

# What Is Jazz?

# 1

## CHAPTER

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

### The World of Jazz

### Defining Jazz

### Studying Different Jazz Styles Historically

### Summary

### Further Resources



Sonny Rollins. Photo by Bob Parent, courtesy of Getty Images

## THE WORLD OF JAZZ

The world of jazz includes many different kinds of music. Some is light and happy. Some is heavy and serious. Some makes you want to dance. Some makes you think. Some is filled with surprises. Some is smooth and easy. Some is fast and complicated. Some is slow and mellow. Jazz is played by big bands and small groups. It has been played on almost every musical instrument. It comes in varieties called Dixieland and swing, bebop and cool, hard bop and fusion. But most jazz has no style designation. We refer to the sounds just by naming the musicians—for instance, Duke Ellington, Miles Davis, or John Coltrane.

Jazz is heard in numerous settings. Many bands present it as serious music in concert halls. Some jazz is played in ballrooms for dancers. There is jazz in background music on the radio. A lot of jazz is offered in nightclubs, where people gather to hear music while they drink and talk with their friends.

Jazz has an impressive reputation. It is so interesting that it is played and analyzed in hundreds of colleges. Almost every high school and college has at least one jazz band. Though it originated in America, jazz is so compelling that musicians on every continent have played it, and today there is no city without it. The sounds of jazz have influenced the development of new styles in popular music and the work of symphonic composers. Jazz is so sturdy that the old styles are still being played, and new styles are always being developed. In fact, jazz is regarded as a fine art, not just a passing fad.

## DEFINING JAZZ

The term “jazz” has a variety of meanings because it has been used to describe so many kinds of music. And the term has different meanings according to who is using it. Different people use different ways to decide whether a given performance is “jazz.” Some consider only how it makes them feel. Some rely on what it reminds them of. Some people decide it must be jazz if the performers have a reputation for jazz. Others consider how the music is made. They look at what techniques are being used. But despite these different attitudes toward defining jazz, there are two aspects that almost all jazz styles have in common—improvisation and swing feeling.

### Improvisation

To improvise is to compose and perform at the same time. Instead of saying “improvise,” many people say “ad lib” or “jam.” This means that *jazz musicians make up their music as they go along. Much of their music is spontaneous. It is not written down or rehearsed beforehand.* This is like the impromptu speaking all of us do every day when we talk “off the cuff.” We use the same words and phrases that we have used before. But now we improvise by using them in new ways and new orders that have not been rehearsed. A lot of originality can result. This is significant because being original is very important to jazz musicians. They try to be as spontaneous as possible. In fact, they try never to improvise the same way twice. Several versions of a tune made during the same recording session may be entirely different from each other because of this.

Improvisation is essential to jazz. If you are not very familiar with jazz, however, you might not be able to tell what has been written or memorized beforehand from what is being improvised. One clue is that if part of a performance sounds improvised, it quite often is. Improvised parts sometimes sound less organized than the written or memorized parts.

Another clue comes from knowing about a routine that most jazz musicians use. The players begin with a tune they all know. First they play it once all the way through. The melody is played by the horns. The accompaniment is played by the piano and bass. Then the piano and bass keep doing what they did before. But this time the horns make up and play new melodies of their own. *They improvise their own melodies to the tune's accompaniment chords.* The way the chords progress in that accompaniment guides the notes they choose to play for their new melodies, which we call improvisations. In other words, when the melody of the piece itself ends, what follows is improvised. Then it is all improvised until that same

melody begins again. This kind of improvisation distinguishes the practices of jazz musicians from most pop musicians, who merely decorate a tune by changing some of its rhythms or adding notes to it.

Even though improvisation is the big emphasis in jazz, not everything is spontaneous. Most jazz bands use arrangements of some sort. In the case of large jazz bands where the players are seated with written arrangements in front of them, a player is usually improvising when he stands up alone and takes a solo. Otherwise the music is coming from the written parts. In the next chapter, we will examine more practices that can help us know what parts in a jazz performance are worked out in advance.

## Swing Feeling

Next we are going to consider the way that jazz makes people feel. This has been called “jazz swing feeling.” To begin, let’s discuss a few elements that contribute to swing feeling in all music, not just jazz. If music makes you want to dance, clap your hands, or tap your feet, it has the effect we call “swinging.” This effect can be created by almost any kind of music that keeps a steady beat and is performed with great spirit. In that sense, many non-jazz performances can be swinging. But to specify the unique ways a jazz performance swings, let’s first discuss the general characteristics of swinging. Then we can discuss the characteristics that are specific to jazz swing feeling.



