

Elements of Jazz



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Chapter 1

Understanding and Defining Jazz

Jazz is America's art form. It is as much a part of our cultural heritage as baseball and our Constitution. It was created and continues to be shaped, like America itself, by risk takers and rule breakers, men and women who put everything on the line for the sake of their art. Jazz is an art form of individual expression, but unlike many art forms, it is spontaneous. What is created now will be recreated differently later. It is an art of human interaction and, like democracy, the individual is free to express himself, as long as the responsibilities to the group are maintained. Jazz is a celebration of the American spirit, and a reflection of our changing culture. To study jazz is to study twentieth century America. Jazz, however, is sometimes hard to grasp by the casual listener, so the study of jazz should take a look at how it is defined and how it is performed to develop a deeper understanding of the music. This appendix will assist you in understanding what jazz is and how it is typically performed, and provide the definitions of some commonly used terms.

Understanding Jazz

The Origins

Jazz is American music that was created out of the social conditions present in the southern United States, where musicians first began synthesizing the oral traditions of African music and the literal traditions of Western European music. The South contained the largest concentration of Americans of African ancestry (as a result of the institution of slavery), who around 1900 began the process of creating a new kind of music out of the resources they had available to them. These resources included the music styles with which they were familiar and could play, the instruments that were readily available, and the political and cultural situations that dictated where and with whom they could play. The incubation period for the creation of jazz goes back to the very beginnings of slavery in the early 1600s. It was only after nearly 300 years of the two musical traditions—African and European—coming in contact with each other that the birth of jazz took place. It is important to remember that it was nineteenth century African-Americans who were motivated for various reasons to incorporate elements of European music into their own musical tradition. This is why jazz was born in New Orleans and other cities in the South, not in the northern states.

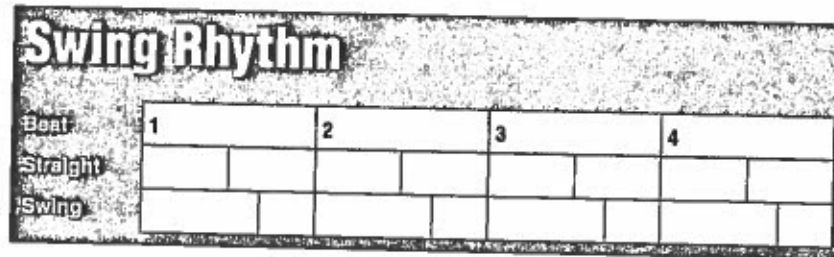
Defining Jazz

Jazz, especially today, is difficult to define. Because it is performed in so many styles and its influence can be heard in so many other types of music, it is nearly impossible to come up with a set of hard and fast rules. Instead, to define jazz, it is helpful to think

of a set of loose guidelines that are followed to one degree or another during the course of a jazz performance. Here are five basic guidelines:

1. **Improvisation:** Improvisation is defined as the act of simultaneously composing and performing. It is an essential element in the performance of most, but not all jazz. For instance, most of what you hear when you listen to a jazz big band is written down and *not* improvised. Generally speaking, jazz is an art form of individual expression, and most jazz contains a great deal of improvisation. When you listen to a small jazz group, you can usually tell which member of the group is improvising a solo. It is, however, important to remember that the other members of the group are also improvising within the framework of their responsibilities to the group sound.
2. **Rhythm:** Jazz rhythm is usually defined in terms of swing rhythm and syncopation. These two elements, like improvisation, are sometimes used only minimally or not at all in a jazz performance (for instance, Latin or rock-influenced jazz does not usually swing). **Swing rhythm** is best described by a loosening of the rigid adherence to the beat of the music, which is accomplished by slightly delaying the notes played between beats, creating a momentary tension that is resolved on the next beat. When this rhythmic momentum drives a piece of music, the music is said to “swing.” If you can tap your foot or snap your fingers to it, you are most likely listening to swing. **Syncopation** is rhythmically placing or accenting notes away from the beat and in unexpected places. It is almost always present in any jazz performance.
3. **Dissonance:** Jazz musicians are continually “pushing the envelope” to incorporate non-harmonious, dissonant tonalities into their music. Jazz dissonance can be subtle and barely noticeable, or sometimes very pronounced, which can make the music difficult to listen to. Like swing rhythm, dissonance creates tension for the listener. An experienced jazz musician will use tension and its eventual resolution often in a jazz performance to give the listener a sense that the music has forward motion.
4. **Jazz Interpretation:** Jazz interpretation is best described as the unique way that jazz musicians produce sound. For instance, jazz saxophonists often slur or bend notes when playing a melody. Trumpeters might put a plunger mute on their horn to create a wah-wah effect. A pianist might “crush” two notes together to create a bent note effect. Although these ways of changing sound production are frowned upon in much of European influenced music (for instance, classical or church music), they are a vital part of most jazz performances.
5. **Interaction:** Although jazz can be performed by a single musician, it is usually performed by several in an ensemble of some sort. Although it is true that any musical group requires the musicians to carefully listen to each other to stay together and to keep the music focused, it is especially important in a jazz performance. Because the musicians are usually all improvising to some degree, communication must be open and honest. A jazz quartet is no different than a panel discussion with four

