Definition: **jazz** from *Musical Terms, Symbols and Theory: An Illustrated Dictionary*

music derived from ragtime, popularized in the United States during the 20th century. Improvisation is an essential characteristic of jazz, which is usually written in duple meter and employs complex rhythm and syncopation. Jazz ensembles include brass and rhythm instruments. See also bebop; blues; jive; ragtime; swing.

Summary Article: **Jazz**

From *Encyclopedia of American Studies*

The sociocultural seeds of jazz came from West Africa, penetrating and developing in the European American soil of the New World. Jazz is, therefore, a “creole” music. Creole in this case refers to a process in which there is a mixture of elements used in creating a new thing that somehow retains characteristics of its origins while preserving its new identity. It may favor first one and then another of its parents but it must somehow maintain a balance of its elements or it reverts to a more fundamental form. Throughout the history of jazz there has been evidence of this dynamic tension, a struggle between its European and African roots that mirrored a comparable struggle in the broader American culture.

To understand jazz it is vital to note that improvisation alone does not distinguish jazz from so-called classical music. Although improvisation is essential to jazz, only a relative handful of its practitioners have been improvisational geniuses; many others have been competent in its execution, and some have been uninspired imitators. What does distinguish jazz from all other types of music are its African-influenced pitch, timbre, and cross-rhythms. There is also the African social element; jazz is a music that thrives on contact between performers and audience. Few if any jazz performers actually sound better in studio recordings than in live performances before an audience.

**The Early Years**

Jazz grew up at the turn of the twentieth century, when the myth of Africa prevailed. That myth was of a “primitive other” who lived out all that was repressed in white society. Jazz history begins with the consequences of this prejudice, the discrimination that resulted from the imposition of Jim Crow laws in New Orleans, and the subsequent cultural clash between black Creoles and other blacks.

Until the application of these laws late in the nineteenth century, Creoles had sought to separate themselves from their fellow blacks, identifying themselves as black Europeans. Those Creoles, who tended to be more musically inclined, performed European music in whatever “dignified” setting they could, including concert halls. Therefore, their subsequent bitterness and alienation is best understood in terms of their sense of betrayal when New Orleans, a city they had felt to be somehow above race consciousness and open to advancement through cultural evolution, joined the rest of the South in imposing segregation based on race rather than on culture.

The European and African tension so vital to jazz is not something simply imposed from outside. Rather it is a theme within its very core, a contradiction, or opposition, present in its very inception.

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Within that dichotomy, “Africa” has come to represent total freedom, however freedom is defined within America at any given time. The myth of the origin of jazz neatly emphasizes that connection. It was presumably played without any rules and somewhat instinctually. African American musicians themselves often promulgated the myth, sometimes in an unsuccessful effort to keep whites from imitating their music and stealing their jobs.

The reality was, of course, much different. Black Creoles in New Orleans represented a well-trained and Europeanized cadre of musicians, culturally identifying themselves with white European musicians. European musical elements did not come from outside the black jazz community but from black advocates of one strain or the other. The true (rare) geniuses of the genre were those who combined both stylistic elements in their performances in unique combinations.

Even whites who loved and admired jazz often missed this point. Consequently, they misunderstood its very structured nature. New Orleans jazz, for example, featured group improvisation. Such improvisation, however, was possible only because certain rather rigid rules operated; for example, the individual melody instruments (cornet, clarinet, and trombone) stayed out of each other's way. Much like the “ideal” African village, jazz was an example of freedom within regulated limits, surprisingly not unlike a Bach three- or four-part invention.

Unrestricted freedom, in imitation of white perceptions of black African freedom, came to be found in the Chicago school of jazz. There, white musicians, many of them quite talented, played a misunderstood form of New Orleans-style jazz. For them great improvisation meant that every melody instrument played the melody. Certainly their misunderstanding proved to be a happy accident, for it is problematic whether this style of jazz was really part of the mainstream or simply an interesting example of “specific evolution,” leading to a dead end. Related cultural developments, such as the art world's “discovery” of African art, embodied similar misunderstandings. The 1920s infatuation with Harlem and other African American centers was often based on images rather than on reality, or at least the reality experienced by African Americans.

**Dixieland Music**

*Dixieland* is a generic term that supposedly refers to the music of the New Orleans musicians who originated jazz. It is commonly extended as well to a music that developed in Chicago. Certainly the music of Joe “King” Oliver and Louis Armstrong influenced white Chicago musicians, including Jimmy McPartland, Bud Freeman, and Frank Teschemacher. These musicians first were introduced to jazz through the work of white New Orleans musicians who went to Chicago and only later heard the black greats in the 1920s. White musicians who were associated in the early 1920s with Nick LaRocca in the Original Dixieland Jass (later Jazz) Band and with Paul Mares in the New Orleans Rhythm Kings (originally the Friar’s Society Orchestra) represent a style that closely parallels the black New Orleans style and had at least as much influence on jazz of the 1920s and 1930s as that of black musicians.

