The Language of Jazz

In the same way that it developed its own musical voice, Jazz has also spawned its own vocabulary. Many of the expressions that define American English from its mother tongue stem from the African-African community, and specifically from Jazz musicians.

Louis Armstrong invented or played a large role in popularizing many of these. However, the great majority are not specifically musical, and therefore will not find their way into this glossary.

Here we have several dozen terms that you will encounter in your reading about the music—many of which are largely self-explanatory, and others which need a bit of extra clarification.

From its beginning, most Jazz musicians used the same terminology as other vernacular, American musicians, with
terms taken directly or adapted from European models. And as the number of players who receive formal training increases, the adaptation of terms is usually exaggerated and the old Jazz lingo becomes more scarce.

Too often, the perception of a separate musical language of Jazz terminology is linked to some aspect of condescension toward the music or to latent racism or to just the plain old cultural inferiority complex that still plagues many American perceptions about American art forms.

A cappella: Performed with no accompaniment.
AABA: A common song form—usually thirty-two bars long, divided into four eight-bar segments—which consists of a musical theme (A), played twice, followed by a second theme (B), played once, followed by a return of the first theme.
Arco: In reference to a stringed instrument, played with a bow.
Arrangement: The reworking of a composition for a specific group or performer.
Atonal: having no established key or tonal center.

Beat: The basic metrical unit of a piece of music; what you tap your foot to.
Bitonal: Played in two keys at once.
Blue note: A tone borrowed from a minor mode and used in a major key. The effect resonates aesthetically as well as musically, since the association with minor sounds is “sad,” while the association with major sounds is “happy.”
Blues: An African-American musical form whose standard length is twelve bars. In its early vocal form, it comprised a four-bar question, repeated, and a four-bar answer.
Boogie-woogie: A blues-oriented piano style characterized by rolling left-hand figures—wherein the left pinky plays the note first, answered by the left thumb—and repetitive riffs on the right hand.

Break: When the rhythm section stops playing, and an instrument or instruments fill in the gap.

Bridge: The B section of an AABA composition.

Cadenza: In a performance, a section in which the tempo stops and the soloist plays without accompaniment.

Changes: The chords that define the harmonic structure of a song.

Chorus: One time through a song form.

Chromatic: Incorporating notes from outside a basic key or tonality.

Comping: The accompaniment of a rhythm-section instrument to a solo—usually refers to the function of a chorded instrument (piano, guitar, or vibes), but can also apply to others.

Consonance: Musical sounds that feel resolved.

Counterpoint: The simultaneous occurrence of two distinct melodies; more broadly, a point of contrast.

Diatonic: Referring to the notes that occur in the basic major and minor scales of a given key.

Dissonance: Musical sounds that feel unresolved and suggest resolution.
Double time: A tempo double the standard rhythmic base of a piece.
Downbeat: The first beat of a measure; also, any rhythm that occurs on the beat.

Fake: To improvise.
Front line: The horn section of a band, usually associated with New Orleans music.
Gig: A musical engagement.
Glissando: The gliding up or down to a given “target” note, without clearly articulating the notes along the way.

Harmony: The confluence of two or more tones.
Head: The melody of a piece.

Head arrangement: An interpretation of a piece that is made up on the spot and not written down.
Horn: Any instrument played through a mouthpiece.
Laid back: Referring to a rhythmic feeling that lags slightly behind the actual metronomic placement of the beat; usually in contrast to “on top.”
Lead: The primary melodic line of a composition.
Lead sheet: A musical manuscript containing the melody and harmony of a piece.
Legato: A way of phrasing notes wherein individual notes are not separately articulated.
Lick: A melodic phrase.

Melody: The succession of individual notes that define the primary shape of a composition.
Meter: The rhythmic base of a composition.
Mode: The seven scales that can be played on all the white notes of the piano, starting on one note and running up to the next octave.
Modulation: The change from one key or mode to another.

Motif: A musical unit that serves as the basis for composition through repetition and development.
Mute: An implement, usually wood, fiber, or metal, that is placed in the bell of an instrument to alter its tone.

Obbligato: A melody that accompanies the primary melody.

Off beat: A rhythm that is not placed on the downbeat.

On top: Referring to a rhythmic feeling that lines up with the metronomic placement of the beat; usually used in contrast to “laid back.”

Ostinato: A repeated phrase, usually played in a lower register, that serves as accompaniment.

Out chorus: The final chorus of a Jazz performance.

Phrase: A melodic sequence that forms a complete unit.

Pizzicato: In reference to a stringed instrument, plucked with the fingers.

Polyrhythm: The simultaneous use of contrasting rhythmic patterns.

Real book: A collection of lead sheets.

Register: The specific range of a particular instrument or voice—usually high, medium, or low.

Rhythm: The feeling of motion in music, based on patterns of regularity or differentiation.

Rhythm section: Any combination of piano, guitar, bass vibes, and drums (or related instruments) whose basic role is to provide the accompaniment to a band.

Riff: A repeated, usually short, melodic phrase.

Rim shot: A beat struck by a drummer with a stick against the snare drum (commonly on the second and fourth beats of a measure).

Rubato: A musical device in which the soloist moves freely over a regularly stated tempo. The term has also come to be used to imply a temporary interruption of a piece’s regular tempo.

