

The Definition of Jazz

"Man, if you gotta ask you'll never know" - Louis Armstrong

Define Jazz - What is Jazz music?

Jazz - an American art form and an international phenomenon! Jazz is not the result of choosing a tune, but an ideal that is created first in the mind, inspired by one's passion and willed next in playing music. Jazz music is a language, sometimes intimate, often boisterous, but always layered with experience and life profoundly lived. Jazz is not found in websites or books or even written down in sheet music. It is in the act of creating the form itself, that we truly find Jazz (see [Jazz etymology](#).)

An academic definition of Jazz would be: A genre of American music that originated in New Orleans circa 1900 (see [Jazz timeline](#)) characterized by strong, prominent meter, improvisation, distinctive tone colors & performance techniques, and dotted or syncopated rhythmic patterns. But Jazz is so much more than that. Most attempts to define Jazz music have been from points of view outside that of Jazz.

Art in general hosts an invitation for the viewer or listener to invest a personal attentiveness. Unlike other mediums, the nature of music is tipped toward the emotional rather than intellectual. It is this personal connection with music and all art that enables the patron to actually experience what is being communicated, rather than merely understanding the information. While all forms of music share this dynamic, Jazz, with its unique characteristic of collective improvisation, exemplifies it.

Most genres of music involve the listener into the realm of the completed work as it was scored. Jazz draws the onlooker to a deeper league, that of a partnership so to speak, of being along when each new phrase is created, when each inspired motive is often the interactive result of audience involvement. Jazz music's dynamic is its "newness" which can be attributed to the defining component - [improvisation](#).

While Classical music may strive to conform the musical tones to orchestral sonorities, Jazz music thrives on instrumental diversities; the player's individual "sound" becoming the desired proficiency. This is where the passion is, a kind found nowhere else.

Jazz is the most significant form of musical expression in American culture and outstanding contribution to the art of music. From obscure origins in New Orleans over a century ago, the music and the word we use for it are now familiar the world over. Like the self-motivating, energetic [solos](#) that distinguish the genre, Jazz continues to evolve and seek new levels of artistic expression. In slightly over one hundred years, this evolution has given birth to approximately two dozen distinct [Jazz styles](#). Jazz music draws from life experience and human emotion as the inspiration of the creative force, and through this discourse is chronicled the story of its people. [Jazz musicians](#) and those that follow the genre closely, can indeed be thought of as an artistic community complete with its leaders, spokesmen, innovators, aficionados, members and fans.

"The real power of Jazz... is that a group of people can come together and create... improvised art and negotiate their agendas... and that negotiation is the art" - [Wynton Marsalis](#) from '[Jazz, a film by Ken Burns](#).'

Jazz Improvisation

Improv, Ad Lib, Solo, Fake, Fill, Ride, Lick, Blow, Jam

Jazz Improvising - What is it?

Jazz improvisation is the process of spontaneously creating fresh melodies over the continuously repeating cycle of chord changes of a tune. The improviser may depend on the contours of the original tune, or solely on the possibilities of the chords' harmonies. It has been said that the best improvised music sounds composed, and that the best composed music sounds improvised. Composed music and improvised music may seem to be opposites, but in [Jazz](#) they merge in a unique mixture.

"You've got to find some way of saying it without saying it." - [Duke Ellington](#)

A common misconception about Jazz improvisation is that it's invented out of the air. This notion may exist because many small Jazz groups do not read music when they perform. [Jazz players](#) will choose phrases that seem to be preordained so you intuitively know where they are going, even though it's being created at the instant you are hearing it. The [musicians](#) are actually spontaneously creating a very intricate form of theme and variation; they all know the tune and the role of their instrument. The guitar, piano, bass and drums, while all able to [solo](#), basically provide the rhythm and harmony over which the soloist will create improvised variations. The structure is flexible so that the soloist may venture in various directions depending on the inspiration of the moment.