There will always be arguments among jazz aficionados concerning the differences between white and black musicians. However, in general the white bands seem to have a stiffer rhythm and to draw more on ragtime and less on other nineteenth-century African American music; for the most part their reliance on European musical forms also is greater than that of black musicians.

When jazz developed and became too sophisticated for some of its fans, there was a longing for the “way things used to be.” That longing was answered with a Dixieland revival that burst forth in the
1940s, marked by Louis Armstrong's return to performing with a small New Orleans group following the success of his 1947 Carnegie Hall concert. The fact that Armstrong played more in a swing style than Dixieland did not hinder his fans from calling the music Dixieland, or New Orleans.

Eddie Condon's Chicagoans typified the American revival of the 1940s and early 1950s. Condon, in particular, nurtured a great hatred of bebop (an outgrowth of swing) and other modern jazz forms. His groups played what he considered jazz in its authentic form. The revival movement continued to be a popular feature of the European jazz scene, where bands commonly performed King Oliver's solos note for note. Rather than simply playing in the old style, many of the European revival bands reconstructed the old performances in the manner of classical musicians.

The predominantly Caucasian, candy-stripe-suited bands that the general public associates with Dixieland jazz have little in common with such musicians as Pete Fountain, Al Hirt, and other figures who became popular performing Dixieland-style music in the 1950s and later. Many of these musicians were fine performers who played a classic style of American popular music, a rich blend of musical traditions that exemplified the American traditions of cultural pluralism and that influenced many other musical traditions and helped pave the way for modern jazz.

Swing

Louis Armstrong was the first great jazz soloist, turning jazz into (for the most part) a soloist's art. His great sense of melodic form played a major role in his success, although it is doubtful whether that sense of melody alone would have proved sufficient to usher in a new era of jazz.

In addition to reworking melodies, Armstrong increased the feel for cross-rhythms in jazz. His improvisations included the full gamut of the African characteristics in jazz: pitch, timbre, falsetto leaps, melismatic vocalizations, terminal vibratos, and, above all, adaptations of African cross-rhythms. Without denying Armstrong's personal charisma, it is essential to note the relationship between his art and the times. Jazz began in reaction to the imposition of Jim Crow laws in New Orleans, a town that had been relatively open racially and had allowed unprecedented social and cultural intercourse between the races. Jim Crow not only tended to segregate black and white, it also forced conservative Creoles into contact with the poor “street” blacks on whom they had looked down. The group improvisation of early New Orleans jazz can be viewed as a means for encouraging racial unity among African Americans at a time of threat.

Much had changed in America, however, between the turn of the century and the early 1920s. Although America was still a segregated society, World War I had allowed at least a glimpse of new opportunities. Many African Americans migrated to the North for new economic opportunities. Louis Armstrong followed that migration. He initially continued to serve his apprenticeship as second cornetist to his mentor, King Oliver. However, it became obvious rather quickly that Armstrong's talent could not be second to anyone's. His abandonment of the cornet and switch to the trumpet symbolically marked the emergence of the soloist in jazz and of individual African Americans from the group and is consonant with the writings of W. E. B. Du Bois and Langston Hughes, the Harlem Renaissance, the stirring of independence in Africa, Marcus Garvey's Black Star Line, and other postwar assertions of African American pride.

Armstrong, moreover, tended to take a trickster's stance to American pop material, undermining it while seeming to embrace it. His music illustrates the entire approach-withdrawal dialectic of jazz and...
exemplifies the ambivalent position of African Americans within American culture. Whenever Armstrong played anything, it was, from then on, never heard in quite the same way again. He forced people to look at the familiar in a new way, the way that he as an African American looked at it. Without Armstrong's rhythmic lesson, it is difficult to envision the emergence of the big band in jazz. Armstrong freed the soloist from the ground beat and moved jazz toward a more African approach to rhythm.

Throughout the big-band period the lessons of Armstrong were applied, modified, and extended by others, primarily Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Art Tatum, and Armstrong's big-band boss, Fletcher Henderson, the man responsible for arranging many of Benny Goodman's early hits. However, these lessons soon entered the public domain and were assimilated by white musicians as earlier innovations had been. Inevitably, these white musicians reaped the popular reward while the African American creators often fell victim to Jim Crow laws. Ironically, Goodman, who did much to end segregation in jazz, was named the “King of Swing.” Other white bandleaders gained great fame: Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, Artie Shaw, Charlie Barnett, Harry James, and Gene Krupa among them.

