

Characteristics of Jazz -- Exploring Jazz (2017)

Jazz is blessed with such a great diversity of styles that it can be difficult to understand how they all fall into a single category of music. After all, what does a swinging Count Basie big band performance have in common with the impressionistic explorations of a Keith Jarrett piano solo? How do these dissimilar musical entities both qualify as part of a single genre of music? The answer is that jazz music involves a set of characteristics that unite all the various styles into a single genre; however, no single characteristic is necessary or sufficient. Jazz is always some combination of this set of “ingredients.” For example, improvisation is a well-known feature of jazz, yet the Duke Ellington orchestra has recorded music that is unmistakably jazz but involves no improvisation. Similarly, the degree of blues tonality in jazz varies from almost none at all to the music of Horace Silver, Charlie Parker and Thelonious Monk which (in transformed fashion) adheres in its form to the African American folk genre known as “the blues.”

Below are seven fundamental features that are present to varying degrees and in various combinations in virtually every jazz performance. No single characteristic is required, or essential, but some of them will always be there.

1. Vocalized or a speech-like use of instruments enables musicians to create a personalized voice.
2. Unique rhythmic feeling: known as “syncopation,” “swing,” or “polyrhythm” or “rhythmic displacement,” the rhythm usually creates a “forward” momentum.
3. Improvisation is the major method for achieving personal expression. Creativity and individuality of the performer is emphasized above the intentions of the composer.
4. Blues tonality informs the sound of jazz. Jazz makes use of blues tonality and often the formal structure of (folk) blues.
5. Conflict, ambiguity, tension, and circumlocution are ubiquitous in jazz across the basic elements of the music: harmony, rhythm, and melody.
6. Call and response (antiphonal) dialogue is common and has a transformative effect.
7. Spontaneous Communication among players is allowed to affect the musical outcome, especially in improvisational formats.