The Contrafact

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Abstract

This article focuses on jazz contrafact as a method of jazz composition. It is advantageous for composers who want to make themselves familiar with certain types of music or certain songs in particular and use them as a source of inspiration. It is by this reason many jazz pieces of composition are borrowed chord progressions. In some cases, the contrafact results in musical restructuring while in other cases the original structures remain intact. As shown in the present study, the contrafact derived from four types of jazz including Blue Progressions, Rhythm Changes, Modal Jazz and Unique Sound.

Keywords: *Chord Progression, Contrafact, Jazz Music*

1. Introduction

These following factors have strong impact on music creation in term of inspiration, impression, familiarity, and a thorough study of certain musical pieces. The contrafact is one of the basic devices allowing the jazz musicians to create a new piece of music based on those songs that once left a strong impression on them or greatly inspired them.

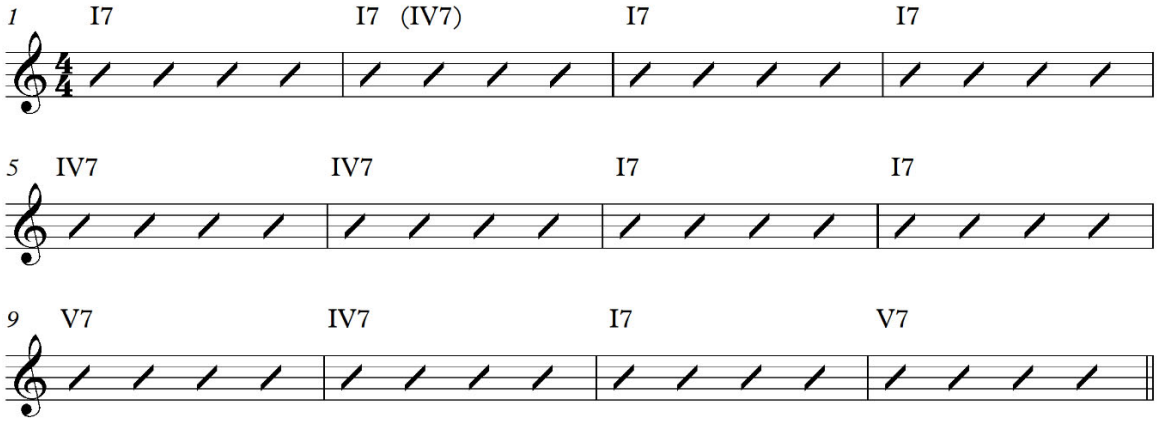
The 1930s and 1940s are the pivotal time of bebop music. Jazz musicians were either familiar with or greatly influenced by chord progressions, which were used in many songs they studied. It motivated them to borrow these chord progressions for their compositions, and in many cases rearrange or even create new melodies based on these progressions. Contrafact could be found in many jazz standard tunes. Many bebop songs were also composed based on this concept (Baker, 1988). It is highly influenced by the variety of the musical types or the unique characters of the chord progressions. There are many popular contrafacts, including the Blues Progression and Rhythm Changes, etc.

In this article, four types of contrafact namely the Blues Progressions, Rhythm Changes, Modal Jazz and Unique Sound will be discussed. It needs to be noted that all the pieces exemplified here are only part of the vast array of the oeuvres that displays the traits of contrafact.

2. Blues Progressions

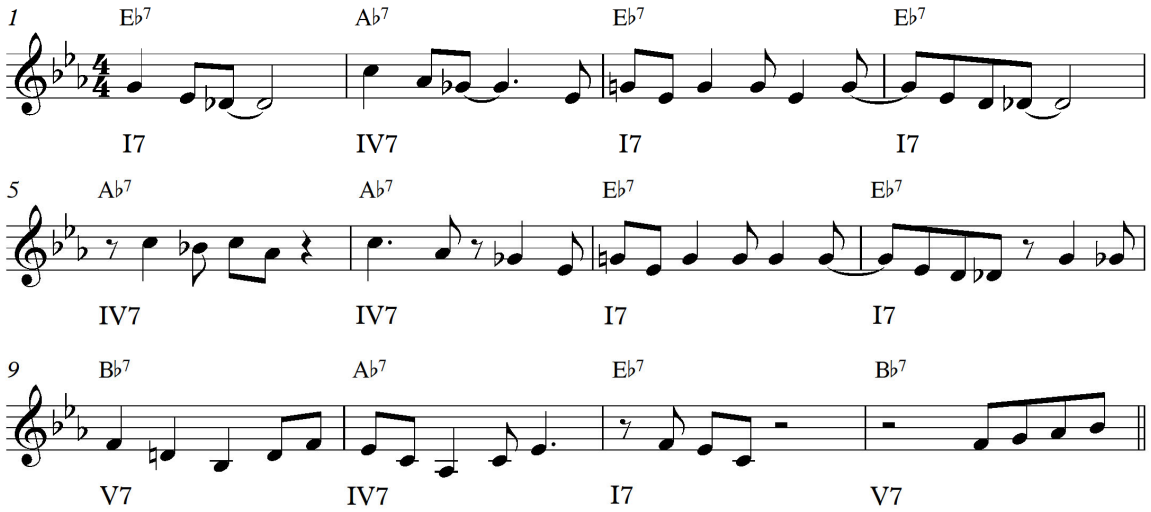
Normally, the basic Blues Progression contains 12 measures in which its melodies and progressions are repeated. The progressions contain dominant chords including I7, IV7 and V7 (the musicians could also play with the dominant 9th, 11th, 13th, etc. However, only dominant 7th chord would be mentioned in this article). These 12 measures comprise of:

Measures 1–4: chord I7 (in some cases; however, it could be chord IV7 in the measure 2)
Measures 5–6: chord IV7
Measures 7–8: chord I7
Measure 9: chord V7
Measure 10: chord IV7
Measure 11: chord I7
Measure 12: chord V7



Example 1: The basic Blues Progressions

John Coltrane's *Bessie's Blues* is one of the perfect examples of songs generated by the method of the Blues contrafact. The song has its key center in Eb. Its main melody contains 12 measures, all of the mentioned characteristics fall into the category of the Blues Progression. However, the exception is found in the second measure whose chord is changed to IV7 (Ab7). For convenience reasons, the chords are indicated in Roman figures below the staff (as shown in Example 2).

