

## An Introduction to Jazz

### Grade 5 | Lesson Plan 1: What is Jazz and Why It's Important to the World

*Adapted from Jazz in America: The National Jazz Curriculum*

#### TOPICS:

1. What is Jazz?
2. Jazz Recordings
3. Basic Musical Elements
4. Improvisation
5. Jazz Sounds
6. Rhythm
7. A Perfect Democracy
8. Where Did Jazz Come From?
9. Ragtime: The Precursor to Jazz
10. Summary – Why Jazz is Important to the World

#### SESSION OBJECTIVES

Students will gain a fundamental understanding of:

1. jazz characteristics
2. basic musical elements
3. musical elements specific to jazz
4. how, where, and by whom jazz originated
5. jazz as a metaphor for democracy

#### 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 basic elements of music
2. introduce the basic elements and origins of jazz
3. examine the roles of people in a democratic society using jazz as a metaphor
4. play jazz recordings, discussing with the students what they heard
5. explore why jazz is considered a democratic art form

#### STUDENT ACTIVITIES:

Students will:

1. participate in a class discussion regarding:
  - a. "what is jazz"
  - b. the basic elements of music
  - c. the basic elements and origins of jazz
  - d. why jazz is considered a democratic music
2. compare improvisation with regular conversation
3. listen to various jazz saxophonists to compare and contrast their individual sounds (tone)
4. listen to jazz recordings

## I. What is Jazz?

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

1. Jazz was born in the United States.
2. Jazz is a model for everyday life:
  - a. It is partly planned and partly spontaneous; that is, as the musicians perform a pre-determined tune, they have the opportunity to create their own interpretations within that tune in response to the other musicians' performances and whatever else may occur "in the moment" -- this is called *improvisation* and it is the defining element of jazz.
  - b. In everything, from regular conversation to playing sports to cooking dinner, we are constantly improvising.
3. A jazz ensemble shows how democracy can function (but on a smaller scale), using the principle of individual freedom but with responsibility to the group. In other words, individual musicians have the freedom to express themselves however they want on their instrument as long as they maintain their responsibility to the other musicians by adhering to the overall framework and structure of the tune, listening to and supporting one another all the while.

### B. Jazz involves improvisation.

1. Improvisation is inventing something on the spur of the moment in response to a certain situation; in jazz, it is when musicians perform a different interpretation each time they play the same tune, that is, a tune is never played the exact same way twice, whether played by the same musicians or an entirely different group. The improvisation becomes its own musical dialogue between band members without any preconceived notion of what the final outcome will be.
2. Every time you talk to your friends, you are improvising (exactly what you are going to say is not planned ahead of time, it depends on what your friend says, then what you say, then what your friend says, and so on).
3. Jazz musicians do the same with their instruments, but rather than using words to communicate, they use music; it's kind of like musical conversation.

### C. Jazz is like a language.

1. Language is what we use to communicate thoughts, ideas, and feelings.
2. Languages such as English, Spanish or Chinese are used to communicate just about everything in life; however, they cannot express emotion (happiness, sadness, anger, and everything in between) in the same way as music; as a singular phenomenon, music communicates *emotion* to every human being on the planet, regardless of language, culture, or nationality.
  - a. that's why music is found in every culture
  - b. that's why music is a multi-billion dollar industry
  - c. that's why many people agree that they are far more emotionally affected by music than by even the most beautifully expressed words
3. With jazz, because of its improvisational aspect, musicians are communicating the "emotion of the moment;" that is, the emotion they are feeling WHILE they are performing (remember, when improvising, they are deciding what notes to play as they respond to the music of the moment and to the other musicians).
  - a. In this way, jazz is different from classical music, which is written down (composed) ahead of time and played the way the composer wrote it.
  - b. In jazz, most of the music heard during a solo is "spontaneously composed" by the musicians themselves and played the way the musicians feel at that given moment.
  - c. The spontaneity heard (or "felt") in jazz requires the listener to be alert at all times to the ever-changing aspects of a given interpretation of a tune.

- d. A helpful analogy: classical music is to jazz as reading a good book aloud is to having a good conversation; while a printed book never changes, a conversation changes according to the situation or moment, depending on with whom you are having the conversation.
- e. The same jazz tune (song) is never performed the same way twice; while it might start and end the same, the middle part is played differently every time.

