Clifford Brown’s Approach To The Blues
Leslie M. Sabina, Ph.D.

Upon hearing Clifford Brown for the first time, listeners are impressed with his technical command of the trumpet (in all registers), change running abilities, and logical bebop phraseology. Important too, is the overall joie de vivre he displays on every recording—from his earliest rhythm and blues outings, to his last informal jam session in a Philadelphia music store. Many critics insist that a jazz musician’s personality comes through in his or her music. One can hear humor in Dizzy Gillespie’s work as easily as moody concentration can be inferred from many of Miles Davis’ recordings. In Clifford Brown, we hear a young man whose obvious enjoyment of playing the trumpet is combined with a deep sense of seriousness and work ethic. His repertoire gives us a clue to this portrait. Although his career was brief, Clifford Brown managed to write a significant number of tunes with whom he will forever be associated. These works are approached with a sense of seriousness by those musicians who choose to tackle them; we rarely hear causal versions of Joy Spring, Daahoud, and Brownie Speaks.

Based on his recording output, Brown seemed enamored with chord changes. David Baker lists Brown’s “preferred tune types” in the following order, with no surprises found for the first three categories:

1. Standards—over 75
2. Jazz originals—over 70 compositions by Parker, Gillespie, Silver, etc.
3. Clifford Brown originals—approximately 10 recordings of his own tunes.

In the bottom three rankings, Baker states that there are “very few” recordings of I Got Rhythm, contrafacts (tunes based on other tunes), and, interestingly, blues.

The lack of I Got Rhythm-based tunes is surprising, as these type of tunes usually offer both the amount of changes and briskness of tempo that Brown seems to have preferred. However, when one considers the historical importance of the blues upon jazz, the lack of a substantial blues output is even more surprising.
In the bebop era, the blues was heard often. It was Charlie Parker’s number one category of preferred tunes, with Billie’s Bounce, Now’s The Time, Bloomdido, and Relaxin’ At Camarillo all becoming favorites of saxophone players worldwide. To further his desire to play this basic form in a way that was indicative of the new bebop era, Parker even applied a complex set of chord changes to the blues (i.e., Blues For Alice). Although Thelonious Monk is now remembered for his very unique compositions (including, incidentally, a blues, Misterioso), heads such as Blue Monk and Straight No Chaser are favorites at jam sessions. Miles Davis used Walkin’ as his quintet’s signature tune in the early 1960s, and in the late 1950s the blues provided a vehicle to showcase his group’s two saxophonists, Cannonball Adderley and John Coltrane (i.e., All Blues, Freddie Freeloader, Dr. Jekyll, Sid’s Ahead, and Monk’s Straight No Chaser). And speaking of Coltrane, his output is partially defined by his approach to the blues, beginning with the hard bop sounds of Blue Train and including tunes such as Cousin Mary, Equinox, Mr. P.C., Up Against The Wall, and of course, the LP, Playing The Blues. Last, but not least, Clifford Brown’s last tenor man, Sonny Rollins, is best known for his “motivic development” solo on Blue Seven, not to mention tunes such as Blues For Philly Joe, Sonnymoon For Two, and Tenor Madness.

When compared to his immediate predecessors and contemporaries, Clifford Brown’s blues output seems somewhat underrepresented. Why? After all, although the post-Parker period was progressive in terms of jazz writing, the blues never fell out of favor. Many contemporaries of Brown provided significant blues recordings—most notably, Rollins, Silver, Adderley, and McLean. And the argument that the blues was used strictly as a means for certain players during this time to achieve commercial success is somewhat tainted, as popular players such as Adderley and Silver also played straight-ahead and progressive post-bop music.

One fact that is unarguable is that the recorded output of Fats Navarro (who was Brown’s main trumpet influence) doesn’t contain a whole lot of blues. Undoubtedly, Navarro’s associations with Billy Eckstine, Lionel Hampton, and Charlie Parker would have yielded a good amount of blues performances on the bandstand—club or concert
performances that were never captured on tape. Navarro’s material that was available on
disc (for Brown’s repeated listening and study) consists mainly of AABA format type
tunes, with a few fairly advanced blues thrown into the mix (such as The Skunk with
Howard McGhee or Dance of The Infidels with Bud Powell). In other words, it was
difficult to hear any “blues drenched” playing from Navarro (but not from Parker, for
example, as illustrated by Parker’s Mood).