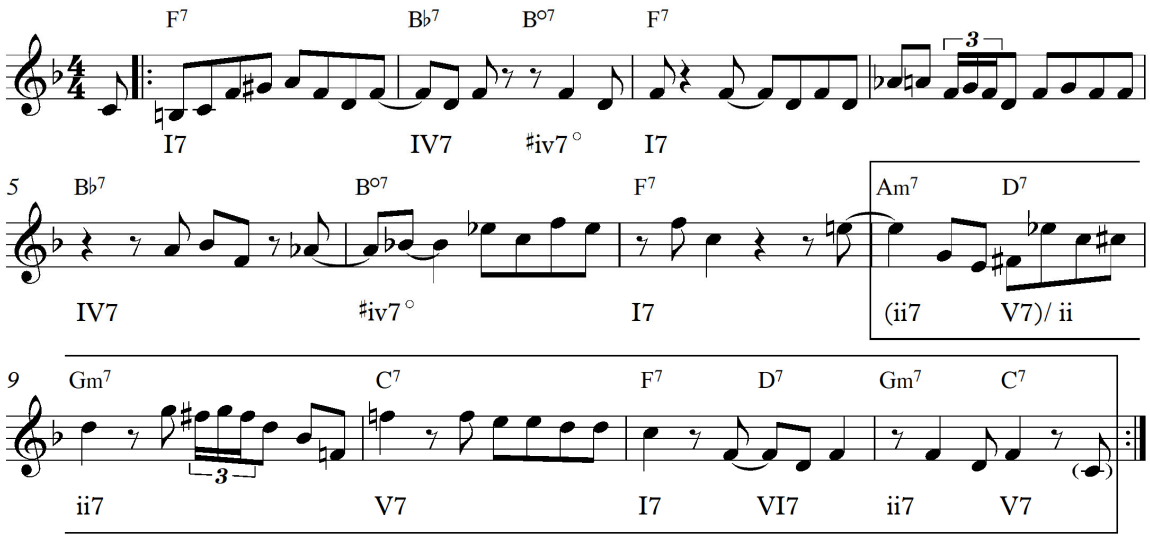


Example 2: John Coltrane's *Bessie's Blues*

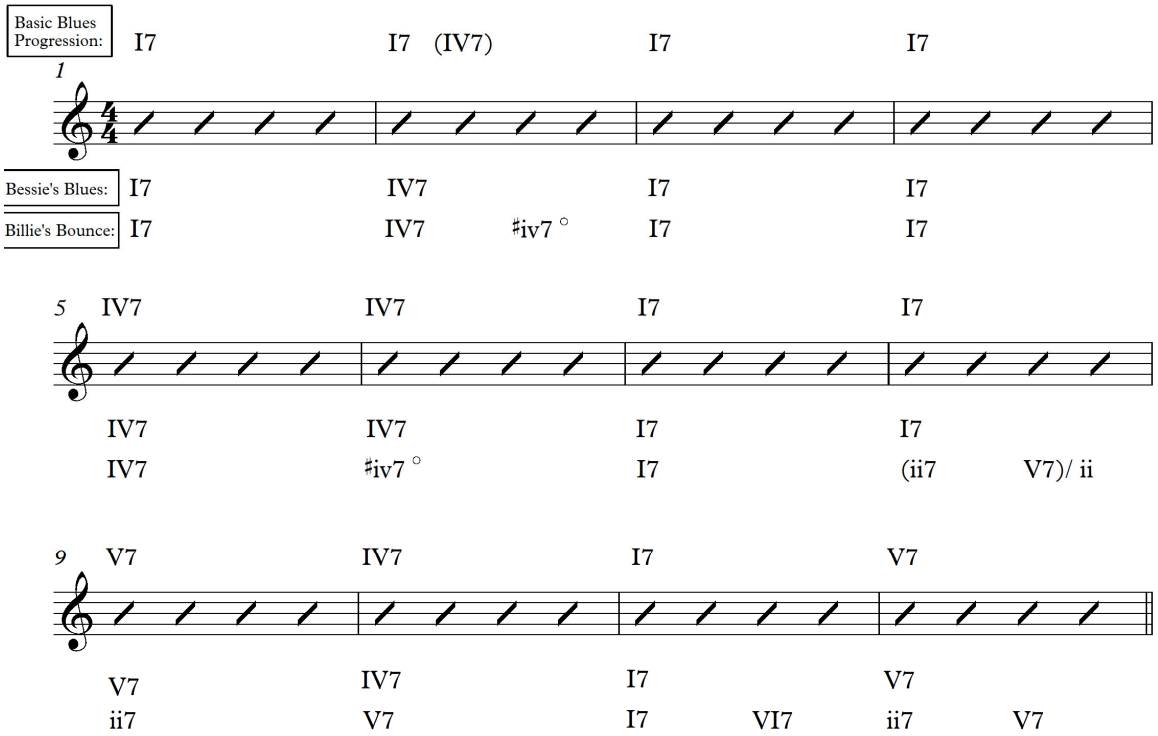
The Blues chord progression has also undergone the transformation in various ways. One of its outcomes is Jazz Blues, whose concept is the combination of the basic Blues Progressions and the ii7 or ii7-V7-I7 chord progressions. Prominent jazz musicians who introduced this concept in their compositions are Charlie Parker and Thelonius Monk. Therefore, some examples of their compositional pieces are provided in this research.