Sideman: Musician hired by a bandleader.

Solo: An episode in which a musician departs from the ensemble and plays on his own.
Sotto voce: Quietly.
Staccato: Articulated in a manner whereby each note is separated.
Stomp: A swinging performance.

Straight ahead: Performed within the conventional Jazz format—4/4 time, theme-solos-theme, and an overall songlike structure.
Tag: An extended ending to a piece, usually four or eight measures, that repeats the closing cadence.
Tempo: The rate at which the beat is played.
Theme: The central melodic idea of a composition.
Timbre: The characteristic sound color of an instrument or a group of instruments.

Vamp: The section of a tune where the harmonies are repeated, usually as an introduction or an interlude.
Variation: The development of a theme.
Vibrato: The alteration of a tone’s pitch, from slightly above that pitch to slightly below, usually used as an expressive device.

Voicing: The specific order in which a composer groups the notes of a chord; also, the assigning of these notes to particular instruments.
Varieties of Jazz

Bop:

All music is tied to its cultural context, and bop (also known as bebop) is inextricably bound to the social issues of the early 1940s, when young black musicians defined themselves against the pernicious remnants of minstrelsy that were buried deep in popular culture. Not only did they behave differently, but their music, in the context of its time, had a penchant for dissonance that many found off-putting. Gone, for the most part, were the straightforward melodies that distinguished the best of the American popular song.

Unlike previous styles of Jazz, much of bop seemed to have a “take it or leave it” attitude when it came to mass appeal. And in this regard, it aligned itself with other contemporary forms of art in other genres. This, of course, played into the hands of both audiences—those seeking to be “hip” and into something new, and those who liked to feel excluded.

Bop was basically an instrumental music, though it did have its vocal subgenre (with even more nonsense syllables and affectations than the worst excesses of the Swing Era).

The rhythm sections played in a more overtly aggressive fashion than before, with the drummer tending to predominate, shaping the general flow of the accompaniment.

The bop vocabulary was largely taken verbatim from the solos of saxophonist Charlie Parker and trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, and reveled in angular melodic shapes (“Shaw ’Nuff” and “Salt Peanuts”).

These solos were characterized by a great range, clean and virtuosic displays of technique, a penchant for unresolved chord changes, and a sense of great urgency. This is not to imply that these characteristics are also not to be found in
earlier music—of course they are—but it’s a matter of proportion. And in the same way that it took awhile for Armstrong’s innovation to trickle down to the next generation, many of the first attempts to capture Parker’s and Gillespie’s style were immature.

Among the first to deal effectively with their new music were the trumpeters Miles Davis and Fats Navarro, the trombonist J. J. Johnson, the tenor saxophonists Warded Gray and Sonny Rollins, the pianists Bud Powell and Dodo Marmarosa, the vibraphonist Milt Jackson, the bassists Oscar Pettiford and Charles Mingus, and the drummers Max Roach and Roy Haynes.

Bop was essentially a small-group music (though Gillespie valiantly tried to sustain a big band for several years) played by a couple of horns and a rhythm section of piano, bass, and drums. There was little in the way of arrangements or interludes—once the theme was stated, a string of solos followed, with the theme being restated without variation at the end. With this eschewing of the compositional and ensemble element, a much greater demand was placed on the individual soloists.

Few of the acolytes of Parker and Gillespie had a comparable genius, and most could not sustain interest over long periods of time. But those who could bring a new electricity and risk taking to the music that could be thrilling. It is a decidedly unsentimental music, but bop in its most concentrated form does not lack for a want of emotion.

There were those who blended the best of the Swing Era with the new vocabulary, and they tended to be composer/arrangers. Tadd Dameron and Gil Evans found ways to weave the new sounds into arrangements that restored some balance between the ensemble and the soloist. In many ways, their music formed a bridge between the aggressive extremes of some early bop music and the cool Jazz that was to follow.
**Bossa Nova:**

During the early 1960s, in the waning days of the pre-Beatles music world, there were a few bright moments when popular music approached the kind of sophistication that had been taken for granted in the ’30s and early ’40s. The bossa nova craze of the ’60s was one of those moments.

It was led by a handful of young composers and instrumentalists in South America who, inspired by pianist and composer Gerry Mulligan and other Jazz writers, strove to combine the best of modern Jazz with their own rhythmically propulsive native music. In the late ’50s, the partnership of guitarist/singer Joao Gilberto and composer Antonio Carlos Jobim created quite a stir in Brazil with their collaboration on “Chega de Saudade.”

The rhythms were descendants of the Brazilian samba, and it was frequently accented by the use of acoustic guitars. Though there were intimations of things to come and an intersection between Jazz and Brazilian music, it wasn’t until the American guitarist Charlie Byrd asked saxophonist Stan Getz to record the now classic album Jazz Samba that bossa nova (“new wave” in Portuguese) was launched. Getz became an international attraction based on his subsequent albums, with his biggest hit being Jobim’s “The Girl from Ipanema.”

