

Getting Into Jazz

One of the nicest things about jazz is that we can enjoy it on so many different levels, and in so many different ways. I have almost no musical education, but I can enjoy the simple beauty of a melody, the complex blend of instruments and voices, the sound of the soloist, the excitement, the rhythm, the content of the lyrics of a song, the emotion conveyed by a soloist, the interesting ways a soloist improvises on a melody each time through, the different sounds created as a pianist or orchestrator uses different, or more complex harmonies. Those with more extensive musical training can hear and enjoy the music at an even higher level, intellectually analyzing the chord structure, the key changes, the arranging techniques, and so on.

Another nice thing about listening to jazz is that the more you listen, the more you tend to hear that you might have missed before. You may begin to recognize individual jazz musicians by their sound, by their playing style, by musical phrases that creep naturally into their solos, by the harmonies they use (you may not be able to think of them or describe them in technical terms, but you can certainly enjoy them). You begin to recognize songs, remember the lyrics (words), even arranging and composing styles, and the styles of various bands.

Jazz has an extensive body of literature, some of it written, some of it recorded, some of existing only in the memories of those who heard a live performance. Just as with any body of literature, the more we experience it, in this case by listening, the more we are able to tie thoughts or elements of one piece of literature to another. Jazz is also a musical tradition, with a history, with ideas, techniques, performances, that evolve and are passed on from one generation to another. Dizzy Gillespie, a trumpet player and composer with a style very different from Louis Armstrong famously said near the end of his life that there was nothing you could do in jazz that Armstrong had not done first. "No Pops," he said, "no me."

Armstrong our first jazz giant, grew up in New Orleans, first learning from older musicians and absorbing the tradition, and gradually building a far more complex way to play (and sing) jazz. Bix Beiderbecke, who created the other fundamental concept of how a trumpet should sound, took up the instrument as a child after hearing Armstrong on a Mississippi riverboat. Both of these trumpet players influenced scores of older musicians, each of whom developed their own styles, helped the music evolve, and themselves influenced musicians who came after them. Part of enjoying jazz is enjoying many different musicians, each bringing a little something different to the music. Another part is understanding and following how these styles developed.

Lester Young, perhaps the second most important giant of jazz, also grew up partly in New Orleans, later also around Minneapolis and New Mexico. He played several instruments, including drums, in a family band led by his father that worked throughout the eastern United States. Lester told several interviewers that he gave up drums when he missed the opportunity to introduce himself to a young lady after a performance because she had left by the time he had packed up his drum kit.

Lester was given the name President, soon shortened to Pres or Prez, by Billie Holiday, because President was the most important title you could give someone. Prez was known for his soft sound on tenor, his wonderfully creative improvisations, and while he was with the Basie band in the late 1930s, his ability to "float" above the beat, with no firm connection to it. Lester cited Beiderbecke's musical partner, saxophonist Frank Trumbauer, as the major influence on his sound. Careful listening to both Bix's and Armstrong's recordings reveal an earlier and less developed tendency to this freedom from the beat, but Prez took it to a much higher level!

Young was a genius, both musically and intellectually, who influenced dozens of saxophonists who came after him, including Stan Getz, Al Cohn, Zoot Sims, Paul Quinichette, Dexter Gordon, Sonny Stitt, Bob Cooper, Richie Kamuca, Allan Eager, Jimmy Guiffre, Bill Perkins, Dave Pell, Pete Christlieb, and Paul Desmond. There are informal recordings of alto sax giant Charlie Parker playing tenor that sound very much like Prez. The sax section of Woody Herman's Four Brothers band consisted of four saxophonists who idolized Prez and sounded like him. Tenor saxophonist Brew Moore famously said, "anyone who doesn't play like Prez is wrong!"

Armstrong influenced the young Roy Eldridge, who influenced the young Dizzy Gillespie. In another stream, trumpeter Clifford Brown can be heard to have built his style on the lyricism of Fats Navarro and the fire of Eldridge and Gillespie. Both Navarro and Brown died young, but their influence can be plainly heard in the music of Kenny Dorham, Lee Morgan, and Roy Hargrove. Freddie Hubbard absorbed some of that and added his own more modern twist to create his style. The Beiderbecke stream came through players like Jimmy McPartland and others, and influenced the very individual and lyrical styles of players like Chet Baker and Jack Sheldon (both of whom sang beautifully), and to some extent, Miles Davis.

We can trace corresponding musical streams in the styles of players of every instrument, of singers, of bands, and in arranging and composition. Discovering these styles, and the relationships between them, can be a very satisfying part of the jazz experience.