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Jazz as individual expression: An analysis of *The Fabulous Baker Boys* soundtrack

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Abstract

The Fabulous Baker Boys (1989) by Kloves is a fictional account of a frustrated sibling piano duo who, in order to liven up their act, hire a singer. As well as a portrayal of sibling rivalry, the film is a study of the working jazz musician and the suppression and expression of individual identity. The film's soundtrack, arranged, composed and performed by jazz pianist Dave Grusin, uses jazz standards and original thematic compositions that work as 'ambi-diegetic cinemusical moments' (Holbrook), which provide improvisatory contexts for the main character's emerging individuality and his relationships with the other characters. This article identifies those compositions and using transcriptions, analyses the score in detail, revealing the melodic, harmonic, structural and improvisatory devices Grusin uses to convey the authority of a jazz 'standard', particularly by drawing on the work of Bill Evans and Miles Davis; and shows that these improvisational structures enable and act as a form of expression for the main character and his emerging individuality. The film takes its premise from *The Fabulous Dorseys* (1947) by Green, the biopic of the swing-era bandleaders the Dorsey Brothers, allowing this article to also consider the historical context of the film and the question of authenticity in both films, particularly through the parallel use of Art Tatum/Bill Evans as signifiers of 'real jazz' and Duke Ellington as a site of articulacy.

Keywords

jazz

individual

improvisation

character

piano

Fabulous Baker Boys

Dave Grusin

Although an entirely fictional account of sibling rivalry, *The Fabulous Baker Boys* (Kloves, 1989) is loosely based on *The Fabulous Dorseys* (Green, 1947), the first Hollywood biopic of the swing era, and there are a number of parallels between the two films. Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey led a successful orchestra in the late 1920s and through the early to mid-1930s, and had a number of hit records. Their band included some of the top musicians of the day including Jack Teagarden (trombone), Eddie Lang (guitar), Glenn Miller (trombone) and Johnny Mercer (vocals). However, the Dorseys were famously argumentative. An article appearing in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1946, entitled ‘The Battling Brothers Dorsey’ (English 1946), described the brothers as ‘violently different in their temperaments’, and that ‘the fabulous Dorseys have fought like Kilkenny cats’. The article goes on to describe Jimmy, the elder of the two brothers, as a shy individual, yet ‘vastly determined’ and as ‘a quiet perfectionist’, while the younger, Tommy Dorsey, was more aspirational and described by his mother as having the ‘gift o’ the gab’ and ‘always hustling’ (English 1946: 18). Eventually the squabbling

and fighting became too much and the Dorsey brothers famously went their separate ways on 30 May 1935 at the Glen Island Casino, New York. While leading the band, Tommy flew into a rage and stormed offstage after a comment from the elder Jimmy about the tempo of the tune 'I'll Never Say Never Again' (English 1946: 18).¹

Subsequently, they successfully led their own separate bands and each had a number of hit records. In July 1942, the Dorsey brothers' father Thomas Dorsey died, and at the funeral the brothers reconciled their differences, according to the article, because their mother, Tess, told them to. Then in 1945, having reunited, they recorded a version of 'More Than You Know' for the V-Disc series² (Sears 1980: 239). And in 1947, with producer Charles R. Rogers (English 1946: 82), they made *The Fabulous Dorseys*, in which the brothers played themselves.

The Fabulous Dorseys depicts a Hollywood version of the Dorseys' lives and careers. The film is a publicity vehicle for the brothers, two of the most highly paid musicians of the late 1940s. The film adheres to all the conventions and prejudices of its time, but today is mostly overlooked because of the successful biopics that followed it, such as *The Glenn Miller Story* (Mann, 1954) and *The Benny Goodman Story* (Davies, 1956). *The Fabulous Baker Boys*, although containing strong performances by the lead actors as lounge/jazz pianists (Vineberg 2004: 25), is even more neglected in jazz scholarship. For example, Gabbard, in his *Jammin' At The Margins: Jazz And The American Cinema*, all but ignores the film, stating only that 'in *The Fabulous Baker Boys* we know that Jeff Bridges is the more sensitive brother, at least in part because he has a picture of John Coltrane on his wall and because he plays jazz in a cellar with black musicians' (Gabbard 1996: 228). The use of the film here, by Gabbard, to simply

illustrate that the use of jazz in film ‘indicates that’ the ‘white protagonist ha[s] character’ (Gabbard 1996: 228), completely overlooks the many parallels between the two films and the ways in which first-time writer/director Steve Kloves and composer Dave Grusin manage to create a modern telling of this traditional jazz narrative. Which is achieved by Grusins’ use of specific melodic, harmonic, structural and improvisatory devices that convey the authority of the jazz tradition. These devices create the improvisational structures that then enable and act as a form of expression for the main character and his emerging individuality.

