

# The Musical Style of Herbie Nichols

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Herbie Nichols was a piano player and composer who performed as part of the New York jazz scene from 1937 up until his death in 1963. A self described 'jazzist',<sup>1</sup> Nichols worked with many different jazz ensembles, moving from Dixieland to Swing and even Rhythm and Blues in his later life. His most notable work however, was with his own piano trio recording his original compositions. Nichols was never able to run a continually working band, instead picking up musicians for each session as it arose (fortunately these musicians included Art Blakey and Max Roach). During Nichols' life very little was documented on his musical style<sup>2</sup>, there is only a small collection of his own writing on music, as well as four albums.

In this paper I will explore why Nichols was left outside the main jazz canon and developments of his era. Nichols has been characterised as '*an outsider even among outsiders*'<sup>3</sup> and he certainly was unable to achieve mainstream success in the jazz world during his time and even to this day. I believe this is due to his musical approach deviating from the bebop era, using distinctive features of bebop's approach, while using new harmonic ideas separating his music from any clear style of jazz. Nichols was also socially outside the usual realm of the New York jazz community and never found acceptance within his lifetime.

## Musical Style

As demonstrated in his four albums, Nichols developed a unique compositional and improvisational voice that stood out amongst his peers. Nichols describes his style of jazz as deriving from 'the Jelly Roll Morton, Earl Hines, Duke Ellington, Thelonious Monk, Bud Powell tradition.'<sup>4</sup> In terms of improvisation there is a clear link to that lineage, however his compositional style is highly informed by the jazz tradition but uses a unique approach to form and harmony. Nichols began studying strictly European classical music, with both his parents and piano instructor forbidding him from playing jazz, up until 1935. At this time, Nichols had no desire to play jazz, he stated: 'My earliest ambitions were to become

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<sup>1</sup> Miller, Mark *Herbie Nichols A Jazzist's Life* (The Mercury Press, 2009) p18

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p8

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p29

<sup>4</sup> Nichols, Herbie, "*Herbie Nichols says*," (Metronome, February 1956)



a Prokofiev'.<sup>5</sup> By the age of 17 it became apparent however that Nichols would be unable to study at a conservatory due to his race, so instead he 'decided to become an Ellington and to enter the fascinating field of jazz'.<sup>6</sup>

### Nichols and the Bebop Era

During bebop's prime development in the early forties, Nichols was drafted to US army, serving from 1941 until 1943. His service also coincided with the American Federation of Musicians recording ban, meaning he was completely removed from this transitional period. By the time of his return he would be forced to immediately come to grasp with the new musical direction. Before he was even drafted he was already outside the realm of the new wave of beboppers, as the jazz critic Leonard Feather stated, Nichols 'got pushed off the piano stool at Minton's where the fledgling beboppers knew him only vaguely as a peripheral figure'.<sup>7</sup>

Nichols' isolation from the new jazz movement of bebop wasn't due to his refusal to play new forms of jazz or due to any desire to play older generations of music. Instead Nichols heard music and jazz developing in a different direction, highly related to the bebop era but with some key differences. Unfortunately there is nothing more than anecdotal evidence to show whether or not Nichols' wartime service further isolated him from bebop musicians, but by the time of his return, his music was headed in a different direction from the majority of beboppers.

Charlie Parker's music is perhaps the clearest symbol of the new jazz sound of bebop. It is worth noting that Parker and Nichols were contemporaries, and born only a year apart, Nichols in 1919 and Parker in 1920. Both Parker and Nichols share many of the same musical influences, both drawing on the previous generations such as Lester Young and Bud Powell. Parker and Nichols even played with some of the same musicians,



with Max Roach (one of the bebop drum pioneers and early Parker collaborators) recording on Nichols' third album.

Nichols music does carry many similarities to bebop, through his fast consistent eighth note lines that requires extreme virtuosity and the post big band era use of smaller ensembles. His overall harmonic approach however, is completely different. Where artists like Charlie Parker added chromatic extensions to chords, Nichols instead created new extended harmonic progressions that carried their own unique sound.

