

The Blues Sentence: A Topology of John Coltrane's Blues Heads

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2026 is a special year for jazz fans as we celebrate the centennials of Miles Davis and John Coltrane. While the output of these artists does not require a special occasion to be cherished and studied, the centennial may still serve as an impetus to investigate some aspects of their work that have heretofore been underexplored. As a towering figure, John Coltrane has made numerous contributions to twentieth-century music. He developed a completely new sound aesthetic on the tenor saxophone that favored the higher register of the instrument.¹ This innovation represented a complete reimagining of the tenor saxophone, which, beforehand, revolved around low-register, subtone-laden aesthetics as heard in the playing of artists such as Ben Webster, Coleman Hawkins, Don Byas, and other predecessors.² Coltrane also used far less vibrato than earlier tenor saxophonists, which contributed to the laser-like intensity of his overall sound, and, unlike other saxophonists, he began using the altissimo register.³ Coltrane also pioneered several important innovations in jazz harmony including Coltrane changes and modal jazz.⁴ He shaped the jazz avant-garde movement in the mid-1960s with his free jazz explorations.⁵ His highly unique playing technique, widely referred to as “sheets of sound,” features rapid passages outlining the underlying chords and can also include harmonic superimpositions.⁶ Depending on the tempo of the given song, these “sheets of sound” comprise sixteenth, thirty-second, or sixty-fourth note groupings that are often combined with rapid triplets.

Another highly significant but under-researched aspect of his music is his blues compositions. Coltrane recorded about 180 blues and blues-related songs,

¹ Lewis Porter, *John Coltrane: His Life and Music* (University of Michigan Press, 1998), 181.

² Porter, *John Coltrane*, 216.

³ Porter, *John Coltrane*, 127.

⁴ Porter, *John Coltrane*, 147, 296.

⁵ Porter, *John Coltrane*, 275.

⁶ The term “sheets of sound” was coined by jazz critic Ira Gitler in the liner notes to John Coltrane's *Soultrane* (Ira Gitler, liner notes to *Soultrane*, by John Coltrane (Prestige PRLP 7142, 1958)).

demonstrating that the blues were omnipresent and quintessential throughout his career. Most of his albums include at least one blues track, which highlights the importance of the song form to him. These include “Blue Train” and “Locomotion” from *Blue Train* (1958), “Cousin Mary” and “Mr. PC” from *Giant Steps* (1960), and “Pursuance” from *A Love Supreme* (1965). The blues can be found in Coltrane’s music from his first recording session on July 13, 1946, in Oahu, to one of his last—“The Last Blues” on May 17, 1965. His collaborations also make use of this musical form (see Coltrane and Sonny Rollins, “Tenor Madness” and “Take the Coltrane,” recorded with Duke Ellington). Coltrane also showcased the blues’ multifaceted nature by always imbuing each composition and solo with unique features, differentiating his approach from more formulaic ones.

As a harmonically straightforward and short song form, the blues is an ideal testing ground for new improvisational concepts, in part because its most complex features lie in the way performers make use of timbral variation, expression, and rhythmic nuance. Coltrane’s contributions show the versatility of the blues and demand consideration in the study of his output. This project aims to develop a deeper understanding of a single, clearly delineated aspect of Coltrane’s music—how a significant portion of Coltrane’s written blues heads reenvision a sentential structure. As one of the most prevalent means of phrase structural organization, evident in a plethora of tonal musics, the sentence introduces a musical idea, repeats it, and then fragments it as it approaches a cadence, creating a sense of statement, restatement, and conclusion. In essence, a sentence is a strategy through which a musical idea is presented and then liquidated. The sentence has been theorized almost exclusively within classical music contexts, some of which I explore below, and it is these contexts that shaped its development as an analytical paradigm. By using these theories to analyze Coltrane’s blues compositions, I wish not to establish a connection between the basic structures of one style of music (eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tonal art music) with that of Coltrane’s blues compositions but rather to demonstrate that a significant portion of Coltrane’s written blues heads feature distinct compositional designs. Roughly a fourth of his written blues melodies can be classified as sentential structures. I do not make the claim that these blues heads are merely sentential modules, but rather that these frameworks represent a single small aspect of the rich mosaic of elements that constitute the blues. Analyzing their sentence structures might help us further understand the inner workings of one of the most important forms of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: the blues.

However, the blues is not just a formal structure. In his monograph *Blues People*, Amiri Baraka argues that the blues is an emotional expression whose

historical and cultural import far exceeds its mere classification as a 12-bar harmonic template.⁷ As such, the blues served as a vehicle for emotional expression, perseverance, and transformation, as Black Americans fought for their own freedom in the wake of the Transatlantic Slave Trade.⁸ Moreover, Baraka situates the blues at the interstices between African and American identity, as a nexus representing a collective awareness that developed out of the Black Freedom Movement.⁹ Coltrane inherited and built upon the blues, a musical form rich in racial significance. While the scope of this project is limited to exploring formal aspects of the blues, these structures are inextricably linked to and developed from the blues' socio-historical contexts.¹⁰ Baraka's *Blues People* reminds us that Coltrane's compositional approaches and innovations are both structural and part of an unfolding historical and cultural trajectory.¹¹

EXPANDING THE SENTENCE PARADIGM

Though first theorized by Arnold Schönberg, the sentence is notably expounded on and codified by William Caplin, who further contextualized it alongside other significant phrase structures, such as the period.¹² Most commonly associated with the music of the first Viennese school, a sentence presents a musical idea (typically referred to as basic idea or b.i.) that is repeated and then fragmented before a cadence (figure 1). These processes occur in two larger subunits of the sentence that normatively span four measures each: the presentation, which hosts the repeated iterations of the b.i., and the continuation, which hosts the liquidation, often achieved through fragmentation of the b.i., and the cadential phase. Beethoven's Piano Sonata in F Minor, Op. 2 No. 1, i, mm. 1–8, depicts what has become the prototypical and normative example of the sentence in much of the *Formenlehre* literature, particularly in the work of scholars such as William Caplin (see figure 1).

⁷ Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (William Morrow, 1963), 25.

⁸ Baraka, *Blues People*, 66.

⁹ Baraka, *Blues People*, 17.

¹⁰ Baraka, *Blues People*, 65.

¹¹ Baraka, *Blues People*, 130–141.

¹² William E. Caplin, *Classical Form: A Theory of Formal Functions for the Instrumental Music of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven* (Oxford University Press, 1998).

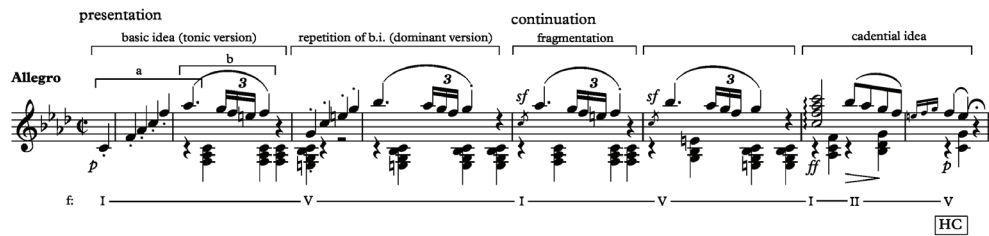


Figure 1. Beethoven's Piano Sonata in F Minor, Op. 2/1, i, mm. 1-8.

Normatively, the harmony in the presentation phase of a sentence is tonic-centered and relatively stable, while the continuation introduces more harmonic variation and instability. Accordingly, the first b.i. is stated in tonic, and the repetition most commonly stays very close, through either a tonic restatement ($I \rightarrow I$) or a move to V ($I \rightarrow V$). The harmonic rhythm is usually sped up during the continuation of a normative sentence as it drives toward the structural dominant chord of the cadential phase of the sentence. This process also often involves sequential harmonic progressions. Toward the end of a normative sentence, a cadence usually concludes the phrase, which can either be a perfect authentic cadence (PAC) within a shorter form or a half cadence (HC) if the sentence is embedded within the context of a larger formal unit, such as an exposition.

Throughout the last three decades, calls for an expansion of the sentence paradigm have been voiced by scholars such as Matthew BaileyShea, Mark Richards, and Steven Vande Moortele.¹³ These authors' call for action is founded on two main premises: 1) an apparent over-specification of the sentence according to its original Schönbergian conception, and 2) the desire to formulate an analytical framework for common formal devices outside the canon of the First Viennese School. Applying sentence analysis to jazz offers an easy step forward in this direction. Standards such as "My Funny Valentine" or "I Can't Get Started" serve as illustrative exemplars that fulfill sentential rhetoric (b.i. + b.i.+ continuation/cadence) and proportional (2 + 2 + 4 measures) frameworks of traditional sentences.¹⁴ Due to its more common 12-bar form, the blues

¹³ Matthew BaileyShea, "Wagner's Loosely Knit Sentences and the Drama of Musical Form," *Intégral* 16–17 (2002–3): 1–34; Mark Richards, "Viennese Classicism and the Sentential Idea: Broadening the Sentence," *Theory and Practice* 36 (2011): 179–224; Steven Vande Moortele, "Sentences, Sentence Chains, and Sentence Replication: Intra- and Interthematic Formal Functions in Liszt's Weimar Symphonic Poems," *Intégral* 25 (2011): 121–158.

¹⁴ Michael R. Callahan, "Sentential Lyric-Types in the Great American Songbook," *Music Theory Online* 21 no. 3 (September 2015): 21. Also see: Sam Falotico, "Sentence Structures and the Jazz Canon" (master's thesis, Hofstra University, 2020).

obviously departs from the proportional design of the normative eight-bar sentence, but this deviation still fulfills the rhetorical conditions for a three-part sentential design in the blues, which harken to its original AAB lyrical design. BaileyShea already uses Alfred Lorenz's bar form model (represented as AAB) to label what he calls the "sentential idea."¹⁵ Bar form was devised for the analysis and taxonomy of sung music, while the sentence was advanced as a frame of reference for instrumental music. Accordingly, it is more suitable to invoke the sentential perspective for Coltrane's music, which is instrumental. Another benefit of the sentential frame is that it has a higher level of functional specificity than bar form, which BaileyShea calls "notoriously vague."¹⁶ Despite its specificity, the sentence form is also flexible. James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy, for example, argue that tonic prolongation—often regarded as a prohibitively calcified feature—is actually not required in the presentation.

