* “Blue 7” performance as a one-time concrete realization of the saxophonist’s stylistic idiom.

Corroborating Rollins’s recollection that “Blue 7” was neither prerehearsed nor premeditated, the track’s solo-order format and intraensemble coordination are uncharacteristically fluid and, at times, lackadaisical, even for an album released on the Prestige record label, whose owner/producer, Bob Weinstock, often encouraged musicians to rely on spur-of-the-moment creativity so as to minimize costly rehearsal time.⁷⁰ As noted, hard bop studio tracks from the mid-1950s typically open and close with theme statements, sometimes framed by introductions and codas. Each featured player ordinarily takes one solo, with the final solo sometimes followed by short improvised exchanges (usually four, eight, or twelve bars long) traded between the instrumentalists, or between each soloist and the drummer. In the case of “Blue 7,” though, Rollins and his sidemen seem not to have decided on any particular road map before they began. After the two introductory choruses by Watkins and Roach, the saxophonist commences his first chorus with a descending D–A♭ tritone on the first two beats, followed by an atypical variant of melodic cell A, its first pitch a half step higher than usual (see Ex. 1, p. 175). During his first twelve measures, he repeats cell A—now in its usual form—at four-bar intervals, a common blues-head format that gives the passage a somewhat thematic quality, though Rollins never comes close to repeating the entire chorus at any other point during the performance, as typically occurs with composed themes.

After playing another five choruses, Rollins cedes the spotlight to Flanagan for a three-chorus piano solo (2:53). The saxophonist then reenters (m. 132 of Ex. 3), interjecting just four improvised bars before Roach begins a seven-chorus drum solo. These four bars function as a send-off—a short ensemble statement at the top of a chorus or other structural downbeat, heralding or punctuating an improvised solo. It appears unlikely that Rollins planned this send-off much in advance, given the performance’s overall informality; bassist Watkins seems not to have anticipated it, since he plays two quarter notes at the start of the chorus’s fifth bar (m. 137) rather than stopping on the downbeat, as would be standard practice. An experienced jazz listener, hearing the saxophonist’s four-bar statement followed by Roach, might well expect the instrumentalists to continue trading four-bar phrases rather than for Roach to play the longest solo so far. After the drum solo, Rollins enters again (6:22).

At some point during this third saxophone solo passage, the musicians become confused. Rollins’s second chorus after reentering consists mainly of an insistently repeated declarative riff (mm. 229–240 in Ex. 4), reminiscent of the sort of rousing climactic “shout chorus” that sometimes concludes a big-band chart. Flanagan and Roach round out the chorus with synchronized

70. Porter, *John Coltrane: His Life and Music*, 101–2.

Example 3 “Blue 7,” mm. 129–144 (3:51–4:19). A sound recording of this example appears in the online version of the *Journal*.

Musical score for "Blue 7" featuring four staves:

- Sonny Rollins (Saxophone):** Treble clef, key signature of one flat (C major), time signature 8/8. Dynamics: - (measures 129-130), - (measure 131).
- Tommy Flanagan (Piano):** Treble and Bass clefs, key signature of one flat, time signature 8/8. Measures 129-130 show eighth-note patterns. Measure 131 shows eighth-note patterns with a fermata over the first measure.
- Doug Watkins (Bass):** Bass clef, key signature of one flat, time signature 8/8. Measures 129-130 show eighth-note patterns. Measure 131 shows eighth-note patterns.
- Max Roach (Drums):** No clef, key signature of one flat, time signature 8/8. Measures 129-130 show eighth-note patterns. Measure 131 shows eighth-note patterns.

Measure 129 starts with a rest followed by a melodic line. Measure 130 continues the melodic line. Measure 131 begins with a rest, followed by a melodic line with a fermata over the first measure, and ends with another melodic line.

Example 3 continued

134

137

139

142

offbeat accents, further heightening the music's intensity (mm. 239–240). All indications are that the performance is drawing to a close, and as the next chorus begins, Watkins immediately diffuses the music's energy level by playing a laid-back bass line using mainly half notes rather than the customary "walking" quarter notes he had been playing until then. It is also here that Rollins invokes the two consecutive melodic figures with which he began seven minutes earlier, with cell A now in its typical form (mm. 241–243). This is the clearest sign that the saxophonist is treating this pair of figures as a theme-like fragment in some nebulous sense, since if the performance were indeed about to end, a head recapitulation would typically be expected. Yet this is the only moment where these two figures recur in direct succession, and from then on Rollins continues to treat only the melodic tritone as if it is a theme, and very freely at that;⁷¹ at measure 241 it cannot be assumed that Watkins, let alone the other musicians, regards it as such, since the bassist begins his valedictory half-note bass line before hearing Rollins fully reference the opening melodic figures. Immediately thereafter, Rollins begins reiterating the ascending sixteenth-note figure, culminating in cell A, to which Schuller drew special attention. Watkins likely believes that Rollins is gradually winding down the performance—the rather meandering, repeated saxophone gestures suggest a fade-out. At any rate, at measure 249, the chorus's ninth bar, Watkins not only continues playing mostly half notes but also doubles the harmonic rhythm, outlining a dominant, F⁷, harmony in measures 249–250 and a subdominant, E flat, in measures 251–252; these chords ordinarily occupy just one measure apiece in a blues chorus's ninth and tenth bars. Rhythmically, harmonically, and texturally the music is losing momentum and seems about to trickle to a halt.

But instead of wrapping up the recording, Rollins keeps playing through the top of the next chorus (m. 253). Unable to divine the saxophonist's intentions immediately, Watkins at first maintains a doubled harmonic rhythm, playing a turnaround chord-progression in measures 253–256 as if a chorus were ending. The miscommunication is not immediately self-evident because the bassist's tonic harmony in measure 253 and IV–VII^{dim7/V} progression in measure 254 coincidentally resemble the correct harmonies for the top of a chorus. At measure 257, Watkins, realizing that Rollins and the others are not about to end the performance after all, starts a new chorus by resuming a walking bass line in quarter notes. But he is now four bars behind the rest of the quartet. For two more choruses the musicians continue, seemingly unaware of being out of phase, since most of the harmonies in a twelve-bar blues recur at four-bar intervals in any case.⁷² The misalignment is obvious only at fleeting moments, such as measure 265, where Rollins and

71. It could easily be argued that a mere melodic tritone is too insubstantial to be called a theme. Still, in this improvised context the tritone alone, as deployed by Rollins, is more suggestive of a theme, however nebulously and transiently, than any other material.

72. To be exact, eight of the twelve bars in a standard blues contain the same harmony as occurs four bars later.

Example 4 “Blue 7,” mm. 228–329 (6:40–9:42)

228

Sonny Rollins
(Saxophone)

230

Tommy Flanagan
(Piano)

Doug Watkins
(Bass)

Max Roach
(Drums)

The musical score consists of four staves. The top staff is for Sonny Rollins (Saxophone), starting with a rest. The second staff is for Tommy Flanagan (Piano). The third staff is for Doug Watkins (Bass). The bottom staff is for Max Roach (Drums). The score shows various rhythmic patterns and harmonic changes across the three measures. Measure 228 starts with a rest for Sonny Rollins, followed by eighth-note chords on piano and bass, and eighth-note patterns on drums. Measure 229 begins with a forte dynamic for Sonny Rollins. Measure 230 continues with eighth-note patterns and harmonic changes.

Example 4 continued

233

8

236

8

239

8

Watkins begins playing half notes instead of "walking" quarter notes

8vb

Example 4 continued

242

A

245

248

A

Watkins doubles the harmonic rhythm

Example 4 continued

251

253

255

A

5

3

Watkins begins a new
chorus, four bars behind

Example 4 continued

258

261

264

Example 4 continued

The musical score consists of three staves of music, likely for a jazz ensemble. The top staff is for the piano, the middle staff for the bass, and the bottom staff for the drums. The score is divided into three sections by brace lines.

