

## “What a wonderful World”



### JAZZ, YOU SAY?

It would not be an understatement that Jazz, as a musical genre, defies all definitions. While it is not difficult to understand the musical theory, if one wishes to embark on a study, it is not at all important to understand improvisation, syncopation, rhythm, blue notes, melody and harmony — musical jargons used to describe the signatures of jazz.

Swing, bebop...fusion, these are only a few of the variations of this music, and to understand them the 'you-know-it-when-you-hear-it' has been the tested approach; perhaps the best approach. As the great Louis Armstrong once said, "If you have to ask what jazz is, you'll never know."

The first experience with jazz is often disorienting, specially to ears deafened by pop. In jazz, multiple melodies and rhythms work and those seeking a predictable format in the tune will simply not find any! But like most other great things in life, jazz, is an acquired taste and the very same attributes that make it difficult to appreciate at

within a piece; one that may never be played again! Jazz, as many consider, is a musical extempore.

Improvisation allows for a kind of communication between players known as a 'call-and-response pattern.' This is a common element in African-American music. It starts when a soloist, singing or playing, who issues a 'call' and the other participants sing or play back a 'response.'

Syncopation refers to shifting the emphasis of a song's rhythm, or beat pattern, to weak or unaccented beats and notes. It appears in jazz when two rhythms are played against each other. This gives the music its characteristic 'swing,' the feeling that makes listeners want to tap their feet, or dance.

Blue notes, are a little more difficult to explain and

palatable, acquired taste.

### A WALK DOWN THE ANNALS OF HISTORY...

...because it's important

Jazz, as we know it, is said to have its origin in twentieth-century New Orleans. That however is a very long story cut short. It can be said, that it is in New Orleans that jazz found its identity in the aftermath of the American Civil War. As the decades followed, the music became popular in America and with technological advancement like recording and radio, jazz became a part of mainstream African-American music, and slowly within mainstream America.

It has been a longstanding misrepresentation of history that African slaves who were abducted to various regions of the world, including the Americas, were socially, morally, and culturally inferior. The African peoples who came to America through the trans-Atlantic slave trade came largely from West Africa and the greater Congo River Basin, and brought their traditions with them, some steeped in thousands of years of splendour as a race.

By the time the Civil Rights Act of 1866 was passed to define citizenship and affirm that all citizens are equally protected by US law, the slave trade had brought nearly 400,000 Africans to North America.

Initially, the African slaves would sing of their glorious past, or as they work, would indulge in 'call-and-responses' where a leader would start and the others reply to what was said. This concept of 'call and response' became the heart of jazz music, many centuries later.

The white captors soon realised that these songs in a foreign tongue actually made the workers calm, and at one point, not only did they promote it, they made it mandatory to sing while the slaves worked.

Songs were also sung at the end of a hard day's labour, but the nature varied.

In early African-American music, drums were used to provide rhythm but those were banned in later years because of the fear that Africans would use them to communicate in a rebellion.

Scholars however often question the factual ground of this fact of banning. Be that as it may, necessity made way for innovation and Africans managed to generate percussion and percussive sounds, using other instruments, or their own bodies.

Strange as it may seem, the work songs were primarily sung while working at cotton plantations, the most common subject in the lyrics were corn, the main component of their diet. The songs reflected the pathos of their lives, a blend of a glorious past, a despicable present, and what may have seemed to them — an endless tunnel.

Another pivotal moment in American musical history is when the slaves, the majority of them Muslims or adhering to tribal religion of Africa, were forced to convert to Christianity.

The spiritual aspect of Afro-American slave songs took new forms.



understand. It occurs when a musician plays or slides through a scale, flattening some of the notes playing them a half-step lower than expected. These are what jazz musicians refer to as the dissonant 'bent' notes, also a hallmark of the blues, jazz's half-brother, also of African American origin.

### JAZZ FEVER

No matter how surprising it may seem, there is method in every jazz piece; the improvisations as stormy as they may seem, follow patterns for the listener to decipher.

Jazz performances have segments; yet, there is no segregation, each blending with the other; the audience must keep the elements in mind, because the forms of jazz can be, and will be bent, but hardly ever broken — there is order in mayhem, so to speak.

Often, in between taking turns doing solos, a jazz ensemble will return to a familiar part of the song, usually a chorus. Once identified, the listener can then pick the variations and truly acknowledge the skills and the creativity of the musicians.

And with time, as one gets more and more familiarised, jazz becomes a more

first, are what more seasoned listeners come to relish.

### THE ELEMENTS

Musicians, critics, and listeners agree — improvisation is at the heart of jazz. Although we often associate it with a quartet; a saxophone or a bass guitar, the ensembles can and do range in style, size and instrumentation. Yet, three elements are set to bind all jazz music:

Syncopation, blue notes, and their improvisations.

It takes time to understand and appreciate these elements, but possibly it is the improvisation that appeals most to listeners.

Jazz music works best as a group, and especially one where all members are so familiarised with one another that they are not only able to follow, but also provide support to create interesting pieces



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