#### D. “Way” vs. “What”

In jazz, it's more about the *way* a song is played, rather than *what* song is played.

1. Jazz musicians can create new elements and moods for any song; for instance, an up-tempo (fast) song can be played as a ballad (slow song) and vice versa.
2. Jazz musicians have their own, unique way of playing their instruments.
  - a. Rather than just the basic sound of the instrument itself, jazz musicians strive to develop their own, unique sound (tone) on their instruments – a sound that expresses them personally (just like singers do with their voices). Some like to say that a jazz musician’s sound on his/her instrument is simply an extension of his/her voice. Good jazz musicians have the ability to produce a wide variety of sounds on their instruments, depicting a wide variety of emotions and feelings (again, just like singers do with their voices).
  - b. A good comparison: just like all human voices sound different from each other (but you can still tell it’s a human voice), all jazz saxophonists sound different from each other (but you can still tell it’s a saxophone).
  - c. In order to be able to hear the difference, you’ve got to listen *a lot*; the more you listen to a particular jazz musician, the more you’re able to recognize that player by his/her sound alone. Again, it’s just like human voices. Think about how easy it is to recognize the voices of your family members and closest friends compared to people you don’t hear that much. Also notice how no two singers sound exactly alike, yet they’re both using the same “instrument” (vocal cords).
  - d. Jazz fans often prefer one jazz artist over another because of his/her own unique sound; that is, his/her *particular* tone on the instrument.

#### E. Jazz is hard to play, but good players make it look easy.

1. Learning to play an instrument is challenging enough, so you can imagine how difficult it is to learn how to play an instrument AND learn how to improvise.
2. But, like anything else, the earlier you start learning how to improvise and the longer you do it, the easier it gets and the better you become (just like reading, sports, etc.). For professional jazz musicians, playing their instruments is as natural as skating is to a professional hockey player. Hockey players aren’t thinking about skating while they’re playing their sport; they’re thinking about and simply reacting to what’s going on around them (they’re improvising). Jazz musicians aren’t thinking about their instruments while they’re playing; they’re thinking about and simply reacting to what’s going on around them (they’re improvising).
3. Anyone who can play a musical instrument can learn how to improvise (just like anyone who can talk can learn to converse, anyone who can dribble and shoot a basketball can learn how to play the game of basketball, etc.).
4. Jazz is a complex form of music, so it often doesn’t have “instant appeal” like other more familiar styles of music such as pop, rock, and hip-hop. A jazz tune sometimes requires that you listen many times before you fully understand or enjoy it.
  - a. But that’s OK. The more you put into something generally, the more you get out of it.
  - b. The more you put into listening and understanding what jazz is all about, the more enjoyment you’re going to get.

## II. Jazz Recordings

## A. Brief Listening Examples

Play a portion (30-90 seconds each) of the following six recordings. Announce the tune's title and artist only. Ask students to write down impressions (anything at all) about each recording.

1. *Birdland*, Weather Report
2. *Maple Leaf Rag*, Scott Joplin
3. *Shaw 'Nuff*, Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker
4. *Mister Magic*, Grover Washington, Jr.
5. *One O'Clock Jump*, Count Basie Orchestra

## B. Discussion

Discuss with the students what they heard (e.g., different instruments, rhythms, emotions, likes and dislikes, etc.).

1. All of the tunes are SO different yet share something in common (they're all jazz) – just like people around the world (they're all people).
2. What do all these diverse tunes have in common? They're all jazz. They all reflect the art of improvisation: partly planned, partly spontaneous.

## III. Basic Musical Elements

### A. Note

1. A note is a single pitch of music, (e.g., if you strike a single key on the piano, that is one note).
2. Notes can be high (right side of the piano keyboard), low (left side of the piano keyboard), or in the "midrange" (middle of the piano keyboard).
3. Notes can be played on any instrument or sung by the human voice.

