

Meme and Variations: How Video Mashups of John Coltrane's *Giant Steps* Became a Thing

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The academic field of ethnomusicology has not been entirely successful at working with memes, or even music tied to moving image. Stemming from a historical split with the field of musicology over the location of musical culture, scholars in the field of ethnomusicology began to adopt tools from cultural anthropology (performance context, ethnography) rather than relying solely on texts (manuscripts, musical scores) for the creation of knowledge. Though my description of the fields here is both blunt and reductionist, it is worth pointing out that neither academic approach (ethnography or source studies) is set up well to delve into musical memes on YouTube, as this chapter will explore. So, here I build a case for the need to develop analytic tools through which to explore today's popular culture, though I will also end up borrowing from classic aspects of these fields as we approach the subject at hand: YouTube memes referencing John Coltrane's legendary 1960 recording, *Giant Steps* (Atlantic Records, 1960). We will find that the YouTube platform, as colloquially used, parallels the various layers of contextual, musical and social engagement inherent in the artform of jazz.

John Coltrane's '*Giant Steps*'

Before we investigate YouTube memes, it is best to understand some of the most important aspects of Coltrane's '*Giant Steps*' as a composition, as well as his iconic performance on the 1960 Atlantic Records album. Coltrane, one of the

towering figures of jazz saxophone and a developer of the jazz genre 'bebop' with trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie and others, was also a prolific composer of jazz pieces, and pushed the realm of jazz into new stylistic areas through many of his recordings and compositions. In 1959, Coltrane had been experimenting with a theoretic compositional style that embraced aspects of twelve-tone and modal music, and had just been working with Miles Davis on his *Kind of Blue* album (Columbia Records, 1959). Coltrane called a session for 5 May 1959 to record pieces for the upcoming album. He had assembled as an ensemble for this particular session, Tommy Flanagan on piano, Art Taylor on drum set and Paul Chambers on double bass.

In the usual fashion in jazz sessions, the musicians probably did not know in advance what pieces they would be playing that day. Legend has it that the musicians thought it would be a ballad session (slow, expressive pieces based on lyrical songs), but Coltrane instead handed them his new composition, 'Giant Steps'. The piece had a complex and incredibly difficult chordal structure (later referred to as the 'Coltrane changes') with a simple melody floating above. The chord progression was based on Coltrane's artistic interpretation of the mathematical relationships between musical scales called the 'circle of fifths,' and presented his innovative systematic pathway through them.¹ Coltrane had been thinking through larger ideas of music and the human experience, and his thought experiments had often taken him deep into the roles of the musician in society (Video example 1).² As Ben Leubner wrote in his review of Chris DeVito's compendium of Coltrane interviews *Coltrane on Coltrane*, the composer was justified in undertaking such introspective work as a part of his compositional process, as he had '... an unwavering confidence in the power of music and a humble self-awareness of his obligation, through his own talents, to develop and advance that power as far as he can, to touch and perhaps heal as many lives as possible by way of it.'³ Coltrane's new work was representative of this sort of deep thought, and was not immediately approachable because of it.

¹ Rich Pellegrin spells out this complexity in a nuanced and comprehensive article 'Motive, Collection, and Voice Leading in John Coltrane's "Giant Steps"', *Jazz Perspectives* 12, no. 1 (2020): 7–49.

² In this piece for the animated series 'Blank on Blank', Frank Kofsky's tape-recorded interview with John Coltrane in November 1966 – recorded a year before Coltrane's death at age 40 – has recently been set to images. In it, we can hear Coltrane discussing some of the larger ideas about music and the role of the musician that he tried to convey in his compositions. Blank on Blank, 'John Coltrane on Giant Steps | Blank on Blank', *YouTube video*, 00:04:57, 12 May 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZF0EvYd_Bgw.

³ Chris DeVito (ed.), *Coltrane on Coltrane: The John Coltrane Interviews* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2010); Ben Leubner, 'Coltrane on Coltrane: The John Coltrane Interviews,' *Critical Studies in Improvisation* 6, no. 2 (2010), 2.

When he composed ‘*Giant Steps*’, Coltrane placed onto his complex chord changes a melody that was more functional than lyrical. As jazz critic Nat Hentoff wrote for the album’s liner notes, ‘The bass line is kind of a loping one. It goes from minor thirds to fourths, kind of a lop-sided pattern in contrast to moving strictly in fourths or in half-steps.’⁴ Or as pianist Tommy Flanagan later explained, ‘I don’t think there was any melody, just the chord sequence, which spells out the melody, practically.’⁵ The melody was in service of the difficult chord progression – the opposite of most jazz pieces, in which a good melody would drive logical and expressive chording.

