

An Introduction to Jazz

Grade 11 | Lesson Plan 1: What is Jazz?

Adapted from Jazz in America: The National Jazz Curriculum

TOPICS:

1. Course Introduction
2. What is Jazz
3. Jazz: America's musical contribution to the world

SESSION OBJECTIVES:

The student will:

1. gain an understanding of the course requirements
2. listen to portions of several recordings
3. gain a fundamental understanding of what jazz is (and what it is not), how, where, and by whom it originated, the musics it has influenced (and been influenced by), and its universal appeal

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. introduce the course and its requirements
2. play six diverse jazz recordings (30-90 seconds each), discussing with the students what they heard
3. discuss the basics of jazz and its historical and cultural foundations, giving the students a point of departure for the remainder of the course

Content Outline

I. Course Introduction

A. Description

1. An introduction to the history of jazz
2. A survey of the evolution of jazz styles from its inception to the present, contributions of important performers and composers, and musical techniques involved in the creation and performance of jazz

B. General Syllabus

1. What is Jazz
2. Elements of Jazz
 - a. Improvisation
 - b. Rhythm
 - c. Sounds and instruments associated with jazz
 - d. Harmony
 - e. Form
3. Jazz's Roots, New Orleans, Ragtime, and Dixieland (1900-1930)
4. Big Band Swing (1930s)
5. Bebop (1940s)
6. Cool and Hard Bop (1950s)
7. Avant Garde/Free Jazz; Fusion (1960-1990)
8. Jazz Today; Jazz Tomorrow (1990-2000+)

II. Jazz Recordings

A. Play a portion (30-90 seconds each) of each of the recordings in either Group 1 or 2; announce tune title and artist only; ask students to write down impressions (anything at all) about each recording.

1. Group 1
 - a. *Birdland*, Weather Report
 - b. *Maple Leaf Rag*, Scott Joplin
 - c. *Shaw 'Nuff*, Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker
 - d. *Full Force*, Art Ensemble of Chicago
 - e. *Mister Magic*, Grover Washington
 - f. *One O'Clock Jump*, Count Basie Orchestra
2. Group 2
 - a. *Chameleon*, Herbie Hancock
 - b. *The Entertainer*, John Arpin
 - c. *How High The Moon*, Ella Fitzgerald
 - d. *Lonely Woman*, Ornette Coleman
 - e. *Take Five*, The Dave Brubeck Quartet
 - f. *Main Stem*, Duke Ellington

B. Discussion – Discuss with the students what they heard (anything goes at this point, e.g., different instruments, rhythms, emotions, likes and dislikes, etc.) What do all these such diverse tunes have in common? It's all jazz; it all reflects the art of improvisation: partly planned, partly spontaneous.

III. What is Jazz (and what it is not)

- Jazz is musical conversation: a partly planned and partly spontaneous musical dialogue among the musicians who are performing it.
- While performing (or practicing), jazz musicians utilize the inspiration of the moment; their knowledge of music theory; their life experience; their social, political, and economic surroundings; their technical savvy on their instruments; and especially all of the music (particularly jazz and blues) they have ever heard that has influenced them (even the most avant-garde jazz artists reflect, in some way, the music of their musical forefathers). Jazz is a music of the present moment, anchored lovingly and respectfully in the past.
- Jazz is a newcomer to music—unlike symphonic music, folk music, opera, Eastern music, etc., jazz is only a century old.
- Jazz was born out of the Black experience in America, basically fusing African and European musical traditions. Evolving from slave work songs, spirituals (religious Black American folk songs), blues, brass band music, and ragtime (a rhythmically sophisticated piano style), jazz first appeared in the culturally diverse city of New Orleans in the early 1900s.
- African Americans devised the major elements of jazz in its formative years and were the primary pioneers of stylistic changes in later decades. Today, jazz is performed, innovated, and listened to by people all over the world from virtually every ethnicity, religion, and culture.
- Jazz has influenced and been influenced by other musics: rock, rap, country, funk, Latin, classical, blues, gospel, African, Eastern, pop, folk, hip-hop, etc., etc.
- Jazz, while extremely diverse and all-encompassing, is its own unique art form. It is more about the way the music is played rather than what is played (more on this later).
- As far as musics go, jazz is relatively complex; there are many musical, technical, intellectual, and emotional elements happening simultaneously (more on this later). Jazz makes far more demands on the listener than do most popular styles which are fundamentally simpler than jazz, requiring less from the listener. The more one knows about jazz (i.e., how to listen, its history, evolution of its styles, key players, forms, relationship to American history and culture, etc.), the more one can appreciate and enjoy it, even possibly gaining insight into his/her humanity via aesthetic experience—jazz's ultimate goal.
- Although complicated, the core of jazz is about feeling, not intellectual definition.

IV. Jazz is the United States of America's musical contribution to the world

A. Jazz is indigenous to the United States, having its birth and much of its evolution there.

1. In 1987 the Joint Houses of Congress passed a resolution declaring jazz an American National Treasure.
2. Jazz masters have been honored in Washington, D.C. (as well as throughout the country), appeared on postage stamps, etc.

B. Throughout America's turbulent 20th century, jazz entertained, interested, affected, and inspired Americans; it has contributed to, and been a reflection of, American culture.

1. Jazz has inspired more praise and more controversy than any other American music
2. Jazz musicians have been utilized as cultural intermediaries and American ambassadors
3. Jazz, more than any other music, has been closely associated with the geographical, social, political, and economic affects of American cities as well as the fluctuating reputation of American culture throughout the world
4. Jazz, more than any other music, has been intimately linked with legal and social equality for all, particularly African Americans
5. Jazz emerged out of ragtime at the turn of the century during a tumultuous period of urban and industrial growth
6. In the 20s, jazz symbolized the cultural struggle between modernists and traditionalists

- a. This period in American history has been coined the "Jazz Age"
 - b. As the "new" jazz music was, in part, a rejection of what traditionalists thought music was "supposed" to be, it was a metaphor for the rejection of Victorian values which dominated 19th century American life
7. In the 30s, jazz reached new levels of sophistication in the Swing Era, reflecting America's need for self-esteem following the Great Depression
 8. The World War II era witnessed rapid changes in American tastes as well as logistics of making music (e.g., the decline of large ensembles in favor of the jazz combo was, in part, due to economic and social factors)
 9. In the late 50s and 60s, avant-garde and free jazz reflected America's social and political changes and the loosening of strict standards of behavior

C. Today, jazz is universal

1. It is performed and listened to by people from virtually every ethnicity, religion, and attitude
2. Skilled performers and composers from around the world have made it their own and jazz continues to hold cultural and historical significance for many countries
3. This may, in part, be considered a reflection of the world becoming "smaller" (via technology and mass communication) and, perhaps, of the planet's best-intentioned striving to bring its peoples together