### B. Melody

1. A melody is a group of notes played or sung in succession, (e.g., when a song is played or sung, the melody you hear is simply a group of notes one after the other).
2. The particular order of notes, as well as the length of each note (i.e., whether it is short, sustains for a long time, or somewhere in between), are what make each melody different and recognizable.
3. When you sing a song aloud, or imagine it in your mind, you are most likely singing or imagining the song's melody.

### C. Chord

1. A chord is two or more different notes played at the same time.
2. Most instruments (e.g., saxophone, trumpet, trombone, human voice) can only play one note at a time and, therefore, can't play chords; these are referred to as single-note instruments.
3. Instruments that can play chords are piano (just strike more than one key simultaneously) and guitar (just strum across more than one string).
4. Two or more musicians playing single-note instruments can produce a chord together if they each play a different note at the same time; when they do this, they are producing harmony (singers in choirs do this all the time).
5. Chord = Harmony (they are synonymous).
6. Chords help depict the music's emotional content.
  - a. Depending on the particular notes that are played (simultaneously), chords can portray every conceivable emotion, (e.g., happy, sad, exciting, mysterious, angry, and many more) – even those nuances of emotion for which there are no words (that's why we have music in the first place: to express emotions that are beyond words).

- b. Even changing just one note in a chord, say, from the notes C-E-G to the notes C-Eb (E flat)-G, can change the emotion depicted by the chord drastically.
- c. Most chords used in jazz have 3 to 6 notes.
- d. Whereas different notes played in succession are called a melody, different chords played in succession are called a chord progression; in jazz (as well as most popular music), melodies are accompanied by a chord progression (a series of chords).

#### **D. Accompaniment**

- 1. Whereas the melody of a song (the most distinguishable part of a song) is what's sung or played "up front," all the music in the background is called the accompaniment.
- 2. The accompaniment consists of all the chords the pianist and/or guitarist play as well as everything else (what the bassist plays, what the drummer plays, etc.) being played behind the melody.

### **IV. Improvisation**

#### **A. Basic Definition**

Simply put, improvisation means making it up as you go along.

#### **B. Improvisation is similar to conversation.**

Improvisation can be considered "musical conversation."

#### **C. Learning to Improvise**

Jazz musicians learn how to improvise in a way that is similar to how kids learn to talk.

- 1. Young jazz musicians learning how to improvise listen to other jazz musicians improvise and try to imitate them; kids (even babies) learn how to talk by listening to others talk and trying to imitate them.
- 2. Jazz musicians learning how to play their instruments play their instruments a lot; kids learning how to talk, talk a lot.
- 3. To play better, jazz musicians study instrumental technique (the physical mechanics of playing an instrument) and music theory (how notes and chords fit together); to speak better, kids study pronunciation and grammar.

#### **D. "Hearing" Notes in Your Mind**

When jazz musicians improvise, they are playing the notes that they "hear" (imagine) in their mind; they "hear" these notes just a split second before they play them (just like when you are talking, you "hear" the words in your head just a split second before you say them, that is, you are thinking the words in your mind immediately before you speak them. It happens so quickly and so naturally that it seems simultaneous, but in actuality, the thought occurs a microsecond before the action).

### **V. Jazz Sounds**

#### **A. Jazz Instruments**

Although jazz can be played on any instrument (including the human voice), the most common instruments on which jazz is played are saxophone, trumpet, trombone, piano, bass, drums, and guitar.

#### **B. Particular Sound**

The particular sound each jazz musician makes on his/her instrument is as important as the instrument itself.

1. Jazz musicians strive to have their own, personal sound (tone) on their instrument; for instance, every saxophone will still sound like a saxophone no matter who's playing it, but every saxophonist will sound different from every other saxophonist (at least slightly); often you have to listen to jazz a long time to be able to hear the differences, but when you do, it's awesome.
2. The sound can be raspy, edgy, rough, smooth, pretty, soulful, warm, dark, light, harsh, or any one of dozens of other descriptions including combinations of descriptions and an infinite number of nuances – just like the human voice (notice how no two human voices sound exactly the same); like singers do with their voices, jazz musicians strive to reproduce on their instrument the sound they “hear” (imagine) in their minds.
3. Jazz sounds are hard to describe in words (the descriptors listed above hardly do a good job – so the only way to really know jazz sounds is to listen to jazz!
4. Listen to these recordings from different saxophonists. Can you hear differences between them?
  - a. Charlie Parker: *A Night in Tunisia*
  - b. John Coltrane: *Giant Steps*
  - c. Sonny Rollins: *St. Thomas*
  - d. Paul Desmond: *Take Five*

