Julien Wilson: Improvisation and timbral manipulation on selected recordings with the Julien Wilson Trio

Maximillian Wickham

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Julien Wilson: Improvisation and timbral manipulation on selected recordings with the Julien Wilson Trio

This thesis is presented in partial fulfilment of the degree of

Bachelor of Music (Honours)

Maximillian Wickham

Edith Cowan University
Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA)
2020
Declaration

I certify that this dissertation does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

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Abstract

This dissertation analyses the playing style of Australian jazz saxophonist Julien Wilson. More specifically, the investigation focuses on his recordings with the Julien Wilson Trio – arguably Wilson’s best known and most original group – featuring Wilson on tenor saxophone, Stephen Grant on piano accordion, and Stephen Magnusson on nylon-string and electric guitars. Although Wilson has received many accolades throughout his career and has been highly lauded by critics, fans and fellow musicians, there is very little academic research investigating his playing style. This dissertation seeks to address this imbalance through an analysis of Wilson’s recordings with his most distinctive original group.

The analysis is founded on transcriptions of Wilson’s performances of his original compositions ‘Beautiful Accident’, from the album While You Were Sleeping (2006) and ‘Trout River’, from Swailing (2013). The recordings have been analysed through the filters of melodic/harmonic improvisational devices, rhythmic improvisational devices, and timbral manipulation/inflection. Excerpts of each transcription have been included throughout the analysis to highlight the techniques Wilson employs in performance and improvisation. In addition, a semi-structured interview with Wilson has been conducted and his responses used to illuminate the findings of the analysis.

It is hoped that this dissertation will add to the relatively new field of research concerning Australian jazz through the discussion of one of Australia’s most distinctive and highly regarded musicians. This investigation may also aid other jazz musicians in developing their improvisational abilities and in finding approaches to performing in ensembles with non-conventional instrumentation. It is hoped that this analysis will aid other saxophonists in developing their capabilities through the study of Wilson’s highly expressive and melodic approach to the tenor saxophone.
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Introduction

Despite being one of Australia’s most distinctive and highly lauded voices in jazz, very little academic research has been conducted regarding the music of Julien Wilson or his eponymous trio with accordionist Stephen Grant and guitarist Stephen Magnusson. Prominent Australian music writer John Shand says of Julien Wilson:

Wilson understands all this: understands that a single note played with a sound to make your hair curl is worth a thousand thin, reedy ones. His tenor carries the mass to make a tune feel better about the fact that it was ever penned ... [his tone is] gorgeous, and the lines drip with joy and pathos and other emotions that remain wonderfully uncategorised. (Shand, 2014)

This is precisely the problem. Wilson’s performances have the power to draw a deep emotional response from his audience and yet the qualities that have earned him such high critical regard have remained, as Shand puts it, “uncategorised”. The existing research concerning Julien Wilson - of which there is little - has examined what is typical about his playing, but has not enumerated the musical devices and saxophone-specific techniques that have enabled Wilson to express so much that is deeply human through his music. This dissertation aims to bridge the gap between the gushing praise that Wilson has received from critics and reviewers and the dry musical analysis he has thus far been the subject of from researchers. Through an analysis of two recordings with the Julien Wilson Trio, the melodic and rhythmic devices and techniques of timbral manipulation Wilson has used to craft his distinctive musical voice will be examined.
Biography

Julien Wilson

In his book *Jazz: The Australian Accent*, John Shand said of Wilson’s break-out performances at the 1994 Wangaratta Festival, “[Wilson’s] sound was massive and arresting, the ideas engaging and devoid of attempts to impress” (Shand, 2008, p. 139). Wilson has drawn on a wide range of musical influences, but he particularly credits the saxophonists he saw live in his formative years of study in Melbourne, Boston and New York as a source of inspiration:

Seeing people live [is really important] man... [I remember] seeing [George] Garzone every Monday night in Boston, and getting to spend five or six hours with him every Wednesday at school, and just hearing that sound in that room. Going to see Paul Williamson at the Rainbow [Hotel in Fitzroy] and standing next to Paul, you know, I’m lucky enough he always gets me up to play... and he sounds huge, he always sounds glorious... Paul was always one for me on Monday nights here [in Melbourne], and hearing Garzone, hearing Tony Malaby in New York every week when I lived there, hearing Mark Simmonds play here a lot when Mark used to play around live in Melbourne. I mean, hearing great tenor players with great personal sounds play live and standing a foot or a metre away from them. It doesn’t matter how good someone is on a record, you never get that feeling of what it’s like to actually be in the room with the air moving around you... There’s no substitute for that. (J. K. Wilson, personal communication, July 18, 2019)

Julien Wilson was born in Melbourne in 1972 and attended primary school in New Zealand and Scotland. Wilson began playing clarinet at the age of 10 and at 14 he took up the saxophone. (Shand, 2008, p. 139) Wilson initially studied at the Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne and later completed a graduate diploma at New England Conservatory in Boston where he learnt from Jerry Bergonzi, George Russell, Paul Bley and George Garzone. Currently based in Melbourne, where he teaches at the Victorian College of the Arts and Monash University, Wilson has also spent large periods of his career living in Zurich and New York. He has been the recipient of numerous prestigious awards including
the 1994 National Jazz Award, the 2006 Freedman Fellowship for Jazz, multiple honours in the Australian Jazz ‘Bell’ Awards, and the 2015 APRA Art Music Award for Excellence in Jazz. Wilson has performed and recorded with numerous significant international and American artists including Jim Black, Mark Helias, Kurt Elling and Charlie Haden, and has worked extensively with many of Australia’s most highly regarded musicians including Mike Nock, Allan Browne, Paul Grabowsky, Barney McAll, Andrea Keller, Sam Anning and Jonathan Zwartz. (Wilson, 2019)

Julien Wilson Trio

The Julien Wilson Trio first formed for a performance in the inaugural Jazz: Now festival at the Sydney Opera House in 2004. The band grew out of another trio, Assumptions, which featured Wilson on tenor saxophone and Stephen Magnusson on electric guitar, but playing alongside a drummer, Will Guthrie. The band was booked to play at the Jazz: Now festival, but Guthrie had moved to France. Rather than replacing Guthrie with another drummer, Wilson chose instead to use multi-instrumentalist Stephen Grant – with whom he shared a house at the time – on accordion. (Shand, 2008, p. 135) Wilson says of the formation of the trio:

When Will [Guthrie] left, you know, we tried a couple of different drummers, who were all awesome, but I really missed playing with Will and we had a couple of gigs that were festival style gigs, and we said ‘fuck it’... I was living with Steve Grant hearing him play, ‘let’s have accordion instead of drums’. Like, why try and replace something with something else that’s the same? Why not just start something different, something new? (J. K. Wilson, personal communication, July 18, 2019)

In particular Wilson remembers hearing Grant play two tunes on the accordion that changed his perception of the instrument:

I was living with Steve at the time we started and I remember hearing him play two songs... out in the back yard and I couldn’t work what the songs were
because they sounded so weird on accordion. One was... ‘Blue In Green’ [by Miles Davis/Bill Evans] and it just sounded beautiful, you know, and the other one was 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' [by Nirvana]. You know, and when I heard him playing those I went... ‘It can go anywhere, that instrument can go anywhere.’ (J. K. Wilson, personal communication, July 18, 2019)

Since this first performance, the stature of the trio has grown exponentially. They have received glowing reviews, performed at every major Australian jazz festival, toured Europe and featured on three albums, *While You Were Sleeping* (2006), *Trio – Live* (2008), and *Swailing* (2013). Jessica Nicholas, a critic for Melbourne's *The Age* newspaper, writes of the group, “Listening to Wilson's trio... is as close as you're likely to get to dreaming with your eyes open” (Nicholas, 2009). John Shand, in a review for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, described the trio's sound as “dreamy music for dreamy people. Over the past three years the music of saxophonist Julien Wilson, guitarist Stephen Magnusson and accordionist Stephen Grant has become dreamier as it has evolved” (Shand, 2007).

