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Jazz: An American Creation

**History of Jazz**

Jazz is a type of music that emerged at the start of the 20th century and was established as a major genre of music during the 1930s and 1940s. It is considered an American creation, and has its origin in African American culture of New Orleans. Jazz is characterized by certain innovations in music such as improvisation, syncopation, and a forceful rhythm that occurs periodically. Widely used musical instruments are brass, woodwind, piano, saxophone, and trumpet. Other instruments used are guitar and violin.

Jazz has been recognized as a great form of musical expression. It has originated through an amalgamation of various musical styles and traditions including African-American traditions, West African expressions, and European horns or military band. All these elements combined and synthesized this new form of expressive music that has a performance orientation. It all happened in New Orleans where there were no restrictions in carrying and beating drums. People cherished their lives at the time when the whole country was concerned with military issues. Jazz bloomed in that community where people became sensitive to the music offered by nature, started experimenting with musical compositions, and expressed their joyfulness to the fullest extent through music. In New Orleans, traits of many cultures and musical traditions were mixed to create Jazz music.

Bolden is considered generally to be the founding father of Jazz music. He started the first band of Jazz music. Another brand emerged in 1917 led by Nick LaRocca. His band named Dixieland released first Jazz record officially titled ‘livery stable blues’. During the 1930s, Jazz became immensely popular. ‘Swing’ was the dominating style of Jazz music that was characterized by big bands, dance orientation, and huge arrangements. Another popular jazz style was Kansas City Jazz, which was highlighted for inclusion of hard-swinging. Gypsy Jazz is also an example. In the 1940s, Bebop was the most popular jazz style (Peretti). It was primarily based on the musician’s work rather than being dance-oriented. Cool Jazz was another innovation in Jazz music that appeared late in this decade. It was distinguished as calm, smooth, and melodious music. In later decades, ‘free jazz’, ‘hard bop’, ‘jazz-rock fusion’, and ‘smooth jazz’ appeared and gave various dimensions to this genre of music. In the modern age, no particular style dominate the genre. Instead, many styles are popular and people enjoy any style if rendered skillfully.

**Styles of Jazz**

African American

African Americans were slaves until 1865, and they had inherited their specific musical traditions particular to their community. They made use of drums for creating music. They used to sing folk songs for their amusement. After they got freedom, they found opportunities to encounter the Western musical style.

Rag Time

Ragtime emerged after the slavery of African Americans was abolished. In the late nineteenth century, black Americans found jobs at clubs and other leisure places to entertain people. Many black piano players entertained the public at bars, brothels, and other places of public gatherings. As a result of their active involvement in local music, the ragtime appeared as a music genre of that time. The familiar pieces of works of that era include 'ragtime medley' by Vess Ossman, ‘Mississippi rag’ by William Krell, ‘Harlem rag’ by Tom Turpin, and the ‘original rags’ by Scott Joplin.

Blues

Blues is an African-American type of Jazz, which originated in the South of the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. This music was the foundation of Jazz. Blues emerged from different types of songs or ballads that people used to sing during their spiritual activities, while at work, and in their social functions. Blues was remarkable in expressing the pain of love and betrayal, acts of injustice, and incidents of conquest over adversity. Blues is also widely considered to be the source of country music, rhythm, and rock 'n' roll.

New Orleans

New Orleans was a land of jubilant people who used to enjoy in all circumstances of life. Their streets were vibrant with songs and dances performed by various local artists and common people accompanied them. It was in New Orleans where the "Jazz" music was born in true essence. Several types of music blended to form one whole genre, Jazz. The building blocks of Jazz were ragtime, European military band, church music, African musical traditions like drumming, blues, folk music, opera, and many others. Papa Jack Laine was famous as the father of white jazz because he established his band by mixing black as well as white performers. The New Orleans style was characterized by syncopation, polyphony, and a beat flat-four. Buddy Bolden laid the basis for syncopation by deviating from the traditional beat.

Dixie Land

Dixieland is the jazz style that originated in the early twentieth century. This style was inspired by the music of New Orleans. The ‘original Dixieland jazz band’ recorded some pieces of music in 1917, which made this style popular.

Chicago-Style Jazz (1920s, 1930s)

When music bands of the South moved North of America after the emergence of Dixieland jazz, Chicago-style jazz was born. The main influence in bringing forth this style was Louis Armstrong whose recordings were released from 1925-28. His compositions were improvisation of traditional compositions. The Chicago-style emphasized more on the solo chorus. This style was distinguished from traditional jazz by a change in the use of saxophone, guitar, tempo, and bass.