Some scholars have expressed concerns about the application of a Caplinian system to the blues. David Forrest and Matthew Santa argue that "the blues model doesn't specifically call for the sense of acceleration one typically finds at the beginning of the continuation."¹⁷ Without fragmentation and the same length, the standard blues form might have a tenuous relationship to Schönberg's initial theorization. However, the general tendency of the sentence is to move from characteristic to generic material, and the pace at which liquidation is achieved is not essential. Although Forrest and Santa problematize the absence of the typical accelerative fragmentation at the start of a continuation, Caplin does not treat this feature as essential. And even if we grant that it is important to a sentential form, acceleration is still induced through the cadential segment and the doubling of the harmonic rhythm (ii^7-V^7 or V^7-IV^7) in mm. 9–10 of the blues form. Coltrane's improvised blues sentences *do* sometimes include fragmentations and abrupt liquidations. Further, blues sentences present a gradual loosening of the form, first with the transposition of b.i. in measures 5–6 and then with the bridge-like release of motivic constraints near the end.

Although the 12-bar blues descriptor may be employed as its own definite formal scheme, I articulate a new formal type of the "blues sentence." The blues

¹⁵ Richards, "Viennese Classicism and the Sentential Idea," 182. Richards describes his requirements for identifying a chain of musical events as a sentence: "...all that is required to begin a sentence is a single basic idea to provide the frame of reference for the ensuing acceleration in the continuation. Needless to say, two basic ideas are far and away the norm for sentences."

¹⁶ BaileyShea, "Wagner's Loosely Knit Sentences," 2.

¹⁷ David Forrest and Matthew Santa, "A Taxonomy of Sentence Structures," *College Music Symposium* 54 (2014), note 23; Vande Moortele, "Sentences, Sentence Chains, and Sentence Replication," 134.

sentence is not a “hybrid” type or deviation from a norm but rather a highly conventionalized design, one that differs from the classical sentence yet has certain sentential characteristics. Using a *Formenlehre*-inspired approach, I develop a typology of Coltrane’s blues sentences and other organizational designs. I present bar form readings in hopes of highlighting their respective advantages. The application of a toolset such as *Formenlehre* allows for more nuanced readings of structural subtleties that cannot be addressed through bar form labeling of the blues.¹⁸ The interweaving of harmonic function, melodic organization, and rhetorical elements in Caplinian phrase structures enables a more detailed insight into the organization of blues heads and solo choruses. Identifying a subsection of the blues form as, e.g., a presentation of a sentence, conveys far more relevant information for my purposes than the stanza structure of the blues by the sheer virtue of its terminological labeling. Designating an “a” section does not inform the reader about the melodic organization of the section, its subsections, its likely harmonic foundation, or its rhetorical evocations.

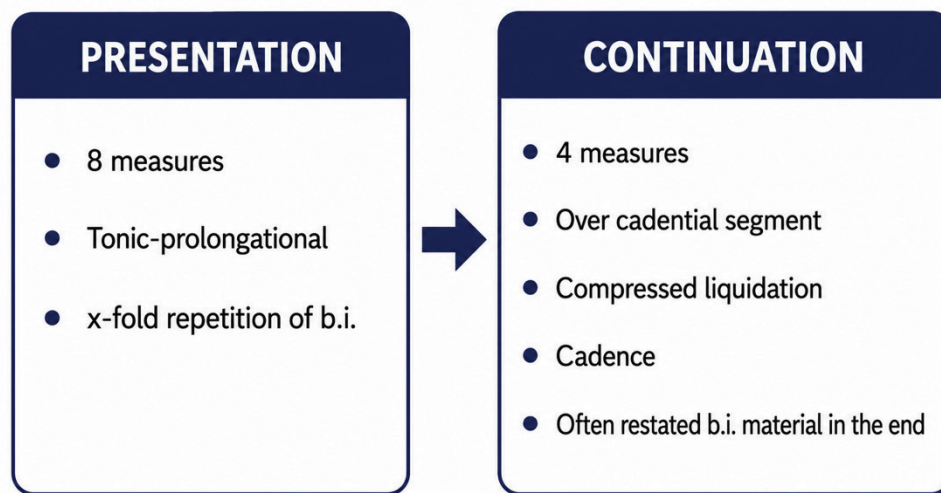


Figure 2. Formal Functions in a 12-measure Blues Sentence

I do not dismiss traditional bar form readings but rather supplement them with sentential analysis to highlight new perspectives of the Black musical form. The 12-bar blues label has conventionally been used to assess strictly melodic

¹⁸ Michael Taft, *The Blues Lyric Formula* (Taylor & Francis, 2013). Comprehensive analyses of blues formulas such as Michael Taft’s *The Blues Lyric Formula* are heavily dependent on the semantic import of sung blues lyrics and syntactical elements of language and thus inapplicable to purely instrumental blues.

repetition (aa) and difference (b) as it coincides with a harmonic scheme. Sentential analysis combines melodic, harmonic, rhetorical, and formal parameters to afford far more nuanced insights into the inner workings and variegated strategies of Coltrane. Traditional bar form labeling lacks the terminological and theoretical depth to do the musical works and their profundity justice. Before engaging with a taxonomy of Coltrane's blues heads, however, some attention should be paid to fairly recent discussions revolving around canon, music theory, methodology, and the use of European analytical apparatuses to analyze Afro-diasporic styles of music.

DISRUPTING THE CANON

In recent years, scholars such as Philip Ewell and Loren Kajikawa have pointed out the structural injustices that have long burdened college music curricula that put an overwhelming emphasis on a Eurocentrism that reflects systemic racism and pernicious socio-cultural hierarchies.¹⁹ Both scholars criticize the over-dependence on what has become a calcified canon of so-called "classical masterpieces," arguing for an expansion of the repertoire that students study. By focusing on a significant constituent of Coltrane's oeuvre, the blues, I hope to achieve exactly such a much-needed widening of the perspective that accounts for Afro-diasporic musics and other underrepresented styles. Ewell makes a strong claim for "diversifying repertoires to include the music of nonwhite composers."²⁰ At the same time, Kajikawa reminds us that "many departments have already made attempts to diversify their curricula, but they have allowed their core requirements to remain wedded to relatively narrow ideas of music proficiency."²¹ Kajikawa calls attention to the fact that diversifying curricula requires more than simply including new repertoire. The analytical systems themselves need to be overhauled to account for the special characteristics of Afro-diasporic musics. In this vein, this project fulfills exactly that role by modifying existing theoretical paradigms and shedding hierarchical approaches

¹⁹ Philip Ewell, "Music Theory and the White Racial Frame," Society for Music Theory Plenary Session, November 9, 2019, <https://vimeo.com/372726003>; Philip Ewell, "Music Theory and the White Racial Frame," *Music Theory Online* 26, no. 2 (September 2020), <https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.20.26.2/mto.20.26.2.ewell.html>; Loren Kajikawa, "The Possessive Investment in Classical Music: Confronting Legacies of White Supremacy in U.S. Schools and Departments of Music," in *Seeing Race Again: Countering Colorblindness across the Disciplines*, ed. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Luke Charles Harris, Daniel Martinez HoSang, and George Lipsitz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 155–77.

²⁰ Ewell, "Music Theory and the White Racial Frame."

²¹ Kajikawa, "The Possessive Investment in Classical Music," 168.

that have been applied to different styles and genres. Accordingly, I hope to model an approach that not only diversifies *what* we teach and study, but also *how* we do it.

As both scholars argue for the inclusion of new pieces and perspectives in music curricula, Ewell also focuses on reframing the application of theoretical apparatuses through the use of new repertoires and a historical awareness.²² Ewell expresses that he is in favor of retaining Schenkerian research and pedagogy when he states that: “I do not suggest that we stop teaching Schenkerian analysis, or that scholars should cease their work thereon—there are of course many significant scholarly inquiries in this area of research” and that scholars should be “engaging with the work of nonwhite composers.”²³ In tonal jazz, Schenkerian analysis offers insight into the structural elements at play and how they are composed and improvised out at various levels. Moreover, applying Schenkerian analysis to tonal types of jazz, such as Coltrane’s blues heads, fulfills exactly what Ewell identifies as a key tactic in reframing music theory through the inclusion of repertoires by composers from historically marginalized racial and ethnic communities.

One of the core tenets of Schenkerian theory is the presumption of structural hierarchies between musical elements. In most forms of music, cross-culturally, hierarchy also plays some role. Specific beats are stronger than others, particular notes are more central than others, and specific instruments take a leadership role in comparison to others. The question isn’t whether there is hierarchy in music. The question is: Does that hierarchy always operate in the same manner? Is it Schenker’s form of hierarchy or nothing? Clearly, the answer to that is: no. In Coltrane, there are resonances with the kinds of things we would find in so-called “classical composers,” but there are also notable differences. Anyone familiar with Schenker’s own analyses of the music he discussed will immediately recognize that this is *not* the kind of music Schenker would have found musically sound. I don’t think it is a question of not being able to “use the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house,” and clearly Ewell doesn’t think so either.²⁴

²² See also Stephen S. Hudson “Inclusive, Student-Centered Keyboard Pedagogy,” *Engaging Students: Essays in Music Pedagogy* 9, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.18061/esm.6975>; Mitchell Ohriner, “Leveraging a Large Internet Repository of Scores to Diversify Music-Theory Repertoire Lists,” *Engaging Students: Essays in Music Pedagogy* 9, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.18061/esm.6977>; Toby W. Rush and Stefanie Acevedo, “Deceptive Gestures: Lies Our ‘Diverse’ Curriculum Is Telling,” *Engaging Students: Essays in Music Pedagogy* 9, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.18061/esm.6981>.

²³ Ewell, “Music Theory and the White Racial Frame.”

²⁴ Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 112.

Instead, we need to be concerned with using those tools effectively with an awareness of their limitations and a concern for what values they might be covertly bringing to bear on our work.