The intimate, almost spoken vocal by Gilberto’s wife, Astrud, played a large role in the success of this recording. Though its popularity has waned, there remains a large audience for bossa nova, and it continues to occupy a significant place in the Jazz marketplace. Two outstanding albums in the genre are Stan Getz’s Big Band Bossa and saxophonist Wayne Shorter’s Native Dancer (with Milton Nascimento).
Chicago Jazz:

The presence of New Orleans masters in Chicago in the ’20s such as King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, and the Dodds Brothers (clarinetist Johnny and drummer Baby) had a profound influence on a group of young, white musicians who wanted to find their own Jazz voices.

Their efforts reflected the heady atmosphere of their hometown, rather than the blues-inspired reflections of Oliver and company. The most significant fact about the Austin High Gang (some of them attended that institution) was that their role models were African Americans. Out of this group came the clarinetists Frank Teschemacher and Benny Goodman; drummers Dave Tough, Gene Krupa, and George Wettling; and the cornetist Muggsy Spanier.

(Black youngsters like drummers Sidney Catlett and Lionel Hampton and bassist Milt Hinton were also there in Chicago, picking up from the same men—but are conveniently overlooked by those who used the term “Chicago Jazz.”)

In later years, the bandleader/guitarist Eddie Condon became the personification of the Chicago school. He had a quick wit—and about the hoppers, he said, “They flat their fifths; we drink ours”) —and generated a lot of work for a long time. But nonetheless, this style remained confining for the handful of superlative players who were its prime exponents.

Musicians such as Pee Wee Russell, Roy Eldridge, Buck Clayton, Bud Freeman, Vic Dickenson, George Wettling, and many others spent the great majority of their later careers unfairly grouped in this category. On the rare occasions when these musicians were given the latitude to expand on a more varied repertoire with musicians of different stylistic stripes, the results were generally revelatory.
Cool Jazz:

“Cool” is the term used to refer to the reaction to bop, in which its frequently frenetic tempos and impassioned solos were replaced by a more reflective attitude. This was usually expressed in moderate tempos and in an instrumental style that drew heavily on the example of the great saxophonist Lester Young, though it must be stated that in lesser hands. Young’s style was occasionally distorted beyond recognition.

Nonetheless, cool Jazz was a welcome relief to the rapid degeneration of the bop style in inferior hands. And in the hands of masters such as trumpeter Miles Davis, baritone saxophonist Gerry Mulligan, and pianist Dave Brubeck, it was a thing of great beauty.

The origins of the style, which emerged in the late 1940s, may be traced to Claude Thornhiir’s big band, an ensemble which favored clarinets, French horns, and tuba. Many young musicians (who had revolved around saxophonist Charlie Parker and trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie) were attracted to this sonority and to the innovative arrangements Gil Evans wrote for the band, adapting elements from classical music to Jazz ends.

With Davis as the primary force, Evans and others (trumpeter John Carisi, pianist John Lewis, and baritone saxophonist Mulligan) arrived at a band of their own that used the smallest amount of instruments necessary to get the tonal colors they desired—trumpet, trombone, alto sax, baritone sax, French horn, tuba, piano, bass, and drums.

The solos were integrated into the ensemble in an Ellingtonian fashion, and this forced the players to think compositionally (“Boplicity,” “Moon Dreams,” and “Jeru”). The band’s dynamic range was wide, but the group never shouted, and functioned best at a medium to medium-soft level that let all the instruments shine.
Though the band was a commercial flop and folded shortly after its debut, its recordings (originally 78s) were reissued the year after as an early LP, titled The Birth of the Cool—and the name stuck.
In the next few years, virtually any new Jazz style that was not overtly boplike was classified as cool.

This rather large umbrella covered the music of Lennie Tristano, Dave Brubeck, and Mulligan, all of whom, like the Birth of the Cool musicians, shared Lester Young as an inspiration—but each of whom came up with radically different results. Yes, there was a surface placidity to the sound of their bands, and in relation to Parker and Gillespie, maybe they were “cool,” but that’s as far as it goes.

**Dixieland Jazz:**

Most of the misinformation that has befallen New Orleans Jazz comes from what has become known as “Dixieland” Jazz. Here the emphasis was on banjos, straw hats, a clipped and frequently unswinging way of phrasing, and hokum. In the mid-forties, a group of white musicians on the West Coast began replicating the music of cornetist King Oliver and others, and this led a “New Orleans” revival—the primary exponent of which was a band led by Lu Watters. Their efforts, though occasionally amateurish, were sincere and respectful of their music’s roots.

Their popularity led to a whole genre of Dixieland Jazz, which seemed dedicated to exploiting the surface elements of nostalgia while ignoring the artistic essence at the heart of the music they were celebrating. In its most commercial incarnations. Dixieland was, in essence, another aspect of minstrelsy in that it was based on a distortion of an African-American idiom. And even in its more benign forms, it remained a prison of sorts for many superlative players.
**Free Jazz:**

This phenomenon of the late ’50s and ’60s was the ultimate reaction not only to the complexities of bop, but of all the Jazz that preceded it. Free Jazz—also called avant-garde—gave up on functional harmony altogether, relying instead on a far ranging, stream-of-consciousness approach to melodic variation.

Saxophonist Ornette Coleman was the fount of inspiration of this genre. This is not to say that there weren’t other attempts to get rid of chords before he came along, but it was the way that Coleman did it that caught on. To begin with, he was a superb blues player and his band always swung.

