

JOHN ABERCROMBIE



John Abercrombie © Chris Tribble / ECM Records

A window into the process of writing odd time signatures based music.

“John’s Waltz”: transcription and analysis

By Edouard Brenneisen

Here’s a transcription of one of my favorite players, John Abercrombie. The following pages represent the entire guitar part of “*John’s Waltz*”, off of the album *November* (ECM records, 1992), with Marc Johnson on bass and Peter Erskine on drums (a fabulous album in my opinion - get it!).

John Abercrombie was born in 1944 in Port Chester, NY. After graduating from Berklee, he went on touring with organist Johnny Smith and played with the Brecker Brothers who were just forming the band Dreams. Within a few years, Abercrombie became one of New York City’s most sought after session musicians, recording for Gil Evans, Gato Barbieri, Barry Miles and many others. Around the same time, he got a steady gig with Chico Hamilton’s band. But wider recognition and public attention came when the guitarist entered Billy Cobham’s group, which also included the Brecker Brothers. After a gig with Cobham at the Montreux Jazz festival, Abercrombie met ECM records’ head, Manfred Eicher, who invited him to record an album for his label. “Timeless”, recorded with Jack DeJohnette and Jan Hammer, was the first album in a long series for ECM. In 1975, the first disc of Gateway was released. Gateway included Jack DeJohnette and Dave Holland. Later in 1979, Abercrombie formed his quartet with Richie Beirach, George Mraz and Peter Donald. Around that time, the guitarist also contributed to the recordings of many of the label’s artists, including Kenny Wheeler and Ralph Towner.

Abercrombie then founded his seminal trio with Marc Johnson and Peter Erskine. Their telepathic playing, freedom, wide sound (Abercrombie is an effects addict, used guitar synthesizer at that time, as well as distortion) and brilliant rendition of standards have led the trio to be compared to Bill Evans' trio many times. The tune transcribed for this project comes from the trio's "November" album, released in 1993. On that particular album (the consummate jazz guitar trio ballad album in my very humble opinion), Abercrombie exhibits many of the characteristics that he is often associated with. Possessing a voice of his own, Abercrombie is a master at fusing the traditional Jazz guitar idiom with more modern sounds.

What's most surprising at first on this cut is Abercrombie's sound. It's hard to discern in his heavily chorused and echoed sound if the guitarist is using an electric guitar with piezzo pickup or an actual acoustic guitar. The sound is very dynamic, very sensitive to the articulations employed. Abercrombie also uses a volume pedal as evidenced in the swells in the intro.

Overall, his playing on that tune is very dense. There's very little silence from him, yet there is an incredible sense of space and respiration here. After stating the melody in the introduction of the tune, a rubato solo guitar part, and with the band in time, Abercrombie comps for Johnson's remarkable bass solo. However sophisticated the sound of the guitarist appears to be, Abercrombie uses very common shell voicings most of the time. He employs block chords, arpeggiated chord forms as well as single line to create very well crafted textures. His rhythmic approach, on par with the rest of the band, is very interesting. Abercrombie often alternates clear and strong 3/4 time rhythmic figures with superimposed metric feels, especially when the band goes into duple time, creating what sounds almost like a 6/8 feel, but that I could relate more precisely to swinging figures with the pulse being the dotted quarter note. The rhythm section (with Johnson soloing) seems to dive into this new pulse at the very same moments as Abercrombie does, denoting a great common language at work here.

From bar 118, Abercrombie starts his solo with a long series of notes on the upbeats, a long, ascending line, which sets the beginning of a rich solo. His solo bears many common features with his comping: arpeggiated chord forms are part of his swinging eight note lines, he goes into different rhythmic superimposition, swing and straight time feels, triplets, swinging at the dotted quarter note, double time feel, etc.

It is interesting to note a few very characteristic features of his playing. The importance of triads first, which contribute to giving his sound a very sing able contour. Abercrombie's trademark "lick", playing a three-note figure across two strings separated by one, usually playing a minor second then a major seventh, which frames the lick in an octave (on long series of these can be found from measure 202 on). It is important to note that Abercrombie makes great use of the entire range of the instrument, creating jumping textures at times or very smooth ones at others. Abercrombie plays a lot of legato lines throughout (he let go off the pick early on in his career), which possibly accounts for his overall airy playing. A very clear example of the trio's formidable sense of interplay is evidenced in bars 184 to 185 where the three of them make the same hits off the beat.

