

Jazz, Etc.

CHRIS GLASSMAN | EDITOR

Unsung Bebop Trombonists

A deeper look into the history of trombone and its involvement in the bebop era

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Nick Mailes is an incredible up-and-coming trombonist. On the several occasions I've had the chance to play with him, I was impressed by his commitment to the lineage of jazz, as well as his explorations of solos that push harmonic boundaries. His article is proof that he digs deep in both his scholarship and his playing.

—Chris Glassman

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The majority of research into the history of bebop jazz trombonists reflects that there is perhaps no greater figure used as a focal point than JJ Johnson. This is understandable, because Johnson was the first notable instance of a trombonist who incorporated the bebop harmonic vocabulary into their playing throughout many recordings. Johnson was also notable as a result of his collaboration with many of the most famous progenitors of bebop: Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Illinois Jaquet, and Miles Davis. It is apparent through these collaborations why Johnson is often given this distinction in jazz history.

I have an interest in challenging the idea that Johnson was the *only* jazz trombonist during this time innovating in the bebop style. Many jazz history texts point to him as the sole reason the trombone was able to enter the world of bebop.

While it is important to recognize Johnson's innovations when discussing bebop trombone, it is important to discuss the many other jazz trombone players who were also innovating during the late 1940s and '50s. Some of these players, such as Carl Fontana, Frank Rosolino, and Jimmy Cleveland, have been recognized.

This article will discuss three different trombone players from the bebop era—Tommy Turk, Melba Liston, and Julian Priester—and how they were innovating and pushing the music forward in their recordings and as a result of various collaborations. Through analysis, there is clear evidence that all three of these players pushed the music forward in different ways, whether it was melodically, technically, or harmonically. It also becomes increasingly obvious that the evolution of bebop trombone was synonymous with a “melting pot” of many different musicians in different eras offering different perspectives to push the instrument and the music forward.



Tommy Turk

There is perhaps no trombonist more important to the development of the Los Angeles improvisational style than Tommy Turk. Several Los Angeles trombonists, including musicians such as Carl Fontana, have pointed to Turk as having had a notable impact on their own playing.

Turk's most notable engagement had him playing alongside Charlie Parker and Roy Eldridge at the 1949 Jazz at the Philharmonic concert, which was immortalized as a live recording and was published in the 1950s. Turk's unique style becomes evident when listening to this live recording.

His solo on "Lester Leaps In" (see **example 1** below) challenges a common historical argument that JJ Johnson was the only trombonist who had the technical capacity to keep up with the other horn players of the era. Turk bucks traditional trombone conventions by playing aggressive eighth note lines throughout his solo. In fact, many of these lines are more technical than those heard on many of Johnson's recordings. This shows that not only were there other trombone players playing bebop at the time, there were also some players who were true contemporaries to Johnson's technical facility.



Example 1: Tommy Turk's eighth note line on "Lester Leaps In"



Melba Liston

Melba Liston is scarcely mentioned throughout the majority of jazz trombone research. Despite her work as a big band trombonist, as well as performing with jazz trombone ensembles, her improvisational style is rarely discussed—even though she recorded some bebop records with famed saxophonist Dexter Gordon in 1947. One of the recordings, "Mischievous Lady," features a solo performed by 21-year-old Liston. This solo offers a different perspective of the bebop idiom (see **example 2** below).

Liston's solo, like most solos of the bebop era, are brief, lasting only 16 bars. Despite this, Liston finds a way to innovate. While she was not known for her technical innovation, she instead showcases an early example of motif improvisation very uncommon in the bebop era. In fact, her playing feels much more indicative of the hard bop era. Overall, her motivic playing is what sets her apart from many other trombonists and champions her advancement within the bebop era.



Example 2: Melba Liston's "Mischievous Lady" solo



Julian Priester

Most academics agree that the bebop era ended in the mid-1950s. This is problematic, because many musicians continued to innovate in this genre after Charlie Parker. One of them was Julian Priester, who is most recognized for his work in the hard bop, post-bop, and jazz fusion idioms. However, he was also incredibly proficient in bebop and recorded several tunes in the style on his first record, *Keep Swingin'*.

"Julian's Tune," which is included on this album, is a master class in bebop improvisation. Priester disproves the common notion that trombone players only "get through" bebop by playing short phrases! Nevertheless, his recordings include phrases often exceeding six bars in length (more than Johnson's standard phrase lengths).

Example 3 (below) contains eight-bar phrases—with no breaths needed—and also showcases some great sequencing from Priester throughout several different keys. These details clearly reflect that Priester was expanding on the bebop idiom.

Changing The Narrative

As a result of this exploration, it is evident that the previously stated JJ Johnson narrative is insufficient at explaining the larger history of jazz trombone in the bebop idiom. Here are two suggested teaching solutions to expand this narrative:

- When discussing the history of bebop with your non-trombone students, be sure to include more than one example of a bebop trombonist in your lectures. Besides the three examples included here, there are many others: Frank Rosolino, Benny Green, Carl Fontana, Kai Winding, Slide Hampton, Curtis Fuller, and Jimmy Cleveland. This will demonstrate to your students that many trombone players were on the scene playing the music effectively during the era.
- When assigning transcriptions to your trombone students, it's important to give them a variety of players. I have seen many students benefit from these alternative perspectives. In addition, this variety changes their minds regarding how they feel about the trombone belonging in the bebop era.

A musical score snippet for a trombone line. It consists of two staves of music in 4/4 time, featuring eighth notes and triplets. The first staff has a key signature of two flats (Bb and Eb) and a common time signature. The second staff continues the line. Above the notes are chord symbols: Gmin7, C7, Fmaj7, Fmin7, Bb7, Ebmaj7 on the first staff, and Ebmin7, Ab7, Dbmaj7, Dmin7, G7, Cmaj7 on the second staff. The music includes triplet markings (3) and a measure starting with a 5.

Example 3: Julian Priester's eighth note line in "Julian's Tune"