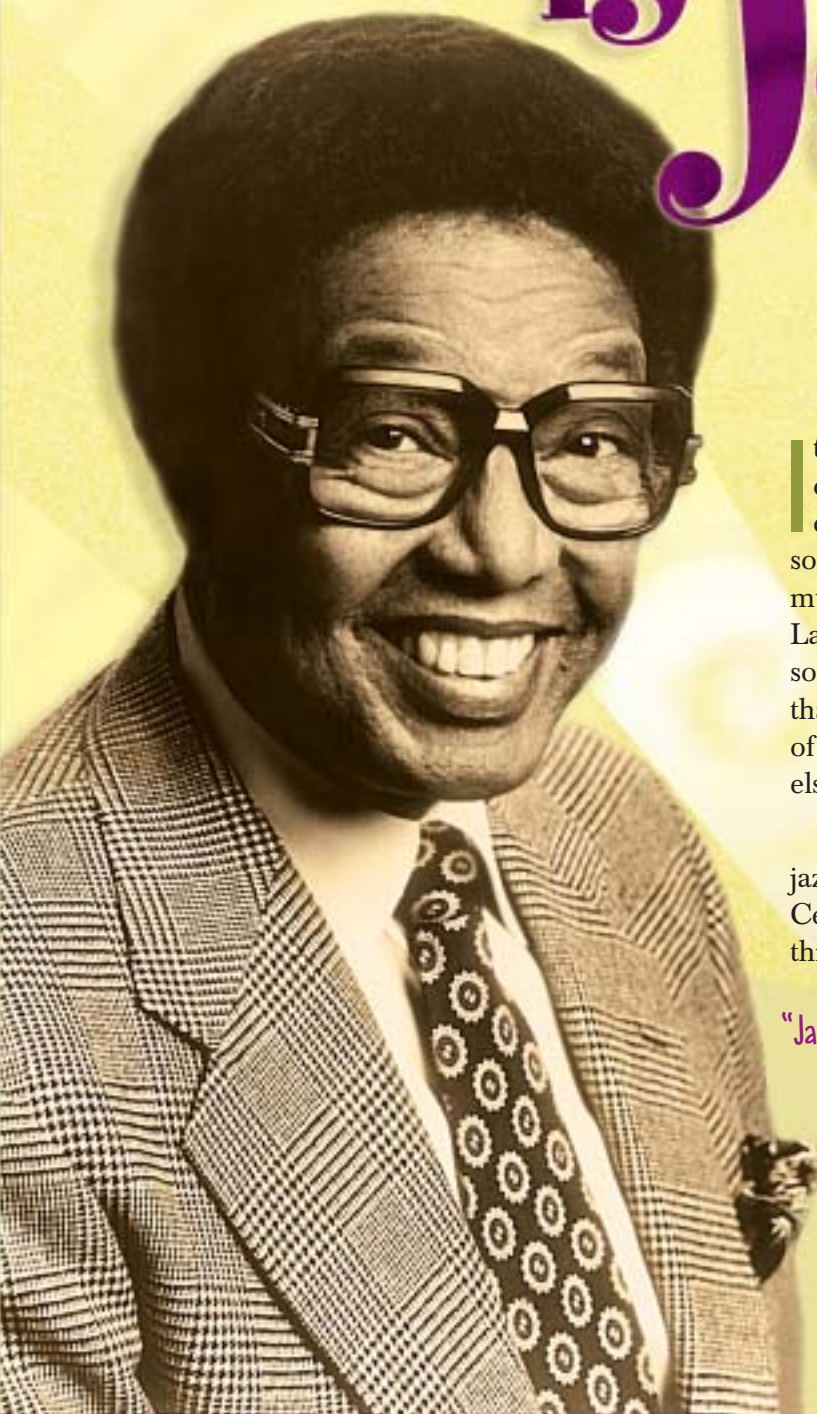


What is Jazz?



