

56. Van Morrison

Tupelo Honey: 1971

(For Unit 3: Developing Musical Understanding)

Background information and performance circumstances

Biography

- Van Morrison is an Irish singer and songwriter who has enjoyed many hits in the course of a long career.
- Born in Belfast, his musical style was influenced not only by his Celtic roots but by his father, who was an avid collector of imported American jazz and blues records.
- 'Tupelo Honey' is the name of the album on which this track appeared in 1971. It refers to a particularly sweet type of honey, native to Florida – Morrison's home in the early 1970s.
- The length of this track (over 7 minutes) is unusual for pop singles, though not so unusual for album tracks at this time.
- The chords and melody of this song have much in common with another Morrison hit: 'Crazy Love'. The two tracks have often been performed together by Morrison.

Performing forces and their handling

- Morrison's vocal line is influenced both by soul/gospel and Celtic singing styles.
- Predominantly syllabic but with a few melismas (e.g. 'to' in bar 11).
- Range of an eleventh (F-Bb) with the high B flat only appearing in Coda 1 and towards the end.
- Higher notes are occasionally sung falsetto.
- Backing vocals used in dialogue with the lead vocals in Verses 2, 3, 4 and in Coda 1 and the final coda.
- Guitars – both acoustic and electric – are used, but in a restrained melodic way. Some strummed chords but much melodic interest. Both guitars keep up a dialogue with the lead vocals throughout the verses, playing short, florid passages, in a high register, similar to the lead vocal line.
- Piano/organ provides chordal backing throughout. The piano is occasionally more prominent with improvised 'fills'.
- Drums plays a reasonably straight rock beat throughout, with increasing use of cymbal crashes and tom-tom fills, normally at the ends of phrases.
- The bass plays a repetitive line with improvised variations. Bars 1 and 3 of the four-bar phrase normally contain B flat descending to an A (varied with an upward arpeggio in the choruses, bars 37-40, and 45-57), while bars 2 and 4 contain either a syncopated

figure in quavers E flat-C-F-B flat or a chromatic move up E flat-E flat-E natural-F. Other beats are filled with decorative quaver and semiquaver rhythms.

- Flute plays a simple two-bar idea at the beginning and end of the track. Flutes were often featured in 'softer' rock in the early 1970s, for example in Jethro Tull and in early Genesis. Flutes were also a part of traditional Celtic music, which was, of course, part of Morrison's musical inheritance.
- Morrison's studio working method was to describe the basic chords to the members of his band, who then improvised according to his instructions. In this case an air of improvisation exists in all the lines, and perhaps accounts for the slightly cluttered and busy texture in places.

Texture

- Predominantly homophonic, as the spotlight is always clearly on Morrison's vocals. However, there is much movement internally, even as part of the accompaniment. For example, in the verses, the electric lead guitar undertakes a florid dialogue with the vocals, filling in the gaps at the ends of phrases.
- The instrumental section, from bar 21, is initially a complex three-part polyphonic texture, counterpointing a soulful alto saxophone solo with interweaving high electric and acoustic guitar lines (panned left and right in the mix for aural clarity) and bass line. When the saxophone drops out, Morrison compensates by increasing the rhythmic complexity of the guitar lines to maintain interest.
- The intensity and passion of the piece builds as it progresses, with the textures becoming busier and louder until the Coda 1 section, after which the music quietsens down and instruments drop out during bars 41-44, allowing for a further build-up during verse 4 for the ending.

Structure

- Despite the apparent complexity of the transcription, the song is basically in a fairly straightforward verse/chorus form.
- Repetition of similar chord sequences throughout makes contrast difficult to achieve.
- Contrasts are achieved by changes in instrumentation, texture and by variations in the melodic material.

Bar		Comments
1-4	Introduction	Flute solo
5-12	Verse 1	
13-20	Chorus	
5-12	Verse 2	Melody of verse 1 varied: The words are different.
13-20	Chorus	

21-36	Instrumental	3 part texture- Alto Sax/Electric guitar/Acoustic guitar over bass line
5-12	Verse 3	Same words and music as verse 2
13-20	Chorus	
37-44	'Coda 1 ', serving as a middle 8	Climactic point at 37 with 'Oh, you know she's alright'
5-12	Verse 4	The same as verse 1
13-20	Chorus	
45-52	'Coda 2' Chorus	
53-56	Coda (based on bars 37-44)	Flute solo reappears to round off the piece. Repeated till fade.

Tonality

- In Bb major throughout, without any contrast of keys.

Harmony

- Diatonic harmony throughout, in Bb major.
- Uses a limited range of chords: I, III, IV, V with 2 main sequences that are used throughout:
 - I, III, IV, I (phrases 1,3 and 4)
 - I, III, IV, V (phrase 2)
 - Chord III is used in second inversion, written as Dm/A.

Melody

- The melodic line is ornate and rhythmically complex.
- There are many (improvised) variants on the melodic shapes.
- Pentatonic shapes in Bb dominate – Bb, C, D, F, and G – there are also three-note motifs using the notes D, F and G that are prominent in a variety of melodic ideas (e.g. the opening flute solo and vocal lines).
- The melody uses the higher end of the male vocal range, with the highest point coming in bar 37 with the top Bb.

Rhythm and metre

- Slow ballad 4/4 tempo, allows plenty of space for soulful decoration and improvisation.
- The vocal line is syncopated and contains anticipations and retardations.
- Many phrases start on the second semiquaver of a beat.
- Rhythmic complexity of solos section (bars 21-36) with cross-rhythmic layering of rhythms (e.g. bars 34-35 with semiquavers in electric guitar against triplets in acoustic guitar).
- Bass uses repeated rhythmic ideas, particularly in bars 2 and 4 of the phrase.