The Fabulous Baker Boys are Frank and Jack Baker, a small-time professional piano duo who play mostly background music in venues around Seattle. In fact, the original screenplay states: ‘*The Fabulous Baker Boys* are a poor man’s version of Ferrante and Teicher’, who were a popular piano duo in the United States that specialized in easy listening music. They were active from the 1950s through until the late 1980s (Ferrante and Teicher 2012). Elder brother Frank (Beau Bridges) runs the business and, like the younger Tommy Dorsey, is the hustler. While younger brother Jack (Jeff Bridges), similar to the elder Jimmy Dorsey, is the quiet one, a talented and brooding musician. After the opening shot of two cars at a junction pulling away in opposite directions, suggesting a context of impermanence, the viewer is introduced to Jack Baker through a rather strained conversation with a woman (Terri Treas), still naked in bed and we learn, as Jack finishes dressing, that even in this intimate situation he is withdrawn. His responses to the woman are monosyllabic and he is clearly unable to ‘commit to anything, not even a conversation’. The solo piano introduction of the opening theme begins as the conversation draws to a close and Jack leaves the room. As the downbeat of

the first chorus of 'Main Title – Jack's Theme' is played, the scene changes to an outside view of the first floor room, which we discover is above a restaurant with a flickering neon sign. The familiar stereotypes of jazz are immediately present – odd hours, promiscuity, the juxtaposition of a tuxedo in slightly tarnished surroundings. And these stereotypical associations continue throughout the opening credits – signs for 'Live Girls', 'Freedman's Loans', and as Jack passes the 'Seattle Music' store, he glances in – but as Sal Marquez on Harmon-muted trumpet begins the melody, it reinforces the modern setting of the opening scenes: this is not the swing era, we are post-1959. The influence of bebop, cool, modal, hard-bop and the dominance of Miles Davis are obvious. In fact, though never stated, the film was set in the present day.

There are four versions of 'Jack's Theme' throughout *The Fabulous Baker Boys*, each one providing an improvisatory context for the emerging individuality of the main character of Jack Baker; and in referencing the Miles Davis recording of *Kind of Blue* (1959), using various melodic, harmonic, structural, textural and improvisatory devices, composer Dave Grusin places the composition within the cool and hard-bop traditions. 'Jack's Theme' has a 34 bar AB form, where A is 16 bars, and B is 18 bars. The key signature is D minor/F Major and the time signature is 6/4. And as well as the introduction, there is an interlude section, which is also used after the brief statement of the head out as a vamp for the coda and final fade. There is a fuller and different take on the original soundtrack recording, but the form is essentially the same – the trumpet plays the A section of the head and Ernie Watts on tenor saxophone plays the B section.

Throughout the opening credits, Jack is alone. He makes his way through various streetscapes, initially walking against the flow of traffic. He is an individual going his

own way, and the association with the non-diegetic full quintet version of ‘Jack’s Theme’, including improvised solo sections, suggests to the viewer that this is the character of Jack Baker, in control, confident and cool. Of course, we soon discover this is not the case.

We have already noted the instrumentation of Sal Marquez’s muted trumpet and Ernie Watts’ tenor saxophone. Both take turns playing the melody and swapping solos. They are backed by a rhythm section consisting of Dave Grusin on piano, Brian Bromberg on bass and Harvey Mason on drums. These are all stellar jazz musicians, given free rein to improvise, so in that sense the opening track suggests a genuine jazz score. But analysing ‘Jack’s Theme’ in detail reveals the various devices Grusin uses to convey the authority of a jazz ‘standard’ and a sense of the jazz tradition. For example, the piano introduction of ‘Jack’s Theme’ in Figure 1 is built on a phrase taken from bars 5 and 6 of the second chorus of the Bill Evans and Miles Davis composition ‘Blue In Green’ from the album *Kind of Blue*, and uses the opening three chords of ‘Blue in Green’ – Gmi7, A7alt, Dmi – as the cadential progression into the top of the first chorus of ‘Jack’s Theme’.

