



Jazz: A Metaphor for America Background Reading

The following outline provides students with essential understandings on the nature of jazz music.

What is Jazz?

A. *Jazz is America's music*

1. Jazz was born in the United States.
 - a. Jazz was born out of the Black experience in America, basically combining African and European musical traditions.
 - b. Jazz evolved from slave work songs, spirituals (religious Black American folk songs), blues, brass band music, and ragtime (a rhythmically sophisticated piano style).
 - c. Jazz is only a century old. It first appeared in the city of New Orleans in the early 1900s.
 - d. African Americans devised the major elements of jazz in its formative years and were the primary pioneers of stylistic changes in later decades. Today, jazz is performed and listened to by people of all cultures all over the world.
2. Jazz is really the best music to represent America because:
 - a. It is partly planned and partly spontaneous; that is, as the musicians perform a pre-determined tune, they have the opportunity to create their own interpretations within that tune in response to the other musicians' performances and whatever else may occur "in the moment" -- this is called improvisation and is the defining element of jazz.
 - b. In everything from regular conversation, to playing

sports (e.g., basketball), to everyday life, Americans are constantly improvising, i.e, deciding what to do and doing it on the spur of the moment.

c. Improvisation is the key element of jazz.

3. There is no better example of democracy than a jazz ensemble -- individual freedom but with responsibility to the group; in other words, individual musicians have the freedom to express themselves on their instrument as long as they maintain their responsibility to the other musicians by adhering to the overall framework and structure of the tune.

B. What is improvisation?

1. Improvisation is inventing something on the spur of the moment in response to a certain situation; in jazz, it is when musicians perform a different interpretation each time they play the same tune, i.e., a tune is never played the exact same way twice, whether played by the same musicians or an entirely different group; the improvisation becomes its own musical dialogue between band members without any preconceived notion of what the final outcome will be.

2. A good example of improvisation in everyday life is regular conversation, e.g., every time you talk to your friends, you are actually improvising (exactly what you are going to say is not planned ahead of time, it depends on what your friend says, then what you say, then what your friend says, and so on).

3. Jazz musicians do the same with their instruments, but rather than using words to communicate, they use music; it's kind of like musical conversation.

C. Jazz is like a language

1. Language is what we use to communicate thoughts and ideas.

2. Languages such as English or Spanish are used to communicate just about everything in life; however, they cannot express emotion (happiness, sadness, anger, and everything in

between) in the same way as music; as a singular phenomenon, music communicates emotion to every human being on the planet, regardless of language, culture, or nationality.

- a. that's why music is found in every culture
- b. that's why music is a multi-billion dollar industry
- c. that's why many Americans would agree that they are emotionally affected far more by music than even the most beautifully expressed words

3. With jazz, because of its improvisational aspect, the musicians are communicating the “emotion of the moment,” that is, the emotion they are feeling WHILE they are performing (remember, when improvising they are deciding what notes to play as they respond to the music of the moment played by the other musicians).

a. In this way, jazz is different from classical music which is written down (composed) ahead of time and played the way the composer wrote it.

b. In jazz, most of the music heard during a solo is “spontaneously composed” by the musicians themselves and played the way the musicians feel at that given moment.

c. The spontaneity heard (or “felt”) in jazz requires the listener to be alert at all times to the ever-changing aspects of a given interpretation of a tune.

d. A helpful analogy: classical music is to jazz as reading a good book aloud is to having a good conversation; while a printed book never changes, a conversation changes according to the situation or moment and depending on with whom you are having the conversation.

e. The same jazz tune (song) is never performed the same way twice; while it might start and end the same, the middle part is played differently every time.

D. Way versus What

In jazz, it's more about the way a song is played, rather than what song is played.

1. Jazz musicians can create new elements and moods to any song; for instance, an up-tempo (fast) song can be played as a ballad (slow song) and vice versa.

2. Jazz musicians have their own, unique way of playing their instruments.

a. Rather than just the basic sound of the instrument itself, jazz musicians strive to develop their own, unique sound (tone) on their instruments -- a sound that expresses them personally (just like singers do with their voices); some like to say that a jazz musician's sound on his/her instrument is simply an extension of his/her voice; good jazz musicians have the ability to produce a wide variety of sounds on their instruments, depicting a wide variety of emotions and feelings (again, just like singers do with their voices).

b. A good comparison: just like all human voices sound different from each other (but you can still tell it's a human voice), all jazz saxophonists sound different from each other (but you can still tell it's a saxophone).

c. In order to be able to hear the difference, you've got to listen a lot; the more you listen to a particular jazz musician, the more you're able to recognize that player by his/her sound alone; again, it's just like human voices -- think about how easy it is to recognize the voices of your family members and closest friends compared to people you don't hear that much; also notice how no two singers sound exactly alike yet they're both using the same "instrument" (vocal cords).

d. Jazz fans often prefer one jazz artist over another because of his/her own unique sound, that is, his/her particular tone on the instrument.

E. Jazz is hard to play but good players make it look easy

1. Learning to play an instrument is challenging enough, so you can imagine how difficult it is to learn how to play an instrument

AND learn how to improvise.

2. But, like anything else, the earlier you start learning how to improvise and the longer you do it, the easier it gets and the better you become (just like reading, sports, etc.); for professional jazz musicians, playing their instruments is as natural as skating is to a professional hockey player -- hockey players aren't thinking about skating while they're playing, they're thinking about and simply reacting to what's going on around them (they're improvising); jazz musicians aren't thinking about their instruments while they're playing, they're thinking about and simply reacting to what's going on around them (they're improvising).

3. Anyone who can play a musical instrument can learn how to improvise (just like anyone who can talk can learn to converse, anyone who can dribble and shoot a basketball can learn how to play the game of basketball, etc.).

4. Jazz is a complex form of music, so it often doesn't have "instant appeal" like other more familiar styles of music, such as pop, rock, rap, and hip-hop; a jazz tune sometimes takes many listenings to begin to enjoy it.

a. But that's OK, the more you put into something generally, the more you get out of it.

b. The more you put into listening and understanding what jazz is all about, the more enjoyment you're going to get.

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