



Jazz in America

What Is Jazz

- I. Jazz is America's music; jazz is the world's music.
 - A. Jazz was born in the United States, but today jazz is played and listened to by people all over the world.
 - B. A jazz combo is an example of a perfect democracy: individual freedom but with responsibility to the group.
- II. Improvisation – Jazz's Key Element
 - A. Improvisation is inventing something on the spur of the moment in response to a certain situation; in jazz, it is when musicians perform differently – “composing spontaneously” – every time they play the same song (“tune”).
 1. A tune is never played the exact same way twice, whether played by the same musicians or an entirely different group.
 2. The improvisation becomes its own “musical conversation” between band members without any preconceived notion of what the final outcome will be.
 - B. Learning to Improvise
 1. Jazz musicians learn how to improvise in a way that is similar to how kids learn how to talk.
 - a. Jazz musicians learning how to improvise listen to other jazz musicians improvise and try to imitate them; kids (even babies) learn how to talk by listening to others talk and trying to imitate them.
 - b. Jazz musicians learning how to improvise play their instruments a lot; kids learning how to talk, talk a lot.
 - c. To play better, jazz musicians study instrumental technique (the physical mechanics of playing an instrument) and music theory (how notes and chords fit together); to speak better, kids study pronunciation and grammar.
 2. “Hearing” Notes in Your Mind
 - a. When jazz musicians improvise, they are playing the notes that they “hear” (imagine) in their mind.
 - b. They “hear” these notes just a split second before they play them (just like when you are talking, you “hear” the words in your head just a split second before you say them, that is, you are thinking the words in your mind immediately before you speak them).
 - c. It happens so fast and so naturally that it seems simultaneous, but in actuality, the thought occurs a microsecond before the action.
- III. Jazz is like a language.
 - A. Language is what we use to communicate thoughts and ideas.
 1. Languages such as English or Spanish are used to communicate just about everything in life; however, they cannot express emotion (happiness, sadness, anger, tranquility, and everything in between) in the same way as music.
 2. As a singular phenomenon, music communicates emotion to every human being on the planet, regardless of language, culture, or nationality.
 - a. That's why music is found in every culture.
 - b. That's why music is a multi-billion dollar industry.
 - c. That's why most would agree that they are emotionally affected more by music than even the most beautifully expressed words.
 - B. Every time you talk to your friends, you are *improvising* (exactly what you are going to say is not planned ahead of time; it depends on what your friend says, then what you say, then what your friend says, and so on).
 1. Jazz musicians do the same with their instruments, but rather than using *words* to communicate, they use *music* to communicate; it's kind of like musical conversation.
 - a. With jazz, because of its improvisational aspect, the musicians are communicating the “emotion of the moment,” that is, the emotion they are feeling *while* they are performing (remember, when improvising they are deciding what notes to play *as* they are playing, responding to their feelings and the music of the moment played by the other musicians).
 - b. In this way, jazz is different from classical music which is written down (composed) ahead of time and played the way the composer wrote it.
 2. The spontaneity heard (or “felt”) in jazz requires the listener to be alert at all times to the ever-changing aspects of what is being played.
 3. A helpful analogy: classical music is to jazz as reading a good book aloud is to having a good conversation.
 - a. While a printed book never changes, a conversation changes according to the situation or moment and depending on with whom you are having the conversation.

- b. The same jazz tune (song) is never performed the same way twice; while it might start and end the same, the middle part is played differently every time.

