

Jazz-Rock/Fusion and Contemporary Jazz

Speaker: David Sharp

Jazz was at a critical stage in the late 1960s. Younger audiences were favoring soul, funk, and rock music, while older jazz aficionados turned away from the abstractness and emotional rawness of much modern jazz. In addition, musicians such as Miles Davis were feeling that bop-based playing had progressed to its farthest point and that jazz could not advance in a conventional process to the next level of artistic expression (as typified by Miles's quintet of the period, along with John Coltrane's music and the free jazz and avant-garde movement). In the meantime, the technology of electronic instruments was becoming more refined and provided a whole new world of untold possibilities. To this end, jazz became "fused" with rock, popular music, and other musical genres. In addition to examining some of the most influential jazz musicians and bands of the 1970s, we will also look at some of the most important musicians of the past 35 years and their influence on today's eclectic jazz performances.

In 1969, Miles Davis ushered in a new musical perspective with the experimental albums *In a Silent Way* and *Bitches Brew*. These recordings combined free jazz improvisation with the rhythms and electronic instruments associated with rock music. The results established the new jazz-rock/fusion style.

Miles's jazz-rock experiments also featured many of the musicians who would become significant in the 1970s. These sidemen went on to form several important fusion bands: saxophonist Wayne Shorter and keyboardist Joe Zawinul formed Weather Report, guitarist John McLaughlin formed the Mahavishnu Orchestra, keyboardist Herbie Hancock formed the Headhunters, and keyboardist/composer Chick Corea formed Return to Forever. Each of these units developed unique approaches inspired by Miles's new concept.

It is important to note that some critics accused these musicians of "selling out." However, much of this music is at an objectively high artistic and virtuosic level and at times can be quite challenging for the listener.

General Characteristics of Jazz-Rock/Fusion

- The use of electronic instruments: electric piano, synthesizers, electric guitar, electric bass, and sometimes the electronic modification of acoustic instruments; saxophones tend to be used more often than brass instruments
- The use of rock rhythms with a straight 8th-note pulse in the drums replaces traditional ride rhythms and jazz swing feel; bass lines are often repetitive figures
- Pieces range from tunes with simple melodies based on repetitive accompaniments with open or free formal structures, to more complex compositions utilizing complex harmonic structures
- Often influences from folk and non-western music cultures

"Shh/Peaceful" from the Miles Davis album *In a Silent Way* is one of the earliest jazz-rock recordings that set the foundation for the jazz-rock style. Davis had begun to introduce elements of popular music and electronic instruments in some of his earlier recordings, but this album established the marriage of

the two genres. There were no rehearsals for this recording. Miles, as was common practice for him during this period, spontaneously conducted the sequence of events. In this piece, which is based on a D mixolydian mode, Miles sets up the groove of this open form with a two-note drone in the bass and a straight 8th-note rock rhythm in the drums. The three keyboards, played by Chick Corea, Herbie Hancock, and Joe Zawinul, improvise collectively in a fragmented fashion along with the guitar of John McLaughlin. Miles enters with the basic melodic theme which becomes a springboard for the rest of his poetic solo statement. *[Listen to “Shh/Peaceful” by Miles Davis]*

As was mentioned, there were important “spin-off” bands from the *In a Silent Way* and *Bitches Brew* sessions. One of the longest lasting and best known ensembles was Weather Report. Co-led by former Miles Davis sidemen Joe Zawinul and Wayne Shorter, Weather Report recorded fifteen albums from 1970 to 1985. The group underwent numerous personnel changes and undertook several transformations in musical direction. Their early recordings reflect a continuation of the highly interactive collective improvisation approach established by Miles. By the 1973 album *Sweetnighter*, the group moved toward more defined compositional structures. Zawinul and Shorter were exceptionally creative composers who combined advanced jazz harmonies with rock, funk, Latin, and popular rhythms. They reached the height of their popularity when the revolutionary electric bassist Jaco Pastorius joined the band in 1976. In 1977, they recorded the album *Heavy Weather* which became the top-selling jazz album of the decade.

