



Contrapuntal Improvisation between Multiple Soloists: the Music of Gerry Mulligan and Paul Desmond

Kit Man Simon Law
QSI International School of Shenzhen

ABSTRACT: Counterpoint is a compositional technique used extensively in the field of classical music. Requiring precision and deliberate planning, counterpoint seems to contradict the fundamental improvisational qualities of jazz. Yet, cool jazz musicians, namely Gerry Mulligan and Paul Desmond, incorporated the use of counterpoint within their solos and improvisations. While they applied classical music techniques into their performances, they also reinterpreted and restructured contrapuntal elements into jazz chord progressions and tunes. Examining transcriptions from Mulligan and Desmond, this article intends to showcase how traditional counterpoint has been reshaped in jazz.

KEYWORDS: Counterpoint, Gerry Mulligan, Paul Desmond, Jazz, Improvisation, Duet, Call and Response.

Received 12 Sep., 2022; Revised 25 Sep., 2022; Accepted 28 Sep., 2022 © The author(s) 2022.
Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

I. INTRODUCTION

In classical music, the planned coordination between two or more melodic lines played simultaneously is characterized as a counterpoint, which is a technique that has been widely applied to compositions with precision, accuracy, and deliberate planning since the Middle Ages.ⁱ To be more specific, counterpoint compositions involve the contrapuntal positions to a cantus firmus, a fixed voice that is repeated throughout the music with slight rhythmic, motion, and interval variations similar to the melody.ⁱⁱ However, the definition of counterpoint has been largely revised. According to Felix Salzer and Carl Schacter, counterpoint refers to ‘the combination of simultaneously sounding musical lines.’ⁱⁱⁱ In the field of jazz music, paradoxically, while counterpoint is used less frequently in bebop and post-bop jazz compositions and improvisations performed by musicians such as Charlie Parker and John Coltrane, it is a prominent character of the West Coast “cool” jazz, a sub-genre of jazz that incorporated more classical elements, represented by baritone saxophonist Gerry Mulligan and alto saxophonist Paul Desmond. In this essay, with several case studies, I intend to exemplify these two jazz soloists’ different contrapuntal skills in improvisational performances, and to explore how these contrapuntal techniques, developed from their traditional counterparts, have been revised and reinterpreted in jazz.

II. GERRY MULLIGAN’S CONTRAPUNTAL TECHNIQUES

Gerry Mulligan, a New York baritone saxophonist born in 1927, played with local bands of Gene Krupa and Claude Thornhill, and gradually developed his musical style that is “light and breezy, but rich with counterpoint and full harmonies, and always relentlessly swinging,”^{iv} exemplifying both his tonal characteristics and improvisational strategies that enabled him to transform the baritone saxophone to a soloist instrument. Such a musical style was then highlighted in his involvement in Miles Davis’s “Birth of the Cool” nonet, the first group to record what is later considered as cool jazz,^v and his establishment of his “piano-less” quartet with Chet Baker in the 1950s, which showcased the two’s unique contrapuntal cooperation.^{vi} Contrapuntal interaction was a technique that extended throughout Mulligan’s career, and this was best highlighted in his cooperation with Paul Desmond, an alto saxophonist who not only played classical music phrases in jazz harmonies, but also improvised in a contrapuntal style.

The jazz standard “All the Things You Are”, performed by alto saxophonist Paul Desmond and baritone saxophonist Gerry Mulligan in the 1962 album *Two of a Mind*,^{vii} exhibits Mulligan’s application of counterpoint in his improvisational performance through his interplaying with Paul Desmond in an ensemble without piano, with only the lead instruments and bass illustrating the chord progression. In this sense, besides from the drum group maintaining tempo and the bass “walking” in a steady pulse, the melody, as well as the chordal structure, is solely outlined by Mulligan and Desmond. As a result, in both their interpretation of the melody and improvisations, Mulligan and Desmond’s voices exhibit constant interaction, in the form of counterpoint, introducing more variety to the rhythm and harmony.