Again, jazz legend has it that in the recording session, Coltrane counted off the tempo for the piece – a blistering 300 BPM – and the musicians, having expected a ballad, suddenly had to dive in headfirst and scramble to keep up, as we can hear in Video example 2.⁶ A jazz piece usually starts with the statement of the melody, or ‘head’ (often played two times), followed by a series of individual improvisations over the repeated structure of that melody, with a return to a statement of the melody just before ending the piece. In this recording, Coltrane plays the ‘head’ from the start of the recording to the 0:13 mark, and then repeats it, ending the repeat at 0:26. Flanagan backs him with chords (the Coltrane changes) on the piano, while Chambers plays through the changes on double bass and Taylor keeps time on the drums. After the second time through the ‘head’, Coltrane takes the first solo, playing immediately at a breakneck pace from the 26-second mark to 2:55 in a virtuosic series of improvisations that sticks strictly to the chordal structure and yet drives the piece forward with a fierce intensity. Tommy Flanagan is next to take a solo, and immediately is in over his head. By the 3:30 mark, he is clearly ‘drowning’ in jazz parlance (a term meaning floundering, or struggling to keep up), and switches back to chords to feebly end his solo at 3:44. Coltrane rushes back in with a second improvised solo, playing even more brilliantly than before from 3:44 to 4:10, wherein he returns to play the ‘head’, repeats it, and then ends the recording with a little outside-of-time saxophone flourish.

In jazz circles, this is one of the most revered pieces in the history of the genre – in part because of the difficulty of its chord changes (Video example 3),

⁴ Nat Hentoff, ‘Liner Notes,’ John Coltrane, et al. *Giant Steps*. Atlantic Records, 1960.

⁵ Lewis Porter, *John Coltrane: His Life and Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 155.

⁶ Jazzman 2696, ‘Giant Steps,’ *YouTube video*, 00:04:46, 30 September 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=30FTr6G53VU>.

and in part because of the effervescent playing by John Coltrane in his improvised solos (jazz fans also love a good story, and the details behind Flanagan's botched solo is a lovely parallel narrative to this masterpiece).⁷ Today's students of jazz – especially saxophone players – will transcribe, note by note, Coltrane's improvised solos on this recording as a rite of passage and as a means to better understand this important piece from Coltrane's musical perspective (Video example 4).⁸ Tony Whyton, in his piece on Coltrane fandom, details this reverence for his compositions and recordings, writing that '... Coltrane is now firmly established as an iconic figure who reinforces the core values and mythologies of the jazz tradition ... Indeed, Coltrane's works, up to and including *A Love Supreme*, are idolized and presented as seminal and canonical.'⁹

Jazz musicians also tend to 'stand on the shoulders of giants' by quoting previous important works in their own improvisations through short referential (and reverential) homages. Predating and paralleling the 'sample' in rap and hip-hop, these short and familiar melodic lines are often dropped into an improvised solo, and function to illustrate that the soloist has 'done their homework' in learning the standard jazz repertoire, as well as to show off their cleverness and in-the-moment mental nimbleness to those listeners who are 'in the know'. This tradition of recontextualizing short referential snippets into other pieces is a hallmark of jazz, and as we will see shortly, also of meme culture.

Meme . . .

A meme is often referred to generically as a unit of cultural transmission, though in practice, today's users of social media platforms will better understand a meme as an easily-sharable short video or image, often with an intricate and fleeting web of cultural references. Most publications on memes suggest that the modern concept was inspired by the Italian geneticist L. L. Cavalli-Sforza working with biologist Marcus Feldman as they explored the idea of 'cultural

⁷ In the Vox series 'Earworm', musicians Braxton Cook and Adam Neely discuss and demonstrate the compositional music theory behind the complex 'Coltrane changes'. 'The most feared song in jazz, explained.' Vox, 'The most feared song in jazz, explained,' *You Tube video*, 00:10:49, 12 November 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=62tIvfp9A2w>.

⁸ dancohen, 'Animated Sheet Music: "Giant Steps" by John Coltrane,' *You Tube video*, 00:04:51, 3 January 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2kotK9FNEYU>.

⁹ Tony Whyton, 'Song of Praise: Musicians, Myths and the "Cult" of John Coltrane,' in *Popular Music Fandom*, ed. Mark Duffett (New York: Routledge, 2014), 109.

transmission and evolution.¹⁰ But Richard Dawkins' 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* had already presented some of the same ideas, built in part on concepts presented by George C. Williams in his 1966 book *Adaptation and Natural Selection*.¹¹ For our purposes, Elliott Oring's 1973 article 'Mimetics and Folkloristics', while also referencing Dawkins ideas, breaks down the influential factors of a meme for our purposes, while also giving us insight into its function:

Memes are entities that can be imitated and copied, and thus constitute a new kind of replicator launching a new kind of evolution. However, they are selected for on the same basis as those first (genetic) replicators in the primeval soup – longevity, fecundity and copying fidelity. Thus, memes, like genes, are selfish and seek (again, using Dawkins' shorthand) to occupy as many brains as possible.¹²

Seeing the importance of video-based memes in my students' lives, I tried to learn about them through an emic perspective. University of Southern California student Navarro Peck walked me through the odd and often slippery history of popular memes, and the layers of referential meaning they build upon. As biologists and geneticists studying the genome of *drosophila melanogaster* (the common fruit fly) have noted, an organism that can reproduce and mutate in the course of a few days is difficult to keep up with, but also allows for quick insights and trackable trends. My field (as mentioned above) does not necessarily have the tools to actively engage with these fleeting cultural documents, as memes operate in a rather liminal space (or maybe as a non-Newtonian substance) – both as a recorded document, and as a living and changing cultural token and referent. As Steve Wixon has noted in his important article on representation in performance.