Swing rhythm differs from “straight” rhythm in the placement of the notes that fall between the beats (which in music terminology are called eighth notes). In straight rhythm, which is typically found in rock, classical, and other music styles, those notes fall exactly halfway between the beats. In swing rhythm, which today is common not only in jazz but the blues, hip-hop, country, rock, and other styles, the notes between the beats are delayed slightly, creating a momentary tension that is resolved at the next beat.



speakers: the conversation must be interactive, with each participant responding in turn to something another said. In a jazz performance, if one musician is soloing, he is still interacting with the other musicians in the group.

The Jazz Soloist

The highest form of individual expression in a jazz performance is the improvised solo. In modern jazz, only one musician solos at a time. The other members of the group either “lay out” (stop playing), or continue playing in a role supportive to the soloist. Because the soloist is composing on the spot while performing, his or her technical skills on the instrument must be developed to a high level of proficiency. The soloist must also have “good ears”—in other words, be able to conceptualize melodies in his or her head before actually playing them, and be able to interact and respond to support and input from other musicians in the ensemble.

Unlike other types of music, jazz musicians are essentially free to develop their own sound that they are identified with during a solo. In fact, creating a unique musical personality is a must for a jazz musician. One way a player can accomplish this is by the choice of which notes to play when improvising. For instance, Dizzy Gillespie, a trumpeter who came into prominence in the 1940s, loved to play notes in the very highest register of the horn, which is one way we can identify his style. Miles Davis, on the other hand, often played very low notes, and far fewer of them than Dizzy. Another way players, especially saxophonists, develop their own sound is by the tonal quality of their instrument. Stan Getz, a tenor saxophonist who became famous in the 1960s, played with a very light and pretty tone that sounded very romantic. John Coltrane, another tenor player from the same era, had a tone that could hardly be described as pretty—harsh and penetrating are better descriptions. Jazz musicians can also use syncopation and rhythmic variety, as well as varying amounts of dissonance in their solos to create their own sound.

Because most jazz uses established rules of melody, harmony, and rhythm—the three essential elements of music—a soloist must



have a thorough understanding of those principles. A soloist must also know the jazz repertoire, the songs, and compositions that are most often played in a jazz performance (i.e., jazz standards).

The Instruments of Jazz

The Rhythm Section

Jazz can be performed with just about any type of ensemble, from a solo clarinet to a seventeen-piece big band. However, most jazz ensembles generally have a rhythm section whose members usually consist of a bass player, a drummer, and either a pianist or guitarist. (Occasionally a rhythm section will use a vibraphonist instead of or in addition to the pianist or guitarist.) Rhythm section musicians all have a specific role to play. Within the framework of those roles, they also have a tremendous amount of freedom as to what they play exactly. In general, if there are also horn players in the band, the rhythm section instruments are always playing, even as the horn players take turns soloing. If a trumpet player is soloing, the role of the rhythm section players is to provide interactive support for that solo. While they are playing supporting roles to the soloist (as described below), the rhythm section players are also improvising, but in a different and much more limited way. Rhythm section players also can take turns soloing, so their roles will change at those times. The basic duties of each of the rhythm section instruments are outlined below:

- **Piano** (or guitar): The pianist or guitarist plays the chords that accompany the melody of the song, usually in a syncopated and interactive manner that is called comping (short for accompanying). The pianist or guitarist often spontaneously “feeds” the soloist rhythmic or melodic ideas with his comping as well. How he structures those chords and the rhythm he uses is up to him. When it is the pianist’s turn to solo, often he will comp with the left hand while soloing with the right hand.
- **Bass**: The bassist might be the most important member of the rhythm section (just ask any bass player) because it is his job to provide a foundation for the chords and to keep a steady beat. In swing rhythm, bass players usually play what is called walking bass—the playing of a note on every beat that outlines the chord in some way. Because the walking bass line is improvised, bassists are free to also spontaneously interact with rhythmic or harmonic ideas from the other musicians.
- **Drums**: The modern drum set is a set of instruments put together in such a way that the performer can play with both his hands and both feet. A typical drum set consists of a bass drum, a high-hat cymbal, a snare drum, one or more “rack” tom-toms (mounted on a metal rack above the bass drum), a floor tom, and at least one ride cymbal and one crash cymbal. In jazz, drummers help keep the beat (or “keep time”) by playing the swing rhythm on either the high-hat or the ride cymbal with their right hand. Because drummers often use the ride cymbal to play swing rhythm, it is often called “ride rhythm.” The left hand and both feet are used to provide improvised, syncopated accents on the various drums and cymbals. When a drummer plays a spontaneous, syncopated accent on the

bass drum to add energy to the performance, it is called “dropping bombs.”

Commonly Used Wind Instruments

The most commonly used wind instruments in jazz today are the saxophone and the trumpet. Four different saxophones are used, ranging from the highest pitched soprano, to the slightly lower alto, to the even lower tenor, down to the very low baritone. (Rule of thumb: The bigger the saxophone, the lower its pitch.) The tenor and alto are the most commonly used, with the baritone most commonly found only in a big band. The trumpet is actually one of a family that includes the flugelhorn, which has a larger bell and wider tubing, and the cornet, a more compact version of the instrument. The first jazz trumpeters played the cornet, which went out of style in the 1920s and is rarely used today. The flugelhorn produces a warmer and mellower tone than the trumpet, and is used most often on ballads or more intimate music. Trumpets and trombones often employ various mutes to color the sound, giving these instruments a greater variety of tonal shadings. Among those used are the cup, straight, plunger, and the Harmon. Another instrument related to the trumpet and a fellow member of the brass family is the trombone. Trombones use a slide and the player's embouchure (the adjustment of the lips, tongue, and mouth muscles on the mouthpiece) to vary the pitch. It is a difficult instrument on which to play jazz, but it offers a degree of flexibility in pitch that other wind instruments cannot match.

Flutes and clarinets are also common in jazz, although they are most often found in big bands. Flutes, clarinets, bass clarinets, and soprano saxophones are often used as doubling instruments, which saxophone players might be called on to play for a specific part on a recording or an arrangement or as a secondary instrument. Other conventional acoustic instruments that are less commonly used in jazz are the violin, harmonica, banjo, and tuba.

Electronic Instruments

Since the 1930s, electronic instruments have found their way into jazz. The first was the electric guitar, followed in the 1950s by the electronic organ and electric bass guitar. These instruments are ubiquitous in jazz today. Since the 1970s, when many jazz musicians began experimenting with rock rhythms and instruments, synthesizers have also played an increasingly large role in jazz performance. When the MIDI (musical instrument digital interface) protocol was agreed upon by musical instrument manufacturers in 1983, the way was cleared for the creation of keyboards, digital samplers, drum machines, and other digital instruments that could “talk” to each other and interconnect with computers. When a MIDI controller, such as a keyboard or drum pad is played, it sends out a digital signal containing such information as what note was played, how hard it was struck, and so on. This information can be recorded on computer sequencing software, where it can be edited in powerful ways and played back on any other MIDI instrument. Today, musicians using MIDI technology are literally redefining jazz with the use of laptop computers in performances

and software to edit and reconstruct performances in the studio after they have been recorded. MIDI controllers are also made for guitar players and wind players, allowing them to take advantage of this technology.

Melody, Harmony, Rhythm, and Form

Melody, Harmony, and Rhythm

To understand jazz, it helps to have a basic understanding of how music is put together. The three basic elements of music are melody, harmony, and rhythm. A brief discussion of them follows.

- **Melody:** Most everyone knows what a melody is—simply, a succession of notes that are played or sung in a specific order and rhythm. Sometimes melodies are referred to as tunes, although usually in jazz the word tune refers to the entire composition.
- **Harmony:** Nearly every piece of music has harmony, or a set of chords (or the implication of chords) that accompany the melody. Chords are defined as three or more notes played simultaneously, and they, like melody notes, are played sequentially in a specific order called a “chord progression.” (Chord progressions are called “changes” in jazz.) Melodies are usually written with a specific chord progression in mind that will always accompany it.
- **Rhythm:** The relationship of notes and sound with time. Rhythm is what gives music forward motion. Usually rhythm is measured in beats. Some notes last for one beat, whereas others may last for several beats or even fractions of beats. Beats (or pulses) are organized into a unit called a measure, or bar. Most music has four beats to a bar, but it is not uncommon to find music that has two or three beats to a bar (for example, “Happy Birthday” has three beats to the bar).

