



Jazz in America

Free Jazz • Fusion

I. Free Jazz

- A. Free Jazz was at the forefront of jazz and went through its most concentrated growth and development from 1959–1970.*
- B. Unlike previous styles of jazz whose compositions (songs) were based on a series of predetermined chords, Free Jazz compositions were **not** based on a series of predetermined chords.
 1. Free Jazz was simply based on sound.
 2. Free Jazz musicians experimented with making all kinds of sounds on their instruments, including squeaks and squawks.
- C. It was called *Free Jazz* because without having to follow predetermined chord progressions, musicians were “free” to play whatever they wanted.
 1. Without having to worry about what chord they were on and what chord comes next, musicians were freer to experiment with sound and explore emotions with their music.
 2. The musicians still listened and reacted to each other very much, perhaps more than any other style of jazz.
- D. Because there were no chords to follow, Free Jazz (for the most part) was *atonal*, that is, the music was not based on a “tonal system” like most other music (pop, rock, other styles of jazz, classical music, etc.).
 1. Because of this, many find Free Jazz unusual and difficult to listen to.
 2. Many jazz musicians and fans did not consider Free Jazz to be “real” jazz.
 3. However, if you approach listening to the music without any preconceived notions of how music is “supposed” to sound, Free Jazz is very artistic and expresses deep emotions.
- E. Unlike Bebop in which there is one soloist at a time with chordal accompaniment, Free Jazz involves more collective improvisation, that is, everyone in the band improvising at the same time, *continuously* reacting to each other.
- F. All styles of jazz have evolved over time from earlier styles; the main precursor of Free Jazz was *Modal Jazz*.
 1. Bebop, Cool, and Hard Bop compositions are based on predetermined chord progressions. Modal Jazz tunes, however, are based on just a few predetermined modes (a mode is a kind of musical scale, that is, a particular series of notes).
 2. In Bebop, Cool, and Hard Bop, the chords change very quickly; in Modal Jazz, on the other hand, the modes (the musical scales to be used for improvisation) change very slowly, often just once or twice in a chorus.
 3. Playing Modal Jazz, the musicians do not have to worry about the chords changing fast and frequently (as in bebop tunes) and can concentrate on improvising on just one scale (mode) for a long time. With only having to think about how they want to mix up and melodically play the seven notes in the mode, the musicians can concentrate more on the melodies they are spontaneously creating (improvising) and the expressiveness of their playing.
 4. The most important Modal Jazz recording of all time is Miles Davis’ “Kind of Blue.”
 5. The next step in the evolution of jazz was to do away with chord changes and predetermined modes all together and, thus, Free Jazz was born.
- G. The most important Free Jazz pioneer was saxophonist **Ornette Coleman**.
- H. 1959 was a great year for jazz.
 1. Besides Free Jazz, all styles of jazz were being played and listened to including Hard Bop, Cool, and Modal Jazz.
 2. Landmark albums recorded and released in 1959 include John Coltrane’s “Giant Steps” (Hard Bop), Dave Brubeck’s “Time Out” (Cool Jazz), Miles Davis’ “Kind of Blue” (Modal Jazz), and Ornette Coleman’s “The Shape of Jazz to Come” (Free Jazz).
- I. Cultural Implications of Free Jazz
 1. Free Jazz represented the loosening of standards of behavior in the turbulent 1960s.
 2. Free Jazz was predominantly played by African American musicians and often expressed anger and dissatisfaction regarding the lack of civil rights in American society.
 3. Free Jazz was primarily an East Coast, urban (e.g., New York) phenomenon.

II. Fusion

- A. Fusion was at the forefront of jazz and went through its most concentrated growth and development from 1969–1990.*

* All styles of jazz from Early Jazz to contemporary are still being performed and recorded today. The style dates given are approximations of when each respective style came to the forefront of jazz and experienced its most concentrated development; of course, styles and dates overlap.

- B. Fusion is the blending of jazz and rock (hence, the term “fusion,” as in “fusing” together the musical elements of jazz and rock).
1. From jazz, Fusion got its sophistication and complexity: sophisticated improvisations and complex interplay among the musicians.
 2. From rock, Fusion got its power, rhythm, and simplicity: electronic instruments (i.e., electric guitars, basses, and keyboard synthesizers), rock rhythms (i.e., straight – not swung – eighth notes), and often simple harmony (i.e., sometimes just long one- or two-chord vamps).
- C. Fusion, at least in part, came about because jazz musicians wanted to capitalize on the popular appeal of rock music.
1. To a degree, it worked. Many rock fans who were not into “regular” jazz (Hard Bop) did support Fusion artists (buying records and attending concerts).
 2. It was more likely for rock fans to support Fusion than jazz fans.
 3. Many jazz musicians and fans did not consider Fusion to be “real” jazz.
 4. But, like Free Jazz, if you approach Fusion without any preconceived notions of what jazz is “supposed” to be, you will most likely find it very artistic and able to express emotions that “straight-ahead” (mainstream) jazz does not.
- D. As with Hard Bop, Cool, and Modal Jazz, **Miles Davis** was at the forefront of the Fusion movement; the first fully formed Fusion album in jazz history is his “In a Silent Way.”
- E. Other important Fusion artists include:
1. **Weather Report**
 2. **Chick Corea** (keyboards)
 3. **Herbie Hancock** (keyboards)
 4. **The Yellowjackets**
- F. Cultural Implications of Fusion
1. Fusion came into being at the height of the “hippie movement” of the late 1960s and early 1970s.
 2. Fusion jazz musicians, like their rock brethren, often expressed their dissatisfaction with society through their music.
 - a. Vietnam War
 - b. Lack of civil rights
- G. Smooth Jazz (AKA Pop/Contemporary Jazz)
1. Smooth Jazz, a simpler, easy-to-listen-to, and very commercial form of Fusion, became popular in the mid 1970s and 1980s and is still quite popular today.
 2. Important Smooth Jazz artists include:
 - a. **David Sanborn** (saxophone)
 - b. **George Benson** (guitar)**
 - c. **Dave Grusin** (keyboards)
 - d. **Grover Washington, Jr.** (saxophone)**
 - e. **Spyro Gyra** (a group that also fused Latin music into the mix).
- H. Cultural Implications of Smooth Jazz
1. Smooth Jazz, the more commercially oriented, crossover jazz which came to prominence in the 1970s and 1980s (somewhat displacing the more adventurous Jazz Fusion from which it emerged), grew in popularity at a time when major recording companies and the business community at large were particularly focused on money making.
 - a. Mass product distribution
 - b. Consumerism
 - c. Large profit margins
 2. Smooth Jazz capitalized on the era’s social and economic trends and, as with the Swing Era, reached a larger segment of the population, not just jazz fans.
 - a. “Yuppies” (acronym for *young urban professionals*) – Coined in the 1980s, “yuppies” was often used as a title for young business people who were obsessed with material objects and financial success.
 - b. The “me generation”

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** Many Smooth Jazz musicians were also superlative mainstream jazz musicians (e.g., George Benson, Grover Washington, Jr.) who played Smooth Jazz, in part, for the financial rewards it provided.