Lastly, it can be theorized that the straight-forwardness of the blues progression
simply did not interest Brown. A study of his compositions reveals unusual—or, at least,
unexpected—elements: The half-step shift in Joy Spring, the altered I Got Rhythm
Changes of Brownie Speaks (including a type of tritone substitution that forecasts
Coltrane’s famous Giant Steps progression), and the deceptively simple harmony that
stands at odds with the difficult (fast) tempo of Swingin’. And when Brown does
compose a blues, he is apt to alter the form by inserting a bridge (Brown and Blue) or by
using unusual chords (Gerkin For Perkin).

**Blues Categorization**

A study of the trumpeter’s recorded blues output reinforces the supposition that
Brown preferred challenging material. His blues vehicles may be categorized as follows:

1. Fairly Simple—slow to medium tempo, straight-ahead changes, with little
   arrangement of the head. Examples include Blues, Now’s The Time, Walkin’, and Sandu.
   A relaxed, “jam session” feel is imparted by these performances (and overtly so, in the
case of the first three!).

2. Basic Challenges—may include one of fast tempo, altered changes, or
   sophisticated head arrangement. Examples include Wee Dot, Lou’s Blues, Gerkin For
   Perkin, and The Blues Walk. These performances impart Brown’s technical command of
   the trumpet and his understanding of advanced improvisation to the listener.

3. Advanced Challenges—may include at least two of fast tempo, altered form, added
   or altered changes, or sophisticated head arrangement. Examples include Cookin’, Blue
   and Brown, and Jacqui (where the bridge only is in blues form). Along with further
demonstrating his technical command of the trumpet and understanding of advance improvisation, these performances demonstrate Brown’s insistence on further expanding a basic blues performance and indicate a desire to go beyond the ordinary.

**The Solos**

Even the most simplistic blues performance by Clifford Brown is never simple, and each performance certainly offers the listener a multitude of interesting phrases and note choices. Every blues performance yields sophisticated elements of melody, harmony, and rhythm.

Clifford Brown’s first recording session (March 1952) found him playing brief solos on jump songs by the R & B group, Chris Powell and the Five Blue Flames. His solo on *Ida Red* contains elements of the blues, even though the tune itself is not a blues form. By incorporating some to-the-point blues motives, Brown demonstrates how the blues sound can be used to good advantage over major tonality in order to provide momentum and excitement.

See Example 1.

Another early session (June 1953) has Brown playing *Cookin’*, a “Bird blues” that incorporates a series of ii-V chord patterns descending by either step or half step. As all young improvisers know, this type of chord progression is challenging (especially at a fast tempo) and tends to disguise the underlying blues progression. In other words, *Cookin’* is a perfect vehicle in which musicians to engage the bebop practice of change running. And it was left to post-bop musicians such as Brown to reconcile the differences between the styles of running through the changes in a vertical sense (i.e., arpeggiating or change running) and playing melodically with a scalar sensibility. Brown’s three choruses show how he alternates between these two styles of playing. Chords that are frequently outlined (1st chorus—mm. 8, 9; 2nd chorus—mm.1, 3, 5, 7, 9; 3rd chorus—mm. 3, 4, 7, 10, 11) are often followed by brief scale-derived motifs. The
most obvious scale phrase occurs in the 1st and 3rd choruses beginning at the end of measure 4 and lasting up until measure 7. While this instance more or less spells out a type of F major-based scale, the briefer motifs are more interesting because they illustrate an important part of Brown’s style—that is, using extreme chromaticism as a means to a goal. An example occurs early in the 1st and 3rd choruses as a means to get to an ‘E’; a longer example is seen beginning at measure 3 in the 1st chorus to arrive at the ‘Bb’ in measure 4. Lastly, it is important to note that Brown does not play one lick derived from the blues scale—from a melodic standpoint, the blues is nowhere to be found!

See Example 2.

So, if *Cookin’* is an early example of Clifford Brown’s post-bop chromatic style (which was only a few recording sessions away from complete maturity), what of two blues performances recorded live with Art Blakey roughly eight months later—namely *Blues* and *Now’s The Time*?

