1959: The Year That Jazz Matured

A look into the influence of pianist Bill Evans on the records *Kind of Blue* and *Portrait in Jazz*

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Who is Bill Evans?

Jazz is considered by musicologist and historians to be the first true American art form; meaning, that it is the first form of art to solely originate from a uniquely American people, and not through a means of imitation or modification of another culture's already existing artform. Today, the history of jazz is seen through the recordings and performance of the many titans that performed across the many years. For pianists, names such as Art Tatum, Errol Garner, and Bud Powell represent a selection of the best musicians to study and emulate; however, Bill Evans stands as the most significant pianist of all time within the jazz idiom. Evan's works reinvented the way that pianists approached jazz, and it is impossible to study jazz at all without learning about the innovations that he brought to the table. Specifically his work on the albums *Portrait in Jazz*[1] and *Kind of Blue*[2] led to a ground up reimagining of not only piano playing, but also the language of jazz itself, and in 1959, thanks in part to Bill Evans, the jazz genre reached a maturity stage where it could truly exist as a form of both popular and art music simultaneously.

Bill Evans and the Birth of Modal Jazz

In 1955, Evans first met fellow jazz pianist George Russel, and this connection would lay the foundation for Evan's contributions to the development of jazz.[3] Russel at the time, was developing his magnum opus *Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization*, a book which pushed the first musical theory to derive solely from jazz.[4] He argued that the Lydian mode was, compared to the major scale, compatible with a wider set of tonalities. This theory was what

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[1] Bill Evans Trio. Portrait in Jazz. Riverside Records, 1960, Stereo LP.

[2] Miles Davis. Kind of Blue. Columbia, 1959, Stereo LP

[3] Chuck Israels, "Bill Evans (1929-1980): A Musical Memoir" 71 (Journal of Jazz Studies, 1985)

[4] George Russell, *Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization*, 1953.

Evans would learn, extend, and perfect over the course of his nearly 25-year long career. The Lydian Chromatic Concept laid the foundations of modal jazz, as it proposed building chords not only on the major and minor scales, but also the various modes of all available scales. It further went on to argue that modes were the ideal choice for improvisation because of the natural extension of chords rising by thirds. This can be seen through the linkage of the Lydian mode to the major chord and the Dorian mode to the minor chord via the eleventh and thirteenth scale degrees respectively (Figure 1). This new approach led to the exploration of harmony in many tonalities other than the traditional major and minor. Although Russel was the first to conceptualize this new modal concept, Evans, as a classical pianist trained at Southeastern Louisiana University, was able to apply this revolutionary theory to his already stellar technique. Evans, as a result, is often credited as one of the progenitors of modality in performance, as his recordings were some of the first most notable ones to arise from this new era. In addition, Evans was particularly fond of the music of French late romantic and impressionist composers, which contributed to his signature style and sound of improvisation, composition, and interpretation of standards.[5] Armed with the modal approach he had learned from working with Russel, Evans took jazz techniques such as block chords, drop voicings, rhythmic independence, and locked hands melodic improvisation and applied them in ways never seen before.

Bill Evans, Scott LaFaro, Paul Motian: *Portrait in Jazz*

The piano trio, in 1959, was not at all a new format for the jazz combo setting; however, Bill Evans took the already pre-existent concept and innovated it in such a way that jazz scholars cannot avoid attributing the modern piano trio to him. Specifically, musicians, critics, and

[5] Henry Darragh, Bill Evans: Harmonic Innovator in Jazz Piano

scholars all point to the period from 1959 to 1961, where Evans played with double bassist Scott LaFaro and drummer Paul Motian, as the true birth of the modern trio. December 1959 marked the recording of this trio's first album, *Portrait in Jazz*, which was released by Riverside Records shortly thereafter in 1960. This exceptional trio saw the collaboration of three prodigal musicians, all classically trained, and greatly experienced in jazz. Evans, saw these musicians as an opportunity to reinvent the trio setting completely, and he pushed both Motian and LaFaro to reach beyond what they were accustomed to in the trio setting. As a result, *Portrait in Jazz* holds a wildly different texture when compared to the trio albums that came before. Traditionally, the piano trio was not jazz chamber ensemble in the vein of say a classical string quartet, and instead, the piano trio served as an extension of solo jazz piano playing. The supporting bassist and drummer were exactly that, simply a means to accompany the pianist as they carried both the playing of the tune head and most of the improvisation choruses. This is not to say however, that prior piano trios did not value the contributions of the bass and drums, for even though all musicians in the combo took solos over choruses, Evan's trio reinvented the way in which these choruses would play out. Traditionally under the piano solo, the bass player would simply play a walking line while the drummer kept steady swing time. In contrast, Evan's combo saw the rise of both melodic and harmonic interplay. Take one of the standard *Autumn Leaves,* is often considered the height of the combo's use of this interplay technique on the album.[6] LaFaro, in the new style of Evan's combo, foregoes walking an accompanying bass line entirely until the introduction of the bridge at 0:28. He also surprisingly takes the first solo chorus, where for 10 measures, he is left unaccompanied by either Evans or Motian, which was 'unheard of' at the

