Bass

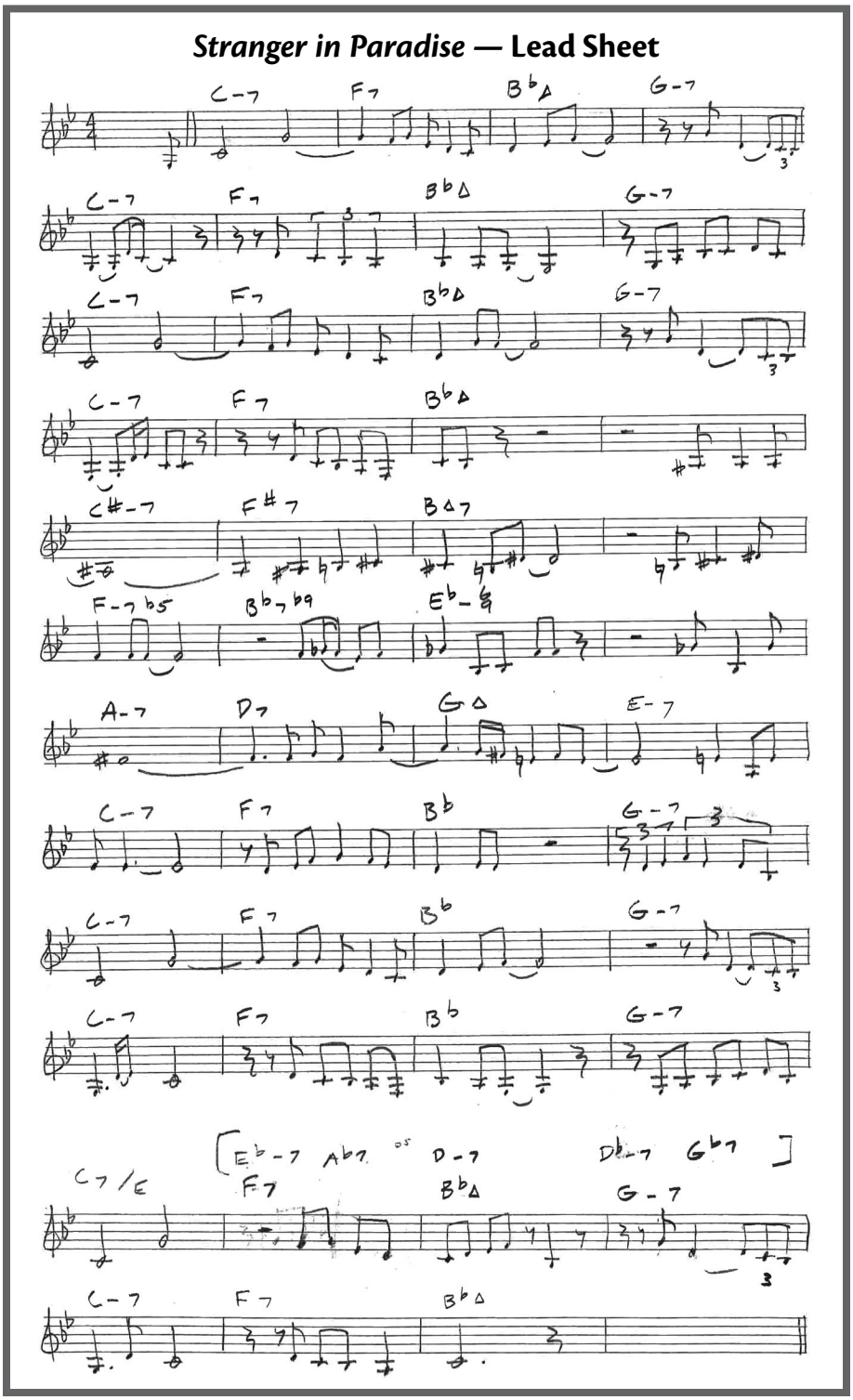
Finding New Voices

by Tom Pieper

Becoming a jazz musician requires a mastery of your instrument while playing your best in the moment. Sure, you must play in time and in tune, but you also have to know what others are doing. You always control how far you dig into material, but you may also be rewarded by stepping back and listening with fresh ears. As much as I love hearing the uber stars of jazz, I like to focus on the sidemen on recordings. Sometimes sidemen are just stars in the background—Miles Davis was a sideman on Cannonball Adderley's *Somethin' Else* recording. The bass player may have top billing, like Charles Mingus, Paul Chamber, Ray Brown and Dave Holland, or may just be swinging away in the shadows. When you dig down deeper you may discover more great solos, rare combinations of personnel, or just great music.

Sidemen are relied upon in non-leadership roles; some may even prefer this lack of spotlight. While living in Rochester N.Y. in the '80s, I ran across a hotbed of players and aficionados who knew the history of jazz. One particular player was a drummer who at 17 could sing any solo he had listened to, and recite all the catalogue numbers of Blue Note recordings. More importantly, he was able to connect the timelines and major developments of all jazz musicians of the 20th century. This also informed his playing and made him a very sought-after player for the next 35 years. Anywhere else, Tina Brooks would not have been considered a household name, but take note how his sidemen are a who's who on their respective instruments. Proof of his success is who chose to be onboard for these recordings.