Diagram 1: Excerpt from *The Gig* by Herbie Nichols

Diagram 2: Transcription of Charlie Parker on *Moose The Mooche* (first 8 measures)<sup>8</sup>

In Diagram 1 and Diagram 2, a comparison can be seen between eight bars of Parker's and Nichols' music, with each sample chosen as an attempt to represent a standard musical passage for each artist. In Parker's excerpt from the second measure there is evidence of his developed use of alterations (unseen in the earlier swing era) and his common musical device of enclosure between the Ab - F - F# and G. This music when recorded was groundbreaking and has come to be seen by some as the pinnacle of jazz. Parker uses harmonic alterations over a chord progression that is essentially diatonic and in C Major (the example was transposed for easier comparison to *The Gig*). Parker addresses each chord, often changing each 2 beats in a manner distinct to the bebop era. This particular chord progression, known colloquially as 'a rhythm changes' due to its basis in Gershwin's *I Got Rhythm* is emblematic of the bebop era. The rhythm changes is one of the most common bebop chord progressions, second only to the 12 bar blues.

In diagram 1 Nichols' own composition, *The Gig*, is shown. The melodic content of the eighth notes does bear a relationship to Parker's material, however where *The Gig* drastically varies is Nichols' chord progression and harmony. Nichols moves through dominant chords, moving down in minor thirds, concluding with an E7 to move to the following section in A minor. Through this eight bar passage Nichols implies seven different key centres (six if you consider the G7 as an extension of the following C7). Where Parker and other exponents of bebop add extensions and alteration to existing chord progressions, Nichols instead alters his musical approach to tonality.

Thelonious Monk

One common misconception that exists around Nichols music is its relation to Thelonious Monk's style. It is often viewed that Nichols' music was highly inspired or imitative of Monk's music. While there are similarities, I believe they each had very different musical approaches. Nichols and Monk were on friendly terms, Nichols provided

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<sup>8</sup> Transposed up a tone to match The Gig

one of the first positive reviews of Monk's music while Nichols was writing for *The Music Dial*.<sup>9</sup> Monk is 18 months older than Nichols and both emerged in the Harlem jazz scene and considered Duke Ellington as one of their strongest influences.

I believe that musically they are commonly associated with one another due to their relationship to the bebop era. Both Nichols and Monk played music highly related to bebop, but very much on the fringe, simultaneously emulating and fighting the language. Nichols' harmonic digressions from bebop have already been discussed, Monk certainly had his own sense of harmony however it was a much more specific language than Nichols'. Monk however had a much more developed sense of rhythmic feel, contrasting highly from the bebop language. Monk's harmonic language worked more within the bebop framework by adding dissonance to more consonance progressions. In Nichols' positive review of Monk's music he did note that Monk is 'partial to certain limited harmonies'.<sup>10</sup> While Monk never reviewed Nichols' music, it is foreseeable that Monk would have made a similar statement about Nichols' use of rhythm.

## Outsider Status

In addition to Nichols' new musical direction he was socially placed outside his environment from birth. Growing up in Harlem with parents from St. Kitts and Trinidad he was considered outside the African American community. A general atmosphere suggested that as West Indians had been released from slavery a generation earlier they had not experienced the same forms of suffering.<sup>11</sup> Whether this atmosphere was real or perceived, it was certainly felt by Nichols and his family. His parents' original forbiddance of him studying jazz reflects their specific disconnect from the African American community. Nichols' original influences were Prokofiev, Stravinsky and Rachmaninov up until he realised he would face great challenges too formally study, perform and compose works in their idiom.<sup>12</sup>

Quotes from other musicians imply that his West Indian background did alter his perception in the community. Bobby Johnson, Jr. who employed Nichols in 1956 described the piano player (and one of his friends) 'two young West Indian guys who had come up through the ranks.'<sup>13</sup> From childhood Nichols was on the outside of this

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<sup>9</sup> Miller, *Herbie Nichols*, p52

<sup>10</sup> Nichols, *Herbie Jazz milieu* (The Music Dial, August 1944, 7)

<sup>11</sup> Waters, Mary C. *Black identities: West Indian immigrant dreams and American realities* Harvard University Press, 2009

<sup>12</sup> Nichols, *The Jazz Life*

<sup>13</sup> Miller, *Herbie Nichols*, p24

community, spending his free hours at public libraries and almost never engaging with other children.

