

What Is Jazz?

Jazz. A musical style that evolved in the United States around 1900, chiefly played by Afro-Americans, though the music has since been produced and consumed interracially and internationally. Jazz was, in the earliest stages, a brewing of many stylistic influences - African rhythms and “blue tones,” European instruments and harmonies, marches, dance music, church music, and ragtime - all played with an exaggerated, emotional pulse (or beat). The twelve-bar blues form originated in jazz and has always been prevalent in jazz performance. The most important characteristic of jazz, however, is improvisation. Virtually every jazz selection will focus on improvisation, even when many other characteristics remain optional. Jazz continues to develop, absorb new styles and techniques, and change with great rapidity, but improvisation, the blues, and the vigorous pulse remain reasonably constant throughout its history of development from folk music to art music. (Jerry Coker. *Listening To Jazz.*)

Jazz historian, Gunther Schuller believes for music to be considered jazz it must contain “swing, improvisation, and blue notes.” When considering contemporary styles, it would be safe to consider music jazz if it contained “two of these three elements.” (Glenn Fisher)

Important Jazz Musicians and Composers

This list is of the major figures and not to be considered all inclusive. It is only a starting place. Many other excellent musicians had a major impact on the development of jazz music. For information on these and other musicians, along with recorded examples, I strongly recommend the Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz which is available through the Smithsonian Institution.

Louis Armstrong
Ornette Coleman
George Gershwin
Billie Holliday
Charlie Parker

Count Basie
John Coltrane
Dizzy Gillespie
Scott Joplin
Sonny Rollins

Miles Davis
Duke Ellington
Herbie Hancock
Thelonious Monk
Horace Silver