As noted below (see Example 3), Parker's Billie's Bounce are still based on the basic chord progressions in measure 1 – 7, but the composer adds the B°7 to the second and sixth measures for a tint of color. The chord progression ii7-V7 or ii7-V7-I7 is introduced in measure 8 – 12. The progression found in the eighth measure is Am7-D7 (ii7 – V7/ii). Those from the ninth to eleventh are Gm7-C7-F7 (ii7-V7-I7). The twelfth

is a turn around which leads back to the first measure while the chord progression is Gm7-C7 (ii7 – V7). As a result, the song repeats itself (see Example 3).



Example 3 Charlie Parker's *Billie's Bounce*

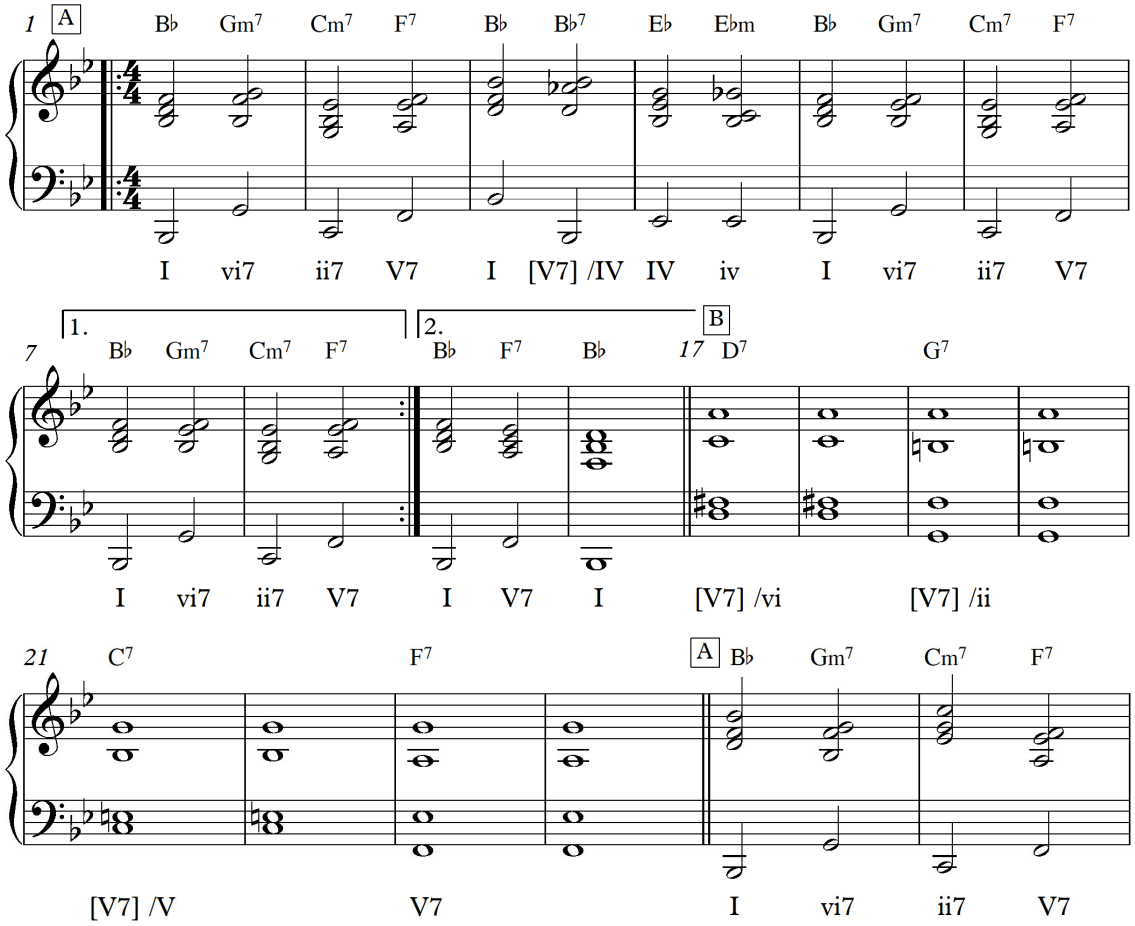


Example 4 The comparison of *Bessie's Blues* and *Billie's Bounce*'s chord progressions

Example 4 is the comparison of the three songs mentioned above. While the chord progression above the staff is the basic Blues, the one below is the progression found in *Bessie's Blues*. The last one is the chord progression found in *Billie's Bounce*.

3. Rhythm Changes

This type of contrafact is also popular among composers and musicians. Levine's discussion of Gershwin's *I Got Rhythm* (Levine, 1995) could be summarized in the following sentence: the Blues chord progression is followed in its popularity by the chord progression based on the song *I Got Rhythm*. Rhythm Changes has the same AABA song pattern. Its length lasts for 32 measures. Each section has 8 measures. George Gershwin's *I Got Rhythm* is a well-known piece with many attempts to the adaptation of chord progression. The uniqueness of Rhythm Changes could be noted in B section with the chord progression [V7] /vi-[V7] /ii-[V7], which is the cycle of fifths. To illustrate, it is brought in for tone color reason. In Example 5, this concept is introduced in the 17 measures and lasts until the 24 measures. There are cycles of fifths contain D7, G7, C7 and F7 respectively (see Example 5).



