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George Alan Russell: Jazz's First Theorist

by
Robert E. Moore



In 1953 George Alan Russell published *The Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization*. By virtue of this work Russell carved out a unique niche for himself in the history of jazz, his opus representing the first theoretical work to come out of the jazz tradition. The purpose of this paper is to define his place in jazz history and to offer a biographical sketch of jazz's first and most important theorist. My points of departure will be references made to Russell in two widely read works—Gunther Schuller's *Early Jazz* and Wilfrid Mellers' *Music in a New Found Land*. Both works stand in need of critical commentary.

Gunther Schuller in *Early Jazz* asserts what many take as axiomatic—that jazz, as contrasted with “classical” music, is a player's or improviser's art.

It is manifest that the basic stylistic and conceptual advances in jazz have been determined by its great instrumentalist-improvisers—Louis Armstrong, Earl Hines, Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman—not by Jelly Roll Morton, Duke Ellington, Thelonious Monk, John Lewis, George Russell, and Charlie Mingus.¹

While the composer may exert an indirect influence on the improviser, a more direct influence is precluded by the virtual impossibility of an instrumentalist emulating a compositional conception that is in itself based on the collective efforts of a number of players. Although Schuller notes a “quasi-compositional conception” undergirding the styles of the great improvisers, it is the instrument and the performance that he considers of primary importance.²

That the improviser has played the major role in the evolution of jazz is not a proposition that this writer would attempt to refute. I do, however, feel compelled to raise a question about the adequacy of Schuller's categories, especially as they apply to one figure mentioned in that select group of composers,

George Russell. Certainly Russell has distinguished himself over the years as one of the pre-eminent composers in jazz. Yet Russell is to be distinguished from the others on Schuller's list because of his theoretical interests, having produced the first original, theoretical work to emerge out of the jazz tradition. Through his theoretical work he has exerted an impact on jazz that goes far beyond his impact as a composer. Notwithstanding his compositional work, Russell has, since the formulation of the Lydian concept, defined theory as his major interest.

Although Russell's name is mentioned in most of the larger historical studies of modern jazz, only recently has he received recognition for some of the more direct ways in which he has influenced the evolution of jazz. Recent biographical studies of trumpeter Miles Davis have revealed that it was Russell who showed Davis how to compose and improvise what became labeled as “modal jazz.” While the improviser-performer Davis is often credited with having initiated one of the major developments in the jazz of the 1960s through his work on such compositions as “Milestones” and “So What,” it was Russell, utilizing the principles of his Lydian theory, who showed Davis how to do modal music. One of the Davis biographers, Nisenson, in describing how the trumpeter composed his landmark composition “Milestones,” notes the following:

The simple melody was an experiment inspired by an evening Miles had spent with the jazz composer-arranger George Russell, who at the time was working on his theoretical “Lydian Concept of Tonality.” Basically, this was a method for the jazz composer and improviser to use modes rather than the traditional tonal chord progressions and tonally responsive melodies. Modes are actually a very old concept in western music, dating back to ancient Greece, and modal concepts were used, in different incarnations, in the primitive music of Africa and in the art music of India. Miles was fasci-

nated by Russell's approach. Here was a means of breaking free from tonal clichés — while maintaining some amount of restraint. "George," Miles told Russell that night, "if Bird were alive, this would kill him."³

Davis has also cited pianist Bill Evans as one who exerted a great influence on him during his modal period; Evans was in the Davis band during the modal period.⁴ Evans was recommended to Davis by Russell, and it would be reasonable to propose that Russell's influence on Davis continued through Evans who had studied the Lydian concept.

While Davis's interpretation of Russell's concept marks one instance in which a composer-theorist has exerted an influence beyond that countenanced by Schuller, it was Davis who provided Russell with the initial stimulus to delve into theoretical concerns. It was a remark made by Miles in the mid-1940s, that he wanted to learn all the changes, that sparked in Russell the desire to learn all the scales. Russell saw this project as one complementary to Davis, given the fact that one of the main tasks of the jazz improviser is to convert chord symbols into scales, creating melodic lines that convey the sound of the chord.