Medium Up Swing ♩ = 200

Figure 1: mm.1-15, “All the Things You Are”^{viii}

As shown in the transcription of Desmond and Mulligan’s performance in figure 1, the baritone part played by Gerry Mulligan applies a type of rather untraditional counterpoint to the alto melody of Paul Desmond. Mulligan, starting from the first measure, before the chord changes, constantly plays the four-beat root notes after the third note of every chord is played out by Desmond’s alto part throughout the beginning section of this piece. For instance, in measure one, when Desmond plays the F of Dm7, the third note of the chord, Mulligan accompanies it by playing its root note D from the third beat of the measure. Notably, this whole rhythmic/ chordal pattern lasts – the root note Mulligan holds two beats into the next measure to accompany a different chord will always be its scale’s third note. For example, in bar 3, Mulligan carries two beats of the whole note C, which is the root note of the third measure’s chord of C7, into measure four, where the chord is FMaj7. Clearly, the C note then becomes the third note of the Fmaj7 scale, smoothing out the transition. The clarity and natural trend of Mulligan’s chord progression not only protrudes Mulligan’s structuring of harmonic and melodic counterpoint, but also reveals his adeptness and precision in applying and playing counterpoints in improvisational performance.

Figure 2. mm.16-26, “All the Things You Are.”^{ix}

Figure 2 presents another prominent characteristic of counterpoint, showing the development and elaboration of a phrase through different contexts and with balance to other voices, which is Mulligan’s application of sequences—“the heightening and lessening of the pitch in a motif or longer melodic passage.”^x This imitation, achieved through the variation of a previous motif, not only fills the progression of one chord to another, but creates a consistent “call and response”, which is essential to two-voice counterpoint. Between measure 17 and 22, Mulligan plays a real sequence, which is a segment of music repeated at different pitches in a period with the exact intervals.^{xi} From measure 17 to 18, Mulligan introduces a chromatic musical idea accompanied by chords F#min7 and B7. The first note C# of this musical idea is raised a half step higher to D, and D is then raised a half step higher to D#. This musical idea, transposed to accompany the changed chord progressions of measures 19 and 20, and measures 21 and 22, possesses the same intervals and rhythm as the original idea: in measures 19 and 20, Bb is raised half a step higher to B, and B is raised half a step higher to C; in measures 21 and 22, G# is raised half a step higher to A, and A is raised half a step higher to Bb. This progression not only demonstrates the three set of measures encompassing this real sequence, but also proves contrapuntal to Desmond’s melody.

With regard to contrapuntal relationship of this sequence to Desmond’s melody in these measures. While Desmond’s melody is holding a constant note for four and a half beats, the chromatically ascending sequence starts with an offbeat after one and a half beat. As Desmond’s stationary part and Mulligan’s part moves, the overall music demonstrates the characteristics of contrapuntal oblique motions, which occurs when one voice remains the same while the other ascends or descends.^{xii} By setting up this contrapuntal motion, the differentiated leading voice contrasts with the static voice, emphasizing the changing melody. Therefore, it could be concluded that the evident real sequence and contrapuntal motion demonstrated by Mulligan between measures 17 to 22 are prominent characteristics of his construction of a contrapuntal melody.

Figure 3: mm.37-52, “All the Things You Are”^{xiii}

Figure 3 reveals that Mulligan uses different comping and interjecting strategies to conduct responses to Desmond’s calls. Traditionally, call and response “describes reciprocal exchanges between musicians in music”.^{xiv} Berliner defines this “dynamic reciprocity” in jazz as the “collective interplay [that] can lead players beyond the sounds of their initial plans.”^{xv} Comping and spontaneous interjections, in the form of walking baselines and guided tones, highlight Mulligan’s capability of contrapuntal improvisations. In measures 39 to 40, Mulligan creates a walking bassline with a crotchet pulse, which is a comping strategy normally used by

bass players to emphasize beats one and three in a measure and “convey a ‘half time’ feel.” This walking bassline, serving as a rhythmic scaffold, then transitions into an accelerated response to Desmond’s “call” in measures 38-39.^{xvi}

During measures 45 to 46, Mulligan establishes a guide tone line, which is a chord’s unstable notes creating tension, such as its guide tones (the third and seventh notes, sometimes the third and sixth if the chord is a simple triad or sixth chord), played in a long duration and in a closely ascending or descending pattern accompanying harmonic changes.^{xvii} This is marked by the D \sharp in measure 46, ascended from Db, as it poses tension in F-7 but might serve as an anticipation to B \flat :7 in the next measure. Particularly, in measure 40, his C on beat 1, B \flat and Ab on beat 2, G and Ab on beat 3, and G and Ab on beat 4 are all harmonically contrapuntal to Desmond’s melody in AbMaj7. With the support of Mulligan’s comping strategies, his responses, in measures 40 to 41, 44, and 51, are all rhythmically and harmonically contrapuntal to Desmond’s melody. The rhythmic walking basslines, as well as the chordal guide tones, contribute to the transition between Mulligan’s comping and call and response interjections to Desmond’s solo.