Shand has said of the group, “the trio has found its own egalitarianism; its own way to... interact, without the music creating masters and slaves” (Shand, 2008, p. 134). This description certainly rings true with Wilson's conception of the sound of the trio:

The idea is that everyone is contributing to that bucket of sound in the centre of the room, that we're all trying to, you know, make our individual sounds indistinguishable. So... it's an unspoken idea with the trio, but it's sort of getting a blend that removes yourself from the sound, makes it something that you can only make [together], you know the sound, you can't take part of that sound away, it only exists as a blend. (J. K. Wilson, personal communication, July 18, 2019)
Rationale

This dissertation will be founded on the analysis of two recordings of the Julien Wilson Trio, namely the Wilson originals ‘Beautiful Accident’, from While You Were Sleeping (2006), and ‘Trout River’, from Swailing (2013). As both are original compositions by Wilson we can reasonably assume that he is familiar with their harmonic and rhythmic structures and that these recordings are, therefore, strong examples of Wilson’s improvisation. The two compositions were recorded seven years apart – ‘Beautiful Accident’ appears on the first album to feature the trio, and ‘Trout River’ is taken from their most recent release. The recordings have contrasting time signatures, tempi and chord progressions, but are also stylistically cohesive and have some compositional similarities. Both tunes have 20-bar forms and coda sections featuring extended improvisations by Wilson over a two-chord vamp.

These recordings show both sufficient variation and cohesion to be a fair representation of the sound of the trio and of Wilson’s playing style with this group. While the scope of an Honours dissertation is too small to fully investigate Wilson’s catalogue of recorded works, or even simply the full catalogue of the Julien Wilson Trio, ‘Beautiful Accident’ and ‘Trout River’ are two examples of Wilson’s playing at its most distinctive, virtuosic and lyrical.

Through an analysis of these recordings, this dissertation seeks to identify the key techniques and devices that define Julien Wilson’s style as a saxophonist and improviser and, more specifically, to define his performance style within the context of the Julien Wilson Trio. As there has been very little research conducted concerning Wilson and there is a notable scarcity of academic research regarding Australian jazz in general, it is hoped that this dissertation will add knowledge to the field and will aid in legitimising the work of Australian jazz musicians as the subject of academic research. As this dissertation focuses solely on Wilson’s performances with the Julien Wilson Trio, it does not represent the full catalogue of Wilson’s work as a bandleader and sideman and can only discuss his playing style in the context of this group. Additionally, as the selected recordings only feature Wilson on tenor saxophone, this dissertation
therefore cannot discuss Wilson's playing style on soprano saxophone, clarinet or bass clarinet, of which he is also an accomplished practitioner.
Chapter 1 - Literature Review

This literature review will discuss the one piece of existing research into Julien Wilson’s performance style, but will focus primarily on the dissertations, articles and music education textbooks that will inform the analysis of the transcriptions. There is fortunately a wealth of general music criticism regarding Wilson, and a selection of the books, album reviews and performance reviews regarding Wilson and the Julien Wilson Trio will also be discussed. While these works cannot inform any musical analysis, they provide useful descriptions of Wilson’s sound and his live performance style.

Dissertations investigating Julien Wilson

The sole piece of academic research regarding Wilson uncovered in the course of this research project is a Masters thesis from Monash University entitled *The improvisational styles of Australian saxophonists Jamie Oehlers and Julien Wilson* (Bailey, 2011). In this thesis, Bailey examines two transcriptions of Wilson’s improvisations, of which one is ‘Beautiful Accident’, also one of the recordings analysed in this dissertation. However, Bailey does not examine Wilson’s sound and inflection, which are key elements of Wilson’s individual playing style. Bailey’s thesis, therefore, will not be used as a framework for analysis.

Dissertations investigating other modern jazz saxophonists

Two Honours dissertations examining the music of other modern jazz saxophonists will form the primary framework for analysis used in this dissertation. These dissertations have been evaluated using the article ‘Jazz Analysis as Cultural Imperative (and other urban myths): a Critical Overview of Jazz Analysis and its Relationship to Pedagogy’ by Barry Kenny (Kenny, 1999), and adapted to suit an investigation of Julien Wilson’s playing style.

three transcriptions of solos by the modern jazz saxophonist Ben Wendel. Each transcription was completed by the author, as will be the case in this dissertation, and Minness analyses each solo in terms of rhythmic and melodic devices and articulations. Minness’s dissertation also includes an interview with Wendel conducted by the author, just as this dissertation will include an interview with Julien Wilson. Through the combination of these forms of analysis Minness seeks to define Wendel’s idiosyncratic improvisational style.

Minness’s dissertation follows what Kenny describes as a combined analytic approach (Kenny, 1999, p. 70), in that it utilises a number of established forms of analysis for improvisation and creates a methodology that best suits the investigation of a particular musician, in this instance Ben Wendel. In order to analyse the transcriptions Minness uses various established methods. These include forms of theoretical analysis such as chord scale theory, formulaic analysis and motivic analysis, (Kenny, 1999, pp. 59-61) and even elements of jazz ethnography (Kenny, 1999, p. 68) in the form of an interview with Wendel. Minness also investigates devices which are not discussed in traditional methods of improvisation analysis, namely rhythm and articulation. As Kenny states, “[A]uthors have augmented existing methodologies to incorporate hitherto neglected parameters, such as rhythm” (Kenny, 1999, p. 70). Minness’s dissertation is probably the most similar in structure to this paper and provides a very strong framework for analysing the improvisational style of a modern jazz saxophonist.

Tom Walsh’s 2018 dissertation, Walter Smith III: A comparison of improvisational techniques on “July” (2014) and “Stablemates” (2009) (Walsh, 2018), is a comparative analysis of two solos by the modern jazz saxophonist Walter Smith III. Walsh analyses each solo through the filters of phrasing devices, melodic devices and harmonic devices and then compares the frequency with which each device occurs in the two solos to highlight the differences in Smith’s improvisational approaches between contrasting harmonic settings. The framework for analysis Walsh uses in this dissertation is useful for an analysis of Julien Wilson’s improvisations, as some of the same improvisational devices can
be found in Wilson’s recordings. Walsh also successfully utilises definitions from jazz education books, in particular Hal Crook’s seminal improvisation instruction text *How to improvise* (Crook, 1991).

Similarly to Minness’s dissertation, Walsh uses a combined analytic approach (Kenny, 1999, p. 70). While Walsh’s methodology does not employ any forms of jazz ethnography, he uses a number of methods of theoretical analysis, including chord-scale theory and motivic analysis. Additionally, Walsh analyses some melodic and harmonic devices not discussed by these more traditional analytical frameworks. As Kenny writes, many researchers are interested in “[h]ow... improvisers underscore the tension/resolution implications of tonal structures (i.e. song forms)” (Kenny, 1999, p. 72). Walsh investigates how Walter Smith III creates tension and resolution over song forms using devices such as chromatic targeting and harmonic substitution. Walsh’s dissertation is a strong example of how to effectively compare multiple improvisations by the same artist and draw conclusions about his or her improvisational style.

**Jazz education texts**

Some specific elements of Wilson’s playing will be analysed with the aid of jazz education texts written by leading educators and musicians.

*How to improvise: an approach to practicing improvisation* (Crook, 1991) is widely regarded as the seminal text on the teaching of jazz improvisation. Written by Hal Crook, a trombonist and educator at the prestigious Berklee College of Music in Boston, *How to improvise* is a textbook commonly referred to in tertiary jazz courses worldwide. Crook discusses a wide array of improvisational techniques, including harmonic, melodic and rhythmic devices. As a number of these devices are also techniques employed by Wilson, *How to improvise* can be used to define certain aspects of Wilson’s improvisational approach.
Journal articles discussing saxophone sound

In order to discuss Wilson’s sound, the journal article ‘Modelling Perceptual Dimensions of Saxophone Sounds’ by Arne Nykänen, Örjan Johansson, Jan Lundberg and Jan Berg (Nykänen, Johansson, Lundberg, & Berg, 2009) will be referred to as a framework for analysing saxophone sound and timbre. Nykänen and Johansson are acousticians from Luleå University of Technology in Sweden. Through a combination of listening tests and spectral analysis of saxophone sounds, they correlate commonly used descriptors of saxophone sound with particular frequencies and harmonic spectra. This article will provide commonly accepted, objective terms which can be used to describe Wilson’s saxophone sound.

