

Exploring Jazz: Guided Listening to Its Greatest Musicians — Fall, 2019

The goal of Exploring Jazz is to enable you to listen to jazz with increased awareness and understanding, making it a deeper, more enjoyable experience. Although the course outline below presents jazz somewhat chronologically, the music we listen to in each class is not rigidly confined to specific decades. As you will quickly realize, jazz is a particular musical language and the vocabulary and idioms of the past are still “spoken” today along with new dialects. A lot of the power of the music to move you and excite you comes from the continuity that its musicians draw upon from a very deep well. While Exploring Jazz will make you acutely aware of how the music evolved, and how the American and African American experience informs it, the emphasis is on active listening, hearing more of what the music is and what we are responding to in it.

Oct. 21, 2019: “Seven Steps to Heaven”

Jazz embraces a great variety of music, but there are characteristics that are common to its diverse styles, linking all of them under the rubric of jazz. “Seven Steps to Heaven,” the title of a well-known jazz composition by Miles Davis, is a phrase I am appropriating to bring attention to seven “markers” of jazz. Through focused, active listening, Class One introduces these “markers” or characteristics, some of which must be present in every musical performance that can accurately be called jazz. We will contrast jazz to popular and classical music and reveal some of jazz’s African roots. Attending the first class is a requirement; being able to hear these characteristics in the music is essential to virtually all of our discussions later on. There will be a lot of active listening. Over the years, I have developed some effective pedagogical tricks that will help everyone “get it.”

Oct. 28, 2019 : New Orleans, the Jazz Solo, and Those Little Black Dots

The idea that New Orleans is the birthplace of jazz may sound like a myth cooked up by the city’s Chamber of Commerce, but it is for the most part true. The musical forms that it evolved from -- African elements, the European sonatas and dances, American ragtime and blues, marching bands -- had origins elsewhere. We will talk about why the synthesis of these elements into jazz happened -- and could only have happened -- in the multicultural, interracial environment of New Orleans. Class Two focuses on two musical innovations: first, the birth of the “jazz solo,” a totally new phenomenon found in no other musical genre. It was the creation of one gifted “genius,” Louis Armstrong. The invention of the jazz solo is the reason he is revered by every jazz musician. We will listen closely to and discuss the best of these solos. Secondly, there was the startling realization in the 1920s that jazz could be “notated” (written down) and arranged, which first occurred in the hands of an outrageously conceited Creole musician, Ferdinand LaMenthe, Jr., better known as “Jelly Roll” Morton. He insisted that the players in his band be able to stick to “those little black dots” on the manuscript page.

Nov. 4, 2019: : The Soundtrack of a People

Duke Ellington, born in Washington D.C., was a talented artist and while in high school was offered a painting and fine arts scholarship at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. Although he turned down a career in painting, his composing and arranging expanded the palette of American music with sensuous harmonic colors and melodies. Perhaps the most important color in his broad spectrum was black. He had great seriousness of purpose in his music and claimed that he was writing “ the soundtrack of a people.” Class Three also includes understanding the appeal of other big bands, like Count Basie’s and even Glenn Miller’s, but the focus is on Ellington.. Ellington was an icon, composer of two thousand pieces, a Pulitzer Prize and Medal of Freedom recipient. Listening to his own orchestra playing his most emotional arrangements is an inspiring experience. This class also introduces soloists who were developed by the big bands and then created their own legacies, for examples, Billie Holiday and saxophonists Lester Young, Coleman Hawkins, and Stan Getz.

Nov. 11, 2019: Bebop Lives

Despite the artistry of the music, jazz was looked at by the public as entertainment. The “modern” players, like Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk and the other beboppers set out to change that. Bebop introduced radical changes in rhythm, melody and harmony... all the essential elements of music. Jazz left the dance halls and became an “art” music played by small combos and virtuoso soloists – an improvised “chamber music” that swings. This class examines the music of Parker, Gillespie, Monk, Bud Powell and other modernists. We will focus on hearing how the modern period produced a radically different, complex, and adventurous music. It did so by reconstructing the blues and the Great American Songbook with new harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic conventions.

Nov. 18, 2019: “Hard Bop and Modal Jazz,” Born in the 1950s Is Alive and Well

After the bebop innovations of the 1940s, there were two significant trends in jazz: one emphasized a “funky,” hard-driving type of improvisation that made use of the blues and the popular song form. We will focus on the music of Miles Davis, early John Coltrane, Horace Silver, Clifford Brown, and Art Blakey. The second trend is often called “modal” jazz because it abandons the conventional blues and popular song harmony (or “chord changes”) in favor of scales or modes. The album “Kind of Blue” (some call it the most influential jazz album ever) makes use of modes. Most of the jazz played today on the radio and in jazz clubs is an extension of these two jazz styles.

Nov. 25, 2019: Sensuous Individualism

Through the use of “modes,” Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Bill Evans, George Russell and others challenged improvisers to become more lyrical and less confined by the harmonic structure of their music. At the same time, composers like bassist Charles Mingus explored the elasticity of the jazz composition combined with spontaneous group improvisations. Mingus’s bands created extreme musical experiences that express anger, sensitivity, and a sensuous aesthetic. The final class will present the Mingus legacy and many of today’s musicians who are playing from the heart of the jazz tradition.

NOTE: Although the course description emphasizes some well-known names, the jazz musicians you will hear also include those influenced by the innovators; the playlist for this course is extensive but not entirely determined. Sometimes, questions and comments in the class will influence the examples used. No course of only six sessions can emphasize both depth of listening and a broad “sampling” of dozens of musicians. In Exploring Jazz, our goal favors depth of listening; but it also encourage “informed exploring” on your own. Finally, this music exists in relation to America’s social and cultural history, which helped to shape it. Historically relevant conditions and influences will be emphasized throughout this course, so we can appreciate the evolution of jazz in its distinctively African American context.