

CHAPTER 6: *Rhythm Changes, A Slippery Form*

Hmmmph. Rhythm changes after “Giant Steps”? That’s a crazy way to organize a book on jazz. Everyone knows that rhythm changes come first and “Giant Steps” comes second. “Moten Swing,” “My Little Seude Shoes,” “My Little Brown Jug,” “I Got Rhythm,” “Anthropology”: old; “Giant Steps”: new, or newer at any rate.

There is a certain logic to that, of course. “Giant Steps” is a more modern response to traditional cadences, an experiment in superimposing chords over ii-V-I, or a way of using 3 keys to get to a major7 chord instead of a ii-7, V7 to get to that same major 7. But in some ways playing on rhythm changes is a lot harder than playing on “Giant Steps.” I don’t just mean in the sense that a lot has already been said on rhythm changes, or that “Giant Steps” has a complex harmonic structure that gives you a lot of suggestions about what notes you should be using at any time. (Meaning, when you play a hard tune with a lot of chords in it, your choices are more limited, so in a way it is easier to play on.)

Rhythm changes are hard for students because they have trouble figuring out which changes to play. Rhythm changes, like blues and the more simple standards, are harder to define because when people play on them they are constantly varying the changes as the solo dictates. When even strong mature players play on “Giant Steps,” most of the time they are soloing over the standard changes of that song. Look at Trane’s solo for example. He nails the changes. But when players play on rhythm changes, even traditional players, they use a lot of variations in the changes they are playing chorus to chorus. Consequently, rhythm changes as a form is more slippery than “Giant Steps.”

So what is the deep structure of rhythm changes? Here things get easier, because on the deeper level of structure, rhythm changes is pretty simple. The first four bars are turnarounds, so the structure is really I in the first and third bars and V7 for all or the second part of bars 2 and 4. Bar 5 is a dominant or a ii-V leading to IV on the downbeat of bar 6. The second half of bar 6 is either a IV7 of IV, a IV-7, or a #iv diminished. Bar 7 and 8 are a turnaround and the first ending. The second ending is a ii-V in bar 7 and I in bar 8. The bridge is a series of extended dominants starting on the III7, each lasting for two bars. (So VI7, II7 and V7 or for those theory heads out there, more correctly: V7/V7/ V7/V to V7/V7/V to V7/V to V7.) The last A is the same as the second A section. The problem, of course, is that this deep structure can be interpreted in so many ways.

The First Four Bars

So here are some of the choices for the first four bars of rhythm changes. (Note: the diagonal line pointing to the I chord in the first bar are possible substitutes for the first 2 bars or the first 4 bars, meaning 4 bars of Bb7sus4 or Bbdiminished, etc.)