

An Introduction to Jazz

Grade 5 | Lesson Plan 7: Free Jazz and Fusion

Adapted from Jazz in America: The National Jazz Curriculum

TOPICS:

1. Free Jazz
2. Fusion

SESSION OBJECTIVES:

The students will:

1. gain a full understanding of free jazz and fusion
2. explore the cultural and social basis of free jazz and fusion in the 1960's and 1970's

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 the fundamentals of free jazz and fusion
2. discuss the historical and cultural implications of free jazz fusion
3. play various jazz recordings, including examples of free jazz and fusion

STUDENT ACTIVITIES:

The students will:

1. participate in a class discussion regarding free jazz and fusion
2. participate in a class discussion regarding jazz history in the historical context of the 1960's and 1970's
3. listen to jazz recordings of free jazz and fusion

Content Outline

I. Free Jazz

A. The Music

Free Jazz was at the forefront of jazz and went through its most concentrated growth and development from 1959 – 1970.

B. Musical Freedom

Unlike previous styles of jazz whose compositions (songs) were based on a series of predetermined chords, Free Jazz compositions were not based on a series of predetermined chords.

1. Free Jazz was simply based on sound.
2. Free Jazz musicians experimented with making all kinds of sounds on their instruments, including squeaks and squawks.
3. It was called Free Jazz because without having to follow a predetermined structure, musicians were "free" to play whatever they wanted.
4. Without having to worry about what chord they were on and what chord comes next, musicians were free to experiment with sound and explore emotions with their music.
5. The musicians still listened and reacted to each other very much, perhaps more than any other style of jazz.

C. Atonality

Because there were no chords to follow, Free Jazz (for the most part) was *atonal*; that is, the music was not based on a "tonal system" like most other music (pop, rock, other styles of jazz, classical music, etc.).

1. Because of the atonal nature of Free Jazz, many find the music unusual and difficult to listen to.
2. However, if you approach listening to the music without any preconceived notions of how music is "supposed" to sound, Free Jazz is very artistic and expresses deep emotions.

D. Collective Improvisation

Unlike Bebop in which there would be one soloist at a time, Free Jazz involved more collective improvisation; that is, everyone in the band improvised at the same time, continuously reacting to each other.

E. Ornette Coleman

One of the most important Free Jazz artists is saxophonist Ornette Coleman.

F. The Year 1959

1959 was a great year for jazz:

1. Besides Free Jazz, all styles of jazz were being played and listened to, including Hard Bop, Cool, and Modal Jazz.
2. Landmark recordings include John Coltrane's "Giant Steps" (Hard Bop), Dave Brubeck's "Time Out" (Cool Jazz), Miles Davis' "Kind of Blue" (Modal Jazz), and Ornette Coleman's "The Shape of Jazz to Come" (Free Jazz).

G. Listening Examples

1. Cecil Taylor's "Enter Evening" and the Art Ensemble of Chicago's "Full Force" (accessible by YouTube)
2. Ornette Coleman's "Lonely Woman" (also via YouTube)

H. Cultural Implications of Free Jazz

1. Free Jazz represented the loosening of standards of behavior in the turbulent 1960s.
2. Free Jazz was predominantly played by African American musicians and often expressed anger and dissatisfaction regarding the lack of civil rights in American society.
3. Free Jazz was primarily an East Coast, urban (e.g., New York) phenomenon.

II. Fusion

A. The Music

Fusion was at the forefront of jazz and went through its most concentrated growth and development from 1969 – 1990.

B. Jazz + Rock = Fusion

Fusion is the blending of jazz and rock (hence, the term “fusion,” as in “fusing” together the musical elements of jazz and rock).

1. From jazz, fusion got its sophistication and complexity: sophisticated improvisations and complex interplay among the musicians.
2. From rock, fusion got its power, rhythm, and simplicity: electronic instruments (i.e., electric guitars, basses, and keyboard synthesizers), rock rhythms (i.e., straight -- not swung -- eighth notes), and simple harmony (i.e., often just long one or two chord vamps).

C. Reaction to the Music

Fusion, at least in part, came about because jazz musicians wanted to capitalize on the popular appeal of rock music.

1. To a degree, it worked; many rock fans who were not into “regular” jazz (hard bop) did support fusion artists (buying records and attending concerts).
2. It was more likely for rock fans to support fusion than jazz fans.
3. Many jazz musicians and fans did not consider fusion real jazz.
4. But, like free jazz, if you approach fusion without any preconceived notions of what jazz is “supposed” to be, you will most likely find it very artistic and able to express emotions that “straight ahead” (mainstream) jazz does not.

D. Important Figures

As with hard bop, cool, and modal jazz, Miles Davis was at the forefront of the fusion movement. Other important fusion artists include:

1. Weather Report
2. Chick Corea
3. Herbie Hancock
4. The Yellowjackets

E. Smooth Jazz

Smooth jazz is also known as Pop/Contemporary jazz.

1. Smooth jazz -- a simpler, easy-to-listen-to, and more commercial form of fusion -- became popular in the mid 1970s and 1980s and is still quite popular today.
2. Important smooth jazz artists include:
 - a. saxophonist David Sanborn
 - b. guitarist George Benson
 - c. keyboardist Dave Grusin
 - d. saxophonist Grover Washington, Jr.
 - e. Spyro Gyra (a group that also fused Latin music into the mix)

F. Listening Examples

1. Fusion: Weather Report’s *Birdland*, the Yellowjackets’ *The Spin*, Herbie Hancock’s *Chameleon*
2. Smooth Jazz: Spyro Gyra’s *Morning Dance*, George Benson’s *Breezin’*, Dave Grusin’s *Mountain Dance*, Grover Washington’s *Mister Magic*, David Sanborn’s *Change of Heart*