I hope that this project fulfills some of Ewell's proposed recommendations in a practical way, without engaging in what he terms "solutionism." This project does not simply encourage an application of putatively questionable systems to another body of music, nor is it an attempt to forge a kind of exceptionalism for John Coltrane. I am not suggesting that Coltrane is acceptable as a legitimate object of musical analysis insofar as he composes in a manner that would be recognizable within the context of "classical masters." Instead, I am interested in employing specific aspects of analytical techniques—not the totalizing theoretical underpinnings wedded to those techniques—to get at an element of Coltrane's music that most listeners find a compelling part of his output: the blues. By critically reframing Schenkerian and Caplinian apparatuses, this project acknowledges their European genealogies while adapting them to engage with Afrodiasporic expressive traditions.

COLTRANE'S BLUES SENTENCE

In Coltrane's hands, the sentence becomes a generative process as he consistently transforms what are often regarded as highly formulaic formats. He achieved this level of diversification through a flexibly reimagined approach, essentially involving sentential structures. While the scope of this essay is strictly limited to Coltrane's composed output, sentential structures are also suffused in his improvised blues choruses. Irrespective of whether the impetus for his improvised choruses echoes the structures evident in his written blues heads, sentential forms function as a link between his improvised and written work. The sentential perspective further illuminates how local motivic cells generate entire choruses in Coltrane's writing across his career. It thus bridges the gap between micro and macro analytical levels, shedding light on the recursive elements and, therefore, aspects of Coltrane's structural compositional thought process. As I demonstrate in the sections below, the blues sentence has an extended presentation (the initial and typically four-bar subphrase) and compressed or omitted fragmentation in the continuation (the concluding and typically four-bar subphrase). After exploring Coltrane's more standard approaches to blues sentences, I introduce other variation: the riff-sentence hybrid, which derives its architecture from what is known as the riff blues, and the through-composed blues, which generally does not feature ideas that are arranged in a recurring and modular fashion. Moreover, I point out the fact that Coltrane's blues compositions tend to feature unique compositional ideas, akin

to the concept of a Verdian *tinta*, that distinguishes them all from each other while still showing similarities in their overarching phrase structural designs.²⁵ To contextualize Coltrane's compositional approach to the blues, this project also includes a comparison between the structural aspects of Coltrane's blues heads and those of some of his most prominent contemporaries.

While Coltrane's written blues heads largely adhere to the presentation and repetition of the basic idea, further repetitions of b.i. also occur. Caplin accounts for instances of extended presentations and establishes two subcategories. The two strategies are to (1) repeat the basic idea (for a total of three b.i.) or to (2) repeat the whole two-part presentation (for a total of four b.i.). Both make the form looser than normal, which in classical form "is especially appropriate to subordinate themes."²⁶ In Coltrane's blues heads and improvised choruses, it is not the presentation itself but the repetitions of b.i. that are responsible for the presentation's expansion. In contrast to Caplin's (1) imbalanced phrase length, the various b.i. restatements always amount to an eight-measure presentation in Coltrane.

Coltrane's "Mr. P.C." can be regarded as a textbook example of his blues sentences (figure 3). We see an expanded presentation, an omission of the fragmentation, a cadential idea, and a restated b.i. material at the end of the chorus. However, some components of the melodic designs are not fully captured by sentential terminology. For instance, in "Mr. P.C.," the $G\flat \rightarrow F$ idea is immediately repeated within the broader cadential idea. The adaptation of the Caplinian model allows for greater detail in a phrase-structural analysis of the blues. Adhering to the conventional model would force the analysis to equally modify the simple "AAB" reading (figure 4). The inherently more encompassing and comprehensive Caplinian framework accounts for deformations by emphasizing formal functions, whereas AAB merely describes similarities and contrasts (and then only with modifications). In customary bar-form labeling practices, analytical detail is comparatively shallow and restricted to four-measure sections that are assigned letter names. To allow more analytical depth, I utilize the term submodule within the various bar-form figures. Accordingly, the term submodule is used akin to what would be viewed as a b.i. or c.i. in phrase structural analyses. For the sake of consistency, I refrain from using terms that are strongly associated with the sentential paradigm within bar form

²⁵ The word *tinta* literally means "color" or "shade" in Italian and refers to the characteristic features that define a work. I apply this concept to the respective musical features that distinguish Coltrane's blues heads from one another.

²⁶ Caplin, *Classical Form*, 99.

diagrams. In traditional bar form labeling of the blues, however, one letter per four-measure section would suffice.

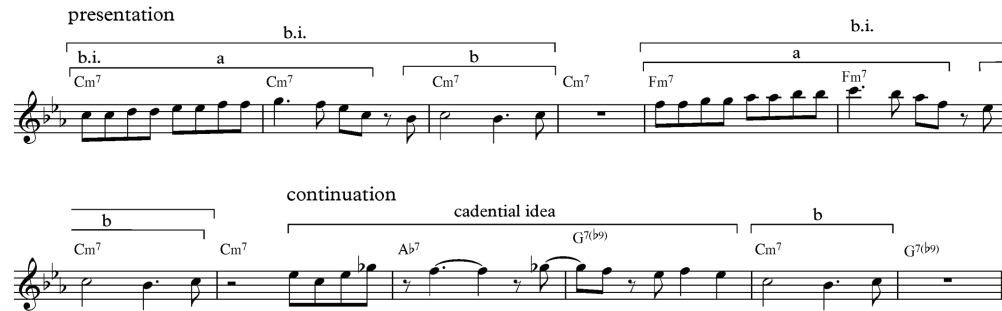


Figure 3. Coltrane's "Mr. P.C." read as a blues sentence. This and the following musical examples are my own transcriptions.

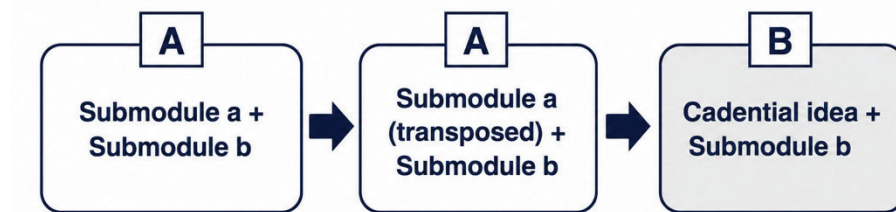


Figure 4. Adapted "AAB" labeling, adding specificity to the reading of "Mr. P.C."

The phrase structural design of "Cousin Mary" is very similar to "Mr. P.C." (figure 5). We observe an omission of the fragmentation in the continuation and a direct statement of the cadential idea followed by b.i. The main distinguishing element between the two blues heads is the fourfold repetition of b.i. in the presentation of "Cousin Mary." Yet, the presentations take up the same number of measures in both pieces. As Coltrane plays the individual b.i. phrases of "Cousin Mary," he applies a very idiosyncratic, short, but wide vibrato-like inflection at the very end of each held note. The effect of this somewhat unique articulation technique serves multiple purposes. Firstly, it concludes each b.i. statement and helps to clearly demarcate it as an individual semiotic unit with a defined beginning, middle, and end. This strategy buttresses the rhetorical integrity of each b.i. statement within the context of the larger sentential apparatus. Secondly, it adds a rhythmic dimension to the b.i. that would otherwise be absent if the held notes were simply faded out. The effect of this short final ornamental flourish is further amplified by the complete absence of

vibrato as Coltrane sustains the held note of each b.i. While it was quite common to start pitches straight and then introduce vibrato toward the end of the note in jazz saxophone performance practice after the mid-1950s, Coltrane's approach in "Cousin Mary" can hardly be considered a true vibrato due to its astonishing brevity. The fourfold repetition of the b.i. is not reflected by simply applying AAB labels to "Cousin Mary" (figure 6). Submodule a' erodes a degree of similarity between the two four-measure "A" segments. Moreover, the final "submodule a" undermines the obligatory contrasting character of "B."

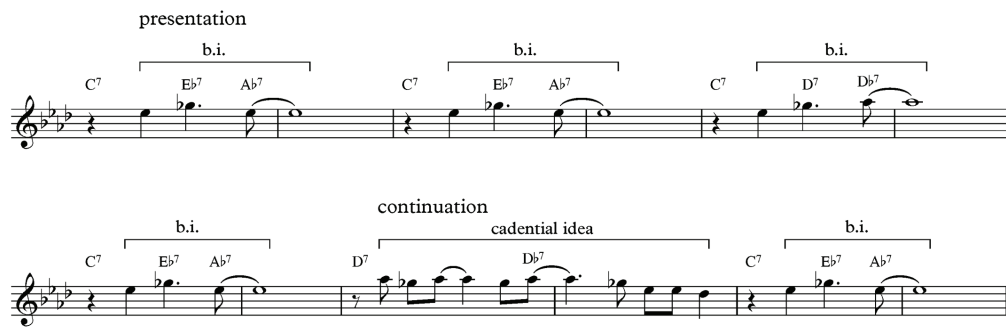


Figure 5. Coltrane's "Cousin Mary" read as a blues sentence.

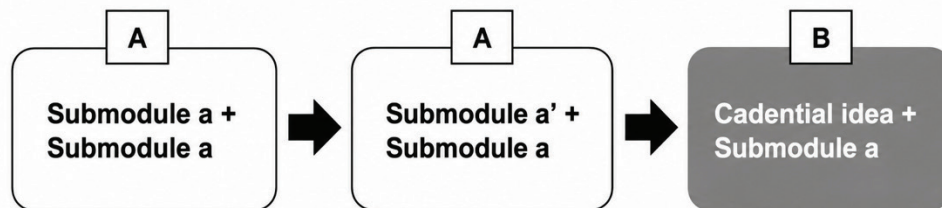


Figure 6. Adapted AAB labeling to add specificity to the reading of "Cousin Mary."