With the slow-tempo *Blues* we hear many instances of reiteration and blue note use, as well as a common major/minor/major alteration device during the stop-time chorus. Perhaps the slow tempo inspired Brown to reach into the “blues bag”, or perhaps the atmosphere of the live session lent itself to the bluesy approach heard. Whatever the case, this performance illustrates that Brown was comfortable with the stereotypical sound of blues melody and, more importantly, able to exploit these clichés through his own sense of melodic development. For example, the repeated motive at the beginning of the 2nd chorus takes an unexpected dissonant detour (in measure 13) before arriving at its concluding notes at measure 17. The same thing with the melodic repetition in the 3rd chorus—the ‘F#’ in measure 28 (while not entirely unexpected) introduces an element of surprise or drama into the proceedings before concluding (twice) with an emphasized and reiterated blue note (the ‘Bb’ in measures 29 and 30). Interspersed throughout is Brown’s scalar melodic sense—the total concept is somewhat reminiscent of Charlie Parker’s *Parker’s Mood*. Brown’s solo on *Blues* is certainly enjoyable and strikes a nice balance between the vernacular and the sophisticated.
See Example 3.

*Now’s The Time*, on the other hand, shows that Brown could carry a long performance (utilizing the standard blues progression) with little reference to the blues convention. This performance is totally at odds with *Blues*. Just when Brown is setting up the listener for some clichés (in this instance, at the beginning of the 3rd chorus), the blues procedure is abandoned in favor of a scalar/chromatic type of playing. Along with this chorus, the only other place where elements of the blues scale appear is at the very end of the solo, complete with a triplet feel. If the melody is heard out of context (i.e., without any accompaniment), then it may be difficult to identify the performance as a blues. *Now’s The Time* is really more typical of Brown’s overall improvisational style—it is very flowing and non-repetitive.

See Example 4.

An important aspect of Clifford Brown’s sensibilities may be open to conjecture here. As *Blues* illustrates, Brown could play within a traditional “blues” style. However, *Now’s The Time* illustrates the approach (or sound) that Brown may have really desired or preferred. The fact that this preferred sound happened to occur on occasion over a blues form is somewhat incidental.

On August 11, 1954, in Los Angeles, a jam session was organized that featured Clifford Brown and Max Roach and some West coast musicians, such as Herb Geller, Joe Maini, and Curtis Counce. One of the performances was a blues, *Coronado*. This performance yields some insight into another facet of Brown’s playing, namely rhythm. Quite often, blues licks are known not only for their melodic aspects, but also for their rhythmic qualities. Blues motifs derived from the blues scale are usually very flowing, although not necessary long in length. In *Coronado* Brown stretches out some blues scale-derived licks, fragments others, and keeps the listener on his or her toes throughout.
The solo begins with a rhythmic motif—a kind of stuttering effect that is interrupted by snippets of the blues scale. However, this idea is discarded in the last third of the chorus in favor of a scalar presentation. At the beginning of the 2nd chorus, Brown reintroduces a strong rhythmic sense (through his articulation) while simultaneously using the blues scale as the main melodic focus. Once again this idea is abandoned in favor of a lengthy scalar presentation. Another highly identifiable rhythmic/melodic motif initiates the 3rd chorus (ending at measure 27 with elements of the blues scale) and is subsequently repeated with its melodic aspects thoroughly altered. This chorus is concluded with a quote from Dizzy Gillespie’s *Birk’s Works!* The 4th chorus promises to begin again with a blues sensibility, but immediately gives way to a scalar outing. However, the end of this chorus reintroduces both a blues lick and sets up a blues “shout” (over the backing horns) that occurs for the first part of the 5th chorus. The shouting idea continues for half of the 6th chorus before being overtaken by the scalar approach. A new stuttering motif (that is drawn from the blues scale) begins the 7th chorus, but this too gives way to the scalar approach. The 8th chorus ushers in a strong rhythmic motif that is repeated two bars later and again referenced half way through the chorus. At the beginning of the 9th chorus it sounds as if Brown may finally be tiring of the blues sound. An extremely chromatic melodic approach dominates most of this chorus, although the last four measures reintroduces the blues scale in a subtle way. Rhythm is used for dramatic effect to begin the 10th and final chorus. Unfortunately, the early promise of this chorus gives way to an abrupt melodic petering-out, with nothing present to forcibly conclude Brown’s solo. (Perhaps Brown was caught off guard as to when to end his solo and was forced to truncate such.)