His melodies varied from abstractions on Charlie Parker to yearning ballads and blues. As the ’60s progressed, Coleman’s discoveries opened the floodgates to all sorts of improvised music that was called free Jazz. While some of it was fascinating, for the most part it was freedom that was unearned and that freed the players from nothing—except, as some noted, from playing for free. One musician likened free Jazz to playing tennis without a net.

But Coleman’s music was rich in mood, and his band could always be counted on for a series of classic improvisations. There was another stream of musicians who were associated directly or indirectly with the later bands of saxophonist John Coltrane, who took up free Jazz.

Coltrane had been immensely affected by Coleman’s music, but when he played “free,” it had a very different feeling. As he neared his early death in 1967, one got the impression that Coltrane’s music was functioning more and more as an emotional catharsis, and it became increasingly difficult to assess by any of the standards used for previous Jazz musics.

But what made it endlessly fascinating was his background and
what he was choosing not to play as much as what he did play.

There was a rash of saxophonists pursuing different aspects of free Jazz in the ’60s, most notably Albert Ayler and Archie Shepp. Their approaches were radically different, though: Ayler frequently conjured mystical moments of religious possession, sounding like he was speaking in tongues on his tenor saxophone, while Shepp, an intellectual, courted the fringe of more traditional forms while remaining outside them.

Slightly later, Anthony Braxton and Chicago’s Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) came on the scene, each with idiosyncratic takes on the Jazz tradition that incorporated theater and a healthy sense of humor into their (at times) searing reflections on contemporary society.

**Fusion:**

As many have noted. Jazz was born out of a melding of styles, but this term has come to stand for the blending of Jazz with rock and funk. It happened in the late ’60s, and was inevitable. Jazz had always had a healthy audience amongst the young, and as younger Jazz players who were weaned on rock came of age, they began to experiment with “fusions” of both. The figure who made it acceptable for the Jazz establishment was trumpeter Miles Davis, who was the prime instigator and undeniably the major factor in this music’s initial appeal.

The album that inarguably created the genre was Davis’s 1969 effort, Bitches Brew and in many ways it remains unsurpassed. The problem that plagued most of the subsequent fusion music was that the basis of rock rhythms is essentially static, and without the forward motion of Jazz rhythm, the music loses its profile. This is not to say that all Jazz has to be played atop a swinging 4/4 beat, but when it is altogether absent, the issue of determining the music’s provenance can get sticky.
One of the most creative and prolific fusion bands was Weather Report, which featured former Davis alumni saxophonist Wayne Shorter and pianist Joe Zawinul. They brought to their explorations a solid musical background and sense of swing that carried over into whatever they did.

The electric bassist/composer Jaco Pastorius came to fame in this band and became a figure analogous to Charles Mingus in his ability to take anything he liked and find a place for it in his music. He was also, like Mingus, a true virtuoso on his instrument who changed the way the electric bass would be played in the future.

Keyboard player Heifbie Hancock’s Headhunters band of the early ’70s looked to soul, funk, and R&B more than rock for its rhythmic base, and became extraordinarily successful. His recording of “Chameleon” was a huge hit and was covered by many artists. Other outstanding groups include Return to Forever and John McLaughlin’s Mahavishnu Orchestra, whose profile was closer to rock than the others, but which nonetheless made some very creative albums early on.

The novelty generated by the juxtapositions that created fusion wore off quickly, and by the 1980s it became a commercial music with little to recommend it to serious Jazz listeners. One of the few groups to take the genre seriously has been pianist Chick Corea’s Elektric Band, whose late ’80s and early ’90s recordings have yet to be challenged as the most recent fusion milestones.

**Hard Bop:**

Like cool Jazz, hard bop was a reaction to bop. In 1955, drummer Art Blakey and pianist Horace Silver sought to capture a part of the listening and dancing audience that had been “lost” by bop’s fast tempos and sheer virtuosity. They managed this by slowing down most of the tempos, using elements of earlier Jazz styles mixed with elements of church music, and
making a concerted attempt to reach the lay black population that had abandoned modern Jazz for R&B and soul music.

If West Coast Jazz was largely white players in California, hard bop was largely East Coast African Americans. Hard bop also brought back some elements from the Swing Era, with arrangements that had interludes, introductions, vamps, and other devices to add an important element of counterpoint. Classic albums include Blakey’s Moanin and Silver’s Songfor My Father.

Hard bop was played for the most part by two or three horns (trumpet, tenor sax, trombone) plus rhythm section. And an interesting thing began to take place in the late ’50s, as Blakey and Silver continued to hire the best young players around.

They naturally were keeping up to date with the newest bits of musical information filtering down from John Coltrane, Sonny Bollins, and others, and there resulted a wonderful contrast between the rather basic, foursquare repertoire, and solos that went further and further afield in their explorations.

It is a credit to Blakey in particular that he encouraged this sort of experimentation and gave his bandsmen the opportunity to contribute their own music to the band’s library. By the early ’60s, with trumpeter Freddie Hubbard and saxophonist Wayne Shorter in his band, he produced albums such as Free for All that are as hard swinging as they are experimental.