A fragmentation omission or compression within the continuation is the second most notable adaption of the sentence form in Coltrane's blues. This modification of normative sentential procedures does not fully depart from the phrase-structural rhetoric associated with sentences but is rather an adaptation to the idiosyncrasies of the blues. Caplin avers that while the fragmentation is closely associated with the inherent aspects of the continuation, its omission does not undermine the rhetorical integrity of the sentence. Coltrane's shortened continuations demonstrate the great flexibility of the sentential paradigm, while other aspects, such as the accelerated harmonic rhythm and heightened surface

activity, buttress the phrase's functional characteristics of the continuation. Truncations and elisions of the fragmentation section are permissible within the Caplinian sentential paradigm. Accordingly, a lacking fragmentation in a blues sentence does not conflict with Caplin's framework.²⁷ Because fragmentation does not regularly appear in Coltrane's written blues sentences, the process of liquidation may occur within a far more restricted time span.²⁸ While fragmentation is a characteristic element of the continuation, its absence does not have a detrimental effect on the phrase function of the continuation.²⁹

Apart from the omission of the fragmentation, the remaining three elements of the normative continuation remain intact in Coltrane's performance of the blues sentence. The (2) harmonic rhythm is generally doubled, the (3) rhythmic activity increases, and even (4) sequential harmonies occur (i.e., V⁷ to IV⁷) within measures nine through twelve of the blues. The differences between Caplinian sentences and the structure of Coltrane's *written* blues heads are 1) the bifold expansion of the presentation, 2) the omission of fragmentations, and 3) an insertion of b.i. material after the cadential idea. The central difference between the Caplinian type and Coltrane's *improvised* blues choruses is limited solely to the bifold expansion of the presentation.

In summary, the blues sentence in Coltrane's written blues heads consists of an eight-measure presentation and a four-measure continuation in which the fragmentation section tends to be omitted. B.i.-related material is generally reintroduced at the end of the cadential idea within the continuation. The Caplinian ontology of the sentence is hence fulfilled in the blues sentence. The repeated b.i.-related material occurs over tonic harmony, whereas the cadential idea is realized over the structural cessation. In bar form structures predating the blues, it is also not uncommon for the same material to close the A and B sections of the songs.

Another example of Coltrane using the blues sentence, albeit in slightly varied form, is his "Bessie's Blues," in which the final invocation of b.i.-related material is omitted after the cadential idea (figures 7 and 8). "Bessie's Blues" otherwise conforms with the design of "Cousin Mary" and "Mr. P.C.," aside from its unique fivefold repetition of b.i. Moreover, "Bessie's Blues" features a phrase-level sentential miniature. Coltrane's blues heads sometimes start with what appear to be simulacra of sentential phrases that are unbound from the normative harmonic undergirding. In most cases, these sentential miniatures occupy the initial four-measure tonic prolongation before they are abandoned. These

²⁷ Caplin, *Classical Form*, 48.

²⁸ Caplin, *Classical Form*, 11.

²⁹ Caplin, *Classical Form*, 41.

sentence-like gestures, optionally also referred to as nested phrase-level sentential simulacra, generally open with a discernible b.i. and its repetition. Mm. 1–4 of “Bessie’s Blues” and mm. 1–4 and 5–8 of Thelonious Monk’s “Blue Monk” provide examples of such nested sentential phrase-level simulacra. Even if a cadence may not appear at the conclusion, the sentential rhetorical design is analogous and unmistakable.

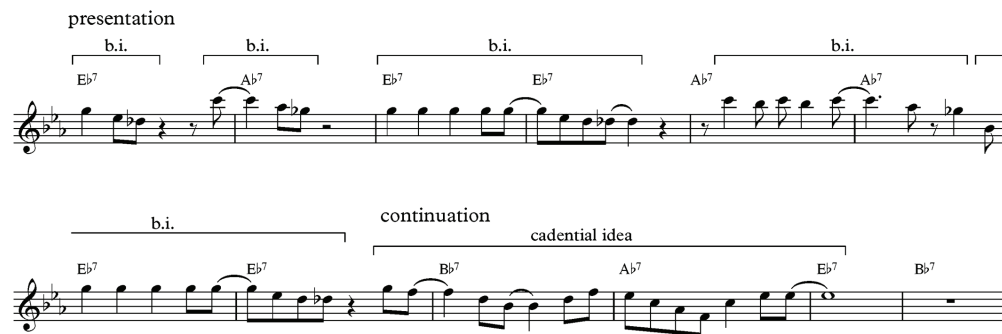


Figure 7. Coltrane’s “Bessie’s Blues” read as a blues sentence.

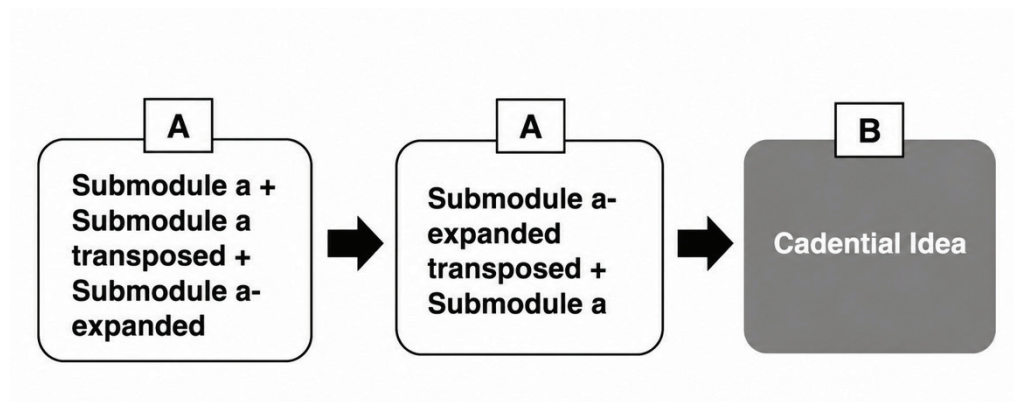


Figure 8. Adapted AAB labeling, adding specificity to the reading of “Bessie’s Blues.”

“Equinox” and “Cousin Mary” follow an identical phrase structural design (figures 9 and 5). In both pieces b.i. repeats four times in the presentation, the fragmentation is omitted, and the cadential idea is followed by b.i. material.

The figure shows two staves of musical notation in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The first staff, labeled "presentation", contains three measures of music. The first measure is labeled "C#m7" and "b.i.". The second measure is labeled "b.i.". The third measure is labeled "F#m7" and "b.i.". The second staff, labeled "continuation", contains six measures of music. The first measure is labeled "C#m7" and "b.i.". The second measure is labeled "A7(#11)". The third measure is labeled "F#m7/A". The fourth measure is labeled "G#7(b13)". The fifth measure is labeled "C#m7". The sixth measure is labeled "C#m7".

Figure 9. Coltrane’s “Equinox” read as a blues sentence.

“Vierd Blues” represents another illustrative example of Coltrane’s adherence to the phrase structural design of the blues sentence (figure 10). Moreover, “Vierd Blues” demonstrates that the phrase structural design is used despite the considerably denser foreground of the piece. The archetypal and universally applicable design of the blues sentence thus transcends the specific character of any given blues head in Coltrane’s blues writing. The main differences between Coltrane’s composed and improvised blues sentences are important to discuss from the outset. Generally, Coltrane’s improvised blues sentences do include fragmentations within their continuations. And we rarely hear the customary restatement of b.i. material after the cadential phrase in them.

These examples illustrate that the blues sentence played an important role in his approach to crafting melodies within the standardized blues form. Without substantial accommodations, bar form labeling cannot account for the occasional segmentations of its “A” modules into various submodules, the fact that “A” modules are not always simple repetitions of each other, and the occurrence of restatements of “A” material at the end of the supposedly contrasting “B” module.

Figure 10. Coltrane's "Vierd Blues" read as a blues sentence.

THE RIFF BLUES – AAA

One variation of Coltrane's written blues heads is the riff blues. Various scholars have described the riff blues as a subtype of the blues that recycles a comparatively short melodic idea—most frequently constructed of the pentatonic scale—three times throughout the blues form over normative harmonies without developing it. As outlined in scholarship on riff blues, this variant type was continuously employed and transformed across various genres, ranging from swing to bebop and ultimately to rock and roll. In *Jazz Composition: Theory and Practice*, scholar Ted Pease codifies the riff blues as an aaa-type blues and lists Duke Ellington's "C-Jam Blues" and Rollins's "Sonny Moon for Two" as examples.³⁰ Other scholars, such as Benjamin Lempert, describe the riff blues in identical terms, while John Covach also outlines the historical context of the riff blues, establishing a connection between Jimi Hendrix's riff blues practices with its predecessor, which he situates in the "traditional riff blues" of 1950s Chicago electric blues.³¹ Scott DeVaux describes how the riff blues influenced early bebop, as artists such as Clyde Hart and Budd Johnson blended repetitive riffs with increasingly complex jazz harmony in pieces such as "Disorder at the

³⁰ Ted Pease, *Jazz Composition: Theory and Practice* (Berklee Press, 2003), 119.

³¹ Benjamin R. Lempert, "Harryette Mullen and the Contemporary Jazz Voice," *Callaloo* 33, no. 4 (Fall 2010): 1063; John Covach, "Jimi Hendrix and the Pentatonic Experience," paper presented at the joint meeting of the Society for Music Theory and the American Musicological Society, Seattle, 2004; presented at the University of Bologna, 2005, 4.

Border" from 1944.³² Henry Martin discusses riffs in the context of their use in non-blues original compositions of jazz musicians, such as Miles Davis's "Four" and "Moten Swing" by Benny Moten.³³

Through the sentential lens, the riff blues, as another popular choice for the construction of melodies within the context of the blues, is a simple threefold repetition of the four-measure b.i. The resulting "riff blues" form would only consist of a presentation section from a melodic perspective. This oversimplification, however, warrants further explication, since melody, harmony, and rhetoric are inextricably linked. The riff blues's melodic construction partly overrides sentential ontology since the third repetition of the b.i. presents an identical melody instead of the continuation's less characteristic material. Yet, the blues's harmonic underpinning still conveys a sense of movement and then closure, where the melody repeated in each of the three four-measure lines is reharmonized each time. The listener experiences the same melody from three different perspectives, making the threefold repetition of b.i. appear less redundant. Melodies of riff blues often do not conform explicitly with the underlying chords and fail to outline the harmonies as the melodies in the blues sentence tend to do. From a sentential perspective, the riff blues may be interpreted in two ways: (1) As an expanded presentation section in which the triple b.i. is undergirded by various foreground harmonies, or (2) a blues sentence that is solely realized by the normative harmonic template. Both readings privilege certain musical parameters over others. The first reading suggests a dominating b.i. (melody), resulting in an enlarged presentation without a continuation. The solo of a riff blues would then fulfill the expected continuation function. While the second reading privileges harmony, both interpretations result in either partial or weak articulations of a sentential structure.