The extended solo situation of *Coronado* shows that Brown was just as concerned with the rhythmic aspects of a blues solo as with its melody. It also demonstrates that Brown is somewhat reluctant to use the blues scale or clichés for an entire chorus—blues ideas are usually discarded by the ninth measure of a chorus.

See Example 5.
A three-day recording session in February 1955 yielded three blues: *Gerkin For Perkin*, *Sandu*, and *The Blues Walk*. The first two have fairly arranged head statements, while *The Blues Walk* contains a brief introduction. Both *Sandu* and *The Blues Walk* offer a solo break for Brown.

*Gerkin For Perkin* was recorded on the first session day. It is not a normal blues progression, as a return to the tonic chord does not occur at the tune’s seventh measure. Instead, a major chord/ii-V descending chord sequence facilitates a return to the tonic chord at measure eleven. This chord superimposition lends itself to the idea of either change running or sequence playing. Brown sequences the beginning of his ‘Bb’ idea down to ‘Ab’ in both the second and third choruses (see mm. 19/21 and 31/33). The bulk of the solo exhibits Brown’s scalar sense, with goal notes approached via chromaticism or through an over-and-under configuration (goal notes at mm. 5, 9, 11, 20, 22, 29, and 35). The only blues scale use is at the onset of the third chorus and is abandoned after only three measures.

See Example 6.

*Sandu* (recorded on the second session day) is the recording that shows Brown at his bluesy best. Although brief (two choruses), the solo contains many memorable moments as Brown exploits the blues scale and reiterates and develops simple ideas. In his blues scale use, Brown often substitutes the scalar sixth in place of the flatted seventh, with the resulting sound being less aggressive. A substantial use of triplets also contributes to the solo’s overall bluesy feel. After the break, Brown exploits the major/minor shift between measures 1 and 2 and concludes his opening statement on the chordal 7th—both cliché, but good sounding blues devices. Even the beginning of his double time excursion contains elements of the blues, with a minor/major shift occurring between measures 6 and 7. The 1st chorus is wrapped up neatly with a return to the blues scale. The major/minor alteration continues in the 2nd chorus, with the opening idea concluding abruptly on the raised 4th (m. 16)—this abrupt-ending idea is heard again at measure 17. The solo ends nicely with an offbeat descent tagged onto a long melodic phrase.
See Example 7.

With *Sandu’s* medium tempo, it is not surprising that Brown sounds totally relaxed. However, with the blistering tempo of *The Blues Walk* (recorded on the third session day), it may be surprising to hear Brown sounding as relaxed as ever, completely unhurried in his output. The three day recording session must have certainly been a enjoyable session for the well-rehearsed band!

The solo contains many great devices, such as rhythmic exploitation (2nd, 3rd and 7th choruses), blues statements (7th chorus), blues shouting (4th and 5th choruses), dynamic contrast (6th chorus), and long melodic phrases (1st and 3rd choruses). The performance is a great summing-up of different ways to play over the blues form.

See Example 8.

Clifford Brown’s last recording date was an informal jam session at a Philadelphia music store. Three tunes were captured on tape, with the blues represented by *Walkin’*. With seven choruses at a medium tempo, it is a fairly long solo, one that gives the listener a chance to hear Brown “stretching out.” The solo begins with the type of long phrase often presented by Brown, which is followed by fragmented double time runs. The solo is interesting in that, after the first half of the next chorus, the long runs never reappear in a dominating fashion (with the exception, perhaps of the middle of the 5th chorus or the solo’s very conclusion). (As an aside, observe the angular nature of these runs—material at measures 16-19 keeps on changing direction, as does that at measures 32-35.) Instead, Brown seems to be in an exploratory mood, and tries out different ideas (ideas that are often interrupted by brief scale motifs or arpeggios) in each chorus. The material played at the beginnings of the 4th, 5th, and 6th choruses seem to give Brown time needed to reflect or to initiate another idea. Lastly, there are really no areas of overt “blues” playing—the blues scale is mainly absent. Brown’s extreme chromaticism dominates this solo.
See Example 9.

