

## Rex Stewart's solo on "Wild Man Blues" by Peter Bouffard

A multi-instrumentalist, Rex Stewart (1907-1967) joined Fletcher Henderson's Band as a cornetist in 1926. Feeling inadequate to fill the position earlier held by Louis Armstrong, he left after only a few months. He rejoined the band two years later and contributed significantly—displaying a style indebted to Armstrong. In 1934, he joined Duke Ellington's band where he became an important part of the Ellington sound for eleven years as he developed his characteristic "talking style" and "half-valve" effects.

For me, this 1957 performance from the video *Trumpet Kings*<sup>1</sup> is most compelling due to Stewart's poignantly vocal style and rhythmic fluidity—a characteristic which cannot be precisely represented in the notation. As Marsalis states on the video, it is "a lesson on how to play the blues." Characteristic of many early jazz compositions, it is not really a blues in the conventional sense of the form. Rather than a twelve bar blues, it is an ABAB song form. Nevertheless, there are strong blues harmonic elements. Foremost is the eventual progression from the tonic minor to a IV7 chord. Added to this is Stewart's use of blues vocabulary combined with his sense of variable intonation, articulation, and tone quality. His variable pitch inflection is produced through a combination of embouchure flexibility, half-valved smears, and alternate fingers (as seen in the video). Interestingly, he consistently employs quite unconventional fingerings—using the middle valve for concert G, first valve for concert F#, and on one occasion, first valve for a concert F! To me, this provides further evidence that Stewart was most concerned with conveying a certain vocal finesse, often at odds with conventional technique.

With respect to his rhythmic conception, a few passages stand out. In mm. 6 and 7, Stewart creates tension and blues feeling through his chromatically descending passage played increasingly behind the beat. To me, the notes (other than those belonging to D7) cannot be considered to have a harmonic relationship with the chords above due to their rhythmic placement and manner of execution. But rather they should be viewed as a chromatic octave descent to the dominant. He reveals his indebtedness to Armstrong in mm. 17-19, both in terms of rhythmic conception and melodic language. Stewart's rhythmic authority in the double-time passages is uncanny. His use of detached "straight eighths" in mm. 15 and 23 provides an inherent double-time feel. And his double-time three-against-four passage in mm. 25 and 26 followed by the beat of silence and an explosive reentrance in measure 27 seems almost too much for the rhythm section, causing a momentary contradiction of beat 1 leading into measure 29.

In terms of melodic/harmonic conception, Stewart does not seem to treat the notes beyond the root, third, fifth, and seventh as chordal extensions—overall exhibiting a more horizontal approach. In mm. 10, 13, and 15, he begins his passages similarly with what I have labeled as a double appoggiatura. While he may have been perfectly comfortable hearing the first note of each passage as a ninth, it seems to me that, in these cases, the two notes really act as tensions resolving to the tonic. His use of the flatted fifth (from concert G blues) creates a flatted ninth in mm. 12 and 27. But again, I think that these notes should not be considered as altered extensions (though they ostensibly are) but rather further interpolation of blues sonorities. In mm. 23-24, Stewart's "Old MacDonald" quote, with its E natural, along with the rhythm section's quasi "Don't Get Around Much Anymore" harmonic embellishment, gives the listener a sense of a local D major tonality.

A gradual expansion of range, dynamics, and rhythmic density reflects an ideal design. Beginning in the lower register, there is an initial climax at the end of the first sixteen bars. A final climax of tension and release is achieved beginning with the double-time metric displacement in mm. 25 and 26 followed by the almost unbearable tension created by the gaping silence and explosion to the apex in mm. 27-29.

Finally, perhaps the most compelling aspect of the performance is the feeling of "good fun" expressed both in the music itself and in the images on the video, even in the midst of the pervading minor and blues sonorities. Rather than feeling the "tragic resignation" so often depicted by the minor mode in other genres, one cannot resist smiling with delight when witnessing such a stirring example of the jazz tradition.

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<sup>1</sup> The video was published by Video Artists International in 1985. By comparing biographical information of the other musicians that I recognized on the tape, I concluded that the excerpt is from the CBS Television show *The Sound of Jazz*, which featured Stewart, Henry "Red" Allen, Coleman Hawkins, Billy Holiday, Count Basie and others. Subsequently, an audio LP was released (Columbia, C5 8040), later reissued on CD (Columbia, CK 45234). While the performances on the video tape and the LP differ, I was able to use the LP to determine the excerpt's title and personnel. Interestingly, Stewart's solo on the LP includes some of the same musical material as the video but, to me, lacks the high artistic nature evinced in the video excerpt.