"Trane's Slo Blues" (figure 11) is a clear example of Coltrane's riff blues writing. In addition to its comparatively simplistic melodic design, Coltrane exclusively employs the constrained palette of the Bb minor pentatonic scale for this blues head. The economy of means on display in this head stands in stark contrast to Coltrane's virtuosic improvised melodies and complex harmonic superimpositions during his solo. This discrepancy between relative plainness and adroit finesse is one of the elements that imbues the track with a great sense of musical diversity.

³² Scott DeVeaux, "Bebop and the Recording Industry: The 1942 AFM Recording Ban Reconsidered," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 41, no. 1 (1988): 156. <https://doi.org/10.2307/831753>.

³³ Henry Martin, "Schenker and the Tonal Jazz Repertory," *Tijdschrift voor Muziektheorie* 16, no. 1 (2011): 7.

Riff blues show little to no adaptations of the melody as it is repeated over the various harmonies of the blues. The boxed annotations in “Trane’s Slo Blues” denote a minimal diversion, which is too insignificant to label it a riff-sentence hybrid. The riff-sentence hybrid—a formal type situated in the interstices between a riff blues and a blues sentence—will be discussed in greater detail in the subsequent section. Riff blues and riff-sentence hybrids only occur in Coltrane’s written blues heads and are virtually nonexistent in his blues improvisations. While riff blues reflect sentential organization in weak or partial ways, riff-sentence hybrids show more explicit correlations to the sentence design.

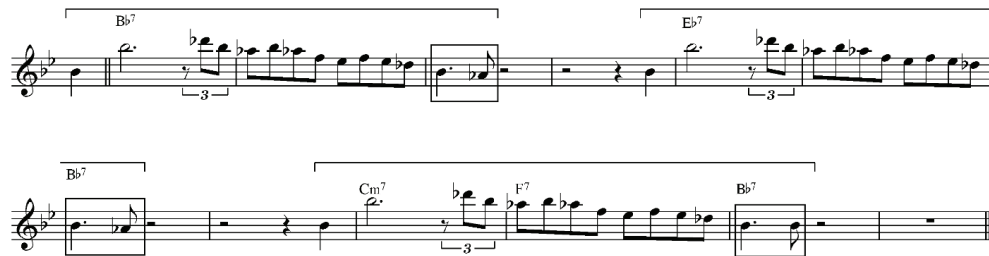


Figure 11. Coltrane’s “Trane’s Slo Blues” is an example of a riff blues.

“Bass Blues” also illustrates some of the same features inherent in Coltrane’s riff blues heads. The basic idea is not transposed to fit IV^7 and V^7 and there are no substantial modifications of the intervallic make-up of the final b.i. statement. The minimal adjustments are shown with boxed annotations and are similar to the oscillations between $\flat 7$ and $\hat{1}$ seen in “Trane’s Slo Blues.” In both pieces, the first phrase concludes with $\hat{1} \Rightarrow \flat 7$, maintaining the musical momentum. The pitch pair is inverted after the final phrases to convey a sense of internal closure.



Figure 12. Coltrane’s “Bass Blues” as an example of a riff blues.

THE RIFF-SENTENCE HYBRID – AAA'

Some examples among Coltrane's blues heads, such as "Blue Train," can be seen as a hybrid between the riff blues and the blues sentence since they show clear signs of melodic adaptation (figures 13 and 14). While riff blues melodies bypass their harmonic undergirding, riff-sentence hybrids entail noticeable modifications of the triple b.i. which account for the shifting harmonic context. Like the blues sentence, the riff sentence hybrid transposes its basic idea over IV⁷, which further distinguishes it from blues heads of the riff blues category.

While the sentential rhetoric from distinct to generic is still rather weak in riff sentence hybrids, they do not appear as merely expanded presentations lacking continuations as riff blues. The unifying characteristic that is shared by riff blues and riff sentence hybrids is their focus on a single melodic idea. While Coltrane tends to transpose the b.i. to fit IV⁷, his melodies are more modified over V⁷. The b.i. transformation over V⁷, labeled as "crux," is a decisive moment in every riff-sentence hybrid, situating the given blues in between the categories of a riff blues and a blues sentence. In general, Coltrane solely retains the rhythmic component of the b.i. for the crux but transforms the intervallic direction. This makes the crux the central identifying moment that places a blues in the riff-sentence hybrid category. In contrast, in riff blues, the b.i. is simply repeated a third time without any modification. Without the crux, the riff-sentence hybrid would simply appear as an extended presentation phase. Accordingly, the crux introduces the contrasting material needed, which prevents the structure from collapsing into a simple perpetual repetition and, more importantly, guarantees its rhetorical integrity and trajectory. As the blues always carries the rhetorical expectation of a repeated A (statement and restatement) followed by a B punchline, the crux fulfills the need for contrast and structural closure. In the riff-sentence hybrid, the crux becomes the essential proxy for the continuation. Since the crux is evident in several of Coltrane's blues heads of this variant type, it is evident that it is not merely an incidental flourish but an important structural entity in his compositional approach. The crux also allows us to identify the hybridity of the riff-sentence variant and distinguish it from the riff blues. While "Blue Train" may be regarded as simply being constructed of two-measure modules, the crux illuminates its hybrid nature as Coltrane does not simply repeat the same module but mixes riff-repetition with rhetorical closure. The crux is far more than a melodic variation as it turns what would be a simple repetition into a moment of resolution.

In "Blue Train," Coltrane uses a short motive that is centered around an upper structure triad (Bb minor), which resolves to the tonic pitch (figure 13). The implied minor sound is mirrored by the idiosyncratic choice of dominant

seventh-chord voicings, which are played by pianist Kenny Drew on this recording. Drew's voicings contain the sharp ninth of every chord, which gives prominence to each chord's minor third while the respective major thirds are played simultaneously. The obscuring of the much brighter Mixolydian sound transfers the sonic environment into a more somber region on the spectrum between major and minor. The sense of darkness which is thus invoked by the dominant-seventh/sharp-ninth voicings is amplified by the minor-flavored melodic motive and carried beyond the statement of the head into Coltrane's solo. The band does not shift to the normative Mixolydian sound until the fifth measure of Coltrane's first solo chorus, when Drew begins to omit the sharp ninth of the IV⁷ chord (A^{b7}).

From a rhythmic perspective "Blue Train" can be regarded as a riff blues, yet there is a crucial melodic crux built into the ninth measure which provides just enough variance to push this piece a little closer into the realm of a blues sentence. In the context of nearly monotonous recurrences of the same theme, such a moment clearly stands out and needs to be given special consideration.

In the case of "Blue Train," the need for a more specific category of riff-sentence hybrid becomes evident. What could simply be referred to as "crux" occupies an odd space between "A-ness" and "B-ness." While clearly A-related, the crux is too distinct to be a full-fledged "A" segment. But it does not contrast enough to be a fully-fledged B segment. We see a similar crux in "Chronic Blues" (figure 15).

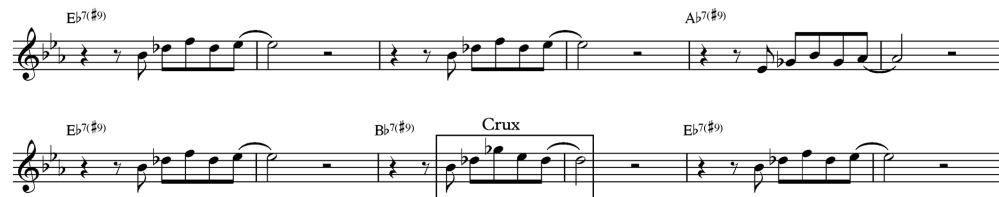


Figure 13. Coltrane's "Blue Train" as a riff-sentence hybrid.

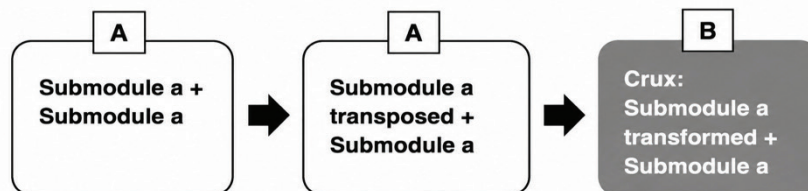


Figure 14. Complementated bar form labeling for "Blue Train"



Figure 15. Coltrane's "Chronic Blues" as a riff-sentence hybrid.

THROUGH-COMPOSED BLUES

Through-composed blues pieces constitute the smallest category of Coltrane's blues heads. Presumably, some of these more loosely knit compositions harken back to the bebop era. If ideas are repeated in bebop, these ideas are generally only repeated once and then in altered form in most examples.³⁴ Since Coltrane performed with some of the founding members of bebop during his early career, it is plausible that some of his blues compositions would reflect this influence. Coltrane's through-composed blues heads seem to split into the two general subgroups of 1) line-driven melodies, which seem to be influenced by the bebop style, and 2) modular melodies, which link together readily identifiable two-measure ideas.³⁵ Due to the absence of clearly demarcated and repeated modular musical ideas, the Schenkerian analytical apparatus is helpful in identifying structural elements in the context of line-driven melodies. Both analytical systems are, however, not mutually exclusive and can be used in tandem (see figure 17).

LINE-DRIVEN MELODIES

It's not necessarily the phrase structural design that lends cogency to "Just for the Love" but the relentless return to the *Kopftone* C, which sounds twenty times in the same register within the twelve-bar form and once in the lower octave (figure 16). As the *Kopftone* (literally "head tone"), the pitch C becomes the guiding

³⁴ There are of course exceptions such as the Dizzy Gillespie compositions "Groovin' High," and "Bebop."