“Birdland” (named after the famous 1950s New York jazz nightclub dedicated to Charlie Parker) from the album *Heavy Weather* became a popular hit. Like many of Zawinul’s compositions, “Birdland” is a series of brief, contrasting sections of varying lengths based on short melodic fragments (themes) that are put together in an enticing and unpredictable way. Zawinul is a master of manipulating and generating a great variety of colorful sounds from multiple electronic analog synthesizers. Instead of a lead instrument, the saxophone of Wayne Shorter is often treated like another color in the ensemble. Electric bassist Jaco Pastorius is often heard playing in a guitar-like fashion emphasizing the highest range of the instrument, and functions more as a melody instrument rather than serving a traditional accompaniment role. The drum groove is based on a disco-like rhythm. *[Listen to “Birdland” by Weather Report]*

By the late 1970s, other groups combined jazz with the more popularly oriented Top 40 style, what is often referred to as crossover. Some of the most successful included the bands Spyro Gyra and The Crusaders; and musicians such as flugelhorn player Chuck Mangione; saxophonists Dave Sanborn, Grover Washington Jr., Tom Scott, and John Klemmer; keyboardist/composer Bob James; and guitarist George Benson. Many pop-rock groups, such as the very popular Steely Dan, also incorporated elements of jazz into their music.

Through the 1980s and 90s, many bands continued to polish and refine the jazz-rock/fusion approach, most notably The Pat Metheny Group, The Yellowjackets, the Jeff Lorber Fusion, The Rippingtons, and Chick Corea’s Elektrik Band.

Contemporary instrumental pop artists, such as saxophonists Kenny G. and Najee, along with trumpeter Chris Botti have enjoyed tremendous commercial success. However, this music, often referred to as smooth jazz, is only marginally jazz influenced.

The Eclectic 1980s, '90s, and Contemporary Trends

No single dominant stylistic trend has emerged since the fusion movement of the 1970s. Instead, a continuation and refinement of previous styles, crossovers, and new individual stylings derived from various sources are common. It would be tedious, at best, to present all of the important and unique individual artists working today. In addition, many of today's musicians are continually evolving and changing musical directions. Some notable trends within this eclecticism seem to be:

- a further sophistication of electronic jazz through the use of computers and digital technology
- a continuation of the fusion of popular music and international styles with jazz
- the growth of European jazz styles
- a resurgent bop and neo-traditionalist movement
- a greater involvement of women
- the growth of formal jazz education and jazz performances in the schools

The advent of computers and digital technology has strongly impacted all aspects of today's society, including jazz. New digital synthesizers, sampling, MIDI capabilities, and more advanced studio recording techniques have enabled musicians to create an endless possibility of timbres.

One of the most important current trends in jazz is a return to and revitalization of bop and traditional jazz styles. The virtuoso trumpeter Wynton Marsalis (b. 1961) and his brother saxophonist Branford Marsalis (b. 1960) received much popular and critical acclaim during the 1980s and '90s playing jazz styles of the '50s and '60s. They managed to extend the art through new approaches to melody, harmony, rhythm, and form, rather than just recreate the music of the past. This neo-bop movement is at the heart of mainstream jazz today.

A significant big band repertoire movement is also taking place. There are numerous ensembles devoted to the re-creation and performance of historically significant jazz artists and their work. Just as European classical music has an accepted repertoire of great works (such as the symphonies of Ludwig von Beethoven), jazz is trying to establish an official canon for jazz.

The Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, conducted by Wynton Marsalis, has received much success as the music of Duke Ellington is at the core of their music. The Carnegie Hall Jazz Band, led by trumpeter Jon Faddis, plays traditional big band tunes in new and revitalized ways. The National Museum of American History in Washington D.C. has established the Smithsonian Jazz Masterworks Orchestra, and the Mingus Big Band has kept alive the vibrant music of composer Charles Mingus.

