

# Improvising the Changes in a Miles Davis Rhythm Section

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This file includes the abstract, keyword list, bibliography, and related material for the video essay, “Improvising the Changes in a Miles Davis Rhythm Section” by Ben Geyer. This video-essay may be found at <https://vimeo.com/societymusictheory/smtv114geyer>

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**Abstract for  
Improvising the Changes in a Miles Davis Rhythm Section**

**by Ben Geyer, *SMT-V11.4***

Individual musicians can make different chord choices in each pass through a tune's form. This variability sometimes results in harmonic disagreement *between* musicians even as they play together. Harmony is a primary lens for understanding improvisation, but what kind of lens fluctuates in its prescription? To navigate this tension, this video turns to the jazz greats, exploring how pianist Red Garland and bassist Paul Chambers strike a balance between harmonic consistency and variation on Miles Davis's recording of "Bye Bye Blackbird." I treat their combined 14 choruses as a corpus—a selection of related examples analyzed for patterns—and find that they approach distinct "zones" within the tune in one of three ways: as "fixed," "what-variable," or "when-variable." This framework motivates a modified lead sheet that captures not only the tune's moments of regularity, but also its spaces for harmonic improvisation.

**Short Keyword List**

jazz, improvisation, interaction, chord, harmony, Miles Davis

**Extensive Keyword List**

jazz, improvisation, interaction, chord, harmony, Miles Davis, rhythm, rhythm section, tune, jazz standard, music theory, Black American Music, #BAM, Red Garland, Paul Chambers, changes

**About the Author**

[Ben Geyer](#) teaches music theory at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts. He holds a BM in Studio Music and Jazz from the University of Miami Frost School of Music and an MM in Jazz Studies from Purchase College, where he studied with Hal Galper. He earned his Ph.D. in Music Theory at the University of Kentucky, taught at Oberlin College Conservatory, and served as Director of Jazz Studies at the University of West Georgia. Ben has worked extensively as a jazz

pianist and has released two [albums](#). He has written on jazz performance practice and music theory pedagogy, and his article, “Maria Schneider’s Forms,” won the David Kraehenbuehl Prize from the *Journal of Music Theory*. Ben is deeply invested in inclusive, effective, and relevant pedagogy, as reflected in his open access textbook, *Music Theory in Mind and Culture*.

## Discography and Filmography

Davis, Miles. "Bye Bye Blackbird," on '*Round About Midnight*. 2001[1957], Columbia CK 85201. Compact disc.

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Seven Choruses of Bass and Piano from "Bye, Bye Blackbird"

