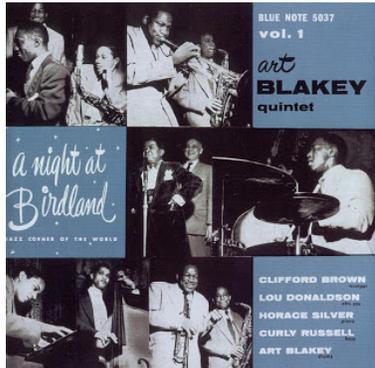


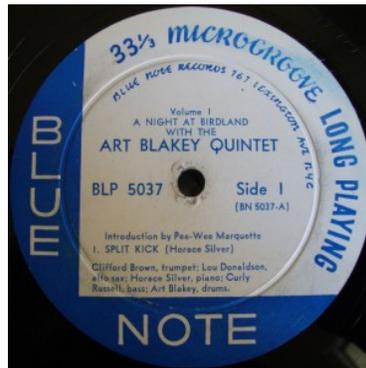
“A Night at Birdland, Volumes 1 and 2”—Art Blakey Quintet (1954)

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Essay by Alan Goldsher (guest post)*



Original album



Original label



Art Blakey

Due to its improvisational nature—and the nature of improvisation—jazz, when performed in a club or a concert hall for a throng of paying customers, can be exhilarating, or infuriating, or transcendent, or tedious, all in the span of 32 bars. But live jazz’s most endemic characteristic is that of the ephemeral, because the moment an improvised solo leaves the musician’s instrument, it’s gone, off into the ozone, never to be repeated in the exact manner. The instrumentalist can play the identical lick in the identical part of the identical song at the identical venue for seven consecutive nights, but it will never sound the same, *never*: maybe the tune’s tempo will be slightly slower, compelling the soloist to hold back, where he might have otherwise jumped the beat; maybe the temperature on the bandstand caused the bassist’s instrument to drift incrementally out of tune, which unconsciously tweaked the soloist’s attack to the point that he placed an accent on the high Bb rather than the high C, as he’d intended; maybe the lubricated gentleman in the front row shouted, “*Blow, saxophone player, blow!*” which broke the soloist’s concentration, which led to a cracked note. For the vast majority of the time, none of these factors make the improvisation any better or worse, just different.

Not only is live jazz ephemeral, it’s also elusive—some nights it’s there, and some nights, it ain’t. Again, there are dozens of factors that could positively or adversely affect an improviser’s approach to either their instrument or the composition: hunger, fatigue, stress, new love, lost love, illness, a shoddy sound system, an out-of-tune piano.

Considering the potential extenuating circumstances, a flawless evening of live jazz is impossible. Mistakes will be made—although many of these so-called mistakes end up sounding glorious—but some nights the stars align, and the listeners and musicians alike are blessed with near-perfection. Ninety-nine percent of those nights, the music suffers its usual fate—disappearance. But once in a while, we get lucky. Once in a while, the tapes are rolling, and the music is captured for all eternity. Such was the case with “A Night at Birdland,” an awe-inspiring outing from the Art Blakey Quintet. Recorded on February 21, 1954 at the famed New York jazz club named for bebop alto saxophone innovator Charlie Parker, and released later that year by Blue Note Records, the drummer’s date encapsulates all that was right and true about the burgeoning hard bop movement of the 1950s.

Though released under the banner of the Art Blakey Quintet, the record was not supposed to be a Blakey-led date, but rather a session by a collective that would be known as the Blue Note All-Stars. Blue Note’s co-founder Alfred Lion had lined up an impressive roster for the Birdland recording, including trumpeter Kenny Dorham, alto saxophonist Lou Donaldson, bassist Gene Ramey, and drummer Art Taylor. And while Taylor was a more-than-able timekeeper, Lion

loved the way Blakey—arguably the most powerful jazz percussionist of the day—propelled a band, and wanted to lock him down for the date. Unfortunately, due to a series of horrendous life decisions, Blakey was stranded in California, nearly penniless, unable to afford a return trip to his home base of New York. Donaldson explains:

Alfred Lion sent him money to come back to New York two or three times, but he never made it. He always had some excuse. Finally, Art bought a new car, a sedan, and drove it all the way across the country with Curly Russell. When he got back to the city, I ran into him. He was driving that car down the street, and he opened the window and said, “I’d like you to meet our new bass player [for the Birdland show], Curly.” I just busted out laughing.

Donaldson had recorded with the 23-year-old trumpet whiz kid Clifford Brown nine months prior to the Birdland date, and when the personnel for the upcoming session proved to be fluid, Donaldson went to Lion and stumped for Brown. “I loved Kenny Dorham,” Donaldson said, “but Clifford was sensational. He played just like [bebop trumpet great] Fats Navarro, and nobody on the scene imagined that *anybody* could play like Fats Navarro.” As for Silver, the pianist was a charter member of Donaldson’s working band, and his approach to bebop was similar to that of Donaldson’s—at once complex, accessible, and bluesy, steeped in the present with a respectful nod to the past—so the Connecticut-bred 28-year-old was a natural fit.

Once assembled, the band rehearsed a grand total of twice, and while that may seem paltry, in 1954—when musicians like Blakey were seemingly always on the road or in a studio—*any* allotted rehearsal time for a recording session was precious. The fact that Lion was able to reign in the quintet for a pair of run-throughs was, in and of itself, a coup. But from the time he launched Blue Note in 1939, Lion almost always made certain that when his artists took to the studio or the stage, they were as ready as possible.

