

An Introduction to Jazz

Grade 11 | Lesson Plan 7: Avant Garde/Free Jazz and Fusion

Adapted from Jazz in America: The National Jazz Curriculum

TOPICS:

1. Avant Garde/Free Jazz (1959-1970)¹
2. Fusion (1969-1990)
3. Cultural Implications

SESSION OBJECTIVES:

The student will:

1. gain a fundamental understanding of Avant Garde/Free Jazz
2. gain a fundamental understanding of Fusion
3. gain a fundamental understanding of Pop/Contemporary Jazz (AKA Smooth Jazz)
4. learn the basic definition of several terms associated with jazz
 - a. atonal
 - b. avant garde
 - c. fusion
 - d. intonation
 - e. pop/contemporary, aka "smooth jazz"
 - f. tonal
5. listen to Avant Garde/Free Jazz, Fusion, and Pop/Contemporary ("Smooth Jazz") recordings
6. participate in a class discussion regarding the cultural implications of jazz in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s

MATERIALS

1. Computer with internet connection
2. Speaker system

Note: This lesson plan includes prompts to play selections from a variety of jazz recordings. Many of the suggested recordings can be found on the Instrumental History of Jazz, which is available as a YouTube playlist, as well as a variety of streaming and/or download outlets including iTunes, Apple Music and Spotify.

INSTRUCTIONAL ACTIVITIES:

The instructor will:

1. discuss Avant Garde/Free Jazz
2. discuss Fusion
3. discuss Pop/Contemporary Jazz ("Smooth Jazz")
4. play significant Avant Garde/Free Jazz recordings
5. play significant Fusion recordings
6. play significant Pop/Contemporary ("Smooth Jazz") recordings
7. lead a class discussion regarding the cultural implications of jazz during the Free Jazz and Fusion Eras
8. inform students that if they happen to own a favorite jazz CD that they would like to share with the class, they should bring it to the final jazz class

¹ All styles of jazz from Dixieland to contemporary are still being performed and recorded today; all style dates given are the approximations of when each respective style came to the forefront of jazz and experienced its most concentrated development; of course, styles and dates overlap.

Content Outline

I. Avant Garde/Free Jazz (1959-1970)²

A. Reaction to Cool and Hard Bop

1. if Bebop was a reaction to Swing, Cool was a reaction to the reaction, and Hard Bop was a reaction to the reaction to the reaction, then Free Jazz was a reaction to all that
 - a. Swing, Bebop, Cool, and Hard Bop improvisations were based on predetermined chord progressions, standard forms, and choruses (see Lesson Plan 2)
 - b. Free Jazz improvisations were generally not based on predetermined chord progressions, forms, and choruses
 - i. Free Jazz musicians "freed" themselves of these "constraints," improvising solely on the emotion of the moment
 - ii. with Free Jazz, traditional values of melody, harmony, and rhythm were discarded, providing more improvisational freedom for the soloist; preconceived notions of what jazz was "supposed" to be (and even what *music* was "supposed" to be) were laid to the wayside
2. Free Jazz allowed for the exploration of new tonal colors, that is, new harmonies (or lack of same), sounds, and musically expressed emotions
3. from its earliest roots (i.e., the music of West African slaves), jazz has been related to and represented freedom; embedded in Free Jazz was the freedom:
 - a. to explore new musical horizons
 - b. to improvise in "unorthodox" ways
 - c. from the musical past
 - d. from traditional melodies
 - e. from common practice scales, chords, and rhythms
4. Free Jazz pushed the limits of what musicians could play and what audiences could accept
5. Free Jazz widened the emotional and expressive parameters of jazz
6. discarding European chord progressions, Free Jazz became even more Afrocentric than Hard Bop; it reached back to the ethnic roots of the music, becoming modern, in a sense, by returning to the primitive