John Abercrombie is a player for all situations, from straight-ahead to free and semi-free playing situations, from rock to delicate playing. He is an absolute master at creating rich textures, using rhythmic flexibility with great taste. While he is firmly rooted in the Jazz tradition, he continues to stretch the idiom to this day.

Edouard Brenneisen, April 2009

JOHN'S WALTZ

JOHN ABERCROMBIE

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RUBATO

5

9

13

17

Rit. *STRAIGHT*

21

JAZZ WALTZ ♩ = 138

25

28

32

D/bb $Amin7(b5)$ $p 7\sharp 5$ *A TEMPO*

$Gmin7(b5)$ $C7(b9)$ $Fmin7$ $Ebmin7$

DMIN7(b5) G7(b9) CMAS7 C/B AMIN7 AMIN/G
 36
 F#MIN7(b5) 87 EMIN7(b5) A7(b9)
 40
 DMIN7(b5) G7(b9) STRAIGHT C/Bb AMIN7
 44
 AbMAS7 EbMAS7/G FMIN7 EbMAS7(#11)
 48
 DMAS7 C#b13 #9 F#MIN7(b5) B7(b9) SWING AT THE DOTTED QUARTER NOTE
 52
 EMIN7(b5) A7(b9)
 56
 D/Bb AMIN7(b5) D7b9
 58
 GMIN7(b5) C7(b9) FMIN7 EbMIN7
 62
 DMIN7(b5) G7(b9) CMAS7 C/B AMIN7
 66

The image displays a musical score for "John's Waltz" by John Abercrombie, consisting of ten staves of music. The score is written in treble clef and includes various chords and melodic lines. The chords are labeled as follows:

- Staff 1: F#MIN7(b5), B7, EMIN7(b5), A7(b9)
- Staff 2: DMIN7(b5), G7(b9), C/Bb, A MIN7
- Staff 3: AbMA7, EbMA7/G, FMIN7, E MA7(#11)
- Staff 4: D MA7, C#b9, F#MIN7(b5), B7(b9)
- Staff 5: EMIN7(b5), A7(b9)
- Staff 6: D/Bb, A MIN7(b5), D7b9, G MIN7(b5)
- Staff 7: C7(b9), FMIN7, EbMIN7
- Staff 8: DMIN7(b5), G7(b9), C MA7, C/B, A MIN7
- Staff 9: F#MIN7(b5), B7, EMIN7(b5), A7(b9)

The score includes various musical notations such as triplets, slurs, and accidentals. The measure numbers 70, 74, 78, 82, 86, 88, 92, 96, and 100 are indicated at the beginning of their respective staves.

DMIN7(b5) *SWING AT THE DOTTED QUARTER NOTE* **INAUDIBLE**

104

AbMA7 **E**bMA7/G **F**MIN7 **E**MA7(#11)

108

DMA7 *STRAIGHT* **C**#^{b13}/_{#9} **F**#MIN7(b5) **B**7(b9) *SWING AT THE DOTTED QUARTER NOTE*

112

EMIN7(b5) **A**7(b9)

116

D/b **A**MIN7(b5) **D**7^{b9}/_{#5}

118

GMIN7(b5) **C**7(b9) **F**MIN7 **E**bMIN7

122

DMIN7(b5) **G**7(b9) **C**MA7 **C**/b **A**MIN7

126

F#MIN7(b5) **B**7 **E**MIN7(b5) **A**7(b9)

130

DMIN7(b5) **G**7(b9) **C**/b **A**MIN7

134

Handwritten musical score for "John's Waltz" by John Abercrombie. The score consists of ten staves of music, each with a measure number and a key signature of one flat (B-flat major / D minor). The chords and melodic lines are as follows:

- Staff 1 (138):** Chords: AbMA7, EbMA7/G, FMIN7, EMAs7(#11). Melody: 3-note triplet, 3-note triplet, 3-note triplet, 5-note triplet.
- Staff 2 (142):** Chords: DMA7, C#b13#9, F#MIN7(b5), B7(b9). Melody: 3-note triplet, 3-note triplet, 3-note triplet, 3-note triplet.
- Staff 3 (146):** Chords: EMIN7(b5), A7(b9). Melody: 3-note triplet, 3-note triplet, 3-note triplet, 3-note triplet.
- Staff 4 (148):** Chords: D/8b, AMIN7(b5), D7#9. Melody: 3-note triplet, 3-note triplet, 3-note triplet, 3-note triplet.
- Staff 5 (152):** Chords: GMIN7(b5), C7(b9), FMIN7, EbMIN7. Melody: 3-note triplet, 3-note triplet, 3-note triplet, 3-note triplet.
- Staff 6 (156):** Chords: DMIN7(b5), G7(b9), CMAs7, C/B, AMIN7. Melody: 3-note triplet, 3-note triplet, 3-note triplet, 3-note triplet. A "STRAIGHT" marking is present under the CMAs7 and C/B chords.
- Staff 7 (160):** Chords: F#MIN7(b5), B7, EMIN7(b5), A7(b9). Melody: 3-note triplet, 3-note triplet, 3-note triplet, 3-note triplet.
- Staff 8 (164):** Chords: DMIN7(b5), G7(b9), C/8b, AMIN7. Melody: 3-note triplet, 3-note triplet, 3-note triplet, 3-note triplet.
- Staff 9 (168):** Chords: AbMA7, EbMA7/G, FMIN7, EMAs7(#11). Melody: 3-note triplet, 3-note triplet, 3-note triplet, 3-note triplet.

172

DMas7 C#^{b13}/_{#9} F#MIN7(b5) B7(b9)

176

EMIN7(b5) A7(b9)

178

D/Bb AMIN7(b5) D7#5

182

GMIN7(b5) C7(b9) FMIN7 EbMIN7

186

DMIN7(b5) G7(b9) CMas7 AMIN7

190

F#MIN7(b5) B7 EMIN7(b5) A7(b9)

194

DMIN7(b5) G7(b9) C/Bb STRAIGHT AMIN7

SWING AT THE DOTTED QUARTER NOTE

198

AbMas7 EbMas7/G FMIN7 EMas7(#11) DMas7

202

C#^{b13}/_{#9} F#MIN7(b5) B7(b9) EMIN7(b5) A7(b9)

Handwritten musical score for "John's Waltz" by John Abercrombie. The score consists of ten staves of music, each with a measure number and chord annotations. The chords are written in a handwritten style and include various extensions and alterations.

- Staff 1 (207): $D/8b$, $A_{MIN7}(b5)$, $D7^{b9}_{\#5}$
- Staff 2 (211): $G_{MIN7}(b5)$, $C7(b9)$, F_{MIN7} , E_{bMIN7}
- Staff 3 (215): $D_{MIN7}(b5)$, $G7(b9)$, C_{MA7} , C/B , A_{MIN7} , A_{MIN}/G
- Staff 4 (219): $F\#_{MIN7}(b5)$, $B7$, $E_{MIN7}(b5)$, $A7(b9)$
- Staff 5 (223): $D_{MIN7}(b5)$, $G7(b9)$, C/Bb , A_{MIN7}
- Staff 6 (227): A_{bMA7} , E_{bMA7}/G , F_{MIN7} , $E_{MA7}(\#11)$
- Staff 7 (231): D_{MA7} , $C\#^{b13}_{\#9}$, $F\#_{MIN7}(b5)$, $B7(b9)$
- Staff 8 (235): $E_{MIN7}(b5)$, $A7(b9)$
- Staff 9 (237): *Rit.* $D/8b$, *RUBATO* $A_{MIN7}(b5)$



John Abercrombie

Selected Discography

- 1974 Timeless - ECM
- 1975 Gateway w/ Jack DeJohnette & Dave Holland - ECM
- 1982 Solar w/ John Scofield - Palo Alto
- 1988 John Abercrombie Marc Johnson & Peter... [live] - ECM
- 1992 John Abercrombie/Dan Wall/Adam Nussbaum - ECM
- 1992 November - ECM
- 2001 John Abercrombie, Marc Johnson & Peter Erskine - ECM
- 2004 Class Trip - ECM
- 2007 The Third Quartet - ECM



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