



Jazz in America

Roles of the Instruments

I. Roles of the Instruments

- A. Horns – The saxophone, trumpet, and trombone (as well as any other single-note instrument, including the human voice) are responsible for playing melodies, both written (e.g., the head),* and improvised (their individual solos).
- B. The Rhythm Section – The piano, bass, and drums comprise the *rhythm section*; their primary role is to accompany and provide support for the horn players as well as each other; they also improvise solos.
 1. The pianist’s primary job is to play chords (the music that accompanies the melodies) in a rhythmically interesting fashion.
 - a. This is called *comping*.
 - b. Notice how it comes from the words “**ac**company” and “**com**plement.”
 - c. The pianist also improvises melodically; when doing this, he/she usually improvises a melody by playing single notes in the right hand while comping chords in the left hand.
 2. The bassist’s primary job is to play the roots of the chords and “lay down a great groove” while outlining the harmony (chords); the bass is the foundation, the bottom, the pulse, the “glue” that keeps everyone together.
 3. The drummer’s primary job is to lay down a great groove, keep the tempo steady, and complement what the soloists (improvisers) are playing via accents and drum fills; the drummer also adds excitement to the performance.
- C. Guitar – The guitarist is versatile – he/she can be like a horn player (that is, playing single note melodies), or like a pianist, that is, comping chords.**

II. Jazz – A Perfect Democracy

- A. Democracy – Democracy is a government in which power and responsibility are vested in the people and exercised by them; according to Abraham Lincoln, democracy is a government “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”
- B. Democracy and Freedom – Although the terms democracy and freedom are often used interchangeably, they are not the same; democracy is *individual freedom but with responsibility to the group*.
 1. In a democratic society, individuals have the freedom to do whatever they wish as long as it doesn’t interfere with anyone else.
 2. In a perfect democratic society, what the individuals happen to freely choose to do enhances the whole group.
 3. If all people freely chose to work hard, not commit crime, be fair, and not discriminate, we would have a perfect democratic society.
 - a. Unfortunately, not all people think this way.
 - b. Things like greed, people wanting power, and racism get in the way.
- C. A Jazz Combo as a Society – A jazz combo is an example of a perfect democracy.
 1. Each player in a jazz combo has the freedom to play whatever he/she wants.
 - a. But, at the same time, each player wants to play something that will not only please himself/herself, but make the whole group sound better as well, enhancing the overall sound.
 - b. Jazz musicians work together on this, supporting each other while not compromising their own artistic individuality.
 2. The best jazz bandleaders want their fellow musicians to express themselves the way they want and not just do the bandleader’s “bidding.”
 - a. In jazz, the best bandleaders encourage their bandmates to think and play however they wish, knowing that the entire group, in turn, will get more ideas and be inspired to play better individually *and* collectively; the leader and his/her bandmates work through each tune as a team, learning from, complementing, and enhancing each other as they go.
 - b. This is the same for the rhythm section and soloist, that is, the rhythm section players want to support, complement, excite, spur on, interact with, and enhance the soloist; the soloist, in turn, wants to interact with, inspire, and be inspired by the rhythm section.
 3. Jazz musicians realize that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.
 - a. Each individual part is enhanced by the group, i.e., each individual player gets better and comes up with more musical ideas because of the others in the group.

* If there is more than one horn player in a combo setting, the horn players usually play the head in *unison*, that is, they play the melody together (they play the same notes at the exact same time). Sometimes, they play the head (or a portion of the head) in *harmony*, that is, they each play different notes that harmonize with each other (they play different notes that sound good with each other at the exact same time). In a combo setting, the players themselves usually decide when to play in unison and when to play in harmony.

** When comping chords, the guitarist is considered a member of the rhythm section.

- b. The musicians can do so much more together than they could ever do individually.
 - c. They need each other to accomplish their individual and collective goals, i.e., making great music.
 - d. Jazz musicians realize the music is better because each player is different – diversity always brings something new to the music.
 - e. If everyone in the band were the same, the music would probably be boring (there wouldn't be much give and take, learning from one another, or enjoyment).
 - f. In a jazz group, it doesn't matter what color you are or what your ethnicity is; all that matters is who you are inside and how you play.
- D. Imagine – Just imagine how it would be if our society worked like a jazz group....