[6] Bill Evans Trio. "Autumn Leaves." in Portrait in Jazz. Riverside Records. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r-Z8KuwI7Gc

time.[7] However, when Evans comes in at 0:56, it is not with the traditional style of comping that rhythm players typically employ. Instead, Evans opens communication to LaFaro, and responds to his improvised line with a similarly structured one, both melodically and rhythmically. Motian, at 1:07 joins into the conversation by lightly introducing eighth notes with his brushes. Evans notices this interjection and responds promptly with eighth notes of his own at three seconds later while LaFaro still speaks in the foreground. Within less than half a minute since the entry of Evans in LaFaro's solo chorus, there is the development of a conversational outbreak within the trio. From 1:20 onwards, LaFaro signals through his rising register and increased note frequency that he is building tension. Evans and Motian follow LaFaro's lead and increase their playing intensity. Finally, as the 32-bar form of the chorus comes to a close, Evans commandingly announces that he will take over from here on out, and this leads to an intense resolution of the built-up tension as Evans takes a more traditional chorus of improvisation at 2:00. Even though this one chorus only lasts a little over a minute and a half, it was significant enough to alter the way in which pianists and their trios approached improvisation. Evan's trio invented a new form of democratic jazz, where all instruments were equally valued. The bass did not simply walk, the drums did not simply keep time, instead the group fully interacted, and each acted as soloists playing as one cohesive unit.

Miles Davis: *Kind of Blue*

Kind of Blue, recorded by the Miles Davis Quintet in the spring of 1959, remains to this day, the best-selling jazz album of all time having sold over 5 million copies. It's staying power in the charts is no surprise, as *Kind of Blue* is representative of the seminal year in which jazz

[7] Darragh, Bill Evans: Harmonic Innovator in Jazz Piano

evolved into what we know it as today. The album came at a turning point in not only jazz, but also a turning point for Davis and the other artists who played in the quintet. The tail end of the 1950's saw the quintet locked into their record deal with the label Prestige, who wanted them exclusively to play and record bebop. Davis however, wanted to explore other possible avenues for jazz, as he and his quintet had been touring the country for the past decade playing bop day in and out. Bop's increasingly complex chord changes and rhythmic intensity were alienating even the top caliber of musicians, as they felt that bop was becoming a hinderance to musical creativity *Kind of Blue's* radical change in style and texture represents Davis's desire to not only move away from bop, but also his desire to move away from recording standards and other popular tunes as most jazz artists were doing at the time.[8] The album contains only original tracks composed by Davis and Evans, and all the tracks recorded have since become core standards of jazz. Primarily through the influence of Evans, the quintet takes a modal approach to every one of the tracks on the album. The introduction to the most famous track of the album "So What" represents the dramatic style shift that Evans brought with his modal approach to jazz.[9] The song opens with back and forth communication between Evans and the bassist, Paul (Mr. PC) Chambers. It takes over 30 seconds for the signature opening melodic figure to appear in the bass, and the horn players do not join until the 50 second mark. This marks a stark contrast from a bebop style opening from the same quintet as found in the track "I Could Write a Book" from Davis's album Relaxin'.[10] Analyzing "So What's" harmonic structure reveals even further differences from bebop standards; specifically, "So What", contains two keys within its 40-bar form.[11] For the first 32 bars, the tune resides in D minor, before reaching an 8-bar bridge in E

