

An Introduction to Jazz

Grade 8 | Lesson Plan 4: Where Did Jazz Come From?

Adapted from Jazz in America: The National Jazz Curriculum

TOPICS:

1. Where Did Jazz Come From?
2. Ragtime

SESSION OBJECTIVE

The student will gain a fundamental understanding of how, where, and by whom jazz originated

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 origins of jazz
2. play recordings of early jazz, discussing with the students what they heard

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

The students will:

1. participate in a class discussion on the origins of jazz
2. listen to jazz recordings

Content Outline

I. Where Did Jazz Come From?

A. New Orleans via Africa and Europe

Jazz was born in New Orleans in the early 20th century, 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. sensibility of playing an instrument in your own expressive way, making it an “extension” of your own human voice
2. From European music (classical 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 African and European musical traditions. (While most all classical music performed today is written, improvisation is an integral component of classical music history. Indeed, besides being great composers, such important figures as Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven were virtuoso keyboardists and excellent improvisers).

B. Why New Orleans?

New Orleans was the perfect city for all of these elements to come together, as it was a port city (with people arriving from all parts of the world), a meeting place for people of different ethnic groups, and a city with a nightlife in which musicians had the opportunity 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 United States.

1. Jazz evolved from slave songs and spirituals (religious African American folk songs).
2. Jazz’s originators and most important 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 *Dippermouth Blues* and/or *Working Man Blues*

E. Jazz Is Always Evolving

Jazz is always incorporating what came before with what’s coming next; some like to say that the best jazz musicians have one foot in the past and the other in the future.

F. Jazz All Over the World

1. Today, jazz is played and listened to by people of all ages, cultures, and ethnicities, and includes musical elements and styles from all over the world.
2. Jazz has gone from being America’s music to being the world’s music and is widely considered America’s greatest artistic gift to the world.
3. International Jazz Day is celebrated annually on April 30th

II. Ragtime

A. Piano Style – Ragtime is primarily a solo piano style and was the immediate precursor of jazz.

1. It originated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.
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 (more on Scott Joplin can be found online at scottjoplin.org).
5. Since ragtime was conceived and developed before records were invented, it was “recorded” on piano rolls.
 - a. these 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 mechanically press down the appropriate piano keys, making it play the song; the faster you pumped the pedals, the faster the tempo would be.
 - c. many people learned how to play ragtime songs (called “rags”) by watching the piano keys go up and down, memorizing the order, and then, through a lot of practice, mastering it themselves.
 - d. more on player pianos and piano rolls, including pictures, can be found online at pianola.com.
6. Ragtime really isn't jazz, per se, as 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* and/or *The Entertainer*

B. Cultural Implications of Ragtime

1. Ragtime represents musics 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 developed in response to and reflected the “balance” of American attitude in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.
 - a. recognized and cherished American traditions (e.g., conservatism, motherhood, rural life) were symbolized by the piano itself (a “classical” instrument) and ragtime’s simple left-hand march rhythms.
 - b. new fast-paced living (e.g., expansion of lively public leisure, excitement of diverse urban opportunities, etc.) was symbolized by ragtime’s ragged, complex right-hand syncopation.
3. Ragtime was enjoyed by both European and African Americans as it reflected the full gamut from conservative to liberal attitudes.
 - c. *conservative* example: ragtime was performed on the piano, a white middle class symbol of nostalgia and status.
 - d. *liberal* example: ragtime’s syncopations reflected the exciting pace of modern industrial life.
4. Listen once again to Scott Joplin’s *Maple Leaf Rag* and/or *The Entertainer* and see if you can “hear” these cultural implications in the music.