# Chapter 10
# Jazz and Jazz Theory

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## ABSTRACT

*The question "what is jazz?" has been asked regularly since the origins of this music in the early 20th century. Over this time, jazz has undergone many changes, but certain characteristics—such as a particular kind of syncopated rhythm, improvisation, and tonal harmony—have remained more or less constant. The central theme of this chapter is that these constant features constitute a common jazz practice analogous the common practice that underlay European art ("classical") music from the mid-18th century to the end of 19th century. While the common practice in jazz is no longer at the creative cutting edge, the tradition it represents is alive and well. All of the major styles within this tradition are still performed by skilled jazz artists around the world. Jazz Theory follows.*

## INTRODUCTION

When asked what jazz is, Louis Armstrong once famously retorted, "if you have to ask what jazz is, you'll never know" (Armstrong and Brothers, 2001). Armstrong also said in an interview with Sidney Bechet and Pops Foster, "I wouldn't say I know what jazz is, because I don't look at it from that angle. I look at it from music … we just always tried to play good" (Bechet, 1960).

These answers are unlikely to satisfy anyone seriously interested in jazz. More satisfying answers can be had if you're willing to study the sets of canonic examples put together by several long-time expert observers of the jazz scene. Among these are Ken Burns' ten-part PBS series *Jazz: A Ken Burns Film* (Burns, 2000), the six-volume *Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz* (Smithsonian, 1973), the New Yorker magazine's *100 Essential Jazz Albums* (Remnick, 2008), and the NPR *Basic Jazz Library* (Horwitz and Spellman, 2019). All of these tell essentially the same story: there is a continuous, readily identifiable jazz tradition that runs from some time in the early 20th century—just before recorded music becomes available—to the early 1960's, when the tradition begins to fall apart with the appearance of "free jazz," John Coltrane's late recordings, and the relatively short-lived "jazz-as-protest." There is still contention over the status of the music of certain jazz performers and groups that have come to prominence since the early 1960's. The consensus view embodied in the historical collections of examples mentioned

here is not universally accepted, but this chapter attempts to give an account of those features of jazz that remain consistent.

## Background

The consensus view of jazz can be defended by showing that, up to the early 1960's, there is a recognizable "common practice" that can be described concisely in the form of "jazz theory." Jazz theory describes the common jazz practice in much the same way that the standard college-level music theory sequence describes the conventions of European art music from roughly the mid-seventeenth century to the end of the nineteenth century. There are principles that govern the construction of scales and chords and the progression from one chord to the next, as well as principles for the design of melody and musical form. Jazz theory also importantly includes the proper interpretation of jazz rhythm.

A sequence of examples representing a variety of styles may convey some idea of the overall range of the music discussed here. The first example, by King Oliver and his Creole Jazz Band, represents the beginnings of jazz, while the two Mulligan/Baker and Horace Silver examples illustrate types of jazz that were popular near the end of the jazz common practice era.

King Oliver (1923) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TE6HRi2E-dc
Louis Armstrong and Sidney Bechet (1940) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=du7Gr6QlCEY
Duke Ellington (1969) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idQw1FOPyo4 Count Basie (1965) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hHMYhajNtNg
Sidney Bechet (1965) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-wr0WRqnhU
Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie (1952: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ovCpL1zjBgI
Gerry Mulligan and Chet Baker (1957) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VoVZ1_zQ_rM
Horace Silver (1959: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V6wgi4NK0Ls

Most jazz musicians in the early years learned by patient listening to skilled practitioners and by trial- and-error in their own playing; however, for several decades it has been possible to study jazz in formal academic programs at the college level. Among the better-known jazz degree programs are those at Juilliard, Rutgers University, North Texas State University, and Berklee College of Music. In addition to these programs there is now a wealth of self-study instructional materials that cover every aspect of jazz performance and composition that, taken together, informally codify the common practice.

## Improvisation

Whenever an attempt is made to define jazz, it is often said that *improvisation* is the key feature of jazz, the essential ingredient that makes it the model of freedom and spontaneity in music, the element that distinguishes it from other musical genres. There are at least two things wrong with this idea. First, jazz is not the only—much less the strongest—tradition of improvisation in Western music. A familiar counter-example is that of church organists, who routinely improvise background music for portions of a service that last an indefinite amount of time. Many organists have raised improvisation to a high art. It is not unusual for an organ recital to contain an elaborate composition improvised entirely from scratch or from musical themes submitted by the audience. France has a long tradition of virtuoso organ improvisers, from Cesar Franck, Charles-Marie Widor, and Louis Vierne, to Marcel Dupré, Olivier

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