### C. Each Instrument's Responsibility

1. Horns: The saxophone, trumpet, and trombone (as well as any other single-note instrument, including the human voice) are responsible for playing melodies, both written (e.g., the “head”), and improvised (their individual solos).
2. The Rhythm Section: The piano, bass, and drums comprise the rhythm section. Their primary role is to accompany and provide support for the horn players as well as each other; they may also improvise solos.
  - a. The pianist's primary job is to play chords (the music that accompanies the melodies) in a lively, rhythmic fashion.
    - i. This is called comping.
    - ii. Notice how it comes from the word “accompany”.
    - iii. The pianist also improvises melodically. When doing this, he/she improvises a melody by playing single notes in the right hand while comping the chords in the left hand (pretty cool!).
  - b. The bassist's primary job is to play the roots of the chords and “lay down a great groove.” The bass is the foundation, the bottom, the pulse, the “glue” that keeps everyone together.
  - c. The drummer's primary job is to keep the beat steady and complement what the soloists (improvisers) are playing. By introducing rhythmic accents and laying down a great groove with the bassist, the drummer adds excitement to the performance.
3. Guitar: The guitarist is versatile. He/she can be like a horn player (that is, playing single note melodies), or like a pianist (that is, comping chords).

## VI. Rhythm

### A. The Beat

Most styles of jazz keep a steady beat. That is, if you're tapping your foot along to the beat of the music, it stays constant, not slowing down or speeding up.

### B. Tempo

Tempo is the speed of the beat. Jazz tunes can be played at any tempo from extremely slow (ballads) to extremely fast (“burning”).

## C. Swing

Swing is important to jazz and, like so many words in the English language, has several definitions (context determines how the word is being used).

1. The two most common uses of the word are:
  - a. When everyone in the band is in sync, playing together and really grooving along with a nice buoyancy, they are said to be “swinging.” Swing is integral to a good jazz performance (jazz great Duke Ellington said: “It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing” and wrote a famous jazz tune with that title).
  - b. Swing is also a way of playing eighth notes (consecutive notes played on each down and up beat): swing means that while keeping the beat (foot tapping) steady, rather than each note being held for the exact same length of time, the notes falling on the downbeats are held twice as long as those falling on the upbeats, making a long-short, long-short, long-short, long-short pattern and giving the music a kind of lilt. When jazz is played this way, it is said to have a swing feel.
2. Like so many things about jazz, swing is hard to describe in words, but when you hear it, you know it.
3. For an excellent example of jazz played with a swing feel, listen to Count Basie’s *One O’Clock Jump*.
4. For an example of jazz that doesn’t swing (in the sense of the second definition above) but is still great jazz, listen to Herbie Hancock’s *Chameleon*. Rather than having a swing feel, this style of jazz has a straight eighth note feel (i.e., the eighth notes are equal value in length, not having the long-short, long-short lilt of the swing feel).

## D. The Swing Era

Most jazz is played with a swing feel. In fact, since this way of playing dominated the style of jazz that was performed by the big bands in the 1930s and 1940s, the period is often referred to as the “Swing Era” (for examples of tunes from the Swing Era, listen to Count Basie’s *One O’Clock Jump* and/or Fletcher Henderson’s *Wrappin’ it Up*.)

# VII. Jazz – A Perfect Democracy

## A. Democracy

Democracy is a government in which power and responsibility are vested in the people and exercised by them. According to United States President Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865), democracy is a government “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

## B. Democracy and Freedom

Although the terms democracy and freedom are often used interchangeably, they are not the same; democracy is individual freedom but with responsibility to the group.

1. In a democratic society, individuals have the freedom to do whatever they wish as long as it doesn’t interfere with anyone else.
2. In a perfect democratic society, what the individuals happen to freely choose to do enhances the whole group.
3. If all people freely chose to work hard, not commit crime, be fair, and not discriminate, we would have a perfect democratic society.
  - a. unfortunately, not all people think this way
  - b. things like greed, people wanting power, and racism get in the way

### C. A Jazz Combo as a Society

A jazz combo is an example of a perfect democracy.