Books about Julien Wilson

There is a considerable wealth of general music criticism written regarding Wilson’s playing. Of these works, the most significant is the 2008 book Jazz: The Australian Accent (Shand, 2008) by prominent music writer John Shand – jazz reviewer for the Sydney Morning Herald newspaper – which features a chapter devoted entirely to the Julien Wilson Trio. While this book does not contain any formal musical analysis of Wilson’s playing, it does contain more general descriptors of his performance style and extracts of an interview with Wilson. This book and the numerous performance reviews and album reviews – many also written by Shand – concerning Wilson and the Julien Wilson Trio will be referred to for general comments regarding Wilson’s playing style and sound, and the sound of the trio.

Data Collection

This dissertation will draw on information collected from a semi-structured interview conducted by the author with Julien Wilson in Melbourne on the 18th of July, 2019 (J. K. Wilson, personal communication, July 18, 2019). In this conversation, Wilson discussed his conceptions of sound and improvisation, some of the saxophone specific techniques he uses to achieve timbral variation,
his influences, and the sound of the trio. Quotations from this interview have been used throughout the dissertation to discuss the findings of the analysis.
Chapter 2 - Methodology

The transcriptions were completed with the aid of the iOS keyboard app Virtuoso and then re-notated using Sibelius music notation software. Each transcription has been performed by the author on a tenor saxophone to ensure melodic accuracy and identify saxophone-specific devices, such as alternate fingerings. In keeping with standard notation practice, ghosted notes have been written using the note-head ‘x’.

Each transcription has been notated as transposed for tenor saxophone, therefore the pitches on the original source recordings sound a major ninth lower than they appear in the transcriptions. Harmony and melody have been discussed in relation to Wilson’s original lead sheets of the compositions, which are notated in concert pitch. Wilson’s original lead sheet for ‘Trout River’ – titled ‘Place Label Here’ – is notated in a 9/8 time signature with the performance instruction ‘3 Feel’. As the accompaniment of Stephen Grant and Stephen Magnusson more strongly suggests a 3/4 time signature and as Wilson plays a mixture of triplets, sixteenth notes, eighth notes, four over three polyrhythms and other subdivisions on this recording, the transcription of ‘Trout River’ has been written in 3/4, not 9/8, for ease of comprehension. The transcriptions are notated in ‘lead sheet’ format, with chord symbols indicating the harmony written above the stave.

When ‘quintuplets’ are referred to, it should be assumed this indicates eighth-note tuplets in the ratio of 5:4 - of which there are 10 in one bar of 4/4 time - unless otherwise specified. The term ‘triplets’ is generally used to mean eighth-note triplets - of which there are 12 in one bar of 4/4 time - unless crotchet triplets are specified. Highly unusual tuplet groupings will be referred to as ‘tuplets in the ratio of…’, for example ‘tuplets in the ratio of 13:8’.

The framework for analysis has been constructed with the aid of the article ‘Jazz Analysis as Cultural Imperative (and other urban myths): a Critical Overview of Jazz Analysis and its Relationship to Pedagogy’ by Barry Kenny (Kenny, 1999)
and has been modeled on frameworks utilised in other dissertations regarding jazz saxophonists, specifically Luke Minness’s 2013 Honours dissertation *Ben Wendel: The manipulation of sound and shapes in the construction of an improvised solo* (Minness, 2013) and Tom Walsh’s 2018 Honours dissertation *Walter Smith III: A comparison of improvisational techniques on “July” (2014) and “Stablemates” (2009)* (Walsh, 2018). Wilson’s performance style will be analysed through the filters of melodic/harmonic improvisational devices, rhythmic improvisational devices, and timbral manipulation/inflection with examples given from each recording.

Wilson’s sound will be analysed with the aid of the article ‘Modelling Perceptual Dimensions of Saxophone Sounds’ by Arne, Örjan Johansson, Jan Lundberg and Jan Berg (Nykänen et al., 2009). The dissertation *Utilizing classical saxophone articulation techniques in jazz performance* (Trezona, 2013) has been referred to in analysing Wilson’s approach to articulation. The book *How to improvise: an approach to practicing improvisation* by Hal Crook (Crook, 1991) will be used to define some of the improvisational devices employed by Wilson.

In addition to the transcriptions, a semi-structured interview with Wilson has been conducted and his responses have been used to discuss the findings of the analysis.
Chapter 3 - Melodic & Harmonic Devices

Wilson is stylistically an incredibly versatile player. He is equally at home playing the blues, playing bebop or playing free jazz. On the recordings examined in this dissertation he does not experiment extensively with harmony. Wilson says of his playing with the trio, “[M]aybe I tend to stay more in diatonic in the group” (J. K. Wilson, personal communication, July 18, 2019). While much of Wilson’s playing on these recordings is diatonic or ‘inside’, there are good reasons for this. The subtle and dream-like nature of the trio does not lend itself to heavy use of harmonic substitutions and non-consonant ideas. Additionally, adopting a less adventurous harmonic approach allows Wilson to experiment extensively with rhythm, as will be discussed in the next chapter. There are present, however, some subtle instances of chromaticism, particularly on ‘Beautiful Accident’, which have a satisfying effect and add colour to the music without detracting from its highly lyrical and melodic qualities.

Diatonic chord-scales

In his seminal improvisation textbook *How to improvise* (Crook, 1991), trombonist and educator Hal Crook defines chord-scales as, “scales applied to chords for the purpose of deriving melody in an improvised solo… chord scales are invaluable for developing a more linear approach to improvising, and for revealing tonal possibilities on chords which, otherwise, might go undiscovered” (Crook, 1991, p. 53). For much of his improvisation on both ‘Beautiful Accident’ and ‘Trout River’, Wilson draws his melodic material primarily from related chord-scales in major scale-tone harmony. In the interview conducted for this dissertation, Wilson said, “You had another question there and I think it relates to this one about... playing harmonically adventurously... with the trio... maybe I tend to stay more in diatonic in the group” (J. K. Wilson, personal communication, July 18, 2019).

On ‘Beautiful Accident’, Wilson commonly plays melodic material drawn from B aeolian over a Bmb6, the most consonant scale choice for this chord. He plays material drawn from this scale over this chord at the start of each of his four
choruses of solo, an example of which is shown in Figure 3.1. In Figure 3.2, he applies D mixolydian over the D7sus, D7 and D7/C chords, resolving to the parent scale of G ionian on the G/B in bar 35. Again, Wilson uses these scale choices over the same part of the form multiple times in his solo. He also commonly plays diatonically over bars 17 to 19 of the form, applying F dorian and Bb mixolydian over Fm11 and Bb13 respectively. An example of this is shown in Figure 3.3. In Figure 3.4, Wilson plays diatonically within A lydian over an Amaj7#11 chord.

