



## Jazz in America

### *What Is Jazz*

- I. Jazz is not only America's music, it is the world's music.
  - A. Jazz was born in the United States.
    1. Jazz was born out of the Black experience in America, basically combining African and European musical traditions.
    2. Jazz evolved from slave work songs, spirituals (religious Black American folk songs), blues, brass band music, and ragtime (a rhythmically sophisticated piano style).
    3. Jazz is only a little over a century old; it first appeared in the city of New Orleans in the early 1900s.
    4. African Americans devised the major elements of jazz in its formative years and were the primary pioneers of stylistic changes in later decades; today, jazz is performed and listened to by people of all ethnicities all over the world.
    5. Today, jazz is not only considered America's music, it is the world's music, bringing the people of all cultures, colors, nationalities, ethnicities, religions, genders, and ages together.
  - B. Jazz represents life.
    1. In everything from regular conversation, to playing sports (e.g., basketball), to everyday life, Americans are constantly improvising, i.e., deciding what to do and doing it on the spur of the moment; *improvisation* is the defining element of jazz.
    2. Jazz is partly planned but mostly spontaneous; that is, as the musicians perform a predetermined tune (song), they create their own rendition (within the tune's framework) in response to what the other musicians are playing and whatever else may be occurring "in the moment."
    3. There is no better example of democracy than a jazz ensemble – individual freedom but with responsibility to the group; in other words, when playing jazz, individual musicians have the freedom to play whatever they like on their instruments as long as they maintain their responsibility to the other musicians by 1) adhering to the overall framework and structure of the tune, 2) reacting to and supporting their fellow bandmembers, and 3) enhancing the overall sound of the group at large.
    4. Jazz represents our most deeply held values: teamwork, unity with ethnic diversity, the correlation of hard work and goal accomplishment, democracy, and the vital importance of really listening to one another.
- II. What is improvisation?
  - A. Improvisation is inventing and reacting to something on the spur of the moment in response to a particular situation.
  - B. A good example of improvisation in everyday life is regular *conversation*, e.g., every time you talk to your friends, you are actually 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).
  - C. Jazz musicians do the same with their instruments, but rather than using *words* to communicate their thoughts and feelings, they use *music* to communicate their thoughts and feelings; jazz improvisation is "musical conversation."
  - D. In jazz, improvisation occurs as musicians perform differently every time they play the same song.
    1. A song is never played the same way twice; the musicians spontaneously "compose" their individual solos *as* they play.
    2. Whenever a song is played multiple times by the same musicians or by an entirely different group, improvisation becomes its own musical dialogue among band members without a preconceived notion of what the final outcome will be.
    3. This is one of the things that makes jazz so exciting, that is, you never know how it's going to turn out because the musicians themselves don't know how it's going to turn out! The musicians *and* the audience are on a path of discovery *together*.
- III. Jazz is like a language.
  - A. Language is what we use to communicate thoughts and feelings.
  - B. Languages such as English or Spanish are used to communicate just about everything in life; however, they cannot express emotion (happiness, sadness, anger, and everything in between) in the same way that music can; as a singular phenomenon, music can communicate emotion to every human being on the planet, regardless of language, culture, or nationality.
    1. That's why music is found in every culture.
    2. That's why music is a multi-billion dollar industry.
    3. That's why so many would agree that they are emotionally affected far more by music than even the most beautifully expressed words, e.g., poetry.

- C. 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 respond to the music of the moment played by the other musicians).
1. 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. In jazz, the music heard during the musicians’ solos is “spontaneously composed” by the musicians themselves and played the way the musicians feel at that given moment.
  3. The spontaneity heard (or “felt”) in jazz requires the listener to be alert at all times to the ever-changing aspects of a given interpretation of a tune.
  4. A helpful analogy: classical music is to jazz as reading a good book aloud is to having a good conversation; while a printed book never changes, a conversation changes according to the situation or moment – it depends on with whom you are having the conversation.
  5. 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* versus *What* – In jazz, it’s more about the *way* a song is played, rather than *what* song is played.
- A. Jazz musicians can create new interpretations and moods to any song; for instance, an up-tempo (fast) song can be played as a ballad (slow song) and vice versa, the musicians can change the accompanying chords, they can change the groove (e.g., play a swing tune with a Latin feel), they can take a short solo or a long solo (or no solo at all), and so much more.
- 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); it has been said 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, 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, etc.); for professional jazz musicians, playing their instruments is as natural as skating is to a professional hockey player – 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); 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).
- C. Anyone who can play a musical instrument can learn how to improvise (just like anyone who can talk can learn how to converse).
- D. 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, R&B, and hip-hop; a jazz tune sometimes takes many listenings to begin to enjoy it.
1. But that’s OK because 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.
  3. Jazz can enrich your life.