



Threadgill's solo takes us on a journey from stepwise motion to intervallic jumps to compound intervals.

Henry Threadgill's Alto Sax Solo on 'Award The Squadtett'

When the topic of wind player Henry Threadgill is brought up, it's often for his compositional skills, which are certainly laudable. But that doesn't mean his improvisational abilities aren't worth a listen, or even a close examination. Here we have Threadgill's alto saxophone solo on "Award The Squadtett," from 1987's *Easily Slip Into Another World* (RCA Novus), transposed here for instruments pitched in E-flat. This section starts out in the key of A-flat major (concert B), somewhat of a difficult one for saxophone. It does modulate down to G, but then back to A-flat (and back to G again). The changes are mostly the same (your standard I-IV-ii-V, but without the VI in the A-flat major part), so it could appear to be a study in navigating a difficult key.

Except Threadgill doesn't play the same licks in the two keys, or even demonstrate any bad-ass chops across the keys. His solo moves in more of a stream-of-consciousness manner to its conclusion. But there are noteworthy elements that he develops through this improvisation.

For example, Threadgill starts out play-

ing one note (D# on the alto) for a full three bars, and then decorates the note with a half-step approach. Then we move into scalar motion (quoting the melody in measures 5-7). In bars 7 and 8 he kicks off the scales with ascending fifths. I've heard this called musical gravity, where a large leap in one direction is often countered with scalar motion in the opposite direction.

But not always. Threadgill starts violating this "rule" in bars 17-18, where we get leaps down and up. He did set this up by starting to incorporate larger intervals, like the minor third in bar 11, the fourths in the following measure, consecutive thirds in bar 15 and then a seventh in 16. So when the 10th and 11th show up in measures 17-18, they're not a total departure, more of an exaggeration.

Threadgill brings us back to scalar motion immediately. There are some larger intervals, though nothing more than a fifth, and the next line descends from a high F# to a low C, spanning two-and-a-half octaves. Having just come from the altissimo A-flat, Threadgill has just laid out the entire range he's using in this three-bar run.

Consecutive large intervals resurface in bar 26, and then Threadgill goes back to a mixture of small and large ones, exploring most of the horn's range in the process. Then, starting in measure 38 we get these massive leaps from below the staff to far above it, and those extreme intervals are not connected through any scalar motion. Threadgill is almost playing counterpoint with himself within the line, but in the highest, lowest and middle registers of his instrument.

This is really the climax of his improvisation. The final five bars have large intervals, but compared to what we just heard, they don't sound as large, though the squealing timbres he gets still keep the energy up (how would one even notate those sounds?). Threadgill has taken us on a journey from stepwise motion to intervallic jumps to compound (and ultra-compound) intervals. And he wraps it up with a tetrachord (four consecutive notes of a scale) and an octave jump.

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