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The Origin and Characteristics of Jazz Music

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# The Origin and Characteristics of Jazz Music

Jazz, a genre that originated in the African-American communities of New Orleans, Louisiana, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, has had a profound impact on music and culture around the world (Schuller, 2024). Its roots lie in blues and ragtime, and it is characterized by swing and blue notes, complex chords, call and response vocals, polyrhythms, and improvisation (Schuller, 2024). As jazz spread globally, it drew on national, regional, and local musical cultures, giving rise to different styles (Schuller, 2024).

The origins of jazz are shrouded in mystery, with debates among aficionados about what qualifies as jazz and where the term “jazz” comes from (Blauvelt, 2017). The story of Livery Stable Blues, the first jazz recording, shows how early these questions were raised (Blauvelt, 2017). Jazz quickly became an idea that inspired artists in other media, as seen in Albert Gleizes’ painting Composition Pour Jazz from 1915 (Blauvelt, 2017).

Jazz has been recognized as a major form of musical expression in traditional and popular music since the 1920s Jazz Age (Schuller, 2024). It has roots in European harmony and African rhythmic rituals, and it incorporated many forms of music, including blues, spirituals, hymns, marches, vaudeville song, ragtime, and dance music (Schuller, 2024). It also incorporated interpretations of American and European classical music, entwined with African and slave folk songs and the influences of West African culture (Schuller, 2024).

Jazz has had a significant impact on society and culture. It has been associated with social change and has enabled different aspects of American culture to evolve (Stutler, 2020). Jazz made African American music a popular and desirable aspect of American society, and it allowed women an outlet to express themselves (Stutler, 2020). Jazz has also influenced literature and fashion, with the Jazz Age bringing about changes such as sequined flapper dresses, more form-fitting clothing, and shorter hairstyles (Stutler, 2020).

Internationally, jazz has been viewed as the sound-image of freedom, especially in repressive societies (Hasse & Blumenthal, 2011). The music has attracted practitioners and influences from all classes, cultures, and parts of the world, and it has incorporated elements from other musical genres, such as Brazilian bossa nova and Indian raga (Hasse & Blumenthal, 2011). Jazz has been honored by the National Endowment for the Arts and is now central to America’s cultural heritage (Hasse & Blumenthal, 2011).

Despite its African-American origins, jazz has faced issues of appropriation and “whitewashing” (Nelson, 2017). For example, the all-white Original Dixieland Jass Band borrowed heavily from black music, a practice that continues today with pop stars such as Taylor Swift (Philipp, 2009).

## What is Jazz?

Jazz is a genre of music that originated in the United States, particularly in the African-American communities of New Orleans, Louisiana, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Schuller, 2024). It is characterized by swing and blue notes, complex chords, call and response vocals, polyrhythms, and improvisation (Schuller, 2024). Jazz has roots in European harmony and African rhythmic rituals, and it incorporates many forms of music, including blues, spirituals, hymns, marches, vaudeville song, ragtime, and dance music (Schuller, 2024). Jazz is often associated with improvisation, which is a primary way that jazz musicians express themselves (Boornazian, 2023). In most jazz performances, players play solos which they make up on the spot, requiring considerable skill (Smithsonian, n.d.). This improvisation is depicted through the changing of melodies rhythmically, embellishments of the melodies, and the creation of solos in the moment of playing (Boornazian, 2023).

As jazz spread around the world, it drew on national, regional, and local musical cultures, which gave rise to different styles (Schuller, 2024). These styles include traditional jazz, swing, bebop, and others (Smithsonian, n.d.). Jazz has been recognized as a major form of musical expression in traditional and popular music since the 1920s Jazz Age (Schuller, 2024).

Despite its rich history and global influence, defining jazz can be challenging due to its constantly evolving nature and the wide range of music it encompasses (Schuller, 2024). However, its distinctive features such as swing, improvising, group interaction, developing an 'individual voice', and being open to different musical possibilities, make it a unique and significant genre in the music world (Schuller, 2024).

## Typical Instruments used in Jazz Music

Jazz music utilizes a variety of instruments, each contributing to the unique sound and style of the genre. The most common instruments used in jazz music include:

1. Trumpet: The trumpet is a staple in jazz music, often used for playing melodies and solos (Fripp, n.d. and Dawkes Music, 2019).

2. Saxophone: The saxophone is another key instrument in jazz, known for its distinctive sound. It comes in different sizes, each producing a slightly different tone (Dawkes Music, 2019).

3. Piano: The piano is a versatile instrument that appears in many genres of music, including jazz. It often forms part of the rhythm section in a jazz band (Fripp, n.d.).

4. Trombone: The trombone adds a theatrical element to a jazz band and was particularly popular during the 1930s jazz era (Dawkes Music, 2019).

5. Clarinet: The clarinet is a woodwind instrument that, while not as immediately recognized as the saxophone, is a staple of jazz music (Dawkes Music, 2019)

6. Double Bass: The double bass, also known as the upright bass, provides a unique and distinct sound in jazz music. It forms part of the rhythm section, providing the low-end sound and often playing a key role in establishing the harmonic foundation (Fripp, n.d.).

7. Drums: The drums are essentially the rhythm section of the jazz ensemble, providing the beat and rhythm for the other instruments to follow (Fripp, n.d.).

8. Electric Guitar: As jazz music has evolved, the electric guitar has become more common in jazz bands, adding a modern touch to the traditional jazz sound (Dawkes Music, 2019).

