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HOW STRANGE THE CHANGES

BY RATZO B.
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ON SEPTEMBER
2, 2011

On Monday, I was working at [Iguana New York](#) in pianist/vocalist [Rick DellaRatta](#)'s group, Jazz For Peace, with drummer [Art Lillard](#). It was part of an event sponsored by [Celebrate Shamone](#) and [Make a Better World Foundation](#) to celebrate the legacy of Michael Jackson and raise funds to donate musical instruments to underprivileged children. The event was well attended, despite Hurricane Irene's impact on travelling in the tri-state area, and a few things happened there that I think are worth discussing here.

[Last week](#), I discussed how certain situations demand that an improvising musician might have to

perform across a wide range of styles and genres inside a single concert (sometimes inside a single work). The examples given then described situations where the featured member of the group would change for each tune or where several musicians of differing backgrounds create a music that is unique to the situation. Monday's situation differs from both of these in that the three musicians are very similar in their backgrounds and changed styles for each song as part of their program, which consisted largely of DellaRatta's original compositions and arrangements of jazz standards. The sole exception to this was the opening number, a freely improvised fantasia based on Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean." Although the three of us had never played together as a trio before, we had all played with each other in different situations. I'm sure this familiarity facilitated the opener's success.

DellaRatta's originals are composed in jazz, mambo, samba, hip-hop, funk, rock-ballad, and Euro-jazz stylistically. His approach to learning these styles was to completely immerse himself in the cliques he worked in. I remember working with him in singer Ana France's groups in the 1990s that stemmed from his work with Guillermo Franco's Pe De Boi. His approach to leading groups, instead of organizing a set that the group performs, consists of forwarding triple the amount of material needed to cover the

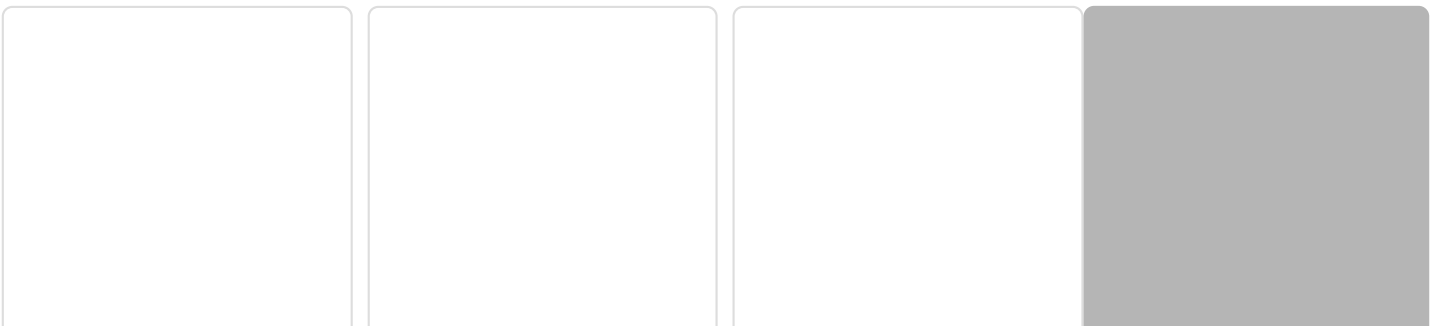
concert and letting his sidemen suggest what to play. “I find it works better if I try to fit in with what the drummer and bassist do than for me to try and show them what I think I want.”

What struck me the most about Rick’s music is how his charts reflect his eclectic musical grounding. Some charts have exacting parts and some are mere suggestions of a form. One of the sheets he sent me, a four-page arrangement of Tom Jobim’s “The Waters of March” set in either Sibelius or Finale, had a very explicit set of changes that had a few mistakes that had been corrected by hand. Because I prefer to not turn pages whenever possible (I use both my hands to play bass) and because I’m pretty good with Finale, I reduced it down to one page. One chord, a G-sharp minor with a parenthetical minor fifth [G#mi(-5)] would appear sometimes with a B in the bass and sometimes without. That the fifth was written inside parentheses indicates that it is suggested, but optional and is fairly commonplace. I use parentheses to indicate other parts of a chord that can be applied at the performer’s discretion. One is a parenthetical delta sign (Δ) before the numeral 7 that indicates that the seventh chord can either be major or dominant. While the idea rubs some “purists” the wrong way, a little discussion about my intent clears things up; but, trying to indicate whether a chord can be played with either a

major or a minor triad as its lower structure continually muddies the conversation. DellaRatta's chord, however, fixed that for me. By putting the minor third (B) in the bass, the result is a B6 chord, without its fifth, that can be either major or minor. If the fifth must be included, use a G-sharp minor seven with a parenthetical fifth [G#mi7(-5)] and et voila!

Even though we didn't play it at the event, the chart reaffirmed my belief that letter-based chord symbols are every bit as capable as Roman numeral symbols of describing voice leading while allowing a greater degree of freedom for the performer in terms of how or if to apply it, especially when one includes so-called "slash chords" [x/y]. I want to pose a question to anyone reading my blog: What is the history of letter-based chord symbols? I've seen something similar in French-language hymnals, where the chords are listed in solfege (do, re, mi, etc.). But where does the system that gives us C7 and Bdim come from? Any ideas?

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ONE THOUGHT ON “HOW STRANGE THE CHANGES” ▼

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