³⁵ The modular subtype may be interpreted as blues sentences with four-measure presentations. Yet there are several issues related to this reading, such as return of b.i. material in mm. 7-8 and the dominating tonic prolongation ranging across mm. 1-8.

thread and a structural pillar of the whole piece. Commonly head tones are either the third or the fifth of a given key and are the first pitch from which structural descents drop as a piece unfolds, according to Schenkerian theory. As the head tone, it is the structurally most significant pitch of the piece. C is initially stated as a local $\hat{3}$ in the first measure over an $A\flat^{maj7}$ chord. The harmonic design of “Just for the Love” is unique as it does not begin with I^7 but $bIII^{maj7}$. This very uncommon harmonic procedure is a testament to Coltrane’s affinity for harmonic exploration, made famous by his milestone achievement *Giant Steps*. (The pieces on *Giant Steps* were recorded in 1959, which separates that album from the earlier “Just for the Love” session by only three years.) The remainder of “Just for the Love” largely conforms to normative jazz blues in respect to harmony. There are two additional points of distinction, though: the proliferation of major seventh chords (as opposed to dominant sevenths) as well as the harmonic half-step slip in the second measure. The composition includes four different major seventh chords: $A\flat^{maj7}$ (m. 1), F^{maj7} (mm. 2-3), $G\flat^{maj7}$ (m. 2.3), and $B\flat^{maj7}$ (m. 5). While it is not entirely unusual to render the I chord as a major seventh in the bebop blues tradition, it is unusual to see three further chords of this quality in the same blues.

Coltrane uses two motives (A and B) throughout the piece. Motive A, consisting of the three eighth notes F, $E\flat$, and C, occurs twice in unaltered fashion as an opening idea and in the final measure. Motive B, an ascending triad resolving downward to C, likewise occurs twice but with slight modification. The third pitch of both statements is adapted to fit the local harmony (first statement of B (G, $B\flat$, D, C), second statement of B (G, $B\flat$, $E\flat$, C)). From a Schenkerian perspective, the *Kopf*ton clearly dominates the piece. Through the many reiterations of the central structural pitch, this blues head is a very overt example of the composing out of a *Kopf*ton. The piece ends in a very unusual location of the form (m. 4), which is generally a prime *locus* for harmonic motion in the blues form and not associated with arrival. A clearly discernible descent is not readily apparent, and the melody suggests a direct jump from $\hat{5}$ to $\hat{1}$.

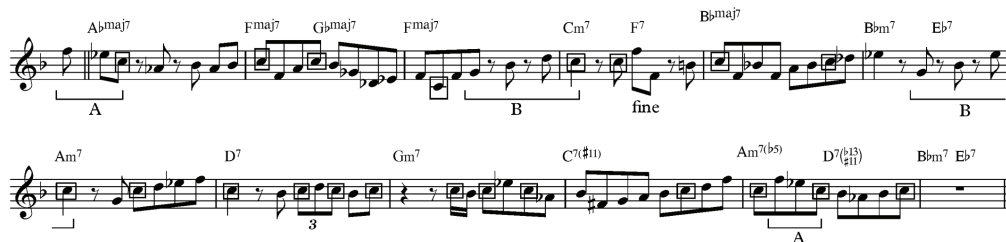


Figure 16. Coltrane’s “Just for the Love” as a line-driven through-composed blues.

The lower staff of figure 17, showing only the rhythms of “Some Other Blues,” illustrates that the head follows a blues sentence structure. Since the outline is, however, solely realized rhythmically, the blues sentence structure is only hinted at in the vaguest sense. The somewhat odd title of “Some Other Blues” was chosen by Coltrane because he thought the piece sounded similar to Charlie Parker’s “Now’s the Time.” Both blues heads open with the *Kopftón* $\hat{5}$ as a pick-up, after which $\hat{1}$ serves as a cover tone. In “Some Other Blues” the cover tone is embellished with its double neighbor $\hat{2}$ and $\flat\hat{7}$, whereas in “Now’s the Time” the cover tone $\hat{1}$ is only decorated by $\hat{2}$. Parker retains a cover tone throughout the piece, while Coltrane abandons it after the second measure. The initial prolongation of the *Kopftón* C (mm. 1-3) leads into motive A, which again consists of Coltrane’s beloved $\hat{3}$ - $\hat{1}$ - $\flat\hat{7}$ trichord. The subsequent presentation of A occurs with a foreground diminution (PT $\hat{7}$), and introduces the first order upper neighbor $\hat{6}$, D in m. 5. The final statement of A subsides to the *Kopftón* in m. 6. Over the structural V^7 chord C^7 , Coltrane arpeggiates up from the *Kopftón* to G via E, while he descends from F through D to the structural $\hat{4}$ over IV^7 . The structurally inferior apex pitches G (over C^7) and F (over $B\flat^7$) may be interpreted as a slight reminder of the piece’s opening cover tone area. The absence of $\hat{3}$ in the *Urlinie* is likely related to the fact that A would be a non-diatonic pitch over $B\flat^7$. For the harmonic underpinning of “Some Other Blues,” Coltrane reenvisioned a basic country blues including a V^7 - IV^7 - I^7 blues cadence, which he enriched with a circle of fifths progression $F^7 \rightarrow B\flat^7 \rightarrow E\flat^7 \rightarrow A\flat^7 \rightarrow D\flat^7$ that resolves by half step down to the structural V^7 chord C^7 .

The musical score for "Some Other Blues" is presented in three systems. The first system shows a melody line with a 5-4-3-2-1 descent, a piano accompaniment with a "b.i." (blue inflection) pattern, and a continuation section with a "cadential idea". The second system shows a melody line with a 5-4-3-2-1 descent, a piano accompaniment with a "b.i." pattern, and a continuation section with a "cadential idea". The third system shows a melody line with a 5-4-3-2-1 descent, a piano accompaniment with a "b.i." pattern, and a continuation section with a "cadential idea".

Figure 17. Coltrane's "Some Other Blues" as a line-driven through-composed blues.

Since "Up Against the Wall" does not fit the modular subtype of through-composed blues heads, it cannot be segmented into bar form labels (figure 18). The close middleground reduction shows that a riff blues hybrid (AA'A') may serve as a template, which is richly ornamented with foreground diminutions. "Up Against the Wall" features the two motives A and B. A is best described as a descending $A\flat$ seventh chord arpeggio that starts with the root and fills the space of an octave. The motive A is initially stated as an arpeggiation of $A\flat^7$ and two arpeggiations of $A\flat m^7$. Motive A becomes evident in its reduced form since it is obscured by various foreground diminutions, such as passing tones and chromatic neighbors. The first statement of A introduces the *Kopftone* $E\flat$ in m. 1. The head tone is stated on the third beat as a repeated eighth note, which lends emphasis to the pitch. The second statement of A (m. 9) appears similar, but the double statement of the *Kopftone* is omitted along with a metric demotion to a weak beat. "Up Against the Wall" includes a full $\hat{5}$ -descent, however $\hat{b}3$ takes the place of $\hat{3}$. A clearly articulated 8-prg. delineates $\hat{4}$ of the *Urlinie*. The octave transfer of $\hat{4}$ leads into $\hat{b}3$. $\hat{b}3$ can either be interpreted as a LN to the

root of IV^7 , Db or, more likely as a blues-inflected third that anticipates $I^7(Ab^7)$. In contrast to A, which can be considered a *bona fide* middleground motive, B occurs on two *Schichten*. Besides its multi-level occurrences, B is one of Coltrane's favorite melodic devices. In its archetypal form, $\hat{3}-\hat{1}-\hat{b}7$, it represents a fragmented descending dominant seventh chord arpeggio which misses its fifth. Coltrane often fills the intervals of B with the passing tones in the foreground, resulting in the bebop scale fragment $\hat{3}-\hat{2}-\hat{1}-\hat{7}-\hat{b}7$. B and its foreground diminution occur in many of Coltrane's solos throughout this article. Coltrane even uses motive B as the b.i. for his blues sentence "Bessie's Blues." The sentential and Schenkerian perspectives are shown in combination in many examples because both analytical systems work in tandem as they elucidate distinct musical aspects. Sentential structures are embedded within the Schenkerian framework at different structural levels. For blues of the through-composed type, however, sentential and phrase structural perspectives are less insightful, since melodic ideas are not repeated.

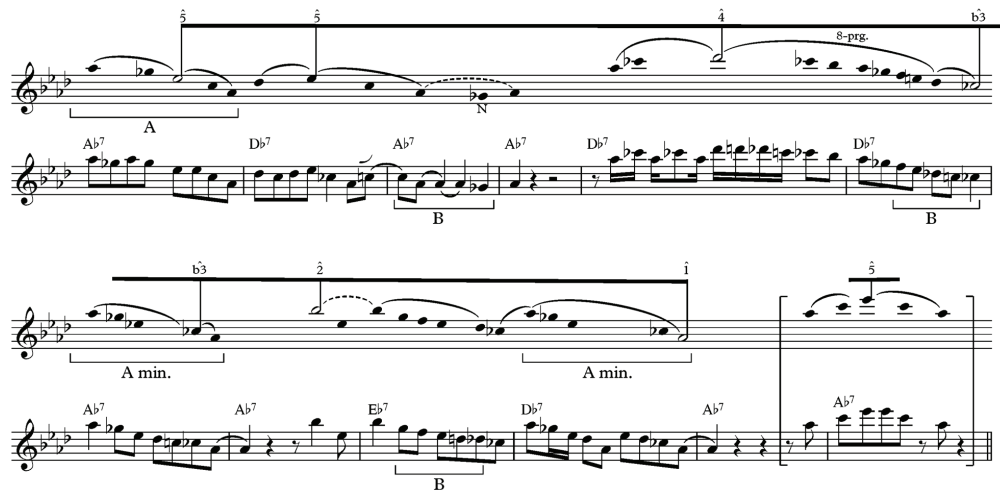


Figure 18. "Up Against the Wall" as example of the line-driven subgroup.

