Jazz, America’s Classical Music
By Billy Taylor

Jazz is an American way of creating music. It is also a repertory which formalizes its various stages of development into classical styles which musically articulate American feelings and thoughts. The written literature of jazz has continually evolved out of informal improvisations and has formularized the musical elements and devices which characterize each of these classical styles. In addition to printed scores, there are sound recordings, videos and other pictorial records of almost every style of jazz from its beginning to the present. No other indigenous music reflects so clearly the American ideal of the individual’s right to personal freedom of expression. In many ways, jazz is a metaphor for the American idea of democracy.

Jazz is America’s classical music. As a musical language, it has developed steadily from a single expression of the consciousness of African Americans to a national music which expresses Americana to Americans as well as to people from other countries. As a classical music with its own standards of form, complexity, literacy and excellence, jazz has been a major influence on the music of the world for more than one hundred years. Recognized as a national treasure by the Congress of the United States, this unique American phenomenon defines the national character and the national culture. It serves, in a sense, as a musical mirror, reflecting how we have seen ourselves at different times in our history. A good example of this is the way the movies portray the 1920’s and 30’s using the jazz of those decades to underscore the pictures.

Like the classical music of other cultures, jazz has been time tested; it has served as a standard and a model; it has established value; and it is indigenous to the culture for which it speaks. In addition to this, throughout the chronological styles of jazz, we find a treasure of music which embodies formal elegance, simplicity, dignity and correctness of style, just and lucid conception and order.
Another important characteristic of jazz is the manner in which the process of improvisation is used. In jazz, the term improvisation is synonymous with spontaneous composition and is an extension of the time honored traditions of African griots (oral historians) bards and minstrels who adapted their offerings to the dynamics of each occasion.

Improvisation was an important tool for many of the earliest jazz musicians who were self taught and learned to play by trial and error. As they improvised singly and collectively they expanded their musical vocabulary and pointed the way toward new musical horizons.

Jazz emerged from the need of African Americans to express themselves in musical terms. This need for self expression stemmed directly from the African musical heritage. In the societies they left behind, there was music for working, for playing, for hunting and much more. They were used to having music to accompany and define all the activities of their lives. However, when Africans were brought to the United States and sold as slaves, they were prevented by law and customs form utilizing the well developed cultural supports that enabled them to enjoy productive lives on a daily basis in their native countries and to make matters worse, they often met strong opposition when they attempted to acquire any knowledge or skills which did not directly relate to their individual value as slaves. In order to survive the harsh, restrictive and demanding realities of enslavement, they were forced to be resourceful and creative. Since music had always played such an important part in the daily lives of so many Africans from different tribes, countries and backgrounds, it was quickly seized upon as a tool to be used for communication and as relief from both physical and spiritual burdens.

In West African countries, music was essential in cementing together a society, perpetuating cultural continuance, enforcing the moral and spiritual order allowing one to express oneself and helping an individual to adjust to group norms. So, though they were stripped of everything material, degraded and dehumanized, Africans brought with them their artistic traditions, their memories and their experiences in expressing themselves
through well established musical techniques and devices which accompanied and defined all the occurrences in their lives.

Other transplanted people, who were not of African origin, also brought memories, musical traditions, musical instruments, songs, customs and attitudes from their places of origin. However, they were free to express themselves in ways which were in keeping with their own traditions, so they were able to sustain and maintain their musical heritage without external need to change. As slaves, transplanted Africans did not enjoy the same freedom. Africans were brought to the West Indies, Central America and South America, but it was in the United States where they were prevented from using one of their most important musical instruments, the drum. Because of this, they internalized the melodies and rhythms that had been supported and dictated by the drum, restructured old musical ideas and created new forms of musical expression when some of the old ones no longer satisfied their needs or conditions. They had to learn a new language and also learn to verbally express themselves in ways that did not obviously exclude their captors. Because of this, their music transcended their needs and reached out toward others, including colonial slave owners. From the very beginning of its development in this country, music created by African Americans incorporated elements from other musical traditions, yet it has retained its own identity for more than three hundred years.