[8] Fred Kaplan, *1959: The Year Everything Changed*, 2009.
[9] Miles Davis. "So What". in Kind of Blue. Columbia Records.
[10] The Miles Davis Quintet. Relaxin' with the Miles Davis Quintet. Prestige Records, 1956, Stereo LP.
[11] W. Norton, So What Listening Guide.

minor (Figure 5).[12] The form repeats like this for the rest of the track, even under the improvisation sections. Again, this is a complete opposite of "I Could Write a Book", where chord changes happen nearly twice every measure with cadences signaling the rapid cycling between key centers gravitating towards the tonic key of C major (Figure 3). This reduction in harmonic frequency greatly impacts the way in which the combo approaches improvisation. Over bebop changes, musicians improvised using licks and figures that emphasized the placement of chord tones and extensions on the strong beats of two and four. This basic improvisational concept can be seen in the utilization of the common 'bebop scale' which includes a passing tone between two notes solely for the sake of allowing chord tones to align on down beats when played as eighth notes. For example, the bebop major scale extends upon the traditional major scale by adding a raised fifth scale degree as the passing tone, allowing the tonic note to be played on the downbeat of the following measure (Figure 2). In modal jazz, improvisation is based upon the collection of notes in the various modes related to the underlying chords. This change in focus of modal jazz gave way to an immediate sense of freedom for the improvisers, and they were able to play lines that expressed a wider palate of harmonic colors. The tenor saxophonist John Coltrane, in his improvisation, frequently uses the Lydian mode to evoke a bright color, as Shearing suggested in his *Lydian Chromatic Concept*. This brightness over the minor chord vamp of "So What" brings a surprising, harmonically outside, texture to the improvisation which at the time, was unprecedented. The birth of modal jazz acted as a signal to the jazz world; it was one that notified musicians that improvisation was no longer limited to the complex rules of bebop, and that musicians were no longer bound by the traditional harmony

[12] *The Real Book*, Sixth Edition, 2004.

rules they had been so accustomed to. Modal jazz brought with it a completely new approach to jazz that also contributed to the divergence of jazz into many subgenres in the post-bop era.

Concluding Thoughts

Bill Evans is the most studied jazz pianist of all time. His unique style has been absorbed by the collective wealth of jazz pianists worldwide and is now part of the general jazz piano repertoire. He not only changed the way that pianists approach jazz, but also the way in which all instrumentalist conceptualizes harmony and interplay. Evans was not the first classically trained pianist to enter the jazz world. In fact, jazz had not truly emerged as an academic art until the second half of the twentieth century. He was, without a doubt, the first pianist, to take his classical background and use it to truly innovate upon the conventions of jazz piano. To this day, like it is nearly impossible to find a rock musician who was not inspired by The Beatles, it is nearly impossible to find a jazz pianist who was not inspired by Bill Evans. Both *Portrait in Jazz* and *Kind of Blue* reside among the most significant jazz albums of all time, and this is due in great part, to the genius of Bill Evans behind the keys. Sadly though, like many great jazz musicians, Evan's life was tormented by tragedy and drug abuse. The sudden death of Scott LaFaro in a car accident en route to the Newport Jazz Festival in 1961 left Evans in a deep depression from which he never truly recovered. This eventually led to Evan's addiction to heroine which would kill him in September of 1980. His legacy though, did not die with him and he still influences jazz musicians to this day.