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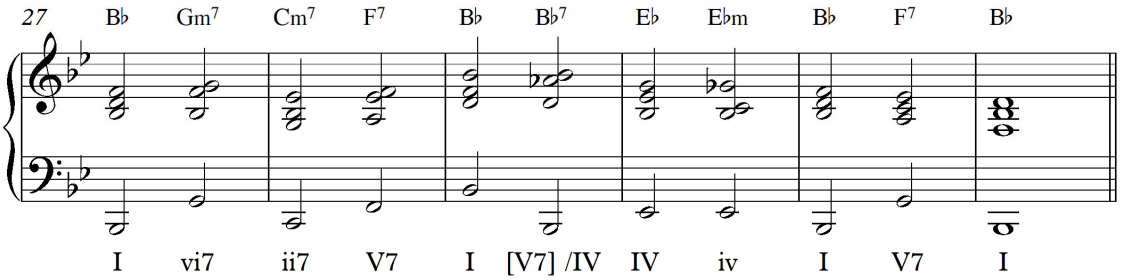
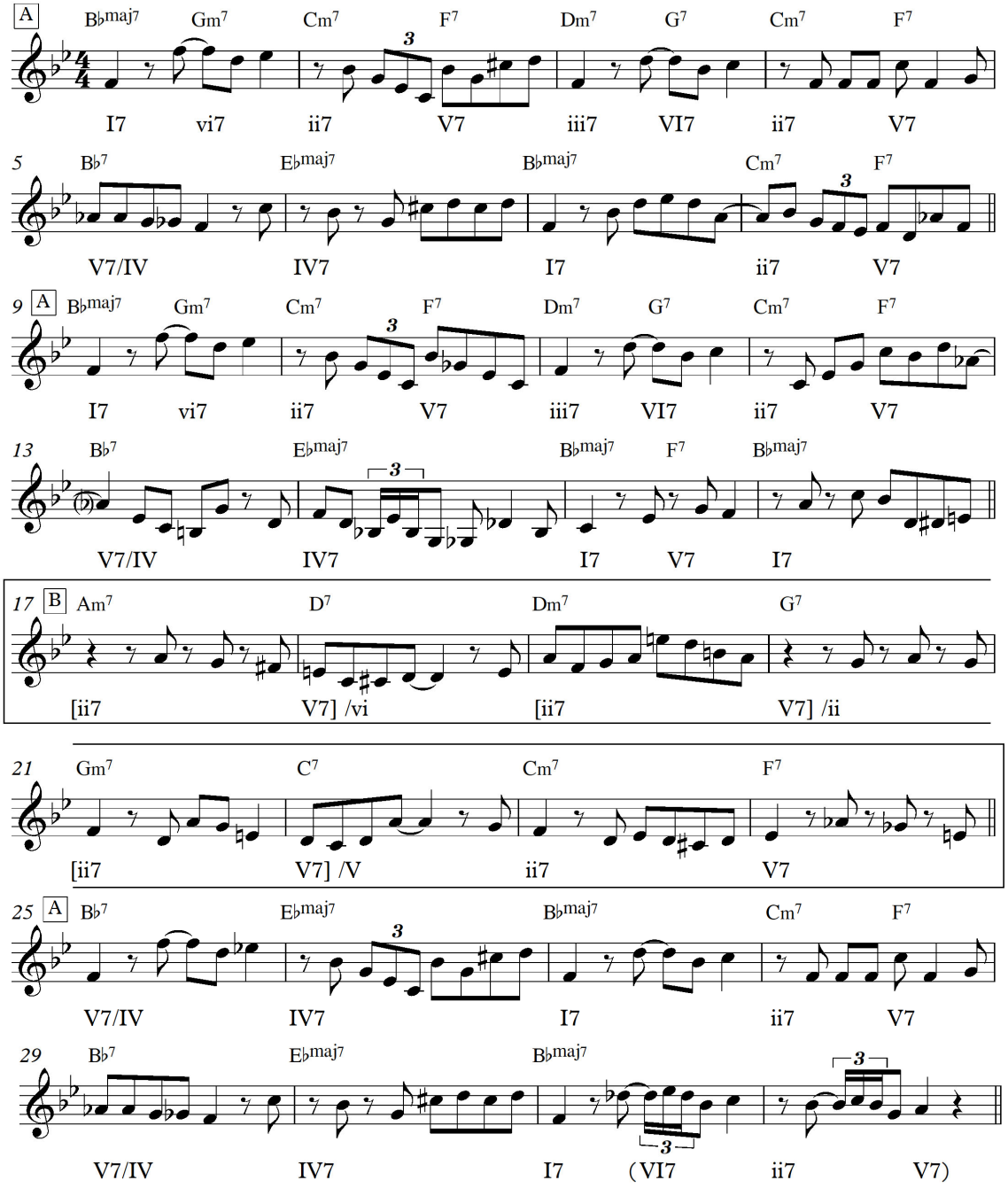