- Section 1 (Measures 267-269):** The piano part features eighth-note chords and sixteenth-note patterns. The bass part provides harmonic support with sustained notes and bass lines. The drums provide rhythmic drive with various patterns, including eighth-note and sixteenth-note figures.
- Section 2 (Measures 270-271):** The piano part continues with eighth-note chords and sixteenth-note patterns. The bass part adds more complex harmonic movement. The drums maintain their rhythmic patterns.
- Section 3 (Measures 273-274):** The piano part introduces a new rhythmic pattern with groups of three and five sixteenth notes. The bass part follows with eighth-note chords. The drums continue their rhythmic drive.

A label "Watkins: new chorus" is placed above the piano staff in the middle section, indicating a change in the musical style or section being performed.

Example 4 continued

276

8

3

(Roach switches to brushes)

3 3

Watkins: new chorus

3 3

280

8

3

3

Watkins: new chorus

3 3

284

8

3

3

3

3

3

Example 4 continued

287

Watkins: new chorus

291

295

299

Watkins: new chorus

303

307

Example 4 continued

311

Roach signals upcoming re-aligned new chorus

315

Musicians all back together again in phase

(Roach switches back to sticks)

318

Example 4 continued

The musical score consists of three staves of music for piano and bass, spanning three systems (320, 322, and 324).

Staff 1 (Piano): The top staff uses a treble clef, a key signature of one flat, and common time. It features a series of eighth-note patterns, some grouped by vertical braces. Measure 320 starts with a sixteenth-note pattern followed by a brace over two groups of four eighth notes. Measures 322 and 324 begin with a single eighth note. Measure 324 includes a sixteenth-note pattern with a brace over three groups of five notes.

Staff 2 (Bass): The middle staff uses a bass clef and common time. It contains mostly quarter notes and rests. Measure 320 includes a sixteenth-note pattern with a brace over three groups of four notes. Measures 322 and 324 begin with a single eighth note.

Staff 3 (Bass): The bottom staff uses a bass clef and common time. It contains mostly quarter notes and rests. Measures 320 and 322 begin with a single eighth note. Measure 324 includes a sixteenth-note pattern with a brace over three groups of five notes.

Example 4 continued

The musical score consists of two staves of music. The top staff represents Flanagan's playing, and the bottom staff represents Watkins' playing. Both staves are in 8/8 time and key signature of B-flat major. The first section (measures 326-327) shows Flanagan playing eighth-note chords and Watkins playing eighth-note chords. The second section (measures 328-329) shows Flanagan playing sixteenth-note patterns and Watkins playing eighth-note chords.

Flanagan begins a new chorus with a I chord while Watkins states a V harmony, believing he is at the previous chorus's ninth bar. A bar later, when Watkins plays a IV chord (the chorus's tenth bar from his standpoint), the inter-subjective discrepancy is again imperceptible since the subdominant also occurs in the second bar of a chorus, which Rollins and Flanagan are playing concurrently. At the end of this chorus (m. 277), Rollins steps away from the microphone again and, having now fully abandoned the conventional format whereby each soloist takes one turn in the spotlight, the musicians seem unsure how to proceed. Flanagan improvises a single chorus in two-handed octaves, but then, probably having noticed that something is amiss, he drops out as well.

Meanwhile Watkins, assuming that four bars remain to complete the chorus, keeps playing, and Roach, hearing no clear cue to stop, continues

as the bassist begins another chorus (m. 293). By now both Rollins and Flanagan, listening to their bandmates, may be aware that Watkins has shifted the chorus form. With the tape rolling and no routine default strategy at hand for concluding the performance convincingly, the musicians have but two choices: to give up midstream, leaving the tape unusable, or to try to extricate themselves. Sometime in the course of Watkins's impromptu, *de facto* bass solo, they choose the latter option; some noninstrumental communication may have occurred, perhaps by a few quiet words or hand signals. With Watkins, his bass lines clearly exposed, showing no sign of readjusting his chorus form, the other musicians fall in phase with him.⁷³ Roach cues the upcoming downbeat of a new chorus, at measure 317, with a four-bar series of eighth-note cymbal triplets and, with the musicians together again at last, three choruses of four-bar saxophone-drum exchanges ensue. Then, at the top of a chorus, Rollins briefly references the D–A \flat descending-tritone figure with which he began, though he plays each pitch twice (m. 341 of Ex. 5). After improvising another two choruses, he returns to the melodic tritone once more for his final chorus, now prolonging its second note for almost two measures and reiterating the gesture three times, with a transposition over the subdominant (mm. 365–372). These final measures, which Schuller characterizes as a distillation of the head into “pure melodic essence,”⁷⁴ in actuality revisit a periodically recurring melodic interval that can at most be said to function as a theme in an extremely casual, ephemeral sense and is certainly far from being part of a fixed, stable composition. The rhythm section fades into silence with Flanagan striking his last chord on the downbeat of measure 376, Watkins falling quiet a bar after the pianist, and Roach concluding with a final cymbal tap another two bars later. As for cell A, only its final two pitches (A \flat and E \sharp) reappear as Rollins's performance reaches its end (mm. 374–377); his final chorus contains neither the complete melodic cell nor any variant.

In one of his article's footnotes, Schuller noted that Rollins “has experimented with this particular phrase [i.e., cell A] in a number of pieces and it threatens to become a cliché with him.”⁷⁵ He called particular attention to the saxophonist's improvisation on “Vierd Blues,” recorded with the Miles Davis Quintet on March 16, 1956 (also at Van Gelder's Hackensack studio, with Flanagan likewise at the piano). “The numerous similarities between Rollins's solos on ‘Blue 7’ and ‘Vierd Blues,’” Schuller wrote, “are so striking that the earlier one must be considered a study or forerunner of the other.”⁷⁶ Example 6 transcribes the beginning of Rollins's improvisation on

73. Monson discusses another recording of a jazz ensemble making collective musical adjustments in order to conform to a disoriented bass player; *Saying Something*, 137–74.

74. Schuller, “Sonny Rollins,” 218. Schuller's example 7 transcribes the saxophone line in the final chorus.

75. Ibid., 217n.

76. Ibid., 216n.

Example 5 "Blue 7," mm. 337–378 (9:55–11:14)

337

Sonny Rollins
(Saxophone) $\text{C} \quad \text{B} \quad \text{A} \quad \text{G}$

Tommy Flanagan
(Piano)

Doug Watkins
(Bass)

Max Roach
(Drums)

$\text{D} = 136$

341

8

8

8

8

344

8

8

8

8

Example 5 continued

346

8

3 8 3

348

8

3

351

8

3 3 3 3

3 3

Example 5 continued

353

356

359

Example 5 Continued

The musical score consists of three staves of music, likely for piano and bass, spanning three measures (362, 365, and 369).

Measure 362: The top staff shows a treble clef, a key signature of one flat, and a time signature of 8/8. It features a series of eighth-note patterns: a single note followed by a sixteenth-note grace, a sixteenth-note grace followed by a eighth-note, a sixteenth-note grace followed by a eighth-note, and a sixteenth-note grace followed by a eighth-note. The middle staff shows a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The bottom staff shows a bass clef and a key signature of one flat.

Measure 365: The top staff shows a treble clef, a key signature of one flat, and a time signature of 8/8. It features a sustained eighth note followed by a sixteenth-note grace, a sixteenth-note grace followed by a eighth-note, a sixteenth-note grace followed by a eighth-note, and a sixteenth-note grace followed by a eighth-note. The middle staff shows a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The bottom staff shows a bass clef and a key signature of one flat.

Measure 369: The top staff shows a treble clef, a key signature of one flat, and a time signature of 8/8. It features a sustained eighth note followed by a sixteenth-note grace, a sixteenth-note grace followed by a eighth-note, a sixteenth-note grace followed by a eighth-note, and a sixteenth-note grace followed by a eighth-note. The middle staff shows a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The bottom staff shows a bass clef and a key signature of one flat.

Example 5 Continued

The musical score consists of two staves of jazz notation. The top staff begins at measure 372 and the bottom staff begins at measure 375. Both staves are in B-flat major. The notation includes various voices, such as a soprano-like line with eighth-note pairs and sixteenth-note patterns, and a bass-like line with sustained notes and rhythmic patterns. Measure 372 features a melodic line with eighth-note pairs and sixteenth-note patterns. Measure 375 features a sustained note and a dynamic marking '8vb'.