Images and Figures

Figure 1: The Lydian and Dorian modes

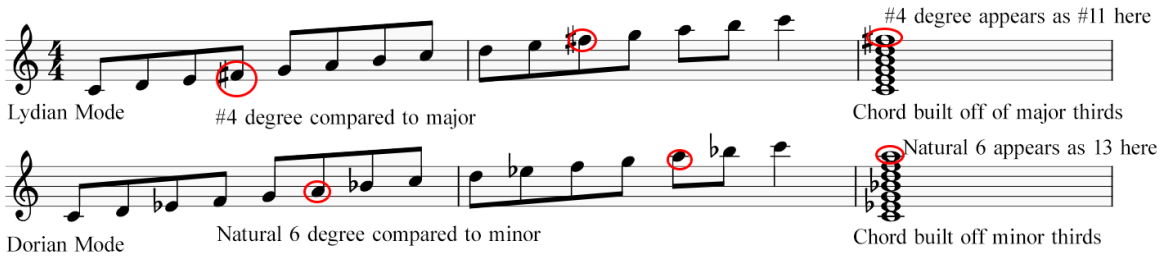

Figure 2: The Major Bebop Scale

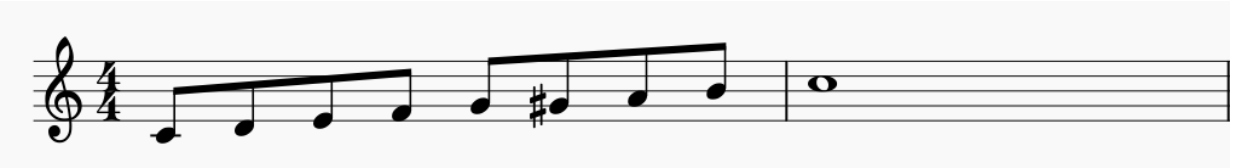

Figure 3: Lead sheet for “I Could Write a Book”

