

Musical Styles III

Dr. Wilding

Emma Donkin

11/20/2020

### **Form, Rhythm, and Harmony in Jacob Collier's *Saviour***

The world of 21<sup>st</sup> century jazz is in a state of growth and flux. Artists of this modern era play off of the old traditions of 1930's and '40's big band swing, taking notes from composers and players such as Count Basie, Miles Davis, Sammy Nestico, Thad Jones, and many more. However, as rock and roll came into being, followed by funk, the world of jazz morphed from blues and gospel into an ambiguous world of extended harmonies, odd meters, and complex formal ideas. One interesting young artist of this era is multi-instrumentalist Jacob Collier, who combines elements of traditional jazz with funk, neo-classical, RnB, pop, and even microtonality. In this paper, I will be dissecting one of Collier's tracks off of his debut album from 2016, and explore how Collier uses rhythmic subdivisions, extended harmonies, and dramatic metric shifts in his song *Saviour*.

*Saviour* is the seventh track on Jacob Collier's debut album, *In My Room*. Collier is a UK-based jazz artist who experiments with microtonality, subdivisions, unique instruments, and the mixing of genres. Trained under the likes of Quincy Jones and Herbie Hancock, Collier comes from a tradition of post-blues jazz. His first album contains instrumental tracks as well as songs which incorporate this jazz tradition, along with funk. The premise of *Saviour* appears to be Jacob discouraging people who are enamored with him or his success; the message is somewhat similar to Michael Jackson's *Billie Jean* in that it forcefully rejects the advances of the

person or persons that Collier references. This is heard in the lyrics “I’m not the person you’re searching for, so go knock on someone else’s door,” and “She wants to find a way to heal me, I bet she’ll never find the real me,” and the rest of the song’s lyrical content is very similar.

One of the clever things Collier does in many of his pieces is messing with rhythm and toying with the listener’s ear. In listening to *Saviour*, we can immediately tell that we are in 4/4, but something is off. There is a bit of a lag between the beats. Upon further inspection, we are able to tell that someone, somewhere in the mix, is rhythmically laying back. If we dig further, we can label exactly what is happening in this first introductory segment. There is a highly accentuated tuplet figure going on here, highlighted by the bass and percussion lines. While the piano and vocals come in on each beat in a fairly straight manner, there is a quintuplet subdivision between beats, giving the piece a groove that feels like it’s slightly in five. While the piece may not be notated this way officially, we are able to count the subdivisions between beats and feel how this swing groove is achieved. This is extremely subtle, but an effective way of notating how Collier wants the piece to feel, or how to swing the beats precisely.

Another aspect of *Saviour* is the unique transitional choices. At the beginning of the piece, we appear to be in a C tonality with the Bb heavily used in the melody, leaving us with a C Dorian mode. The piece starts out as a seemingly tonally solid funk chart, but things begin to shift as Collier moves to lines, “I’ve been up, and I’ve been down.” The harmonic and melodic lines ascend with the lyrical content, using an C minor pentatonic scale starting on the third (Eb, F, G, Bb, C, Eb, C, F). The bass descends gradually by step until we end on a Gb, or the major 7<sup>th</sup> relationship to F. However, the following answering line shifts everything up by a half step, yielding an E major pentatonic scale. The next line lands us solidly in E major; this direct modulation does not hinge on any pivot chords. Instead, Collier uses the scalar lines to launch us

into the new key of E major, with a melody that constantly lands on the 5<sup>th</sup>, B. Throughout the work, Collier capitalizes on the vocal melodic lines, refusing to compromise their complexity as a response to the complex harmonies supporting them, and instead uses transitions like this to capture the audience's ear and hold their attention with a unique melody that functions solely in the complex context of the harmonic structure.

The harmonies that support the scalar lines are complex as well. Each note in the passage is supported by an extended harmony chord. In the ascending C minor pentatonic scale, we have the following chordal structure as seen below in Figure 1a: Cmin11, F major, Cmin 4/2, Cmin7/F, Ab13, Eb11/G, and Bbsus/Gb. These chords can be analyzed several different ways; however, I've chosen the above passage as the one that makes the most harmonic sense when compared to the melodic content of the passage.

Fig. 1a



Collier seems to focus on the melody and then adapt the harmony around the melodic lines to create tension and ultimate funkiness. He does the same with the answering scalar passage in E pentatonic: E13, A dim7, C# minor4/2, Bbhalfdim7 b9, Asusb11, E13, and E9/C#.

