

## **An Introduction to Jazz**

### **Grade 8 | 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 student will:

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

#### **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 cultural and social basis of free jazz and 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. 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.

1. 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.
  - a. Free jazz was simply based on sound.
  - b. Free jazz musicians experimented with making all kinds of sounds on their instruments, including squeaks and squawks.
2. It was called free jazz because without having to follow predetermined chord progressions, musicians were “free” to play whatever they wanted.
  - a. 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.
  - b. the musicians still listened and reacted to each other very much, perhaps more than any other style of jazz.
3. 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.)
  - a. because of this, many find the music unusual and difficult to listen to.
  - b. 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.
4. Unlike bebop in which there would be one soloist at a time with chordal accompaniment, free jazz involved more *collective improvisation*, that is, everyone in the band improvised at the same time, continuously reacting to each other.
5. All styles of jazz have evolved over time from earlier styles; the main precursor of free jazz was modal jazz.
  - a. bebop, cool, and hard bop compositions were based on predetermined chord progressions; *modal jazz tunes*, however, were based on a predetermined mode, that is, a certain musical scale (a scale is particular series of seven notes).
  - b. In bebop, cool, and hard bop, the chords change very quickly; in modal jazz, on the other hand, the modes (the musical scales to be used for improvisation) change very slowly, often just once or twice in a chorus.
  - c. playing modal jazz, the musicians did not have to worry about the chords changing fast and frequently (as in bebop tunes) and could concentrate on improvising on just one scale (mode) for a long time; with only having to think about how they would mix up and play the seven notes in the mode, the musicians could concentrate more on the melodies they were spontaneously creating (improvising) and the expressiveness of their playing.
  - d. the most important modal jazz recording of all time is Miles Davis’ “Kind of Blue”.
  - e. the next step in the evolution of jazz was to do away with chord changes and modes all together and, thus, free jazz was born.
6. The most important free jazz artist is saxophonist Ornette Coleman.
7. 1959 was a great year for jazz.
  - a. besides free jazz, all styles of jazz were being played and listened to including hard bop, cool, and modal jazz.
  - b. 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).
8. Listen to examples of free jazz
  - a. Cecil Taylor’s *Enter Evening*

- b. Art Ensemble of Chicago's *Full Force*
- c. Ornette Coleman's *Lonely Woman*

## B. Cultural Implications

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.

1. *Fusion* is the blending of jazz and rock (hence, the term “fusion,” as in “fusing” together the musical elements of jazz and rock).
  - a. from jazz, fusion got its sophistication and complexity: sophisticated improvisations and complex interplay among the musicians.
  - b. 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).
2. Fusion, at least in part, came about because jazz musicians wanted to capitalize on the popular appeal of rock music.
  - a. 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).
  - b. it was more likely for rock fans to support fusion than jazz fans.
  - c. many jazz musicians and fans did not consider fusion real jazz.
  - d. 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.
3. As with hard bop, cool, and modal jazz, Miles Davis was at the forefront of the fusion movement; one of the most important fusion records in jazz history is his “Bitches Brew.”
4. Other important fusion artists include:
  - a. Weather Report
  - b. Chick Corea
  - c. Herbie Hancock
  - d. The Yellowjackets
5. Smooth Jazz (AKA Pop/Contemporary Jazz)
  - a. smooth jazz, a simpler, easy-to-listen-to, and very commercial form of fusion, became popular in the mid 1970s and 1980s and is still quite popular today.
  - b. important smooth jazz artists include saxophonist David Sanborn, guitarist George Benson, keyboardist Dave Grusin, saxophonist Grover Washington, Jr., and Spyro Gyra (a group that also fused Latin music into the mix).
6. Listen to jazz recordings of fusion and smooth jazz:
  - a. Fusion: Weather Report's *Birdland*, The Yellowjackets' *The Spin*, Herbie Hancock's *Chameleon*
  - b. Smooth jazz: Spyro Gyra's *Morning Dance*, George Benson's *Breezin'*, Dave Grusin's *Mountain Dance*, and Grover Washington's *Mister Magic*, David Sanborn's *Change of Heart*

## B. Cultural Implications

1. Fusion came into being at the height of the “hippie movement” of the late 60s and early 70s.
2. Fusion jazz musicians, like their rock brethren, often expressed their dissatisfaction with society through their music.

- a. Vietnam War
  - b. lack of civil rights
- 3. Smooth jazz grew in popularity at a time when the major recording companies and the business community at large were particularly focused on mass product distribution, consumerism, and an emphasis on large profit margins; in this way, smooth jazz was able to capitalize on the social and economic trends and, as with the Swing Era, smooth jazz was able to reach a large segment of the population.