The categories live and recorded can be usefully conceptualized in relation to their spectator-auditors (consumers). The live is characterized by the spatial co-presence and temporal simultaneity of audience and posited event. The recorded is characterized by the event's spatial absence and temporal anteriority.¹³

¹⁰ Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza and Marcus W. Feldman, *Cultural Transmission and Evolution: A Quantitative Approach* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981).

¹¹ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976); George C. Williams, *Adaptation and Natural Selection: A Critique of Some Current Evolutionary Thought* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1966).

¹² Elliott Oring, 'Memetics and Folkloristics – The Theory,' *Western Folklife* 73, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 438.

¹³ Steve Wurtzler, 'She Sang Live, But the Microphone Was Turned Off: The Live, the Recorded, and the Subject of Representation,' in *Sound Theory, Sound Practice*, ed Rick Altman (New York: Routledge, 1992), 89.

In the case of memes, the 'live' and 'recorded' are in some way blurred, and the category of 'producer' should probably be added (or 'produser' as Axel Bruns writes), as the consumer is often also a producer, or at very least (as consumers 'like and share') a modifier and replicator.¹⁴

Recent scholars working with memes and virality have come up with various means through which one can study the digital life and human interface of a meme. Limor Shifman has theorized a more modern approach to Dawkins' initial ideas of longevity, fecundity and copying fidelity to include stages of viral dissemination, giving us tools through which to best understand a meme's circulation. 'Three main attributes ascribed to memes are particularly relevant to the analysis of contemporary digital culture: (1) a gradual propagation from individuals to society, (2) reproduction via copying and imitation, and (3) diffusion through competition and selection.'¹⁵ Shifman goes on to suggest that the higher-level processes beyond simple propagation – imitation, repackaging, mimicry and remix – require a deeper engagement with the meme.¹⁶ Ryan M. Milner suggests that these deeper engagements often rely on specialization in creative technologies – such as experience with and access to audio or video editing software – and that memetic responses incorporating multimodality are fundamentally more engaging:

Multimodality – in its intense integration of word, image, audio, video and hypertext – facilitates the vibrant creative expression and conversation at the heart of memetic media. Some forms of this expression – like participating in a hashtag or uploading a photo – are widely accessible. Some forms – like Photoshopping or AutoTuning – are more specialized. Through these practices, mediated conversations are not just linguistic, or even just visual. Instead, these conversations rely on an array of communicative forms. And commentary spills out from these multiple sources.¹⁷

With all this in mind, I decided to approach the subject of video-based musical memes by enhancing the tools that I already have from the field of ethnomusicology: contextual research and personal ethnographic interviews, paired with the above ideas on process and circulation.¹⁸ Together, Navarro and

¹⁴ See Axel Bruns' discussions on the changing role of the 'produser' and consumer in Web 2.0 in *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008).

¹⁵ Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 2013), 18.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 19–20.

¹⁷ Ryan M. Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2016), 218.

¹⁸ Though I am very much anticipating Paula Harper's forthcoming book, *Viral Musicking and the Rise of Noisy Platforms*.

I assembled a list of roughly forty video-based memes referencing John Coltrane's 'Giant Steps'. Though we noted that memes often spread through social media and person-to-person transfer, most of the longer-form video memes were hosted on YouTube. In a way, this platform is perfect for the study of musical memes, as it presents content with an upload date and account name, provides easy content links to share and facilitates a section for comment from viewers. With additional assistance from independent meme researcher Zev Spencer-Shapiro, we sorted them chronologically, and I reached out to the creators of each meme for an interview.

One of the earliest 'Giant Steps' memes, which was also the most referenced by other meme creators (and whose creator was by far the most difficult to track down) was a video entitled 'Giant Steps in C (Live)'. Originally posted on 22 January 2014, the GiantStepsInC YouTube account had posted no other content, and included no obvious means of contacting the creator. The video presented the audio of Coltrane's 'Giant Steps' with video from a different performance, but the audio had been manipulated to iron out every chord to C major – thereby rendering the Coltrane changes moot. In April 2020, the video had 475,000 views and more than a thousand comments ranging from disbelief to deep engagement with the aspects of jazz culture being referenced (Video example 5).¹⁹ My research found mentions of 'Giant Steps in C (Live)' in various chat boards, with some extended discussions in a Facebook group called 'The Shitposting of Jazz to Come' and on various jazz subreddits.²⁰ With no leads on the creator, I left a hopeful note in the 'Giant Steps in C (Live)' YouTube comments with contact information, and waited.

