

"A Cyclic Approach to Harmony in Robert Glasper's Music"

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This paper develops a model for the harmonic language of jazz pianist Robert Glasper. Although there is little scholarship about Glasper, he has been hailed as “the most prominent jazz musician of his generation” (Russonello 2018). Glasper’s music blends jazz with elements of R&B, gospel, neo-soul, and hip-hop. His chord progressions frequently feature diatonic tertian harmonies and clear tonal centers, but many familiar elements of traditional jazz harmonic syntax are often deemphasized. I argue that, in their absence, recurring patterns of root and upper-voice motion within and between diatonic collections form a common thread that runs throughout much of Glasper’s music.

To elucidate these patterns, I employ a music-theoretic construct with a rich history of modeling diatonic harmony: the $ic3/4$ dual interval cycle. The cycle efficiently models many of the diatonic chord motions and accompanying melodic patterns that characterize Glasper’s music. I also develop a slide transformation between cyclic subsets, which proves a powerful tool for capturing the voice-leading patterns that underlie typical collection shifts in Glasper’s vamps and across his song forms. Ultimately, by mapping the patterns of harmonic color that characterize Glasper's sound, I seek to contextualize his music within the broader sweep of harmonic trends in post-millennial jazz.