Welcome to *Cuesheet*, a performance guide published by the Education Department of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington D.C. This *Cuesheet* is designed to help you enjoy and understand jazz performances you will see.



The saxophone marks items you may want to do or discuss with other students, friends, or family members.

It has been said that there is a style of jazz that sounds like European classical music, a style of jazz that sounds like country and western music, a style of jazz that sounds like Latin music, a style of jazz that sounds like rock music, and styles that sound like various other kinds of music heard in this country and elsewhere in the world.

Dr. Billy Taylor, the renowned jazz artist, educator, and Kennedy Center Artistic Advisor answered this question by stating that:

"Jazz is America's classical music. It is an American way of playing music."—Dr. Billy Taylor

What's in Cuesheet?

What is Jazz? page 2

Jazz and the African-American Tradition, pages 2–3

Jazz Develops, pages 4–5

The Building Blocks of Music, page 6

Instant Composition, page 7

Move to the Music and Resources, page 8

The quotes throughout are from two books by Dr. Taylor: Jazz Piano — A Jazz History and Jazzmobile's Music Activities Packet.

What is Jazz?

Jazz has developed as a musical language from a single expression of the consciousness of black people to a national music which expresses Americana to Americans as well as to people from other countries.

Jazz has been a major influence on the music of the world for more than ninety years.

“Comparing styles is the best way to discover that there is no one way of playing jazz, for there are as many different ways of playing the music as there are musicians playing it.”

You will learn about three important elements in music – **melody**, **harmony**, and **rhythm**. You will also learn about improvisation and syncopation—two important aspects of jazz music. You will learn why every jazz musician is a composer and what makes people move to the music.



Jazz Glossary

harmony—an arrangement of simultaneous sounds.

melody—A series of single tones arranged to produce a pleasing effect on the ear.

rhythm—the movement of music. A part of music with accent, tempo or time.

Jazz and the

Jazz is an art form that originated and was used as a way of expression by African Americans. It emerged from the need of African Americans to express themselves in a musical way. This need for self-expression stemmed directly from the African musical heritage.

The African Musical Tradition

In African societies, music was most important in maintaining and continuing a culture. As a result, Africans brought with them to this country the tradition of having music to accompany and define the activities of their lives. There was music for working, for playing, for festivals, for marriages, births, deaths, and wars. For Africans, music had many purposes.

As Dr. Billy Taylor explains in his book *Jazz Piano – A Jazz History*, because transplanted Africans did not have the same freedom to maintain their cultural identity, their musical traditions had to change.

As Africans endured slavery, they had to reshape work songs, leisure songs, religious music, and other types of music found in their heritage. Africans created American music as

ballads—songs used to tell stories of good and bad men and women, heroes, heroines, justice, injustice, great events, and problems blacks in America were having.

cries, calls, and field hollers—melodic calls used to communicate messages of all kinds—to bring people in from the fields, to call them to work, to attract the attention of a person in the distance, to signal hunting dogs, or to make a person's presence known. Some were happy, some were sad.

African-American Tradition

they adapted to this new land and faced the conditions of slavery.

Most slaves were taken from the western countries of Africa. They were Vai, Twi, Mandingo, Yoruba, or people of dozens of other tribes. They brought with them their memories and habits based on the old ways of life – religious beliefs and practices, crafts, music, dances, and the tradition of telling history by word of mouth – orally.

Music in the Early Days of Slavery

Music played a very important part in the daily lives of Africans. Enslaved Africans began to use music as a relief from both the physical and spiritual burdens they endured in America. It was also used as a tool for communication, since Africans came here from different tribes and backgrounds.

Work songs, cries, calls, field hollers, spirituals, satirical songs and ballads – these forms of music formed the musical family that produced jazz. Black Americans created something of beauty from a very ugly situation – slavery. They created African-American music.



HULTON ARCHIVE

▲ This painting of a plantation slave-wedding illustrates the importance of African traditions, such as music and dance, in the lives of African-American slaves.