III. PAUL DESMOND’S CONTRAPUNTAL TECHNIQUES

Paul Desmond, born in San Francisco, California in 1924, was immersed in a musical environment during his childhood as his father was a music sheet printer and offered him opportunities to study music.^{xviii} In 1951, he began collaborating with pianist Dave Brubeck, whose forceful and polyphonic style of playing was a result of his training of classical music under Darius Milhaud at Mills College.^{xix} Desmond did not confine himself to jazz standards or bebop; instead, he experimented with different musical styles, concepts and elements, such as irregular and unusual time signatures and rhythms exemplified by “Blue-Rondo A La Turk” and “Take Five” in the 1959 album *Time Out*.^{xx} In addition to “All the Things You Are,” Desmond also used counterpoint in a soloist setting. He modeled on Bach’s counterpoints and applied them to chord progressions and tunes of jazz. His incorporation of classical sequences into jazz chord progressions also reveal the influence of classical contrapuntal and sequential models in his improvisation.

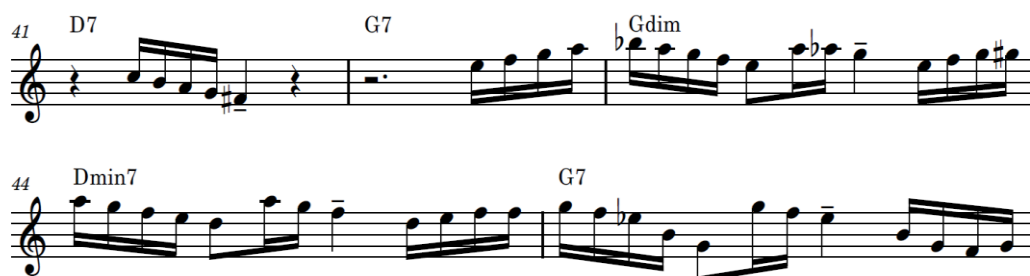


Figure 4: mm.41-45, “The Song is You”^{xxi}

Desmond’s use of sequences in jazz standards is demonstrated in figure 4 –“The Song is You”. From measures 42 to 45, he develops a set of tonal sequence through the chord changes – G7, Gdim, Dmin7, and G7. While the intervals within the individual sequences are not uniform, their rhythmic patterns and melodic contours are the same. In measure 42, Desmond starts original motif of the sequence with the E, which is a major six away from the root note of the G7 chord. For the first sequence, he begins again with an E on the fourth beat. This emphasizes the dissonant quality of the chord and exhibits tension to emphasize the progression of the sequence into the next chord of Dmin7 through the chromatic notes. In measure 44, Desmond starts the second sequence with a D on beat four, corresponding to the pattern of his original motif established in measure 42. As a result, this set of sequence, though different in terms of specific pitches, all rhythmically begin on the fourth beat of their respective measures. Desmond’s ability to construct sequences in a soloist setting can be interpreted as an effort to create counterpoint. Since the original musical motif and his sequences begin and end on different pitches, the contrast between previous and following variations can be seen as a set of “call and response”, which is a prominent characteristic of Desmond’s counterpoint with Mulligan in the aforementioned “All the Things You Are”. Therefore, Desmond’s application of sequences into his solos not only reveals his mastery of foundational classical music techniques but also his ability to modify them into a jazz standard, creating a pitch-difference which resembles a contrapuntal motif.

