

Jazz Ensemble – Spring 2020
Supplement Material #2
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Kissing Bug – Comparison and Analysis
Part 1: Composed by Billy Strayhorn (see previous supplement #1)
Part 2: Arranged by Bill Holman

This is the second part in a comparison and listening analysis of Kissing Bug by Billy Strayhorn. The first part was a complete listening analysis of the original 1945 recording, and this second part will be a listening analysis and comparison of the Bill Holman arrangement of the same tune.

As was the case in Part 1, this analysis is conducted by listening only. A much more thorough theoretical and thematic analysis can be done by studying the score in detail. Further, the most advanced rewarding experience is transcribing (writing out) the entire arrangement by ear.

PART 2

(Willis) Bill Holman, in my opinion, is one of the greatest big band composers and arrangers in the history of jazz. His career has spanned well over 50 years, and his compositions utilize a wide variety of styles and range from small group, to small big band, to full jazz ensemble and more written for anything from a small jazz gig to TV, film, and more. It is really a disservice to his credentials to list something briefly here, so if you are interested I highly recommend looking into him further on your own. Holman's arrangement of Kissing Bug comes from the recording In A Jazz Orbit, recorded in 1958. This was a great year for jazz, as it was one year before the iconic Miles Davis recording Kind of Blue was released. Bill Evans, John Coltrane, Cannonball Adderley, Miles, and so many more musicians were on an upward trajectory into what has become a one-of-a-kind period for creative music. In A Jazz Orbit was one of two records released by the Holman Big Band in 1958 (the other is The Fabulous Bill Holman) and they are what put him on the map.

The recording of Bill Holman's arrangement of Kissing Bug is here:

https://youtu.be/URSw_Bs1ymQ

As was the case with Part 1, listen all the way through without reading anything. Then listen to the Strayhorn version, and make some comparisons for yourself. There are plenty of differences without even getting into specifics. Everything discussed further will be referring to the Holman version (so I don't have to keep saying "the Holman version").

Global features/differences:

- Better recording quality! This is not a feature of the writing or playing but a sign of the times.
- Slightly faster tempo. The original seemed a little sluggish to me, this is a much happier vibe.
- No vocals!
- The feel of the band and rhythm section is massively different. Not because of ability, but because of how time feel changed over the course of ten years. Mel Lewis is on drums, and he is probably the very best big band drummer you will EVER hear. The original was very downbeat oriented on all four beats and emphasized 1 and 3. This is

focused on the more modern “2&4” in the hi-hat. Listen in particular how the drums set up and fill every band figure. It’s often said that if the band had notes but no rhythms they would know where to place the hits based on how the drummer sets things up.

Form and general layout:

While the Strayhorn version featured vocals and a few soloists, these early arrangements were written more for dancing and live situations, and therefore were shorter. Although this version is only a minute longer, you can really tell, and that extra minute can take us to many different places. Remember the form of the tune is AABA (8-8-8-8). Refresh yourself with Part 1 for the details of the form. This arrangement holds true to that, but also features a few significant departures. In addition, Holman’s writing often clouds the form by using the band playing across a form divide or starting a solo in the middle of a section. There was a little bit of this in the Strayhorn version, but the concept is clearly more developed in this instance. The overall layout for the track is:

0:00- 0:07 - Piano Intro (4 measures)
0:07-1:03 - Melody (1 full chorus AABA)
1:03-1:07 - Solo sendoff (2 added measures)
1:07-2:04 - Tenor solo (AA) – Trombone solo (BA) – 1 full chorus
2:04-3:01 - Development! (AA) – Alto solo (BA) – one full chorus
3:01-3:45 - Shout and Bass solo (AAB)
3:45-3:59 Melody out (last A)
4:00-4:07 - Outro (4 measures)

0:00-0:07 Intro: Seemingly simple and maybe unrelated, the melodic content of the piano intro references the melody of the bridge (B) of the tune. While there are more notes and back and forth to the bridge melody, the three main pitches one can take away from it are the three played in the first measure of the piano intro. Listen for the difference in what the piano is playing and what the bass is playing. *Too much info alert* While the piano gets a little more complicated, the bass maintains the “&’s” in measure 3 and 4 in the circle of 4ths/5ths to get to the bIV, V and finally I.

0:07-1:03 Melody Chorus

First 8: Like Strayhorn, the tenor voices get the melody. In this case it’s the trombones. Listen to the sound, feel, and overall homogenous style of the trombone section especially as it relates to the groove of the rhythm section. This is top notch playing something that seems rather simple.

Second 8: While the trombones continue the melody for the second A, the altos and trumpets add a second line. Listen to it closely and see if you can hear ONLY that line – block out the trombone melody. This counter line starts just like the trumpet backgrounds for the vocals in the Strayhorn version, AND uses elements of the bridge melody/piano intro. Also notice how even though these two melodies are different, they can live together perfectly well because of how each compliments the other both rhythmically and harmonically. Using low and high instruments separates the lines by an octave, which also helps.