Moving Away

Being sold into slavery, Africans were forced to move away from their homeland without any possessions. If you were forced to move from your home without possessions, what would you do to remember the good times you had at home? Slaves brought festival and religious music to America. Make a list of songs and styles of music you would want to take if you moved. Share your list with the class.

“This new music is the trunk of the tree from which a truly American music would grow—jazz, America’s classical music.”

satirical songs—songs used to make fun of people and events.

spirituals—group expressions of many aspects of the slaves’ lives. Most spirituals were used to express religious convictions. There were also spirituals used to give messages, to teach, to scold, to speak of escape, and to express the desire for freedom.

work songs—slaves’ work songs were a revision of the African work song. Work songs were sung to make one’s labors easier to perform. The words (lyrics) spoke about work being done and were also comments of social criticism, ridicule, gossip, and protest.

Jazz Develops



As America's classical music, a melting pot of music from various musical traditions, jazz has provided a unique and continuing view of who Americans are and what we are about. The blues provides an excellent example of how music expresses us to ourselves and to others."

Ragtime was the earliest form of jazz, characterized by syncopation, improvisation, and cross-rhythms. 1896 is considered to be the beginning of ragtime, because that was the date of the first publication of a ragtime piece for the piano; however, most jazz historians agree that piano ragtime existed before it was published. Ragtime became the leisure-time music of slaves on Southern plantations. It also was the music of performers in taverns, places of entertainment, and social events. Ragtime was sung, and was played on banjos, fiddles, harmonicas, drums, trumpets, and whatever other instruments were available. At this time the human voice was the most important musical instrument.

Blues is of equal importance as a parent of jazz. Its roots are as old as the presence of Africans in the United States. The blues evolved from the spirituals and the work songs, and like them began as vocal music.

Performers used "the voice" according to their needs and concepts. The blues developed its style and repertory almost entirely from African musical concepts and materials. It was folk-oriented jazz in the beginning. The blues, as in the African tradition, expressed how an individual related to the culture. The blues were created after the Civil War period. As the music became popular, groups with instrumentalists were formed.

▲ Cornet player Joe "King" Oliver's Dixie Syncopators was one of the great bands of the 1920s. They played for dancers at the Plantation Cafe in Chicago from 1925 to 1927 and recorded for Vocalion and Brunswick.

abstract jazz—in the late 1960s, a period of spontaneous exploration.

beat—rhythm and the tempo or timing in music.

boogie woogie—A kind of blues that is played on the piano with a strong, deep bass added.

funky jazz—a return to a blues- and gospel-oriented feeling which was updated to include melodies and harmonies which were in common use at that time.

hard bop—an aggressive return to bebop concepts with a more direct approach to "hot" phrases and rhythms.

improvisation—a way of expressing yourself with music. When a jazz musician improvises, he/she makes up music as he/she goes along.

jam session—getting together to play jazz — "jamming."

jazz rock—an attempt to fuse the elements of rock with the elements of jazz, often using electronic instruments.

mainstream jazz—since the late 1980s and currently part of the renewed interest in the jazz tradition.



CORBIS

▲ In the 1947 film *New Orleans*, the owner of a Bourbon Street gambling house makes it his mission to call attention to the value of jazz and the black musicians who perform it. This fictional account of the birth of jazz features Billie Holiday and trumpeter Louis Armstrong.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, because of phonograph records and radio shows, the blues became very popular in urban areas.

This music created by African Americans in the South became even more popular when they migrated north to Chicago and Kansas City.

During that period, jazz, which had combined the elements of ragtime and blues, became so popular that the 1920s became known as the Jazz Age.

Swing was the dominant jazz form of the 1930s and 1940s. One of its distinctive features was the accent of four **beats** to a measure. It expanded the rhythmic patterns of ragtime. It was played by big bands and small bands and was used mostly for dancing.