Form

Most music is organized into a basic structure or form. A simple form would be one time through the melody and chord progression. A good example would be to think of singing the first verse of “Silent Night.” With three beats to each bar, it takes twenty-four bars to get through the verse; so it is said to have a twenty-four bar form. Some music has very complex forms, like a Beethoven symphony or a Frank Zappa composition; however, most jazz performances are very simple in concept and easy to explain.

Usually a jazz performance consists simply of the form (chord progression or verse) of the tune, whether it is twelve, twenty-four, or thirty-two bars (or whatever) in length, played over and over. Each statement of the form is called a “chorus.” Almost always, in the first chorus, the melody is played. This is called “the head.” When the head is finished, the musicians start over at the beginning of the chord progression and play another chorus (think of moving on to the second verse of “Silent Night”), but this time, one of the performers creates an improvised solo using notes selected from the chords of the chord progression as it advances. The soloist is free to solo over as many choruses as he chooses. When he

is done, other solos are improvised in the same fashion until the head is played one more time to finish the song. This format of head-solos-head is called the “Jazz Performance Form.” A chart of a typical jazz performance might look something like this:

Chorus 1	Chorus 2	Chorus 3	Chorus 4	Chorus 5	Chorus 6
Head	First solo	First solo continues	Second solo	Second solo continues	Head

Some Commonly Used Jazz Terms

Although there are definitions of words and phrases throughout this book, following are a few terms that are commonly used to describe jazz performance.

Melody

- **Riff:** A short melodic phrase or melody. Some jazz tunes are nothing more than simple riffs repeated several times. A riff may also describe a short phrase in an improvised solo. Also sometimes called a line, lick, phrase, or motif.
- **Phrasing:** The combining of melodies with silence, or rests. Think of human speech. When someone talks, each sentence or expression is followed by a pause of some sort. Some people talk rapidly with few pauses; others talk slowly with many pauses. Phrasing in jazz improvisation works in the same fashion.
- **Embellishment/Ornamentation:** Simply, the improvised decoration or “jazzing up” of a melody, whether in the head or in a solo.
- **Hot/Cool:** Terms used to describe an improvised solo or an individual performer’s style of improvising. A hot soloist tends to add a lot of drama to his solo by playing lots of notes, playing high in the instruments range, or using interesting rhythmic effects, etc. A cool soloist plays in a more laid-back and relaxed style.
- **Lyrical:** A melody that is very singable or melodic. Cool soloists tend to play more lyrically than hot soloists.

Rhythm

- **Pulse:** The fundamental beat driving the music that creates the tempo.
- **Tempo:** The speed of the music. Fast music is said to have a fast tempo; slow music has a slow tempo.
- **Bar/Measure:** Repeated groupings into which beats are organized. Most music in Western culture has four beats to the measure, although some have two, three, or even five, six, or seven. “Someday My Prince Will Come,” for example, has three beats to each bar.
- **Downbeat:** Beat one of each measure.

- **Backbeat:** Beats two and four of each measure. The backbeats are usually accented in swing rhythm.
- **Syncopation:** Placing notes or accents off the beat or in unexpected places.
- **Polyrhythm:** Using two or more rhythms simultaneously.

Harmony

- **Chord:** The fundamental building block of harmony created when three or more notes are played simultaneously.
- **Chord Progression:** The sequential order of the chords of a tune. In the jazz world, the word *changes* refers to the chord progression of a song.
- **Chord Symbols:** Notational representations of chords, or a kind of shorthand used to quickly communicate the harmonic content of a chord.
- **Lead Sheet:** A notated roadmap of a tune using only the melody and chord symbols. Lead sheets give only the most basic information to allow the performers maximum leeway in the performance of a tune.
- **Fake Book:** A book made up of tunes in lead sheet form.

Some Other Jazz Terms

- **Jazz Standard:** A jazz or pop tune that is widely known by jazz musicians and often played. "Someday My Prince Will Come" is a good example of a jazz standard.
- **Gig:** A jazz performance.
- **Call and Response:** A melodic phrase played or sung by one performer that is answered by the rest of the group.
- **Trading Fours:** The technique of exchanging four bar solos, often between a soloist and a drummer. In a performance, trading fours most often occurs (if at all) near the end of a tune, before the head is restated.
- **Double Time:** In an improvised solo, the technique of playing rhythmically twice as fast as the established tempo.