Section → Measure →	A1								A2								B								A3																					
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8														
Chorus 1 (Head In)	Garland		Gm		Gm-F <sup>m</sup>	F	B <sup>b</sup> 7	Am	Abm	Gm	D7	Gm		Gm	E <sup>b</sup> o	F <sup>#</sup> <sup>m</sup>	Gm	Gm	Gm	C7	F		F <sup>m</sup>	F-E <sup>m</sup>	A <sup>m</sup>		Am	D7	Gm	Gm6	Bbm6	C7	F	Gm	F	Gm	F	A <sup>m</sup>	D7	Gm-F <sup>#</sup> <sup>m</sup>	C7	Gm	C7		---	
	Chambers	F				F	B <sup>b</sup>	Am	D7	Gm	C	D7	Gm	C	D7	Gm	C7	Gm	C7	F					Am	D7	Gm	D7	Gm	C7	F		C7	F	B <sup>b</sup>	Am	D7	Gm		C7	F	(Break)				
Chorus 2 (Davis Solo 1)	Garland	F	Gm	C7	F	Gm	C7	F	G <sup>#</sup> <sup>m</sup>	Gm	D7	Gm					C7	F		Gm	C7	A <sup>m</sup>		D7	Gm	F <sup>#</sup> <sup>m</sup>	Gm	D <sup>b</sup> 7	C7	G <sup>b</sup> 7	F	B <sup>b</sup> 7	F	A <sup>m</sup>	D7	Gm		C7	F	G <sup>#</sup> <sup>m</sup>	Gm	C7				
	Chambers	F	Gm	C7				F	Am	D7	Gm	C7	Gm	C	D7	Gm	C7	F						A7	Dm	D7	Gm		D <sup>b</sup> 7	B <sup>b</sup>	C7	F	C7	F	C	D7	Gm		C7	F		C7				
Chorus 3 (Davis Solo 2)	Garland	F	B <sup>b</sup> 7	C7	F	Gm	C7	F	Am	Abm	Gm	Am	D7	Gm	Am	D7	G <sup>m</sup>	F <sup>#</sup> <sup>m</sup>	D7	Gm	C7	F		Gm	C7	A <sup>m</sup>		D7	Gm	F <sup>#</sup> <sup>m</sup>	Gm6	Abm	D <sup>b</sup> 7	C7	F		F-4 <sup>m</sup>	F	D7	Gm-F <sup>#</sup> <sup>m</sup>	Gm	C7	F	G7	C7	
	Chambers	F	C7		F	C7		F	Am	D7	Gm	D7	Gm	C7	Gm	C	D7	Gm	C7	F				Gm	C7	Am	D7		Gm	Am	D7	Db7	C7	F	C7	F	Am	D7	Gm		C7	F	D7	Gm	C7	
Chorus 4 (Coltrane Solo 1)	Garland	F	Gm	G <sup>#</sup> <sup>m</sup>	F	Gm	C7	F	Abm	D <sup>b</sup> 7	Gm	Am	D7	Gm			G <sup>m</sup> -D7	A7-D7	Gm	C7		F		Gm-C7	A <sup>m</sup>		D7	Gm		D <sup>b</sup> 7	C7		F	Gm	G <sup>#</sup> <sup>m</sup>	F	A <sup>m</sup>	D7	Gm		F	Gm	C7			
	Chambers	F	B <sup>b</sup>	C7	F	C7		F	D7	Gm	C	D7	Gm	C	D7	Gm	C7							Am	D7		Gm	C	D7	Abm	D <sup>b</sup> 7	Gm	C7	F	C7	F	C	D7	Gm		C7	F		C7		
Chorus 5 (Coltrane Solo 2)	Garland	F	Gm	G <sup>#</sup> <sup>m</sup>	F	Gm	C7	F	Am	Abm	Gm	Am	Gm			D7	Gm		C7	F	Gm-G <sup>#</sup> <sup>m</sup>	F	Gm-C7	A <sup>m</sup>		Bbm	D7	Gm	F <sup>#</sup> <sup>m</sup>	Gm6	Bbm	F <sup>b</sup> 7	Gm	C7	F		F <sup>m</sup>	F	A <sup>m</sup>	D7	Gm		C7	F	G7	C7
	Chambers	F	C7		F	C7		F	C	D7	Gm	C7	Gm	C	D7	Gm	C7	F					Am	D7	Bbm	D7	Gm		Am	D7	Gm	C7	F		A <sup>m</sup>		D7	Gm		C7	F		C7			
Chorus 6 (Garland Solo 1)	Garland	F	Gm	C7	F	Gm	C7	F	D7	Gm			D7	Gm			C7	F	G <sup>#</sup> <sup>m</sup>		C7	F		D7	Gm		Abm	D <sup>b</sup> 7	Gm	C7	F	Gm	C7	F	D7	Gm		C7	F	D7	G7	Gm-C7				
	Chambers	F	C7		F	C7		F	D7	Gm	C	D7	Gm				C7	F		C7		Am	D7	A7	D7	Gm		D7	Gm	D7	Gm	C7	F	Gm	C7	F	C	D7	Gm		C7	F		C7		
Chorus 7 (Garland Solo 2 & Head Out)	Garland	F	Gm	C7	F	Gm	C7	F	Abm	Gm	D7	Gm			Fm	C7	Gm		C7	F	Abm	Gm	C7	Am		D7	Gm		Bbm	Gm	C7	(Harmonizes melody in thirds)								Gm-F <sup>#</sup> <sup>m</sup>	Gm	C7				
	Chambers	F	C7		F	C7		F	F6/C	Gm	C	D7	Gm	C7	Gm	C	D7	Gm	C7	F				Am	D7	Am	D7	Gm	Am	D7	Dm	Gm	C7	F		B <sup>b</sup>	Am	D7	Gm		C7					

Key	Comments on Notation
Fixed Zone	• The smallest boxes represent the half note in 4/4; hyphens indicate quarter-note harmonic rhythm.
When-Variable	• Chords are simplified to basic quality: major, minor seventh, minor sixth, dominant seventh, half diminished, diminished seventh.
What-Variable Zone	Major Seventh: Root name alone (no quality listed)
Exception to Fixed Zone	Minor Seventh: m
Ending (diverges from form)	Minor Sixth: m6
	Dominant Seventh: 7
	Half Diminished: <sup>b</sup>
	Diminished Seventh: <sup>b</sup>