Pre-bebop was an outgrowth of swing music, which was melodically, harmonically, and rhythmically more complex than its predecessors. It led directly to bebop and beyond.

Bebop was the jazz style of the 1940s. It featured long melodic lines and impressionistic harmonic patterns, many of which ended on an accented upbeat.

Cool jazz was an attempt made by jazz musicians of the late 1940s and early '50s to reorder the basic elements of jazz. They used subtle rhythms, impressionistic harmonies, melodies which were not rugged or aggressive, and combinations of musical instruments which were not typical in ensembles. The volume was lowered and the rhythmic aspects were more subtle.

At the end of this period, jazz was rushing toward its next phases – **hard bop, progressive, funky, abstract, modal, jazz rock, third stream**, and **mainstream**.

From the 1970s to the present, there has been a renewed interest in jazz, especially among young people. In contrast to jazz styles which were becoming more complex, interest has been revived in the concepts and devices of the jazz masters of the past.

The music of many of these masters (i.e. Duke Ellington, Thelonious Monk, Charles Mingus) is being redefined by a generation of young musicians.

modal jazz—music based on modes instead of chord progressions.

progressive jazz—an extension of bebop and cool techniques and devices, which incorporated tonal mass and density as sonorities as well as uneven meter arrangements such as 5/4, 7/4, and so forth.

ragtime—rhythm with a syncopated melody and a regularly accented accompaniment.

score—written or printed music.

syncopation—a shifting of accents and stress from what are normally strong beats to weak beats. It often means playing one rhythm against another in such a way that listeners want to move, nod heads, clap hands, or dance. Syncopation is part of jazz.

third stream—an attempt to organize jazz materials using classical and contemporary European musical techniques and devices. The first stream—European classical; the second stream—jazz; the third stream—fusion of the two.

The Building Blocks of Music

The three most important elements in music are:

Melody

Harmony

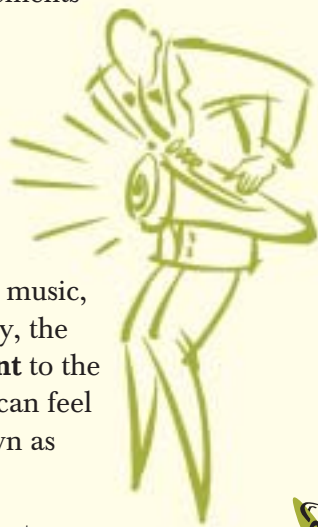
Rhythm

When you listen carefully to music, you can hear the tune or melody, the **notes** that provide **counterpoint** to the tune, called harmony, and you can feel the beat of the music, also known as rhythm.

These three important elements help determine whether the music is a march or a waltz. They also provide a framework that helps musicians sing and play music together.

How do you hear these three important “building blocks” in a jazz performance?

When a jazz ensemble performs, the rhythm is usually played by the drums. The string bass or bass guitar helps the drummer “keep time,” and also plays the low notes that sound good with the melody and harmony.



The piano and the guitar play the harmony or **chord** progressions. These are other notes that sound good with the melody. When these “harmony” notes are played together they are called chords, when they are played separately they are called arpeggios, or broken chords. The piano and the guitar are sometimes used to play the rhythm when there is no bass or drums.

The melody may be played by any instrument. It may also be sung. In large groups the melody is frequently played by instruments like the trumpet, the trombone, the saxophone, the clarinet, the flute, the violin, or the melodica.



Who is Playing What?

Listen carefully to the jazz performance you will see. Can you identify who is playing the melody, the harmony, and the rhythm? Does this ever change?

chord—a combination of three or more tones.

counterpoint—two or more melodies played together.

notes—symbols that represent tones in music.



▲ Dr. Billy Taylor at the piano with trumpeter Roy Hargrove

Instant Composition

Improvisation is an important part of a jazz performance. Every jazz musician is a composer. Improvisation is a way of expressing yourself through music.