Third 8: Orchestration! The first 4 measures here are just saxes and trombones playing the literal melody in harmony. See if you can hear the trombones, often the saxes dominate in these situations because they are higher. The second 8 features the addition of the trumpet section and the whole band plays the melody as a full band shout. The pickup to the second 4 incorporates the same type of pickup as in the Strayhorn version and continues with the literal melody. Note the huge chord right at

0:43 – this is the same vibe as the chord at 2:23 in the Strayhorn version. Note that Holman goes for it already, while that chord served as the overall climax 2/3 of the way through Strayhorn's piece.

Fourth 8: The whole band is in now using elements from AAB up to now. Tenors and trombones have the melody in unison while the altos and trumpets have the second line.

1:03-1:07 Solo Sendoff

After the two unison lines, Holman extends the form by two measures with melodic content in the saxes (unison) and harmonic content in the brass to set up the tenor solo. This is the first departure from the form, but also something Strayhorn did before the vocals with the 4 bar pyramid after the long intro.

1:07-2:04 Tenor and Trombone Solo

First 8: The tenor gets a full 8 measures alone with just the rhythm section. This is refreshing after everything that has come before.

Second 8: The trombones enter with the second line that was added to the melody earlier. This is interesting because it was the higher voices that had it originally. So it doesn't clutter the soloist (same range!), it only happens for 4 measures and then the tenor is left alone to finish the solo.

Third 8: Lots of orchestration going on in the first 4 measures for the trombone solo send off! First voiced brass with unison saxes, then the saxes hand off the unison to the brass, where the saxes become voiced. The saxes continue their voiced pads into the second 4 measures under the trombone solo. We are back to the points made in the Strayhorn version where the sax pads work for the trombone because of the color difference - woodwind pads for a brass solo.

Fourth 8: Sax pads continue for the remainder of the trombone solo, stopping short to give the trombone a few measures alone with just the rhythm section. This is for three reasons – one: to calm things down before the next VERY melodic element, and two: to give the players a breather before starting the next section, and perhaps the biggest of all: to allow the rhythm section only to **CHANGE KEY**. This is done by using what would be the I chord and changing it to a V chord. If we were ending the solo in the key of Bb, that Bb is now a Bb7, and the next section has a new I chord of Eb. This happens very quickly in the last bar.

*If you listen VERY closely, you can hear someone say something about a second after the trombone solo ends out of the right channel.

2:04-3:01 Development and Alto Solo

First 8: This clever melodic line begins with a variation of the A section melody introducing chromatics for the first time into the arrangement of otherwise pentatonic-based melodic content thusfar. Listen closely to these first 8 bars of trumpets and altos before you continue.

Second 8: While the trumpet and alto line from the first 8 bars continues to unravel in its own organic way, the tenors and trombones begin a counter line. This line is IDENTICAL to the line from the first 8 above. The genius thing here is that it sounds like a second line to the trp/altos, but in reality is it what we have already heard, and the trp/altos are really complimenting the main line as we proceed through. Incredible. The listening assignment here is to really try and hear each line for what it is, blocking out the other. Take several listens through this section.

Third 8: Big chords from the whole band offset the melodic counterpoint we just heard to send off the alto solo, which is over the bridge, still in our new key. The band drops down a few dynamics to create simple yet effective backgrounds over the bridge harmony.

Fourth 8: The alto solo continues, but with unison backgrounds from the counter line from the original melody chorus. The alto ends with no backgrounds to prepare us for the last major section of writing, completing a second full chorus of the tune.

3:01-3:45 Shout including bass solo

First 8: The full band shout chorus over the chords to the first A section, still in the new key. The first 4 bars are fully harmonized over the full band, while the second 4 features what I would consider classic Holman unison brass with harmonized saxes. There is a mixture in the saxes here of pads and unison rhythms with the brass.

Second 8: This is perhaps the most complicated section of the entire piece to listen to and understand what is happening. Instead of trying to explain this without a score, this section in my opinion serves as a melodic development of the bridge theme before the bridge arrives.

Third 8: When the bridge finally arrives at **3:31** (with the 2:23 chord from Strayhorn) we don't realize it because we have already been hearing it in the bars before this. It seems as though we are somewhere else when in fact we are right where we should be. The jarring thing here is what happens at 3:34 – this is not exactly how the bridge melody goes, and whether you know it or not it sticks out. This is the beginning of the transition out of the new key back to the original key. After the band gets the modulation going the bass solo finishes it off, and lands us back at home.

Fourth 8: We are back to the last A of the melody, back in the original key, with both original melodies as stated in the last A of the very first melody chorus.

4:00-4:07 Outro/Ending

The last 4 measure ending reminds us of the developing material based on the bridge used in the second 8 measures of the final shout chorus (3:17), only this time continues downward to take us melodically to the tonic. Similar to the Strayhorn ending, we end here with 3 notes (“1, 2 &”) that mimic the syllables when saying “Kissing Bug,” and also similar to the Strayhorn version but also a bit different we have just the bass drum giving a final punctuation to the piece on beat 4.