Main Title (Jack's Theme)

3

Written by Dave Grusin

♩ = 144, Swing

The musical score is arranged in two systems. The first system is for Piano and Drums. The Piano part has a treble clef and a bass clef. The treble clef part starts with a quarter rest, followed by a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, and a half note C5. The bass clef part has a D3 pedal point. The second system is for Piano and Drums. The Piano part has a treble clef and a bass clef. The treble clef part starts with a quarter rest, followed by a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, and a half note C5. The bass clef part has a D3 pedal point. The Drums part has a snare drum and a bass drum. The snare drum has a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, and a half note C5. The bass drum has a D3 pedal point.

Piano

Drums

3 Gmi11 A7alt

Pno.

Dr.

Figure 1: 'Main Title (Jack's Theme)' – Written by Dave Grusin, taken from Biggs' *The Fabulous Baker Boys Songbook* (2007: 3).

Second, the first four bars of the melody of 'Jack's Theme' are a melodic development of the first four notes of 'So What' (Figure 2), and harmonically the opening eight bars of 'Jack's Theme' are on a D minor pedal, following a modal structure also similar to 'So What'.

The musical score shows two staves. The top staff is for 'SO WHAT' and the bottom staff is for 'JACK'S THEME'. Both are in 6/4 time. The top staff starts with a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, and a half note C5. The bottom staff starts with a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, and a half note C5. The bottom staff has a 3-measure rest after the first four notes.

SO WHAT

JACK'S THEME

Figure 2: Opening phrase of ‘So What’ – by Miles Davis and opening four bars of ‘Jack’s Theme’ – by Dave Grusin.

Third, the B section of ‘Jack’s Theme’ utilizes a chord progression where the chords function as I – V7sus4, moving through several transpositions – Abmi11 – Eb7sus4 to F#mi11 – C#7sus4, and on through Bmi9 – F#7sus4. This is similar to ‘Flamenco Sketches’, another Evans/Davis composition from *Kind of Blue*, which was developed from an earlier Bill Evans composition/improvisation ‘Peace Piece’ (1958). Evans took the progression from ‘Some Other Time’ by Leonard Bernstein (Pettinger 1998: 68). The influence of Bill Evans on Miles Davis around the time of the *Kind of Blue* recording sessions is well documented (Pettinger 1998:71). But Evans is also a major influence on the sound and character of Jack Baker, and Kloves directly references ‘Peace Piece’ in relation to Jack in the screenplay (Kloves 1985). This influence is discussed in more detail later in the article.

Melodically, harmonically and structurally, it is clear that ‘Jack’s Theme’ is reminiscent of certain aspects of *Kind of Blue*, but more than that the improvisatory language is very much within the same tradition. Ernie Watts on tenor saxophone takes the first solo and his rhythmic and melodic language includes semi-quavers, triplets, odd groupings, altered notes and unusual interval leaps as well as scalar runs; in contrast, Sal Marquez’s trumpet solo uses more space, blues notes and very strong melodic development, with both soloists stylistically in the tradition of John Coltrane and Miles Davis’ playing on *Kind of Blue*.

By using these melodic, harmonic and structural elements, as well as the instrumentation, textures and improvisatory language of *Kind of Blue*, Grusin is able to

contrast 'Jack's Theme' with the music of the Dorsey Brothers and the swing era of the 1940s, and position 'Jack's Theme' clearly within the cool and hard bop tradition. In short, Jack Baker is a jazz musician. But, while the visuals suggest a stereotypical jazz musician and context, Kloves and Grusin challenge those dated Hollywood associations with the non-diegetic music of 'Main Title – Jack's Theme', suggesting a more modern musician and therefore a more modern telling of what Bourjaily calls 'The Story' (Gabbard 1996: 67).

