

Bebop: The Beginning of the Modern Period. 1940 - 1945

After the big band era of the late 1930s, and especially after America entered World War II at the end of 1941, the feasibility of traveling big bands who could gather large crowds to dance was no longer feasible. Millions of men were off to war, including musicians. However, beginning in the mid-1930s, another musical setting had emerged which became fertile for musicians to evolve this new style of the young music. It was a result of the great migration of musicians to major cities in the North especially Kansas City, Chicago, and New York. This new format for jazz players was a breeding ground for new ideas; it could be found late at night into the morning hours in a hundred different locations where audiences were often the musicians themselves.

Though common today, the “jam session” was a new phenomenon created by many players who had come out of the band era in which they were allowed brief improvised solos here and there. But this was not enough for a music motivated by the need for self-expression. At the jam session, soloists became long-distance runners, not sprinters. The jam session environment, along with the demise of traveling big bands, led to a small-*combo* (combination of instruments) format in which the music became a brief statement of a theme (the song) followed by a series of improvised solos by each of the players, much as it remains today. This was a jazz “chamber music” in which soloing distinguished the players from one another, created the star performers. It was a music where the technical proficiency (known in the jargon as “chops”) of the players along with the originality of their ideas and instrumental tone defined them. Between 1936 and 1940, because of the swing era soloists Lester Young and Coleman Hawkins (among other saxophonists) the trumpet and clarinet were gradually eclipsed by the saxophone, which became the iconic jazz instrument by the 1950s. The sax -- played through a reed like a clarinet, it was invented by Belgian instrument maker Adolphe Saxe in 1848 -- sounded like a woodwind but with its brass body, it could compete with the trumpet in volume and expressiveness.

But the modern period was not simply a new format for music. There were new ideas that saturated all of the major elements of music: rhythm, harmony, and melody. Rhythmic displacement became more extreme and was integral to every part of the music including the composition itself. The standards 32-measure popular song and the 12-measure blues remained as commonplace structures but they were almost unrecognizable because of the new harmonic and melodic conception they housed. The leaders of this revolutionary period were Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, Tad Dameron, Bud Powell, and of course more players than can be mentioned in this short appreciation.

Another unique development in this period was a more insular, aloof, and even hostile attitude among many of its players. For decades previously, musicians had traveled in bands to play and draw profitable crowds at hotels and clubs where they themselves could not walk in the front door, rent a room, or purchase a meal. Black musicians knew they were being exploited not only as citizens but as musicians by their white-owned record companies, agents, and club

owners. Positioning themselves as entertainers felt uncomfortably similar to the racist profile of minstrelsy. A strategic and creative device, known as a “contrafact,” was one way the grievance of musical exploitation was expressed and addressed.

One million African-American men served in military during World War II, But nearly all of them were in segregated units. (The military was not officially desegregated until 1948, under the Truman administration). The fact that Black soldiers risked their lives to fight for a country which *de jure* and *de facto* discriminated against them was not lost on jazz musicians. The beboppers (with some exceptions, like Dizzy Gillespie) rejected the role of “entertainer” and took on the attire (in Dizzy’s case, his signature *beret*) of the artiste who did not care what the public thought. During the 1940s, jazz developed a reputation for being esoteric, exclusive, and even angry. In time, the overt social alienation evolved and modulated, but it has not entirely disappeared.

The musical innovations of bebop, however, remain an essential and active element of jazz. The way time is marked on the ride cymbal and high hat instead of the bass drum bass, which was considerably lighter than the bass-drum thumps of earlier jazz, is now standard. The “tritone” (flatted-fifth of the scale) dissonance of the harmonies; the “substitution” or “passing” chords, the emphasis on technical proficiency (the instrumental virtuoso), and the sensuous, circuitous melodic vocabulary of bebop changed the sound of jazz permanently. All these are well represented in the music of today’s jazz musicians.