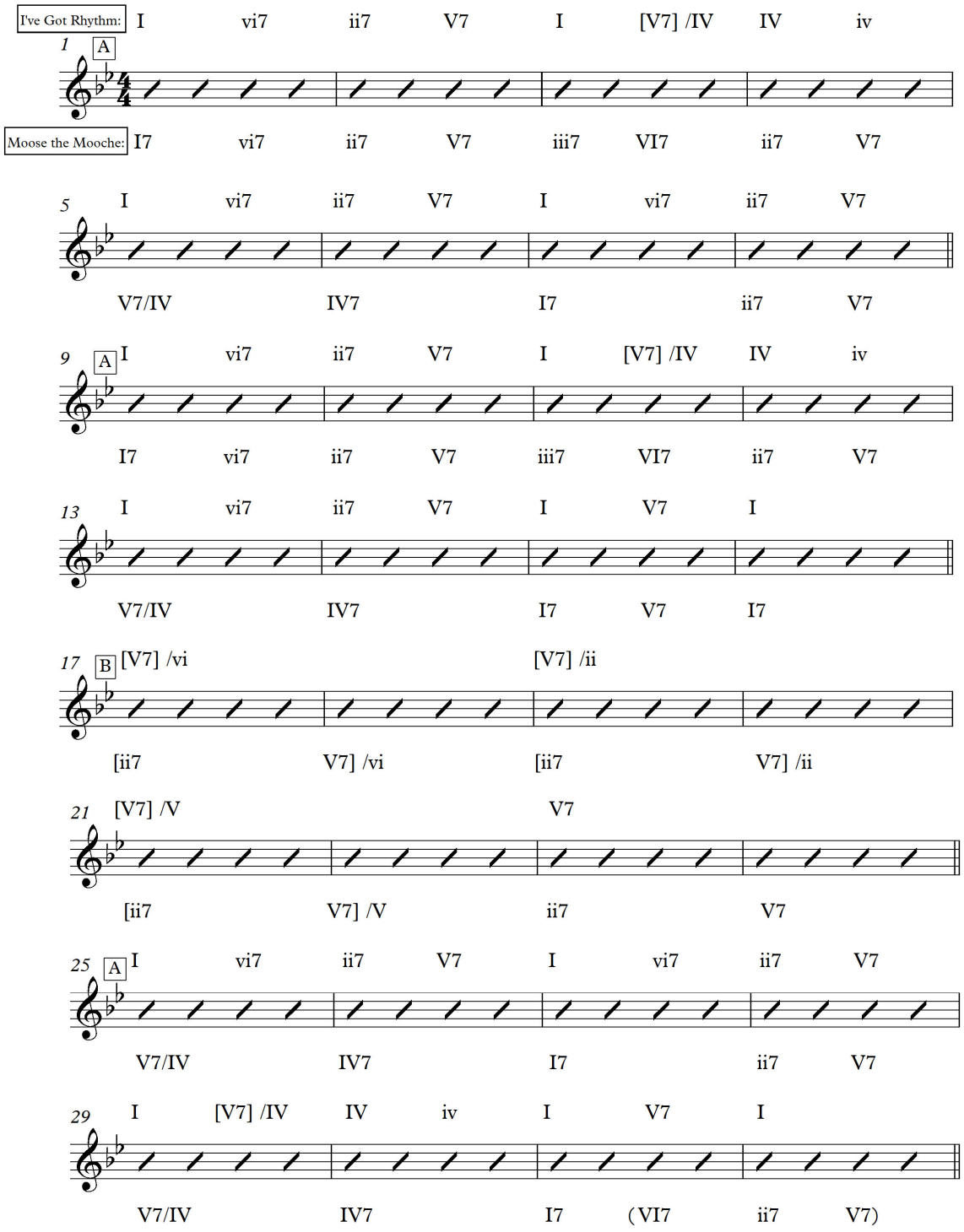
Example 5 The chord progression of Gershwin's *I Got Rhythm* (Levine, 1995)

Another song that was strongly influenced by Rhythm Changes is Charlie Parker's *Moose the Mooche*. Its basic chord progression is taken from *I Got Rhythm*. Its melody contains 32 measures and 8 measures per section. The chord progression in section A is considered distinctive, but it retains to D7-G7-C7-F7 and the cycle of fifths in section B. Parker adds ii7-V7 to produce more motions in chord progression without reducing effects, which probably acquired by the cycle of fifths (see Example 6 in the rectangles at measures 17–24).



Example 6 Charlie Parker's *Moose the Mooche* (Terefenko, 2018)

Example 7 is the comparison of *I Got Rhythm*'s and *Moose the Mooche*'s chord progressions. The chord progression above the staff is *I Got Rhythm*'s, the other below is *Moose the Mooche*'s.



Example 7 *I Got Rhythm*'s and *Moose the Mooche*'s chord progressions in comparison

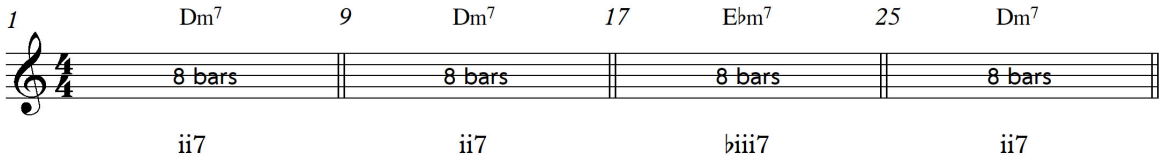
4. Modal Jazz

In the late 1960s, Miles Davis began to compose less complicated songs. He was also trying to avoid the kind of chord progressions that were frequently found in bebop music, including its characteristic of a perpetual motion. His improvisation is based on the ideas influenced by the mode that was closely related to chord and scale relationship. His *Kind of Blues*, recorded in 1959 and released by Columbia Records, is a remarkable album that gave birth to a new concept of jazz music named Modal Jazz. It features *So What*, one of Davis' compositions, exemplified the contrafact. Its melody contains 32 measures with only two chords. The structure of its chord progression is arranged in this manner:

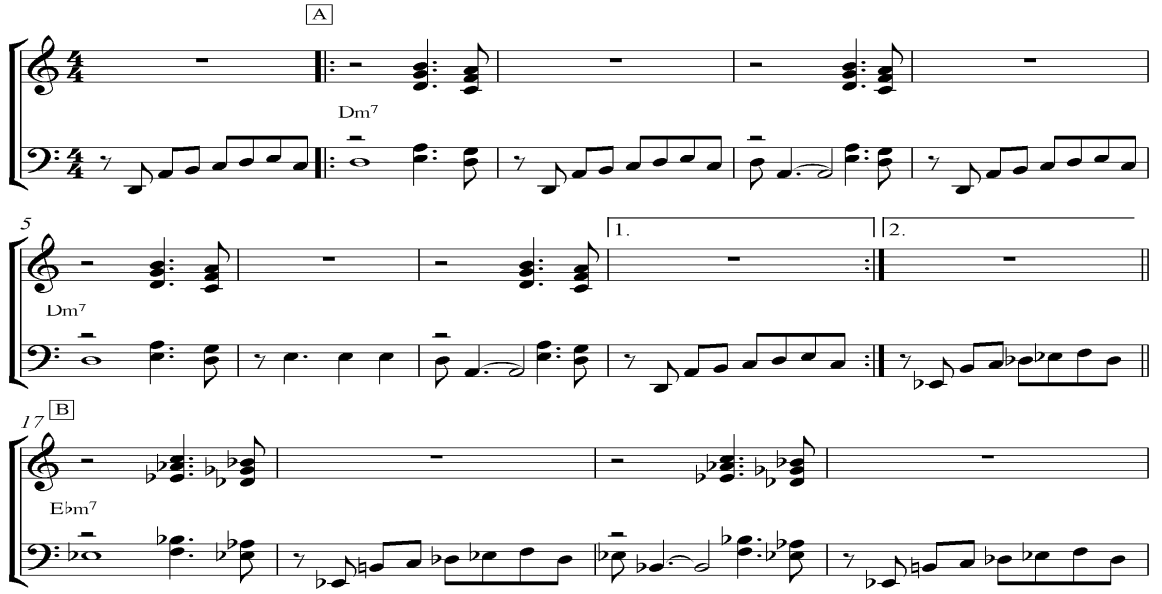
Measures 1–8: Dm7 Measures 9–16: Dm7

Measures 17–24: Ebm7 Measures 25–32: Dm7

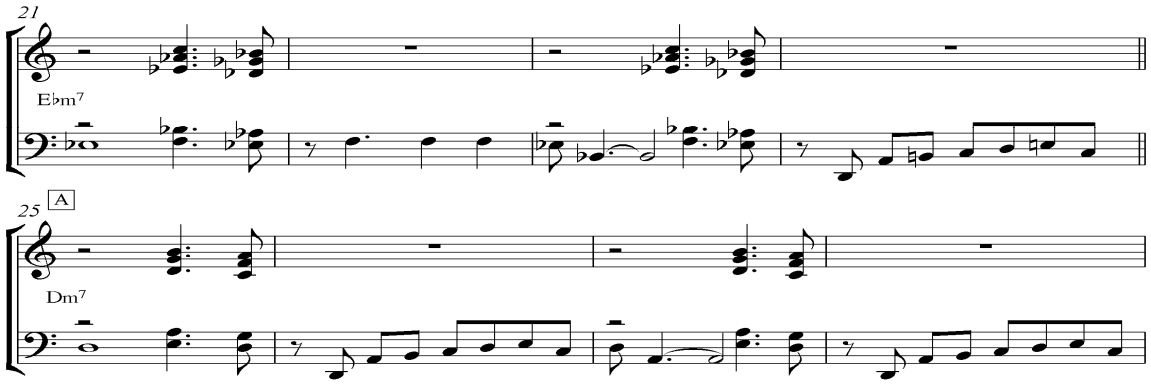
In Example 8, the chord progression contains two chords, which are Dm7 and Ebm7. Each chord has 8 measures. The slower chord progression is one of the unique character of Modal Jazz. It is crucial to note that there are two chord shifts. The first one is a shift from Dm7 to Ebm7 in the 17 measure. The latter is the shift from Ebm7 to Dm7 in the last part of the twenty-fifth. As the melody comes toward the end, the chord progression will repeat itself as the improvisation continues. You could see *So What*'s melody in Example 9.