B. Performance Practices

1. the **size** and **instrumentation** of Avant Garde/Free Jazz groups were more varied than those of prior jazz genres (e.g., Ornette Coleman's recording Free Jazz in 1960 featured a "double quartet," that is, two quartets playing together each having bass and drums and two horns)⁸
2. the music was not based on traditional chords, forms, or structures
3. the music was not tonal, that is, based on an accepted, somewhat predictable series of notes and chords; instead it was atonal, that is not based on an accepted, somewhat predictable series of notes and chords
4. the concept of pitch varied according to musical circumstances, personal feelings of the performers, context, accompanying rhythms, etc., not what notes sounded "right" with the chord being played at the moment; intonation (i.e., playing "in tune" as opposed to playing "in the cracks" between the notes on the piano) was a matter of context and expression
5. the use of rhythm was highly varied, often with no steady pulse; melodies and phrases served as the impetus for rhythm and pulse and vice versa

C. Important Figures

1. Ornette Coleman, alto saxophone (1930-2015)

² The octet on Ornette Coleman's 1960 release *Free Jazz* was comprised of alto sax, pocket trumpet (a smaller, specially made trumpet), regular trumpet, bass clarinet, two basses, and two drum sets.

2. Cecil Taylor, piano (1929-2018)
3. Art Ensemble of Chicago (led by trumpet player Lester Bowie)

D. Listening Examples

1. *Enter Evening*, Cecil Taylor
2. *Full Force*, Art Ensemble of Chicago
3. *Lonely Woman*, Ornette Coleman

II. Fusion (1969-1990)

A. Jazz musicians fuse jazz and rock

1. as a result of the rapid maturation of rock through the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, and others in the 1960s, jazz and rock were ripe for a merger
2. Fusion saw jazz musicians experiment with electronic instruments (e.g., electric guitars, electric basses, electronic keyboard synthesizers, etc.), rock rhythms, long vamps, and rock riffs
3. Fusion basically fused the sophistication and virtuosity of jazz with the raw power and emotion of rock

B. Reaction to Free Jazz

1. many jazz musicians resented the "art-for-art's-sake" attitude of Free Jazz players, accusing them of alienating jazz audiences with music that was relevant only to a special few
2. Fusion appealed to a broader spectrum of tastes, bringing to jazz a popularity not witnessed since the Swing era
3. generally speaking, Free Jazz ignored its audience ("art-for-art's-sake"); Fusion strived to reach and affect its audience
4. Free jazz was "cerebral;" Fusion, borrowing from rock's raw energy, was also "physical"
5. Free jazz was acoustic, Fusion was electric
6. Miles Davis' *Bitches Brew* was the landmark album that launched Fusion

C. Performance Practices

1. the size and instrumentation of Fusion groups varied, combining jazz and rock instruments; group size and instrumentation would often change from composition to composition
2. jazz instruments: trumpet, saxophone, acoustic (upright) bass
3. rock instruments: electric guitar, electric bass, electronic keyboard synthesizers
4. Fusion groups often employed multiple electronic keyboard players and percussionists (playing a wide variety of percussion instruments, e.g., congas, bongos, shakers, cymbals, etc.)
5. Fusion groups utilized amplification, synthesizers, reverb, distortion effects, and other electronic devices
6. Fusion groups were characterized by collective improvisation, high energy, heavy drama, extended (long) compositions/performances
7. Fusion repertoire consisted of almost exclusively original material (written specifically for/by the particular group recording/performing it)

D. Important Figures

1. Miles Davis, trumpet (1926-1991)
2. Weather Report (led by keyboardist Josef Zawinul and tenor saxophonist Wayne Shorter)
3. Herbie Hancock, piano and electric keyboards (b. 1940)
4. Chick Corea, piano and electric keyboards (b. 1940)
5. John McLaughlin, electric guitar (b. 1942)
6. Jaco Pastorius, electric bass (1951-1987)

E. Listening Examples

1. *Birdland*, Weather Report
2. *The Spin*, Yellow Jackets
3. *Chameleon*, Herbie Hancock

F. Besides rock, Fusion combined jazz with musical elements from such styles as funk, soul, and especially, Latin music; play *Salsa Caliente*, Tito Puente