This situation produced a tension that caused the music to change. African American musicians, perfecting styles uniquely their own, were aware that their music had been stolen from them. No other band, for example, could imitate the swing of the Basie band or be mistaken for Ellington's. Ellington, however, found himself in the position of using harmonies and tone colors inspired by French impressionist music and painting and therefore of having to prove his African authenticity time and time again.

Eventually, out of the pride and anger of African American musicians, came bop, or bebop, a new form of jazz. Bop was a logical development of swing, but one that reflected the experience of African Americans who were raised in the Depression and matured during World War II. These young people saw the creative power of their music, a vibrant, playful music, and knew their own value; for some, such as Dizzy Gillespie, that playfulness took on rhythmic forms.

**Bop and Beyond: The Myth of Africa**

Throughout the postwar era, Africa’s aura grew among jazz musicians. The African independence movement added to its mystique in the United States, and the linkage of black liberation to jazz was natural. Islam became common among musicians long before it spread to other segments of the African American community. Armstrong's trip to Ghana was merely the most noticeable of many trips by jazz musicians to the African continent. Africa increasingly became a metaphor for authenticity, and for identity within the African American musical community.

In the 1960s black nationalism became more openly dominant in jazz than it had ever been. This movement was in conformity with the self-conscious assertion of the right of blacks to control their own destiny and identity. As America in general entered the confrontational politics of the late 1960s, assertions of identity—youths, homosexuals, women, and African Americans—became more pronounced. Initially, they tended to be separatist and exclusionary. The movement illustrated an interesting contrast between black and white images of Africa in jazz. White musicians choose to be part of African American culture; they are, however, free to move in and out of it at will; they are, therefore, always on trial by African American musicians and are aware of their probationary status.

There were a number of manifestations of the movement to Africanize jazz but all of them shared the adjective *free*. Indeed, even before the black power movement itself had jelled, Ornette Coleman and
his plastic alto sax had come on the scene in 1959. After an initial burst of enthusiasm, he met with outright hostility. Within a few years, however, many of his basic ideas were being incorporated into the mainstream of jazz.

The “free jazz” movement was interested in giving the individual as much freedom as possible in order to allow nothing to get between his message and the audience. That quest for freedom, part of the broader political and artistic movement of the 1960s, led to a return to modal and other types of playing that stressed melodic and thematic development without binding the performers to strict adherence to set or altered chord progressions. Just as “black” was being proclaimed beautiful in defiance of the dominant aesthetics of the past, so, too, were new sounds being explored for their potential beauty, even if—or perhaps especially if—former “experts” had termed them ugly.

The 1960s return to modes by John Coltrane, Miles Davis, and others was a conscious search for African roots. This harmonic simplification into a more “vocal” style of playing was generally coupled with an increasingly sophisticated and complex form of rhythm. The purpose was to tie changes in the music to changes in society. Ultimately, “free jazz” music failed, largely because, as noted by Elvin Jones, one of its great stars, its success would have meant the death of jazz. Tension between European and African elements is required for jazz to exist (a culture that is neither this nor that, but somehow this and that, and something else, too). This juxtaposition of seemingly polar opposites is essential to the survival of the form.

Beginning in the 1980s there was a neoclassical movement in jazz; the Marsalis clan (including father, Ellis, and well-known sons, Branford and Wynton) was primary in the movement but many others also were prominent: Roy Hargrove, Nicholas Payton, and Joshua Redman among them. These musicians tended to feel that before any new thing could emerge, there had to be a picking up of the thread that free jazz dropped in the 1960s. They believed that revolutions in jazz had to be founded on rhythmic changes that developed the essential nature of jazz.

**Conclusion**

One of the truly remarkable aspects of jazz performance is the interaction between emotions and intelligence and the raw courage to expose these characteristics in public. The liberating qualities of jazz, its freedom and ability to initiate one into the company of “the wise,” serve as powerful themes. Jazz in its pure form constantly reminds its listeners that things can be other than they are—that reality is but one possible melody of many based on a set of chord changes.

Such a perspective is a metaphor for American culture itself. Even the most banal themes can be transformed into things of exquisite beauty and at the most unexpected times. In the midst of despair, hope explodes into consciousness. America and jazz have grown up together and each expresses the fact that differences must be reconciled in a creative tension of harmony that together can produce something far more beautiful and productive than their individual elements.

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