*Photo by Paul Hoeffler, courtesy of Getty Images*

- ◀ Charles Mingus, jazz bassist known for his composing and improvising. He is important for getting his musicians to improvise their own parts to fit with his written music in colorful and provocative ways.



▲ Joe Zawinul, Wayne Shorter, Manolo Badrena, Alex Acuna, and Jaco Pastorius, leading musicians in jazz of the 1960s and 70s.  
Photo by Andrew Putler, courtesy of Getty Images

*Listening to Jazz* by Steve Gryb  
Demo DVD Track 15

One of the clearest causes of swing feeling is a steady beat. This helps us distinguish it from the kinds of symphonic music where conductors are free to vary the tempo while playing a piece. A steady beat is nearly always kept in jazz pieces. Constant tempo brings a certain kind of momentum that is essential to swing feeling. Much of the excitement in jazz comes from musicians in the band tugging against this very solid foundation by playing notes slightly before or after the beat.

To call music “swinging” also means that the performance conveys a lilting feeling. This property is also sometimes referred to as a “groove.” In fact, verbs derived from the nouns “swing” and “groove” are commonly applied to the sound of jazz: “The band is swinging tonight.” “That pianist is really grooving.” For many listeners, swinging simply means pleasure. A swinging performance is like a swinging party. Both are very enjoyable. Jazz has a reputation for being highly spirited music. In fact, the word “jazzy” is sometimes used instead of the word “spirited.” To “jazz up” and to “liven up” are often used interchangeably, and some people call clothes “jazzy” if they are gaudy or extraverted.

“Boogie Woogie” by Count Basie  
on the *Prentice Hall Jazz History*  
DVD. Basie was one of the great  
masters of swing music.

Music that swings, then, has constant tempo and is performed with lilt and spirit. But for music to swing in the way peculiar to jazz, more conditions have to be met. One is an abundance of syncopated rhythms. “Syncopating” means accenting just before or just after a beat. You might think of syncopation as off-beat accenting, or the occurrence of stress where it is least expected. Jazz swing feeling requires certain combinations of these off-beat accents. The tension generated by members of a band accenting opposite sides of the beat is essential to jazz swing feeling.



Photo by Lee Tanner

- ◀ Dizzy Gillespie, modern jazz trumpeter who devised a highly syncopated style of improvising. He specialized in rhythmic surprises.

One more component of jazz swing feeling is not actually a rhythmic element. It is the continuous rising and falling motion in a melody line. This pattern makes you alternately tense and relaxed, tense and relaxed, over and over again.

We must keep in mind that listeners disagree about whether a given performance swings, and, if so, how much. So, just as we often hear that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” it is also true that swing is in the ear of the listener. In other words, *swinging is an opinion, not a fact about the music*. Ultimately this becomes another reason that it is difficult to reach a workable definition for jazz. We find that the same music one listener calls jazz will not necessarily be what another calls jazz because the listeners disagree about whether it swings.

## STUDYING DIFFERENT JAZZ STYLES HISTORICALLY

Jazz comes in many varieties. The easiest way to introduce a lot of these varieties is to group them into categories called styles. Every jazz musician has a personal style of playing. But this can be a confusing way to use the word “style” because we also use it to designate a larger category of ways musicians like to play. These larger categories have names such as bebop and Dixieland. Each of these styles includes particular ways the musicians like to improvise and the types of accompaniment harmonies and rhythms they prefer. Throughout this book we will be examining the particular styles of famous jazz musicians. But we also have to categorize them within the larger styles, such as Dixieland and bebop, so that we can divide the book into chapters. Grouping the players in these ways is not always fair because styles vary considerably, and some players from the same era don’t play at all like each other. But because some musicians’ approaches have more in common than other musicians’, we rely on the common aspects to help us decide which musicians to discuss in each chapter.

As we study styles in a chronological order, it is important to keep in mind several considerations. First, the musicians discussed in this book did not create their styles entirely by themselves. Their work reflects the influence of other players in addition to their own original ideas. Second, jazz history is not a single stream of styles that developed smoothly from Dixieland to swing to bebop and so forth. Several streams exist at the same time, and streams overlap, merge, and influence each other all the time. Third, each new style does not render the previous ones obsolete. Many different styles of jazz exist at the same time, though some are more popular during one era than another. Fourth, jazz history is not merely a series of reactions in which one style made musicians angry and so they invented another to oppose it. However, many journalists and historians believe this because they look for conflict, and they attach great drama to the development of new styles. The truth is that most musicians find their own favorite ways of playing. Often it is an existing style they like. Sometimes they choose one traditional approach and modify it to suit their tastes and capabilities; sometimes they combine different approaches to make a mixture they like. Many players stick with that style for good; some change their styles whenever they become bored with what they are doing or whenever they hear something new that they like more.