Example 8: The chord progression of Miles Davis' *So What*

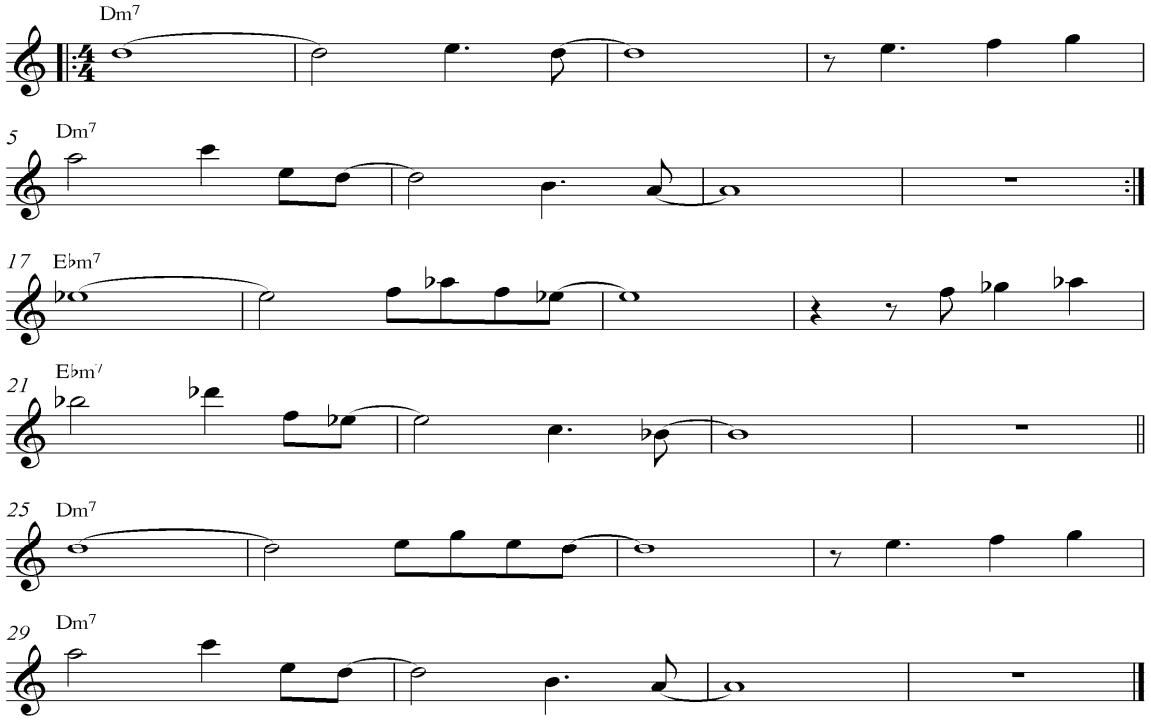


Example 9 Miles Davis' *So What*



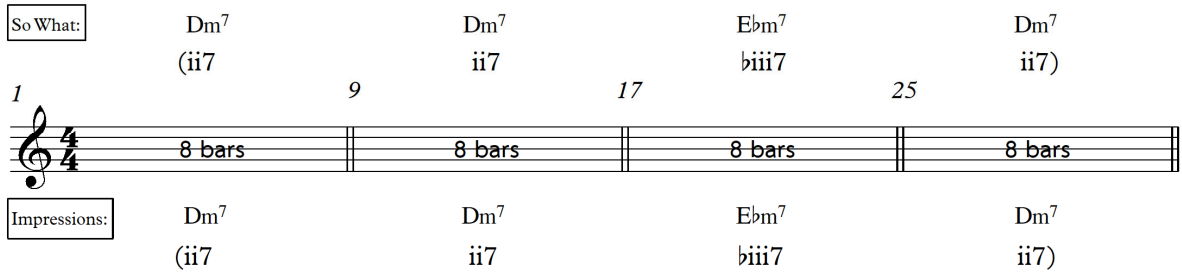
Example 9 Miles Davis' *So What*

John Coltrane's *Impressions* is one of the songs derived its chord from Davis' *So What*. This song is included in Coltrane's album *Impressions* recorded in 1961 and released by Impulse Records. Although both songs have the same chord progressions, their melodies are obviously different (see Example 10).



Example 10 John Coltrane's *Impressions* (Continue)

The chord progressions of these two songs are compared in Example 10. The chord progression found above the staff belongs to *So What* whereas the one found below belongs to *Impressions*. It can be said that chord progressions of both songs are thoroughly identical.



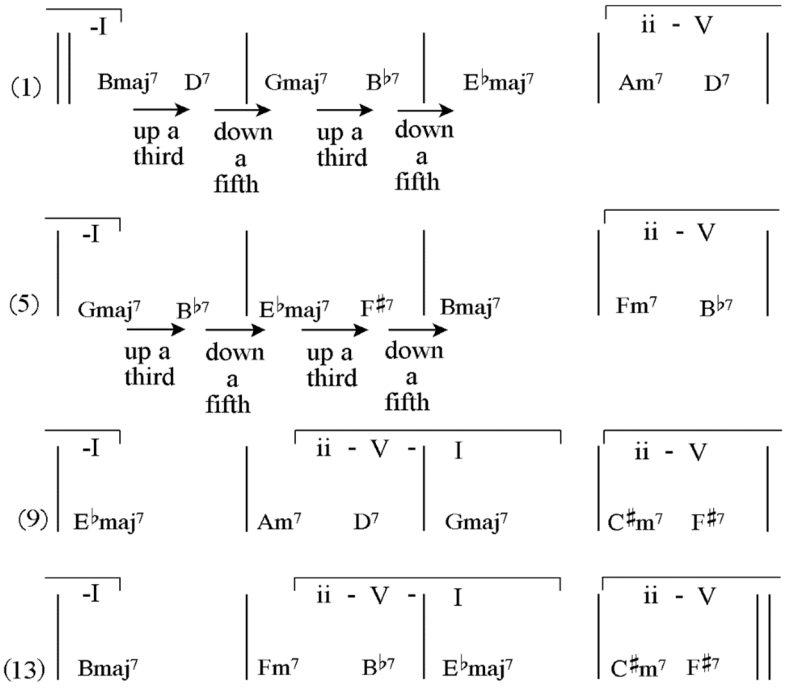
Example 11 *So What*'s and *Impressions*' chord progressions in comparison

5. Unique Sound

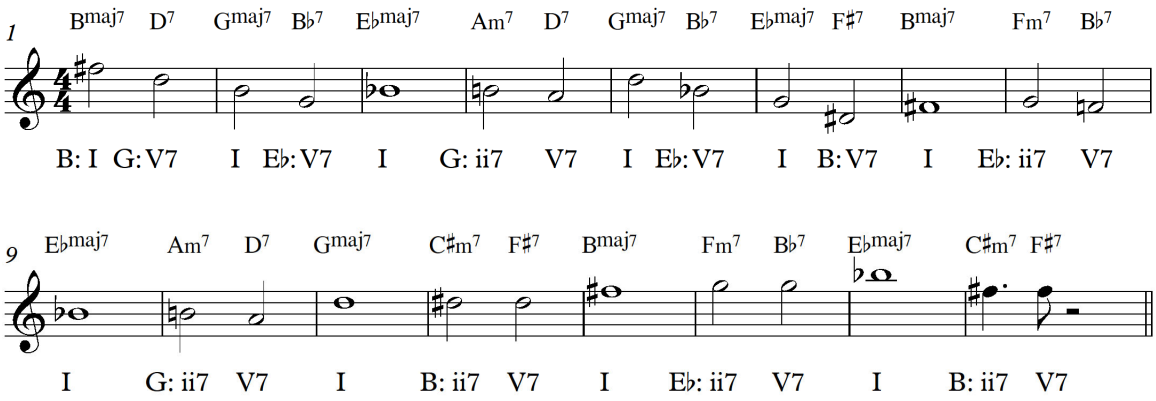
This type of chord progression is originated from numerous experiments which result in the uniqueness of sounds and motions, i.e. Coltrane Changes. It is invented by Coltrane himself. The system is not only his legacy but also a fine contribution to the development of the jazz scene in general.

In 1959, John Coltrane introduced his system of Coltrane Changes to his musical pieces in his album *Giant Steps*, released by Atlantic Records. His song *Giant Steps* is an exemplary adaptation of the Coltrane Changes in its chord progression, leading to the presence of the third relationship. Its melody contains 16 measures in total.

As seen in Example 12, Potter shows the symmetry of the chord progression and the third relationship in *Giant Steps*. The repetition in the first part is found in measures 1 – 8, the latter found in measures 9–16. This reveals the complexity of the unique sound which Coltrane experimented and invented. We could see it in Example 13.