G. Pop/Contemporary Jazz, aka "Smooth Jazz" (1970-today)

1. a simpler, more "listenable" commercial style of jazz
2. fuses jazz with black popular song, blues, rhythm and blues, soul, funk, rock, Latin, and gospel music
3. main focus: to sell recordings
4. jazz musicians "crossing over" into the pop field is nothing new (e.g., Louis Armstrong was a huge commercial and pop music success)
5. while many jazz purists object to Pop/Contemporary Jazz even being called jazz, the philosophy of jazz has usually been one of inclusiveness, not exclusivity (jazz has torn down barriers, not put them up)
6. many Pop/Contemporary Jazz artists are often excellent straight-ahead jazz (i.e., hard bop) players as well, performing and recording "smooth jazz" to supplement their income (e.g., George Benson is one of the greatest straight-ahead jazz guitarists of all time)
7. while less sophisticated than Hard Bop, Free Jazz, or Fusion, Pop/Contemporary Jazz is filled with a fresh light rhythmic buoyancy, offering "feel good" emotional content to its listener (music does not have to be sophisticated to be good)
8. Important Figures
 - a. George Benson, guitar (b. 1943)
 - b. Dave Grusin, piano and electric keyboards (b. 1934)
 - c. David Sanborn, alto saxophone (b. 1945)
 - d. Spyro Gyra (led by saxophonist Jay Beckenstein)
 - e. Grover Washington, tenor, alto, and soprano saxophones (1943-1999)
9. Play listening examples
 - a. *Morning Dance*
 - b. *Breezin'*, George Benson
 - c. *Mountain Dance*, Dave Grusin
 - d. *Mister Magic*, Grover Washington
 - e. *Change of Heart*, David Sanborn
10. inform students that if anyone happens to own a favorite jazz CD that they would like to share with the class, he/she should bring it to the final session

III. Cultural Implications

A. Avant Garde/Free Jazz

1. jazz musicians remained at the forefront of the artistic avant-garde
2. from its earliest roots, jazz has been about freedom; Free Jazz is a natural outgrowth of this issue
3. in a nation and world transformed by the social trauma, civil tumult, cultural and behavioral changes, drugs (including hallucinogenics that stimulated chemically-induced escapes from reality), and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction of the 1950's and 60's, artistic expression in all the arts was transformed.
4. For example, these decades witnessed:
 - a. free verse poetry
 - b. abstract art
 - c. circular novels
 - d. modern dance
 - e. Free Jazz
5. Free Jazz was very much a part of the post-World War II era, a time when traditional concepts of behavior, art, order, and even reality were questioned
6. Free Jazz reflected a growing movement in major American inner cities toward an Afrocentric form of spirituality

7. Free Jazz reflected both black pride and anger
8. via its blending of dissonant harmonies and simple naive-sounding chant-like tunes, Free Jazz reflected both the anger and lost innocence of African American childhood and tradition; it was able to express a vulnerability and fragility that black political militants could not express

B. Fusion

1. Fusion developed in the late 1960's out of perhaps the most confusing and pessimistic time for jazz and American society at large
2. For Americans, Fusion was the stage for new cultural roles in jazz brought on by the search for meaning in the context of multiple struggles:
 - a. against communism, North Vietnam, and poverty
 - b. for civil rights, racial equality, and "the American dream"
3. America's faith in progress was shaken by continuous images of bloodshed, waste, and corruption; its postwar feelings of affluence, righteousness, and liberal progress were thwarted
4. America responded to society's strife by turning inward, giving rise to the "me generation"
 - a. music became a vehicle for Americans' search for satisfaction
 - b. musical styles reflected America's various subcultures' separate and "private" preferences, not a shared public experience
5. "Smooth Jazz" was associated with the uncommitted, private, detached life styles of a fragmented 1970s mass public
6. although new cultural trends took the urgency and protest out of music, allowing mass marketing to direct much of popular musical taste in jazz, many social revolutions that had begun in the 1960's were continued and realized; that, too was reflected in the music
7. Fusion was heard as the backdrop of many motion pictures and television shows, especially adult thrillers (e.g., *Body Heat*, *Jagged Edge*, *Nine and a Half Weeks*, *Miami Vice*)