One of hard bop’s most brilliant exponents was saxophonist Cannonball Adderley, who, after reaching the pinnacle of the Jazz world as a member of Miles Davis’s band in the late ‘50s, formed a quintet with his brother, cornetist Nat. A gifted raconteur and bandleader, Adderley found a rare intersection of commercialism and art that made him a leading figure of the ’60s right up through his early death in 1975 at age forty-six. His 1966 hit recording of “Mercy, Mercy, Mercy” expanded
the populist tendencies of hard bop right into “soul Jazz.”

**Kansas City Swing:**

Kansas City was to the ’20s and ’30s what New Orleans had been to the 1900s and 1910s. The town was wide open, and the music took on the characteristics of both its rural and urban nature. Kansas City swing was based in the blues, yet approached it with a newfound sophistication.

In the mid-thirties, bassist Walter Page, after years as the leader of his own band and the linchpin of another (Bennie Moten’s), found himself in the rhythm section of Count Basie’s band. Page soon managed to translate his own swinging beat to the other members of the section. Together, they created a four-man unit that played as one.

They swung hard, but with a light touch and elegance that was new to Jazz. This enabled the best of the Kansas City horn players to play with the tempo in a new fashion. Lester Young, the most brilliant of these, helped make the Basie band one of the best of the era. They went to New York in December 1936, and within a short time, both Benny Goodman—who, along with his brother-in-law, producer John Hammond, had been responsible for getting the band out of KC—and Duke Ellington became fans.

Other groups that reflected the Kansas City magic and that made the successful trek eastward to New York were Andy Kirk and his Clouds of Joy and Jay McShann’s band, which brought Charlie Parker onto the national Jazz scene. One of the founding fathers of R&B, which led directly to rock and roll, was the singer Big Joe Turner, who began his career as a singing bartender at Piney Brown’s legendary KC saloon.

**Latin Jazz:**

West Indian, Caribbean, and Spanish music were all essential
ingredients in the formation of Jazz in New Orleans. Early blues hits such as the “St. Louis Blues” had a “tango” chorus, and many of Jelly Roll Morton’s pieces referenced these rhythms.

A major turning point occurred in 1930 when a recording of a rhumba, “El Manisero,” known as “The Peanut Vendor,” became the first Afro-Cuban dance to become popular with the American public at large.

Both Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington quickly recorded their own versions, and both continued to explore Afro-Cuban pieces throughout the ’30s. Indeed, Juan Tizol, a Puerto Rican trombonist who was in Ellington’s band for more than twenty years, composed “Perdido,” “Caravan,” “Moonlight Fiesta,” “Conga Brava,” and “Bakiff” for the band. But the big breakthrough that cleared the way for a new idiom that was equally Afro-Cuban and Jazz came about through the efforts of multiinstrumentalist/arranger Mario Bauza.

A classically trained Cuban musician, he played first with Chick Webb’s band, and then, while working with Cab Calloway in 1939, met the young trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, who showed a big interest in the subtleties of Afro-Cuban music.

When Gillespie formed his own big band in the mid-forties, Bauza (by this time a key figure in Machito’s Afro-Cuban band) introduced him to the legendary conguero Chano Pozo. This turned out to be a historic, though short-lived, association (Pozo was killed in a barroom brawl shortly after).

Together, they recorded, the first Latin Jazz masterpieces (“Cubano Be,” “Cubano Bop,” and “Manteca”) in 1947. Other bands were also exploring the same territory, most notably Stan Kenton (“The Peanut Vendor” and “Cuban Episode”). By the early ’50s, Machito’s band was featuring Charlie Parker, Gillespie, and others as guest soloists, and Latin Jazz was well on the way to becoming an established genre.
As the ‘50s went on, there was a tremendous amount of diversity among the bandleaders working in the Latin Jazz arena (aficionados actually prefer the term “Afro-Cuban Jazz”).

Tito Puente, who besides being a wonderful vibraphonist was a skilled and original arranger, led a high quality band for years. His music eventually became famous as salsa, a commercial term for which he had great disdain (it means “sauce”) but there was no fighting it.

The brothers Charlie and Eddie Palmieri have managed the miracle of being both popular (in the Latin community, at least) and tremendously artistic since the 1960s. Both are respected within the genre as truly brilliant musicians. Pianist Eddie is an experimental pianist/arranger who is almost a Monklike figure in Latin Jazz—one of his greatest albums is The Sun of Latin Music. Mongo Santamaria, a legendary Cuban conguero like Pozo, had the greatest commercial success in the genre with “Watermelon Man” in the early ’60s. In recent years, Cuban musicians have been able to emigrate to the U.S. on occasion.

Modal Jazz:

A mode is a musical scale. The most common ones are the ones formed in an octave’s range by using only the piano’s white keys. In modal Jazz, the improvisers use these scales instead of chords as the fodder for their solos. This gives the music a more “horizontal” sound, but it also creates a sense of tonal rigidity that can become at least as trying on listeners as can too many chords. But, in the hands of pianist Bill Evans, trumpeter Miles Davis, saxophonist John Coltrane, or pianist George Russell, modal Jazz provided a new avenue of expression for players who needed a break from the well-worn musical vocabulary.

While there had been premonitions of and experiments with
modal Jazz before. Miles Davis’s 1959 Kind of Blue brought it to a large audience with a handful of classic performances. Some soloists did not limit themselves exclusively to the modes when improvising, but the modal basis of some compositions is what made them sound so different. Another vital component in the success of this recording was that all the players were past masters at the intricacies of diatonic Jazz harmony and brought their mastery of that idiom into their modal explorations.