Examples of this approach can also be found on the recording of 'Trout River'. Figure 3.5 shows Wilson playing diatonically within Ab dorian over Abm9. In Figure 3.6, he plays a double-time line using melodic material from C# lydian over C#maj7#11 and drawing from F dorian over Fm6/9. A similar example is shown in Figure 3.7, with Wilson playing a triplet-based line navigating Cm9, C#maj7#11 and Fm6/9 using C dorian, C# lydian and F dorian respectively. In Figure 3.8, he plays a double-time line using an ascending Bb mixolydian scale over Bb7sus.
Although Wilson does not use many blues ideas on ‘Beautiful Accident’, he employs the blues scale heavily over ‘Trout River’. In particular, he uses the Bb blues scale over the vamp between F#maj7 and F7sus that occurs in bars 14-17 of the form and in the coda section. ‘Trout River’ also features on a quartet album, *This Is Always*, and Wilson discusses how the vamp section is played quite differently with the trio on *Swailing*:

A lot of my tunes end up with vamps with one or two chords at the end [like] in ‘Trout River’, and the trio [on *Swailing*] and the quartet [on *This Is Always*]... they play very differently on those shapes there. I mean, Steve Grant gets super funky on the outro on that, on the accordion, and he think he’s doing... that funky blues, you know, mixing the major and minor up together. (J. K. Wilson, personal communication, July 18, 2019)

This suggests that Grant’s accompaniment led Wilson to adopt a bluesy approach over this section. Additionally, the melody over this part of the form, shown in
Figure 3.9, is drawn from the Bb blues scale – or minor pentatonic scale – so it is not surprising that Wilson explores this sound in his improvisation.

Figure 3.9 - 'Trout River' - mm. 14-17: The melody is drawn from the Bb blues scale

While Bb blues may not be the most obvious scale choice over these chords, it contains enough common tones to sound predominantly consonant, and the non-consonant tones add an extra colour to Wilson’s improvisation. Using one scale also allows Wilson to improvise more fluently over this vamp section and grants him greater freedom to experiment with rhythm. Examples of Bb blues and minor pentatonic applied over this section of the form are shown in Figures 3.10-3.12. Figure 3.13 shows Wilson using the blues over another section of the form with more harmonic movement.

Figure 3.10 - 'Trout River' - mm. 33-37: Wilson uses the Bb blues scale

Figure 3.11 - 'Trout River' - mm. 75-77: Wilson uses the Bb blues scale

Figure 3.12 - 'Trout River' - mm. 142-147: Wilson uses the Bb blues scale

Figure 3.13 - 'Trout River' - mm. 70-73: Wilson uses the Bb blues scale
**Bebop devices**

Julien Wilson is not always noted as being a heavily bebop influenced player. According to prominent Australian jazz critic John Shand, “Wilson developed a view of jazz in general and the saxophone sound in particular in which bebop was less important than what came before and after” (Shand, 2008, p. 140). Wilson, however, may disagree with that assessment. He argues, “I think [bebop language] informs everything. I mean it’s like learning your alphabet. I still feel like I want to go back to it all the time” (J. K. Wilson, personal communication, July 18, 2019).

On ‘Beautiful Accident’, certainly, Wilson employs a number of bebop devices. Chromatic approach and surrounding in particular are heavily utilised on this recording, most commonly in the passages of double-time improvisation. These devices are used so heavily that it would not be practical to list every instance, but a selection of typical instances of chromaticism are shown below, in Figures 3.14-3.15, with the instances of chromatic approach and surrounding highlighted by a bracket above the stave. Chromatic approach has been labelled using the abbreviation “C. A.” and chromatic surrounding with the abbreviation “C. S.”.

![Figure 3.14 - ‘Beautiful Accident’ - mm. 47-48: Wilson incorporates chromatic approach and surrounding within a double-time phrase](image1)

![Figure 3.15 - ‘Beautiful Accident’ - mm. 57-58: Wilson incorporates chromatic approach and surrounding within a double-time phrase](image2)

There are also instances of Wilson using sawtooth - another standard bebop device – as a means of incorporating chromatic surrounding in a line. Lark writes, “Common to bebop styled improvisation is the sawtooth pattern. This melodic device is an ascending or descending scale passage, usually brief in duration, in which all odd or even numbered notes in the pattern replicate the
same pitch” (Lark, 1994, p. 95). In Figure 3.16, starting on the third semiquaver of beat 3, Wilson uses this sawtooothing effect to chromatically surround the F on the third semiquaver of beat 4 from a tone above and a semitone below, with E as the axis pitch of the sawtooth. The same chromatic surround occurs in Figure 3.17, this time starting on the downbeat and landing on the F on beat 2. Each of these examples is shown below with the sawtooth highlighted by a bracket above the stave.

Figure 3.16 - 'Beautiful Accident' - m. 59: Wilson uses sawtooothing to chromatically surround F from a tone above and a semitone below

Figure 3.17 - 'Beautiful Accident' - m. 72: Wilson uses sawtooothing to chromatically surround F from a tone above and a semitone below

Wilson’s improvisation on 'Trout River' does not contain as much evidence of this bebop influence, but there are still a few instances of chromatic targeting. Two such examples are shown in Figures 3.18-3.19, with the instances of chromatic approach highlighted by a bracket above the stave and labelled “C. A.”.

Figure 3.18 - 'Trout River' - m. 43: Wilson incorporates chromatic approach within a double-time phrase

Figure 3.19 - 'Trout River' - m. 60: Wilson incorporates chromatic approach within a double-time phrase
Recurring melodic ideas

A number of the ideas Julien Wilson plays in his improvisation on ‘Beautiful Accident’ occur multiple times throughout the recording, some appearing both in Wilson’s solo over the form and in his extended improvisation over the coda section. These recurring melodic ideas are likely patterns or licks, predominantly in the bebop idiom. Wilson admits to using patterns, although he does not necessarily like the sound of them:

> There’s [patterns] that I’ve got in my head that I hate and I wish they’d fuck off. You know, like, the bane of my life is those things that you hear going round and round again… Things sink in and they get stuck there, but… you have to be aware of the language… I mean you can’t just re-invent it without learning it. (J. K. Wilson, personal communication, July 18, 2019)

Wilson sometimes even plays melodically identical material in different subdivisions. His rhythmic manipulation of patterns will be discussed further in the rhythmic devices section of this analysis.

The double-time passage shown in Figure 3.20 contains a pattern duplicated almost exactly later in the recording. The passage from beat 4 of bar 47 to beat 4 of the bar following is played again - almost identically - in the coda section, shown in Figure 3.21. These examples are shown below with the pattern highlighted by a bracket above the stave.

![Figure 3.20 - 'Beautiful Accident' - mm. 46-49: Wilson plays a pattern within a double-time phrase](image-url)
Another pattern played within double-time phrases over different parts of the form is shown in Figures 3.22-3.24. A fragment of this melodic phrase occurs within a double-time line in Figure 3.25. A different fragment of this original pattern occurs within a passage of tuplets grouped in the ratio 13:8, shown in Figure 3.26. It is worth noting that not only are these examples melodically identical, Wilson almost always accents the same note within the phrase. In all but one instance, the Bb, the third note of the phrase, is accented. These examples are shown below with the pattern highlighted by a bracket above the stave.

Figure 3.21 - 'Beautiful Accident' - m. 219: Wilson plays a pattern within a double-time phrase

Figure 3.22 - 'Beautiful Accident' - mm. 58-59: Wilson plays the same pattern in different octaves within a double-time phrase

Figure 3.23 - ‘Beautiful Accident’ - mm. 71-72: Wilson plays a pattern within a double-time phrase

Figure 3.24 - ‘Beautiful Accident’ - m. 90: Wilson plays a pattern within a double-time phrase

Figure 3.25 - 'Beautiful Accident' - mm. 72-73: Wilson plays a fragment of this same pattern
Chromaticism shifting away from the tonal centre

Much of Wilson's improvisation on 'Beautiful Accident' can be characterised as 'inside'. As mentioned earlier, for most of the first chorus of his solo and in many other passages in the recording he plays almost completely diatonically. Chromaticism is used, but it mostly appears as a means of surrounding or approaching chord tones. In the coda section, however, he begins to move 'outside', shifting away from the tonal centre. Wilson moves away from the prevailing diatonic mode by introducing chromatic tones not common to the chord-scale into otherwise diatonic phrases. He conceives these chromatic tones as being a part of the scale:

Every scale has 12 notes in varying degrees of weight or gravity or importance... there's the seven notes, and then the other five are all part of F major as well. You've just got to work out what their weight is and what their function is... I guess there's functional and non-functional chromaticism. (J. K. Wilson, personal communication, July 18, 2019)

A prime example of this approach can be seen in Figure 3.27. The chords in this coda section are Fm11 for two bars followed by Bb13 for two bars, essentially a long ii – V on a four bar loop. The diatonic chord-scale from which Wilson draws the majority of his melodic material in this section is F dorian or Bb mixolydian. In the first four bars of this passage, bars 197-200, Wilson uses solely notes from this mode, establishing the sonority of the key centre. Over the next five bars, bars 201-204, Wilson introduces chromatic notes foreign to F dorian, these tones being the C# and B ♭ in bar 201, the B ♭ and C# in bar 202, the A ♭ in bar 203 and the Gb crossing over the barline into bar 204. The phrase then resolves back to F dorian in bars 204-205.
The majority of the pitches in this passage are still drawn from the most directly related chord-scale, but, using these chromatic notes, Wilson moves out of the key centre and back again in a smoothly flowing manner. These chromatic tones may also be an attempt to play something that is deliberately ‘wrong’. Wilson sometimes sets himself the challenge of “digging a hole”:

Did I talk about digging a hole?... So that’s something I like to do in the outro as well, or the start of a solo... as soon as you get to the outro, play something wrong and then try and weave that into the tapestry so it sounds right. (J. K. Wilson, personal communication, July 18, 2019)

This passage is shown below with the chromatic tones foreign to F dorian/Bb mixolydian marked with a tick (√).

*Figure 3.27 - ‘Beautiful Accident’ - mm. 197-204: Wilson uses chromatic tones to shift away from the diatonic chord-scale*
Chapter 4 - Rhythmic Devices

Julien Wilson says of himself, “For me rhythm... feels like my weak point” (J. K. Wilson, personal communication, July 18, 2019). This statement may be one of false modesty or it may be a perceived weakness that has led Wilson to focus on this area of his playing, but it could not be argued that he is a rhythmically weak player. In fact, the rhythmic aspects of Wilson’s improvisations are some of the most intriguing. He explores different subdivisions at great length, including unusual subdivisions such as quintuplets. He is a master of weaving in and out of time within his lines, but his ideas always have an internal rhythmic logic and consistency that allow him to push and pull the time without ever appearing uncertain of the pulse. These rhythmic approaches have harmonic implications too. Otherwise simple lines incorporating bebop-style chromatic targeting become far more adventurous and compelling harmonically as a result of Wilson’s rhythmic manipulations.

Changing between subdivisions

Wilson commonly explores changing subdivisions in his improvisation. Changing between higher and lower subdivisions allows Wilson to increase or decrease the rhythmic density giving him greater control over the intensity of his solo. Crook defines rhythmic density as, “the degree of activity (melodic and/or rhythmic) found in the music... rhythmic density is an extremely noticeable aspect of improvising that is important to balance and use to create variety and interest in a solo” (Crook, 1991, p. 29). Effectively, Wilson controls the rhythmic density by shifting up to a higher subdivision or down to a lower one.

A number of examples of this technique can be found throughout the recording of ‘Beautiful Accident’. In Figure 4.1, Wilson starts a phrase with eighth notes, slowing down to crotchet triplets in bar 26 and shifting down another gear to crotchets, starting on beat 3 of bar 27. In Figure 4.2, he begins a phrase in quintuplets, shifting up to triplets in bar 45, then in bars 46-48 heightens the rhythmic density again switching to a sixteenth note subdivision. Figure 4.3 shows Wilson shifting down from tuplets in the ratio 13:8 to quintuplets.
Wilson commonly shifts down to a lower subdivision, usually triplets, at the end of long double-time phrases. His lines will often slow down as he reaches the top end of the standard range of the saxophone. This may be because it is more technically challenging to execute fast lines evenly in the higher range of the instrument, but it also helps bring a sense of conclusion to Wilson’s double-time phrases by gradually decreasing the rhythmic density. Examples of this tendency are shown below in Figures 4.4-4.6.

Figure 4.1 - ‘Beautiful Accident’ - bb. 25-28: Wilson uses changing subdivisions to decrease rhythmic density

Figure 4.2 - ‘Beautiful Accident’ - mm. 44-48: Wilson uses changing subdivisions to increase rhythmic density

Figure 4.3 - ‘Beautiful Accident’ - mm. 209-210: Wilson uses changing subdivisions to decrease rhythmic density

Figure 4.4 - ‘Beautiful Accident’ - mm. 73-74: Wilson changes subdivisions to triplets at the end of a double-time phrase
While on ‘Beautiful Accident’ Wilson commonly changes subdivisions within a line, on ‘Trout River’ he usually plays each subdivision for an extended period and changes the rhythmic density between phrases and choruses. For instance, in the first chorus Wilson plays mostly triplet-based ideas. He then shifts up a gear to sixteenth note ideas in the second chorus of his solo, increasing the rhythmic density. Excerpts from each chorus are shown below in Figures 4.7 and 4.8.
Triplets

Julien Wilson frequently uses triplets in his improvisation, and there are many instances of triplet ideas in both recordings, ‘Trout River’ in particular. Wilson initially conceived ‘Trout River’ in a 9/8 time signature:

‘Trout River’ for me is in [9/8]... I wrote it in 9, then I played it with a drummer and he played all this horrible fusion shit on it and I went ‘Oh, okay, it’s not in 9, it’s in 1’... That’s what I want to hear kind of from the drums, is a one feel... it’s weird it just kind of made sense for me to write it [in 9/8] for some reason. (J. K. Wilson, personal communication, July 18, 2019)

While Wilson conceives of the tune in 9/8 and feels the pulse in one, the accompaniment of Stephen Grant and Stephen Magnusson most strongly suggests a 3/4 time signature. This feeling of 9/8 is still present, though, as the melody consists largely of triplets and Wilson uses triplets heavily in his improvisation.

There are a number of examples of Wilson playing around with triplet subdivisions in ‘Trout River’. Figure 4.9 is a good example of his use of syncopated triplet ideas. In Figure 4.10, Wilson navigates moving chords playing a mixture of syncopated and consecutive triplet phrases. In Figure 4.11, he employs yet more syncopated triplet ideas to blur bar lines and develop and release rhythmic tension.

Figure 4.9 - ‘Trout River’ - mm. 26-29: Wilson uses syncopated triplet ideas
On ‘Beautiful Accident’, Wilson uses two-beat triplet motifs and repeats them, varying the pitches. In Figure 4.12, he plays a repeated cell consisting of two crotchet triplets followed by two eighth note triplets. In this instance the contour of the line remains constant and Wilson ascends diatonically through F dorian, switching to D mixolydian at the start of bar 33 while maintaining the flow of the line. Another similar rhythmic motif is shown in Figure 4.13. Starting on beat 3 of bar 37, he plays a motif made up of a crotchet triplet followed by an eighth note triplet, a triplet rest, and then two more eighth note triplets. In this case the contour of the line is more random, but again Wilson plays diatonically, this time within F dorian and Bb mixolydian. These examples are shown below with each instance of the rhythmic motifs highlighted by brackets above the stave.

Figure 4.10 - 'Trout River' - mm. 62-68: Wilson a mixture of syncopated and consecutive triplet ideas

Figure 4.11 - 'Trout River' - mm. 149-152: Wilson uses syncopated triplet ideas

Figure 4.12 - ‘Beautiful Accident’ - mm. 32-33: Wilson plays a repeated rhythmic motif based on triplets

Figure 4.13 - ‘Beautiful Accident’ - mm. 37-40: Wilson plays a repeated rhythmic motif based on triplets
Quintuplets and unusual subdivisions

Wilson does not always limit himself to conventional subdivisions such as eighth notes, triplets and sixteenths. As mentioned earlier, he does not consider rhythm to be the strongest aspect of his playing, and, in order to counter this perceived deficiency, he has explored using unusual subdivisions. Wilson says of this approach:

[Using odd subdivisions] was... a way of approaching [rhythm], but not in a rymthmical way, it’s more in a way of flowing, of enabling me to just flow across. It’s like... water flowing across the stream. (J. K. Wilson, personal communication, July 18, 2019)

The melody to 'Beautiful Accident' contains a sixteenth note quintuplet grouping, shown in Figure 4.14, so it is no great surprise that Wilson chooses to explore unusual subdivisions in his improvisation.