MODULAR MELODIES

This category of blues heads features clearly discernible musical ideas that are applied in a modular fashion. In this context, the terms module and modular connote clearly articulated and delineated ideas, such as sentential basic ideas, that are arranged in specific sequences within the blues form. These modules are often one or two measures long and restated throughout the blues form but not in a sentential ordering. The individual motivic subunits, or modules, of Coltrane's untitled "Original 11383" are far more discernible than in "Just for

the Love” (figures 19 and 20). In the former, two contrasting ideas (b.i. and c.i.) are followed by a cadential idea. In “Original 11383,” the $A\flat \rightarrow E \rightarrow B\flat$ idea that ends the second basic idea launches the contrasting idea, which suggests what might be viewed as a type of melodic chaining that is employed by Coltrane in this composition. “Original 11383” is further unified through the strict use of the $B\flat$ blues scale as a pitch source for the whole head. This economy of means is usually only observed in riff blues. Coltrane abstains from the use of direct thirds in the melody of “Original 11383” and rather focuses on steps and fourths/fifths (figure 21). The “thirdless” character of the piece is also evident in the quartal voicings for “Original 11383.” The piece is thus horizontally and vertically unified through the restrictive use of seconds and fourths.

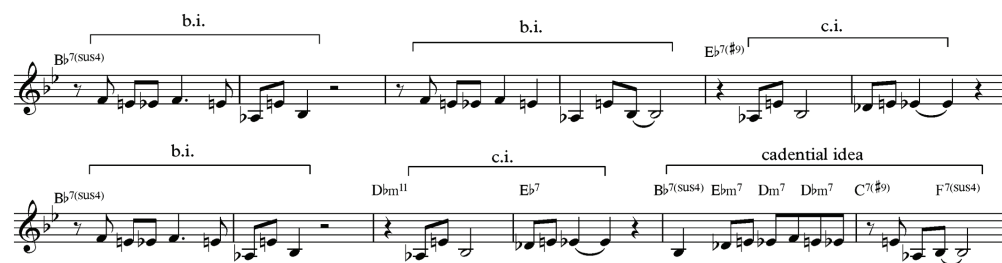


Figure 19. “Original 11383” as a through-composed blues of the modular subgroup.

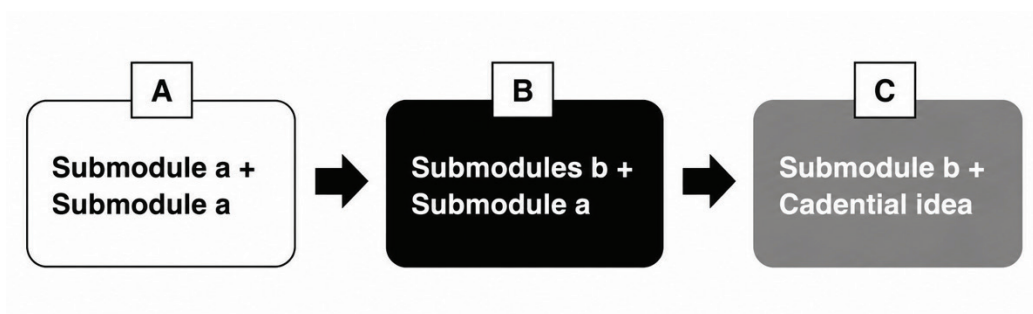


Figure 20. Adapted and complemented bar form reading of “Original 11383.”

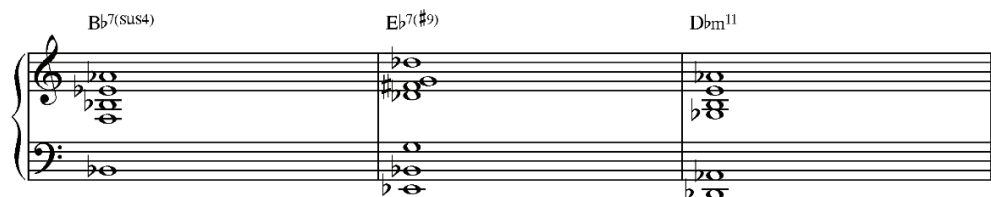


Figure 21. McCoy Tyner's quartal voicings for “Original 11383.”

The idiosyncratic chord melody of “Mr. Syms” represents an important part of the character of this blues (figures 22 and 23). The individually harmonized pitches of the various ideas occur over pedal points outlining the archetypal harmonic progression I-IV-V-I. “Mr. Syms” starts with what appears to be a sentential phrase structure, yet a c.i. intervenes in mm. 5-7. The return of b.i. in mm. 7-8 strongly reinforces the tonic prolongation ranging across mm. 1-8.

The A and B segments of “Mr. Syms,” “Mr. Day,” and “Original 11383,” with their submodule structure a + a + b + a, invoke the notion of rounded binary form, which further amplifies the sense of an overarching tonic prolongation throughout the first eight measures.

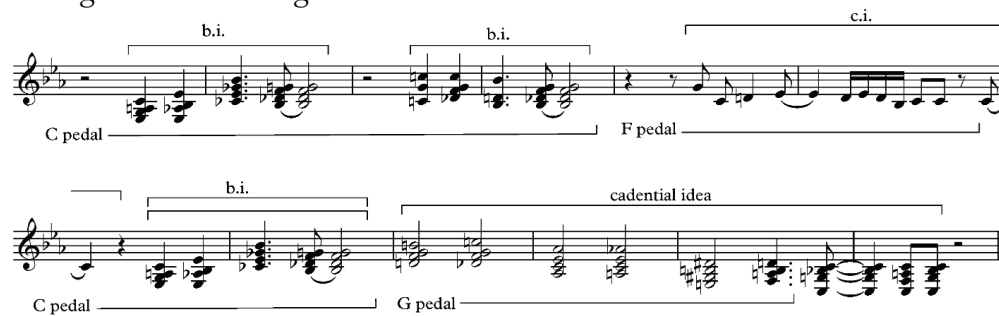


Figure 22. Coltrane’s “Mr. Syms” as a through-composed blues of the modular subgroup.

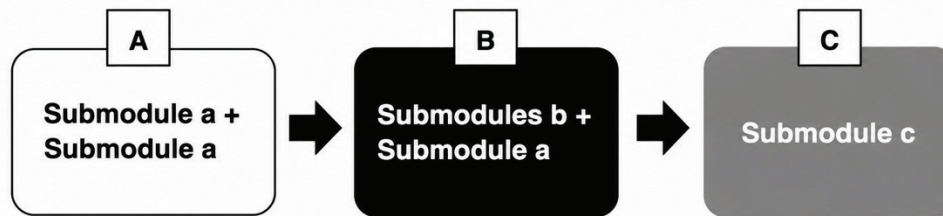


Figure 23. “Mr. Syms” interpreted with complemented ABC subsection labels.

“Mr. Day” has a clear organization of musical ideas and phrases (figures 24 and 25). A repeated b.i. is followed by a c.i. after which b.i. returns. Subsequently, the blues head concludes with a cadential idea. This format is identical to the modular design of “Mr. Syms.” Coltrane’s trichord $\hat{3}-\hat{1}-\hat{b}7$ (labeled as “A”) is used to end the second and third b.i.s (mm. 4 and 8). The gapped *Urlinie* $\hat{5}-\hat{4}-\hat{b}3-\hat{1}$ is dominated by a prolongation of the *Kopftone* $\hat{5}$ throughout mm. 1-9. Over IV^7 (mm. 5-6) the pitch B suggests a role as LN to $\hat{5}$, which Schenkerian theory explicitly rules out since $\hat{4}$ usually indicates the

onset of an inescapable descent to $\hat{3}$ and forms a dissonant interval over I.³⁶ Throughout this project I refrain from treating $\hat{4}$ as a lower neighbor within prolongations of $\hat{5}$.

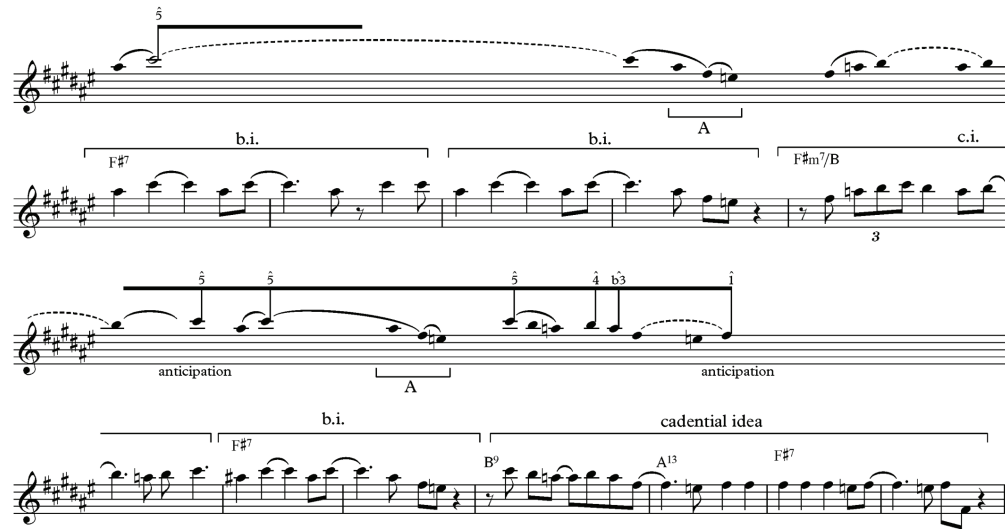


Figure 24. Coltrane's "Mr. Day" as a through-composed blues of the modular subgroup.

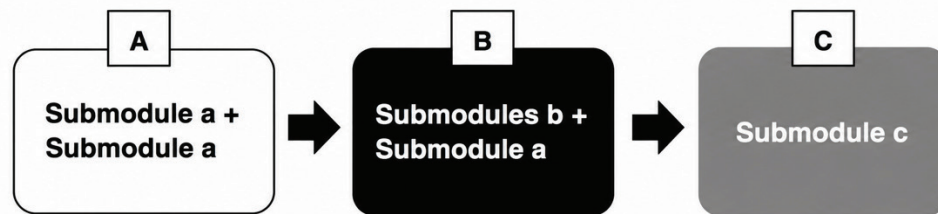


Figure 25. "Mr. Day" interpreted with complemented ABC subsection labels.