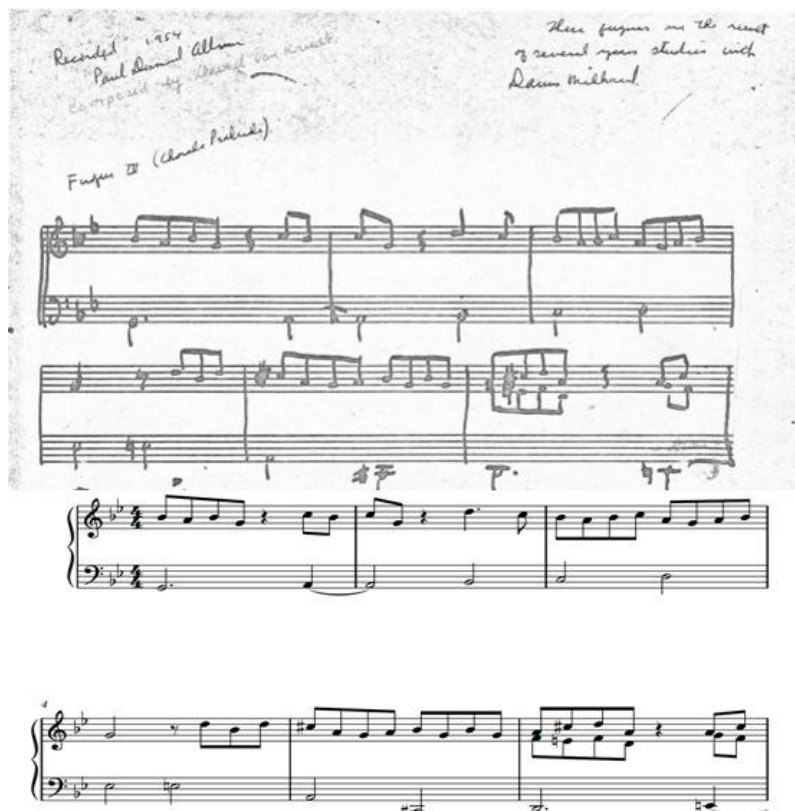


Figure 5: mm.1-6, “Fugue IV” for Paul Desmond by David Van Kriedt^{xxii}

In Figure 5, a heading of the score for “Fugue IV”, which Paul Desmond adopted to create “But Happy”, is presented. The score was composed by David Van Kriedt, a tenor saxophonist who studied at Mills College under Darius Milhaud and with Dave Brubeck in the late 1940s.^{xxiii} Although this score is relatively simple in terms of its structure, it reveals the use of counterpoint through its baroque motions in the music Paul Desmond selected for recording. Specifically, similar motion, contrary motion, and oblique motion could be observed in the score. In some of the measures, the top voice and the lower voice move in the same direction but by different intervals. For instance, in measure four, the upper voice moves up a perfect fifth from G to D, while the lower voice moves up a minor second from E \flat to E. Moreover, oblique motion is presented in measure one and two. When the upper voice is lowered from a group of two eighth notes of C and B \flat to a group of C and G, which is a minor third, the lower voice accommodating it is maintained by a quarter note A tied with a half note A. On the other hand, contrary motion is seen in measure three: the second group of four eighth notes in the upper voice possessing two beats is lowered from the first group, while the second half note in the lower voice is raised by a major second to a D from the C of the first half note. These contrapuntal motions derived within the fugue illustrates the basis of Desmond’s arrangement of a baroque fugue into a jazz tune. It also reveals the influence of classical counterpoints and musical characteristics in Desmond’s own music education and practice, which can be observed in his later collaboration with Mulligan.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, through the analyses of Gerry Mulligan and Paul Desmond’s jazz compositions, improvisations, and musical languages, it could be observed that counterpoint and contrapuntal thoughts heavily influenced their musical expression, especially when playing in a multi-vocal setting. In fact, counterpoints are frequently utilized in jazz composition, as well as the improvisations of jazz musicians, such as Mulligan and Desmond, belonging to the ‘cool’ school of west coast. Mulligan even remarked that “the contrapuntal idea had always been there... It certainly existed in the early days with New Orleans music.”^{xxiv} This tradition, however, is not without change, and it is through the improvisations and compositions of jazz musicians, Mulligan and Desmond, for example, that counterpoint, as a musical technique originated from the classical music style, has been renewed in jazz.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Beeche, Jack Trehwella. "Improvised Counterpoint: A Study of Contrapuntal Strategies and Interchangeable Roles between Two Soloists in Jazz Improvisation." MA diss., Monash University, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.4225/03/58b6345262a76>.
- [2]. Ben, Dunnett. "Sequences." *Music Theory Academy*. Accessed August 26, 2022. <https://www.musictheoryacademy.com/composing-music/sequences/>.
- [3]. Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopedia. "Gerry Mulligan." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, April 2, 2022. Accessed August 26, 2022. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gerry-Mulligan>.
- [4]. Brubeck, Dave, and Paul Desmond. *The Dave Brubeck Quartet: Time Out and Further Out*. Derry Music, 1962.