![Figure 4.14 - 'Beautiful Accident' - m. 13: The melody contains a sixteenth note quintuplet grouping](image)

Although Wilson uses quintuplets frequently throughout the recording of 'Beautiful Accident', each instance is fairly short. Most are one bar or less and none are longer than two bars. Often, quintuplets are used in 'Beautiful Accident' to increase or decrease the rhythmic density, not as a subdivision in which to improvise long continuous phrases. Examples of quintuplet phrases are shown below in Figures 4.15-4.19.
Quintuplets are not the only odd subdivision employed by Wilson on ‘Beautiful Accident’. The passage shown in Figure 4.20 contains a phrase of continuous tuplets in the ratio of 13:8. Unlike the examples of quintuplets, this subdivision is not used simply to shift between two more conventional subdivisions. It functions more like a double-time line, a phrase at a higher rhythmic density in which Wilson plays a constant stream of bebop-style lines incorporating chromaticism. Concerning how he accesses unusual subdivisions in his improvisation, Wilson says, "I'm thinking in one, so a bar can be any subdivision... that can be divided by one... Like, eight and nine, even 10, six is obvious... they all fit... really easily if you're just thinking of a one pulse" (J. K. Wilson, personal communication, July 18, 2019). By feeling the pulse in longer groupings, usually one beat per bar, Wilson facilitates the exploration of higher subdivisions, in this case groupings of 13.
Floating time

Occasionally, Julien Wilson’s improvisation cannot be strictly notated in one consistent subdivision. Some of his improvised lines weave in and out of time in a manner not directly related to the tempo conveyed by the accompaniment of Stephen Grant and Stephen Magnusson. Crook refers to this technique as stretching the time and defines it as, “intentionally contract[ing] or expand[ing] the note values slightly… The objective is to clearly define a steady alternate tempo to the one being played” (Crook, 1991, p. 61). This sort of stretched or floating time is typical of Wilson’s style of improvisation.

While Wilson’s floating ideas are not strictly in time with the accompaniment, they are not entirely devoid of any sense of time. Usually, these passages start in time and then slow down or speed up gradually and evenly before ‘resolving’ into time at the end of the phrase. Wilson often conceives these ideas in conventional subdivisions and then pushes and pulls the time within the phrase.

What's interesting is I do play quavers and semiquavers, but I just play them in fives and sevens... in groupings of fives and sevens rather than playing shorts and longs, like often all my notes seem to be the same length. (J. K. Wilson, personal communication, July 18, 2019)

The passage shown in Figure 4.21 is a good example of this approach. Wilson starts the phrase in time with a passage of triplets and swung eighth notes. In bar 65, he starts playing quintuplets, in time, then over the next bar and a half
gradually speeds up to the rate of triplets and slows down again, returning to
time on beat 4 of bar 67. To contrast this floating effect, Wilson starts his next
phrase very clearly in time with an accented low C on the offbeat of beat 4 in bar
68.

![Figure 4.21 - 'Beautiful Accident' - mm. 63-68: Wilson speeds up and slows down within a phrase before returning to time](image)

On 'Trout River', Wilson creates a similar effect by playing gestural ideas which then flow into phrases in time. These examples are not as controlled as the deliberate pushing and pulling within phrases he employs on 'Beautiful Accident'. In Figure 4.22, Wilson plays a gestural idea over F#maj7 and returns to time on the F7sus in the bar following. His next phrase is clearly locked in to the pulse in order to contrast this floating effect.

![Figure 4.22 - 'Trout River' - mm. 74-76: Wilson plays a gestural idea returning to time in the following bar](image)

**Recurring melodic ideas played in different subdivisions**

As was mentioned previously, Wilson often repeats melodic material, likely patterns, in his improvisation. When practising patterns, however, he makes a concerted effort to manipulate his source material and make the ideas he plays his own. Wilson describes how he conceives the use of material from a transcription for improvisation:
I really like that thing, it's from that space but it's not that anymore. And I like that idea, like let's use that as the basis for something... Is that improvising? Well, it's toying with an idea. Which is improvising isn't it? It's fleshing out an idea and developing it until it turns into something else. (J. K. Wilson, personal communication, July 18, 2019)

Wilson often changes the subdivision as a means of manipulating the source material to make it his own. This changes the feeling of the line, not just rhythmically but also melodically and harmonically. In Figure 4.23, a pattern can be identified within a double-time phrase. This pattern occurs again within a line of tuplets in the ratio 13:8, shown in Figure 4.24. Examining the two examples, it becomes apparent that the melodic and harmonic effect of the line is quite different in this new subdivision. As there are no downbeats apart from the start of each bar in the grouping of 13:8, no one tuplet has any more harmonic importance than the others. The F♯ at the end of the pattern, therefore, has no more or less harmonic importance than the tension tone, F#, two notes earlier, so the resolution of this instance of chromatic surrounding becomes somewhat blurred. These examples are shown below with the pattern highlighted by a bracket above the stave.

![Figure 4.23 - 'Beautiful Accident' - mm. 71-72: Wilson plays a pattern within a double-time phrase](image_url)

![Figure 4.24 - 'Beautiful Accident' - mm. 206-207: Wilson plays a pattern within a phrase of tuplets in the ratio 13:8](image_url)

Another pattern occurring within a double-time phrase is shown in Figure 4.25. This pattern also occurs - with a very slight melodic variation - in Figure 4.26 within a line of tuplets in the ratio 13:8. Again, as none of the tuplets in the second example fall on the beat, the chromatic tones and the tones belonging to
the chord-scale of Bb mixolydian have equal harmonic weight within the bar making this phrase sound quite different from a conventional bebop pattern. These examples are shown below with the pattern highlighted by a bracket above the stave.

*Figure 4.25 - ‘Beautiful Accident’ - mm. 220-221: Wilson plays a pattern within a double-time phrase*

*Figure 4.26 - ‘Beautiful Accident’ - mm. 207-208: Wilson plays a pattern within a phrase of triplets in the ratio 13:8*

On ‘Trout River’, too, there are examples of Wilson rhythmically manipulating melodically identical material. Figure 4.27 shows a blues phrase played in triplets. In Figure 4.28, this same phrase appears, but played in sixteenth notes. This change of subdivision does not have any particular harmonic ramifications as Wilson is essentially blanketing Bb blues scale over the whole coda section. It does serve, however, to heighten the rhythmic density and raise the intensity of his improvisation over this vamp. These examples are shown below with the pattern highlighted by a bracket above the stave.

*Figure 4.27 - ‘Trout River’ - mm. 142-143: Wilson plays a blues phrase in triplets*

*Figure 4.28 - ‘Trout River’ - mm. 145-146: Wilson plays this same phrase in sixteenth notes*
Chapter 5 - Inflection, Articulation & Timbral Manipulation

Julien Wilson is a highly expressive saxophonist. He says of the instrument, “I love the saxophone because it sounds human” (J. K. Wilson, personal communication, July 18, 2019). Any investigation of Wilson’s music that did not discuss the saxophone-specific techniques he uses to achieve this “human” expression would be disregarding much that is so compelling about his playing. Through various alternate fingerings and articulations, and techniques such as subtone and vibrato, Wilson achieves an extraordinary degree of timbral variation and expression.