► Ella Fitzgerald, singing with the Dizzy Gillespie big band, with Gillespie looking on from his seat, bassist Ray Brown in background.

*Photo by William P. Gottlieb, courtesy of the Library of Congress*

Fifth, the origination of most new jazz styles cannot necessarily be traced to non-musical forces such as politics and sociocultural conflicts, though some historians believe that they can. Certainly, jazz does not exist in a vacuum, yet the media have exaggerated the contributions of non-musical factors. Usually, jazz innovators draw primarily upon their own extraordinary individual creativity, and they frequently adapt methods and materials from previous jazz styles, pop music, classical music, and world music.\* In other words, in making their music, the originators tend to gather far more from music itself than from the non-musical world around them.

A sixth consideration is also important to keep in mind. Many people tend to think that jazz is just the music that they first heard termed “jazz.” They are not aware of the diversity of styles that have been tagged “jazz.” On the other hand, some people who are aware of numerous styles prefer that certain styles not be included in the jazz category. For instance, during the 1970s and 80s many people felt that jazz-rock fusion should not be called “jazz.” As recently as 2013 there were still many jazz purists who did not want the most popular styles such as “smooth jazz” to be called “jazz.” Granted, different jazz styles do convey different rhythmic feelings, and some even use different instruments and differing amounts of improvisation. But classical music fans and popular music fans find jazz styles more distinguishable from classical music and popular music than from each other. No matter how sticky these controversies get, though, remember that learning how to label the styles is just a handy way to keep track of what you want to hear. The most important goal is to increase your enjoyment of jazz.

## SUMMARY

---

1. Defining jazz is difficult because there are so many varieties.
2. The most common elements that appear in definitions of jazz are improvisation and swing feeling.
3. Improvisation means making it up as you go along, as with impromptu speaking.
4. Jazz musicians usually begin by playing a tune they all know. After that, they make up their own music and guide their improvisations by the accompaniment chords that came with the original tune.
5. Swing feeling is the rhythmic property perceived by listeners who enjoy a particular performance.
6. Jazz swing feeling seems to be perceived in listeners when music has a certain combination of:
  - a. steady tempo
  - b. a certain kind of off-beat accenting
  - c. a continuous rising and falling of the melodic line
7. Listeners do not always agree that a given performance is jazz. One reason is that jazz swing feeling is an opinion about how the music feels, not a fact.
8. Jazz style designations are often more expedient than accurate. Style designations are made in this book to present a variety of musicians in the smallest number of chapters.

\*For an in-depth discussion regarding controversies about the role of politics in the emergence of bop and free jazz, see “Misconceptions in Linking Free Jazz with the Civil Rights Movement.” *College Music Symposium*, Vol. 47, 2008, pages 139–155; available at <http://www.jazzstyles.net/illusory.html>.

# FURTHER RESOURCES

---

✓ Study and Review on [mysearchlab.com](http://mysearchlab.com)

This is the complete web supplement for this text. As a start, test your knowledge with the chapter quiz.

## VIEW

*The Prentice Hall Jazz History DVD*

21 historic clips of performances by key artists.

*Listening to Jazz DVD* by Steve Gryb

Demonstrates how jazz musicians go about making their music. Illustrates all the instruments; constitutes a video version of the Gridley *Demo CD* audio demonstrations.

## LISTEN

*Demonstration CD* by Mark Gridley, 157 narrated demonstrations of how musicians make jazz.

*What Is Jazz?* by Leonard Bernstein, Columbia CL 919, LP, 1956; reissue: in *Bernstein Century: Bernstein on Jazz*, SONY SMK 60566, CD, 1998. The best introduction to jazz, it explains improvisation, the blues, A-A-B-A song form, Dixieland, swing, bebop; Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and other musicians illustrate Bernstein's narration. (Alternate versions are on *Demo CD* and [mysearchlab.com](http://mysearchlab.com).)

## READ

Feather, Leonard. 1957, 1965, 1976. *The Book of Jazz*. New York: Horizon-Dell.

Gridley, Mark, Robert Maxham, and Robert Hoff. 1989. "Three Approaches to Defining Jazz." *Musical Quarterly*, 73(4):513–31; reprinted and updated in Lewis Porter, *Jazz: A Century of Change*. New York: Schirmer, 1997, and at <http://www.jazzstyles.net/ThreeApproach.html>.

Ostransky, Leroy. 1960. *Anatomy of Jazz*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, reprinted 1973 by Greenwood, Westport, CT.