“Vierd Blues,”⁷⁷ another B-flat-major blues, with bracketed passages cross-referenced to measure numbers from “Blue 7.”⁷⁸ Although Schuller made nothing more of his passing observation, Kernfeld has proposed that the correspondences between these two performances suggest that Schuller’s “Blue 7” analysis “demands reconsideration.”⁷⁹ John Szwed notes, furthermore,

77. Davis, “Vierd Blues,” *Collectors’ Items* (Prestige 7044, 1956), rec. March 16, 1956. For another transcription of this performance, see Baker, *Jazz Style of Sonny Rollins*, 28–29. Baker identifies cell A as a principal “melodic motive”; *ibid.*, 30.

78. It is possible that the first time Rollins plays cell A in “Vierd Blues,” at m. 18, he is inspired to do so by Flanagan, who plays a subdominant ninth chord with raised eleventh (i.e., an E-flat ninth chord with an added A \flat) on the third beat of the previous bar (m. 17). It could be that Rollins reacts to Flanagan’s use of the distinctive A \sharp —tritonally related to the underlying chord’s root—by reiterating A \sharp as the final pitch of cell A in m. 18.

79. Kernfeld, “Sonny Rollins,” 3:446. See also *idem*, “Adderley, Coltrane, and Davis at the Twilight of Bebop,” 8–9.

Example 6 Sonny Rollins, “Vierd Blues” (2:06–3:38). A sound recording of this example appears in the online version of the **Journal**.

Example 7 Sonny Rollins, “Pent-Up House” (3:09–3:14). A sound recording of this example appears in the online version of the *Journal*.



that a similar melodic figure also appears in Rollins’s solo on “Pent-Up House,” recorded several days after “Vierd Blues,” on March 22, 1956; Example 7 transcribes the relevant passage from “Pent-Up House,” with cell A bracketed.⁸⁰ What explains these earlier instances of cell A? If the opening saxophone chorus of “Blue 7” were a theme that Rollins had composed no later than the spring of 1956, this melodic pattern’s prior occurrences could be quotations. But since the first twelve bars of “Blue 7” were executed spontaneously, cell A must instead be a melodic formula (or “lick”—one of the short recurrent figures that comprise the saxophonist’s musical vocabulary.⁸¹ Rollins’s abundant recordings of the 1950s provide ample verification for this conclusion.

Table 1 lists fifty-four tracks from twenty-three different albums featuring Rollins as either a leader or sideman, all recorded between 1951 and 1958.⁸² For each track, the third-from-left column indicates the timepoint(s) where Rollins plays cell A or a close variant; certain rhythmically and intervallically modified variants have been included because, as will be discussed below, they shed light on how this melodic figure relates to Rollins’s broader musical vocabulary and the hard bop style in general.⁸³ Despite documenting just a minute fraction of the music Rollins played during the period encompassed by Table 1, the recordings incontrovertibly reveal that the melodic cell Schuller identified was one of the saxophonist’s improvisatory formulas.⁸⁴

80. Szwed, *Jazz 101*, 201; Rollins, “Pent-Up House,” *Sonny Rollins Plus Four* (Prestige 7038, 1956), rec. March 22, 1956.

81. On jazz improvisers’ use of musical formulas, see Owens, “Charlie Parker: Techniques of Improvisation”; Gushee, “Lester Young’s ‘Shoeshine Boy’”; Kernfeld, “Two Coltranes”; and Smith, “In Quest of a New Perspective on Improvised Jazz.”

82. The assembled data is drawn from every available recording that Rollins made between 1949 and 1958. Although most of the albums were released within a few years of being recorded, a few of them contain “bootleg” tracks that have only become commercially available relatively recently.

83. The time point of 3:51 indicated for the third-to-last track, “Limehouse Blues,” refers to this recording as it appears on the album *Sonny Rollins at Music Inn/Teddy Edwards at Falcon’s Lair with Joe Castro* (Metrojazz 1011, 1958). However, a reissue of the same track which was added to a compact disc reissue of *Sonny Rollins and the Big Brass* (Verve 314 557 545-2) includes an additional half minute of applause and a spoken announcement before the music begins; for that reissue of the track the corresponding time point is 4:20 instead of 3:51.

84. For a comprehensive online discography see “Sonny Rollins Discography.”

Table 1 Occurrences of cell A, cell N, and other variants, from Rollins's recordings of the 1950s

Date	Track	Elapsed Time	Cell Form			Leader
			A	N	Other	
10/5/1951	“Dig”	0:40 1:11 1:26 1:30 1:55 1:58	• • • • •			Dig Miles Davis
12/17/1951	“With a Song in My Heart”	2:42	•			Sonny Rollins <i>Jazz Quartet</i>
	“This Love of Mine”	2:12	•			
	“Shadrack”	0:45 0:52 1:19	• • •			
6/29/1954	“Airegin”	2:55	•			Bags' Groove Miles Davis
	“But Not For Me” (Take 2)	2:30	•			
11/7/1955	“Cherokee”	17:16 17:20 17:47	• • •	•		Clifford Brown
	“Hot House”	10:12		•		
12/2/1955	“There Are Such Things”	8:41	•			Worktime Sonny Rollins
	“It's All Right with Me”	1:06 1:30 2:37	• • •			

(Continued)

Table 1 continued

Date	Track	Elapsed Time			Cell Form			Leader
		A	N	Other	Album	Cell Form	Album	
1/4/1956	“Step Lightly”	1:54		•	<i>At Basin Street</i>			Clifford Brown and Max Roach
	“Powell’s Prances”	1:10		•				
		1:17		•				
2/16/1956	“The Scene Is Clean”	1:32	•					
	“What Is This Thing Called Love?” (Alt.)	3:26		•				
	“Round Midnight”	3:32	•					
2/26/1956	“Vived Blues”	2:42	•	•	<i>At the Cotton Club 1956</i>		Clifford Brown	
		2:45	•	•				
		2:48	•	•				
3/16/1956	“In Your Own Sweet Way”	2:17	•		<i>Collectors’ Items</i>		Miles Davis	
		2:52		•				
				•				
3/22/1956	“Pent-Up House”	3:13	•		<i>Plus Four</i>		Sonny Rollins	
		4:05		•				
5/24/1956	“When Your Lover Has Gone”	1:56	•		<i>Tenor Madness</i>			
	“The Most Beautiful Girl in the World”	1:57	•					
		1:41		•				

5/28/1956	"Nice Work If You Can Get It"	4:05 4:08 4:10 4:12 4:14 4:15 4:17 4:22	• • • • • • • •	•	<i>At the Cotton Club 1956</i>	Clifford Brown
6/1/1956	"Lover"	2:05 3:46 3:47	• • •			
6/18/1956	"I Get a Kick Out of You"	5:26 5:39 6:10 6:50 15:30 15:31 15:32 15:33	• • • • • • • •	• •	<i>The Last Concert</i>	
	"Just One of Those Things"	6:00 6:35		• •		
6/22/1956	"Blue 7"	0:47 0:54 1:01		• • •	<i>Saxophone Colossus</i>	Sonny Rollins

Table 1 continued

Date	Track	Elapsed Time	Cell Form			Album	Leader
			A	N	Other		
6/22/1956	“Blue 7”	7:06 7:18 7:21 7:26 7:28 7:30 10:39	• • • • • • •			<i>Saxophone Colossus</i>	Sonny Rollins
	“You Don’t Know What Love Is”	2:28 2:29 2:31 2:32 2:33 2:35	• • • • • •				
	“Strode Rode”	0:50 1:04 1:16	• • •				
	“Moritat”	6:01		•			
12/16/1956	“Plain Jane”	2:07	•			<i>Sonny Rollins: Volume One</i>	
9/1956	“Ezz-Thetic”	1:21 2:13 2:36		• • •		+4	Max Roach
	“Just One of Those Things”	1:21					
	“Mr. X”	3:37					
	“Body and Soul”	6:03					