For the first time in its history, women are taking a very prominent role in jazz. One of the most significant of today's jazz composers is big band leader Maria Schneider. In the tradition of arrangers Gil Evans and Bob Brookmeyer, Schneider is renowned for her subtle and sophisticated compositions. Soprano saxophonist Jane Ira Bloom has combined elements of contemporary classical music with

bebop and spatial electronic effects to create a uniquely original music. Vocalists such as Diana Krall, Cassandra Wilson, and the astonishing vocalist/bassist Esperanza Spalding, have created uniquely individual styles and each has received much popular and critical acclaim. *[Watch “I Know You Know” by Esperanza Spalding from the Nobel Peace Prize Concert]*

Although jazz remains essentially the cultural property of American musicians, its international audience has flourished to the extent that numerous non-American musicians are an integral part of jazz today. Cuban born musicians, such as trumpeter Arturo Sandoval and saxophonist Paquito D’Rivera, have had a great impact with their impressive technical prowess. A whole European jazz and third stream movement, which began in the 1970s by musicians such as Norwegian saxophonist Jan Garbarek, has had a significant influence on American musicians. Japan has also produced an amazing number of fine musicians, including pianist Makoto Ozone.

The rise of jazz education has also had an immense impact on jazz today. Because of the importance of educational organizations like the Jazz Education Network, jazz is now being taught at every grade level. There are jazz bands in most high schools in America, and most colleges and universities now offer courses in jazz studies at all levels. Many jazz musicians perform live concerts and present clinics regularly at schools throughout the world.

Of all the important players of recent years, two have had an indelible impact on young jazz musicians: guitarist Pat Metheny (b. 1954) and tenor saxophonist Michael Brecker (1949-2007). Each has been influenced by and has been involved in many different styles, and both are representative of today’s eclectic jazz musician.

Pat Metheny has performed and recorded in a variety of idioms. He has popularized a specific electric guitar sound and was the first prominent guitarist to utilize the guitar synthesizer. His technical ability is never overshadowed by his balanced and smooth improvisations.

Metheny is a truly eclectic musician drawing ideas from various musical sources. Metheny’s diverse influences include bebop and the work of hard bop guitarist Wes Montgomery, Ornette Coleman, rock music, country music, Latin American music, and Brazilian music. Metheny’s compositions are very colorful and lyrical. Although the intensity level is quite high and the polyrhythmic textures are quite dense, Metheny achieves an openness to the overall sound, which is indicative of the music of the Pat Metheny Group. *[Listen to “Third Wind” by Pat Metheny Group]*

Beginning with his jazz-funk work in the 1970s, Michael Brecker formed the Brecker Brothers Band with brother and trumpeter Randy Brecker. Michael Brecker has been arguably the most influential saxophonist in contemporary jazz and popular music. His uniquely identifiable sound and unbelievable technique has set a new standard for contemporary players.

“Escher Sketch (A Tale of Two Rhythms)” is an original composition inspired by the drawings of M.C. Escher, a Dutch graphic artist known for his prints that use realistic detail to achieve bizarre optical and conceptual effects. From the album *Now You See It, Now You Don’t*, it is an example of what some refer to as “techno-jazz.” It is based on two contrasting rhythmic feels; a 4/4 jazz swing feel and a straight 8th-

note rock/funk rhythm. Another striking contrast is apparent with the more traditional, bop-based saxophone playing mixed with numerous digital electronic sounds, some generated by Brecker playing an EWI (Electronic Wind Instrument). *[Listen to “Escher Sketch (A Tale of Two Rhythms)” by Michael Brecker]*

One Last Note

Jazz is still growing and is still evolving. All of the styles described in our evolutionary survey of jazz are continually being performed and enjoyed: from New Orleans and Dixieland, swing, bebop, free jazz, and fusion, to the most current and cutting edge trends. Almost the entire recorded legacy of jazz is available on compact discs, online music services, and satellite radio. Thousands of new recordings and artists emerge every year. Jazz offers something for everyone. So as a listener with a new understanding and appreciation of this remarkable American art form, seek it out, LISTEN, enjoy, and have fun!

© David Sharp and Indian Hills Community College