The name spiritual was given to the folk music created by slaves as it spread rapidly throughout the south. Spirituals were group expressions of many aspects of the slaves’ lives. Thought the texts often dealt with religious subjects, they were also used to convey messages, to teach, to scold, to speak of escape, and to express the desire for deliverance from bondage. In their original forms, spirituals varied according to the time, place and inclinations of the singers, but over the years they were formalized and thus emerged as the first new music through which slaves could publicly express their collective feelings. In the spiritual, we find the first formalization of the musical elements that led to the creation of jazz; rhythms based on the memory of drums and tribal chants; the African approach to melody and harmony; the African concept of timbre (the quality of notes used and the tendency to approach certain notes by sliding into them from above or below the pitch etc.); call and response; syncopation; improvisation and other devices.
taken from cries, calls, and field hollers. It was necessary to redefine and reshape all of these elements and develop new concepts which would work more effectively in the hostile surroundings of the new world.

Two distinct styles of secular music developed from the spiritual, the blues and ragtime. Ragtime musicians consciously organized and restructured both African and non-African elements using a variety of musical instruments along with the human voice to develop the first authentic jazz style as well as a vocabulary and repertory which defined and delineated it. In the beginning, the blues, like the spiritual, was primarily a vocal idiom, developing its style and repertory almost entirely from African musical concepts reshaped to fit African American situations and lifestyles. In time, the blues also became more structured and spawned popular styles such as rhythm and blues and rock and roll.

Ragtime first came into focus as the leisure time music of slaves on southern plantations and as the music of performers in taverns, barrel houses and other places of entertainment and social activity. This provocative music was sung, played on banjos, fiddles, harmonicas, pianos, trumpets, clarinets and whatever other instruments which were available. If no traditional instruments were handy, performers often created homemade substitutes from materials such as washboards, combs and tissues and animal bones.

According to Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet and many other jazz pioneers ragtime was played by string bands, brass bands and a wide variety of small ensembles long before it became a national fad as piano music. Many of the basic characteristics of ragtime were found in abundance in the ballads, fun songs, dance music and other vocal and instrumental music popular in African American communities throughout the 1800’s.

Although ragtime was, for the most part created and developed by unschooled musicians, composers like Scott Joplin took note of the work of earlier composers like Louis Moreau Gottschalk of New Orleans, Blind Tom Bethune of Columbus Georgia, Peter O’Fake of Newark, New Jersey, Francis Johnson of Philadelphia and Justin Holland of Virginia. Books and periodicals of the time make it evident that musically trained and untrained
black musicians were influencing one another in more ways than either group cared to admit. The syncopations and accidental harmonies of the untrained musicians were formalized by trained musicians. The forms which were constantly found in the music of the trained musicians were used to organize the improved melodies which were the common property of the untrained musicians. The important aspect of this development of ragtime was that the European form did not dictate the content of the piece but rather was made more flexible to accommodate the African American ideas.

From the beginning, jazz was both a way of creating music and a rapidly expanding repertory, so jazz musicians had to quickly acquire the ability to communicate with others using spontaneously created (improvised) music as a tool. The music of every era of jazz was characterized by the ways in which the basic elements of music (the melody, the harmony and the rhythm) were expanded or otherwise adjusted to fulfill the needs of the generation using it. Throughout all of this musical development, the African concepts of rhythm were redefined and applied to the music being created in a different way. This was called “swinging”. Though the term is hard to define without aural music examples, it was so well understood by musicians and non-musicians in the 1930’s that the jazz style which developed out of ragtime was called “Swing”.

As noted earlier, the blues, like ragtime came out of vocal music and as a seminal style of African American music it swung, too. It is important to note the manner in which rhythm affects all of the other aspects of African American music. This is obvious in the blues. Like ragtime, it was formed from many different sources of black musical utterances: field hollers, cries, shouts, grunts, groans, and other expressive sounds that conveyed emotions too deeply felt to be expressed in ordinary words alone. Rhythm has always been a very important ingredient in the expression of those of ragtime yet they, too, were full of similar African retentions, such as slurring up or down to a note, vibrato, call and response, breaks and syncopation. In their early blues singing, performers utilized the human voice to its full potential according to their needs and concepts but as time went on blues singers encountered more and more musical accompaniments so their music became much more structured. Whereas ragtime consciously restructured and
organized both African and non-African elements to develop the style and repertory of early jazz, the blues developed its style and repertory almost entirely from African musical concepts and materials. The blues were, in a sense, secular spirituals. Spirituals expressed the essence of the African American community’s religion while the blues were concrete expressions of black consciousness from a personal and secular vantage point.