As the 'Main Title – Jack's Theme' fades, we meet older brother Frank Baker. Immediately the tension between the brothers is obvious, and we get our first taste of their musical lives together. Throughout the film, Jack's piano playing was recorded by composer Dave Grusin, and Frank's by John F. Hammond, and after a sentimental preamble the brothers begin to play a two-piano version of 'People'. As Jack/Grusin begins to play the opening chords, the camera focuses in on Jack's hands, slowly panning out to a wider shot of him and then cutting to Frank's hands when he begins to play, and again panning out to reveal Frank. This is followed by a wide shot of the two brothers performing. This is one of the particular strengths of *The Fabulous Baker Boys* that allows it to work as a film about musicians, where so many other films have failed. The Bridges brothers learned the pieces and 'were filmed playing dummy instruments (which look real but make no sound) – a practice called "sidelining"' (Stewart 1989). So what the viewer sees and hears is synonymous. Jack, though, is clearly tired of the routine and, we sense, frustrated, perhaps by a lack of creative opportunity.

The next gig we see is the only time that the brothers perform as a duo with any energy in their playing. They play an up-tempo version of 'The Girl From Ipanema', the

closest the brothers get to playing a jazz standard together. It is the end of a quiet night in a Hawaiian-themed bar and we hear their outro chorus. Any genuine enthusiasm that there was in the music soon disappears as the bar owner, speaking alone to Frank, pays them off and suggests it is time that they have a break from this long-standing gig. Later as Frank drives them home he suggests they hire a singer. The ensuing auditions are painful and hilarious, but, arriving late, Susie Diamond (Michelle Pfeiffer) performs 'More Than You Know' (an obvious reference to the Dorsey brothers and their 1945 V-Disc release, and in a further reference to the Dorseys she tells Jack to play it 'real slow'.) Susie can sing, an obvious 'torch singer' (Jones 2007: 24) in the mould of so many that have gone before. Not simply because of the song choices – 'More Than You Know', 'My Funny Valentine' – and their themes of 'unrequited love' (Jones 2007: 16), but also because of her physicality. Susie doesn't dance so much as channel the music through her body, a complete contrast to the static, rather hidden performance style of the two pianos. Susie joins the act and, after an initial gig, the new act looks promising. But after this glimpse of something better, we find Jack at 'Henry's', a basement jazz club, which features a trio with a young pianist who bears a striking resemblance to Art Tatum, playing an up-tempo improvised chorus on 'Lullaby Of Birdland'.³

Henry's is used as a site of authenticity, by referencing the 'basement-like club' scene in *The Fabulous Dorseys* where 'the revered black pianist' Art Tatum improvises (his only appearance in a feature film). Though Gabbard discusses the Tatum scene in terms of its inherent racism, Jack's race at Henry's is not an issue. Rather, the relevance of the Tatum scene is in its use of a 'real musician' improvising, and as such its representation of the jazz tradition.

The conversation between Jack and the bar owner Henry (Albert Hall) during the first scene at Henry's suggests that Jack is indeed frustrated working with Frank, and is not being true to himself or honest with those around him. There is an interesting resonance here to what Williams wrote about in *The Jazz Tradition* (1993: 254–55). He said,

The music represents important aspects of our lives, ... aspects that are associated with all our unresolved problems, with our unrecognised lack of self-knowledge, with all the truths about ourselves which we refuse to admit to or face up to... Those things, however, are positive as well as negative in that they involve a fundamental redemption if we could acknowledge them. (Williams 1993)

Throughout the film there are tacit acknowledgements from others that Jack Baker is an exceptional musician, – ‘you’re brilliant’, says Frank Baker in a late night drunken moment of candour; and, ‘you’re good, aren’t you?’ Susie asks. The screenplay describes Jack’s reverie when playing: ‘his face is suddenly calm. Peaceful’ (Kloves 1985). Often jazz histories and books focus on the negative aspects of musicians’ lives (Foster 2013: 1). The music’s revelatory and contradictory qualities of the individual are less emphasized. Here though, through the development of the character of Jack Baker, we see this ‘redemptive’ perspective explored. And the use of improvisation within the character’s development is crucial.

Later in the film, Susie finds Jack playing alone in the hotel ballroom where the three are staying while playing a series of dates at a resort. This is the first time we have

seen Jack playing solo and Susie is uncomfortable to begin with. Glancing around, she is aware that she is glimpsing something private as Jack works through a solo piano version of 'Jack's Theme'. But she moves towards the piano – in fact, she is almost drawn to it – and taking a drag on Jack's cigarette says, referring to his playing, 'It's nice', which of course is an understatement, as she is clearly absorbed in the music almost as much as Jack is. Later Frank comes to the door, yet he remains outside the ballroom, in a sense excluded from the musical exchange between Jack and Susie. As such, this seemingly private practice session becomes a public declaration of Jack's individuality.