Alternate fingerings

A number of the inflections used by Wilson are achieved using alternative fingerings on the keys. On ‘Beautiful Accident’, he uses an effect that is not standard saxophone practice, but can be loosely related to the trumpet technique of ‘half-valving’. Tague writes, “Half valve effects are accomplished by pressing one or more valves slightly and blowing strongly to bend the pitch” (Tague, 2017, p. 38). Wilson achieves a similar effect on saxophone by not fully closing the key, creating a pitch similar to a quartertone. He only uses this approach between G and F#, although he employs it in different octaves. Examples of this technique are shown in Figures 5.1-5.3, with the half-valved notes marked with a plus (+).

**Figure 5.1** - ‘Beautiful Accident’ - m. 22: Wilson uses ‘half-valving’ between G and F#

**Figure 5.2** - ‘Beautiful Accident’ - m. 24: Wilson uses ‘half-valving’ between G and F#

**Figure 5.3** - ‘Beautiful Accident’ - m. 61: Wilson uses ‘half-valving’ between G and F#
To achieve a variation in timbre, Wilson often uses an alternate fingering for middle D – the note written as D5 and sounding C4 in concert pitch. Instead of using the standard fingering with the left-thumb pressing the octave key and the first, second and third fingers in each hand pressing down the keys, Wilson presses the palm D key – usually used to play the D an octave higher – without the octave key held down. Wilson discusses using this alternate fingering:

[I use] alternate fingerings. I mean a classic one is side D instead of front D in the bottom register... From that concept I take that up to Eb [which] is just D and Eb ... if I finger a high F with all the palm keys on that's an E in the middle range. (J. K. Wilson, personal communication, July 18, 2019)

This alternate D fingering has a very different timbre from the conventional fingering. It is darker and often its pitch is slightly flatter than the standard fingering. Wilson says of the sound, “I might use that as a starting point, and, again, it just puts me in a slightly different world” (J. K. Wilson, personal communication, July 18, 2019). Examples of this alternate fingering occur on ‘Beautiful Accident’ and are shown in Figures 5.4 and 5.5 marked with the symbol “°”.

Figure 5.4 - ‘Beautiful Accident’ - m. 37 - Wilson uses an alternate fingering for middle D

Figure 5.5 - ‘Beautiful Accident’ - m. 81 - Wilson uses an alternate fingering for middle D
Overtones

Wilson uses overtone fingerings heavily on 'Trout River'. Overtones are a common practice tool used by saxophonists - Wilson amongst them - for sound development. He discusses using overtones in his practice and the effect it has on his sound:

[I practise] overtones... I’ll play the low Bb and I won’t try and get all the overtones, I’ll just listen for them in the sound, yeah, and just be aware of all the upper partials of that lower note... bringing out upper partials is brightening the sound. (J. K. Wilson, personal communication, July 18, 2019)

Overtones can also be used for timbral effect in improvisation. Overtone fingerings have quite a distinct timbre from conventional fingerings and usually produce a slightly sharper pitch. Examples of Wilson using overtone fingerings for a variation in timbre are shown below in Figures 5.6 and 5.7.

Wilson also explores the upper harmonic partials of a fundamental pitch, such as low Bb - the note written as Bb3 and sounding in concert pitch as Ab2. He discusses how he enjoys playing in the upper partials in his improvisation:

[I like] playing on the overtones in like the third or fourth partial, so up around the second octave and a third above that, those areas, I’m often playing right down low on the horn and moving around in there. Sometimes... [it’s] a bit hard
to remember exactly where you are in key, it’s almost like you’re transposing into another key. (J. K. Wilson, personal communication, July 18, 2019)

Wilson talks about playing around the third or fourth partial of a low Bb, but he also explores much higher partials. This allows Wilson to play in the altissimo register of the tenor saxophone, but creates a very different contour from what Wilson would be able to achieve with standard altissimo fingerings.

An example of this is shown in Figure 5.8. Wilson accesses different harmonic partials from a low Bb fingering. In the middle of the phrase, bars 160-161, there is a quick gestural idea in the altissimo register ascending rapidly from a high F to an altissimo Db before quickly descending to the Bb a minor tenth below. This is an effect that would be impossible to achieve with conventional altissimo fingerings, but Wilson’s mastery of saxophone harmonics allows him to explore this register with both extreme freedom and great control.

![Figure 5.8 - 'Trout River' - mm. 159-163: Wilson uses overtone fingerings and accesses the upper partials of a low Bb](image)

**Half-tonguing**

While Wilson does use conventional articulations, many of the notes he plays are half-tongued. Half-tonguing is the practice of applying the tongue to the reed in order to dampen the sound without fully muting it. Wilson describes half-tonguing as “Like kind of feather-tonguing... When I [half-tongue] I’m thinking about taking the tongue off, not putting it on” (J. K. Wilson, personal communication, July 18, 2019). It is a softer and subtler articulation than more
conventional approaches such as staccato or even legato tonguing. The sound produced is similar to the syllable ‘da’.

Wilson has quite a practical reason for using half-tonguing. He admits, “Because my articulation is a weak point, I cheat a lot of things by half-tonguing, or by ghosting things” (J. K. Wilson, personal communication, July 18, 2019). When Wilson half-tongues, he makes contact with the reed with a point about a centimetre back from the tip of the tongue. Trezona argues:

> The majority of players... find that the best results are produced by touching the tip of the reed with the top part of the tongue at a point slightly back from its tip... it matters little how much area of the tongue makes contact with the reed, for even a small area is sufficient to regulate the reed's vibration. (Trezona, 2013, p. 12)

For Wilson, there is a very good reason he does not use the tip of his tongue:

> I never use the tip of my tongue, unless it's for an effect... I find if I use the tip of my tongue I have to pull my tongue right back... and it gets in the way of the air stream. (J. K. Wilson, personal communication, July 18, 2019)

This is another very important reason why he prefers half-tonguing to conventional saxophone articulations.

There are too many instances of half-tonguing in ‘Beautiful Accident’ and ‘Trout River’ to list every one, but a selection of examples are shown in Figures 5.9-5.13 with the half-tongued notes accented “>” and annotated above the stave with the text “1/2”.

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*Figure 5.9 - 'Beautiful Accident' - mm. 10-13: Wilson uses half-tonguing*
Wilson often adds inflection to a phrase or long note by bending into the pitch. This scooping effect is usually achieved through jaw movement, with Wilson lowering his jaw to drop the pitch and raising his jaw back into position to bring the note in tune. However, tongue position and the shape of the oral cavity may also play a role. Wilson describes how he manipulates the pitch, “I might just bend one note down... just bend it down a tone or a semitone... [I use] jaw mostly, but also an opening up of the [oral] cavity” (J. K. Wilson, personal communication, July 18, 2019). A few examples of pitch bends are shown below in Figures 5.14-5.18.
Julien Wilson is known for playing with a large, full sound, but, in the more delicate setting of the trio, a softer dynamic approach is often called for. In his book *Jazz: The Australian Accent*, prominent Australian music critic John Shand discusses this seeming juxtaposition:

It says much about Wilson, the man and the artist, that despite being a big-toned, explosive tenor-player, he has chosen to make his primary project small, intimate and often soft. While this has reined him in to some extent, it has also given him vast room to move dynamically, from whispered drones to volcanic eruptions, over settings that are a world away from any conventional jazz texture. (Shand, 2008, p. 134)

Using descriptors from the article ‘Modelling Perceptual Dimensions of Saxophone Sounds’ by Arne Nykänen, Örjan Johansson, Jan Lundberg and Jan Berg (Nykänen et al., 2009), Wilson's sound on recordings with the trio can be described as ‘full-toned’, ‘warm’ and ‘soft’. While he is capable of playing with a
‘rough’ sound, and does so on a number of recordings, with the trio Wilson softens his sound, often by adopting a subtone approach.

