

Clifford Brown's Approach to Practicing

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The purpose of this report is to take a brief look into the mind of one of the greatest trumpet players, musicians, and human beings that has ever lived, Clifford Benjamin Brown. I have provided detailed analysis and categorizations of vocabulary, patterns, and specific practice habits of this great individual, the data of which I have transcribed from two specific audio recordings of Clifford practicing in 1954 at his home in Philadelphia.

Life

Clifford Brown was gifted, and he established a new style of jazz; a new way of playing the trumpet that was different from those around him. Clifford was a person who developed early on an incredible understanding of what it took to progress, grow, and be consistent in a craft, and later, on an instrument. Being the youngest of 8 kids didn't tamper this development; if anything it became sharpened because of it. Joe Brown, Clifford's dad, encouraged all his children to have as much formal training in music as possible, so it is safe to say that Brownie was destined to be a musician ever since his birth on October 30 1930 in Wilmington Delaware. As a kid, as early as five, Clifford was messing around with his fathers trumpet, and by age twelve he began to show some true potential and genuine interest in getting better. Joe decided at this point it was time to get his son some private lessons. Clifford was just starting out in junior high school around this time.

Brown began his mentoring with trumpeter and educator Robert "Boysie" Lowery during this time, and it was Lowery that was known for teaching his students how to use their ears and practice being able to hear what they want to execute on their instrument before they play. Lowery's method called "the classes," taught students how to hear chord changes and to improvise off of what they have heard. It was with this method that Clifford began to learn about how to connect and work with musical thought. Brown also began to learn piano, bass, and vibes during this time, which only could have helped his hearing abilities. Lowery also encouraged his students to record their practice sessions. Wire spool recorders were made available in the 1940's, and Clifford became one of the first jazz players to use these devices. Fortunate we all are of this, because without Lowery's guidance, perhaps the practice recordings may have never been created.

"Boysie" would be Brown's mentor for life, however after studying with Lowery exclusively for three years and playing in his dance band for a while, Brown moved on to arguably his most important trumpet teacher, Harry Andrews, band and choral director at Howard High School in Wilmington, which at that time was the city's black secondary school. Andrews started him on the Prescott system, which is based on the Arban's method, and also introduced him to his non-pressure system. These classical training methods had Brown playing long phrases in one breath, sometimes 16 to 32 bars long, and doing all sorts of intervallic leaps and slurs. It is no surprise then, that for his graduation solo he played *The Carnival of Venice*, one of the most difficult pieces to play on trumpet regardless of skill level. Brown began to improve his sound, range, and technique tremendously, and on certain

marches in parades he'd play an octave above the rest of the trumpets. The intense classical training he received during his time with Andrews created the overall foundation that he would begin to expand on shortly thereafter.

Now 18, having graduated high school with some advanced chops, the young trumpeter entered Delaware State College on a music scholarship. He soon found out, only after starting there, that the college's music department was not only on the fritz; there was none at the time. Brownie remained there a year anyway majoring in mathematics, and in his spare time he played gigs in Philadelphia with preeminent bop figures such as Kenny Dorham, J.J. Johnson, Max Roach, and Fats Navarro. Clifford idolized Fats, got to study with him privately during this time as well, and got a lot of encouragement from him. The next year, Brownie transferred to Maryland State on scholarship and began to arrange and play for a quality big band in the area.

In June 1950, on the way home from a gig with the Chris Powell band, Clifford would be in car accident, and for an entire year; until May 1951, Brownie could not play the trumpet. During that period of time he practiced piano, and received moral support from Dizzy Gillespie, who encouraged him to get back on the horse when he was ready. His old teacher, Andrews remarks, "After his first car accident, he couldn't play trumpet. So he switched to piano for a while, and he played very well for a guy who was just starting. I don't mean he was an Erroll Garner."ⁱ In March 1952 he played piano and trumpet with R&B group, Chris Powell's Blue Flames, on their debut recording.

After getting his chops back, Clifford was ready to start making himself known on the scene throughout the world. Quincy Jones recalls, "In the summer of 1953, while I was working with the Lionel Hampton band in Wildwood, N.J., I begged Hamp to hire three of the musicians from Tadd Dameron's band, which was nearing the end of its Atlantic City engagement: Gigi Gryce, Benny Golson, and Clifford Brown. They were all hired and then began an association that I'll always be grateful to Lionel for."ⁱⁱ From August to December, Brown was with Lionel's band, touring Europe and North Africa as well as leading the Paris recording sessions from September 28 thru October 11, 1953. He recorded a Blue Note album for the first time as Lou Donaldson's side man and also recorded with Art Farmer, Dizzy Gillespie, Art Blakey, J.J. Johnson, Sarah Vaughan and Dinah Washington. Art Farmer, who played with Brownie in Lionel Hampton's band in '53 recalls "I had pretty good respect for myself in those days and I had real ability, but every night out, Hamp would pit Brownie against me...he killed me. Every single night, I was so scared out of my mind because this guy was coming after me like you can't believe...but I could never feel any kind of antipathy towards him because he was such a special person and he was so good to me."ⁱⁱⁱ

