

## CHAPTER 5: “Giant Steps” – Changing Chords Really Fast

“Giant Steps” is something that I use a lot when I work with students. On the one hand it is difficult but it offers a very clear problem that we can creatively apply ourselves to. The problem is switching chords (and chord scales) rapidly.

First, it’s important to think of where “Giant Steps” comes from. In 1959 when Trane recorded “Giant Steps,” he was interested in superimposing chords over cadences. He was already very adept at playing changes, and so he was investigating adding more and more changes for smaller periods of time to his chord progressions to create a blur of harmony—something like an aural mosaic—by moving quickly from one chord to another. The way Coltrane plays on each chord is very precise. His lines go through the heart of each chord change, which helps emphasize the rapidly shifting harmony.

Modern playing has moved in two seemingly opposite directions: 1) toward more changes in a smaller spaces of time, creating a kind of harmonic maze for the soloist, and 2) more open space and longer periods of time on one chord.

Trane had been exploring this second approach with Miles Davis during this period. 1959 was the same year that “Kind of Blue” was recorded. Actually, these two different approaches often turn out to be related. When playing over open forms, players can superimpose other harmonies over them. This is something that Trane had been doing and was to continue a few years later when he moved to more open one chord forms in his compositions, but for now on tunes like “Giant Steps,” “Countdown,” “Satellite” and “26-2,” those complex changes were written into the song form.

Okay, so here is my own personal history with this song. I was playing every week at a club in New York called Augie’s. Augie’s was a dive, but a lot of great younger musicians played there. I had been playing there with a great trumpet player named Scott Wendholt for three or four years, and at this point I was working there regularly with an extremely talented tenor sax player named Joel Frahm. Joel is a great and extremely facile musician. (I remember when I was doing a clinic with Joel and he said that students should check out Charlie Parker and he launched into a Bird solo that he had listened to a lot years before. He played about four choruses, took the horn out of his mouth and said that he had started with Bird’s solo but didn’t remember all of it exactly. “I was paraphrasing,” he said.) Anyway, he is that sort of player—a very good memory, great pitch and time and very quick-witted as a soloist. Anyway, Joel would play “Giant Steps” at a fast tempo every week (**CD Example 12: Joel Frahm playing Giant Steps**), and every week I would play a less than stellar solo on it. After about six months of this weekly humbling, it occurred to me that I could practice this tune. Now, it took me a while to think of this, because I had never really cared much for “Giant Steps.” It seemed kind of academic to me; the harmony followed a pattern and it seemed a little mechanical. I was more into the “open” thing—Miles with Herbie and Wayne, Ornette and Keith Jarrett and later Trane. I didn’t really want to hem myself in with a lot of chords.