Toward the end of the ragtime era, the blues and ragtime came closer together in Kansas City and other parts of the midwest and southwest and enriched the new emerging jazz style which was being called “swing”. Ragtime rhythms featured basically two major pulses to a measure while swing rhythms featured an even four to a measure basic pulse. This change inspired a drastic change in social dancing styles. In the ragtime period, dances like the Charleston and the Bunny Hug were popular but suddenly everyone was jitterbugging to a new beat.

When the style of “swing” is mentioned most people think of the big bands of the 1930’s – bands such as those led by Artie Shaw, Benny Goodman, Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, Chick Webb and Glenn Miller and the continuing tradition of jazz as dance music. These large ensembles usually featured fifteen or sixteen players and their repertories formalized concepts developed and recorded by earlier bands led by Fletcher Henderson, Don Redmon, Jimmy Lunceford, Duke Ellington, Earl Hines and other famous black band leaders of the 1920’s and early 1930’s. “Swing” was also played in small groups like the John Kirby Sextet, Artie Shaw’s Gramercy Five, Benny Goodman’s trios and quartets, Red Norvo’s octettes and even international ensembles such as Quintet of the Hot Club of France with Django Rheinhardt and the Stephane Grappelli. Like ragtime, swing developed through the exploration and experimentation of a generation of professional and amateur musicians in rehearsals, in jam sessions, on recording dates and in many private sessions where really creative artists could try out new ideas.

So, in the “swing” style of jazz, the basic pulse shifted from 2/4 to 4/4. This often resulted in the piano, bass, guitar and drums playing each beat of a four beat measure
with the same amount of stress – no accent on beats two and four, as was the case in earlier styles. The harmonies also became more complicated, with four, five and six note chord resolving in previously unused directions. More sophisticated harmonies quickly spawned longer and more complicated melodies. Jazz was rapidly becoming music which challenged the listener as well as the dancer.

Bebop was the next major jazz style to evolve from Swing. This complex and challenging style emerged in the 1940’s as the result of several years of experimentation by a diverse group of jazz musicians who were not content to confine their creative efforts to the parameters set by the big dance bands of the 1930’s and the soloists sought to redefine the relationship of the instruments in the small ensemble, as well as to expand the responsibility of the soloist as a catalyst who could suggest alternate approaches to the music the ensemble was performing. In other words, the bebop soloist had to be a superb technician who could execute intricate spontaneous melodies as well as play extremely difficult preconceived melodic lines in strict unison with other instruments.

Pace setting composers, arrangers, and improvisers of the Swing period like Duke Ellington, Coleman Hawkins, Art Tatum, Charlie Christian, Jimmy Blanton and Roy Eldridge laid the foundation for the Bebop style. Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, Oscar Pettiford, Kenny Clarke and many others experimented, individually and collectively and with their musical explorations helped create Bebop by enlarging the scope of jazz, melodically, harmonically, and rhythmically. By using the types of melodic development inherent in the styles of Coleman Hawkins, Roy Eldridge and Don Byas, the harmonic devices of Duke Ellington, Billy Strayhorn, Mary Lou Williams, and Art Tatum, and the rhythmic devices of Jo Jones and Sid Catlet as a starting point, these imaginative and talented former big band players (and others who were attracted to their concepts) radically altered the sound of jazz with their imaginative and logical usage of longer, more convoluted melodic lines, highly altered chords and an approach to rhythm which featured more interplay between the piano, bass, guitar and drums when they accompanied soloists.
Bebop musicians restated and reshaped the African concept of layers of rhythm. The bassist played a melodic outline of the harmonic structure, four beats to a measure; the drummer played syncopated patterns on his ride cymbal while making offbeat accents on his snare drum, his highest cymbal and his bass drum; the pianist alternated the guitarist playing extended harmonies in syncopated patterns; and the soloist improvised long complicated melodies on top of all that.

The basis of improvisation in the bebop style was the alteration (or revision) of the composition being composed or played and the development of its rhythmic, harmonic and melodic potential according to the mood, conception and creativity of the player. As in previous jazz styles, a specific repertory was created which formalized the vocabulary as it was being developed.

When Bebop was in full flower, the age of the big band was over. But Dizzy Gillespie loved big bands and he tried time and time again to maintain a working big band. It was with his big bands that he most successfully combined his jazz ideas with Latin rhythms. Gillespie was one of the most rhythmically oriented musicians of his time. He explored Cuban, Brazilian, African and West Indian rhythms and used them effectively in his music. Jazz had had what Jelly Roll Morton called a “Spanish Tringe” since its ragtime period, but Dizzy helped redefine and popularize this aspect of the music in a way that made it much more important.