3/18/1957	“It Don’t Mean a Thing”	0:28	•			
3/20/1957	“Minor Trouble”	1:15 1:25	• •			
	“Valse Hot”	1:41 1:43	• •			
3/21/1957	“Lover”	1:08 1:10 1:18 1:20 1:21 1:23	• • • • • •			
5/1957	“Falling in Love with Love”	3:49 5:53	• •		<i>Jazz Contracts</i>	Kenny Dorham
	“I’ll Remember April”	7:09	•			
6/1957	“Just in Time”	2:47	•		<i>The Sound of Sonny</i>	Sonny Rollins
	“What Is There to Say?”	1:14	•			
	“Cutie”	1:11	•			
6/19/1957	“The Last Time I Saw Paris”	1:43 1:46	• •			

(Continued)

Table 1 continued

Date	Track	Elapsed Time	Cell Form			Album	Leader
			A	N	Other		
9/27/1957	“Namely You”	2:40		•		<i>Newk's Time</i>	Sonny Rollins
11/3/1957	“What Is This Thing Called Love?”	5:41	•			<i>A Night at the Village Vanguard</i>	
		5:43	•				
		5:44	•				
		5:46	•				
	“Softly as in a Morning Sunrise” (Alt.)	3:19			•		
	“I Can't Get Started”	0:25	•				
		3:02		•			
	“Woody 'n' You”	4:37	•				
		4:38	•				
11/4/1957	“Like Someone in Love”	1:32	•			<i>Sonny Rollins Plays</i>	
7/10/1958	“What's My Name?”	1:25			•	<i>Sonny Rollins and the Big Brass</i>	
7/11/1958	“Grand Street”	2:24		•			
8/31/1958	“Limehouse Blues”	3:51		•		<i>Sonny Rollins at Music Inn/Teddy Edwards at Falcon's Lair with Joe Castro</i>	
	“You Are Too Beautiful”	5:29			•		
10/1/1958	“The Song Is You”	0:48		•		<i>Sonny Rollins and the Contemporary Leaders</i>	

So, in claiming that “Rollins simply extends and develops all that the theme implies,”⁸⁵ Schuller is mistaken on two counts. First, on the day of the recording there was no theme in the sense of a composition existing independently of the performance. Second, the solo does not contain motives that Rollins derived from the first (improvised) twelve measures he plays; rather, certain preexisting formulas occur periodically throughout the entire improvised performance. Schuller fails to grasp that cell A is a formula because his analysis focuses almost exclusively on “Blue 7,” scarcely considering its larger stylistic context.⁸⁶ If Rollins’s personal musical language and the hard bop conventions shared by many jazz musicians of the 1950s are more fully taken into account, a quite different view of the solo emerges. To this end, a useful terminological framework is Leonard Meyer’s tripartite scheme of musical dialect, idiom, and intraopus style.⁸⁷ A “dialect” is a set of musical attributes associated with a number of composers (or improvisers); musicians with a shared dialect have individual approaches, which Meyer calls “idioms”; and finally, any given piece of music has its own “intraopus” style consisting of features that are “replicated within a single work,”⁸⁸ or, by extension, within a jazz improvisation such as Rollins’s “Blue 7” solo.

Rollins’s musical dialect, the 1950’s hard bop style, includes a melodic figure closely resembling cell A; it appears in similar harmonic contexts and differs only in that its final note is three half steps, rather than four, beneath its penultimate pitch, so that it typically ends with a consonance instead of a dissonance. The figure occurs in each of the postwar hard bop solo excerpts transcribed in Example 8: “Roll Call,” recorded by tenor saxophonist Hank Mobley (1930–1986); “Cool Struttin’,” by trumpeter Art Farmer (1928–1999); “One for Mort,” by trumpeter Carmell Jones (1936–1996); “Good Old Soul,” by tenor saxophonist Tina Brooks (1932–1974); “Bu’s Delight,” by trumpeter Freddie Hubbard (1938–2008); and “One by One,” by tenor saxophonist Wayne Shorter (b. 1933).⁸⁹ More pervasive in hard bop than Rollins’s cell A, this consonant

85. Schuller, “Sonny Rollins,” 216.

86. David Huron speaks to the pitfalls of analyzing individual works (and, by extension, improvisations) in isolation: “When characterizing a musical work it is important, not simply to make accurate or truthful observations about its organization; but also to identify those characteristics that set the work apart from other musical works. . . . [M]usic analyses can occasionally fall prey to such empty descriptive language. . . . [M]any otherwise truthful observations simply fail to be informative”; “What is a Musical Feature?: Forte’s Analysis of Brahms’s Opus 51, No. 1, Revisited.”

87. Meyer, *Style and Music*, 23–25.

88. *Ibid.*, 24.

89. Hank Mobley, “Roll Call,” *Roll Call* (Blue Note 4058, 1961), rec. Nov. 13, 1960; Sonny Clark, “Cool Struttin’,” *Cool Struttin’* (Blue Note 1588, 1958), rec. Jan. 5, 1958; Booker Ervin, “One for Mort,” *The Blues Book* (Prestige 7340, 1965), rec. June 30, 1964; Tina Brooks, “Good Old Soul,” *True Blue* (Blue Note 84041, 1960), rec. June 25, 1960;

melodic pattern can be considered a normative version; it is labeled “N” in Example 8. Cell A, conversely, is a variant whose effect, both rhetorical and harmonic, is a function of its dissimilarity to the “N” form. That is, when an accustomed hard bop listener hears an improviser begin to play cell A, he or she expects the melodic cell to resolve normatively, as in cell N, and is surprised when it does not. Rollins himself often played cell N: Example 9 displays transcriptions from three of his recorded improvisations from the mid-1950s, with the normative cell labeled in each case: “It’s All Right With Me”; “Ezz-Thetic”; and “Grand Street.”⁹⁰ Table 1 identifies, in the second of the three “cell form” columns, each recording that contains this specific melodic figure, which was part of Rollins’s habitual formulaic vocabulary from at least 1951 through 1958.

Since the hard bop dialect is as fluid and mutable as most any musical style, cells N and A are best conceptualized not as fixed, discrete types but as two among several variants of a recurrent six-note pattern with roughly the same melodic contour, rhythmic profile, and harmonic context, usually heard at the end of a phrase. Example 10 shows that Rollins’s 1951 improvisation on “Shadrack” contains, along with a pair of instances of cell N (bracketed in mm. 9 and 35), two other different variants.⁹¹ In measure 3, Rollins begins a melodic pattern in the manner of cell N, but instead of ending on a normative D \sharp , he skips down a tritone from the apex pitch F, on beat three, to B \flat . Later, in measure 23, his first four eighth notes initiate cell N but the next two pitches—quarter notes rather than eighths—differ from the norm: an A \sharp , a half-step above the expected A \flat (thus consonant with the underlying F-major harmony), followed by C \sharp , a major sixth below it, rather than the typical F \sharp . In measures 4–5 of Example 11a, from a January 1956 solo on “Step Lightly,” Rollins plays a version of the melodic cell whose final pitch is a minor seventh beneath the penultimate one.⁹² And in the last bar of

Art Blakey, “Bu’s Delight,” *Buhaina’s Delight* (Blue Note 4104, 1962), rec. Nov. 28, 1961; idem, “One by One,” *Ugetsu* (Riverside 9464, 1963), rec. June 16, 1963.

90. Rollins, “It’s All Right With Me,” *Worktime* (Prestige 7020, 1956), rec. Dec. 2, 1955; Max Roach, “Ezz-Thetic,” +4 (EmArcy MG 36098, 1957), rec. Sept. 1956; Rollins, “Grand Street,” *Sonny Rollins and the Big Brass*, rec. July 11, 1958. Note that, on “Grand Street,” the normative cell’s final pitch is reiterated after a beat rest, much akin to Rollins’s opening measures on “Blue 7.” Evidently, this additional note was a recurrent suffix to the formula (see also Ex. 13b). The suffix also pervaded the hard bop melodic vocabulary more widely (see, for instance, Ex. 8b and Ex. 12b).