"In Jazz, improvisation isn't a matter of just making any ol' thing up. Jazz, like any language, has its own grammar and [vocabulary](#). There's no right or wrong, just some choices that are better than others." - [Wynton Marsalis](#)

But there's more to Jazz than just improvisation. Composers such as [Duke Ellington](#) and [Charles Mingus](#) wrote occasional Jazz compositions practically devoid of improvisation. The real challenge comes when a composer integrates improvisation into a piece, merging Jazz composition and improvisation in the act of creativity. Coleman Hawkins' [Body and Soul](#) or Thelonious Monk's [Straight, No Chaser](#) are sophisticated compositions built from the improvised line.

Composers including Bach, Handel, Mozart, Beethoven and Liszt have all been celebrated for their ability to improvise. In a sense, all Jazz musicians are also composers. While they do not necessarily sit down with pen in hand to write out their solos on score paper, their solos do require the same discipline as that of any composer. Listen to players who are both great composers and soloists, such as [Benny Carter](#) or [Billy Childs](#) improvise their own material and extend their creative reach.

"In fifteen seconds the difference between composition and improvisation is that in composition you have all the time you want to decide what to say in fifteen seconds, while in improvisation you have fifteen seconds." - [Steve Lacy](#)

Three [methods of Jazz improvisation](#) are melodic, harmonic and motivic. Improvised melody occurs when musicians use slurs, alternate notes and syncopation in order to recreate the melody in new and interesting ways. Improvising harmonically employs chords and tone centers to inspire new [soloing](#). Improvising by redefining motives, phrases and statements serves to sophisticate the musical arrangement. Just as no two artists would paint a scene in the same way, no two musicians improvise in the same way. Seasoned Jazz musicians combine all three techniques to create new works, inspired by the original melody, harmony and structure representing their unique creative passion. The true value of this music lies in an artist's individual creativity and that unique process of expression which is Jazz.

"Ahhh - those Jazz guys are just makin' that stuff up!" - Homer Simpson

Styles of Jazz Music ^[1] 2

Jazz styles significantly evolved with an inner necessity characteristic of any true art form

Ragtime - The origins of [Jazz](#): Rhythms brought from a musical heritage in Africa were incorporated into Cakewalks, Coon Songs and the music of "Jig Bands" which eventually evolved into Ragtime, c.1895 ([timeline](#)). The first Ragtime composition was published by [Ben Harney](#). The music, vitalized by the opposing rhythms common to African dance, was vibrant, enthusiastic and often extemporaneous.

Notably the precursor to Jazz styles, early Ragtime music was set forth in marches, waltzes and other traditional song forms but the common characteristic was syncopation. Syncopated notes and rhythms became so popular with the public that sheet music publishers included the word "syncopated" in advertising. In 1899, a classically trained young pianist from Missouri named [Scott Joplin](#) published the first of many Ragtime compositions that would come to shape the music of a nation.

Classic Jazz - At the beginning of the 1900's, Jazz styles took the form of small band music and its origin credited to New Orleans. This musical style is sometimes mistakenly referred to as "Dixieland" but is less solo-oriented. Though traditional [New Orleans Jazz](#) was performed by blacks, whites and African-American creoles, "Dixieland" is a term for white performer's revival of this style.

New Orleans style, or "Classic Jazz" originated with brass bands that performed for parties and dances in the late 1800's and early 1900's. Many of the musical instruments had been salvaged from the Confederate War which included the clarinet, saxophone, cornet, trombone, tuba, banjo, bass, guitar, drums and occasionally a piano. Musical arrangements varied considerably from performance to performance and many of the solos embellished the melody with ornaments of [Jazz improvisation](#). This lively new music combined syncopations of ragtime with adaptations of popular melodies, hymns, marches, work songs and the Blues. The mid 1990's saw a strong resurgence in the Classic form.

Hot Jazz - c.1925 Louis Armstrong recorded the first of his Hot Five band records, the first time he recorded under his own name. The records made by Louis Armstrong's [Hot Five and Hot Seven](#) bands are considered to be absolute Jazz classics and speak of Armstrong's creative powers. The bands never played live, but continued recording until 1928.

The music was characterized by collective improvised solos, around melodic structure, that ideally built up to an emotional and "Hot" climax. The rhythm section, usually drums, bass, banjo or guitar supported this crescendo, many times in the style of march tempo. Soon, larger bands and orchestras began to emulate that energy, especially with the advance of record technology, that spread the "Hot" new sound across the country.