In early 1954, Clifford recorded at Birdland with the Art Blakey Quintet; one year before the Jazz Messengers came into existence. Shortly thereafter, Clifford formed the Brown-Roach quintet, together with drummer Max Roach, and won the Down Beat critics' poll for the *New Star of the Year* that year. In August, Brown recorded with Jazz Immortal which featured Zoot Sims on tenor sax, and in January 1955 he recorded one my favorite albums of all time, "Clifford Brown with Strings," arranged and conducted by Neal Hefti. Of course, "Study In Brown," was recorded in February of 1955, which includes the legendary performance of "Cherokee".

Clifford had always been aware of the moral, social, and economic problems which constantly confuse the jazz musician and he steered clear of them. The passion and love that he brought to the music was mirrored back to him for 25 years on earth. During that time he was able to become one of the most technically advanced trumpet players in history who displayed a musical genius that players even today are baffled by. Brown was such a mature individual and musician at such a young age that if he was given more time there's no telling what the music could have become or what changes the world may have seen. His untimely death in yet another car accident along with his pianist Richard Powell, and Richard's wife on June 26 1956 is an event in history event that still makes me cry to this day. The Downbeat Critic's Poll inducted him into the Hall of Fame in 1972.

“Clifford Brown was a very beautiful person. He had a very warm personality and usually seemed so relaxed it made me relaxed to be around him. In my opinion Brownie had a very even temperament, if that's the best way to describe it, and a kind of wisdom or knowledge of himself and those around him, and of life in general, that one associates with someone quite a bit older than he was at the time; and to me these same qualities were evident when he expressed himself through his instrument. I have had more than one talented musician say to me, referring to Brownie, that he played his instrument like a young old man! And in each instance I'm sure they meant this statement to be an extremely beautiful compliment, that a man so young in years could acquire such command, depth, and broad musical scope in such a relatively short span of time. Playing with the fire and creativeness of a young man with the depth, tenderness, and insight into past, present, and future of an older man.” ^{iv}

Practice

Brownie was big into chess, and pool. Two games that require intense concentration, awareness, and skill. Math was his third love (after his wife LaRue), not to mention the trumpet, so it would seem obvious that he was quite intelligent and very interested in challenging his brain. He didn't do drugs or drink, so his mind was always functioning at optimal efficiency. A good state of being to be in, if you're about to sit down for a few hours of intense shedding on an instrument. “In this generation where some well-respected and important pioneers condemn the young for going ahead, Brownie had a very hard job. He constantly struggled to associate jazz, it's shepherds, and it's sheep, with a cleaner element, and held no room in his heart for bitterness about the publicity-made popularity and success of some of his pseudo-jazz giant brothers, who were sometimes very misleading morally and musically. As a man and a musician, he stood for a perfect example and the rewards of self-discipline.” ^v

Physically, you can tell just by looking at Clifford's face that he played a lot of trumpet. The definition of the muscles surrounding his mouth when he was playing or smiling showed the foundation that he was working with and building upon. He was an innovator and a pioneer on his instrument, as he consistently would strive for beauty in making music out of seemingly technically difficult vocabulary. He truly pushed the limits of what was physically and musically possible on the trumpet, and just from looking at his lips just after he played, or even in a normal state you can see the evidence of that. The indentation of the mouthpiece, a true sign of having the horn to his face for a long time on a consistent basis, is also a sign that he was pushing and expanding his physical limits on the trumpet, constantly trying to get better, and

constantly practicing.

Clifford's wife LaRue remarked "I'll put it like this: We would have breakfast, and Clifford would practice. We would go out and then Clifford would practice. We would have lunch and Clifford would practice. Clifford practiced anytime he possibly could, and even if we were in a place where he couldn't blow his horn, even with the mute, he would do lip exercises and tongue exercises or he would just simply play his mouthpiece. He played constantly." ^{vi}

After listening to the two recordings of Clifford practicing, one of which is 17 minutes 30 seconds in length, and the other being 13 minutes and 30 seconds in length, a few things became quite clear. One was that this man had amazing chops. He barely took any breaks during either recording. During the first one, he took maybe 3 breaks, each of which lasted approximately 10 or 15 seconds. On the second recording, LaRue, Clifford's wife, would interrupt his shedding only about 4 times, for reasons I could not make out from the recording, but either way, the interruptions lasted only about 5-10 seconds each. As a trumpet player, I know what it feels like to have the instrument pressed to my face for an extended period of time while I shed. It's not easy to do, considering how physically challenging the trumpet is to begin with.

