

The Grateful Dead's "Blues for Allah": Syncretic Composition in Mid-1970s Rock Music

Although it is one of the more unique and challenging pieces composed and recorded by an Anglo-American rock group in the 1970s, the Grateful Dead's piece "Blues for Allah" has received little in the way of scholarly attention. In our paper, we will examine how diverse musical vocabularies are integrated in this singular, syncretic composition. The suite fuses passages of blues- or folk-derived harmony, gospel vocal elements, and rock instrumentation with a highly chromatic main theme using all twelve pitch-classes, along with a developmental middle section made up of a structured post-tonal collective improvisation. We will show how, despite the composers' comparative lack of formal training, unity is preserved throughout the eclectic extended work, across these different stylistic languages, both with the consistent use of similar types of stepwise descending melodic movement and with motion between the pitch centers of F and E – between phrases in the main theme but also between and across sections.

As one would expect from a piece of music by a rock band in the 1970s, the popular music associations of "Blues for Allah" are at points obvious. But on the whole, it is highly unorthodox. Although there is a consistent pulse, there is little sense of a consistent meter in either its main theme or "Sand Castles and Glass Castles" (SCAGC), the improvised middle section, which is proportionally by far the longest. And though F is clear as the piece's tonal center in its introduction (see Fig. 1) and penultimate "Under Eternity" section (Fig. 4), the main theme (Fig. 2) and the improvisation significantly complicate this with a number of post-tonal strategies that at times blur any clear sense of tonality. Interestingly, both the entire composition and the first thematic section begin in F major but end open and unresolved on the pitch class E (e.g. see Fig. 3), while the five-and-a-half-minute improvised section bridges the two areas by moving from unison playing on E to highly chromatic material centered on E, through more tonally ambiguous passages with shifting centers, before ultimately resolving to a clear center on F, preparing us for the gospel-based "Under Eternity".

Diverse analytical methods are required for the various musical vocabularies that we find in this piece. The main theme is most usefully analyzed in terms of pitch-class sets, showing its intricate compositional unity. In contrast, when considering other sections, modal or functional harmonic analysis are more germane. Examining linear counterpoint between the bass and lead guitar lines is helpful when analyzing SCAGC. It is in the fusion of and transitions between these diverse sections that the composition derives its unique strength, a characteristic undergirded by its overall formal integrity.

In order to consider how the form evolved, we will compare two different versions (diagrammed in Fig. 5): first, an early, proto, twice-performed one; second, its final recorded version, which was performed live only once after which it disappeared from the band's performing repertoire.

Fig. 1: Introduction

The introduction consists of two staves. The treble staff shows a melodic line with a key signature of one flat and a 4/4 time signature. The bass staff provides a harmonic accompaniment. Above the treble staff, the chords are labeled: F⁷, Fdim⁷/C, C⁷_{b9}, and F. Below the bass staff, a harmonic progression diagram shows the sequence: I⁷ → V → I.

Fig. 2: Main theme (NB: the thematic sections end with a restatement of Phrase 2, concluding on E, cf. Fig. 3)

The main theme is presented in four systems, each with fretboard diagrams above the notes. The first system (measures 1-8) contains Phrase 1, divided into sections a, b, and c. The second system (measures 9-16) contains Phrase 2, divided into sections a and b. The third system (measures 17-25) contains Phrase 2 again, divided into section c. The fourth system (measures 26-33) contains Phrase 3, divided into sections a, b, and c.

Fig. 3: Concluding statement of thematic material:

The concluding statement features three parts: Vocals, Lead guitar (measures 8-13), and Lead guitar (measures 14-19). The vocal line includes the lyrics: "Bird of Pa-ra-dise fly in white sky Blues for Al-lah In - sh'A - llah". The guitar parts provide accompaniment for the vocal line.

Fig. 4: "Under Eternity" Refrain

"Under Eternity" Refrain

Un - der e - ter - ni - ty 1.2. 3.
blue

Fig. 5: Formal structures of different versions

Formal Breakdown of BFA Versions

| | Intro | Main Theme | SCAGC (Improv.) | Stronger Than Dirt | Under Eternity Refrain | M. Theme Reprise | Lyrics |
|---------|-------|------------|-----------------|--------------------|------------------------|------------------|--------|
| 3/23/75 | | X | X | X | X | | |
| 6/17/75 | | X | X | X | X | | |
| Studio | X | X | X | | X | X | X |