Throughout the history of jazz there have been many stylistically different approaches to the same musical material. The key to these stylistic differences has often been the treatment of rhythm. When the basic pulse of a piece was approached in an energetic, aggressive or dynamic way (as with Coleman Hawkins or Roy Eldridge) the result was a “hot” style of playing. When the basic pulse of a piece was approached in a quiet, subtle, more relaxed manner (as with Lester Young or Paul Desmond) the result was a “cool” style.
With the “Cool” style, the relaxed, understated, impressionistic type of jazz statement was revived, this time building a concept which distilled elements from ragtime to bebop and floated them along on top of a subtle pulse instead of driving them through a vigorous one. This mandated a decrease in volume and softer playing made individual voices, subtle sonorities and polyphonic melodies more easily discernable. With a trend toward a quieter expression and slower tempos, cool melodies were composed and articulated from a less rhythmic point of view than bebop, even though many of the same players were involved in both styles.

Cool jazz, as a major style began to splinter into several other styles during the 1950’s. The four most important musical directions were:

**Hard Bop:** an aggressive return to bebop concepts with a more direct approach to “hot” phrases and rhythms.

**Progressive Jazz:** the melding of an extension of bebop and cool techniques and devices which incorporated tonal mass and density as sonorities and explored the use of music organized in odd meters such as 5/4, 7/4 and so forth.

**Funky Jazz:** a return to jazz with a blues and gospel oriented feeling, updated to include melodies and harmonies which were in common use at the time.

**Third Stream:** an attempt to return to the concept of organizing jazz compositions utilizing techniques and devices found in the longer forms of European classical and contemporary music.

In the 1960’s, African Americans began to reevaluate their position in American society and opted to actively strive to make changes in the way they were treated. There emerged a growing interest in black achievements and awareness of those achievements as viewed from the black perspective. As African Americans began to verbalize what was important to them, the term “soul” came more and more into use. Ultimately, “soul” was used to denote the essence of blackness. Soul brother, soul sister, soul food – the soul concept permeated every aspect of life in the black community and jazz musicians
responded by creating “Soul Jazz”. They went back to church for inspiration and gospel oriented jazz took its place alongside the earlier styles of Wes McCann, Cannonball Adderley, Ray Charles and many other prominent jazz artists leading the way. During this period, blues and gospel music exerted a greater influence on jazz musicians than ever before. Traditionally, both the blues singer and the preacher had always given public expression to private emotions that were deeply felt by African Americans. In attempting to express “soul and solidarity” in musical terms, postbop and soul jazz (neo-gospel) musicians made a conscious effort to update the emotionally charged music of the past and fuse it with the emerging socially conscious attitudes of the day. While many jazz musicians were rediscovering the blues and gospel, others like John Coltrane, Randy Weston and Yusef Lateef were examining the music of other cultures and adapting newly learned devices and techniques to their needs as creative American artists. At that time, the pride, frustrations, victories, defeats, the search for roots and the dynamic struggle for human rights occupied an important place in the consciousness of African Americans from every walk of life. Jazz reflected these attitudes and many jazz musicians began to seek the common ground between emotionalism and intellectualism. Once again, there were stylistic results.

For years, adventurous jazz musicians had struggled to create jazz in more abstract styles. They felt constrained by traditional approaches and worked hard to create styles of jazz which were not bound by conventional rules and practices. This was called “Free Jazz” and there were many experiments along these lines in the late 1930’s and early 1940’s. During the 1940’s many jazz musicians studied with contemporary composers who taught them to use atonal techniques. Some of them, like Mel Powell, a former Benny Goodman pianist left the jazz field entirely while others, like Martial Solal, a famous French jazz pianist found ways to incorporate their techniques and devices into jazz.

Several approaches to free jazz which had started in the late 1940’s and 1950’s, had now matured and were influencing jazz in other parts of the world more than jazz at home. Innovations by Lennie Tristano, Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman, Sun Ra and others were being heard in the work of more mainstream jazz musicians than ever before.
In 1958, during a segment of “The Subject of Jazz”, I was asked by composer Aaron Copeland if jazz musicians ever improvised without previously deciding what melodies, harmonies and rhythms they would use. When I said we did, he replied that he would like to hear such improvisation. On the spot we improvised a piece which we later titled “Hurricane”, after one of his compositions (though it bore no resemblance whatsoever). The resulting music surprised Copeland because it sounded like a well scored, modern abstract piece with jazz rhythms. The musicians who were involved in that performance were not musicians who had played publicly in that style but they were all familiar with the vocabulary being used at the time by the experimental and innovative musicians of that period.