91. Rollins, “Shadrack,” *Sonny Rollins with the Modern Jazz Quartet* (Prestige 7029, 1956), rec. Dec. 17, 1951.

92. Clifford Brown and Max Roach, “Step Lightly,” *At Basin Street* (EmArcy MG 36070, 1956), rec. Jan. 4, 1956.

Example 8a Hank Mobley, “Roll Call” (1:25–1:32). A sound recording of this example appears in the online version of the *Journal*.

Musical score for Example 8a, featuring two staves of jazz notation. The top staff begins with a tempo of quarter note = 260. It contains chords Fmin, G7, Fmin, Emin7, and Ab7. The bottom staff continues with chords D, Gm7(b5), C7, Fmin, and N.

Example 8b Art Farmer, “Cool Struttin’” (2:31–2:42). A sound recording of this example appears in the online version of the *Journal*.

Musical score for Example 8b, featuring two staves of jazz notation. The top staff begins with a tempo of quarter note = 110. It contains chords F, Gmin7, and C7. The bottom staff continues with chords F, N, B7, F, and 3.

Example 8c Carmell Jones, “One for Mort” (0:41–0:48). A sound recording of this example appears in the online version of the *Journal*.

Musical score for Example 8c, featuring three staves of jazz notation. The top staff begins with a tempo of quarter note = 340. It contains chords Cmin, Fmin, and Cmin. The middle staff continues with chords Fmin, Cmin, and N. The bottom staff concludes with chords Dm7(b5), G7, Cmin, and N.

Example 8d Tina Brooks, “Good Old Soul” (2:38–2:48). A sound recording of this example appears in the online version of the **Journal**.

Example 8e Freddie Hubbard, “Bu’s Delight” (1:46–1:53). A sound recording of this example appears in the online version of the **Journal**.

Example 8f Wayne Shorter, “One by One” (1:58–2:04). A sound recording of this example appears in the online version of the *Journal*.

A musical score for piano featuring two staves. The top staff begins with a dynamic of $f = 136$, a $G\text{min}$ chord, and a $N \ C\text{min7}$ chord. The bottom staff begins with a $B\flat$ chord. Both staves are in common time (indicated by 'C' and '8'). The music consists of six measures of rapid eighth-note patterns.

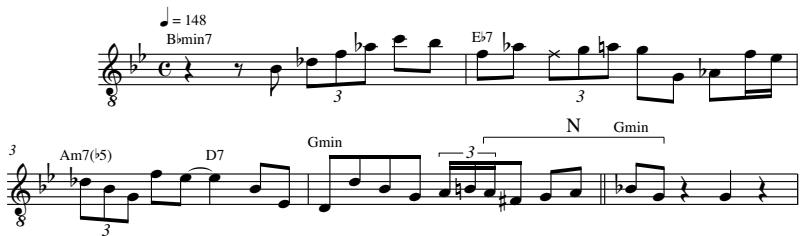
Example 9a Sonny Rollins, “It’s All Right With Me” (1:05–1:07). A sound recording of this example appears in the online version of the *Journal*.



Example 9b Sonny Rollins, “Ezz-Thetic” (2:10–2:13). A sound recording of this example appears in the online version of the *Journal*.



Example 9c Sonny Rollins, “Grand Street” (2:19–2:26). A sound recording of this example appears in the online version of the *Journal*.



Example 11b, from a solo on “Strode Rode” recorded the same day as “Blue 7,” he ends the cell with a descending tritone, similar to measure 3 of Example 10.⁹³

Melodic cell A, which is one of cell N’s variants, is by no means an exclusive signature device of Rollins’s; Example 12 illustrates examples from solos by trumpeter Donald Byrd (1932–2013) on “Bluesnote,” trombonist Curtis Fuller (b. 1934) on “Anedac,” tenor saxophonist Johnny Griffin (1928–2008) on “Stix’ Trix,” and pianist Wynton Kelly (1931–1971) on

93. Rollins, “Strode Rode,” *Saxophone Colossus*, rec. June 22, 1956.

Example 10 Sonny Rollins, “Shadrack” (0:43–1:20). A sound recording of this example appears in the online version of the *Journal*.

“Gingerbread Boy.”⁹⁴ But during the 1950s Rollins seems to have used it at least as often as any other prominent jazz improviser, and likely more than most. Table 1 (pp. 205–210) identifies, in the first of the “cell form”

94. Rollins, “Bluesnote,” *Sonny Rollins Volume 1* (Blue Note 1542, 1957), rec. Dec. 16, 1956; Wilbur Harden, “Anedac,” *Tanganyika Strut* (Savoy MG 12136, 1958), rec. May 13, 1958; Johnny Griffin, “Stix’ Trix,” *Johnny Griffin Sextet* (Riverside 264, 1958), rec. Feb. 25, 1958; Jimmy Heath, “Gingerbread Boy,” *On The Trail* (Riverside 4583, 1966), rec. Spring 1964.

Example 11a Sonny Rollins, “Step Lightly” (1:47–1:58). A sound recording of this example appears in the online version of the *Journal*.

The musical score consists of three staves of jazz notation. Staff 1 begins with a B^b7 chord, followed by a B^b7, Bdim7, and B^b7 chords. Staff 2 begins with an F chord, followed by D7, Gmin7, and F chords. Staff 3 begins with a C7 chord, followed by F and C7 chords. The tempo is indicated as 133 BPM.

Example 11b Sonny Rollins, “Strode Rode” (0:46–0:50). A sound recording of this example appears in the online version of the *Journal*.

The musical score consists of two staves of jazz notation. Staff 1 begins with a B^bmin7 chord, followed by D7 and B^b chords. Staff 2 begins with a C7 chord, followed by Gm7(b5), C7, and Fmin chords. The tempo is indicated as 240 BPM.

columns, each of cell A’s sixty-four occurrences on his 1950s recordings, and Example 13 transcribes instances from a February 1956 recording of “Round Midnight” and a March 1957, recording of “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing).”⁹⁵ The saxophonist appears to have been playing this particular melodic formula especially often between 1955 and 1958, with its frequency peaking during the year he recorded “Blue 7”—it occurs on twelve other tracks dating from February through June of 1956.

Yet as early as December 1951, Rollins played a close variant of cell A toward the end of a recorded solo on “This Love of Mine” (Ex. 14); only the

95. Clifford Brown, “Round Midnight,” *At the Cotton Club* (Lone Hill Jazz 10292, 2007), rec. Feb. 26, 1956; Max Roach, “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing),” +4, rec. March 18, 1957.

Example 12a Donald Byrd, “Bluesnote” (1:17–1:23). A sound recording of this example appears in the online version of the **Journal**.

Example 12b Curtis Fuller, “Anedac” (0:43–1:20). A sound recording of this example appears in the online version of the **Journal**.

Example 12c Johnny Griffin, “Stix’ Trix” (5:48–5:52). A sound recording of this example appears in the online version of the **Journal**.

figure’s initial pitch differs from the exact form as here defined.⁹⁶ In this instance its distinctive dissonance on the sixth note appears within an arpeggiated augmented triad superimposed over a dominant-seventh chord: Rollins arpeggiates a G-flat-augmented triad over A^{b7}, sounding the underlying

96. Rollins, “This Love of Mine,” *Sonny Rollins with the Modern Jazz Quartet* (Prestige 7029, 1956), rec. Dec. 17, 1951.

Example 12d Wynton Kelly, “Gingerbread Boy” (3:30–3:33). A sound recording of this example appears in the online version of the *Journal*.



Example 13a Sonny Rollins, “Round Midnight” (3:29–3:33). A sound recording of this example appears in the online version of the *Journal*.

Example 13b Sonny Rollins, “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing)” (0:27–0:28). A sound recording of this example appears in the online version of the *Journal*.



harmony’s minor seventh ($G\flat$), ninth ($B\flat$) and raised eleventh (D^\sharp). His recordings of the early 1950s suggest that, within his musical idiom, cell A may have originated from this harmonic strategy of superimposing augmented triadic structures over dominant-seventh chords.