1. Each player has the freedom to play whatever he/she wants.
  - a. But, at the same time, each player wants to play something that will not only please himself/herself, but make the whole group sound better as well, enhancing the overall sound.
  - b. Musicians work together on this, supporting each other while not compromising their own artistic individuality.
2. The best jazz bandleaders (e.g., Miles Davis) want their fellow musicians (a.k.a. sidemen) to express themselves the way they want and not just do the bandleader's "bidding."
  - a. In jazz, the best bandleaders encourage their sidemen to think and play however they wish, knowing that the entire group, in turn, will get more ideas and be inspired to play better individually and collectively. The leader and the sidemen work through each song as a team, learning from, complementing, and enhancing each other as they go along.
  - b. This is the same for the rhythm section and soloist. The rhythm section players want to support, complement, excite, spur on, interact with, and enhance the soloist; the soloist, in turn, wants to interact with, inspire, and be inspired by the rhythm section.
3. Jazz musicians realize that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.
  - a. Each individual part is enhanced by the group, (i.e., each individual player gets better and comes up with more musical ideas because of the others in the group).
  - b. Together, the musicians can do so much more than they could ever do individually. They need each other to accomplish both their individual and collective goals.
  - c. Jazz musicians realize the music is better because each player is different; this brings something new to the music.
  - d. If everyone in the band were the same, the music would probably be boring (there wouldn't be much give and take, learning from one another, or enjoyment).
  - e. In a jazz group, it doesn't matter what color you are or what your ethnicity is. What matters is who you are inside and how you play.

### D. Listening Examples

Remember that a jazz ensemble functions like democracy in action. Each participant has the freedom to express themselves while also remaining respectful of the group. Listen to any recording by Miles Davis, like *So What* or *All Blues*, for an example of democracy at work.

### E. Imagine

Just imagine how it would be if our society worked like a jazz group.

## VIII. Where Did Jazz Come From?

### A. New Orleans via Africa and Europe

Jazz was born in the Southern part of the United States, in the American city of New Orleans, Louisiana a little more than 100 years ago (early 1900s), but its roots can be found in the musical traditions of both Africa and Europe. In fact, some people say that jazz is a union of African and European music.

1. From African music, jazz got its:
  - a. rhythm and "feel"
  - b. "blues" quality
  - c. tradition of playing an instrument in your own expressive way, making it an "extension" of your own human voice
2. From European music, jazz got its:



- a. harmony – that is, the chords that accompany the tunes (the chords played on the piano); jazz harmony is similar to classical music's harmony
- b. instruments – most of the instruments used in jazz originated in Europe (saxophone, trumpet, piano, etc.)
3. Musical improvisation came from both traditions.

## B. Why New Orleans?

New Orleans was the perfect city for all of these elements to come together; it was:

1. a port city (with people arriving from all parts of the world).
2. a meeting place for people of different ethnic groups.
3. a city with a nightlife, where musicians had opportunities to play together, learn from each other, and blend all of these elements.

## C. African-American Experience

Jazz was born out of and evolved through the African-American experience in the U.S.

1. Jazz evolved from slave songs and spirituals (religious African-American folk songs).
2. Jazz's originators and most important early innovators were primarily African Americans.

## D. Louis Armstrong

The most important jazz originator and first truly great jazz soloist (improviser) was trumpet player Louis Armstrong. Listen to his recording of *Dippermouth Blues*.

## E. Jazz is all over the world.

Today, jazz is played and listened to by people of all cultures and ethnicities and includes musical elements and styles from all over the world; jazz has gone from being the United States's music to being the world's music.

# IX. Ragtime

## A. Piano Style

Ragtime is primarily a solo piano style and was the immediate precursor to jazz.