Given the variables that factor into extended practicing on the trumpet, such as constant air flow, muscle support from mouth and stomach, as well as breath support and mental focus, it is quite remarkable that Clifford's sound and flexibility remained generally consistent throughout both recordings. It is also evident that Clifford loved playing the trumpet. This man lived to play his instrument, and from what he brought to the music, I'm sure we are all grateful of this. He knew how much work it would take to get where he wanted to be musically, and these two recordings are great examples of the kinds of things he worked on in the process of achieving this long term goal. You can hear him flubbing some attempted lines, either while he's soloing over a tune or shedding chromatic II-V patterns and not going on immediately, but going back, repeatedly, over and over again and working out a line until it came out sounding right to him.

One of the main things that Clifford worked on in the total time of the practice recordings was II-V's. He tended to play them descending in half-steps. There are points on both recordings when he started tapping his foot and making it obvious that he was keeping time while playing, but for the most part he practiced out of time, with no clear time signature or meter being maintained. In fact, I could tell that at times Brownie would be changing chords in seemingly odd points in the "bar", if you were to keep time from the point when he started the line. In the middle of a line he would suddenly imply the start of a new bar on beat 3, 4 or the end of 4, according to where the line began originally; it often sounded like he was playing in 7/8, even though his language suggested straight 4/4 swing. This shows that he could have been a monster at playing in odd time signatures in modern day improvisation, not to mention his already creative approach to playing in ¾.

For purposes of the paper, I have left out much of when Brownie was simply "blowing free" or playing lines that would have no start, end, or direction. Although one could argue that some of these instances could be meaningful to transcribe, I did take the time to listen to what

he was playing, and I feel that the fragments and lines with no destination that *I have* included, display Brown's vocabulary and thought process quite well. Note that in the following examples, I have notated the chord changes that seemed most appropriate. The chord changes and notes have been written in Bb trumpet key.

Example #1 (a) which occurred right at the beginning of the first tape is an example of Brown practicing a II-V to Bb. As you can see, he lands on the third of the five chord, as is common with many of his II-V ideas. If you take a look at example #1 (b), which occurred immediately after (a), you can see that he started the line with the same idea, but ended up creating a line which would end up cycling through 3 keys, descending chromatically. You can see that he did not play over each change using the same beat allotment, as I mentioned earlier. Brown liked to chromatically enclose the third of the 5 chord, and as seen in the II-V in Ab, he displaces the time by resolving to the third, an eighth note late. He also displaces the change to Bb-7, as it appears that he starts that change an eighth note early. Again, the notation is relative to how I perceived his harmonic conception. However, even to the ear alone, the phrasing sounds displaced.

In example #2 which occurs after flubbing an attempted line starting with the same 6 notes, Clifford displays some nice vocabulary here. Again, landing on the third on the D7, and enclosing it on the Db7, it's another example of his tendencies on the V chord. You can see at the very end of the line, he outlines an Eb-7 chord using a triplet rhythm; he does this same shape in example 1 as well.

Example #3, Brown starts off another II-V sequence with a familiar shape, and ends up cycling through four keys descending chromatically. Look at the difference between the way he approached the 6th of the E7 and D7 chords; both shapes have become standard bebop vernacular. Again, phrasing displacement, and enclosing of the third on the Eb7 chord.

The next 7 examples are of phrases that Clifford practiced descending in half steps. Aside from example #5, which is the outlining of minor keys, all the other examples are II-Vs. He took these sequences only through maybe 5 or 6 keys; he never went through all the keys with a given phrase. He would get to a point in the sequencing where his thought would change, either to a rhythmically or harmonically different shape from what preceded it, and he would flow into that new idea, and work with that for a while. Again, in most of the examples, he is enclosing the third of the five chord. Perhaps it is safe to say that his ear naturally heard the resolution to the third of the five chord, and his lines organically navigated there most of the time. It is interesting to note the contrast between the ascending and descending shapes that he employed to start a given II-V. In addition, about 6 seconds prior to example #4, Brown scatted the phrase he was about to play.

The "phrase of note" for the first tape is a selected line from a passage of Clifford playing through rhythm changes in concert Ab. The phrase has no real beginning or end, nor does the entire passage on the recording, but I feel as though the Bb at the end of the phrase would be the end of the "bar." He is outlining Bb throughout, weaving in and out of C-7, F7, and Bbmaj. I just love the contour of the line, and how much it changes directionally. The last 4 beats really do it for me; it's such a beautiful melodic way to outline at II-V, yet he employs the

use of the minor 7 chord arpeggio. Notice the enclosures of the third throughout as well.