Fortunately, Caleb Curtis saw my comment a few weeks later, and agreed to an interview on his work. Curtis is an active jazz instrumentalist working in New York City, and had made the original audio of 'Giant Steps in C (Live)' as an experiment with music manipulation software:

I think I originally ... there are these videos that – I think it's called Major to Minor or something like that, where they're taking pop tunes or Beatles tunes and turning them minor. I found those somewhere and wanted to know how they did that – how that happened. I didn't understand what the technology was.

¹⁹ GiantStepsInC, 'Giant Steps in C (Live)', *YouTube video*, 00:04:43, 22 January 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200408164342/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTYzYpb1MY0&app=desktop>.

²⁰ 'The Shitposting of Jazz to Come.' Facebook group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/745582758958047/>.

Somehow I figured out that it was a plug-in from Zynaptiq called Pitchmap. I wanted to see what was possible. I made a handful of clips: like a whole tone version of ‘Donna Lee’. Just trying to think of different things to map different melodies – like trying to map a major version of ‘So What’ . . . a major version of “Moanin’.”²¹

The Pitchmap software, created by the software company Zynaptiq, allows users to apply pitch-adjusting filters to recorded sound in much the same way that the familiar pitch-correcting software AutoTune functions for single notes (Video example 6).²² Often used to shift songs between major keys and minor keys, Pitchmap-adjusted parodies (or recontextualizations) can be found across YouTube, with effects such as this version of Henry Mancini’s ‘Pink Panther Theme’ (1963), which has been adjusted to a major key (Video example 7).²³

Curtis explained that Coltrane’s ‘*Giant Steps*’ was a perfect source for chordal recontextualization, and a jazz idol ripe for parody. As a jazz saxophone student in college, he ‘learned the Coltrane solo on it, and spent time wrestling the progressions and trying to improvise within it. For a long time it was one of the most mysterious things.’²⁴ With Pitchmap software, he made a version in which every chord was ironed out to a C major, and every note of Coltrane’s lauded solo was within the C major scale. Though he had been experimenting with other jazz standards and playing them to friends, Coltrane’s piece ‘elicited the greatest reaction. Because of course, think about it – it turns up the primary element of the song! I love the irreverence of the whole thing. There’s a deep love for Coltrane and it wouldn’t make this without that.’²⁵

Curtis deliberately chose the most appropriate hosting site for his creation, realizing that it would have more impact if it was mapped with video (Video example 8):²⁶

I had the melody, and I had it in Dropbox – just the audio – and I sent it (in November or December 2013) to a couple of people and showed it to a couple of

²¹ Personal interview with Caleb Curtis, 11 October 2019.

²² Production Expert, ‘Zynaptiq Pitchmap Review’, *YouTube video*, 00:07:02, 16 November 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O6T0S2D1dBU>.

²³ Oleg Berg, ‘Pink Panther Theme in Major Key’, *YouTube video*, 00:02:14, 25 June 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2BkEorFwJGg>.

²⁴ Personal interview with Caleb Curtis.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Guillermo Arriagada R., ‘John Coltrane Quartet – Impressions’, *YouTube video*, 00:14:05, 8 February 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=03juO5oS2gg>.

people, then it started to make its way around. And then I was like, I want to be able to see what happens, how many times it gets listened to or whatever. I thought it would be funny to put a video to it. So I found a video from (John Coltrane's composition) 'Impressions' and it was sort of a similar tempo, and so I downloaded the video of 'Impressions' and threw it into Final Cut or Premier or something and started to try to edit. I spent an hour trying to make it look like they were playing – to try to line up the breath when Coltrane was breathing, and make the ride cymbal look sorta like it was right. I didn't want it to be on Vine, or a personal YouTube channel, because I just want attribution – I didn't want to incur anyone's wrath. I didn't want the attention if there was any kind of copyright issue.²⁷

The jazz world and meme world overlapped in their reactions – with responses coming in the form of criticisms and applause on message boards, and uploads of video responses in the form of informed memes. Jazz purists called the piece



Figure 10.1 Caleb Curtis' 'Giant Steps in C [Live]', originally uploaded to YouTube on 22 January 2014. Curtis edited historic footage from a performance of Coltrane's 'Impressions' to fit his chordal parody of Coltrane's 'Giant Steps', 'Giant Steps in C [Live]' (18 March 2022).