Rollins’s October 1951 solo on “Dig” (Ex. 15), a “Sweet Georgia Brown” contrafact, sheds more light on cell A’s genesis.⁹⁷ Cell N occurs four times during this solo (mm. 8–9, 39–40, 55–56, and 85), along with two variants (mm. 59 and 88–89). Furthermore, throughout measures 17–24 Rollins arpeggiates augmented triads belonging to the same whole-tone pitch collections as their underlying dominant-seventh chord’s root, third, and seventh, just as he did in “This Love of Mine”: over the F^7 chord

97. Davis, “Dig,” *Dig* (Prestige 7012, 1956), rec. October 5, 1951.

Example 14 Sonny Rollins, “This Love of Mine” (2:01–2:15). A sound recording of this example appears in the online version of the *Journal*.

(mm. 17–20) he mainly plays subsets of D-flat- and E-flat-augmented triads, whereas over B-flat⁷ (mm. 21–24) he alludes to A-flat- and B-flat-augmented triads.⁹⁸ A three-note succession, G–Ab–E \natural , occurs in measures 21 and 23 (its G \natural s are the only notes during this entire passage that fall outside their surrounding whole-tone collections). This melodic fragment is, needless to say, a segment of cell A, pitched at the exact same transpositional level as in “Blue 7,” as are the solo’s several iterations of cell N and its variants. During the “Dig” solo Rollins never links cell N with the whole-tone-derived G–Ab–E \natural segment to create cell A in full, but, as Example 14 shows, he comes very close to doing so two months later, in “This Love of Mine.” Used in close juxtaposition, these two melodic devices foreshadow the emergence of cell A in Rollins’s improvisations by the mid-1950s.

Because cell A is an element of both Rollins’s personal idiom and the general hard bop dialect, its individual occurrences are all interrelated in a synchronic—that is, atemporal—sense, whether during a single solo such as “Blue 7” or between separate performances. But by the same token, no particular instance of the melodic cell can be said to generate any other. Of course, this does not rule out the possibility that Rollins could deploy this synchronic relationship diachronically within a given improvisation; as it happens, he clearly did so on more than one documented occasion. A good illustration is provided by Example 16, a transcription from a bootleg tape of Rollins performing live in Cleveland, Ohio, with the Brown–Roach Quintet on May 28, 1956, a month before recording *Saxophone Colossus*.⁹⁹ Eight bars into his final chorus on George Gershwin’s “Nice Work If You Can Get It,” the saxophonist plays the first five notes of cell A (m. 5 of Ex. 16), whereupon he reiterates this melodic pattern fragmentarily in successive

98. Enharmonic equivalency is assumed.

99. Clifford Brown, “Nice Work If You Can Get It,” *At the Cotton Club*, rec. May 28, 1956. Brown died in an automobile accident, along with the Brown–Roach Quintet’s pianist Richie Powell, four days after the *Saxophone Colossus* session, on June 26, 1956.

Example 15 Sonny Rollins, “Dig” (0:32–2:05). A sound recording of this example appears in the online version of the **Journal**.

♩ = 241

1 C7 F7

3

8 N E^b7

12 A^b

16 C7 F7

21 B^b7 Fmin7

26 C7 Fmin7 C7 A^b

30 F7 B^bmin7 E^b7 A^b F7

34 B^b7

38 N E^b7

42 A^b

Example 15 continued

47

51

55 N

59 Fmin7 C7 A♭

63 B♭min7 E♭7 A♭ F7

68 B♭7

72 E♭7

77 A♭

81 F7

85 B♭7 N

89 Fmin7 C7 Fmin7 C7

93 A♭ F7 B♭min7 E♭7 A♭

semitonal downward transpositions (mm. 6–8). At measures 10–11 he plays cell A in its entirety, repeating it thereafter with various transpositions and modifications through the end of the chorus; each is bracketed in Example 16. During a solo on Richard Rodgers's "Lover," taped at the same venue three days later, Rollins plays three different transpositions of the same figure, two of which are just two bars apart (transcribed in Exx. 17a and 17b).¹⁰⁰

"Intentionality," Meyer observes, "is a function of stylistic improbability: the more improbable it is that a conformant relationship could have arisen for stylistic reasons alone, the more we impute conscious intention to the composer."¹⁰¹ Although Rollins's intent can never be conclusively ascertained through musical analysis without further corroborating information, it seems quite possible that he consciously intended to foreground the motivic relationships in "Nice Work If You Can Get It" and "Lover" insofar as such insistent melodic repetition is relatively uncommon in both the hard bop style and his personal idiom. Likewise, cell A's recurrences in "Blue 7," especially the stylistically improbable reiterations in measures 248–255 (Ex. 2, pp. 177–78), suggest that Rollins may have intentionally sought to highlight this melodic figure. Even so, Schuller's assertion that cell A's initial appearances during Rollins's opening chorus are the conceptual point of departure for each subsequent instance of the melodic cell—"the fountainhead from which issues most of what is to follow"¹⁰²—is an incontestable description, not of Rollins's artistic intent, but only of how Schuller subjectively hears the piece, and of how he encourages others to hear it.

There would be much stronger grounds for arguing that Rollins intentionally derived elements of the "Blue 7" solo from his opening chorus if these first twelve measures were a composed theme and if cell A were markedly untypical of his improvisational style. The cell's recurrences would then seem more likely, from the saxophonist's perspective, to be generated dynamically from a preexisting incipit. But because his first chorus is improvised and cell A is a melodic formula, the most that can be said, beyond simply describing a subjective hearing, is that cell A's recurrences within this particular solo are nonhierarchically associated elements of Rollins's habitual musical idiom.¹⁰³ As such, they do not

100. Clifford Brown, "Lover," *At the Cotton Club*, rec. June 1, 1956. Rollins also plays cell A four times in a row at 1:18 on a studio version of "Lover" recorded in early 1957; Max Roach, "Lover," *Jazz in 3/4 Time* (EmArcy MG 36108, 1957), rec. March 21, 1957. He plays the figure twice at 1:08 on the same track, as well.

101. Meyer, *Explaining Music: Essays and Explorations*, 73–74.

102. Schuller, "Sonny Rollins," 216.

103. For a clear elucidation of the distinction between motivic repetitions that are simply associated by similarity and those that involve a "precedence-ordering," see Cohn, "Autonomy of Motives in Schenkerian Accounts of Tonal Music," 165.

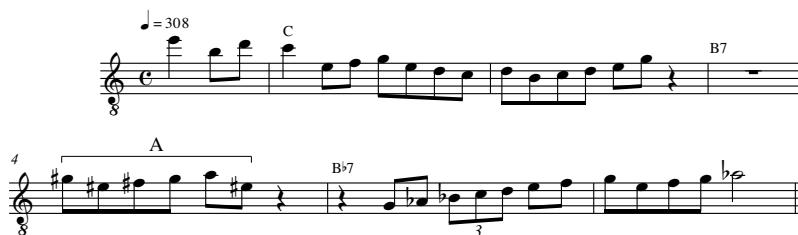
Example 16 Sonny Rollins, “Nice Work If You Can Get It” (3:59–4:28). A sound recording of this example appears in the online version of the *Journal*.

The musical score consists of eight staves of music for a single instrument, likely a saxophone. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats), and the tempo is 228 BPM. The score is divided into measures by vertical bar lines. Above the staff, various chords are written in a bracketed format, indicating harmonic progressions. Measure 1 starts with an A-flat note. Measures 2-3 show a sequence of chords: Cmin7, F7, B-flat min7, E-flat 7. Measures 4-5 continue with A-flat, C7, F7, B-flat 7, E-flat 7. Measures 6-7 show A-flat, Cmin7, F7, A. Measures 8-9 show A-flat, B-flat min7, E-flat 7, A. Measures 10-11 show A-flat, A, Fmin7, A. Measures 12-13 show D-flat 7, Fmin7, A, B-flat 7, E-flat min7, A. Measures 14-15 show A, B-flat 7, E-flat min7, A. Measures 16-17 show C7, F7, A, B-flat 7, E-flat min7, A. Measures 18-19 show B-flat 7, E-flat 7, A, B-flat 7, E-flat min7, A. Measures 20-21 show A, B-flat 7, A, B-flat 7, A. Measures 22-23 show B-flat 7, E-flat 7, A, B-flat 7, E-flat min7, A. Measures 24-25 show Cmin7, F7, Cmin7, F7, B-flat min7, E7. Measures 26 shows a final sequence of A-flat, 3, 3, C7, F7.

unify “Blue 7” as a singular, discrete musical statement; on the contrary, they are a point of connection with many of Rollins’s other mid-1950s improvisations.