COLTRANE'S UNPARALLELED APPROACH TO THE BLUES

Despite the potentially stark formulaic prescriptions of the blues as a conventional form, Coltrane applied immense inventiveness and approached the form with great flexibility. Coltrane's approach to blues writing is reminiscent of the Verdian *tinta musicale*, according to which every piece ought to display its

³⁶ Heinrich Schenker, *Der freie Satz*, trans. and ed. Ernst Oster (New York: Longman, 1979), 51.

very own idiosyncratic tinge (Table 1). The specific *tinta* (It. “color” or “hue”; pl. *tinte*) refers to the distinctive expressive or structural coloration that characterizes a given blues composition or performance.

Piece	Key/Mode	<i>Tinte</i>
“Blue Train”	E♭ Mixolydian	Dominant seventh #9 sound
“Original 11383”	B♭ Mixolydian	Restricted interval use of 4 th s and steps which is vertically reflected using quartal harmony
“Just for the Love”	F Mixolydian	Offsetting proliferation of major seventh chords and added key centers. Persistent reinvocation of the pitch C
“Up Against the Wall”	A♭ Mixolydian	Interplay of $\hat{3}$ and $\flat\hat{3}$ in the middleground motive A. Generally descending melodic gestures
“Mr. Syms”	C Dorian	Individually harmonized pitches within the modular melodic building blocks occurring over pedal points
“Mr. Day”	F♯ Mixolydian	Persistent invocation of prolonged C♯s governs the melodic make-up of the piece in conjunction with pedal points
“Chronic Blues”	E♭ Dorian	Crux moment, uncommon key, manifold b.i. repetitions
“Bessie’s Blues”	E♭ Mixolydian	Trichord $\hat{3}-\hat{1}-\flat\hat{7}$
“Trane’s Slo Blues”	B♭ Mixolydian	Exclusive use of pitches belonging to the B♭ minor pentatonic scale
“Veird Blues”	B♭ Mixolydian	Chromatic passing tones between $\flat\hat{7}$, $\hat{1}$, $\flat\hat{3}$, and $\hat{4}$ in the b.i. contribute to the unique character of this blues head
“Some Other Blues”	F Mixolydian	Circle of 5 th s reharmonization of the country blues
“Bass Blues”	A♭ Mixolydian	Use of the blues scale built on the 6 th degree (F)
“Cousin Mary”	A♭ Mixolydian	Reharmonization of the blues cadence: $\flat V^7 - IV^7 - I^7$

Table 1. Selected blues heads by Coltrane with their respective *tinte*.

The heads of many other compositions by Coltrane may be assigned to one of the formal categories discussed in this article:

Blues Sentences: "Pursuance," "By the Numbers," "Mr. Knight"
Riff-Sentence Hybrid: "Blues to Bechet" & "Village Blues," "Chasin' the Train"
Riff blues: "Blues Minor" (blues variant), "Locomotion" (with bridge)
Through Composed: "Blues to You" (likely not notated), "The Last Blues"

Table 2. Classification of other blues heads by Coltrane.

Coltrane's distinct approach as a blues composer crystallizes when juxtaposed with some of his peers, such as Dexter Gordon, Charlie Parker, and Sonny Rollins (table 3). In comparing Coltrane's blues heads to some of his peers, similar sentential structures are evident. Sonny Rollins' "Tenor Madness" follows the structure of a blues sentence and includes a closing module that repeats the initial b.i., which is also a common strategy in Coltrane's blues heads with a sentence-like design. The cadential idea introduces a significant element of contrast in Coltrane's sentential blues heads as well as in Rollins' "Tenor Madness." Coltrane's unique position as a composer of blues heads crystallizes in his heavy reliance on sentential structures. While other saxophonists, such as Rollins, also used sentential formats, Coltrane seemed to have clearly preferred the sentential layout. Some of Rollins' other blues heads are "Sonnymoon for Two," a riff blues, and "Blue Seven," which is also a riff blues with a transposed b.i. that recycles a single rhythmic idea. Rollins' "No Moe" and "Blues for Philly Joe" do not follow a sentential or riff format but are rather line-driven blues. Similarly, Charlie Parker's blues heads, such as "Barbados," "Relaxin' at Camarillo," "Perhaps," "Big Foot," "ChiChi," "Blues for Alice," "Cheryl," "Billie's Bounce," and "Bloomdido," are all line-driven and not blues sentences. Parker's "Cool Blues" presents a rare exception as it is a riff blues. Parker's seemingly only blues sentence composition is "Now's the Time," while "Au Privave" is a line-driven blues that features a phrase-level sentential simulacrum in its first four measures. Parker's "K.C. Blues" may also be interpreted as a blues sentence, however, it seems to have been extemporized and not precomposed. Another blues that features a phrase-label sentential miniature is "Parker's Mood," which was, however, also not composed. Thus, while other iconic saxophonists make use of the sentential format, Coltrane used it much more frequently. This may be explained through his stylistic transition away from the bebop idiom into his own compositional aesthetic that played a substantial part in shaping the budding hardbop idiom, which mostly avoided eighth-note line-dominated melodies.

Another example of a blues sentence, as it was similarly employed by Coltrane, are Thelonious Monk's "Blue Monk" and "Functional." Monk's "Straight No Chaser," "Ba-Lue Bolivar Ba-Lues-Are," and "Blue Sphere," may be classified as riff sentence hybrids, that are, however, more closely related to the riff blues than to a sentential design as they mostly simply compress repeated b.i. material over the cadential segment rather than transforming it in another marked way as heard in Coltrane's cruxes. This makes Coltrane's and Monk's approach to the riff-sentence hybrid rather distinct. While Coltrane clearly modifies material, amounting to what I describe as crux, Monk tends to compress and repeat previously heard material. To achieve a crux-effect, Coltrane, in contrast, tends to invert the intervallic direction within the recycled b.i. material over the cadential crux moment. While many of Monk's lesser-known blues were improvised and not previously notated, it is difficult to classify them for this study, as its scope is deliberately limited to composed blues heads; however, Monk's "Blueshawk," "Monk's Point," "Five Spot Blues," "North Of The Sunset," and "Raise Four" are all riff blues, which, in contrast to Coltrane, demonstrate his preference for the design over the sentential layout. Monk's blues heads, which seem to have been extemporized for certain, are "Round Lights" and "Something in Blue," with the latter still following an extemporized sentential design.

Dexter Gordon was also a prolific composer of blues heads and should be considered an important influence on Coltrane. Like Coltrane, Gordon also seemed to have favored the sentential design of the blues as his "So Easy," "LTD," "August Blues," "Winther's Callin'," "Antabus" (minor blues), "What it Was," "Blow Mr. Dexter," "Blowin' For Dootsie" (improvised), "Home Run," "My Blues," "Stanley the Steamer," and "Society Red" all feature this format. However, Gordon also made use of other designs. Accordingly, Gordon's "McSplivens" is an example of a riff-sentence hybrid, and "Daddy Plays the Horn" (improvised), "Bonna Rue," and "Backstairs" are riff blues. "Sticky Wicket" is one of Gordon's blues that deserves special attention because it follows what might be likened to a period-like design with a bi, c.i. (contrasting idea), another b.i. and a short cadential segment. This design is extremely rare in the twelve-bar blues and is virtually not found elsewhere.

While it is not the aim of this project to compare all blues compositions by different jazz musicians of a certain period, it is certainly a relevant undertaking that affords insight into Coltrane's approach to composing blues heads by juxtaposing his works with those of some of his most prolific contemporaries. In general, a chronological trend surfaces that ranges from the through-composed, line-driven blues heads that governed the bebop era to motivic and modular sentential designs that became more popular thereafter. In this gradual process,

Coltrane should be regarded as a major contributor, alongside peers such as Dexter Gordon. What makes Coltrane unique is that he employs all formal designs of blues (blues sentence, riff blues, riff-sentence hybrid, through-composed blues) while other saxophonists strongly favor one or two types. Moreover, the crux moment in the riff sentence hybrid represents a unique element in Coltrane's blues writing that is absent in all others, who rely on compression and repetition solely. Historically, Gordon may be regarded as the musician and composer who codified the blues sentence, while Coltrane used it and further developed it.

Composer	Works	Blues Sentences	Riff Blues	Riff-Sentence Hybrids	Through-Composed	Improvised /Other	Dominant Tendency
John Coltrane	24	8 (33%)	4 (17%)	5 (21%)	7 (29%)	0	Balanced formal variety
Dexter Gordon	20	10 (50%)	4 (20%)	1 (5%)	0	5 (25%)	Largely blues sentence
Thelonious Monk	14	3 (21%)	5 (36%)	3 (21%)	0	3 (21%)	Riff-based and hybrid
Charlie Parker	15	1 (7%)	1 (7%)	0	9 (60%)	4 (26%)	Through-composed (line-driven)

Table 3. Use of blues designs by comparison: Coltrane, Gordon, Monk, Parker.

CONCLUSION

This article examined the phrase-structural designs of John Coltrane's blues compositions and demonstrated that a substantial portion of his blues heads follow a sentential organization. To account for these designs, I introduced the concept of the blues sentence, adapted from *Formenlehre* but modified to accommodate the characteristics of the blues. In Coltrane's blues heads, the sentential organizational principle typically features in altered forms that are characterized by expanded presentations, compressed or absent fragmentations, and the restatement of basic-idea material following the cadential segment. By comparing these readings with conventional AAB bar-form interpretations, the analyses revealed patterns of melodic organization and development that are not readily captured by traditional analytical approaches to blues form.

While the more traditional AAB reading of the blues may serve as a vague description of some of John Coltrane's blues compositions, it lacks a level of detail and nuance that can only be accounted for using more involved methods of phrase structural analyses. The proposed blues sentence, as well as other novel design types, such as the riff-sentence hybrid, shed more light on how Coltrane designed his blues heads. With hundreds of blues recordings that Coltrane made during his career, this song form represents a highly significant aspect of his output and his artistic expression. The blues sentence has been identified as a preferred way of structuring his heads, while other structures also occur less frequently but with relative regularity. Phrase structural analyses not only afford insight into how Coltrane crafted his blues but also allow an investigation into details of his contributions and innovations in this context.

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