The diegetic solo version of 'Jack's Theme' (Figure 3) is a slower stripped-down version. Essentially it has a thoughtful half-time feel in a 3/4 time signature. But Grusin cleverly suggests the possibility of double time by using a dotted crotchet pattern in the left hand, allowing the melody to float in three over the top of the implied two feel,⁴ but the playing never feels rushed. Neither is it tentative; there is an assurance to the playing. The key signature has been dropped down a tone from the 'Main Title' version in D minor to C minor, which has a more mellow quality than D minor. There is no introduction, interludes or coda on this version and the whole performance is only one chorus with no improvisation. It is as though Jack is thinking carefully about what he wants to say, with the statement of the melody being predominantly a single note line and with little in the way of pianistic flourishes. Harmonically this solo version is exactly the same as the 'Main Title' version, and the chord voicings are standard Bill Evans rootless voicings, placing this version of the tune also firmly in the cool or hard bop styles.

Jack's Theme Solo Version

Written by Dave Grusin

♩ = 80

Cmi⁹ Cmi⁹ C¹³sus⁴ C⁷alt

Figure 3: Opening four bars of ‘Jack’s Theme’ – by Dave Grusin, taken from Biggs’ *The Fabulous Baker Boys Songbook* (2007: 60).

What makes this performance such a powerful statement of intent is, first, that throughout the film Jack says very little, rarely does he initiate a conversation, particularly with Frank; and second, that the diegetic music which Jack/Grusin are playing is integral to the main character’s development and expression. As such, the restatement here of ‘Jack’s Theme’ suggests to the viewer that Jack is being honest with himself and acknowledging the possibility of a different life for himself and, by extension, a better relationship with those around him. Perhaps this is the real power and resonance of ‘Jack’s Theme’ in particular and of jazz more generally, that ‘the music reaches beyond its immediate circumstances... and tells all men something about themselves which they do not know and have never heard before’ (Williams 1993: 255).

The fact that Jack does not improvise on this solo version provides a stark contrast to the opening ‘Main Title’ version. In the audience’s mind, the true character of Jack Baker improvises. His frustration at the piano during the duo scenes with Frank has been palpable, and this hotel scene has provided the first glimpse of him playing in a relaxed

and attentive manner. That he does not improvise here is telling – perhaps this is a new composition that he is working through, or he is not able to express himself, or both.

The use of improvisation in this film is key to the development of the characters and their relationships to one another. The song choices for the film help to illustrate this point. Throughout, the Baker Boys' repertoire (like that of Ferrante and Teicher) consists almost entirely of easy listening classics, for example 'Feelings', 'The Look of Love', 'Can't Take My Eyes Off You'. These songs contain no improvisation, either during the film, or more generally in performative contexts. Whereas the songs played by Jack and Susie – 'More Than You Know', 'Makin' Whoopee'; other musicians – 'Lullaby of Birdland'; other diegetic music – 'Perdido', 'Moonglow'; and non-diegetic songs – 'Do Nothin' 'Til You Hear From Me', 'My Funny Valentine' are all jazz standards. These jazz standards provide improvisatory contexts for the respective soloists and the emerging individuality of the main characters. There is then a sense in which Jack feels as though he is on the outside of the jazz tradition, because when he is performing with Frank they 'play the same... songs the same... way every night'. So the choice of repertoire that the brothers play puts a barrier between them, with Frank on the one hand playing it safe with set arrangements of easy listening classics, and Jack on the other, for the most part, surrounded by other people listening, playing and improvising on standards.

Interestingly, as if to emphasize the point that the improvisatory contexts of the soundtrack songs are acting as a narrative tool to the development of the main character's individuality, several of the song choices are of Duke Ellington compositions – 'Perdido', 'Do Nothin' Till You Hear From Me', 'Prelude to a Kiss', 'Solitude' – Ellington's music

is used, like Tatum and Evans/Davis, as representative of authenticity and articulacy. Ellington placed a lot of importance on the soloists in his bands and he would often compose with a specific individual in mind, because of their unique sound (Hodeir 1956: 88; Williams 1993: 108). For example, the opening melodic phrase of ‘Do Nothin’ Till You Hear From Me’ references Ellington’s earlier orchestral work ‘Concerto For Cootie’ written for the trumpeter Charles ‘Cootie’ Williams. Jack reinforces Ellington’s authority when, during an argument, Frank asserts ‘She’s got the Harry James orchestra in there!’ To which Jack mutters ‘Ellington’.