Even if “Blue 7” lacks the sort of calculated solo-head motivic unity that Schuller claims, Rollins certainly appears to have undertaken overt motivic development in a number of his improvisations during the 1950s. In addition to the above-mentioned passages from “Nice Work If You Can Get It” and “Lover,” the saxophonist manipulates motives extensively on occasional tracks such as “Sonnymoon for Two,” recorded at New York’s Village Vanguard in late 1957. He spends the better part of this nine-minute blues solo toying with a two-note falling motive—either the fifth or third scale degree descending

Example 17a Sonny Rollins, “Lover” (2:03–2:07). A sound recording of this example appears in the online version of the *Journal*.



Example 17b Sonny Rollins, “Lover” (3:45–3:48). A sound recording of this example appears in the online version of the *Journal*.



to the tonic.¹⁰⁴ While not strongly related to the head melody, the recurrent figure happens to be a melodic formula heard in some of his other improvisations of the era, from a solo recorded in 1949 on J. J. Johnson’s “Hilo” to a 1957 sideman appearance on Dizzy Gillespie’s “Wheatleigh Hall.”¹⁰⁵ It also occurs at the very beginning and toward the end of the June 1957 track “Funky Hotel Blues,” a twelve-bar blues that Rollins may well have improvised completely spontaneously *à la* “Blue 7.”¹⁰⁶ So this two-note pattern, like cell A, can be properly understood only in the context of the saxophonist’s musical idiom *in toto*.

104. Rollins, “Sonnymoon for Two,” *A Night at the Village Vanguard* (Blue Note 1581 / LA475, 1958), rec. November 3, 1957. Interestingly, “Sonnymoon for Two” is one of the very few Rollins recordings with which the saxophonist himself claims to be satisfied; see Ratliff, *Jazz Ear: Conversations Over Music*, 43. Rollins cites this live version of “Sonnymoon for Two” in particular, not the studio recording taped a day later for his album *Sonny Rollins Plays* (Period 1204, 1958), rec. November 4, 1957.

105. Rollins plays the figure at 1:27 on “Hilo”; J. J. Johnson, Kai Winding, and Benny Green, *Trombone by Three* (Prestige 7023, 1956), rec. May 26 1949; and at 7:56 on “Wheatleigh Hall”; Dizzy Gillespie, *Duets* (Verve 8260, 1958), rec. December 11, 1957.

106. “Funky Hotel Blues,” recorded on June 19, 1957, was originally issued on an anthology of tracks by various performers entitled *Blues for Tomorrow* (Riverside 12-243, 1957). The figure in question first appears on “Funky Hotel Blues” at 0:00 and recurs at 5:08. Unlike “Blue 7,” “Funky Hotel Blues” was not initially considered worth releasing when other tracks from the same session were first issued on Rollins’s album *The Sound of Sonny* (Riverside 12-241, 1957).

Ironically, the saxophone improvisation that Schuller lauded for its exceptional intellectuality and formal unity may well be Rollins's most casually executed, haphazardly organized performance ever approved for release on a commercial album. To be sure, extemporaneity and risk-taking are often prized in jazz, and ensembles' collective ability to recover from mistakes exemplifies the music's dialogic, interactive aesthetic and communitarian ethos.¹⁰⁷ Mistakes can even be welcomed as markers of authentic spontaneity and creative daring.¹⁰⁸ Nonetheless, it is quite rare for a jazz recording, especially one made in a studio, to be issued with coordination errors as conspicuous as the several consecutive misaligned choruses and near-breakdown resulting from Watkins's momentary—and perfectly understandable—misstep.¹⁰⁹ Little wonder that Rollins remains “puzzled” by the praise lavished upon “Blue 7.”

There have been welcome indications in recent years that the recording is beginning to be reevaluated: a 2011 edition of *The Smithsonian Anthology* of jazz recordings supplants “Blue 7” with Rollins’s “St. Thomas,” as does a compact disc anthology released in conjunction with director Ken Burns’s high-profile 2001 television documentary on jazz history.¹¹⁰ Yet Rollins continues to be depicted as a thematic improviser in a number of recent jazz history texts.¹¹¹ This characterization is somewhat misleading. The saxophonist has undoubtedly employed motivic development in his improvisations from time to time throughout his career, as did some of his well-known contemporaries such as fellow–tenor saxophonist John Coltrane (1926–1967), but there is little reason to believe that he has ever been especially inclined to develop motives derived from a preexisting theme.¹¹² In fact, no compelling evidence of this has

107. Monson recounts a conversation in which drummer Ralph Peterson reflected that “It’s not what you play when you’re playing, but what you play *after* you fuck up that really counts, you know. It’s not *that* you fuck up, but how you clean it up that matters, because a lot of times those are the most musical moments, because the desire to compensate for the . . . mistake . . . often leads to a special moment in music where everybody begins to come to the support”; *Saying Something*, 176.

108. Ake, *Jazz Matters*, 46–50.

109. Postwar jazz musicians have often valued precise musical execution: for example, Gabriel Solis concludes, after thoroughly examining two alternate takes of the tune “Evidence” recorded by the Thelonious Monk Quartet, that Monk’s choice of which rendition to release commercially evinces the pianist’s desire for “precision and concision from his sidemen”; “‘Unique Chunk of Jazz Reality’: Authorship, Musical Work Concepts, and Thelonious Monk’s Live Recordings from the Five Spot, 1958”; Solis, “A Unique Chunk of Jazz Reality,” 327.

110. *Jazz: The Smithsonian Anthology* (Smithsonian Folkways SFW CD 40820, 2011); *Ken Burns Jazz: The Story of America’s Music* (Columbia Legacy C5K 61432, 2000). Rollins, “St. Thomas,” *Saxophone Colossus* (Prestige 7079, 1957), rec. June 22, 1956.

111. Harker, *Jazz: An American Journey*, 231; Giddins and DeVeaux, *Jazz*, 367; Gioia, *History of Jazz*, 283; Martin and Waters, *Jazz: The First 100 Years*, 248–49.

112. On procedures of motivic development in Coltrane’s improvisations, see Kernfeld, “Two Coltranes,” 46–49; and Porter, *John Coltrane*, 226–28 and 238–43.

ever been offered in print. Besides “Blue 7,” the only other recorded Rollins solo commonly cited as an example of thematic improvisation is “St. Thomas,” which begins with a descending fifth dyad that inverts the theme’s incipit ascending perfect fourth.¹¹³ However, the dyad in question, consisting simply of the dominant and tonic pitches, is too commonplace in tonal music to be a distinctive motivic parallelism, let alone a stylistically improbable intentional reference.¹¹⁴

To this day, it is common to find analytical studies of jazz that, like Schuller’s, address individual improvisations rather than stylistic issues encompassing more than any single performance.¹¹⁵ Even writers who are concerned primarily with the music’s social context and cultural meanings can often be inclined to treat improvised solos as somewhat independent entities rather than situating them within broader musical conventions.¹¹⁶ The curious saga of Rollins’s “Blue 7” suggests that much is to be gained from exploring synchronic stylistic aspects of jazz improvisation—dialects shared by musical communities and, above all, players’ personal idioms.¹¹⁷ “The improvisor,” according to jazz pianist and composer Vijay Iyer,

113. See, for example, Blancq, *Sonny Rollins*, 68–69; Kernfeld, *What To Listen For in Jazz*, 143–44; idem, “Sonny Rollins,” 446; and Wilson, *Sonny Rollins*, 68–69. Palmer provides a brief analytical overview of “St. Thomas”—along with a transcription by Ken Rattenbury erroneously transposed from C to D-flat-major—in *Sonny Rollins: The Cutting Edge*, 183–85, 188–91.