While all this was going on, there was a breakthrough in technology which made it possible to amplify acoustic instruments more effectively, synthesize and sample sounds and electronically create hybrid sounds which imitated violins, voices, reed instruments and on and on. Suddenly there was a plethora of vibrato pedals, wa-wa pedals, varitone instruments which split one note into several and electronic keyboards. Many jazz musicians experimented with this technology, created electric bands and a style called jazz fusion was created. Jazz fusion was quickly coopted by record companies and became jazz-rock. This fad lasted well into the 1980’s when many more artists emerged and began to explore the entire history of jazz searching for inspiration and knowledge which would help them find their individual voices. Today many of them are world famous and they are helping younger artists find firm footing in a very rapidly changing music world.

By the 1980’s enough young musicians had been brought into the jazz field through private jazz studies, jazz programs in schools, exposure to the music from live performances and recordings to start a trend of renewal which is stronger than ever today. Today we have large numbers of gifted young jazz artists all over the world who are ready to join the jazz masters whose creativity and talent has paved the way for them. The jazz field is growing and we need to provide opportunities for all of our artists. We
are currently celebrating the achievements of jazz masters, past and present and now we need to nurture the emerging artists. They have much to add to jazz and to our culture. Many of them have been discovered and introduced by established jazz artists like Art Blakey and Betty Carter. Others have been presented by private organizations like Jazzmobile, The Thelonious Monk Institute and the International Association of Jazz Educators.

There is no generation gap in jazz, traditionally, younger artists learned from older, more experienced artists, but the older artists learned from the younger ones as well. Today, bebop is mainstream jazz but jazz is a performer’s art and bebop, electronic jazz, free jazz, latin jazz and many other jazz styles are still evolving because improvising jazz artists are constantly discovering new ways to express themselves and they are extending the jazz tradition and legacy with new concepts, techniques, and resources. Their compositions and common vocabulary formalize the music they create, forming a growing repertory which expresses Americana to Americans as well as to people from other countries and cultures. In true “melting pot” style, jazz has absorbed many diverse elements; but it has developed its own concepts and traditions by fusing those elements together in a manner which is unquestionably tied to the time and place of its origin. Jazz is truly America’s classical music.

Billy Taylor encompasses that rare combination of creativity, intelligence, vision, commitment and leadership, qualities that make him one of our most cherished national treasures.

The distinguished ambassador of the jazz community to the world-at-large, Dr. Billy Taylor's recording career spans nearly six decades. He has also composed over three hundred and fifty songs, including "I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel To Be Free," as well as works for theatre, dance and symphony orchestras.

Playing the piano professionally since 1944, he got his start with Ben Webster's Quartet
on New York's famed 52nd Street. He then served as the house pianist at Birdland, the legendary jazz club where he performed with such celebrated masters as Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie and Miles Davis. Since the 1950s, Billy Taylor has been leading his own Trio, as well as performing with the most influential jazz musicians of the twentieth century.

Dr. Taylor has not only been an influential musician, but a highly regarded teacher as well, receiving his Masters and Doctorate in Music Education from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and serving as a Duke Ellington Fellow at Yale University.

He has also hosted and programmed such radio stations WLIB and WNEW in New York, and award winning series for National Public Radio. In the early 1980s, Taylor became the arts correspondent for CBS Sunday Morning, a post he still holds today.

Dr. Billy Taylor is one of only three jazz musicians appointed to the National Council of the Arts, and also serves as the Artistic Advisor for Jazz to the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, where he has developed one acclaimed concert series after another including the Louis Armstrong Legacy series, and the annual Mary Lou Williams Women in Jazz Festival.

With over twenty two honorary doctoral degrees, Dr. Billy Taylor is also the recipient of two Peabody Awards, an Emmy, a Grammy nominations and a host of prestigious and highly coveted prizes, such as the National Medal of Arts, the Tiffany Award, a Lifetime achievement Award from Downbeat Magazine, and, election to the Hall of Fame for the International Association of Jazz Educators.

Now in his eighties, Billy remains active, touring and recording with his Trio, playing concert dates, television, and radio engagements, writing music and lecturing.

Please visit Billy’s website: http://www.billytaylorjazz.com