As a result of Frank being called away, Susie and Jack are left alone at the hotel over New Year’s Eve to complete their run of gigs. During the evening they attempt to avoid acknowledging the obvious attraction both feel towards one another. The ambidiegetic version of ‘Do Nothin’ Till You Hear From Me’ performed by the Mercer Ellington Orchestra plays out, and there is no dialogue (Holbrook considers it is played ‘on the same portable boom-box’ as ‘Perdido’ was (Holbrook 2012: 132) and there are other instances throughout the film where the source of the music is uncertain – for example ‘Moonglow’). As the solo builds the tension, the two characters, sharing adjoining rooms, indulge their mutual attraction by secretly taking it in turns to go through the others’ personal belongings. The narrative of the solo is the narrative of the characters’ flirtations. However, the song is ended abruptly when the phone rings, leaving this dance between Susie and Jack unresolved. And so, then, in the famous ‘Makin’ Whoopee’ scene that follows, when Susie and Jack improvise (both musically and physically) we recognize the whole performance as the inevitable consummation that it

is. Allowing the two central characters, paraphrasing Williams, to face up to the truths about themselves and in so doing, glimpse redemption.

Over the course of the film, composer Dave Grusin also uses a recurring ascending theme to underscore the tender moments between Susie and Jack. A non-diegetic ballad, called variously 'Soft on Me' or 'Susie and Jack', it is played by the same quintet that plays the 'Main Title' version of 'Jack's Theme'. The 'Susie and Jack' version has an ABCA structure where each section is ten bars. Throughout the harmonies are rich, extended chords. Each time it occurs, the melodic embellishment is increased, and the improvisatory nature of the piece grows as the relationship between the two develops. At the end of the 'Makin' Whoopee' scene when Susie kisses Jack, we hear the improvised C section of 'Susie and Jack'. A harmon-muted trumpet (referencing Miles Davis) conveys the tenderness of the moment.

The scene cuts to the deserted ballroom, while the solo continues. Susie walks through the remnants of New Year's Eve towards Jack and, as the music fades, Susie and Jack are alone and Susie begins to talk. Susie is open and honest, while Jack listens, but says very little. A 'sad, plaintive' improvised solo piano version of 'Susie and Jack' begins to play (Kloves 1985), and the inevitable seduction occurs. For the viewer, the consistency of Grusin's playing, his phrasing and unique sound on Jack's performances means we associate this non-diegetic solo piano performance directly with Jack, and realize this improvisation on 'Susie and Jack' is an expression of his tenderness.

After returning from the run of nights at the resort, Susie goes to look for Jack. Trying Jack's apartment first, she comes face to face with Nina, the child of an upstairs neighbour from Jack's apartment, whom he takes care of, and there is no dialogue

between Susie and Nina (in *The Fabulous Dorseys*, Jane – the girl next door – and Jane – the adult singer – are the same person!); Susie then visits Henry’s. The ensuing diegetic version of Jack playing with the house band on ‘Jack’s Theme’ is longer than the solo version because, crucially, Jack improvises and he does so in public. This is the first time that Jack Baker has played something of his own volition in a public setting, and it is not just another standard; he is playing his own composition and as such this performance is a statement of the character’s identity. The trio provides the stability, supporting the rhythmic ambiguity of the two against three comping pattern, leaving Jack space to develop and build the melody. Susie is uncomfortable when she arrives at the club, but as she orders a drink at the bar she recognizes the music. Slowly she peers around the pillar at the band, the camera takes her point of view and reveals to Susie (and the audience) that it is indeed Jack playing. His solo (Figure 4) is only half a chorus, but it is full of rhythmic and melodic invention using the same improvisatory language of the ‘Main Title’ version.

Figure 4: Opening four bars of improvisation on ‘Jack’s Theme’ – Trio Version – by Dave Grusin, taken from Biggs’ *The Fabulous Baker Boys Songbook* (2007: 72). The

original screenplay is also revealing – ‘Turning slowly, Susie discovers Jack, hunched over the piano onstage, playing with the trio’ (Kloves 1989a).

