

MSC 1003 – Music in Civilization Spring 2022

Prof. Smey

Class 23, Wednesday April 27

In this session we dug into Jazz History, covering the first three periods.

New Orleans Style (1900-1920s)

Swing (1920s-40s)

Bebop (mid 40s + 1950s)

I like to call these the three “bedrock” periods of Jazz, in which the music clearly evolves from one generation to the next and the history is still straightforward. In some ways the Bebop period codifies the jazz you can still hear today.

In Class 24 we’ll see that after Bebop jazz starts to go in many different directions!

1900-1930s – the emergence of Jazz and the New Orleans style

The emergence of jazz involves bands with a mixture of horns, drums, and chordal instruments such as piano, guitar, or banjo. These groups of musicians originally formed to play Blues, Ragtime, and other styles of dance music that were popular at the turn of the century. By blending these styles of music and adding a lot of improvisation these groups created jazz.

An early figure who became known for playing jazz music was New Orleans trumpeter **Buddy Bolden**, who was active around 1900-1907. Unfortunately this was too early to be recorded, so we don’t know exactly what his band sounded like.

After a crackdown on **Storyville**, the “red-light” district of New Orleans in 1917, many musicians traveled upriver to Chicago, where they recorded some of the first jazz records.

In class we first listened to Joe “King” Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band 1923 recording “Dippermouth Blues.” Louis Armstrong plays second cornet in this band. He eventually becomes one of the most famous figures in jazz history.

For the quiz we will listen to **Louis Armstrong** and his Hot Five with their 1927 recording of “Hotter Than That.” In class we carefully followed the structure of the record, which begins with Armstrong playing the tune on trumpet and then moves through a few improvised solos. In general one could say that the structure of a jazz performance is a lot like a Theme and Variations, as the form of the main tune is repeated over and over and people add new things each time.

(In jazz each pass through the form is called a *chorus*. On “Hotter Than That” some musicians like the clarinetist Johnny Dodds improvise one whole chorus, and others like Kid Ory the trombone player get a half-chorus.)

Characteristics of the New Orleans-style of jazz

There are a few ways that this early period of jazz sounds distinctly different from later periods.

- The beat still owes a lot to ragtime, with its somewhat stiff “oom-pah” pattern. (When modern musicians play this music it is not so stiff but it still has a noticeably different groove, more like a marching band.)
- At key points in the performance all musicians will solo at once, creating a chaotic, polyphonic texture.
- New Orleans-style jazz uses certain instruments that are less common later. The bass line may be played on a tuba. Saxophones are rare – instead the clarinet is the main reed instrument. And the banjo is a common element in the rhythm section (instead of the guitar).
- Because of the limitations of recording technology at this time drummers were not allowed to play much.

1930s – early 40s: The Swing Era

Swing introduces a few stylistic changes.

- “Everyone soloing at once” is basically abolished. Instead, performances are more organized. Much of this music is written down and carefully planned out.
- The groove becomes more swinging and danceable. Bass lines in particular tend to hit all four beats in a constant pulse.
- The main format for this music is the **Big Band**, a group of 16 or so musicians with a full brass section (trumpets + trombones), reed section (who can play saxes, clarinets and flutes as needed) and a rhythm section (that plays chords, bass line, and keeps the beat.) You will often hear the different sections of the band “talk back and forth” and take turns doing things.

This is the era when jazz becomes America’s popular music, and jazz is everywhere – in dancehalls, on the radio, in movies, and on jukeboxes.

Important big band leaders include...

Duke Ellington (1899-1974)

Duke Ellington is artistically the most important figure of the swing era. He began leading bands in the 20s, and by the 30s he was writing ambitious compositions that aimed for unique concepts and sounds.

His big break was when he became musical director of New York City’s **Cotton Club** in 1927. The Cotton Club featured African-American entertainers doing a vaudeville-like mix of song,

dance, comedy, and burlesque, and Duke's music provided a very colorful and "exotic" atmosphere for all of it. Radio broadcasts from the venue made him well-known across the country, kickstarting a career of recordings, films, and concert appearances which would make him the most prestigious name in jazz, all the way until his death in 1974.

Between in-class listening and homework we heard:

"Mood Indigo" [1930] – this ballad features a distinctly soothing, bluesy sound that showcases Duke's enthusiasm for unusual timbres. We talked about the choice of instruments (and mutes) which create this effect.

"Ko-Ko" [1940] – this is our quiz piece! This is Ellington at the height of his fame, and it showcases his "exotic" sound. (At the time this was marketed as "jungle music.") We can hear how the piece slowly builds up from an ominous growl to screaming brass at the end, and yet it still remains swinging and danceable.

"Take the A Train" [1941] – This was a signature tune for the Duke Ellington orchestra, but it wasn't composed by Duke. Instead, it was written by Billy Strayhorn, a young man from Pittsburgh who came to New York to work with Ellington as an assistant composer and arranger.

Benny Goodman (1909-1986)

Benny Goodman was the most successful popularizer of jazz. His concert appearances in 1935 and 1936 became media sensations that made swing music and dancing mainstream entertainment. His most recognizable recording today is probably "Sing Sing Sing (with a Swing)." In 1937 he was also the first white musician to play with a desegregated band, which featured the pianist Teddy Wilson and vibraphonist Lionel Hampton.

Glenn Miller (1904-1944)

Glenn Miller was perhaps the most pop-oriented entertainer of the era, presenting familiar tunes such as "Moonlight Serenade" and "In the Mood."

Count Basie (1904-1984)

During Swing's wave of popularity the Count Basie band from Kansas City emerged as a new alternative for jazz purists, who liked his blues-based compositions and hard-swinging beat.

Bebop – mid 40s to Present

Bebop was a movement to pull jazz away from the world of popular entertainment and make a more challenging kind of “art.” It has several stylistic trademarks:

- Return of small groups, often 3-5 players. It was played in bars like Minton’s Playhouse on 118th St. in NYC.
- Not for dancing. The beat is more aggressive and “abstract.” Drums and bass are often louder in the mix.
- There are generally no more carefully arranged backup horn riffs or fancy composed-out interludes. We go back to the Theme-and-Variations-like form that we saw in the New Orleans period – the musicians just play the tune and then take turns soloing over the structure of the tune.
- This music is really all about the solos. Bebop improvisations feature long, ornate lines with lots of notes. They use “advanced” techniques like unusual scales, new chords and so on.

We have heard music from a few major figures in the bebop movement.

Dizzy Gillespie, trumpet, was an early innovator in bebop improvisation. He teamed up with Charlie Parker in 1943 (a pairing referred to as “Bird and Diz”), and together they became leaders of the new sound. However, after a few years of working together Gillespie went off on his own.

Charlie Parker (aka “Bird”), alto saxophone, is probably the greatest bebop soloist of all time. He could improvise very elaborate lines with lots of notes and he made it all sound effortless.

We also heard **Miles Davis** playing trumpet with Charlie Parker. Davis moved to New York at age 20 and immediately sought out his jazz heroes. For the quiz we will listen to Parker and Davis on “Ornithology,” recorded in 1946. Soon after this Miles would lead his own bebop combos and would be hugely important in future developments in jazz.

Finally, we looked at the somewhat eccentric pianist and composer **Thelonious Monk**, whose tunes have a distinctive “off kilter” sound. Monk is not trying to impress by playing long, complicated lines in his solos – instead he explores punchy and unusual gestures. His compositions are always catchy and fun, and musicians still love to play them. (“Off kilter” means “out of balance” or “crooked.” Students often don’t know what I mean by this, but it is still my favorite way to describe Monk’s musical style. He’s a little strange but very fun.)