

Master Class

By Richard Best



Why Jazz Matters

Have you listened to any jazz today? I'm sure you have. If you keep your ears open, you'll quickly discover that jazz and its influence are everywhere. In the elevator, at the grocery store, sitting at Starbucks, or watching TV, you'll hear plenty of jazz and jazz-derived music. There are even some forms of music that, although nothing like jazz, owe their very existence to jazz.

Now, we often think of jazz as that 'ding-dinga-ding' stuff, but jazz has a very complex history that draws from many sources. And it has influenced much of what we take for granted in music today. The popular story is that jazz began when sidemen, tired of playing it straight all night, would get out their instruments after the guests and dancers had gone home, and just play. The emphasis was on freedom, improvisation, breaking the rules, and just generally having fun with it. There were no masters and few, if any, rules.

Jazz drew from many traditions that were popular in America in the early 20th century: blues, ragtime, gospel, military, and various Latin idioms. This fusion of styles has been hailed as America's great contribution to music, and yet jazz often doesn't get the respect or recognition it deserves. (One of the saddest examples of this was when a US president, while hosting a gathering of European composers at the White House, lamented the lack of significant American composers -- despite Duke Ellington being among the guests.)

From the Beatles to Bernstein to Bootsy, jazz has had an impact on almost all forms of contemporary music. Over the years it has served as a conduit, borrowing from various sources, repackaging it, and sharing it with the world at large. It is this ability -- perhaps the need -- to emulate, integrate and evolve that has made jazz such an important music form.

Jazz is the original 'bad boy' of music. The style was born out of an emotional and spiritual need to break out of established norms, to investigate new ground, and to challenge both authority and the technical limits of the instruments and the players.

Over the years, jazz evolved into something of an elitist art form, and while the form is open to all players, it seems to attract the "crème de la crème" of improvising musicians. This tradition of pushing boundaries, dispensing with rules, and pursuing technical and musical excellence has been adopted by players of other forms. Would we have seen such bands as Cream in the '60s, Genesis in the '70s and a host of others if the course had not been laid out so well by the jazz pioneers of the '30s, '40s and '50s? Listen to country swing, prog rock, MOR, uptown country -- almost anything these days -- and you'll hear jazz's influence.

You'll also discover that many top drummers regardless of preferred musical genre seek out a jazz teacher. Neil Peart and Freddie Gruber, Danny Gottlieb and Joe Morello ... it's a very long list. And most contemporary music schools base their programs on jazz.