The “pattern of note” is actually something I have never heard Clifford play before on any recording. He takes this sus shape and moves it down in half steps for a while, then ends the phrase with a very modern melodic sequence. The pattern came out of nowhere; as the preceding content had no relation to this pattern. It seems like he just jumped 10 years with this example. To finish off the first tape Brown did some lip buzzing for a half a minute. After having the trumpet to his face for almost 16 and a half minutes straight, buzzing is a great way to cool down. Clifford definitely took care of his chops despite working them to the limit.

On tape 2, Brown worked on Cherokee for the most part. The bridge being II-V-I's descending in whole steps follows suite in the vein of his II-V work. For about the first 2:30 Clifford blew over Cherokee at record tempo. He would get flustered occasionally and have to either stop and take a breath, or simply continue to solo as if there was a rhythm section playing behind him, and he couldn't stop. At about 2:31, he started to slow it down and work out some lines. Example #1 is a beautiful line that shifts direction tastefully, which he played over the first few bars of the bridge I especially like the melodic shape he used over the Dbmaj7 chord; cliché language today, but at the time, it was fresh content. Example 2 is another start to the bridge; just another example of how Clifford approached this II-V sequence; again standard language.

The “phrase of note” is a long line Brown played over the A section of Cherokee. This line occurs in the midst of him blowing over the tune in time, however he actually starts his phrase it would seem, 4 bars before the next A section, which I have signified with a bar line. Two things caught my attention here; one was the shapes he is using over the Cmaj7 chord to start the A section. He is employing diatonic 7 chords, but with the ghosted notes he is almost implying triad pairs. Definitely not what he was thinking, but you can see where his ear is going. In addition, to end the phrase, he plays Ab augmented triad over the C7. A very practical choice, but something that no trumpet players were doing. The “pattern of note” is a difficult intervallic shape that Brown was working on playing very fast. He moved it through a few keys, but definitely did not intend on shedding it that day too much; a very a modern pattern none the less.

It would appear that Clifford Brown had a very open mind, open ears, and a lust for improvement. He would no doubt have been one of the pioneers on trumpet as jazz evolved in later years. He just had a sense of what good music was, and he brought so much soul and fire to the bandstand. In the practice room, he shed hard, and shed to get better. He shedded to improve his foundation and expand his vocabulary, and was able to do so a fast rate due to the strength of his chops. Playing for even 5 minutes let alone 13 without a real break is not something that just anyone can do. Clifford contributed so much to the music and to people's lives in so little time, and yet had only reached the beginning of what he would have later become. A great composer, band leader, teacher, trumpet player and musician, Clifford Brown's legacy will live forever. “Here was the perfect amalgamation of natural creative ability, and the proper amount of technical training, enabling him to contribute precious moments of musical and emotional expression.” ^{vii}

TAPE 1 Pg. 1

① 00:00 C-7 (F7)
② 00:04 C-7 F7 B-7
Bb-7 Eb7

② 0:14 A-7 D7 Ab-7 Db7
(Db7) ...

③ 0:42 C-7 F7 B-7 E7
Bb-7 Eb7 A-7 D7

④ 6:00 C#-7 F#7

⑤ 6:13 B- Bb-

TAPE 1 Pg. 2

7:25
 ⑥ E-7 A7 Eb-7 Ab7

8:02
 ⑦ C-7 F7

8:25
 ⑧ F-7 Bb7

12:00
 ⑨ D-7 G7

14:00
 ⑩ A-7 D7

PHRASE OF NOTE

(Bb7, C-7, F7)

4:08

PATTERN OF NOTE 5:46

(B, F#sus, E-) (Bb- A-) (Ab, Db7) (V I)
 (Cb, D-)

17:00 -

LIP BUZZING CONCERT B, Ab

TAPE 2 pg. 1

① 2:31

$Eb-7$ $Ab7$

$Db7$ $Db-7$

etc...

② 3:41

$Eb-7$ $Ab7$

PHRASE OF NOTE 5:12

$E-7$ $A7$ $D-7$

$G-7$ $C7$

$G-7$ $C7$

PATTERN OF NOTE 7:20

i West, Holly. "Clifford Brown: Trumpeter's Training." Downbeat. July, 1980.

ii Jones, Quincy. "A Tribute to Brownie." Downbeat. August, 1956

iii Catalano, Nick. Clifford Brown: the life and art of the legendary jazz trumpeter. Pennsylvania State University. Oxford University Press, 2001. p. 78.

iv Land, Harold. Liner notes, Clifford Brown in Paris (Prestige PR 24020)

v Jones, Quincy. "A Tribute to Brownie." Downbeat. August, 1956

vi Catalano, Nick. Clifford Brown: the life and art of the legendary jazz trumpeter. Pennsylvania State University. Oxford University Press, 2001. p. 154.

vii Jones, Quincy. "A Tribute to Brownie." Downbeat. August, 1956

Other Sources

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