The night of the recording, Blakey tracked down Birdland’s soprano-voiced emcee, William “Pee Wee” Marquette, and they made a deal: “Art gave Pee Wee a couple of dollars,” Donaldson said, “and told him to announce the band as the Art Blakey All-Stars, instead of the Blue Note All-Stars. After the introduction, Horace asked me, ‘What the heck is happening?’ and I said, ‘I don’t know, and I’m not going to ask.’ I didn’t want to rock the boat. I didn’t want to get kicked off of the date.”

Donaldson need not have worried. He was an integral part of the unit, as borne out by the fact that he was the first soloist on side one, track one, of volume one, Silver’s tune, “Split Kick.” Based on the chord changes of Harry Warren’s 1942 composition “The Way You Look Tonight,” the jaunty mid-tempo bopper offers Donaldson the opportunity to flaunt his Charlie Parker influence, an influence he did not always wear on his sleeve. For his part, Brown demonstrates an ability to build an improvisational narrative from the bottom up, an attribute not always found in a musician of his tender age. As is the case throughout the entire session, Blakey is right with Brown every step of the way; like the trumpeter, the drummer increases volume and intensity as the solo progresses, so by the time Brown has wound his way to the climax of his final chorus, both musicians are in a controlled frenzy that could have only come to pass in the presence of a live audience, outside of the cold confines of a recording studio. Silver follows with a steady solo that is a tasteful contrast to Donaldson and Brown’s animated spots, after which Brown and Donaldson trade thoughtful eight-bar phrases, which leads into a brief Blakey solo that is more subtle—but no less noteworthy—than his patented bombasts. Finally, the quintet restates the melody, and the eager audience offers the band a well-deserved ovation.

Arguably the highlight of both albums is another Silver tune, the aptly-titled “Quicksilver.” Silver, who would soon become one of jazz’s most respected small-band writers, again usurped a set of chord changes from a pop standard, this one being the Sigmund Romberg/Oscar

Hammerstein 1928 composition, “*Lover Come Back to Me*.” Here, Silver displays a sense of both humor and history in the 13th bar of the melody, arbitrarily quoting the opening phrase of the hoary 1911 standard, “*Oh, You Beautiful Doll*.” Without those Lion-mandated rehearsals, the tricky melody of “*Quicksilver*” would have been difficult to execute in such impressive fashion, but as it came to pass, the quintet was in complete lockstep, as if they had been performing together for years.

Saxophonist Wayne Shorter, a future member of Blakey’s revered collective, the *Jazz Messengers*, cited “*Quicksilver*” as a particularly influential and memorable moment in his development. In 1954, Shorter was in the Army, stationed at Fort Dix in New Jersey, when “*A Night at Birdland*” was released, and, as he explained:

Whenever I played “*Quicksilver*,” everybody said, “Hey, turn that up, that stuff is good,” even the guys in the motor pool who didn’t know anything about jazz. They wouldn’t stop talking about it, and I’d always be thinking, Damn, I’m in the Army, and all this stuff is happening at Birdland. And “*Quicksilver*” was the tune that made people see Horace, and Clifford, and Lou as individuals. It made people see their humanity, and what they brought to this collective.

This humanity is most evident on the session’s two Charlie Parker compositions, “*Confirmation*” and “*Now’s The Time*.” The latter is a simple 12-bar riff blues pulled from a 1944 Parker recording session, his first as a leader. Performed at a loping tempo, the improvisations are relaxed, chatty, and oftentimes amusing, e.g., Donaldson’s sly nod to “*As Time Goes By*” at the end of his first solo chorus, and Brown’s Louis Armstrong-influenced half-valve smears. The band’s adoration with the material and one another are the primary reasons why their comfort in their own musical skin is felt in every bar. As for “*Confirmation*,” Parker originally recorded the tune in 1946, and his growth as a composer was nothing short of astonishing. Unlike the vast majority of original bebop songs circa the mid-1940s, “*Confirmation*” features a unique set of chord changes that wasn’t culled from a pop standard, and Brown treats Parker’s tune with a reverence that revealed a heartfelt love for both Parker as a musician and jazz as an entity. (Author’s note: I first listened to “*A Night at Birdland*” in 1983—which, as of this writing, was over 30 years ago—and since then, I have yet to hear a trumpet solo from a live recording that has equaled Clifford’s “*Confirmation*” masterpiece.)

Since it first hit stores, Blue Note has released “*A Night at Birdland*” in several different iterations—it first saw the light of day as a pair of 10-inch albums, and 50 years later, the re-mastered re-release introduced a volume three, which included several alternate takes—tangible proof that it has been and always will be a lynchpin of their catalog. The album launched both Art Blakey’s and Horace Silver’s careers as bandleaders, and helped make Clifford Brown one of jazz’s most in-demand trumpeters. (To that end, almost immediately after the record’s release, Brown officially joined forces with drummer Max Roach, and the two co-lead one of the most enduring bebop bands of the era.)

For his part, Lou Donaldson carved out one of the longest careers in modern jazz history—his first date as a leader was in 1952, and he recorded well into the early 2000s—and even with the hundreds of sessions and live performances to his credit, he counts this as a life highlight. “I would’ve done it for no money,” Donaldson said. “It turned out to be a magnificent piece of music. I’ve heard a lot of records, and I’ve played on a lot of records, and no record is better than this one.”

Alan Goldsher is a music and culture writer and the author of 14 books, including “Hard Bop Academy: The Sidemen of Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers.” As a ghostwriter, he has

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* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.