114. Charles Rosen elaborates on this basic music-analytical point in *The Frontiers of Meaning: Three Informal Lectures on Music*, 92–94. See also Tovey, *A Musician Talks: 2, Musical Textures*, 48; quoted in Meyer, *Explaining Music*, 62–63.

115. See, for instance, Al-Zand, “Improvisation as Continually Juggled Priorities: Julian ‘Cannonball’ Adderley’s ‘Straight, No Chaser’”; Martin, “Balancing Composition and Improvisation in James P. Johnson’s ‘Carolina Shout’”; and Steinbeck, “Area by Area the Machine Unfolds’: The Improvisational Performance Practice of the Art Ensemble of Chicago.”

116. See, for example, Robert Walser’s discussion of Miles Davis’s 1964 solo on “My Funny Valentine”: (My Funny Valentine [Columbia 9106, 1965], rec. Feb. 12, 1964); “Out of Notes: Signification, Interpretation, and the Problem of Miles Davis,” 351–58; and Monson’s discussion of the Jaki Byard Quartet’s 1965 recording of “Bass-ment Blues”: (*The Jaki Byard Quartet/Live!* Vol. 2 [Prestige 7477, 1965], rec. April 15, 1965); *Saying Something*, 137–74. Although these two analyses do address intertextual musical references as well as broader questions of meaning, both writers confine their attention almost entirely to a single performance when it comes to engaging aspects of musical structure. Part of the underlying explanation, of course, lies in jazz scholars’ tendency to focus their analytical attention on recordings, which present the music as a decontextualized product rather than a socially-situated process. This issue is discussed in Rasula, “The Media of Memory: The Seductive Menace of Records in Jazz History”; DeVeaux, “This Is What I Do”; and Jackson, *Blowin’ the Blues Away: Performance and Meaning on the New York Jazz Scene*, 7–11.

117. For instance, improvisers’ individual idioms can potentially provide clues about the authorship of jazz compositions. A famous example is the 32-bar theme of Miles Davis’s 1959 “So What”: historian Mark Gridley recalls that pianist Bill Evans claimed that Davis’s bassist, Paul Chambers, composed the theme’s well-known bass riff, and Evans’s recollection is confirmed by the appearance of the same melodic pattern in Chambers’s earlier recorded improvisations, such as his rendition of Jerome Kern’s “Yesterdays” (*Bass on Top* [Blue Note 1569, 1957], rec. July 14, 1957), where it can be heard at 2:45. See Ortiz de Urbina, “The Story of ‘So What.’”

"is concerned more with making individual improvisations relate *to each other*, and to his or her conception of personal sound, than he or she might be with obeying some standard of coherence on the scale of the single improvisation."¹¹⁸ Indeed, improvised music is embedded in stylistic conventions even more deeply than is composed music inasmuch as spontaneous invention depends on the sorts of reflexive thought and action that can be more easily contravened during non-realtime composition.¹¹⁹ These habitual engrained practices inevitably recur from one performance to the next by any given improviser. And though each player's idiom is enmeshed within a larger dialect, the jazz community has always valued distinctive personal musical identities especially highly. Another improviser, pianist Paul Bley, recently reflected that "you might think of one's *oeuvre* as a single piece, and the *oeuvre* is a lifetime."¹²⁰ Studies of single independent solos will always be able to help explain and even enhance how listeners perceive them, but we can begin to understand the craft of musical improvisation more deeply if we examine a corpus of performances large enough to reveal stylistic norms, as even Schuller himself eventually came to acknowledge.¹²¹

More than a half century after publishing "Sonny Rollins and the Challenge of Thematic Improvisation," Schuller still deserves much credit for broadening the scope and intellectual range of jazz criticism and scholarship, even if his interpretative orientation has been justifiably called into question. Yet he did so mainly by dint of his aspirations and polemical gifts. However rhetorically compelling, his article caused both Rollins and "Blue 7" to be widely misunderstood, with a large swathe of jazz critics and scholars subsequently promulgating his thesis, including some who have critiqued it politically, as well as those who may have shared his aesthetic affinity for motivic unity.

118. Vijay Iyer, "Exploding the Narrative in Jazz Improvisation," 400. Original emphasis. Recent analytical jazz research that does address stylistic norms includes Fernando Benadon's and Matthew Butterfield's recent investigations of jazz rhythm; Fernando Benadon, "Slicing the Beat: Jazz Eighth-Notes as Expressive Microrhythm"; *idem*, "Time Warps in Early Jazz"; Butterfield, "Why Do Jazz Musicians Swing Their Eighth Notes?" Robert O. Gjerdingen's research on Galant-style compositional schemata in Western art music discloses a mode of individual creativity that draws on formulaic patterns in much the same way as does jazz improvisation, as Gjerdingen himself notes; *A Classic Turn of Phrase: Music and the Psychology of Convention*; *idem*, *Music in the Galant Style*, 370–71.

119. To be sure, in this respect the relationship between a classical work and its genre has evolved over time. Carl Dahlhaus argues that between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, "a work was primarily an example of a genre . . . [it] formed not so much an isolated, closed whole, . . . as, rather, it exemplified a type"; *Esthetics of Music*, 15.

120. Meehan, *Time Will Tell: Conversations with Paul Bley*, 86.

121. "An analysis of Beethoven's *Eroica* or Armstrong's *West End Blues* without reference to musical history or the development of musical style," Schuller writes, "could yield a certain amount of factual information, but a full *evaluation* would obviously be impossible without considering the authors' total *oeuvre* and that of their immediate predecessors, contemporaries, and successors"; *Early Jazz*, ix.

So what ought to be the fate of “Blue 7”? Should it be expeditiously dislodged from its pedestal in the musical firmament? Not necessarily. Perhaps the recording deserves to retain a niche in jazz’s history not as a *locus classicus* of structurally unified improvisation but rather for embodying certain exemplary social values and ethical principles: the embrace of serendipity and risk, perseverance in the face of unforeseen challenges, and above all a willingness, on behalf of a collective enterprise, to accommodate and ameliorate, rather than simply recognize or critique, the errors of one’s peers.¹²² These are lessons that today’s scholars can take to heart, for we need not fully abandon the pathway Schuller paved. To better understand Rollins’s music, our prospects will instead be brightest if we navigate Schuller’s route more attentively, if more circumspectly. His mistake was not simply to have pored over “Blue 7” too closely, aestheticizing it in a cultural void; in truth, he did not contemplate the solo and its musical context diligently enough. Without neglecting the manifold other modes of interpretation, we ought to rededicate ourselves to scrutinizing musical details and surveying stylistic norms, if only out of respect for musicians’ meticulously honed craft and empathy for their lived experience as performers. “Blue 7” affirms just how crucially jazz improvisation, as a social process and as an artistic endeavor, depends upon its practitioners’ commitment to listen to the music as intently as possible, moment to moment, chorus after chorus, and day by day. We should ask no less of ourselves.

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122. See also Monson, *Saying Something*, 169.

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Abstract

Scholarly opinion has for many years been divided over Gunther Schuller's landmark 1958 article, "Sonny Rollins and the Challenge of Thematic Improvisation." Jazz theorists view the article's close analysis of Rollins's 1956 jazz saxophone improvisation "Blue 7" as one of their discipline's founding statements; historians and ethnomusicologists meanwhile tend to fault it for neglecting cultural context. In either instance the specific details of Schuller's analysis have been largely accepted as being internally consistent. The present study proposes that the analysis of jazz improvisation ought to engage more extensively with broader stylistic issues in addition to the specifics of isolated individual performances. Such a musically contextualized perspective reveals that Schuller's principal argument—that, in this particular improvisation, Rollins developed motivic elements of a composed theme—is false. "Blue 7" was in fact improvised in its entirety, and the melodic pattern that Schuller cited as a thematic motive was one of

Rollins's habitual improvisational formulas, heard on many of the saxophonist's other 1950s recordings. This canonic recording, as well as the notion of Rollins as a "thematic" improviser, therefore needs to be reconsidered.

Keywords: jazz, improvisation, analysis, Sonny Rollins, Gunther Schuller