We can see this in Figure 2a below:

Fig. 2a

The chords Collier chooses to support the E pentatonic scale are different than the scalar passage preceding it, and for good reason. At this point, we have modulated away from a flat, minor key into a bright, sharp, major new key. Interestingly, while this specific passage occurs twice (once after each verse), there is no other passage that utilizes a scalar transition to a new tonal center in this way except for the coda of the piece. When examined in context together in Figure 3a, these short melodic phrases provide us with a unique harmonic structure that directly modulates to E major:

Fig. 3a



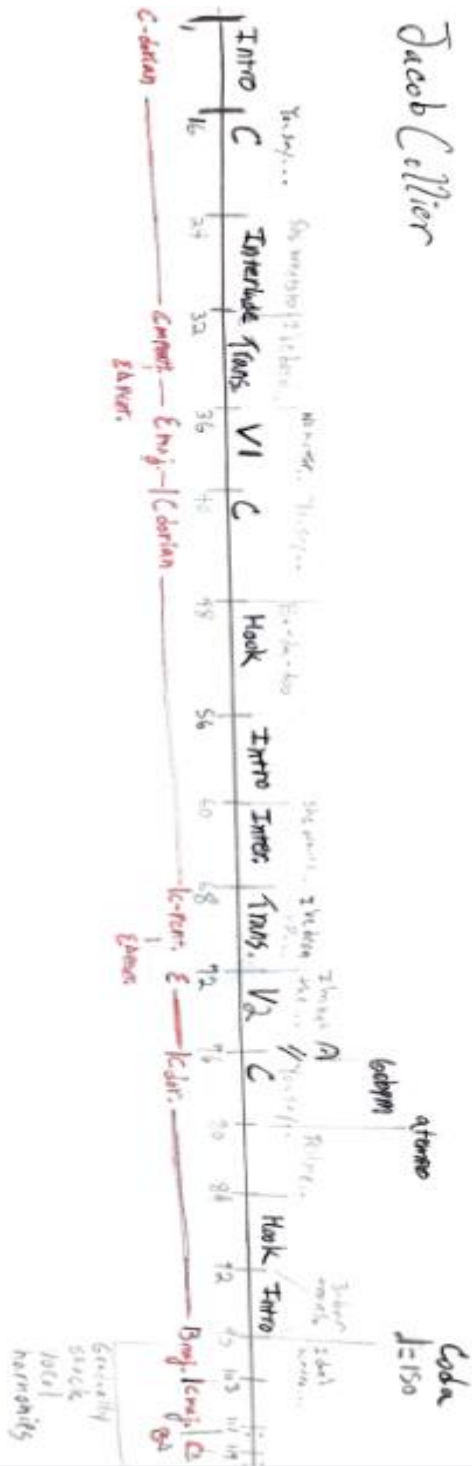
Much like the rhythmic ingenuity of the opening, the latter half of *Saviour* morphs through several tempos and groove. The initial quintuplet subdivision at the opening of the piece is the most prominent, but roughly two-thirds of the way through the piece, Collier slows the entire tempo for half of a chorus to 60bpm. The effect is jarring, and focuses our attention on the improvisatory subdivisions in the bass and vocal lines. Then, seemingly without a care, Collier speeds back up to the original tempo. This creates an effect like moving through mud, and then stumbling back onto solid ground to continue running. As analysts, we may question why Collier chooses such a drastic metric change, especially given the previous ear-catching motives and harmonic passages; we might not think that the piece needs further complexity. However, if we look back to the original premise of the song, and analyze the lyrics of this section (“You say

that I'm lost, you can help me find...but I don't wanna be your Saviour, no..."), we can conclude one of two things. Firstly, these lyrics have begun every chorus so far. This means that this is the third iteration of these exact lyrics. At this point, given the context of the rest of the piece, we might say that the shift in tempo may be Collier slowing everything down and slowly, yet firmly, repeating his wishes to the listener. We can visually imagine Collier or the singer grabbing an obsessed lover by both arms and, with agonizing slowness, telling them off one last time. The alternative reason behind the metric change could be purely musical: perhaps Collier felt that the groove had gone on for too long, and he wanted to break out of the confines of the funk pattern. This specific metric shift is not repeated; rather, later on, we shift into a straight eighth note groove that borrows the same idea of shifting tonalities by step from the scalar passage we hear before. The only sense of swing we hear comes in the form of a counter-melody in the vocal line, which contains a dotted-eighth, sixteenth-note rhythm, implying a heavy swing. In this section, we modulate directly from a B major passage to C major, and then back down; this back-and-forth tonal center repeats several times, gradually adding more harmonies and counter rhythms in the vocal line. This coda section is accompanied by lyrics such as, "I don't wanna be your saviour, I just wanna be your friend; if I let your mind create me, the work will never end," and other phrases that reject the blind idolization of the singer.

The interplay of melodic and harmonic elements in this piece is entirely cohesive, yet each element is individually complex and intriguing. Collier is not bound to a singular key at any one moment, and though *Saviour* stays in C Dorian for the majority of the work, the freedom with which the tonal centers modulate is aurally brilliant. *Saviour* blends elements of jazz, funk, and even pop in a unique yet satisfying way, and forces the listener to re-engage with the music through direct modulations, surprising metric shifts, and a singularly catchy groove.

Formal Chart:

# DAVIDAR II Jacob Collier



In My Room  
2016

Score: [While there is no official score, there are some helpful transcriptions online which I will provide links to:]

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rdb\\_udqEA30](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rdb_udqEA30)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVfzGTk5WWw>