When jazz musicians improvise, they make up music as they go along. Because every jazz musician is a composer, improvisation is instant composition. A good improvisation has a beginning, a middle, and an ending. It is like telling someone something. You must put your thoughts into phrases that are easily understood. In musical composition you must do the same – the only difference is that you are using musical sounds instead of words.

"There is no music in front of us and there is no conductor, yet the music we are playing communicates our ideas and feelings to the audience. There is a non-verbal communication between us which enables us to share our feelings with the audience and then there is interaction between the audience and us."

In a jazz group, improvisation is like a conversation; the musician who is improvising listens to the other members of the group and says something to them, using musical phrases. Sometimes it is like call and response, with the group asking a question musically and the improvising musician answering them.

Jazz does not exist in a vacuum. It reflects life as it is being lived. In the jazz tradition, musicians are free to express their ideas and feelings in a way that is not possible in other styles of music.



▲ A string bass player improvises a solo.

JEFFREY KLIMAN, PHOTOGRAPHY YOU CAN HEAR



Communicating Feelings

As you see and hear the jazz performance, try to listen to what each player is doing. Is the mood intense and aggressive or tender and loving? Are the musicians trying to say something funny or sad? What does the musician want to say? To whom?



Building Thoughts

When several musicians improvise music together, they build on the musical thoughts and ideas of those in the group. In a group of four, improvise a story with the outline below. Each member of the group will take one cue and make up (improvise) the details for the story (use several sentences). Like musicians do, build upon what was said before it was your turn to improvise.

1. When I looked out the window last night I saw a really big...
2. As I tried to sleep, I couldn't stop thinking about...
3. After I did get to sleep...
4. As I woke up this morning I was surprised to see...



◀ Jazz is such an important part of American culture that the U.S. State Department sends jazz musicians to other countries as ambassadors. This photo shows the excitement of the Cotonou Benin (West Africa) citizens before the Jazz Ambassadors concert.

JEFFREY KLIMAN, PHOTOGRAPHY YOU CAN HEAR



◀ A young, aspiring jazz artist participates and performs in a residency program at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. The Betty Carter Jazz Ahead program mentors young jazz musicians who wish to become professional musicians.

Move to the Music

Syncopation is a type of rhythm. It is the shifting of accents and stress from what are normally strong beats to weak beats.

In European classical music, the accented beats are usually beats 1 and 3, as in 1-2-3-4, 1-2-3-4.

In jazz, beats 2 and 4 are most often accented, as in 1-2-3-4, 1-2-3-4.

Syncopation often involves playing one rhythm against another in such a way that listeners want to move, nod heads, clap or tap hands, or dance.



syn-co-PA-tion

Try this syncopation activity
“Happy Birthday” is usually accented as follows:

HAP-py BIRTH-day

If different, unexpected syllables are stressed, it might be pronounced:

hap-PY birth-DAY.

1. With a partner, first practice repeatedly chanting “happy birthday” with the usual, expected accents, then practice with the unexpected, syncopated accents.
2. As you chant, clap your hands and move your bodies to the beat.
3. Repeat this activity with other phrases or with the names of your classmates. For example, the name “Melissa” is usually pronounced “mel-LIS-sa,” but a syncopated pronunciation could be “mel-lis-SA.”

◀ *Drummers are integral in establishing syncopated rhythms. Drummer Cindy Blackman performed as part of the Kennedy Center’s annual Mary Lou Williams Women in Jazz Festival, a three-day event highlighting the work of female jazz musicians.*

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Resources

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Roberts, John Storm. *Black Music of Two Worlds*, 2nd edition. New York: Wadsworth Publishing, 1998.

Taylor, Billy. *Jazz Piano—A Jazz History*. Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Co. Publishers, 1983.

You may want to go online:

Duke Ellington: Celebrating 100 Years of the Man and His Music <http://dellington.org/>

What is Jazz? Lectures by Dr. Taylor <http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/whatisjazz/>

What is Jazz? timeline <http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/timeline/>



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