

What is Jazz? Good Question

by Jason West

What is jazz? According Wynton Marsalis, jazz is music that swings. According to Pat Metheny, jazz is not the music of Kenny G. According to Webster, jazz is characterized by propulsive syncopated rhythms, polyphonic ensemble playing, varying degrees of improvisation, and often deliberate distortions of pitch and timbre.

Certainly, the question is a highly subjective one. Ask 100 different people “What is jazz?” and you’re likely to get 100 different answers. The debate becomes even more confusing given the fact that the history of jazz is relatively well documented.

It’s no secret that jazz music started in the black ghettos of New Orleans at the end of the 19th century. In the 1920s jazz moved up river to Chicago and New York as African Americans migrated north in search of a better life. The 1930s saw the evolution of swing bands like those lead by Duke Ellington and Count Basie. At the same time great soloists emerged, virtuosi like Louis Armstrong, Coleman Hawkins and Lester Young. In the 1940s be-bop hit, personified in the music of Charlie Parker. The Mozart of his day, Bird took all of the melodic and harmonic information available and crystallized it into be-bop. But, even in 1955, at the time of Bird’s death, most people could answer with confidence when asked, “What is jazz?”

Why then, less than half a century later, can’t we agree on a working definition? Part of the reason is because jazz has always been and remains today a living art form, ever changing and ever growing. Subsequently, after Bird took be-bop to its logical conclusion, musicians like Miles Davis and Ornette Coleman invented new forms like modal playing and “free” jazz. In the 1960s musicians began incorporating R&B, rock and new electric instruments into their jazz. John Coltrane gave us “sheets of sound.” The Modern Jazz Quartet mixed jazz and classical music. Everything exploded and suddenly jazz was all over the place.

In their effort to market these musical voyages, major record companies have added to the mystification, bombarding us with labels to ponder: Contemporary jazz, mainstream jazz, smooth jazz, alternative jazz, avant-garde jazz, Latin jazz, fusion, etc. At present, it seems that there are almost as many names for jazz as there are jazz groups. Still puzzled? Me too.

But not worried. Once again, each one of us is left with our own purely subjective views on jazz. My guess is that, if asked, even musicians - the men and women who are currently dedicating their life to creating this music - would likely disagree on the meaning of jazz.

So perhaps a better question is: What do you like? From Jelly Roll Morton to Lee Morgan, from James P. Johnson to John Zorn, the answer is out there, preserved on record for our learning and listening pleasure. Yes, experiencing all the different styles of jazz is a daunting task, but the rewards are great; and the more you listen, the more you’ll find similarities within the styles. What’s more, jazz elements can be heard outside of its own genre - in rock, R&B, Latin music, African music - the list is endless.

Yet, one thing is sure: Jazz remains America’s only original living art form. Today, its influence envelops the globe. It’s expressive. It’s enriching. Call it what you like - jazz is here to stay.

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