

Understanding Jazz

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Jazz is America's unique contribution to music – a highly developed and democratic art form that plays an important role in American society and has had a major impact on world music. Jazz is one of the crowning achievements of African-American culture. It is a profoundly integrative genre, both musically and socially. Although African-Americans have accounted for most of the important advancements in jazz, the music today is open to all people. In this unit, we will look at musical elements that make jazz unique, instruments and ensembles that are common to jazz performances, what takes place in a jazz performance, and examine listening skills to gain a greater appreciation of any jazz performance.

The word “jazz” tends to defy definition. Jazz can mean a lot of different things to a lot of different people, including musicians. How jazz is defined can depend on whom one talks to. Jazz has been called “America’s Classical Music” and “America’s only true art form.” Jazz is a 20th-century music. It is the most individual and democratic art form on earth where every performer in an ensemble contributes equally to its performance. It is the basis of rock and contemporary popular music. Perhaps the best response to the question “What is Jazz?” was provided by the first great jazz musician, Louis Armstrong, who when asked that question by a reporter said, “If you don’t know, you’ll never know.” What Armstrong was trying to say is that one must listen to the music. To gain a greater appreciation and enjoyment of jazz, the listener must be actively involved and understand the elements that comprise a jazz performance. The more one is aware of how a jazz performer thinks, the more one can appreciate what they are playing.

Today, jazz has become an international music, as it is performed and listened to throughout the world. It is a timeless and robust music incorporating the entire evolution of and history of the music. At the same time it is a progressive art form where new approaches to performance are constantly being fostered.

Jazz is unique in that it is performed and heard in a variety of venues. It is often performed in concerts, at festivals, as background music, at parties, in nightclubs, and in ballrooms. Elements and influences of jazz are evident in all forms of popular music, film music, television and radio jingles, and in contemporary European “classical” music.

The history of jazz includes many different styles and idioms. Drawing upon earlier traditions of gospel music, the blues, ragtime, New Orleans brass bands, and society orchestras, jazz has continued to incorporate new musical influences including, European “classical” music, popular music and rock and roll, Latin American music, and the traditional music of non-Western cultures. Jazz is a continually evolving idiom where successive jazz styles, including New Orleans, swing, bebop, free jazz, and jazz-rock/fusion, reflect an increase in musical complexity. Although jazz can be seen as an evolutionary process, many creative and innovative individuals, including Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, and John Coltrane, were responsible for profound transformations in the music and in developing the “jazz language.”

Musical Elements that Make Jazz Unique

Three characteristics have distinguished jazz throughout its history: 1) improvisation, 2) a uniquely emotional approach to rhythm and its momentum called jazz swing feel, and 3) an expectation that each jazz musician attain a uniquely individual sound through his or her distinctive improvisational approach to the basic elements of music, including harmony, melody, and rhythm.

The most vital element of jazz is the art of improvisation. In each jazz performance, there are various levels of musical spontaneity. This gives the individual performer the freedom to follow his or her own musical ideas and react to other musician's ideas during an ensemble performance. Tension and excitement are created as soloists play over regularly changing harmonies and rhythms. Improvisation does not mean, however, that a musician can simply "play anything." The musical choices that a jazz performer makes are always within a context, otherwise the sound would be chaotic. Jazz performers improvise within the conventions of a chosen style and utilize a variety of expressive devices including subtle nuances of pitch, such as blue notes. Jazz performers create rhythmic excitement by using syncopation and by exhibiting jazz swing feel – a uniquely emotional approach to rhythm and its momentum.

Jazz also tends to use a more complex harmonic system than in many other types of music, especially in more contemporary jazz styles. The harmonies jazz musicians employ are based on the European musical concepts of scales and chords, but throughout its development, jazz musicians have expanded this traditional theory to include what is called extended harmony (simply put – more notes in chords).

The Jazz Band

Jazz is unique in that it may be played by almost any number and combination of instruments, however certain instrumentations are distinctive to jazz.

Instruments most common in jazz:

- Saxophone (soprano, alto, tenor, and baritone)
- Clarinet
- Trumpet (cornet/flugelhorn)
- Trombone (bass trombone)
- Piano (acoustic or electric)
- Synthesizer
- Electric organ
- Electric guitar
- Bass (acoustic or electric)
- Drum set
- Vibraphone
- Human Voice

Some common types of jazz ensembles:

- Jazz combo (quartet, quintet, sextet, septet)
- New Orleans/Dixieland ensemble (typical in early jazz)

- Big band (jazz orchestra or stage band)
- Piano trio (piano, bass, and drums)

The Rhythm Section

Typical modern jazz bands contain a rhythm section consisting of a piano, a bass, and a drum set. (Sometimes a guitar is added or is used instead of a piano.) Through the evolution of jazz styles, certain practices have developed regarding the role of the rhythm section. Its primary function is to provide a rhythmic and harmonic foundation, and to accompany and interact with the ensemble and soloists. Rhythm section members are also expected to interact with one another and play as a cohesive unit.