Chicago Style - Chicago was the breeding ground for many young, inventive players. Characterized by harmonic, innovative arrangements and a high technical ability of the players, Chicago Style Jazz significantly furthered the improvised music of it's day. Contributions from dynamic players like [Benny Goodman](#), [Bud Freeman](#) and [Eddie Condon](#) along with the creative grooves of [Gene Krupa](#), helped to pioneer Jazz music from it's infancy and inspire those who followed.

Swing - The 1930s belonged to Swing. During that classic era, most of the Jazz groups were Big Bands. Derived from New Orleans Jazz style, Swing was robust and invigorating. Swing was also dance music, which served as it's immediate connection to the people. Although it was a collective sound, Swing also offered individual [musicians](#) a chance to improvise melodic, thematic solos which could at times be very complex.

The mid 1990's saw a revival of Swing music fueled by the retro trends in dance. Once again young couples across America and Europe jitter-bugged to the swing'n sounds of Big Band music, often played by much smaller ensembles.

Kansas City Style - During the Depression and Prohibition eras, the Kansas City Jazz scene thrived as a mecca for the modern sounds of late 1920s and 30s. Characterized by soulful and bluesy stylings of Big Band and small ensemble Swing, arrangements often showcased highly energetic solos played to "speakeasy" audiences. Alto [sax](#) pioneer [Charlie Parker](#) hailed from Kansas City.

Gypsy Jazz - Originated by French guitarist [Django Reinhardt](#), Gypsy Jazz is an unlikely mix of 1930s American swing, French dance hall "musette" and the folk strains of Eastern Europe. Also known as Jazz Manouche, it has a languid, seductive feel characterized by quirky cadences and driving rhythms.

The main instruments are nylon stringed guitars, often amounting to a half-dozen ensemble, with occasional violins and bass violin. Solos pass from one player to another as the other guitars assume the rhythm. While primarily a nostalgic style set in European bars and small venues, Gypsy Jazz is appreciated world wide.

Bebop - Developed in the early 1940's, Bop had established itself as vogue by 1945. It's main innovators were alto saxophonist [Charlie Parker](#) and trumpeter [Dizzy Gillespie](#). Until then, [Jazz improvisation](#) was derived from the melodic line. Bebop soloists engaged in chordal improvisation, often avoiding the melody altogether after the first chorus. Usually under seven pieces, the soloist was free to explore improvised possibilities as long as they fit into the [chord structure](#).

Differing greatly from Swing, Bebop divorced itself early-on from dance music, establishing itself as art form but severing its potential commercial value. Ironically, what was once thought of as a radical Jazz style, Bebop has become the basis for all the innovations that followed.

Vocalese - The art of composing a lyric and singing it in the same manner as the recorded instrumental solos. Coined by Jazz critic Leonard Feather, Vocalese reached its highest point from 1957-62. Performers may solo or sing in ensemble, supported by small group or orchestra. Bop in nature, Vocalese rarely ventured into other Jazz styles and never brought commercial success to it's performers until recent years. Among those known for writing and performing vocalese lyric are [Eddie Jefferson](#) and [Jon Hendricks](#).

Mainstream - After the end of the Big Band era, as these large ensembles broke into smaller groups, Swing music continued to be played. Some of Swing's finest players could be heard at their best in jam sessions of the 1950s where chordal improvisation now would take significance over melodic embellishment.

Re-emerging as a loose Jazz style in the late '70s and '80s, Mainstream Jazz picked up influences from Cool, Classic and Hardbop. The terms Modern Mainstream or Post Bop are used for almost any Jazz style that cannot be closely associated with historical styles of Jazz music.

Cool - Evolving directly from Bop in the late 1940's and 1950's, Cool's smoothed out mixture of Bop and Swing tones were again harmonic and dynamics were now softened. The ensemble arrangement had regained importance. Nicknamed "West Coast Jazz" because of the many innovations coming from Los Angeles, Cool became nation wide by the end of the 1950's, with significant contributions from East Coast musicians and composers.

"A Jazz musician is a juggler who uses harmonies instead of oranges." - [Benny Green](#)