

# Jazz, an American tradition

## 1. What is jazz?

Jazz is a very rich artistic expression so it is not easy to cover in a definition all that is jazz. However, we can start by saying that *jazz is a genre of American music that originated in New Orleans about 1900*. Travis Jackson says about jazz: “it is music that includes qualities such as swing, improvising, group interaction, developing an ‘individual voice’, and being open to different musical possibilities”. Krin Gibbard says us: “jazz is a construct” that, while artificial, still is useful to designate “a number of musics with enough in common to be understood as part of a coherent tradition”. One of the most representative figures of jazz, Duke Ellington, sometime said that “jazz is all music”.

## 2. Origin of jazz

*Jazz music started in the black ghettos of New Orleans at the end of the 19th century*. Many were the influences that led to the origin of jazz. One of them, the African traditions primarily make use of a single-line melody and call-and-response pattern, and the rhythms have a counter-metric structure and reflect African speech patterns. Lavish festivals featuring African-based dances to drums were organized on Sundays at Place Congo, or Congo Square, in New Orleans until 1843.

Another influence came from the harmonic style of hymns of the church, which black slaves had learned and incorporated into their own music as spirituals. Other influences in early jazz were: Afro-Cuban rhythmic motifs, Ragtime and Blues.

## 3. Jazz features

Jazz has at least three characteristics that clearly identify them as musical genre: improvisation, treatment of rhythm and finding their own sound.

### **3.1 Improvisation**

*Improvisation is central to the jazz art form. It is the immediate creation of a melody.* Jazz musicians draw on previously learned "vocabulary" to create melodies "in the moment."

This improvisation is given within an order. To improvise, the musician must know the harmonic structure of the music piece, and from this improvising always respecting that harmony. The soloist is responsible for improvisation. Very often, the musicians take turns between them in the improvised passages.

### **3.2 Treatment of rhythm: the swing**

The treatment of rhythm is more related to jazz with other genres of black music which proceeds. This feature shows your remote African origins.

*It is called swing the way to treat the characteristic rhythm of jazz, which seeks rolling effect (swing), very danceable. That rhythm is not exactly well placed in the music sheet, but it is the interpreter that is slightly different rhythmic forms of the score for that effect. This tends to slightly extend some notes or other cut slightly. They are very small variations, but they create this distinctive effect.*

*The swing is closely related to improvisation, as likewise, each performer tries to give a slightly different and own swing on the same theme.*

### **3.3 Searching for a unique sound**

Another typical jazz musician's element is not seeking the pure and perfect sound of each instrument, but tries *to find a sound that is original and very personal*. At bottom, what they want with this is a greater expressiveness of his interpretations.

Jazz vocalists also have a large repertoire of vocal resources, different sounds or imitations of other instruments. Notably, the so-called 'scat', in which the singer improvises imitating the improvisations of an instrumentalist.

## 4. Jazz eras

Since its creation, jazz has evolved to offer new horizons in the art of music. We present a very quick tour of some of the most representative eras of jazz.

### 4.1 Early Jazz

This era covers the first two decades of the twentieth century (1900s-1920s). This earliest style of jazz included *collective improvisation in the front line*. Two musicians are representative of this era: "*Jelly Roll*" Morton and *Louis Armstrong*.

### 4.2 Swing Era

The 1930s saw the evolution of swing bands like those lead by *Duke Ellington* and *Count Basie*. *The purpose of this music was primarily for dancing*. At the same time great soloists emerged, virtuosi like *Louis Armstrong*, *Coleman Hawkins* and *Lester Young*. Other important musicians were: *Benny Goodman*; *Billie Holliday*; *Ella Fitzgerald* and *Frank Sinatra*.

### 4.3 Bebop

In the 1940s bebop began, the alto saxophonist *Charlie Parker* and trumpeter *Dizzy Gillespie* defined the style. Other important musicians were: *Ella Fitzgerald* and *Thelonious Monk*. *The purpose of music is for listening rather than dancing*.

Some features of Bebop are: It has complicated language using scales and arpeggios required technical proficiency, there are tension in music reflected by fast tempos, upper register of the trumpet, syncopations, and aggressive drumming.

### 4.4 Cool Jazz

By the end of the 1940s, the nervous energy and tension of bebop was replaced with a tendency towards calm and smoothness with the sounds of cool jazz, which favored long, linear melodic lines. It emerged in New York City, and dominated jazz in the first half of the 1950s. *There is influence of classical music and passive use of some bebop vocabulary*.

Some players of Cool Jazz were: *Bill Evans*; *Chet Baker*; *Dave Brubeck* and *Paul Desmond*; *Gerry Mulligan*; *Miles Davis*; *Stan Getz* and *Thelonious Monk*.

#### 4.5 Hard Bop

Hard bop was developed in the mid-1950s; it developed partly in response to the vogue for cool jazz in the early 1950s, and paralleled the rise of rhythm and blues. *Hard bop is an extension of bebop music which incorporates influences from rhythm and blues, gospel music and blues, especially in the saxophone and piano playing.*

Some players of Hard Bop were: *Art Blakey; Charles Mingus; Horace Silver; Julian and Nat Adderley; Miles Davis; Sonny Rollins and Thelonious Monk.*

#### 4.6 Other jazz styles

Jazz is continually evolving. Since half of the last century have emerged other styles, some of them are: **Modal Jazz** (1950's – *Bill Evans, Miles Davis and John Coltrane*); **Free Jazz** (1950's - *Ornette Coleman*), **Jazz Fusion** (1960's – *Miles Davis; Herbie Hancock; John McLaughlin*), **Neo-Classical Jazz** (1980's - *Wynton Marsalis*) and **Smooth Jazz** (1980's- *David Sanborn*). Similarly, there are currently several jazz artists continue to bring value to this musical art, some of them are: *Chick Corea; Chris Potter; David Sanborn; Esperanza Spalding; Kenny Garret; Michael Brecker and Pat Metheny.*

#### 5. Jazz as American cultural heritage

As you know, jazz it's fun to hear, it's complex, it's creative, it's inspiring, it's basically a life force. It has been part of the important events of the American Nation. Jazz is the most significant form of musical expression in American culture and outstanding contribution to the art of music. It gives students a deeper respect for this country's diverse cultural heritage while demonstrating those American values epitomized by jazz: *freedom with responsibility, unity with ethnic diversity, hard work toward goal accomplishment, teamwork, democracy, and the American spirit.* Jazz is important to many of us. For some, it's a part of our DNA. For others, *it represents a proud part of our heritage*, while, for others still, it's simply great music that's an ever-present part of our daily lives. What do you think?