Jazz: An Introduction to America’s Art Form

By John R. Murnane

See companion site for music and videos, click on the link below:
https://murnanejazz.wordpress.com/
Congo Square in Louis Armstrong Park, located at the corner of Rampart and Basin Streets in New Orleans, is highly symbolic.

The City of New Orleans Parks and Parkways website explains:

In a city famous for its musical traditions, perhaps no other single location claims as much musical and cultural history and importance as Louis Armstrong Park. Located at 701 N. Rampart Street on the edge of the French Quarter, the park is dedicated to one of the City’s most celebrated native sons and to the tradition of jazz in the City. The park is located in the Tremé neighborhood, birthplace of many of New Orleans' most famous jazz musicians.

Within the park confines is historic Congo Square. Formerly known as Place de Negres, it took its name from the tradition of slaves who gathered there on Sundays, their day off, to sing, beat drums, sell homemade goods, and celebrate.
“Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears.” --Frederick Douglass

The birth of jazz was intimately connected to the tragedy of American slavery and the struggle of blacks to maintain a sense of hope and identity.

According to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, edited by professors David Eltis and David Richardson, 12.5 million Africans were shipped to the New World and roughly 10 million survived the dreaded Middle Passage. Nearly half a million went on to the United States. The peculiar institution was held together by force and terror.

The diary of Louisiana planter named Bennet Barrows gives a glimpse into the nightmare of slavery:

1836
Dec. 26. House Jerry & Israel chained during Christmas bad conduct - for a year and better - Israel bad conduct during cotton-picking season

1837
Sept. 4. . . . had a general whipping frolic

Oct. 2. More whipping to do this Fall than altogether in three years owing to my D[amned] mean Overseer
Dec. 31. ran two of Uncle Bat’s Negroes off last night-for making a disturbance - no pass - broke my sword cane over one of their skulls
Jan. 23. my House Servants Jane Lavenia & E. Jim broke into my store room - and helped themselves very liberally to every thing - I whipped [them] ... worse than I ever whipped any one before

Sept. 28. Dennis and Tom "Beauf" ran off on Wednesday - . . . if I can see either of them and have a gun at the time will let them have the contents of it . . .

For more information, see Thayer Watkins, San Jose’ State University site called The Diary of Bennet H. Barrow:
http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/watkins/barrow.htm

In addition to beatings, slaves lived in sub-standard housing—reeking in summer, cold during the winter. They were susceptible to many diseases and could be sold at any time—husbands, wives and their children were often separated, sold to other plantations, never to see one another again. Twelve to fourteen hour-days picking cotton was the norm.

How could anyone survive this and maintain a sense of identity and hope?

Music helped:

• Communal music making was an African tradition—slaves carried it with them to the New World
• Negro Spirituals gave a sense of a better life in the hereafter
• Work songs made the time pass during long hours in the fields

These three traditions carried over and are still used by jazz musicians today!

Listen to some samples of this type of music at:
https://murnanejazz.wordpress.com/1-slavery-and-jazz/
New Orleans the Birth Place of Jazz

Brennan's in New Orleans is known worldwide for fine cuisine. Jambalaya is one the restaurant’s specialties.

Brennan’s Creole Jambalaya

from Ralph Brennan’s New Orleans Seafood Cookbook

For 6 servings

Ingredients

1 tablespoon unsalted butter (or 2 tablespoons if pork and sausage are very lean)
4 ounces Andouille sausage*, sliced into ¼-inch rounds
4 ounces picked pork** or ham, cut into ¼ cubes
1 medium yellow onion, chopped
1 bunch green onions, chopped, white and green parts separated
1 medium green sweet pepper, chopped
2 cans (10 oz size) crushed plum tomatoes
¼ cup canned tomato puree
2 cloves garlic, minced
1 whole bay leaf
1 teaspoon table salt
½ teaspoon ground black pepper
¼ teaspoon ground cayenne
¼ teaspoon dry thyme leaves
4 quarts chicken stock
1 tablespoon Louisiana pepper sauce
2 cups long-grain white rice, uncooked
1 pound raw medium shrimp, peeled

Jambalaya is a great metaphor for New Orleans and for jazz. The city, the music and the food all have a unique flavor. A glance at a map helps explain why New Orleans has been a meeting place for so many different types of people.
New Orleans did not become part of the United States until 1803 when President Thomas Jefferson signed the Louisiana Purchase. Prior to that, the area was under Spanish control and later French. Its location at the terminus of the Mississippi River and on the Gulf of Mexico, made it the number #1 trading port in the American South; here exports of cotton and wheat were exchanged for manufactured goods and slaves. Trade led to a vibrant cultural exchange—**the Jambalaya effect!**

**For a more indebt history of New Orleans, see**

“The People And Culture of New Orleans”  
By Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon  
Department of History, University of New Orleans at  

http://www.neworleansonline.com/neworleans/history/people.html

**This mix of cultures can be heard in the music of New Orleans. Listen at**  
https://murnanejazz.wordpress.com/2-new-orleans/
Jazz Goes Mainstream

The Great Migration of blacks from the South, particularly to find work in wartime industry during the First and Second World Wars, spread the New Orleans sound to Kansas City, St. Louis, Chicago, L.A., New York and other cities throughout the United States.