²⁷ Personal interview with Caleb Curtis.

everything from ‘an abomination’ to ‘pure genius’, while many tried to figure out who had posted the video – and why.²⁸ One video response that immediately stood out was in the form of a transcription of the ‘Giant Steps in C (Live)’ melody and solo – something that a jazz performer would do with any iconic Coltrane piece (Video example 9).²⁹ Curtis kept an eye on the responses, mentioning that:

I love it when they think they know my motivations for it. There are a couple of things that happened that just bring me so much joy. The first one was the transcription. It’s a scrolling video of the solo with the chord changes – a sendup of what everyone is doing, except with a C over every bar.³⁰

He is still amazed that the video has had so much attention, especially as the videos he has posted in his personal YouTube account – many featuring his own performances on saxophone and trumpet – have had drastically fewer views:

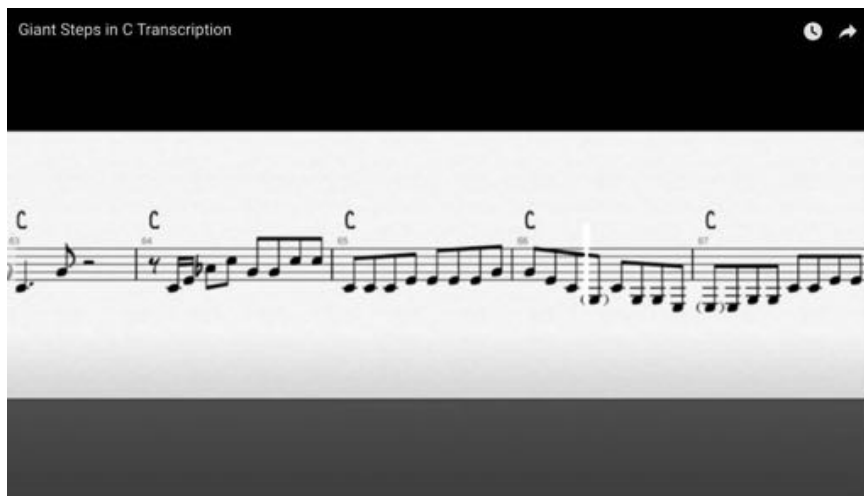


Figure 10.2 Kaz Takasugi uploaded his ‘Giant Steps in C Transcription’ to YouTube on 1 January 2016. The single chord transcription is a sendup of a deep rite of passage in jazz – transcribing every note of an improvised Coltrane solo to understand its complexity, ‘Giant Steps in C Transcription’ (1 January 2016).

²⁸ GiantStepsInC, ‘Giant Steps in C (Live)’, *YouTube video*, 00:04:43, 22 January 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200408164342/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTYzYpb1MY0&app=desktop>.

²⁹ Kaz Takasugi, ‘Giant Steps in C Transcription’, *YouTube video*, 00:02:57, 1 January 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vPFh5_hTM28.

³⁰ Personal correspondence with Caleb Curtis, 11 October 2019.

I was just fucking around. It was funny, and I realized that it might have some legs to it, and so I made it more available, and then just watched it go. I don't aspire to have 500,000 views on my videos. It would be nice, but it's not something I'm trying to design. And so it's sort of funny and interesting to see it do it on its own, with no effort.³¹

. . . and variations

Curtis had sent his audio version around to friends more than a year before posting it with video on YouTube on 22 January 2014. With the enthusiastic discussions and comments on 'The Shitposting of Jazz to Come' Facebook page and elsewhere, a number of video responses began popping up, and the meme took off. We will be looking at those responses in a moment, but must mention two outlier videos first.

Brad Smith had posted a Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) transcription version of '*Giant Steps*' almost two years before Curtis' '*Giant Steps in C (Live)*'. The sound is distinctive to eight-bit music, as was used in video gaming consoles with low processing speed and memory – especially Nintendo systems. Smith uploaded to YouTube an NES version of '*Giant Steps*' on 25 November 2012, complete with transcribed and recreated saxophone and piano solos (Video example 10).³² Smith noted that he had come from both a jazz and computer science background, mentioning that 'yes you could call me a jazz fan. I played trombone in jazz bands throughout high school and university. At university I studied music and computer science'.³³

His original idea was to transcribe the piece, and potentially use the transcription to generate similar version of Coltrane's solo through applied AI:

I like to transcribe music, either to learn about it or learn how to play it. '*Giant Steps*' seemed like a fun challenge; a little bit unusual compared to other transcriptions I had done before. The great density of notes, but also their strange uniformity made it a bit unique. I transcribed a lot of it sometime around 2002, and wondered if I could make a computer generate endless/infinite variations of that solo. I put a pin in that idea for a rainy day.³⁴

³¹ Ibid.

³² Brad Smith, '*Giant Steps – NES*', *YouTube video*, 00:04:43, 25 November 2012, <https://youtu.be/i5vyQO81qNc>.

³³ Personal correspondence with Brad Smith, 16 September 2019.

³⁴ Ibid.

