

Moanin': The Perfect Blend of Swing, Blues and Bop

Every era of jazz has unique qualities that bring joy to a listener; the soulfulness of the blues, the strong dancing rhythm of swing, the melodic chord progressions of bop and the creativity of funk make jazz an art-form that has been enjoyable for nearly 100 years. But there is no time period of jazz that as seamlessly and beautifully combines the great attributes of so many eras as does 1950s hard bop. "Moanin'", a song written by Bobby Timmons, who was one of the premier composers during this period, was performed by Art Blakey, the best and most riveting drummer of his day, and Blakey's band in the early 1950s. The song, with its unique blend of gospel, blues, swing and bop, really epitomizes hard bop which is the peak of the jazz listening experience.

What is it about this song besides its blend of different jazz styles that makes it uniquely hard bop? The size of the band (only 5 members) and its instrumentation (no trombone, guitar, tuba, banjo, etc.) rules out any era prior to the 1940s and the set chord progressions, inclusion of piano, and lack of rock influence rules out any era post 1950s. This leaves bop, cool jazz and hard bop from which to choose. Cool jazz is not a logical choice for the constant pushing rhythm is too fiery, the tone quality too rough and the range of the improvisations too great. It could be confused with bop, however, this song really swings and accentuates blues notes, something that is unique to hard bop. "Moanin'" is therefore the quintessential hard bop piece.

Like a leaf riding the flow of a stream, the song really rides the drumming of Art Blakey, who uses the ride symbol for a swing pattern (accentuating beats 1, the & of 2, and 3) and stresses beats 2 and 4 on the snare. Jymie Merritt also helps push the pace along by walking the bass. These two band members really give the piece its swing feeling. The gospel feeling can be traced to the song's melody and the main riff's call and answer style. The bluesiness comes from the soloists themselves who an abundance of blues notes.

“Moanin’” starts off with a very bluesy piano riff that turns into a call and answer with the trumpet, sax and trombone. The pattern is reversed when the sax and trumpet play the bluesy riff and the piano answers. This gives off the feeling of a gospel choir, as if the lead singer is being answered with an “amen” or “yes, lord.” After the call and answer section, the whole band plays a very melodic tune where each melodic thought is major and bluesy but is resolved by the sax to a minor chord (and later on is resolved by the piano). It returns to the call and answer riff which gives way to the section of the song where each member of the band, save for Blakey, has 32 bar solos. First is Lee Morgan’s superb trumpet solo which, like the melody of the song itself, is very bluesy and melodic. Even though he often uses machine-gun like tufts of air to accentuate notes, which sounds like liberal use of a technique called tonguing, it still flows well and blends in with Bobby Timmons’ comping. The solo jumps around and is unpredictable yet it returns to themes often enough that once listened to enough, it in itself becomes singable. This flows seamlessly to Benny Golson’s tenor sax solo and he plays perfectly off the melodic idea found at the end of Morgan’s solo. His solo is somewhat smoother and his interval jumps are smaller. His solo, however, is just as unpredictable yet unlike Morgan, Golson races up and down through parts of scales showing off his unbridled dexterity. After Golson’s solo, the listener is treated with Bobby Timmons’ brilliant piano solo. Like Morgan on the trumpet, he uses blues notes frequently, and during the solo, the reflection of hard bop’s unique qualities is really at its peak. Timmons’ seems to be comping for himself frequently during the solo, using complex chords with his left hand as the base for his melodic figures on the right hand. Timmons’ also loves to use falls and glissandos. At one point, between his steady chromatically descending chords, he just fills the empty space with long glissandos. It is certainly a memorable solo. This finally leads to Jymie Merritt’s solo on the bass. It is perhaps the least impressive of the solos, in part because the others are so good, but also because dexterity and fluidity on the bass are much more difficult to achieve. Nonetheless, the solo

is still good and Merritt uses a two-time triplet feel to make it seem as if the piece has slowed down when it really has not. It is also interesting to note the diminuendo of the band behind him because bass players during this time period were not amplified and could be difficult to hear. Therefore, Blakey switches to brushes on the high hat and snare, and Timmons' comping is softer and his chords far more sparse. At the conclusion of the solos, it returns to the beginning theme and repeats. In the final repeat the band gets very quiet, down to pianissimo and crescendos to maybe a fortissimo before completely dropping off and leaving the piano to finish up the piece with a bluesy cadenza solo that resolves into its final chord.

"Moanin'" is nearly 10 minutes long, yet every second of it is captivating. The melody, the solos, the rhythm and the cohesiveness of the song are all terrific. It would leave any listener clamoring for more of Art Blakey's band, more of the hard bop era, and most importantly, more of jazz in its entirety.