Russell immersed himself in his chosen task during a long period of confinement for tuberculosis in a New York hospital in 1945 and 1946. There he spent most of his hours at the piano in the sitting room matching chords to scales, enduring the complaints of fellow patients who tired quickly of his incessant piano playing. It was during this time that Russell hit upon the idea that the Lydian scale (e.g., C D E F# G A B) conveyed the sound of a major chord (C E G) better than the traditional major scale (C D E F G A B). The experimentation with the Lydian scale was, he notes, inspired by the practice of Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, et al, of utilizing the flatted fifth of major chords. These musicians were the creators of the so-called "BeBop" music.

Out of the hospital in 1947, Russell composed one of the first Afro-Cuban jazz numbers, "Cubano Be, Cubano Bop," for the Dizzy Gillespie Orchestra, employing one of the techniques derived from the developing Lydian theory. His introduction was based on a single Lydian chromatic scale, departing from the traditional practice in which chords provide the foundational elements. While Russell continued his activity as a composer-arranger in the late 40s, the call of his theoretical muse led to his withdrawing from the music world in the early 50s. He took a day job at Macy's and devoted his free hours to the completion of his concept of tonality.

In 1953 Russell published *The Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization*, the first theoretical work to be written by a jazz musician. His opus was not offered as a prescriptive text, i.e., one that attempted to legislate a particular taste or style. The

significance of his work was its attempt to apply an Ockham's razor to music theory, to generate a *descriptive* theory that offers the instrumentalist-composer the full range of options and possibilities lying within the universe of equal temperament. In the introduction of his book, Russell asserts the following:

The Lydian Chromatic Concept is an organization of tonal resources from which the jazz musician may draw to create his improvised lines. It is like an artist's palette: the paints and colors, in the form of scales and/or intervallic motives, waiting to be blended by the improviser. Like the artist, the jazz musician must learn the techniques of blending his materials.

The Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization is a chromatic concept providing the musician with an awareness of the full spectrum of tonal colors available in the equal temperament tuning. There are no rules, no "do's or don'ts." It is, therefore, not a system, but rather a view or philosophy of tonality in which the student, it is hoped, will find his own identity.⁵

. . . *Russell carved out a unique niche for himself in the history of jazz, his opus representing the first theoretical work to come out of the jazz tradition.*

From the basic principle formulated during his hospital confinement, Russell had moved on to devise a scale that offered the full range of tonal colors, which could be used in shaping melodic lines as well as harmonies. Out of the material provided by the Lydian chromatic scale, his book demonstrates how one can derive all of the major categories of chords and scales. The upshot of this chromatic view is that *all* chords and scales built on each of the twelve chromatic tones are related, the connecting link being described by the circle of fifths.

One of the practical ramifications of Russell's view is mentioned by trumpeter Art Farmer, who studied the concept in the mid-50s. Farmer asserts that studying with Russell engendered the view that there are no wrong notes, that one might justify the use of any note within the parameters of tonality. Farmer also makes note of a demonstration by Dizzy Gillespie that antedated his studying with Russell. Gillespie, he relates, played a variety of triads in a chromatic fashion over a single pedal point. "All of them," according to Farmer, "sounded bright."⁶ What Russell accomplished, as Farmer im-

plies, is the development of a system that formally explains Gillespie's point about chromaticism.

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Russell describes his theory as being in part a codification of the techniques and intuitive principles that have been developed by the jazz improviser over the course of the history of jazz. The influence of the flatted fifths of the beboppers has already been noted. But nowhere is this aspect of Russell's thesis more evident than in his defining, in Lydian concept terminology, the two basic approaches to improvisation—the vertical and the horizontal. Coleman Hawkins's style represents the paradigm of vertical playing in which the improviser addresses each passing chord, playing a melody that best conveys the sound of the chord. Lester Young offers the paradigm of the horizontal style. Where Hawkins responds to each chord, Young tends to bypass chords in favor of what Russell calls "tonic stations." In Young's system, tonic stations are often defined by determining what the resolving tendency of two or more chords might be. Take, for example, the following series of chords: Fm7 Bbm7 Eb7 Abmaj. Where Hawkins would address each chord as it appears, Young might go to Abmaj, imposing an Ab blues scale on the preceding progression of chords. In the vertical approach, scales color chords. In the horizontal approach, chords color scales.