1. It originated in the late 1800s and early 1900s.
2. It consists of each hand doing something different:
  - a. The left hand plays a steady, almost march-like succession of alternating bass notes and chords in a steady "oom-pah, oom-pah, oom-pah, oom-pah" fashion.
  - b. The right hand plays syncopated melodies in a "ragged" fashion (hence the name "ragtime").
3. Ragtime is primarily an African-American invention and was a source of pride to African-American composers, musicians, and listeners.
4. One of ragtime's inventors and most important pianists and composers was Scott Joplin.
5. Since ragtime was conceived and developed before records were invented, it was "recorded" on piano rolls.
  - a. Piano rolls were long rolls of thick paper that had holes (i.e., perforations) punched in them. When spun through a special type of mechanical piano (called a "player piano"), the instrument would mechanically play the notes indicated by the perforations; different songs had different patterns of perforations.

- b. By someone simply pumping two foot pedals back and forth at the bottom of the piano, the piano roll would spin through a mechanism that would press down the appropriate piano keys, making it play the song. The faster you pumped the pedals, the faster the tempo would be.
- 6. Ragtime really isn't jazz since it rarely includes improvisation. However, it was the immediate precursor of jazz.
  - a. Bands tried to imitate the ragtime style.
  - b. They added improvisation and, thus, jazz was born.
- 7. For an excellent example of ragtime, listen to Scott Joplin's *Maple Leaf Rag*.

## **B. Cultural Implications of Ragtime**

- 1. Ragtime represents music from both Europe and Africa.
  - a. The piano is a European instrument.
  - b. The left hand (steady march-like rhythm) was derived from European classical music and marches.
  - c. The chord progressions were rooted in European classical music.
  - d. Ragtime uses standard European notation (all the music was written).
  - e. The right hand's syncopated, "ragged" melodies, derived from complex polyrhythms (several different rhythms played simultaneously), have their roots in African music.
- 2. Ragtime was enjoyed by both European and African Americans as it reflected the full gamut from conservative to liberal attitudes.
  - a. Conservative example: ragtime was performed on the piano, a white middle class symbol of nostalgia and status.
  - b. Liberal example: ragtime's syncopations reflected the exciting pace of modern industrial life.
- 3. Listen once again to Scott Joplin's *Maple Leaf Rag* and see if you can "hear" these cultural implications in the music.

## **X. Summary – Why Jazz is Important to the World**

### **A. Jazz is a Universal Language**

- 1. Jazz is performed by (and thus communicated among) people of all ages, colors, nationalities, ethnicities, religions, personalities, and socioeconomic groups all over the world.
- 2. In a jazz group, it doesn't matter what age, color, gender, nationality, ethnicity, or religion you are; or how rich or poor you are; or what your personality is; or what you look like. All that matters in jazz is how well you play, how well you swing, and what you have inside.

### **B. Jazz Represents Our Most Important Values**

- 1. *Teamwork*
  - a. All members of a jazz group work as a team, supporting and complementing one another all the while.
  - b. A jazz group cannot function without teamwork.
- 2. *Unity with ethnic diversity*
- 3. *The correlation of hard work and goal accomplishment* – in jazz, it's a one-to-one correlation: the more you practice, the better you get.
- 4. *Democracy* – individual freedom but with responsibility to the group
- 5. *Persistence*

- a. Learning to play jazz doesn't come overnight; it takes years of practice to become a good jazz musician.
  - b. Learning to play jazz includes many ups & downs, disappointments, and discouragement along the way. Jazz musicians have learned the importance of persistence, that is, to never, ever, ever give up.
6. *Tolerance*
- a. If someone in a jazz group doesn't get along with another member of the group (musically or otherwise), they rise above it; they realize that they are there to serve the greater good.
  - b. Jazz musicians always find a way to get along with those they disagree with, musically and otherwise.
  - c. More often than not, jazz musicians' tolerance of things they initially "don't like" leads to growth, musically and otherwise.
7. *The vital importance of really listening to one another*
- a. Jazz musicians must listen to one another intensely in order to function.
    - i. The members of the rhythm section must intensely listen to each other in order for the music to groove; for example, the drummer doesn't know what to play unless he's intensely listening to the bassist and vice versa (and they both need to listen to the pianist and vice versa).
    - ii. The rhythm section and the soloists must intensely listen to each other and vice versa; they continuously support, complement, and inspire one another.
  - b. Wouldn't it be GREAT if all the world leaders were jazz musicians!