Later improvisers, who had not had that experience, were not able to distinguish themselves melodically in the modal idiom, and this created a glut of rather uninspired performances. John Coltrane’s “Impressions” and Davis’s “So What” are quintessential modal pieces, with simple, scalar melodies. This style presented a particular challenge to the guitarists, pianists, and vibraphonists, who could not fall back on their usual voicings and progressions without sounding anachronistic.

New Orleans Jazz:

The classic formation of trumpet, clarinet, trombone, piano, guitar or banjo, tuba or bass, and drums has come to represent the definitive New Orleans Jazz band, though any number and variety of instruments can play the music. What is usually referred to as “New Orleans Jazz” grew out of the rich musical and cultural heritage of its cosmopolitan home. Its emergence after World War I was the product of many influences. One of the most significant came from the band orchestrations of ragtime music that flowered around the country in the early twentieth century.

The players began to improvise within the framework of these arrangements, and from this came the rough and tumble and spontaneous form that evolved quickly into what became known as Jazz in the mid-1910s.
There are many explanations for precisely how this occurred and which musicians were the key movers. Buddy Bolden’s 1905 band seems to have been a prime factor in spreading a new kind of blues-based instrumental music around New Orleans that was soon to be developed by the next generation of players.

But what we do know from the first definitive recordings of the genre, those made in 1923 by King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band, is that a generation of musicians had arrived at a miraculous way of playing together and generating a rocking and rolling music (with a swinging 4/4 beat and a basis in the blues). Their conception remains at the root of Jazz to this day.

New Orleans Jazz is basically contrapuntal in nature, meaning different melodies play off against one another at the same time. Although solos play a part in it, the essence of the music is transmitted by the confluence of many people playing at the same time, without getting in one another’s way. In fact, not only do they not step on one another’s musical toes, but much of the magic comes from the brushes and rubs that occur between the instruments. In this sense, each player is a composer of his own line in a spontaneously created composition.

This eventually led to the liberation of one of the lines into a preeminent solo, and it was to this task that Louis Armstrong applied his genius. He was at once the quintessential New Orleans musician and the one who brought about the next era in the music’s evolution. Because of its ensemble nature, New Orleans Jazz stayed firmly rooted to the piece at hand, and the solos tended to be melodic paraphrases that eventually grew into variations. It was from this that Armstrong’s brilliance emerged and eventually made the variations themselves the goal.

The 1923 King Oliver Creole Jazz Band (on which Armstrong recorded his first solos) and the 1926 Jelly Roll Morton Red
Hot Peppers sessions represent the joys of New Orleans Jazz and reveal the tremendous variety of approaches to be found within the idiom. No matter how different their music may sound, what unites them is that all the instrumentalists were playing the great majority of the time, and yet their music never sounds cluttered.

So in its myriad expressions of form. New Orleans Jazz has far more variety than most subsequent styles of Jazz. The great composers—Ellington, Lewis, Mingus, Brookmeyer, Marsalis among them—never forgot this and leavened their music with similar alternations of structure.

Bands made up of older players from New Orleans, led by the clarinetist George Lewis and the Preservation Hall Jazz Band, enjoyed great success from the 1950s on. While they were regarded as “authentic,” they were comprised largely second-rank musicians, and this gave New Orleans music a primitive profile in the minds of many. This was followed by the more refined efforts of pianist Bob Greene in the ’60s and ’70s, which were well-received.

However, it was the emergence of trumpeter Wynton Marsalis in the 1980s and his championing of the real roots and relevance of the genre that brought worldwide exposure to the glories of New Orleans Jazz. He made it live and breathe without even a whiff of antiquarianism.

Consequently, it is no longer the exception, but the rule, for young players to be conversant in its vernacular and that is a wonderful thing to see.

**Smooth Jazz:**

Smooth Jazz is really a subset of fusion, but it has gained such a tremendous profile in the last decade that it deserves its own heading. It is basically an easy-listening genre. Musicians of all different stripes have ventured into this
genre, from the immensely talented Jazz guitarist George Benson and the big bandleader Bob Mintzer (he is a key member of The Yellow jackets) to saxophonists Kenny G., Najee, and Dave Koz.

Perhaps the musician who did more to create the idiom than anyone, saxophonist Grover Washington, Jr., was competent in the Jazz language and used his knowledge of it to enlighten his forays into lighter-weight music. His proteges, however, rarely have his talent or his feeling for the blues.

**Soul Jazz:**

In the 1960s, soul Jazz took hard bop one step further in its pursuit of a young, urban crowd, and reduced the complexities of bop even further. It was not unusual for there to be a repeated loop of a bassline as the “hook” for a piece. To be sure, this had been used in many other styles of Jazz before, but again, it was a matter of emphasis.

Whereas hard bop’s Art Blakey kept in touch with the new sounds of Jazz through the sidemen he chose, pianist Horace Silver played up the “funky” nature of his music and influenced a whole generation of musicians, some of whom brought big hits to other bands, including pianist Bobby Timmons’s classic, “Moanin,’” for the Blakey band.