In his 1953 work Russell was to anticipate in Lydian terms what was to be the next major revolution in jazz. He spells out what he describes as the "outgoing," chromatically enhanced, horizontal approach, which found its practical realization in the work of Ornette Coleman. What Coleman introduced was an approach to tonality in which the improviser might relate to just one tonic center, for example, the key of the music, or proceed freely by selecting tonic centers on the spur of the moment. The Lester Young approach is thus taken to its outer chromatic limits. Coleman studied with Russell in 1959 at the School of Jazz in Lenox, Massachusetts. Although he had already arrived at his horizontal style by this time, one cannot help but note that the basic principles of this style were spelled out by Russell in 1953.

Russell had an influence on figures outside of the jazz domain as well. Indiana University professor

David Baker represents one whose work spans both the jazz and European classical and symphonic traditions. Baker, who studied with Russell at Lenox, is the author of a widely used series of textbooks on improvisation, and his approach is based on the Lydian concept.⁷

During Russell's extended stay in Scandinavia in the late 1960s he had a marked impact on both jazz and non-jazz European musicians. Among the latter was the leading Norwegian "art" music composer Kora Kolberg. Russell, Kolberg asserts, exerted a profound influence on the younger Norwegian composers who, like himself, were looking for an alternative to the elitist, atonal approach of the avant-garde. What they found in the Lydian concept was "a new way of looking at tonality which was not bound by the timeworn, traditional major-minor approach."⁸ This infusion was a central element in the creation of a music that sought once again to embrace the listener. The respect for Russell's work among the non-jazz composers was also evidenced by his being commissioned to compose his "Electronic Sonata for Souls Loved by Nature" by Ny Musikk, the Norwegian branch of the International Society for Contemporary Music.

Now that Schuller's failure to consider Russell's place as a *theorist* in jazz history has been addressed, in the second part of this paper I will correct an error in the scholarship of authors such as Wilfrid Mellers in his *Music in a New Found Land*. The error to which I allude can seriously impair one's understanding of the social, cultural, and aesthetic background out of which the Lydian concept evolved.

In Mellers' book one finds the following statement:

More creatively vigorous than the academically trained jazz composers who stem from the manner of the Modern Jazz Quartet is George Russell, a highly sophisticated musician who has become guide and mentor to "advanced" developments. As a *white* [emphasis mine] man he has tried to do what Cecil Taylor attempted as a coloured man: and has, perhaps, failed for a reason that complements Taylor's failure. In Taylor's case the compositional elements that were supposed to discipline the primitivism did not convince, and this made the primitivism itself seem suspect.⁹

In the case of the "white" Russell, the situation is reversed: "the explosion of jazz license (read "primitivism") . . . sounds the most 'thought up'."¹⁰

While this writer wishes to make no claim about the scientific cogency of ways of reckoning race in the United States, Russell's birth certificate reads "Negro." Born in Cincinnati, Ohio, on June 23, 1923, his biological father was a white Oberlin College music professor; his mother a black Oberlin undergraduate. He was adopted a year later by Joseph

Russell, a railroad chef, and his wife Bessie, a registered nurse, and raised in the Walnut Hills section of Cincinnati. Whether race is considered biologically or sociologically, existentially Russell was black. Nothing drives this point home more clearly than his experience as a seriously injured, six-year-old, hit-and-run victim, who was barred from admission to the Jewish Hospital by a nurse who refused to admit him because he was “colored.”

The environment in which Russell grew up was one in which black music — sacred and secular — was ubiquitous. Although his mother attended Mt. Zion Methodist Church, whose congregation included a number of Cincinnati’s black elite, young George was particularly attracted to the music he heard at the sanctified church near his home and at the revival meetings that he was taken to by his mother and Bishop Mary Mack (a popular midwestern evangelist in the 1920s and 30s, whose son was Russell’s playmate).

The experimentation with the Lydian scale was, he notes, inspired by the practice of Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, et al., of utilizing the flatted fifth of major chords. These musicians were the creators of the so-called “BeBop” music.

Russell’s first attraction to jazz came as a young child when he heard the legendary Fate Marable’s band on riverboat excursions. Famed arranger Jimmy Mundy was a Kerper Street neighbor. Cousins of Art Tatum lived on the terrace behind the Russells’ house, and George could hear the redoubtable pianist practice whenever Tatum was in town. Zack Whyte, leader of the popular Chocolate Beau Brumels, lived but a block away. Two blocks away were Duffy’s Tavern and the Avalon Club where many famous musicians played or came to relax. And three blocks away was the Manse Hotel where many of the top stars, barred from downtown hotels, stayed.