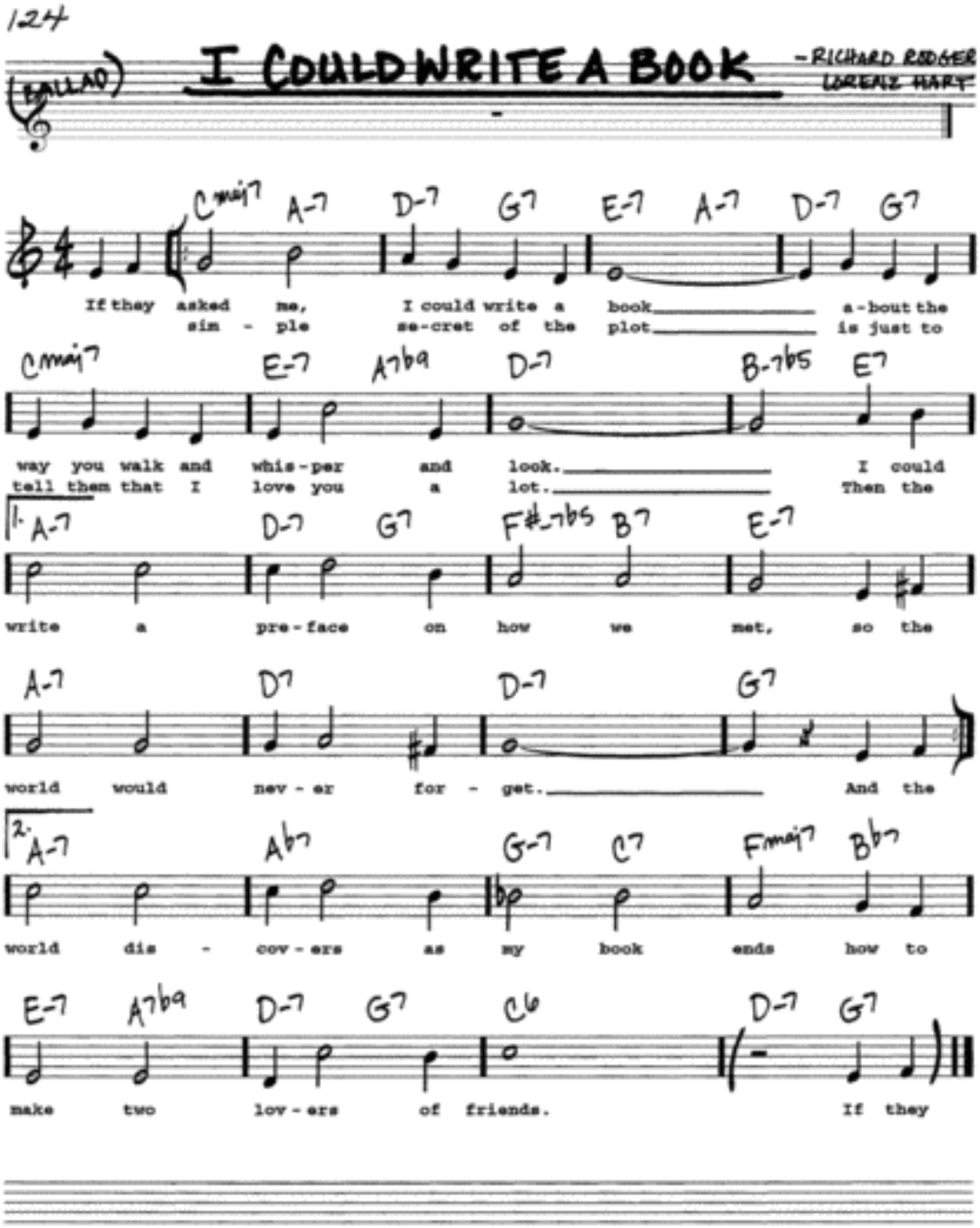

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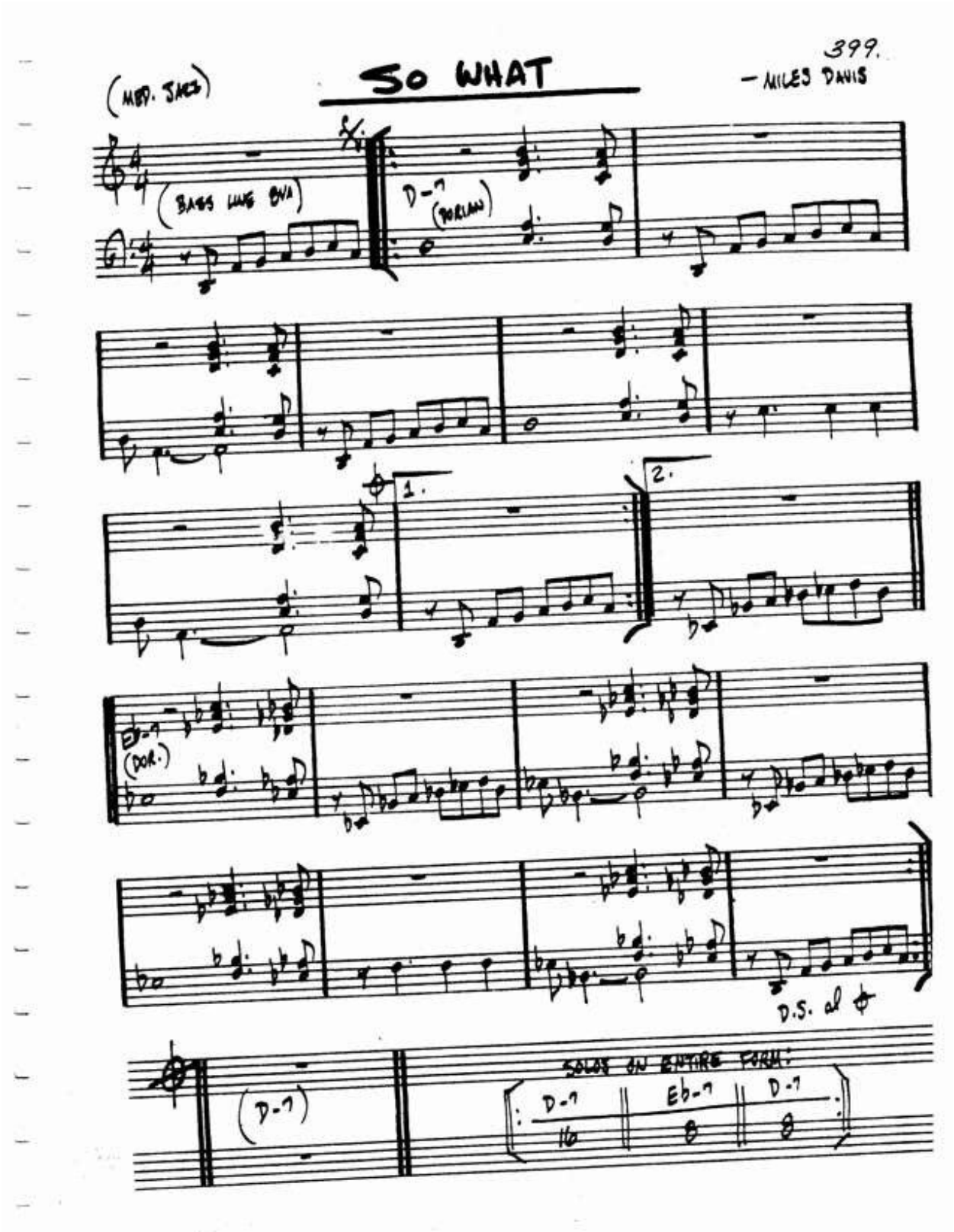
Figure 4: Lead Sheet for “So What”



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