



The Arts: Jazz/American Music

By D. H. Coop

Jazz is performance art and not composed art. It is built on improvisation. The foundation of jazz is found in the music of Europe, Africa, India and Latin America. The sound includes many forms from the blues, ragtime, Dixieland, Charleston, swing, boogie-woogie, crazy bop, cool bop and bossa nova. Music finds its form in folk music and builds until it is accepted as cultural music and not lower class. Jazz shakes up music by remodeling the beat through syncopation of weak beats on the second and fourth notes instead of the traditional first and fifth.

Slaves came to the new world with their music, which had a call-and-response style and a quarter note that cannot be reproduced on the piano. Jazz used two notes together on the piano in what is called syncopation to make the sound. The three-chord hymn can be found in jazz along with standard poetic forms. The actual blues songs have a poetic form, such as the iambic pentameter in which the first line is repeated. Songs of Bessie Smith are an example.

In the early 19th century, Louis Moreau Gottschalk used the sound of the slaves he heard in New Orleans parks to create a new sound, which was popular in Latin America before the Civil War. After the Civil War, his music gained popularity in the United States, and a case could be made that he was America's first classical composer. Then in the 1890s, Scott Joplin introduced America to ragtime with syncopation of rhythm, in which one can hear the echoes of Gottschalk.

Improvisation Leads to Creation

Those that see jazz today as a lower form of music say it is because of its improvisation during a piece. Yet classical composers also improvised. Mozart had many variations on the simple scales that every student begins to learn when they begin to practice music—one can see this ability of improvising in the film *Amadeus*. Jazz takes this same simple scale of notes and modifies them with “blue notes”—two notes played together—that give that African quarter-note sound on the piano. Other instruments are used to provide a tremor to the sound to give it a tone of color. Plus, jazz holds a little humor in the notes.

As jazz moved from Dixieland to swing music, the artists began to do more and more composition and arrangement in pieces. People had to listen to the music more, and the ability to dance to the music became harder without a lot of practice. Therefore, jazz moved into the area of chamber music. Americans lost interest for a while, and the jazz scene moved from America to Paris until its return in the 1980s.

Today, some hold the classical position that other forms of jazz are not pure jazz. They forget that the history of jazz is filled with various types of music styles.

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