Then there was the appearance of the organist Jimmy Smith in the mid-fifties, and his string of hit albums that merged his mastery of the Charlie Parker idiom with a penchant for “soul” and vestiges of R&B. The blues (as a form, not as an inspiration) played a much larger role in soul Jazz than it had in hard bop, and organ trios with guitar and drums popped up in clubs around the country.

Out of this milieu, came major talents like the guitarists George Benson and Grant Green; the organists Shirley Scott, Jimmy McGriff, and Richard “Groove” Holmes; and the
saxophonists Stanley Turrentine and Eddie Harris.

Back when Jazz was part of the mainstream of popular music, Armstrong, Ellington, and others could create works that had the potential to satisfy listeners who came to the music expecting sheer commercialism or sheer art (or any combination thereof).

By the time soul Jazz became a commodity in the mid-sixties, the vestiges of Jazz and R&B were fighting a losing battle against the encroaching hegemony of rock and roll, then in its English incarnation. Although some of it is quite commendable, little of soul Jazz has attained “classic” status in the pantheon of Jazz.

Stride:

This two-handed approach to Jazz piano is based in a strong, steady accompaniment in the left hand, which alternates between a low bass note and an answering chord played an octave or so higher. It is the effort taken to make these sometimes difficult jumps that led to the name “stride.” The right hand generally carries the melodic lead.

The great challenge is to take on this “Handful of Keys” (which is the name of a stride composition by Fats Waller) and make it swing. This is a virtuoso’s music, since the essential nature of this piano style is orchestral.

Counterpoint, shifts of rhythm and register, somehow haveto be accomplished not by horns, but by manipulation of ten fingers. And while the essential horn players of early Jazz were based in New Orleans, the men who invented Jazz piano for the most part wound up in and around New York City.

The ragtime pianists Eubie Blake and Luckey Roberts were great virtuosi and songwriters, and their stretching of ragtime’s limits during the 1910s pointed toward a new style. James P. Johnson, who picked up where they left off, has rightly been
called the “father of stride piano,” and from his innovations of the early 1920s flowed the great majority of Jazz piano styles.

Whereas ragtime was not an improvised music, Johnson became known for his ability to spin off variations on a theme that lasted for thirty minutes and more. His early recorded solos and piano rolls (most notably “Carolina Shout”) became the basic text that taught Duke Ellington and countless others how to make a piano swing.

And through Johnson’s disciple Thomas “Fats” Waller, we get a direct link to Count Basie. Waller was an even more refined pianist than Johnson, and while he composed many hit tunes and became a huge star, in artistic terms, he operated within the idiom that Johnson created. Another seminal figure was Willie “The Lion” Smith, who was more interested in harmonic variations than the others, and this was also to have a big influence on Ellington.

What all these men shared was an ability to generate a massive sense of swing from the steady beat of their left hands and the relentless melodic variations of their right. Because they frequently had to play for large groups of people, with no one else on the bandstand and no amplification, they were known for their larger-than-life personalities and great showmanship.

And though they have been few and far between, there have been players who have mastered this demanding tradition down through the decades. Don Ewell managed to be very creative while staying squarely in the idiom. Thelonious Monk’s music was rooted in a brilliantly original abstraction of stride piano. (It’s worth noting he knew James P. Johnson and liked to be told he sounded like him on occasion!)

And it is only a hop, skip, and a jump from Monk to contemporary Jazz piano, so the link to the stride tradition
remains vital. In recent years, Marcus Roberts has come up with some startling and swinging updates of this heritage.

**Swing:**

It took awhile for the young Jazz musicians of the ’20s and early ’30s to catch up with Louis Armstrong. When they did, and used his language as the basis for their own discoveries, they created what has become known as the “swing” style. This came to fruition when not only the soloists, but the rhythm sections (as a unit) and the big bands (as an ensemble) learned to play with Armstrong’s rhythmic feeling and phrasing.

The Count Basie rhythm section was the first to perfect this approach, with all four instruments blending into a cohesive whole greater than the sum of its parts. To be sure, there were other players and writers who also contributed, but there is no denying that it was Armstrong’s transformative example that served as the prime catalyst for what followed: one of those serendipitous moments when popular culture merged with a new and rapidly expanding art form, with both elements taking inspiration from the other.

Also, the interaction of the swing style with dancers cannot be overstated. As the popular dances that had their roots in the black community became more popular (a trend going back to the early twentieth century), the dancers and the swing musicians looked to each other for inspiration. This helped fuel both groups, and the third group that simply liked to listen and watch.

Pianists Teddy Wilson and Count Basie; saxophonists Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, and Benny Carter; clarinetist Benny Goodman; trumpeter Roy Eldridge; trombonists Jack Teagarden and Dickey Wells; drummers Jo Jones and Sid Catlett; bassist Walter Page; and xylophonist Red Norvo were among the best of this generation. They could sail along at any tempo,
skillfully encounter difficult harmonies, deal with the blues in an original fashion, and create solos of any length that were immaculately coherent and original.

The standard formation for their music was the big band. The bands of Count Basie, Benny Goodman, Jimmie Lunceford, Claude Thornhill, and Duke Ellington were certainly different from one another, but they also had much in common. They found a way to organize a large section of horns supported by a rhythm section that sustained an equilibrium between the composed elements and the spontaneous, improvised portions.

