

# Understanding Music

Seventh Edition

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**W**hat is jazz? Most of us recognize it when we hear it, but it's not so easy to list the essential ingredients of jazz. First of all is the rhythm. Jazz usually has a steady rhythm that continues from the very beginning of a piece to the end. That rhythm is often underscored by percussion instruments, which play a central role in the performance of jazz. The most characteristic part of jazz rhythm is **syncopation**: accenting the "offbeats." (See p. 24 for a more detailed explanation of syncopation.) The combination of a steady beat and accented offbeats contributes to what is known as "swing." Swing is the *feeling* generated by the music. Swing is what makes you want to move your head or tap your foot. Or both!

Another primary ingredient of jazz is the use of "blue notes." Blue notes are notes that are played or sung low or flatter than the pitches in a conventional Western scale. Common blue notes in jazz are the third, fifth, and seventh notes of a scale. Often, these notes are not exactly a half step lower but rather indeterminate in pitch, and they can be "bent" or "scooped" by many instruments and by singers. These blue notes contribute to the expressive nature of much jazz performance.

Third, jazz often contains special sounds produced by conventional instruments. Trumpets playing "wah-wah," trombones sliding between notes, clarinets squealing in the high register—these are sounds directly associated with jazz but avoided in "straight" concert music. Jazz singers also deliberately make use of unusual sounds. A special kind of singing in which the vocalist improvises with invented syllables ("doo-be-doo dah," etc.) is known as **scat singing**. There are also instruments rarely used in concert music that are central to jazz. Foremost among these is the saxophone, which comes in many sizes, from the small soprano sax to the enormous contrabass. Most common in jazz are the alto and tenor saxophones.

Finally, most people would say that improvisation is a necessary element in jazz. Certainly in many forms of jazz, improvisation plays a central role in the creation of the music, and some of the best jazz performers have been spontaneous and inventive improvisers. There is a difference, however, between genuine improvisation and the performance of a free-sounding melodic line that has been worked out in advance. Some of the most famous jazz performers would repeat their best solos night after night. This does not mean that



they were not playing jazz. Perhaps the best approach is to say that improvisation is a typical but not an absolutely necessary ingredient of jazz.

Great jazz artists, however, are often great improvisers. This means that they are not just performers but *composers* as well.

The saxophone comes in many different sizes—from soprano to subcontrabass.

A jazz musician is a juggler who uses harmonies instead of oranges.

—Jazz author Benny Green

Jazz is about the only form of art existing today in which there is freedom of the individual without the loss of group contact.

—Dave Brubeck

## The History of Jazz

### Origins

Although jazz seems to have developed in several places simultaneously, one of the most important of these was New Orleans. In the late nineteenth century, New Orleans was one of the most culturally diverse and thriving cities in the United States. Its people were of African, French, Spanish, English, and Portuguese origin. There were first-, second-, and third-generation Europeans; African Americans who were former slaves or descendants of former slaves; Haitians; Creoles; and a constant influx of new immigrants from Europe, the Caribbean, and other parts of the United States. As a flourishing port, New Orleans also attracted sailors and visitors from all over the world.

### JAZZ: FOUR KEY ELEMENTS

1. Syncopated rhythm (accents on the offbeat)
2. Flatted "blue" notes
3. Unusual instrument sounds
4. Improvisation



The city had one of the liveliest musical cultures of any city in America. There was opera and chamber music. European ballroom dances were heard side by side with sailors' songs and hornpipes. Street sellers advertised their products with musical cries. Work songs and "field hollers" (chants sung by workers) mingled with the piano music of elegant salons. The bars, gambling joints, dance halls, and brothels were filled with smoke, liquor, and music.

### Band Music

Everywhere in New Orleans were the bands: marching bands, dance bands, concert bands, and society orchestra bands. Bands played at weddings, funerals, parades, and political rallies, or just for the joy of it. Some of the musicians were classically trained; most could not read a note. But almost everybody played. Bands often held competitions among themselves to see which could play the best. And the sound of a band in the street was an excuse for children (and adults) from all the neighborhoods to come and join the fun.

The standard instruments in late nineteenth-century American bands were the trumpet (or cornet—a mellower form of trumpet), clarinet, trombone, banjo, drums, and tuba. This instrumentation provided the proper balance between melody instruments, harmony instruments, bass, and percussion. All these instruments were, of course, portable. Only later, when band music moved indoors, did the instrumentation include piano and string bass, and the stationary drum kit was invented.

Band music was the first of the three major musical influences on early jazz. The other two were ragtime and the blues.

Ragtime: white music, played black.

—Jazz historian  
Joachim Berendt

### Ragtime

Ragtime was a type of piano music (sometimes also played on other instruments) that became popular in the 1890s. It was originally played mostly by African American pianists in saloons and dance halls in the South and the Midwest. "Ragging" meant taking a popular or classical melody and playing it in characteristic syncopated style. Later the style caught on and developed a form of its own, and ragtime was played by both black and white musicians to audiences all over the country.

Ragtime music is usually in duple meter and has the feel and tempo of a march. The left hand plays a steady, regular beat while the right hand plays a lively melody in syncopated rhythm. A ragtime composition usually consists of a series of related sections with a repetition pattern, most often AA BB A CC DD or something similar.

The most famous composer and performer of ragtime was Scott Joplin, whose father was a slave but who himself received a formal music education and composed classical music as well as a large number of piano rags. Scott Joplin was born in 1868 and eventually got a job as a pianist in the Maple Leaf saloon in Sedalia, Missouri. His most famous piece, "Maple Leaf Rag," was published in 1899 and sold so well that Joplin moved to St. Louis to concentrate on composition. In 1909 he settled in New York and composed a full-length opera, *Treemonisha*, which he attempted (without success) to have professionally produced. Joplin died in 1917, completely unrecognized by the musical establishment.