IV. *Way* vs. *What* – In jazz, the *way* a song is played is more important than *what* song is played.

- A. Jazz musicians can create new elements and moods to any song; for instance, an up-tempo (fast) song can be played as a ballad (slow song) and vice versa. It can be played with a swing, rock, funk, Latin, or any other type of groove.
- B. Jazz musicians have their own, unique way of playing their instruments.
 - 1. Rather than just the basic sound of the instrument itself, jazz musicians strive to develop their own unique sound (tone) on their instruments – a sound that expresses them personally (just like singers do with their voices). Some like to say that a jazz musician’s sound on his/her instrument is simply an extension of his/her voice. Good jazz musicians have the ability to produce a wide variety of sounds on their instruments, depicting a wide variety of emotions and feelings (again, just like singers do with their voices).
 - 2. A good comparison: just like all human voices sound different from each other (but you can still tell it’s a human voice), all jazz saxophonists sound different from each other (but you can still tell it’s a saxophone).
 - 3. In order to be able to hear the difference, you’ve got to listen *a lot*; the more you listen to a particular jazz musician, the more you’re able to recognize that player by his/her sound alone. Again, it’s just like human voices. Think about how easy it is to recognize the voices of your family members and closest friends compared to people you don’t hear that much. Also notice how no two singers sound exactly alike yet they’re both using the same “instrument” (vocal cords).
 - 4. Jazz fans often prefer one jazz artist over another because of his/her own unique sound alone; that is, his/her particular tone on the instrument.

V. Jazz is hard to play but good players make it look easy.

- A. Learning to play an instrument is challenging enough, so you can imagine how difficult it is to learn how to play an instrument *and* learn how to improvise.
- B. But, like anything else, the earlier you start learning how to improvise and the longer you do it, the easier it gets and the better you become (just like reading, sports, computers, video games, math, etc.).
 - 1. For professional jazz musicians, playing their instruments is as natural as skating is to a professional hockey player.
 - a. Hockey players aren’t thinking about skating while they’re playing; they’re thinking about and simply reacting to what’s going on around them (they’re improvising).
 - b. Jazz musicians aren’t thinking about their instruments while they’re playing; they’re thinking about and simply reacting to what’s going on around them (they’re improvising).
 - 2. Anyone who can play a musical instrument can learn how to improvise (just like anyone who can talk can learn to converse).
- C. Jazz is a complex form of music, so it often doesn’t have “instant appeal” like other more familiar styles of music, such as pop, rock, and hip-hop. A jazz tune sometimes takes many listenings to begin to enjoy it.
 - 1. But that’s OK. The more you put into something generally, the more you get out of it.
 - 2. The more you put into listening and understanding what jazz is all about, the more enjoyment you’re going to get. Indeed, jazz can enrich your entire life.

VI. Where Did Jazz Come From?

- A. New Orleans via Africa and Europe (and elsewhere)
 - 1. Jazz was born in New Orleans a little over 100 years ago (early 20th century), but its roots can be found in the musical traditions of both Africa and Europe (and elsewhere). In fact, it has been said that jazz is a union of African and European music.
 - a. From African music, jazz got its:
 - i. rhythm and “feel”
 - ii. “blues” quality
 - iii. sensibility of playing an instrument in your own expressive way, making it an “extension” of your own human voice
 - b. From European music, jazz got its:
 - i. harmony, that is, the chords that accompany the tunes (the chords played on the piano); jazz harmony is similar to classical music’s harmony
 - ii. instruments – most of the instruments used in jazz originated in Europe (saxophone, piano, trumpet, etc.)
 - c. Musical improvisation came from both traditions.
- B. Why New Orleans? – New Orleans was the perfect city for all of these elements to come together, as it was a port city (with people arriving from all parts of the world), a meeting place for people of different ethnic groups, and a city with a nightlife where musicians had the opportunity to play together, learn from each other, and blend all of these elements.
- C. African American Experience
 - 1. Jazz was born out of and evolved through the African American experience in the U.S. Jazz evolved from slave songs and spirituals (religious African American folk songs).

2. Jazz's originators and most important innovators in subsequent decades were primarily African American.
- D. The most important jazz originator and first truly great jazz soloist (improviser) was trumpet player **Louis Armstrong**.
- E. Jazz is all over the world.
1. Today, jazz is played and listened to by people of all nationalities, cultures, colors, ages, religions, genders, and ethnicities and includes musical elements and styles from all over the world.
 2. Jazz has gone from being America's music to being the world's music.