In the '80s Mosaic printed only 7,500 copies of each of their collections so certainly it is historically interesting if not significant for a record company to release any artist's portfolio. These 4 sides are noted for the swinging interpretations of jazz standards, iconic personnel, and availability of tracks not all released and complete in one place previously. It is evident Tina Brooks was comfortable in this quintet setting, and he delivers work of the finest order. Four great sides of hard bop heaven! T*he Complete Blue Note Recordings of the Tina Brooks Quintets* are here: https://youtu.be/AQ-3ROgAixI



The collection I still have on vinyl was passed on to my son in 2017. After re-listening to these recordings, I am starting with this tune and solo to learn, so here it is: *Stranger in Paradise* https://youtu.be/ifPxhbrWTkc. Johnny Coles on trumpet provides the perfect complement to Tina Brooks on this track. He plays the opening solo, adds a harmonic background on the head out and an inventive ending on the coda. This solo is cool because of its length, the chord progression, his phrasing, and the ability to be easily adapted for the bass. When I play horn solos, I like how the ideas may not be idiomatic for the bass, but expand my understanding of improvisation through a different lens. Typically, by "lens" I mean how brass or reed players breathe and phrase during the solo. I have done this with singers too, especially when I am trying to learn the words or a sublime melody. Now when I listen to guitar, piano and bass, I am on the lookout for this phrasing too. Not only does this give our listening ears a break, but it also allows the other instruments to accompany the soloist and propel the tune forward. Here, Coles demonstrates this hard bop phrasing, breathing, and note choices using bebop and chromatic scales effectively.

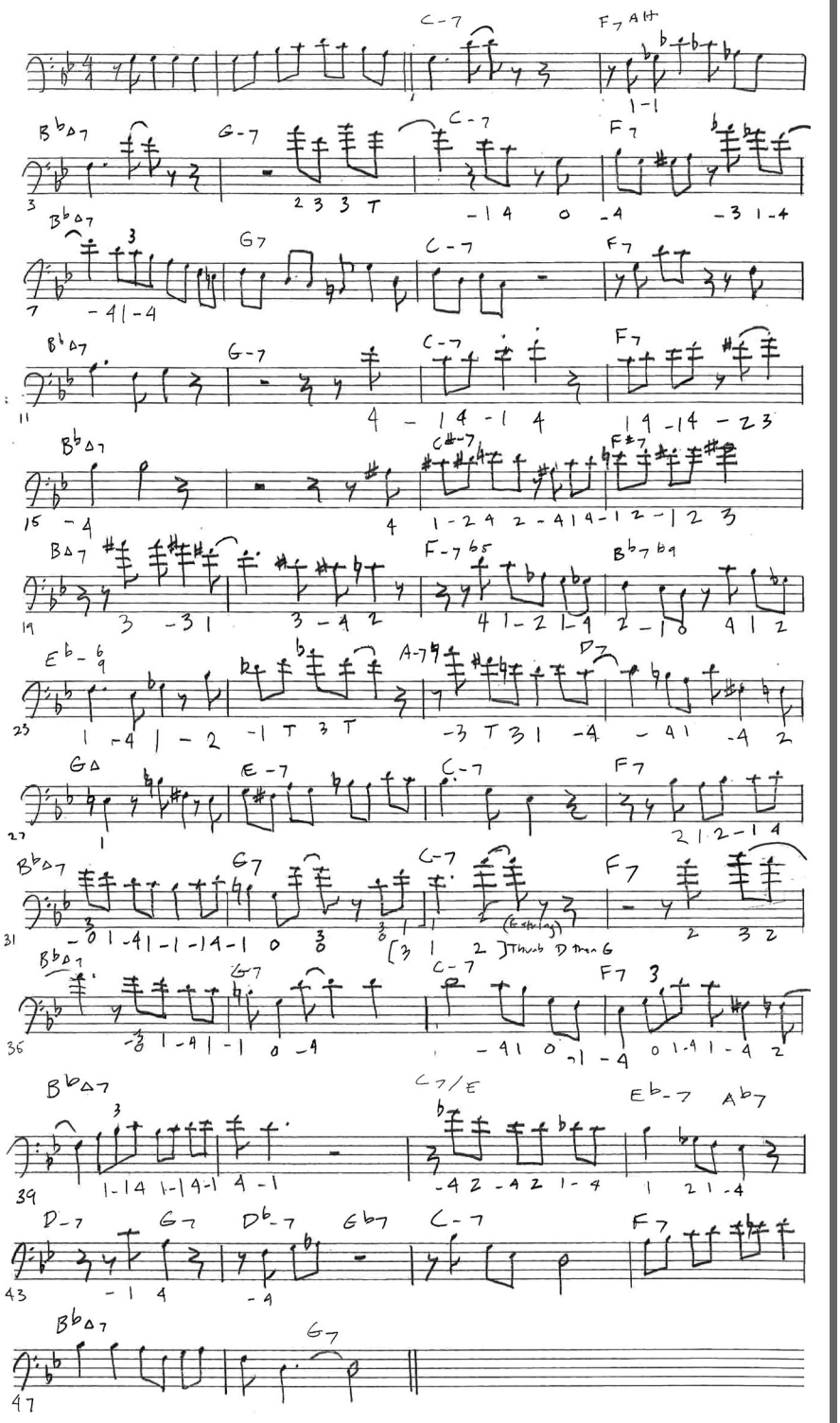
My examples show the lead sheet for *Stranger in Paradis*e, and Johnny Coles' solo transcribed in bass clef.