George’s first display of musical ability came through his performances as a boy soprano when he was frequently called upon to sing at his family’s church and at social club programs. At the age of ten he shared billing with Fats Waller in a program at the local YMCA. His interest in vocal music continued through his adolescent years as he and three high school buddies formed a quartet that sang modern harmony and made appearances in southern Ohio and Indiana. He also sang in the Withrow High School Glee Club and later in the Wilberforce University Glee Club.

It was, however, the drums that really drew Russell’s interest. This interest first manifested itself in

his participation in the Boy Scouts Drum and Bugle Corp. At the age of 13 his parents purchased a drum set, and, with the encouragement and tolerance of a loving mother who turned over her living room to him, George set about teaching himself how to play. In time he learned the fundamentals, and he began to listen to and closely watch the older boys and men who played around the neighborhood.

By the age of 14 Russell’s interest in music, coupled with his adolescent interest in exploring the adult world, took him far beyond the boundaries of Walnut Hills. He began making the long four mile trek down Gilbert Avenue to downtown Cincinnati and the Cotton Club. Although “Cotton Clubs” were to be found in just about every American city with a sizable black population, Cincinnati’s was known throughout the black entertainment world. Jimmy Lunceford, Cab Calloway, Earl Hines, Andy Kirk, and others of that stature appeared there. The Cotton Club became school for George as his attendance at Withrow High School dropped precipitously. Finally, at the age of 16, George dropped out of high school and began working at a downtown department store in the day and playing at night.

Racism and racial discrimination played a most important part in Russell’s life, as it did in the lives of most of his peers. Interviews conducted with some of his early associates — musical and others — revealed that racism cut quite deeply into all of their lives. Every interviewee had a collection of horror stories to tell. George recalls being pushed down the hall by the gym teacher at the Hoffman School who yelled at him, “You ain’t nothing but a nigger.” He was discouraged from participating in the high school band. He walked out of class and out of Withrow High School for the last time when he was ordered by his English teacher to read the racially derogatory monologue of a stereotypical slave.

Russell’s contact with formal education did not end, however, with his exit from Withrow High School. A little over a year later, he was offered a scholarship to attend the preparatory high school department of Wilberforce University. He had by that time developed into one of the better drummers in Cincinnati. The drummer in the college’s dance band — the Wilberforce Collegians — had dropped out, and George was selected as his replacement. It was at Wilberforce that he received his first formal instruction in music from Professor Anna Terry, mentor to a long list of distinguished African-Americans. About Russell, Professor Terry related: “When he came to me he didn’t know a thing . . . what a staff was. I had to teach him all of the fundamentals.”¹¹

Russell left Wilberforce before receiving his diploma, eventually landing the drummer’s chair with the highly-regarded Benny Carter and his orchestra in 1943. It was during this period that he made the decision to put his drums aside and take up the com-

poser-arranger's pen. The event that led to that fateful choice was the fact that Max Roach took the job with Carter away from Russell. Evaluating his skills and stacking them up against the amazing Roach, Russell quickly concluded that he was no match for the latter and that his life's work lay elsewhere.

Russell learned the rudiments of arranging from a friend, the gifted bassist Harold Gaston, while both were confined in a Cincinnati sanitarium. Soon he was to do an arrangement for his former boss, Carter. Shortly after that, in 1944, he was arranging for the Earl Hines Band in Chicago. The conversion was now complete.

Eventually Russell was drawn to New York by the new music being played there. By 1945 he was back in the hospital. Once again his confinement marked a crucial period in his musical development. While at St. Joseph's Hospital in the Bronx, he evolved the principles of the Lydian chromatic concept of tonal organization.

Recent years have witnessed a wider recognition of Russell as a composer and band leader. He landed a contract with Blue Note Records in 1980. This was his first contract with an American record company in close to two decades. Along with wide critical acclaim for his music, his Blue Note album *African Game* received a Grammy nomination, and his Liv-

ing Time Orchestra has appeared at major festivals and concerts in the United States and abroad. Notwithstanding the marked increase in such activities, he remains heavily immersed in his academic and theoretical work. He continues to teach privately at the New England Conservatory of Music. Work on a second volume of the Lydian chromatic concept of tonal organization and the development of a way of schematizing rhythm have been some of his major concerns of late. All in all, it seems clear that jazz's first theorist will continue to exert a broad influence, both unique and profound, on modern music.

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