Insights in Jazz – a companion for brick-layers by John Elliott

Conrad Cork, June 2009.

The idea behind *Harmony with LEGO Bricks* is very simple. Your best approach to the individual chords in a song is via an overview of the song's shape. You see the wood before the individual trees. That way you always have a context, and the actual key is incidental. This 'top down' approach has many other advantages. You can see that many songs share quite large sections with each other, for example, and also that much of what appears at first sight to be complex is a matter of variations on simple underlying structures.

My own introduction to this way of looking at a song came nearly 50 years ago, when I was playing bass behind the great baritone player Harry Klein. Not surprisingly, he wanted to play *Bernie's Tune*. When I said I wasn't sure of the bridge, instead of calling the chords out, which would have solved the immediate problem but had no investment value, he talked to me about how it worked. And that has stayed with me ever since.

In the early 1980's I disappeared deep into the French countryside and attempted to analyse all the songs Lionel Grigson's *A Jazz Chord Book*, in a quest to find recurring patterns. The resulting first edition of *Harmony with LEGO Bricks* solved my problems and the problems of anyone with my background. Over the course of the next fifteen years or so the book (and its target audience) expanded as a result of feedback from my students, primarily at De Montfort University, but also private teaching and adult education courses, so that it became usable by anybody with an interest in listening to and playing jazz.

Necessarily I only had space to include a couple of dozen or so songs as fully worked examples, and by no means covered every possible structure, even having to omit some common ones. What I hoped to do was to set people up so that they could find their own way through songs I hadn't covered. And that is what has happened. But it still left a gap for a full-sized book of jazz changes, presented in the form of LEGO bricks.

The triumph of John Elliott in this astonishing and comprehensive new book is to have achieved that in spades. Here are over 200 songs (all you will ever need, really) laid out as LEGO Bricks. Each song is presented in diagram form, 'brick walls' which are what Elliott calls 'road maps of bricks and joins', with the careful use of colour to provide emphasis and add clarity. This is all admirably done.

But of course, if you haven't met *Harmony with LEGO Bricks* before and you open Elliott's book at random, you won't have any idea what is going on. You need an 'in'. And this is where Elliott succeeds brilliantly. In an extraordinarily readable opening section, he introduces the idea of the top down approach to a

song (he calls it taking a 'meta view') and provides a 'flow chart' to help you see where you are and what you might want to do as you learn. The reader is then guided through the whole process of seeing the bricks and the joins, and introduced to a core repertoire of 13 songs with their principal distinguishing features described. So even a complete beginner will have a handle on what is going on. Ornette Coleman once said that you didn't need to be able to spell in order to speak, and following that principle, Elliott manages not to swamp the reader with too much detail.

What he does do is to present the whole of the LEGO Bricks system in a beautifully written cogent and concise form, which is made easy to absorb by the writer's clear and approachable style. It is as if he were having a conversation with you rather than trying to teach you something. Each brick and join is analysed, explained, illustrated with examples of songs where it occurs, and cross-referred to other songs. Because of the constant references to other songs, Elliott makes the reader feel that they understand the repertoire as a whole, which is massively useful in aiding coherent musical thought. In itself that will make anyone's playing better.

A set of diagrams summarise the system, and then Elliott introduces his road maps, explaining how and why he does it the way he does. I defy anyone to find any of it difficult, abstruse, or irrelevant.

In a letter to me at the time of the original publication of my book, the late Ken Rattenbury said 'in a word, needed'. That is even more true of John Elliott's new book. It is an idea whose time has truly come, and I doubt whether it could have been done better. It is little short of magnificent.

It is the book I wish I could have written myself.