For more on the Great Migration, see “Black Mecca,” at Third Sight History, Rollins College.  
http://social.rollins.edu/wpsites/thirdsight/2013/11/15/black-mecca/
The Great Migration coincided with the growth of radio and the recording industry. Jazz enjoyed its widest appeal as a result. In fact, jazz helped define the mood of the times—from the Roaring 20s, the Great Depression to the war years.

Let's sample jazz from the 1920s, 30s and 40s.  
https://murnanejazz.wordpress.com/3-jazz-goes-mainstream/
From Be-Bop to Cool

Be-Bop or Bop emerged after World War Two; it was developed during after-hours jam sessions in New York clubs such as Minton’s Playhouse. Improvisation was emphasized as well as a new approach to harmony—similar to the approach of Impressionism, Be-Bop musicians began to add notes to traditional chord patterns creating a more complex musical texture. Musicians such as Charlie Christian pioneered the new approach to harmony. But Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie (Bird and Diz) were the first full-fledged Be-Bop musicians. They took standard songs—like George Gershwin’s “I Got Rhythm”—and played new melodies over them and altered some of the chords to allow for more possibilities. These re-workings of familiar songs provided a platform for soloists with lightening-fast technique to showcase their skills. Charlie Parker remains unsurpassed on the alto saxophone—the speed and fluidity of his playing was truly amazing. He inspired generations of jazz musicians.
Not everyone was happy with the fast-paced, hard-hitting sound. Miles Davis—who appeared with Bird and Diz in at the age of 19—soon took jazz in another direction. He experimented with the “cool” sound in the late 1940s and 50s. His 1959 album, *Kind of Blue* (the best selling jazz album of all time) featured fewer and simpler chord progressions, a form called modal jazz. Chords are written as letters above the notes, such as a C, for a C-major chord (C-major consists of the notes C, E and G, playing any of these three notes while the chord is being struck will sound “right”). Chords provide the harmony or harmonic structure. Charlie Parker’s songs had constant chord changes, which forced Parker to play different notes to match-up with the chords. Parker could more than keep up with very rapid chord changes. Miles slowed it down and simplified—this led to different sounding solos by the musicians in his band. By simplifying, soloists like tenor saxophone great John Coltrane could try out new ideas while soloing over the simplified chord patterns and structures found throughout the *Kind of Blue* album. Miles, Coltrane and the other players on the *Kind of Blue* recording session inspired decades of emulation and musical exploration.

**Let’s listen to the shift from Be-Bop to Cool**

[https://murnanejazz.wordpress.com/4-be-bop/](https://murnanejazz.wordpress.com/4-be-bop/)
From Free Jazz to Fusion

Kind of Blue was not the only breakthrough album of 1959. Ornette Coleman’s The Shape of Jazz to Come appeared that same year, a follow-up to his 1958 release of Something Else! Coleman became the most recognized pioneer of free jazz, a controversial approach that has been hotly debated ever since. It threw out most of the rules of harmony and tempo—the emphasis was on creating in the moment, improvisation on overdrive. It often had an atonal and chaotic quality. Big Band trumpeter Ruby Braff said “it sounds like utter confusion and madness. I’ve never heard anything so disjointed and mixed-up and crazy in my life.” Quincy Jones quipped, “If that’s liberty, boy, they’re making an ass out of Abraham Lincoln.” Supporters liken it to a Jackson Pollack painting and other works of abstract expressionism.
Jazz underwent a great deal of experimentation during the 1960s and 70s. In addition to Free Jazz, John Coltrane and Miles Davis developed what later became known as Jazz Fusion.

Jazz Fusion or Jazz-Rock is exactly what it sounds like—a mixture of jazz with rock and roll music—typified by groups such as Spyra Gyra and the Weather Report.

Quotes re: free jazz and information on Ornette Coleman from Iain Anderson’s interesting book *This Is Our Music: Free Jazz, the Sixties, and American Culture*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.

Jackson Pollack paintings at: [http://artphoto.riostro.com/2013/06/jackson-pollock.html](http://artphoto.riostro.com/2013/06/jackson-pollock.html)

**Listen here to Free Jazz and Fusion**
[https://murnanejazz.wordpress.com/5-free-jazz-to-fusion/](https://murnanejazz.wordpress.com/5-free-jazz-to-fusion/)
In addition to the works noted above, general studies of jazz include:


**For articles I’ve written about jazz see**

“The Arab Roots of Miles Davis’ Sketches of Spain,” *All About Jazz* (May 17, 2009) [Click here](#)

“Paris Blues: Expatriate American Jazz Musicians and the City of Lights,” *Jazz Times* (July, 2009) [Click here](#)

“Toward an Inclusive Narrative: Jazz and the Power of Borrowing Across Cultures,” *Jazz Times* (July, 2009) [Click here](#)