## LISTENING GUIDE

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### SCOTT JOPLIN (1868–1917)

#### Maple Leaf Rag, for piano solo

**Date of composition:** 1899

**Tempo:** *Tempo di marcia* ("March tempo")

**Meter:**  $\frac{2}{4}$

**Key:** A $\flat$  major

**Duration:** 3:14



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Scott Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag" was published in 1899 and became immensely popular. Like most music at the time it was published in sheet music form; it became the first instrumental sheet music to sell over a million copies. It is typical of much ragtime music written around the turn of the century. A steady left-hand accompaniment keeps the march beat going throughout the piece while the right hand plays a lively, syncopated melody against this steady beat. The sections are



repeated in the usual pattern: AA BB A CC DD. Each section is 16 measures long. The slight changes between sections, the standard but slightly irregular repetition pattern, the contrast between the rock-steady left hand and the dancing right hand—all of these characteristics make for a composition of great attractiveness and help to explain the enormous popularity of ragtime in the early years of the history of jazz. In this recording, we hear a **piano roll** (early mechanical recording) made by Joplin himself in 1916.



### Time Listen for

	A
0:00	Strong, steady chords in left hand; syncopated rhythm in right hand; short arpeggiated phrases.
	A
0:21	Repeat.
	B
0:42	Melody begins higher and moves down; <i>staccato</i> articulation.
	B
1:03	Repeat.
	A
1:24	Opening section is played only once here.
	C
1:45	Change of key to D <sub>b</sub> major (IV); rhythmic change in right hand; left-hand leaps.
	C
2:06	Repeat.
	D
2:28	Return to original key; strong final cadence.
	D
2:48	Repeat.

## The Blues

The blues is a form, a sound, and a spirit, all at the same time. It began as a type of vocal music that crystallized in the 1890s from many elements. Among these were African American spirituals, work songs, and street cries. The blues began as unaccompanied song but soon came to use banjo or guitar accompaniment. The common themes of early blues are sadness in love, betrayal, abandonment, and sometimes humor.

There is great variety in sung blues, but if there is a “standard” form, it is this: a series of three-line stanzas, in each of which the first two lines are the same:

*I followed her to the station, with a suitcase in  
my hand.*

*I followed her to the station, with a suitcase in  
my hand.*

*Well, it's hard to tell, it's hard to tell, when all  
your love's in vain.*

*When the train rolled up to the station, I looked  
her in the eye.*

*When the train rolled up to the station, I looked  
her in the eye.*

*Well, I was lonesome, I felt so lonesome, and I  
could not help but cry.*

(From Robert Johnson, “Love in Vain”)

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“Robert Johnson  
‘Love in Vain’”



Each line is set to four measures, or bars, of music, so this pattern is known as **12-bar blues** (4 bars  $\times$  3 lines = 12 bars). The chord progressions in 12-bar blues

are very simple, using only tonic (I), subdominant (IV), and dominant (V) chords. The overall pattern of 12-bar blues looks like this:

	MEASURE 1	MEASURE 2	MEASURE 3	MEASURE 4
Line 1	I	I	I	I
Line 2	IV	IV	I	I
Line 3	V	V (or IV)	I	I

She had this trouble in her, this thing that wouldn't let her rest sometimes, a meanness that came and took her over.

—Jazz saxophonist Sidney Bechet about Bessie Smith

Every stanza of the song follows the same pattern. The singer may accompany him- or herself on a guitar and may occasionally vary the accompaniment a little by introducing other chords or extra beats, but the basic pattern stays the same. Also, the singer has ample opportunity for varying the melodic line according to the expression of the text and his or her own personal feeling. The best blues singers use the rigid structure of blues as a vehicle for the most subtle variations in pitch (blue notes) and rhythm. Slight shadings of the pitch, little ornaments, and especially deliberate “misplacement” and constant manipulation of the rhythm are part and parcel of blues singing. The effect is of a very flexible and very personal vocal style against a square and simple background.

The form of the blues, with its special combination of flexibility and rigidity, began to be widely used by instrumentalists in the 1920s and has strongly influenced other types of popular music and jazz ever since.

Our example of blues singing is by Bessie Smith (1894–1937), known as the “Empress of the Blues.” (See **Listening Guide**.) Bessie Smith grew up in Tennessee and from an early age helped support her family by singing on street corners. After false starts as a dancer and a vaudevillian, she devoted herself full time to singing blues.

Smith had a hit in 1923 with her very first recording. Audiences were stunned by the mature, tragic quality of her voice and by her sensitive, personal style—which seemed to speak directly to the listener. On her way to a singing session in 1937, her car crashed into the side of the road, and by the next day, Bessie Smith was dead.

## LISTENING GUIDE

 Listen on MySearchLab

### BESSIE SMITH (1894–1937)

#### “Florida-Bound Blues”

Date of performance: 1925

Duration: 3:14

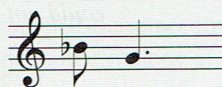


Bessie Smith often recorded with a small ensemble, but many of her performances feature piano and voice alone. Some of the great jazz pianists of the day recorded with Smith; and this recording features pianist Clarence Williams, who was also active as a songwriter, music publisher, and record producer.

“Florida-Bound Blues” is a standard 12-bar blues with words and music in an AAB pattern. Listen, though, for subtle changes in the words and melody between the first two lines of each stanza. In the first stanza, for example, “North” and “South” are sung as short notes in the first line but extended in the second line.

Among Smith’s many vocal trademarks found in this recording is the addition of a chromatic note before the last note of a line.

The bare-bones melody:



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