Conclusion

Although Clifford Brown did not concentrate on recording many blues tunes, it can be surmised that, based on his existing blues recordings, he excelled at the genre. More importantly, he seemed to have enjoyed stretching out on a blues when the opportunity presented itself. And although his chromatic, scalar bebop style dominated his approach to the blues, he was able to “authenticate” the genre through convincing use of blue notes, blues scales, memorable clichés, and rhythmic devices. In a word, Clifford Brown’s blues playing was second to none.

Notes

_Ida Red, Blues, Coronado, Gerkin For Perkin_, and _Sandu_ transcribed by the author. _Cookin’, Now’s The Time_, and _The Blues Walk_ transcribed by Marc Lewis. _Walkin’_ transcribed by David Baker.

All solo transcriptions edited by the author.

References


Example 1
(Tpt. Key--Sounds M2nd Lower)

"Ida Red"

\( \text{\textit{J}} = \text{ca. 186} \) Break  \( \text{\textit{F}} \)

\( \text{\textit{F}} \)

\( \text{\textit{C}} \)

\( \text{\textit{F}} \)
"Cookin’"

(Tpt. Key--Sounds M2nd Lower)

1. Bmin7(b5)  E7(b9)  Amin7  D7  Gmin7  C7
2. Fm7  Bb7  Em7  A7  Ebmin7  Ab7
3. Dmin7  G7
4. Em7  A7  Dmin7  G7
5. C  Bmin7(b5)  E7(b9)  Amin7  D7  Gmin7
6. F  Em7  Bb7  Em7  A7  Ebmin7  Ab7
7. Dmin7  G7
8. Em7  A7  Dmin7  G7
9. C  Bmin7(b5)  E7(b9)  Amin7  D7  Gmin7
10. F  Em7  Bb7  Em7  A7  Ebmin7  Ab7
11. Dmin7  G7
12. Em7  A7  Dmin7  G7
13. C  Bmin7(b5)  E7(b9)  Amin7  D7  Gmin7
14. F  Em7  Bb7  Em7  A7  Ebmin7  Ab7
15. Dmin7  G7
16. Em7  A7  Dmin7  G7
17. C  Bmin7(b5)  E7(b9)  Amin7  D7  Gmin7
18. F  Em7  Bb7  Em7  A7  Ebmin7  Ab7
19. Dmin7  G7
20. Em7  A7  Dmin7  G7
21. C  Bmin7(b5)  E7(b9)  Amin7  D7  Gmin7
22. F  Em7  Bb7  Em7  A7  Ebmin7  Ab7
23. Dmin7  G7
24. Em7  A7  Dmin7  G7
25. C  Bmin7(b5)  E7(b9)  Amin7  D7  Gmin7
26. F  Em7  Bb7  Em7  A7  Ebmin7  Ab7
27. Dmin7  G7
28. Em7  A7  Dmin7  G7
29. C  Bmin7(b5)  E7(b9)  Amin7  D7  Gmin7
30. F  Em7  Bb7  Em7  A7  Ebmin7  Ab7
31. Dmin7  G7
32. Em7  A7  Dmin7  G7
33. C  Bmin7(b5)  E7(b9)  Amin7  D7  Gmin7
34. F  Em7  Bb7  Em7  A7  Ebmin7  Ab7
35. Dmin7  G7
36. Em7  A7  Dmin7  G7
37. C  Bmin7(b5)  E7(b9)  Amin7  D7  Gmin7
38. F  Em7  Bb7  Em7  A7  Ebmin7  Ab7
39. Dmin7  G7
40. Em7  A7  Dmin7  G7
41. C  Bmin7(b5)  E7(b9)  Amin7  D7  Gmin7
42. F  Em7  Bb7  Em7  A7  Ebmin7  Ab7
43. Dmin7  G7
44. Em7  A7  Dmin7  G7
45. C  Bmin7(b5)  E7(b9)  Amin7  D7  Gmin7
46. F  Em7  Bb7  Em7  A7  Ebmin7  Ab7
47. Dmin7  G7
48. Em7  A7  Dmin7  G7
49. C  Bmin7(b5)  E7(b9)  Amin7  D7  Gmin7
50. F  Em7  Bb7  Em7  A7  Ebmin7  Ab7
51. Dmin7  G7
52. Em7  A7  Dmin7  G7
53. C  Bmin7(b5)  E7(b9)  Amin7  D7  Gmin7
54. F  Em7  Bb7  Em7  A7  Ebmin7  Ab7
55. Dmin7  G7
56. Em7  A7  Dmin7  G7
57. C  Bmin7(b5)  E7(b9)  Amin7  D7  Gmin7
58. F  Em7  Bb7  Em7  A7  Ebmin7  Ab7
59. Dmin7  G7
60. Em7  A7  Dmin7  G7
61. C  Bmin7(b5)  E7(b9)  Amin7  D7  Gmin7
62. F  Em7  Bb7  Em7  A7  Ebmin7  Ab7
63. Dmin7  G7
64. Em7  A7  Dmin7  G7
65. C  Bmin7(b5)  E7(b9)  Amin7  D7  Gmin7
66. F  Em7  Bb7  Em7  A7  Ebmin7  Ab7
67. Dmin7  G7
68. Em7  A7  Dmin7  G7
Example 2
(Tpt. Key--Sounds Midd. Louder)
"COOKIN"