Returning to it later, he incorporated the transcription into a project involving the Nintendo sound:

A decade later I had become interested in the NES, and had been experimenting with programming games and demos and music for it. I remembered that idea I'd had for 'Giant Steps' and figured it could fit on the NES. I went back and finished my transcription, getting the bass and that very important and delicate piano solo as well, and then I wrote the NES program to play it.³⁵

Smith does not think that his project fits into the recent history of 'Giant Steps' memes. He noted that 'Well, the question of it being a recent meme is not really my story,' and suggested that many of the people who became interested in the phenomenon may have done so through exposure to the Vox video with Braxton Cook and Adam Neely (mentioned above), which was published on 12 November 2018.³⁶

Another outlier video was created by Ilja Reijngoud, and references both 'Giant Steps' and the disco supergroup The Bee Gees (Video example 11).³⁷ Reijngoud's video, entitled 'Giant Steps Bee Gees' was uploaded to YouTube on 21 January 2014 – the day before 'Giant Steps in C (Live)'! Paralleling the comments by Curtis above, Reijngoud's video had more success than his other more 'serious' jazz videos:

The funny thing is that I recorded this 'Giant Steps Bee Gees' thing as a joke. I even sang the vocals myself and played a one-take simple trombone solo over it. And shortly after that it became quite popular on YouTube (at least it had more success than my regular recordings as a jazz trombone player on YouTube haha).³⁸

Many of the video memes that referenced 'Giant Steps' began to spring up in 2018, and often referenced other trends in meme culture. Diane Wong's 'Giant Step (Dubstep Remix)' was posted to YouTube on 29 March 2018, and referenced both the moon landing and the electronic dance music (EDM) subgenre called dubstep (Video example 12).³⁹ Wong mentioned that she made the video for her Electronic Writing & Production class while in music school. 'I did this mainly

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ilja Reijngoud, 'Giant Steps The BeeGees,' *YouTube video*, 00:01:04, 21 January 2014, <https://youtu.be/wHV6gMLZkmY>.

³⁸ Personal correspondence with Ilja Reijngoud, 16 September 2019.

³⁹ Wong Diane, 'Giant Step (Dubstep Remix),' *YouTube video*, 00:02:45, 29 March 2018, <https://youtu.be/hDsIYGdYGps>.

because I had to do a dubstep project, and I thought of doing Giant “step” and included one small “step” – just as a joke and to have some fun with my assignment. Haha.⁴⁰

Wong even included in her video some footage from the ‘Impressions’ video that Curtis had used in creating his ‘Giant Steps in C (Live)’ video. Wong knew that ‘*Giant Steps*’ was an iconic tune in jazz circles, and though she didn’t personally identify with it, she realized its potential for satire.

It definitely was a tune that people talked about in harmony classes and like a staple tune that you would learn if you are a jazz musician – and thus some inside joke among music college students, I think, to poke fun at. I myself was not a performance major, so not as much of a mountain for me to climb personally.⁴¹

Ian Ostaszewski was not a stranger to mashups when he created ‘Giant Steps/Work’, which was uploaded to YouTube on 15 January 2019. He noted that ‘I’d definitely seen some similar videos and stuff like that before. I love mashups and I’ve made a lot of them.’⁴² Ostaszewski combined the Coltrane changes with Rihanna’s ‘Work’ (2016) to make a recontextualized mashup (Video example 13).⁴³

So I was just inspired by edits like these because I thought they were hilarious and wanted to try doing something similar. I’m not sure where I specifically got the idea for ‘Work/Giant Steps’, the only thing I can remember is one day I randomly noticed how the melody phrases are a little similar – the way ‘Work’ repeats the same word five times and ‘*Giant Steps*’ has five notes followed by a slight pause. That’s when I realized I could just combine them, overlay one song with the other because it might be surprising and funny.⁴⁴

Even pianist Tommy Flanagan did not escape meme attention, as the video entitled ‘Tommy Flannagan [sic] Solos on Giant Steps (Rare Footage)’ was uploaded to YouTube on 20 May 2018 (Video example 14).⁴⁵ In this piece, the creator uses images from the Japanese manga *Golden Boy* (a static visual meme in itself), while depicting Flanagan ‘drowning’ during his solo during the classic

⁴⁰ Personal correspondence with Diane Wong, 17 September 2019.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Personal correspondence with Ian Ostaszewski, 16 September 2019.

⁴³ Ian Ostaszewski, ‘Work by Rihanna but it’s Giant Steps by John Coltrane,’ *YouTube video*, 00:00:31, 15 January 2019, <https://youtu.be/oqmVs2Orb-0>.

⁴⁴ Personal interview with Ian Ostaszewski.

⁴⁵ andyydna101, ‘Tommy Flannagan Solos on Giant Steps (Rare Footage),’ *YouTube video*, 00:00:44, 20 May 2018, https://youtu.be/subUre6o_Qk.