The importance in this direction is in the description of Jack’s posture – ‘hunched over the piano’. If Art Tatum was a ‘revered’ pianist of the swing era and throughout the career of the Dorsey Brothers, then Bill Evans is similarly revered in the modern era, and his is the hunched posture that Kloves alludes to, and Jack emulates.

Bill Evans was a profoundly introspective musician. It has already been mentioned above the influence Evans had on Miles Davis, and the connection of his composition ‘Peace Piece’ to *The Fabulous Baker Boys*, and particularly ‘Jack’s Theme’. But there are further references to Bill Evans in the different versions of the original screenplay, and, despite what Gabbard claims, there is actually a picture of Bill Evans on the wall in Jack’s apartment. And Holbrook has also noted the ‘Bill Evans-inspired’ solos on ‘Jack’s Theme’ (Holbrook 2012: 133). Therefore, just as Art Tatum lent an authority to *The Fabulous Dorseys*, so too, the influence of Bill Evans, though never explicitly stated, provides an authenticity to *The Fabulous Baker Boys*.

As the solo fades on the last two bars of the A section of ‘Jack’s Theme’ at Henry’s bar, an unresolved altered dominant chord is left hanging, questioning the potential of this moment when Jack Baker publicly improvises. The tension, implied by the hanging Eb7b9#11 at the end of the trio version, is played out in the following scenes as Jack argues with and shuts out those around him, eventually admitting to Frank, after a vicious argument, that he ‘can’t do it anymore’, that he is ‘through’ playing with Frank.

The culmination of this section of the film (the antithesis of the large-stage endings of the swing era biopics) is played out in a short scene where Jack is alone, again

at Henry's bar. He plays a fully improvised piece in C minor of Imi7 – V7sus4. 'Jack's Theme – Reprise' (Figure 5), abandoning the structure of 'Jack's Theme' and playing with the 'Peace Piece' progression on which the B section of 'Jack's Theme' is based. Demonstrating all the technical fluency and versatility of the opening 'Main Title' version, Jack plays syncopated semi quaver runs with articulations that wrong-foot the listener and include odd groupings that effortlessly cross the beat. The improvisation confirms that Jack 'can't play the same songs the same way' anymore. His life performing with Frank is over. On finishing the piece, Henry appears and says to Jack 'I've got Tuesdays and Thursdays open, they are yours if you want them?'

80

Jack's Theme - Reprise

Written by Dave Grusin

Figure 5: Opening five bars of improvisation on 'Jack's Theme – Reprise' – by Dave Grusin, taken from Biggs' *The Fabulous Baker Boys Songbook* (2007: 80).

The resolution of the film takes place in the street, outside Susie's apartment, during the day. It is played out with the same non-diegetic solo piano version of the theme 'Susie and Jack' that was used for the New Year's Eve seduction scene. Jack is visibly emotional in this scene as he reaches out to Susie. The improvised piano of the soundtrack reinforces the vulnerability of Jack in that moment. The two never touch and their future is left uncertain. The final dialogue is followed by a solo piano introduction to 'My Funny Valentine' (Figure 6), Susie's voice humming in unison with the piano's melodic line. The camera cuts to a long shot as Susie walks away and the final credits

begin. This performance is similar to 'Makin Whoopee' in that Jack's piano supports Susie's vocal throughout. Musically, there is lots of interaction, and the piano responds after every vocal phrase. All of Grusin's melodic invention and phrasing, as well as the rhythmic variety that we have associated with Jack throughout the film, is apparent. This version is in the key of G minor/Bb Major, rather than the traditional C minor/Eb Major it is usually performed in and has a 12/8 time signature instead of the written 4/4. The form, though, is the standard 32 bar AABA, with the four bar introduction and a rallentando on the last phrase and a 4 bar ending. The lyrics of the classic 'torch song', 'My Funny Valentine', which refer to the imperfect nature of the singer's lover and yet the fact that she loves him anyway are, of course, entirely appropriate. More than that though, this song is a further reference to the jazz tradition because it has a strong association with some venerable jazz musicians, particularly Chet Baker (1956). And it was a standard that Miles Davis (1964) played regularly.