$\text{C}^\text{Bmin7(5)}$ $\text{E7(9)}$ $\text{Amin7}$ $\text{D7}$ $\text{Gmin7}$ $\text{C7}$

1

2

3

$\text{F}$ $\text{Fmin7}$ $\text{Gb7}$ $\text{Emin7}$ $\text{A7}$ $\text{Em7}$ $\text{Ab7}$

1

2

3

$\text{Dmin7}$ $\text{G7}$ $\text{Emin7}$ $\text{A7}$ $\text{Dmin7}$ $\text{G7}$
Example 3
(Tpt. Key—Sounds M2nd Lower)

"Blues"

\( \text{\textcopyright 1939 PETER B. COK} \)

\( \text{\textcopyright 1978 THE J. W. ROGERS COMPANY} \)

\( \text{\textcopyright 1978 THE J. W. ROGERS COMPANY} \)
Example 4
(Tpt. Key--Sounds M2nd Lower)

"Now's The Time"

\(\text{D= CA. 154 G7 C7 G7}\\)

[Music notation]

\(\text{2nd Chorus G7 C7 G7}\\)

[Music notation]

\(\text{2nd Chorus} G7 C7 G7\\)

[Music notation]

\(\text{2nd Chorus} G7 C7 G7\\)

[Music notation]

\(\text{2nd Chorus} G7 C7 G7\\)

[Music notation]

\(\text{2nd Chorus} G7 C7 G7\\)

[Music notation]
"Coronado"

(Tpt. Key--Sounds M2nd Lower)

Example 5

(Coronado) 3rd Chorus

(Tpt. Key--Sounds M2nd Lower)
Example 6
(Tpt. Key—Sounds M2nd Lower)

"Gerkin For Perkin"

\[ \text{Tempo: ca. 204} \quad \text{G7} \quad \text{C7} \quad \text{G7} \quad \text{Dm7} \quad \text{G7} \]

\[ \text{C7} \quad \text{Cm7} \quad \text{F7} \quad \text{BbMaj7} \quad \text{BbM7} \quad \text{Eb7} \]

\[ \text{AbMaj7} \quad \text{Am7} \quad \text{D7} \quad \text{G7} \quad \text{Bb7} \quad \text{Am7} \quad \text{D7} \]

\[ \text{2nd Chorus} \quad \text{G7} \quad \text{C7} \quad \text{G7} \quad \text{Dm7} \quad \text{G7} \]

\[ \text{C7} \quad \text{Cm7} \quad \text{F7} \quad \text{BbMaj7} \quad \text{BbM7} \quad \text{Eb7} \]

\[ \text{AbMaj7} \quad \text{Am7} \quad \text{D7} \quad \text{G7} \quad \text{Bb7} \quad \text{Am7} \quad \text{D7} \]

\[ \text{3rd Chorus} \quad \text{G7} \quad \text{C7} \quad \text{G7} \quad \text{Dm7} \quad \text{G7} \]

\[ \text{G7} \]
Example 7
(Tpt. Key--Sounds M2nd Lower)

"Sanou"

Example 7 (Tpt. Key--Sounds M2nd Lower)
"The Blues Walk"

Example 8
(Tpt. Key--Sounds Minor Lower)
Example 9
(Tpt. Key--Sounds M2nd Lower)

"Walkin'"

Example 9
(Tpt. Key--Sounds M2nd Lower)

"Walkin'"