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Graduate Written Examination MUSC 224

“A study into the fusion of Country & Jazz Music idioms by John Scofield, Bill Frisell, & Jerry Douglas”

1) *Compare, contrast- and possibly analyze- “Small Town/Epistrophy” by Bill Frisell and Thomas Morgan, “Country For Old Men” by John Scofield, and “What If” by The Jerry Douglas Band*

Answer:

As a musician, multi-instrumentalist connoisseur of jazz, bluegrass, and country music idioms, the music of John Scofield, Bill Frisell, and Jerry Douglas have impacted me tremendously. I will be discussing the work of all three musicians listed including similar and contrasting repertoire. The music and material that will be discussed include Bill Frisell’s version of “Wildwood Flower” from the 2017 live record release “Small Town”. Due to the limited space in this exam, I will not be looking at Frisell’s rendition of “Wildwood Flower” from his Epistrophy release. After studying the two versions, I believe his rendition from “Small Town” better suites the Carter Family style and is important to include here. I will also be discussing John Scofield’s arrangement of “Wildwood Flower” from the 2016 release “Country For Old Men”, and “Cave Bop” from The Jerry Douglas Band’s 2017 release “What If”.

In addition to the information listed above, I will be using interviews that I conducted via phone with both Bill Frisell and John Scofield as primary resources. With the included excerpts, I hope it will give the reader a better sense how they approached learning and blending these styles as

well as their wealth of knowledge and expertise. Other material will include lead sheets from John Scofield which I have transcribed in Finale for a better glance into his arrangement of “Wildwood Flower”. I will also be using a lead sheet Jerry Douglas’s band member, guitarist Mike Seal who taught me, of “Cave Bop”, the title track on the record “What If”, which I performed in my Masters Recital. This paper aims to give the reader a new insight and investigation into how to approach blending jazz and country music idioms.

Fusion music is important to define and expand on when discussing the fusing of acoustic bluegrass/folk/country idioms and jazz. Authors Lewis Porter, Michael Ullman, and Edward Hazell in “Jazz : From Its Origins to the Present” define fusion music as “A combination or “fusing” of jazz with other types of music.”¹ In this case it is the combination of jazz with folk/bluegrass/country music stylings, harmony, form, melody, and the idiom. Author and bluegrass musicologist Robert Cantwell states in “Bluegrass Breakdown: the making of the old southern sound” in Chapter 7, *Workin’ Music, Bluegrass and Jazz* “Since the early days of bluegrass, as [Alan] Lomax observed, bluegrass has not only adopted the ground rules of jazz, and absorbed its experimentalist spirit, but actually echoed the music itself.”² This is also the case for jazz, as these idioms have been fused since the early 1950’s, beginning first with Sonny Rollins record “Way Out West”, and the 1960’s release “Jazz Winds” by Nashville guitar great Hank Garland featuring Gary Burton. A few years later, Burton’s released his own seminal country/jazz fusion release entitled “Tennessee Firebird”, produced by Chet Atkins.

¹ Lewis, Porter and Michael Ullman with Ed Hazall, *Jazz: its origins to the present* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1993), 462.

² Robert Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown: the making of the old southern sound* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 162.

Bill Frisell has led a tremendous career in the jazz music world, and has been blending these styles since the early 1990's with his release of the record "Nashville".

In an interview I conducted with Bill he mentioned about how he understands and learns the music;

“The melodies are amazing, same as they are if it was a Billy Strayhorn song. I like the melodies, [and] it’s mainly just that, I would approach those songs that you mentioned [Wildwood Flower], the same way I would approach any other song you know, like say it was a Duke Ellington song or a Monk song. I go through this process of just trying to absorb the melody and— there’s this point where the song, enters into your bloodstream, where do you don’t have to think about it. I’m trying to get to that.”³ Bill later mentions about his influences which will be brought up again by John Scofield “It [country and bluegrass music] always has, many of the people that inspired me long ago, I mentioned Sonny Rollins— “Way out West” his album from the 50’s where he plays “I’m an Old Cowhand”, “Wagon Wheel” and stuff like that. [Also], Gary Burton was a huge influence on me and he had a record “Tennessee Firebird”. He played with Nashville guys when he was really young, and that was one of the first jazz guys that got me fired up.”⁴ Specifically speaking in Bill’s recording of “Wildwood Flower” from “Small Town”, written by Joseph Philbrick Webster and made famous by The Carter Family, you can hear his ideas on how he absorbed that beautiful melody. Frisell makes use of the Maybelle Carter cross-picking style through the melody. With bassist Thomas Morgan providing a two feel accompaniment, they use the simple harmony in C major with little to no alterations from the \square and \square sections of the piece in a beautiful duet of a timeless classic in a modern jazz context. Below in Figure 1 is the lead sheet of “Wildwood Flower” which John Scofield sent me before our interview. In the interview with John Scofield he mentions his own inspirations for blending country and jazz music “I’m a Sonny Rollins fanatic, and I knew that record [Way out West], and that’s a good example of taking country tunes and playing jazz on them—you know, I mean that’s a real jazz record.”⁵

³ Bill Frisell, interview by the author, 23 April 2020, phone.