My Funny Valentine

Music by Richard Rogers
Lyric by Lorenz Hart

♩ = 68

Voice

Piano

3

Voice

Pno.

Chord symbols: Gmi¹¹, Gmi⁹, Gmi⁹, G[°], Cmi/G

Figure 6: Introduction to ‘My Funny Valentine’ – by Dave Grusin, taken from Biggs’ *The Fabulous Baker Boys Songbook* (2007: 91).

With the exception of Holbrook (2012), *The Fabulous Baker Boys* is a largely overlooked film in scholarship, and this article argues that it is an important film in the canon, worthy of consideration. Indeed, it is argued that through a close analysis of the film’s soundtrack, the improvisatory structures, and the nature of those improvisations, are integral to the development of the main character Jack Baker (Jeff Bridges) and to his relationships with the other characters. The ‘Main Title – Jack’s Theme’ has been examined and is seen to contain a number of elements that allow it to work as a narrative tool, including melodic, harmonic and structural elements, as well as instrumentation, textures and improvisatory language that imply the cool/modal and hard bop styles of jazz and aspects of the album *Kind of Blue* by Miles Davis, and the influence of Bill

Evans in particular. More than that, 'Jack's Theme' provides an important site of authenticity, as does the music of Ellington, within the film's narrative, just as Art Tatum was a site of authenticity for *The Fabulous Dorseys* approximately 40 years earlier. The development of 'Jack's Theme', through four different versions, in relation to the character development of Jack has been considered in detail, and close analysis has shown that the use of 'Jack's Theme' as an improvisatory context has allowed for Jack's individuality to emerge. Similarly, other compositions as improvisatory contexts are also identified – 'Do Nothin' Till You Hear From Me', 'Makin Whoopee', 'Susie and Jack' and 'My Funny Valentine' – each of which is used to articulate the developing relationship between the characters of Susie and Jack. Ultimately then, *The Fabulous Baker Boys* explores and articulates the positive redemptive nature of the music.

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Australian-born Adam Biggs is a pianist and music educator. He is head of jazz studies at Bath Spa University, and holds a Masters degree in jazz piano performance (2011). Adam trained at Elder Conservatorium at the University of Adelaide, South Australia, graduating in 1994 with a B.Mus. After many years working internationally, he released his first solo recording *When Lights Are Low* in 2003. He has played and worked with many musicians including Iain Ballamy, Derek Nash, Andy Sheppard, Clare Teal, Jamie Cullum and Geoff Simkins. He leads the jazz trio *Adam's Apple* and they released their first CD *Love Unknown*, a collection of hymn tunes arranged for jazz trio, in 2007. Also in 2007 he published the *Circle of Fifths*, a unique learning tool for students, and *The Fabulous Baker Boys Songbook*, a collection of transcriptions of the music from the film *The Fabulous Baker Boys* written by Dave Grusin. In 2009 *Adam's Apple* released their second CD, *Be Still*. In 2010 Adam became a Roland endorsed artist. Adam completed

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Notes

¹ Throughout *The Fabulous Baker Boys* there are references to the tempo, for example at her audition Susie corrects Jack as he plays the introduction to ‘More Than Yo,u Know’, ‘Real slow, O.K!’ she says. Amusingly, at one point Frank challenges Jack on Jack’s time-keeping – ‘You came in early on Little Green Apples!’ The ensuing argument descends into a fruit fight with Frank first throwing a kiwi fruit at Jack, and Jack responding by threatening Frank with, and then throwing, a pineapple.

² ‘V-Discs’ (V standing for Victory) were a series of recordings, made and distributed during and after World War II – October 1943 – May 1949. The aim of the project was to boost troop morale by supplying phonograph records of a variety of classical, jazz and popular music selections.

³ This is a clear reference to Art Tatum because ‘Lullaby of Birdland’ refers to the jazz club ‘Birdland’ in New York where Art Tatum played. George Shearing who, like Tatum, was blind, wrote ‘Lullaby of Birdland’. Therefore ‘Henry’s’ represents the authentic jazz

tradition, which is important in terms of Jack's playing and improvisation, his sense of self and his worth as a jazz musician.

⁴ A dotted-crotchet in a bar of 3/4 divides the bar evenly in two, which means that although there are three beats in each bar, a good musician can subdivide those beats into two, or four, and therefore create a new time feel, resulting in a floating effect.