Description of solo highlights

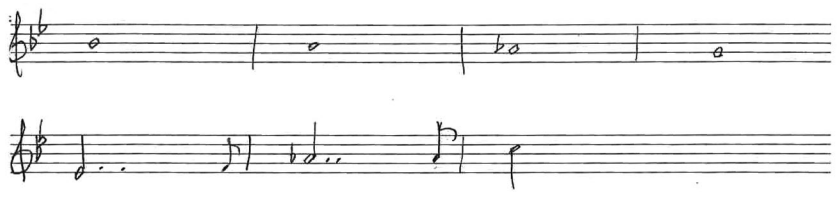
Many good solos start with a break into the chorus and this simple scale helps set up the solo, and this one is no exception. I will count the solo measures from the top of the form and consider the first 2 measures the solo break leading into the chorus. In the second measure, he uses the altered dominant to highlight the ♭9, ♭13, ♭5, and ♯9 of F7 altered. Next comes movement by thirds and plenty of space to breath. He uses the ♯9 and ♭9 again on the F7 in measure 6. This is a choice for improvisers as the note is not in the melody. Often this can add color and tension and makes for a more interesting line. Notice how the phrasing length changes with shorter and then longer sequences. Coles also uses chromatic notes in measure 6 between chord tones. This one is reminiscent of Sonny Rollins' line from *Tenor Madness*: https://youtu.be/3MkUvZUTFUc. He uses a motive and repetition in measures 13 and 14 to finish the A sections.

The bridge is amazing because as it moves to the key of B major. Coles uses the

Stranger in Paradise — Solo in Bass Clef transcribed from Johnny Coles recording



Stranger in Paradise — Background 2x



B♭ blues scale to work through the opening harmonic material (II–V–I in B major). By using the blues scale from the 7th of the B maj7 chord, Coles highlights the 7th, 9th, 3rd, 4th, ♯11, 13th and 7th of the tonal center. Blues scales are sometimes thought to be an easy way through a set of changes, but not here. You can hear him fighting to get each note in place and I am pulling for him all the way.

In measures 21 through 26 his bebop mastery of linking chromatically between chord tones is plain to see. Bear in mind that jazz musicians favor the dominant chord and think of 1,3,5,7,9,11,13 as chord tones. This would equal all the scale tones if laid out end to end in the same octave. Measure 32 has a syncopated figure that he plays several times that changes the chord from minor to dominant and again breaks the steady 8th note stream. In measure 41 he winds down but still allows space and momentum to complete the solo with clarity. I hear a nod to Sam Jones' *Visitation* in the final 2 measures: https://youtu.be/SjtJP-AX2Tg. In short, every bar of this solo leads to the next and Coles never has you wondering where he is in the form—classic Johnny Coles!

Back to the background musicians: we hear Philly Joe Jones on drums, Chicago native Wilbur Ware on bass, and Kenny Drew on piano. For practice, I play each section of this solo with the recording, separately out of tempo with the bow, on piano, and during the piano solo I will try to play the solo in counterpoint to Kenny Drew's solo. I even made the trombone player across the hall read it with me to check for accuracy. All these routines will help you solidify the solo so you can use some of the content in your own playing.

More places to hear Johnny Coles:

- With Charles Mingus: https://youtu.be/BR1WtrZEGM8 and https://youtu.be/XrUa7C1VAhg
- As a leader: https://youtu.be/YQ4yVJPdZfk

I have been musing about how innovators on an instrument have attained their goals, or at the very least, move toward them. As a bassist, you are not always in the spotlight, but what you play matters. This is the sweet spot! The cool thing is when you get to play in this situation, you have a great seat to hear some great playing. My suggestion is you continue to play along with what you like and remain curious about all things you hear. You may be surprised where it leads to.

Tom Pieper teaches orchestra at Central Middle School in the Wayzata School district and bass in his home studio and at MacPhail Center for Music in Minneapolis. You can hear him on YouTube with the Illicit Sextet, Spiritjazz, and catch him live at Salem Lutheran Church in Uptown. Contact info: Thomas.pieperyoga@gmail.com.