- [5]. Burlingame, Sandra. "Paul Desmond." *JazzStandards*. Accessed August 26, 2022. https://www.jazzstandards.com/biographies/biography_291.htm.
- [6]. Chase, Samuel. "A Quick Guide To Species Counterpoint." *Hello Music Theory*, May 11, 2022. Accessed August 26, 2022. <https://hellomusictheory.com/learn/species-counterpoint/>.
- [7]. Chase, Samuel. "What Is Counterpoint In Music: A Complete Guide." *Hello Music Theory*, August 5, 2022. Accessed August 26, 2022. <https://hellomusictheory.com/learn/counterpoint/>.
- [8]. De Lucia, Jon. "Bach and the Intervallic Sequences of Paul Desmond." *Jon De Lucia Music*, May 25, 2017. Accessed August 26, 2022. <https://www.jondelucia.com/bach-intervallic-sequences-paul-desmond/>.
- [9]. Desmond, Paul, and Gerry Mulligan. *All The Things You Are*. Transcribed by Carles Margarit. YouTube, March 8, 2015. Accessed 13 October 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Elxi3BR04s8>.
- [10]. Fulara, Adam. "The Model of Counterpoint Improvisation and the Methods of Improvisation in Popular Music." *AVANT 4*, no. 1 (2013): 417–54. <https://doi.org/10.12849/40102013.0106.0022>.
- [11]. Gowers, Patrick. "Modern Jazz." *The Musical Times* 103, no. 1432 (1962): 389–92. <https://doi.org/10.2307/949499>.
- [12]. Hancock, Herbie. "West Coast Jazz Guide: 3 Characteristics of West Coast Jazz." *MasterClass*, May 8, 2021. <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/west-coast-jazz-explained#what-is-west-coast-jazz>.
- [13]. Hobson, Vic. *Creating Jazz Counterpoint: New Orleans, Barbershop Harmony, and the Blues*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014.
- [14]. Hutchinson, Robert. "Types of Motion." *Music Theory for the 21st-Century Classroom*. Accessed August 26, 2022. <https://musictheory.pugetsound.edu/mt21c/TypesOfMotion.html>.
- [15]. Jackson, Roland John. "Counterpoint." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, January 5, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/art/counterpoint-music>.
- [16]. Josephson, Sanford. "Gerry Mulligan: A Modern Jazz Artist Who Respected Tradition." *The Syncopated Times*, January 25, 2019. <https://syncopatedtimes.com/gerry-mulligan-a-modern-jazz-artist-who-respected-tradition/>.
- [17]. "Mulligan, Gerry." *E-Jazz Lines*. Accessed August 26, 2022. <https://www.ejazzlines.com/big-band-arrangements/by-arranger/gerry-mulligan-concert-jazz-band-charts/>.
- [18]. "Paul Desmond." *Famous Composers*. Accessed August 26, 2022. <https://www.famouscomposers.net/paul-desmond>.
- [19]. Pilkington, Bob. *Counterpoint in Jazz Arranging*. Boston: Berklee Press, 2020.
- [20]. Salzer, Felix, and Carl Schachter. *Counterpoint in Composition: the Study of Voice Leading*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1969.
- [21]. Sharp Eleven Music. "How Paul Desmond Improvised Counterpoint like J.S. Bach". YouTube, September 13, 2019. Accessed 13 October 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FP2CVn9tMw8>.
- [22]. "Two of a Mind." *AllMusic*. Accessed August 26, 2022. <https://www.allmusic.com/album/two-of-a-mind-mw0000199842?1661505109773>.
- [23]. "What Are the Elements of Jazz?" *New York Jazz Workshop*. Accessed August 26, 2022. <https://newyorkjazzworkshop.com/what-are-the-elements-of-jazz/>.
- [24]. "What Is a Sequence in Music? Definition, Types & Examples." *Pro Musician Hub*. Accessed August 26, 2022. <https://promusicianhub.com/what-is-sequence-music/>.
- [25]. Wöllner, Clemens. "Call and Response: Musical and Bodily Interactions in Jazz Improvisation Duos." *Musicae Scientiae* 24, no. 1 (May 8, 2018): 44–59. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1029864918772004>.