Subtone is a technique that has been employed by jazz tenor saxophonists of all eras, particularly when playing on ballads. Wilson says of subtone, “The players I love, the players that made me want to play the tenor saxophone played with that sort of sound down there... I think it’s a character of the tenor saxophone that’s wonderful” (J. K. Wilson, personal communication, July 18, 2019). To achieve a subtone effect, the player will pull the chin and jaw back to soften and muffle the sound of the saxophone. For Wilson, the key to achieving subtone is to have less of the mouthpiece in his mouth. “For subtone, I kind of pull the horn, pull the bottom hand away from me and look down so there’s less mouthpiece in the mouth for the subtone stuff” (J. K. Wilson, personal communication, July 18, 2019). Examples of subtone can be seen in Figures 5.19-5.23.

![Figure 5.19](image1)

**Figure 5.19** - ‘Beautiful Accident’ - mm. 99-100: Wilson uses subtone

![Figure 5.20](image2)

**Figure 5.20** - ‘Beautiful Accident’ - mm. 211-212: Wilson uses subtone

![Figure 5.21](image3)

**Figure 5.21** - ‘Beautiful Accident’ - mm. 243-244: Wilson uses subtone

![Figure 5.22](image4)

**Figure 5.22** - 'Trout River' - mm. 79-81: Wilson uses subtone

![Figure 5.23](image5)

**Figure 5.23** - 'Trout River' - mm. 157-158: Wilson uses subtone
Vibrato

Vibrato is a key expressive device used by saxophonists of all styles. Tenor saxophonists throughout the history of jazz have employed vibrato. The key distinguishing factors of the vibrato of each individual saxophonist are the speed and width of the vibration. An early swing-era saxophonist like Ben Webster, for instance, would typically employ a fast and wide vibrato. Wilson’s vibrato, however, is slow and undulating. It is often almost imperceptible, but it adds thickness to the sound. Wilson describes the style of vibrato he aims for:

More and more I’ve started playing this kind of slow, really super slow vibrato, but not very big... almost like a watery kind of chorus sort of thing, almost like a phaser thing, but yeah, a really slow undulation of pitch. (J. K. Wilson, personal communication, July 18, 2019)

He also discusses how vibrato adds thickness to the sound, “It’s like corn flour. Somehow it’s just making things a bit thicker... I’m just trying to think about adding thickness to the sound and adding to the sound without it being an obvious thing” (J. K. Wilson, personal communication, July 18, 2019).

This very slow, undulating vibrato can be detected throughout both recordings on almost all notes of roughly a crotchet length or greater, however these examples are often so subtle as to be barely perceptible. The very last note of ‘Beautiful Accident’, shown in Figure 5.24, is an interesting example of Wilson’s use of vibrato. From the start of the note a slow vibration can be detected, then, as the note dies out the pitch becomes sharper. In this one note you can hear how Wilson’s sound breathes life into everything he plays.

![Figure 5.24 - 'Beautiful Accident' - m. 244: Wilson employs a slow, undulating vibrato](image)

Sometimes Wilson does employ a faster, more obvious vibrato. This usually occurs at the end of a phrase and is a more conventional use of vibrato in a post-
bop era jazz setting. Examples of Wilson employing vibrato of varying speeds and widths are shown in Figures 5.25-5.30.

**Figure 5.25** - 'Beautiful Accident' - m. 35: Wilson uses vibrato

**Figure 5.26** - 'Beautiful Accident' - m. 97: Wilson uses vibrato

**Figure 5.27** - 'Beautiful Accident' - m. 194: Wilson uses vibrato

**Figure 5.28** - 'Trout River' - mm. 7-8: Wilson uses vibrato

**Figure 5.29** - 'Trout River' - m. 75: Wilson uses vibrato

**Figure 5.30** - 'Trout River' - mm. 123-124: Wilson uses vibrato
Conclusion

Julien Wilson’s performances with the Julien Wilson Trio are a master class on how to craft a sophisticated and intriguing solo in a delicate musical setting. Wilson adopts a simple harmonic approach to facilitate the exploration of rhythmic ideas, although certain key melodic devices are employed. He controls the rhythmic density of his improvisation using changing subdivisions and is not afraid to explore unusual subdivisions such as quintuplets. By weaving in and out of time in a controlled fashion, he creates a floating effect that heightens the dream-like nature of the trio’s music. Most importantly, his performances are highly expressive, using his control of the saxophone to create timbral variation and lend his phrases a human quality. Using these techniques, Julien Wilson crafts performances that are full of intensity and lyricism, both technically impressive and exceptionally beautiful.

Despite his stature as one of the most significant jazz artists in Australia, there has been very little research conducted investigating the music of Julien Wilson. This research project seeks to fill this space in the existing literature. It is hoped that this dissertation will encourage others to study Wilson’s playing style and will add to the growing field of research into Australian jazz. His vast improvisational tool-kit and command of the saxophone make Wilson an excellent subject for research, and his expressive capabilities and incredible sound make his playing deeply pleasurable to listen to. Julien Wilson is truly a modern master of the tenor saxophone and deserves to be held in the highest esteem.
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# Appendix

## Appendix A – Key for interpretation of transcriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Notation</th>
<th>Technique</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+</td>
<td>Half-valve</td>
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<td>°</td>
<td>Palm fingering</td>
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<tr>
<td>½</td>
<td>Half-tongued</td>
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<tr>
<td>🎹🔍</td>
<td>Overtone fingering</td>
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Appendix B – Transcription of ‘Beautiful Accident’

Beautiful Accident
As recorded on the album While You Were Sleeping

Julien Wilson
transcribed by Maximillian Wickham

\[ d = 65 \]

Tenor Saxophone

Head

Bm(96)

F7(9b9)/A#

Gm9(96)

D7

(side Bb)

F9(sus4)

Blmaj7(#11)

A7/C#

Dm11

G♭9

Cm(96)

G7(sus4)/B

A7maj7(#11)

/G

Fm11

/F♭9

D7(sus4)

D7

D7/C

G/B

Dmaj7/F♯

(tongue cut-off
-4+)

1/2

1/2

vib.

1/2

1/2

1/2

Fm11

B♭5

B♭13

B♭13(9)

17

19

Tenor Solo

Bm(96)

F7(9b9)/A#

Gm9(96)

D7

F9(sus4)

Blmaj7(#11)

A7/C#

Dm11

G♭9

23

Cm(96)

G7(9b9)/B

A7maj7(#11)

/G

Fm11

/F♭9

 subtone

full sound

29

33

D7

D7/C

G/B

vib.

Dmaj7/F♯

51
backtongued

Gm\(9\(b6\)\)

subtone

vib. (slow, undulating)
Appendix C – Transcription of ‘Trout River’

Trout River
As recorded on the album Swailing

Julien Wilson
transcribed by Maximillian Wickham

$\frac{4}{4}$ 115

Tenor Saxophone

5 C$\text{maj}(\#11)$ approx.

9 B$\text{m}^9$

13 B$\text{m}/C$

17 F$^7(sus4)$

Tenor Solo

21 A$\text{maj}(\#11)$ 1/2

25 C$\text{maj}(\#11)$

29 vib.

33 B$\text{m}/C$ subtone

4.5

Julien Wilson

transcribed by Maximillian Wickham
F7(sus4)  Fmaj7  F7(sus4)  Fmaj7

F7(sus4)  Fmaj7  F7(sus4)  Fmaj7

F7(sus4)  subtone  Fmaj7  almost inaudible  F7(sus4)  Fmaj7

F7(sus4)  subtone  vib.  F7(sus4)  Fmaj7

F7(sus4)  Fmaj7  F7(sus4)  Fmaj7

F7(sus4)  Fmaj7  F7(sus4)  Fmaj7

F7(sus4)  Fmaj7  F7(sus4)  Fmaj7

F7(sus4)  Fmaj7  F7(sus4)  Fmaj7

F7(sus4)  bend down  Fmaj7  F7(sus4)  Fmaj7

(slight undulation of pitch, no deliberate vib.)
Appendix D – Lead sheet of ‘Beautiful Accident’
Appendix E – Lead sheet of ‘Trout River’ (‘Place Label Here’)