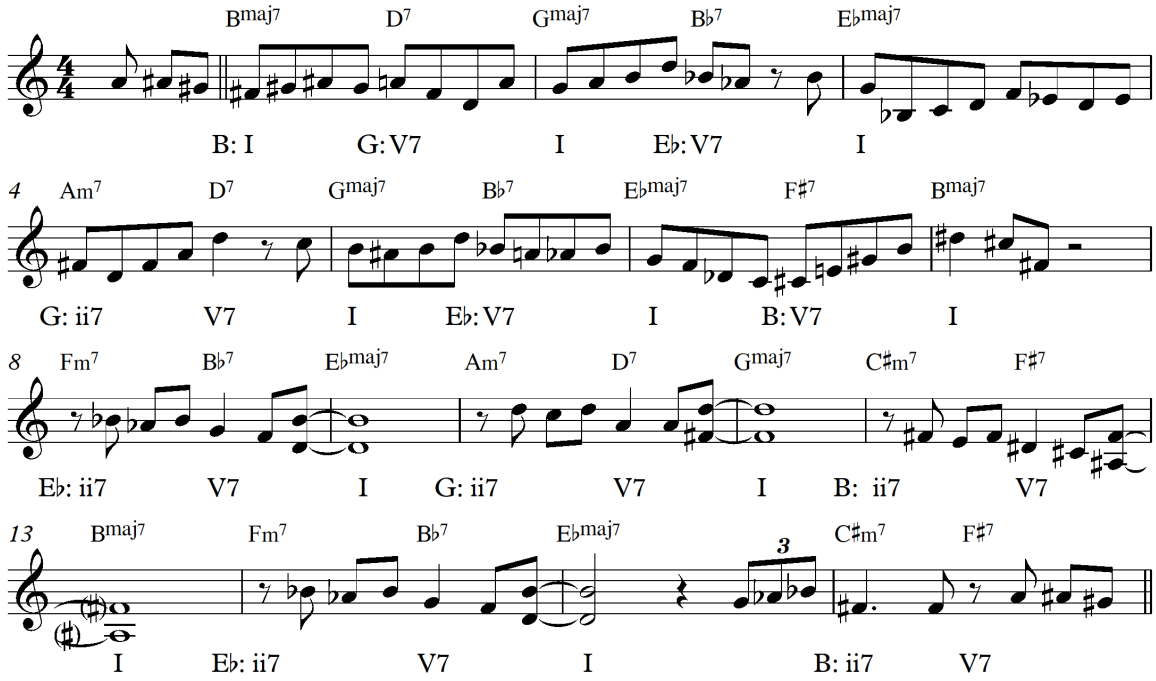


Example 12 The analysis of the *Giant Steps*' chord progression (Potter, 1983)



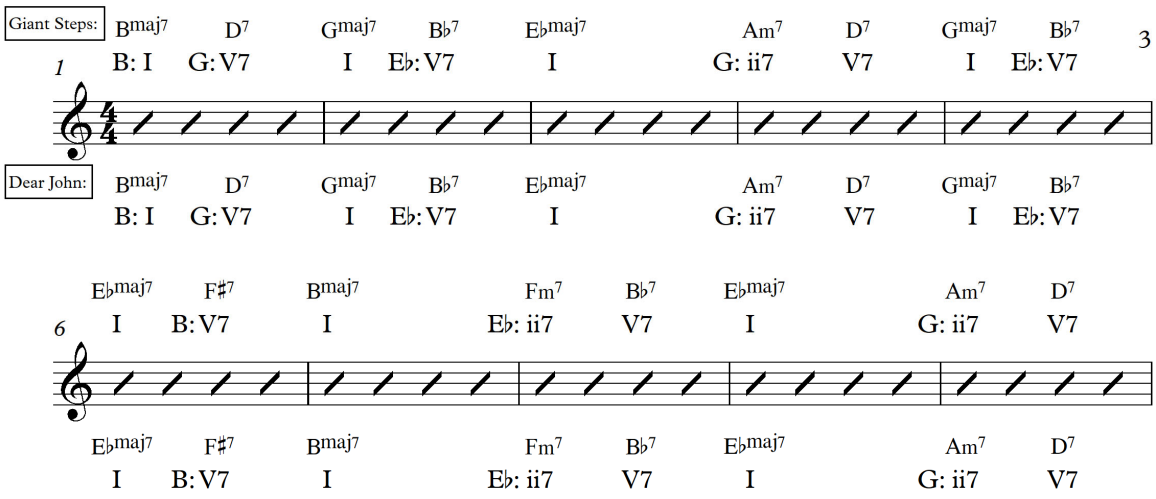
Example 13 John Coltrane's *Giant Steps*

We could also find the Coltrane Changes system in Freddie Hubbard's *Dear John* which took its chord progression from *Giant Steps*, but not the melody. The song's name may signify the eulogy of John Coltrane, the creator of the system, which put forth by the composer (see Example 14).

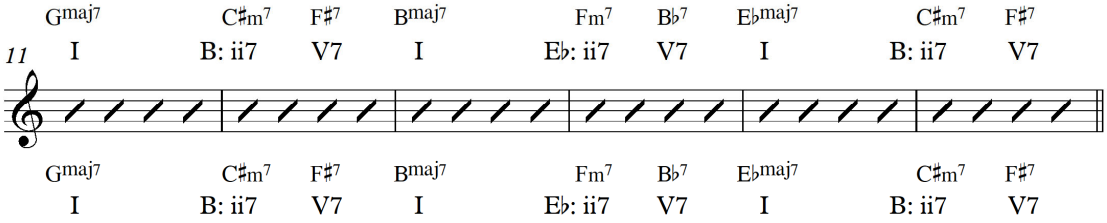


Example 14 Freddie Hubbard's *Dear John*

We could see the comparison of *Giant Steps* and *Dear John* in Example 15. It should be noted that their chord progressions are identical while their melodies are different.



Example 15: The comparison of *Giant Steps*' and *Dear John*'s chord progressions



Example 15 The comparison of *Giant Steps*' and *Dear John*'s chord progressions (continued)

6. Conclusion

In summary, the concept of the inspiration-led contrafact is an adaptation. To elaborate, whether the contrafact method is a partial or a total modification of the original structure, there will also be new melodies created at the same time. This method is popularly used in four types of Jazz music, namely Blues Progression, Rhythm Changes, Modal Jazz, and Unique Sound.

7. Reference

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