Swing

Swing was the dominating Jazz style of the 1930s. It provides the fundamental rhythm of Jazz music. The ‘swing’ music symbolized connecting and synchronizing with people. It fit particularly well in the context of the economic recession of that era. It encouraged people to support and love each other. It was associated with a particular type of dancing that has now gained significant prominence. In that era, big bands used to play swing music (Riggs). The leaders of big bands of that era include Paul Whiteman, Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman, and many others. A notable thing of the swing era was that some soloists also got enormously famous and influential. For instance, Coleman Hawkins garnered fame for his technical mastery, use of tenor saxophone as the solo instrument, and improvising the musical compositions. Ella Fitzgerald established her career as a distinguished vocalist for rendering a new style of singing known a scat singing.

Bebop

Bebop gave new dimensions to jazz music. Originated in the early 1940s, it was characterized by complicated melodies, fast tempos, and intricate harmonies. It aimed at intelligent jazz listeners. It was not composed of dancing orientation. People were supposed to sit and listen carefully to this music. This music style involved many new devices that were not used before. It shifted toward the chord-based improvisation. Chromaticism along with dissonance were introduced in their new forms.

Cool Act

Cool act or cool jazz is a new style of jazz music. It entails technical sophistication of composition. It exhibits an expressive restraint that makes the rendering cool.

Free Form Jazz

This type of jazz emerged as the musicians were fed up with the traditional jazz music and wanted to experiment something new. It was characterized by free improvisation of small ensembles, and breaking down the conventions of jazz.

Jazz Fusion

Developed in the 1960s, this form of Jazz music employs several practices of rock music, and it makes use of electronic instruments along with the traditional ones.

Funky

Funky jazz or Jazz-funk was introduced in the 1970s. It had influences from traditional African music. Other inspirations were Afro-Cuban style and Jamaican music. This style emphasized little on improvisation. Instead, the focus shifted to the entire composition. The funky style is known by strong groove and electronic synthesizers.

Smooth Jazz

Smooth jazz is a type of jazz fusion that is characterized by downtempo and has a lead instrument for playing the melody. It has a soothing effect on people listening to it.

Present Day

Today, jazz is characterized by a fast tempo, improvisation, and instrumental mastery. It excludes free form jazz and fusion jazz. Modern jazz is based on Bebop, swing, blues, etc. It represents pluralism. This implies that no particular style would be dominant. Many styles and genres have become popular.

**Famous Jazz Musicians**

Louis Armstrong (1900-1971)

He was the most prominent and influential musician of the Dixieland period. He was a master of improvisation in jazz solo. He changed the composition structure by allowing musicians to play during breaks. Later, the musicians started playing solos during breaks. His sound was clear. He had a remarkable sense of swing music. His improvisations were melodic. His harmony was perfect.

Duke Ellington (1899-1974)

He is universally acclaimed for his contribution to jazz music. His greatest achievement is the compositions he made for the big swing band (*Duke Ellington Biography*). He had a clear vision regarding every member of his band. He mixed all tones arising from the band members’ instruments with complete mastery to produce an altogether new effect. He continued to lead and compose for his jazz band all through his life.

Charles Parker (1920-1955)

He was one of the leading musicians of the Bebop trend. He was a soloist and he played saxophone exquisitely. He gave new harmonic ideas that included new dimensions on chords treatment in composition. He emphasized chords to be passed rapidly, introduced new variants of altered chords, and detailed about chord substitutions.

Dizzy Gillespie

He was a master of playing the trumpet. He was a bandleader and a prolific composer. In collaboration with some other musicians, he contributed much to jazz and bebop. He contributed to modern jazz by incorporating Latin American rhythms to it, collaborating with other artists like Chano Pozo and Machito.

**A sample Jazz Composition**

“Sophisticated lady” was a jazz music composition rendered by Duke Ellington and his band, which was released in 1933. It featured solos by Ellington, Toby Hardwick, Lawrence Brown, and Barney Bigard. Ellington played the piano. Hardwick played alto saxophone. Bigard was engaged with the clarinet. Brown got busy with his trombone. The members of the orchestra had their respective contribution to the composition of the song. The melody was also a collaborative effort of the band members. The song title is considered to be a metaphor for an entrance to paradise or hell. The song represents the popular swing style of jazz of that particular era. The tempo has been set high for the musical piece. It is characterized by the most energetic rendering of a song by Ellington. The writing for this piece abounds in dissonant harmonies in the section known as horn. It ends at a solo drum play in the whirlwind style. The song begins as an instrumental. It slowly gets filled with lyrics. This was the usual style of Duke Ellington’s compositions. The song turned out to be Duke’s one of the most successful releases. The song was selected to include in Paris Blue, The Natural, Ulee’s Gold, and other films.

**Works Cited**

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