In 1941 Nichols stated that 'Of all the ways for a young Negro to get a financial foothold in life, the jazz racket is the easiest.'<sup>14</sup> By the 1960s however Nichols optimism had significantly fallen stating: 'It seems like you've got to be an Uncle Tom or a drug addict to make it in jazz, and I'm not either one'. As a non drug or alcohol using West Indian, playing a deviation of bebop Nichols struggled to find avenues to perform his own music and scraped a living playing a variety of other peoples' music, including much Dixieland and later in life Rhythm and Blues. As a representation of Nichols musical status, *The New Yorker* - which listed many jazz venues and was considered supportive of the bebop era - eventually listed one of the few venues Nichols was able to play, Cafe Bohemia, as 'musicians who stand with reluctant feet between Beale Street and Bartók talk over their problem here'.<sup>15</sup>

While Nichols faced significant social and musical isolation he did work as a writer under the name Herbert Horatio Nichols, in particular for the New York Amsterdam News. In an article he wrote 'The progress of the Negro in the future depends upon unprecedented skepticism' before discussing issues of race and music. Nichols notes: 'Jazz artistry reigns supreme in our group, ... in swing music we stomp louder and more often than the other fellow [white musician]'.<sup>16</sup> Towards the end of his career this feeling had completely change as he states:

'experience shapes the whole pattern of thinking in a human being: in music, science, industry, philosophy and everything else. In other words there is no doubt in my mind that a child born of Russian, Chinese, English, Turkish, Swedish or Finnish parents has [the capacity to play] the same kind of jazz that Teddy Wilson, Lester Young, Art Tatum and Dizzie Gillespie are playing these days. It's all a matter of musical experience.'<sup>17</sup>

As a non alcohol drinking, drug free West Indian, Nichols spent much of his life struggling to find acceptance within any particular musical community and struggling with associated issues. This is important in considering why he may have struggled to find greater musical success and acceptance.

### *The Gig*

*The Gig* (see Appendix 1) is a composition by Nichols, recorded in 1956 for his third album, featuring Max Roach on drums and Al McKibbon on bass. Nichols describes *The*

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<sup>14</sup> Nichols, *The Jazz Life*

<sup>15</sup> *Mostly for music The New Yorker*, 17 December 1955, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Nichols, *The Jazz Life*

<sup>17</sup> Nichols, Herbie *The jazz purist* (The Music Dial, September 1944, 20.)

*Gig* as ‘one of my best tunes’<sup>18</sup> and the composition has been recorded by multiple different artists since its release. Composed in reference to jam sessions, the composition represents many key elements of Nichols musical style.

The melody features a jagged A section against a flowing bebop inspired B section. The entire form of this piece used for improvisation is 67 measures long moving through ABABCABD (C section demonstrated in Diagram 2), something unheard of in the bebop era. The introduction features a four bar drum break and is also used as the final musical figure. In this case Nichols’ 9 bar phrases are used as a commentary on the ‘extra measures’ that can occur in a jam session.

Intro	Drum	A	B	A	B	C	A	B	D	Drum
6	4	9	8	9	8	8	9	8	8	8

Diagram 3: Musical form of the Gig

Improvisation, which was essentially the main component of bebop tunes is built into this piece as a musical tool, as opposed to being the essence of the form. Nichols uses the drums (as he does in many compositions) to help control the form of the piece, beginning with a drum break between the intro and the A section and using the drums to lead into the improvised solos. Over *The Gig* only Nichols improvises a solo over the form, through 2 choruses, with the second merging into the final melody. Nichols improvisation stems from the earlier jazz tradition of elaborating on the melodic material, as an expansion of the opening melody as opposed to a new direction only using the chord progression as inspiration.

Nichols uses a wide of range of harmonic movement throughout the composition. Particularly notable is the C section (discussed above) which features symmetrical movement of dominant chords, moving in minor thirds. This style of composition only really became part of the wider jazz scene five years later, when John Coltrane recorded *Giant Steps*. At this stage not only was the sound of this harmonic progression unused by bebop musicians it would have presented extreme improvising challenges, even for the best beboppers. When *Giant Steps* was recorded five years later, it presented significant challenges to the musicians involved and set a new standard of accomplishment for jazz musicians.

Nichols composed and improvised complete musical statements exploring new harmonic landscapes. I consider Nichols as an improviser, a complementing force to Nichols the composer. While other artists composed frameworks that they could improvise over, Nichols wrote compositions where his improvisations could help develop the melodic

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<sup>18</sup> Feather, Leonard et al. *The Encyclopedia of jazz*. (Horizon Press, 1960.)

material. Drums and bass solos are almost always used as structural tools as opposed to key ingredients.

Nichols music occupies a unique position as an extension of the bebop era, showing alternate directions from the overall bebop canon. Unfortunately due to his harmonic divergence and social status Nichols never received acclaim or even regular performances during his life. As is the case for too many musicians of his era there is only limited documentation and research currently taken into his music. Fortunately, he recorded four albums and much of his sheet music still exists opening a passage for further exploration of his music and legacy.

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