While these are the most common instruments, jazz is a flexible genre that can be played on any instrument, including less common ones like the flute and bassoon (McGuire, 2024). The human voice is also considered an instrument in jazz, often used for scat singing, a vocal improvisation with wordless vocables or nonsense syllables (Jazz in America, n.d.).

## Short Biography of Important Persons in Jazz

### **Louis Armstrong**.

Louis Armstrong, who is also known as “Satchmo”, was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, on August 4, 1901. He is widely regarded as one of the most important and influential figures in the history of jazz music (Britannica, 2023b). Growing up in poverty, Armstrong's musical talent and passion for the trumpet emerged at an early age. He began playing the trumpet in his youth and quickly became known for his distinctive style and groundbreaking contributions to the genre (Britannica, 2023b).

His frequent expansion of the popular market through recordings was among his most remarkable achievements. However, his most significant influence was on the evolution of jazz itself, which was largely regarded as a novelty at the outset of his career. With his great sensitivity, technique, and capacity to express emotion, Armstrong not only ensured the survival of jazz but led in its development into a fine art (Britannica, 2023b).

Major contributors to the rise in popularity of jazz were Louis Armstrong's humor and his positive stage presence. Many youngsters were inspired to take up the trumpet after hearing or seeing him, and millions more were introduced to jazz through his performances (Britannica, 2023b).

Armstrong's impact on jazz was profound. He was one of the first soloists on record and played a pivotal role in changing jazz from ensemble-oriented folk music into an art form (Britannica, 2023b). His innovative approach to trumpet playing and his unparalleled skill as a jazz soloist set new standards for the genre (Smithsonian Music, 2016). Armstrong's music was characterized by his expressive attack, unique timbre, and improvisational genius, which made his recordings major innovations in jazz (Britannica, 2023b).

In addition to his musical innovations, Armstrong's charismatic personality and stage presence helped to make him one of the most popular and beloved performers of his time (Grout, 2023). His wide smile, infectious laugh, and engaging banter with audiences endeared him to fans around the world (Grout, 2023). Armstrong's influence extended far beyond jazz, as the energetic, swinging rhythmic momentum of his playing was a major influence on soloists in every genre of music (Smithsonian Music, 2016).

The legacy of Louis Armstrong continues to inspire and motivate jazz musicians worldwide. His innovations in style and technique have helped to shape the sound of the genre, while his passion for improvisation and individual expression continue to inspire musicians to push the boundaries of their art (Grout, 2023). It is no exaggeration to say that Louis Armstrong's impact on jazz music has been immeasurable, and that his contributions to the genre will continue to be felt for generations to come (Grout, 2023).

### Charlie Parker.

Charlie Parker, also known as “Bird”, was born on August 29, 1920, in Kansas City, Kansas. He was a pioneering jazz saxophonist and composer, famous for his role in founding the innovative bebop style of jazz in the early 1940s (Barnett, n.d.). Parker began playing the alto saxophone when he was 13 and by 14, he had quit school to start performing with youth bands (Britannica, 2023). From 1935 to 1939, he played the Missouri nightclub scene with local jazz and blues bands (Barnett, n.d.).

Parker's music was revolutionary, characterized by fast tempos, complex chord progressions, and virtuosic improvisation. He developed a new style of jazz called bebop, which was different from the dance or swing music that was popular at the time (Brody, 2020). His music was jumpy, crowded, and energized to the breaking point, and it quickly became a vital inspiration to a younger generation of musicians (Brody, 2020).

Parker's influence on modern jazz was immense. His many followers included Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, and Albert Ayler – leading figures in the development of free jazz (Britannica, 2023). He was considered the greatest of the bebop jazz musicians and his hits during this time included “Now's the Time”. Parker's music was not only influential in the jazz world but also foreshadowed the history of jazz to come (Brody, 2020).

Parker is widely regarded as one of the most pioneering and influential musicians in American history, despite his relatively short life. He has won several posthumous awards, including a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award for his contributions to American music (Barnett, n.d.). His difficult life was the subject of “Bird” (1988), a film directed by Clint Eastwood (Britannica, 2023).

Parker's life was tragically cut short due to his struggles with drug and alcohol abuse. He died on March 12, 1955, in New York City at the age of 34 (Britannica, 2023). Misled by the damage that drug and alcohol abuse had done to Parker’s body, the attending physician at the time of his death guessed that Parker’s age was fifty-three (Barnett, n.d.). Despite his early death, Parker's influence on jazz music continues to be felt today. For me, being a saxophone player as well, Charlie Parker and his contributions to jazz are especially important.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, jazz is a rich and complex genre that has had a profound impact on music and culture around the world. Its origins in African-American communities and its subsequent spread globally have led to a diverse range of styles and influences. Despite debates about its definition and issues of appropriation, jazz remains a significant part of global musical heritage.

Musicians as Charlie Parker, Louis Armstrong, and Benny Goodman were monumental figures in the development of jazz music. Louis Armstrong's contributions to jazz music were immeasurable. His innovative style, virtuosic trumpet playing, and charismatic stage presence helped to shape the sound of the genre and inspire generations of musicians. Armstrong's impact on American music and culture continues to reverberate into the 21st century, solidifying his legacy as one of the most influential figures in the history of jazz (Smithsonian Music, 2016).

Armstrong's innovative trumpet playing and charismatic singing, along with Goodman's role in popularizing swing and breaking racial barriers in music, as well as Parker’s influences on modern jazz have left an indelible mark on the genre. Their contributions have not only shaped jazz but have also had a lasting impact on the broader landscape of American music.

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