Each band varied the proportions, but all of these groups followed the same general formula much of the time: The ensemble would play the melody, with spots left open for the leader to help the public readily identify whose band it was; solos or a vocal followed, with the accompaniment being a reduction of Armstronglike phrases, played by one of, or a combination of, the horn sections. There might be a modulation, or an interlude, another solo, and then the climactic out choruses, usually featuring a high-note trumpet or clarinet.

While there were countless variations on this, this is the basic way these bands presented their music. The arrangers, who composed the music the bands played, maintained the same compositional thread that bound New Orleans Jazz. But since they had more instruments at their disposal, and the harmonic base of the music had continued to expand, they had more options.

The greatest soloists of the Swing Era needed an outlet for their Jazz playing where they could “stretch out,” and most of them either formed small groups of their own or established combos that alternated with the larger group. Basie’s Kansas City 6’s and 7’s (“Lester Leaps In” and “Dickie’s Dream”), the various Goodman chamber groups (“After You’ve Gone,” “Dizzy Spells,” and “Body and Soul”), the Ellington units under his
sidemen’s names (“C Blues,” “Love in My Heart,” and “Menelik”), and Chick Webb’s Chicks (“Stompin’ at the Savoy” and “I Got Rhythm”) all made many classic recordings.

There were a handful of small bands that existed by themselves, the most notable of which was the John Kirby Sextet. Its music was at once accessible and inveterately smart, and its popularity led to its becoming the first black band to have its own network radio spots.

**Third Stream:**

Jazz has been in dialogue with European classical music since its inception. The stride pianists, for instance, would often take a well-known classical piece and “jazz” it by changing the rhythms and improvising on it (this was also an aspect of ragtime). Composer/arrangers such as Bill Challis, Eddie Sauter, Billy Strayhorn, Paul Jordan, and Bob Graettinger found original ways to integrate elements taken directly from classical orchestral music into their own Jazz idioms.

But third stream as a discrete phenomenon was the brainchild of French hornist/composer/conductor Gunther Schuller. Thoroughly at home in any musical genre, Schuller sought in the mid-fifties to combine various elements of these disparate musics—the result of which would be a style without boundaries.

As he put it at the time, “It is a way of making music which holds that all musics are created equals coexisting in a beautiful brotherhood/sisterhood of musics that complement and fructify each other. . . . And it is the logical outcome of the American melting pot: E pluribus unum”.

Most of the classics of third stream came shortly after Schuller coined the term in 1957. Works by George Bussell (“All About Rosie”), John Lewis (“Three Little Feelings” and “Golden Striker”), J. J. Johnson (“Jazz Suite for Brass”), and
Bill Russo ("An Image of Man") managed to skirt the misunderstandings that eventually doom many artistic crosscultural amalgams.

Although it is little remembered today, Schuller helped John Lewis form the ambitious Orchestra U.S.A. in 1962. It lasted for three years, during the course of which they commissioned Harold Farberman (who was one of the cofounders), Jimmy Guiffre, Hall Overton, Gary McFarland, Benny Golson, and Teo Macero among others. The band itself comprised many first-call Jazz and classical players, and the featured artists included Ornette Coleman, Coleman Hawkins, and Gerry Mulligan. With all this music, it seems all the more strange that Orchestra U.S.A.’s recordings have been largely out of print since the ’60s.

Only a few adherents to the third-stream philosophy remain, most notably the pianist/educator Ron Blake. But at the turn of the new century, the genre clearly seems to have prefigured “World Music.” Here, we find room for the challenging admixtures of musical cultures that clarinetist Don Byron, saxophonists Steve Coleman and John Zorn, trumpeter Dave Douglas, and guitarist Bill Frisell have created.

**West Coast Jazz:**

Of all the labels out there, this is one of the most misleading. For although many of these players did live on the West Coast, most of them were not born there; the music they played had its roots solidly on the East Coast. Furthermore, there were many groups of musicians playing on the West Coast whose playing doesn’t fit into this category.

Nevertheless, it is a movement that has established its own canon. The musicians identified with this style were almost exclusively white, although their prime inspirations remained black players, many of whom were not doing nearly as well in the business as their white counterparts. This created a
series of personal and critical schisms that made objective evaluations of their music difficult.

West Coast Jazz is a subgenre of cool Jazz. Players who had been in the Stan Kenton and Woody Herman bands—trumpeter Shorty Rogers, reed man Jimmy Guiffre, drummer Shelly Manne—experimented throughout the 1950s with a wide range of compositional devices that succeeded more often than not, and offered a welcome contrast to the theme-solos-theme bop formula.

The various-sized groups led by pianist Gerry Mulligan (most famously his quartet with trumpeter Chet Baker) and saxophonist Stan Getz were also thought to be part of this West Coast crew, though their music related equally to the New Orleans/Kansas City stylings of Lester Young and the Basie small bands and to Charlie Parker.

The basic sound of West Coast Jazz came directly out of the Miles Davis Nonet and the Birth of the Cool recordings. The dynamics were kept relatively low, and the shadow of saxophonist Lester Young (or at least part of him) hovered over much of what they did.

The Very Best of JAZZ – Louis Armstrong, Frank Sinatra, Norah John, Diana Krall, Ella Fitzgerald