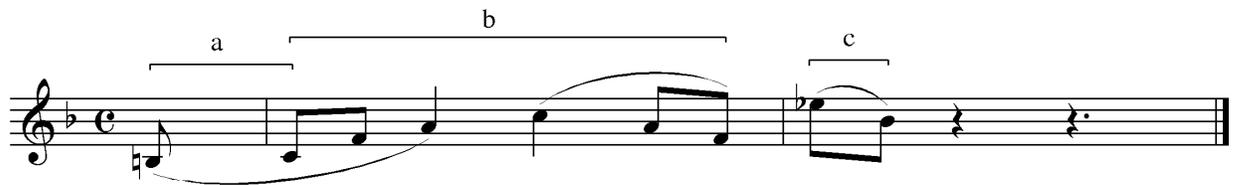


Web Feature 12.2

Motives in Thelonious Monk's "Well You Needn't"—in composition and improvisation

Like Bach, the jazz pianist and composer Thelonious Monk often worked out entire compositions from terse motivic figures that are usually presented at the very beginning. Web Example 12.2 shows the opening phrase of his composition "Well You Needn't." We can split this into several workable motives—the chromatic two-note pickup figure, the arpeggiated triad, and the angular two-note "kick" that ends the phrase (these are labeled "a," "b," and "c" in the example). The second phrase of the tune is a variant of the first, with a different concluding two-note figure that nevertheless preserves the contour of the original. (It should be pointed out here that the chord roots of these phrases, alternating between F and G \flat , is also a form of motive a, playing out the two-note chromatic figure in augmentation.) The third phrase is a repetition of the first, and the final phrase employs several repetitions of the figure shown in Web Example 12.3, which might also be considered to be a truncation (shortening) of the opening.



Web Example 12.2. Motives in Thelonious Monk's "Well You Needn't," first and third phrase (second phrase uses a different version of the "kick" c motive).



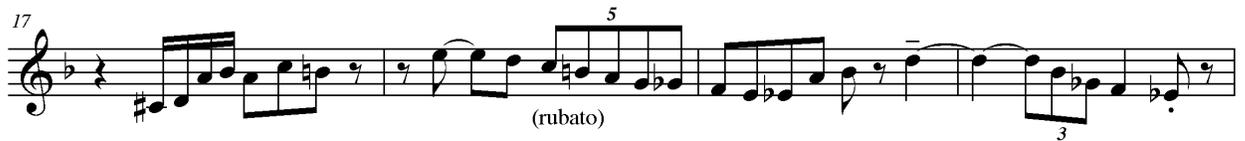
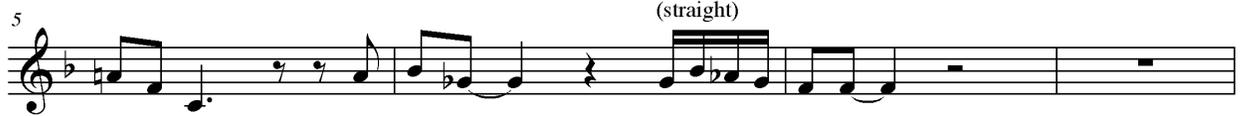
Web Example 12.3. Motive in last phrase of “Well You Needn’t.”

In the bridge or “middle eight” section of the composition, Monk focuses extensively on the figure of Web Example 12.3, sequencing it up a whole step and then up by successive half steps until it is a tritone away from where it began before sequencing it down by successive steps until it returns to the tonic. Thus, most of the theme is in some way developed from the first three notes.

Motives are not only found in notated composition; they also often occur in improvisation. Jazz players often find motives—sometimes present in the original tune upon which they are basing their improvisation—a useful tool for building effective solos. We can see something of how this is done in Miles Davis’s recording of “Well You Needn’t.” Web Example 12.4 shows how Davis works with the motives identified in Monk’s theme. He initially works with the triad figure (motive b), ornamented with the chromatic figure (motive a) from above rather than below. In the second phrase he shifts his attention to the chromatic figure, treating it as a series of elongated appoggiaturas. Where Monk leaves the F – G \flat vamp of the first sixteen measures to roam upward within the tritone in his third phrase, Davis seems to take this freedom as a cue to similarly wander. However, as the bass line begins its descent back down to the tonic, he returns to sequencing arpeggiated triads (derived from motive b). Davis begins his last phrase by developing the chromatic figure in sustained tones, reminiscent of the second phrase, before a final peppery rush of notes, ending on the all-important G \flat and F (a minor second interval, like motive a, and the pitches of the chord roots throughout the first half of the tune) brings the solo to a close. Thus, in this short but eloquent solo, Davis has

managed to crystallize the essence of Monk's composition, using all of its important elements as the grammar for his own musical expression. A lesser player might arguably just find notes that fit the chord changes and improvise accordingly, without incorporating any of the motives from the original tune. In his own way, Davis reminds you of what you are listening to.

("swung" rhythms except where indicated)



Web Example 12.4. Transcription of Miles Davis' "Well You Needn't" solo, first chorus.