Bass: Most often an acoustic (or upright) bass played through an amplifier. The instrument is played pizzicato (plucked) rather than arco (with the bow). Its primary function is that of a timekeeper, providing the rhythmic foundation of the band. Most often, the bass player plays an improvised walking bass line. This particular musical pattern provides a constant pulse (or beat) and harmonic foundation by clarifying the chords of the piece.

Drums: Unlike in rock-based music, the jazz drummer functions as a colorist who controls the feel and mood of the music. Along with the bass, it provides a regular pulse. The left foot plays the hi-hat cymbals (opened and closed) which emphasizes swing feel. In 4/4 meter, it is played consistently on beats 2 & 4. The right hand most often plays ride rhythms on the ride cymbal. The left hand is free to accent and “color” on other cymbals, the snare drum, and toms. The drummer also plays fills that provide the music with “spice,” drive, and excitement. The right foot plays various accents (or kicks) on the bass drum. In some early styles, the bass drum is played evenly on all beats. Drummers also use a variety of sticks, brushes, and mallets for “color.”

Piano: When accompanying, the pianist plays chords in a syncopated fashion called comping, which complement and support the soloist or ensemble. When playing a featured solo, the right hand usually plays an improvised melody while the left hand comps.

The Form of a Typical Jazz Performance

In a jazz performance, the song or tune is often a starting point or frame of reference for the musicians to improvise around. Typically, an improvised solo is accompanied by a repeated chord progression of a particular song or original composition.

Although there are many different formal structures used in jazz, two formal patterns (or microforms) are frequently encountered in jazz. One is the 12-bar blues, a structure deeply rooted in African-American folk music. The other is the 32-bar standard song form – a structure used in most American popular music of the early and mid-20th century. These forms are repeated over and over during a jazz performance in what is called the chorus format.

There are usually three overall sections in a jazz performance (macroform):

|| Head | Improvised Solos | Head ||

Head: The initial statement (usually one chorus) of the composed melody and its accompanying harmonies. The head is also played after the improvised solo section at the end of the piece.

Improvised Solos: Players in the ensemble take turns improvising new melodies based on the form and accompanying harmonies presented during the head. Each soloist is featured for as many choruses as they desire.

- Even more pre-composed and arranged jazz music will follow the basic organizing principle of: “head--solos--head.”
- Introductions and endings (called tags or codas) often occur.

The Jazz Soloist

Primarily, the jazz soloist improvises melodies based on the formal and harmonic structure of the tune, extemporaneously creating a musical statement that is personal and original. The musician must be conscious of all of the musical events that are occurring at any given moment and respond to them.

The jazz soloist must also possess numerous skills to successfully perform in a jazz situation:

- A solid command of his or her instrument.
- Knowledge of major jazz styles and specific stylistic idioms.
- A recognition through the study of great jazz soloists, especially on his or her instrument.
- A working knowledge of the piano.
- The ability to understand musical composition.
- An exceptional sensitivity to rhythm and harmony.
- The ability to listen and interact with other ensemble members.
- A respect for the traditions regarding the jazz format: roles of players, the form of a performance, sequence of soloists, etc.
- A knowledge of many tunes (what musicians call standards).

Listening to Jazz

The primary goal in developing listening skills is to focus one’s attention to the various musical elements as they unfold during a performance. Much concentration is needed. If one is to learn more about the formal structure of music and to identify stylistic differences, it is important to develop the ability to separate contiguous musical sounds and focus on a single musical element. Listening attentively to jazz can be an intimidating experience at first, but with practice, the experience can be very rewarding.

- When possible, listen to the piece several times, each time concentrating on specific aspects of the performance.
- Don’t always try to listen to the entire performance. Listen to only a part of the performance, or to only one instrument at a time.
- Listen to the interaction of the players.

- Concentrate on identifying any specific techniques.
- During improvised solos, hum the original melody if possible that the improvisation is based on.
- Visualize the music. Imagine a graph of the melodic lines.
- Tap your foot, snap your fingers, “air-drum”; try to “feel” the music.
- Imagine yourself as a performer.

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