⁴ Bill Frisell, interview by the author.

⁵ John Scofield, interview by the author, 28 April 2020, phone.

Scofield later states when planning the album “I wanted them all to be vehicles for jazz improvisation, so to just play the song is one thing and that’s nice, but I wanted to be able to blow on em’, you know—so when you take a tune like “Red River Valley”, we played it like we would play “When the Saints Go Marching In”.⁶ Below is John’s chart of “Wildwood Flower”, which I notated in Finale due to the poor image quality of the original. It is merely the basic chord changes and melody written, giving John and the band the freedom to improvise as he mentioned above.

(Straight feel over head, swing for solos) Composed by Joseph Patrick Webster
Arr. by John Scofield

The Wildwood Flower

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transcribed by Jason Keiser

Scofield takes more liberty with the harmony, adding in more of a jazz progression I-vi-V7 as well as improvised ideas when comparing to Bill Frisell and previous renditions in the bluegrass music idiom. Both versions have great interpretations displaying the fusion of country and jazz music by two leading guitar giants in the jazz music industry.

⁶ John Scofield, interview by the author, phone.

Below in Figure 2 is the first 8 measures of “Cave Bop” composed by Jerry Douglas and performed by The Jerry Douglas band from the 2017 record “What If”. The connection to Bill Frisell is important to note as Jerry first recorded “Cave Bop” on his 2002 record “Lookout For Hope”, also written and recorded by Bill Frisell. Their connection began when he recorded his album “Nashville” with Jerry, and one of my mentors from Tennessee, professional mandolinist Adam Steffey. This piece makes use of the bluegrass instrumentation with lead dobro on the melody, as well as the tremendous speed at which it is played. The second version heard in “What If” is played at over **300** bpm. Thus, the band makes use of a fast, virtuosic bluegrass tempo and a melody phrased in straight eighth notes, while in Figure 2 the jazz elements present themselves in the use of limited chord changes, harkening back to the modal jazz era of longer intervals of static harmony. The use of F#- pentatonic for the melody also gives the listener a sense of the jazz sound. I had the opportunity to perform this piece in my Masters recital, under tempo, but over 220 bpm. Having played the piece, it gave me more of an understanding to see the jazz and bluegrass elements throughout in the melody, tempo, and harmony. Douglas’s use of the same pitch Ab on the end of 2 and beat 3 is quite interesting and strangely difficult to play up to speed.

Figure 2

Cave Bop

Jerry Douglas

The connections between bluegrass, country, and jazz music idioms are clear. The musicians expertise comes out in arranging, composing, improvising and everyone is influenced by somebody who had done it before. The ways in which the melody and chord changes are handled in each piece make it a unique fusion between country and jazz. The overall purpose of this research and study is to shed light in the wonderful musical connections between bluegrass/country and jazz music and give the reader a better sense how to understand and approach the fusion of these timeless musical styles by Bill Frisell, John Scofield, and Jerry Douglas.

Bibliography

Primary Source Material

Interviews:

Keiser, J, (2020). An interview with Bill Frisell. Unpublished, interview by author, April 23rd, 2020.

Keiser, J, (2020). An interview with John Scofield. Unpublished, interview by author, April 28th, 2020.

Musical examples:

“Cave Bop,” from *What If*, New Rounder Records, played by Jerry Douglas and six others, recorded 2016, released 2017.

“Wildwood Flower,” from *Small Town*, ECM Records, played by Bill Frisell and Thomas Morgan, recorded 2016, released 2017.

“Wildwood Flower,” from *Country For Old Men*, Impulse Records, played by John Scofield and 3 others, recorded 2016, released 2017.

Transcriptions:

Douglas, Jerry (2017). *Cave Bop*. “What If”, Rounder Records. Transcription by Mike Seal, guitarist Jerry Douglas Band.

Scofield, John (2016). *Wildwood Flower*. “Country For Old Men”, Impulse Records. Transcribed originally by John Scofield, re-notated by Jason Keiser, with permission from John Scofield.

Secondary Resources

Books:

Cantwell, Robert. *Bluegrass Breakdown: the making of the old southern sound, First Da Capo edition*. University of Illinois, 1984.

Holoman, D. Kern. *Writing about Music: a Style Sheet*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2014.

Porter, Lewis, Michael Ullman, and Ed Hazell. *Jazz: from Its Origins to the Present*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993.