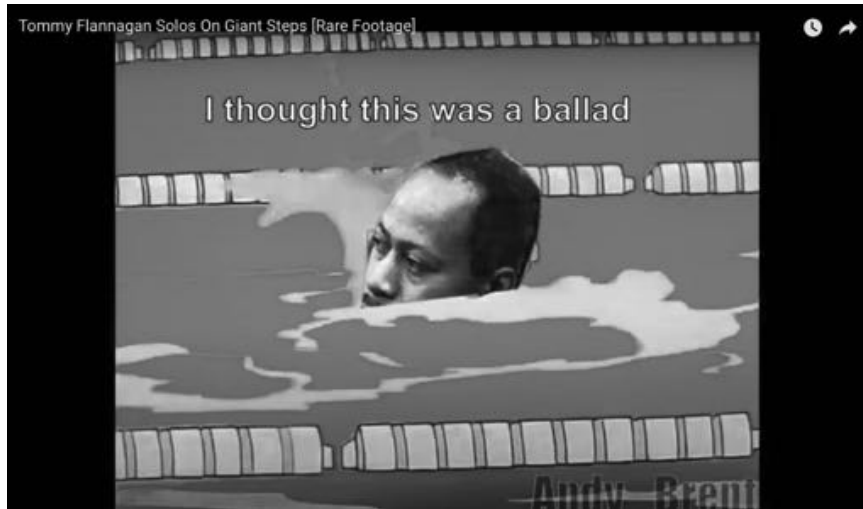


Figure 10.3 A mashup of Tommy Flanagan’s piano solo on ‘*Giant Steps*’ with images from the popular manga ‘*Golden Boy*’, uploaded to the YouTube account andyyna101 on 20 May 2018. Andy Brent plays on the jazz term ‘drowning’ (not being able to keep up) in the classic session where Flanagan had thought he would be recording slower and more esoteric ballads, ‘Tommy Flanagan Solos On Giant Steps [Rare Footage]’ (21 May 2018).

1959 recording session. Surrounding the floundering Flanagan are the other members of the ensemble, with Coltrane himself blowing a saxophone mouthpiece reframed to look like a lifeguard’s whistle. At one point in the video, the words ‘I thought this was a ballad’ scroll past, indicating that the creator is steeped in jazz lore and the specific history of the ‘*Giant Steps*’ recording session. The visual references in this piece also mark an intersectional moment between jazz and meme worlds, as iconic images from *Golden Boy* are paired with homages to iconic instrumentalists.⁴⁶

As meme culture began to drive video postings on the theme of ‘*Giant Steps*’ or the Coltrane changes in 2019, heady mashups became the predominant genre in uploads. Jasper Swunk quickly created and posted at least nine relevant videos – from a Baroque harpsicord performance with the ‘*Giant Steps*’ chord progression, to a mashup with the popular earworm ‘Baby Shark’ (Video example

⁴⁶ It is worth noting here that this article does not take on the rich and nuanced area of visual imagery in meme culture, as that could fill an entire book by itself!

15).⁴⁷ Swunk was very aware of trends in popular culture, and decided to take on ‘*Giant Steps*’ as the basis for a number of his projects:

I heard the rumour about ‘*Giant Steps*’ being hard to play in a book. I think it was at that time that I rolled in the Facebook group ‘the Shitposting of Jazz to Come’, where ‘*Giant Steps*’ slowly became popular as a reference, which re-sparked my interest. With all the shitposting I got pieces of information about how to interpret the changes and I started practising the chords, now with some harmonic context.⁴⁸

Swunk had seen Curtis’ work (among many others), and decided to try his hand at reworking another popular earworm for laughs:

Somehow ‘Giant Steps in C (Live)’ grabbed my attention about then. I guess that must have been the moment I felt the urge to take ‘*Giant Steps*’ and do all sorts of things with it, just ‘for the lolz’. And suddenly the popular meme was ‘Baby Shark’, turning up everywhere. Every Facebook music group, every discord guild, every classroom in elementary school . . . It was the Rick Roll of the month I guess.⁴⁹

By 2019, ‘*Giant Steps*’ memes quickly took a strange turn and began to splinter into videos referencing multiple other parallel memes. Examples of this would include ‘John Coaltrain – Thomas the Giant Engine (Rare) (1962)’ posted to an account named The Cursed Recordings of the Spirit of Jazz, or Simon Fransman’s ‘Katy Perry’s “Giant Steps” but it’s John Coltrane’s “Roar” but it’s smooth jazz’ in which the chords of Katy Perry’s ‘Roar’ (2013) are transmogrified into the Coltrane changes, while also being recontextualized as smooth jazz (Video example 16).⁵⁰ Memes referencing ‘*Giant Steps*’ from this moment on seem to be reaching to meme culture for laughs and recognition, rather than to the jazz world. Many can be viewed on the accompanying YouTube playlist, though I personally advise you to restrain yourself.

⁴⁷ jasperiscool, ‘Funky Swunk – Baby Steps,’ *YouTube video*, 00:01:20, 28 February 2019, <https://youtu.be/fyPVSQBkVmM>.

⁴⁸ Personal correspondence with Jasper Swunk, 23 September 2019.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Simon Fransman, ‘Katy Perrys “Giant Steps” but it’s John Coltrane’s “Roar” but it’s smooth jazz,’ *YouTube video*, 00:01:28, 17 January 2019, <https://youtu.be/0WiNuiVm6o>.