ⁱ Roland John Jackson, "Counterpoint," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, January 5, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/art/counterpoint-music>.

ⁱⁱ Samuel Chase, "A Quick Guide To Species Counterpoint," *Hello Music Theory*, May 11, 2022, accessed August 26, 2022, <https://hellomusictheory.com/learn/species-counterpoint/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Felix Salzer and Carl Schachter, *Counterpoint in Composition: the Study of Voice Leading* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), xvii.

^{iv} "Mulligan, Gerry," *E-Jazz Lines*, accessed August 26, 2022, <https://www.ejazzlines.com/big-band-arrangements/by-arranger/gerry-mulligan-concert-jazz-band-charts/>.

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Gerry Mulligan," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed August 26, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gerry-Mulligan>.

^{vii} "Two of a Mind," *AllMusic*, accessed August 26, 2022, <https://www.allmusic.com/album/two-of-a-mind-mw0000199842?1661505109773>.

^{viii} Paul Desmond and Gerry Mulligan, *All The Things You Are*, transcribed by Carles Margarit, YouTube, March 8, 2015, accessed October 13, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Elxi3BR04s8>.

^{ix} *Ibid.*

^x "What Is a Sequence in Music? Definition, Types & Examples," *Pro Musician Hub*, accessed August 26, 2022, <https://promusicianhub.com/what-is-sequence-music/>.

- ^{xi} Dunnett Ben, "Sequences," Music Theory Academy, accessed August 26, 2022, <https://www.musictheoryacademy.com/composing-music/sequences/>.
- ^{xii} Robert Hutchinson, "Types of Motion," Music Theory for the 21st-Century Classroom, accessed August 26, 2022, <https://musictheory.pugetsound.edu/mt21c/TypesOfMotion.html>.
- ^{xiii} Jack Trewhella Beeche, "Improvised Counterpoint: a Study of Contrapuntal Strategies and Interchangeable Roles between Two Soloists in Jazz Improvisation," (MA diss., Monash University, 2017), 25, <https://doi.org/10.4225/03/58b6345262a76>.
- ^{xiv} Ibid, 24.
- ^{xv} Clemens Wöllner, "Call and Response: Musical and Bodily Interactions in Jazz Improvisation Duos," *Musicae Scientiae* 24, no. 1 (May 8, 2018): 55, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1029864918772004>.
- ^{xvi} J. T. Beeche, "Improvised Counterpoint," 22.
- ^{xvii} Ibid, 18, 20, 25.
- ^{xviii} Sharp Eleven Music, "How Paul Desmond Improvised Counterpoint like J.S. Bach," *YouTube*, September 13, 2019, accessed October 13, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FP2CVn9tMw8>.
- ^{xix} Sandra Burlingame, "Paul Desmond," *JazzStandards*, accessed August 26, 2022, https://www.jazzstandards.com/biographies/biography_291.htm; Jon De Lucia, "Bach and the Intervallic Sequences of Paul Desmond," *Jon De Lucia Music*, May 25, 2017, <https://www.jondelucia.com/bach-intervallic-sequences-paul-desmond/>.
- ^{xx} Dave Brubeck and Paul Desmond, *The Dave Brubeck Quartet: Time Out and Further Out* (Derry Music, 1962), 20.
- ^{xxi} Sharp Eleven Music, "How Paul Desmond Improvised Counterpoint like J.S. Bach."
- ^{xxii} De Lucia, "Bach and the Intervallic Sequences of Paul Desmond."
- ^{xxiii} Ibid.
- ^{xxiv} Sanford Josephson, "Gerry Mulligan: A Modern Jazz Artist Who Respected Tradition," *The Syncopated Times*, January 25, 2019, <https://syncopatedtimes.com/gerry-mulligan-a-modern-jazz-artist-who-respected-tradition/>.