Figure 10.4 The musical theme from *Thomas the Tank Engine* set to the Coltrane changes was uploaded to the YouTube account ‘The Cursed Recordings of the Spirit of Jazz’ on 13 November 2016, ‘John Coaltrain – Thomas the Giant Engine (Rare) (1962)’ (13 November 2016).

Coda

Meme culture, satire and parody are contextual, and are not always fully understood outside of their bounded ecosystem or echo chamber. Caleb Curtis mentioned a moment in which his ‘Giant Steps in C (Live)’ returned to him in a rather surprising fashion, giving light to non-contextual misunderstandings and the secret lives of memes. ‘I was a guest on a concert. After I got off (stage) I had a message from a buddy of mine, and he said “Have you seen this?” and sent me this clip from Facebook.’⁵¹ His friend had sent him a clip from an Italian documentary on jazz, in which the narrator was discussing the difficult chord changes in John Coltrane’s ‘*Giant Steps*’, and playing video from ‘Giant Steps in C (Live)’ (Video example 17).⁵²

To be totally honest, I was done with the gig, and I got a little stoned, and I was like ‘Is this real life?’ I found out that what they were talking about in the clip was

⁵¹ Personal interview with Caleb Curtis.

⁵² Scott Spencer, ‘Giant Steps Italian Documentary’, *YouTube video*, 00:00:55, 17 March 2022, https://youtu.be/cRqiRL_1SUo.

his harmonic innovation, and how important Coltrane changes are in jazz. I imagine the producer was like ‘Go get me video of “Giant Steps”’. And there isn’t video of ‘Giant Steps’ – there’s really only that recording – from the record. I was not sure what I was seeing, because it was so bizarre. It was so far from anything I could have imagined. It had travelled over there and someone had gotten it and just because I called it ‘Giant Steps in C (Live)’. I was totally taken aback. This exposed their deep ignorance on the topic.⁵³

Curtis’ creation, ‘Giant Steps in C (Live)’ was removed from YouTube in 2021. The original post is currently marked with ‘Video unavailable. This video is no longer available due to a copyright claim by Michael B. Frisch’ (Video example 18).⁵⁴ My research shows that Michael B. Frisch is a partner with the law firm Herbsman, Hafer, Weber & Frisch, LLP, an intellectual property firm based in New York City.⁵⁵ At the time of writing, my enquiries to Mr Frisch and the firm remain unanswered.

Flourish

YouTube has recently become a repository for layers of cultural knowledge, giving researchers the resources to puncture through strata of static documents in an attempt to contextualize certain moments in a dynamic popular culture. Academia has to play catch up to new developments, and so we must constantly recalibrate our existing research and analytic tools to adjust to the needs of any new use of media. A means to explore musical memes could, as demonstrated here, include a thorough media archaeology paired with a more fluid ethnographic approach to find glimpses of process and influence; meaning; timelines; personal agency and impact. But, a digital repository is inherently in flux: an important post may be removed, and the string of cultural referents would then be broken. But would the contemporaneous performativity of having posted then be rendered historically and culturally moot? Would a jazz player who quotes obscure tunes be irrelevant?

Jazz as an artform has a long history of performative riffing; improvisation and referencing; quotation and recontextualization; posturing, satire and

⁵³ Personal interview with Caleb Curtis.

⁵⁴ YouTube: ‘Video Unavailable’, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTYzYpb1MY0&app=desktop>.

⁵⁵ Herbsman, Hafer, Weber & Frisch, LLP <https://musiclaw.com>.

positioning – all as a means for personal expression and placement in the history of the genre. Memes function as a similar form of cultural curation and personal performance, perfectly suited to today's creative climate and enabled by the ever-presence of technology and ease of access to and interaction with primary source documents. As Damon R. Young writes in the article 'Ironies of Web 2.0':

For the idealist, the technologies of Web 2.0 embed a certain democratic potential, turning authorship into an open category and inviting a mode of reading that can participate in the revision of the text (as on Wikipedia), its evaluation ('thumbs up' or 'thumbs down') and an active responsiveness through the comments threads that are arguably Web 2.0's most ubiquitous feature.⁵⁶

However, memes seem to live lives of their own, reproducing and mutating like laboratory fruit flies in a hotbox of interconnected media.

In jazz, the roles of performer, audience and reviewer have always been strictly separated – delineated by stage, seat and published critique. In YouTube meme culture, these roles have all been wrapped into one platform. Jazz-like riffing, referencing, improvisation, criticism and commentary are now all supported on a public platform in which culture is consumed and passed in our feverish and fleeting lacuna of tiny attention spans and ever-shifting digital spotlights.

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⁵⁶ Damon R. Young. 'Ironies of Web 2.0,' *Post45* 2 (2019), at <https://post45.org/2019/05/ironies-of-web-2-0/>.

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