

# THE LIFESTYLE PARENTHESIS

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## “What a wonderful World”

These spirituals were religious folk songs to express the desire for freedom and their devotion to their new found faith. This would continue without much appreciation or acknowledgement by historians until 1865, when slavery was formally abolished.

Although the plight of the Afro-Americans was still an ever present reality, for the first time they had the power to join the mainstream, even if in a segregated society, and culture and tradition took unprecedented twists and turns.

### CONGO SQUARE, NEW ORLEANS

The two types of African-American musical traditions that were paramount in the development of jazz are the spirituals and the work songs. In fact, it can be said with

their traditional music and dances. As the traditions of other migrant population were amalgamated, the music that was till then purely of African origin, got a flavour of America and jazz performances started using string instruments and improvised percussions where multiple rhythms played simultaneously.

Over time, this give and take became more elaborate and free. Work songs or spirituals, was more rhythmic; European music that amalgamated with it was more focused on melody and harmony.

At New Orleans, African music was Europeanised, and the European style of music embraced the African traditions with open arms. This continued well into the 20th century and continues today as jazz is played around the world.

mainstream American society.

At the musical level, Chicago jazz, absorbed ragtime, a new style of piano playing that developed towards the end of the 19th century.

In the early days, jazz and dancing were inextricably tied to each other. And that was also one reason for many to consider this as unwholesome and lower-class.

Although more than half a century had passed since the abolition of slavery, Afro-American heritage was degraded largely because of its racial connections; but not everyone was opposed and white musicians, eager to learn the new genre, began to seek out black musicians, and jazz started to explode.

### THE LAST NOTES

Jazz has always been about freedom,

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Nothing felt worse than the frequent bouts of homesickness that engulfed us all in the first months of grad school. At first the remedies seemed to work great — partying on the weekends, cooking khichuri and begun bhaja, or just talking about missing home. But it was only for a while; eventually talking about the same things over and over again seemed pointless.

Misery loved company and we were a gang of five homesick adults.

On one random Friday night out we discovered a bar. It was underground; until that point neither one of us were familiarised to the term 'speakeasy.'

You would have to take the stairs to an underground little bar. The lighting in the space was perfect — neither murky nor dim, which could give you dodgy vibes, or too bright, like the usual clubs that could lead to potential seizures, or migraines that we had often suffered earlier.

The speakeasy was cosy and comfortable with fairy lights strung around the ceilings. People were huddled at tables, busy talking and drinking while the musicians on the little stage were busy setting up their instruments. As one of us made their way to the bar to grab a menu, we looked for an empty table.

Our friend was back with the menu and as we ordered our drinks, the musicians started to play.

It was Jazz!

This was probably the first time in my life that I was properly listening to jazz, and that too live. As the musicians got into their groove, so did the people. Romance was in the air. People were laughing, talking, bobbing their heads, or swaying their bodies to the music.

For the first time since we had arrived to this strange land, we felt at ease. The music was romantic, happy, nothing crazy that made your blood rush. It was comfortable. As the pace of the rhythm picked up and fell, so would the excitement in the air.

The music had me amazed. I don't think I'll ever be able to put a finger on what it was precisely, but jazz definitely played a role in it.

— Supriti Sarkar

authority that the earlier slave populations were the first jazz musicians.

The music remained vivid in collective memory, and as it was handed down from one generation to another, the music evolved, and the pivotal moment in Afro-American music was in fact the Emancipation Proclamation.

The exodus of people from Hispaniola fearing the Haitian Revolution made a remarkable contribution; as did the migrant Europeans — Scottish, English, Irish, French, Spanish and Italians, each etching a mark on the jazz scene of New Orleans, the place now recognised as the birthplace of the genre.

In the early 1800s, slaves gathered in Congo Square, New Orleans to perform

Congo Square, possibly named after the Congo river, the native land of most African slaves, and the dances that were performed there, had a lasting influence on spirituals, the blues, Creole music, brass band, even post 19th century European classical music.

### THE JAZZ AGE

From 1920 to 1933, Prohibition in the United States resulted in illicit 'speakeasies' which became lively venues of 'the Jazz Age,' hosting popular music including current dance songs, novelty songs, and show tunes.

As jazz began to be associated with alcohol and what was perceived to be other social maladies, it began to get a reputation of being immoral, and the older generations saw it as a threat to their old cultural values.

To them, jazz was synonymous to the new 'decadent values' of the Roaring Twenties, and soon even radios and the media too began to denigrate jazz.

Jazz became an American phenomenon and broke the racial barriers through the radio, and thanks to the advancements of the recording technology. Yet, it was the live performance that moulded what we now consider jazz.

Typically led by a trumpet or cornet — supported harmonically by reeds and other horn instruments, and rhythmically by bass and drums — the emphasis in New Orleans jazz was on collective, melodic improvisation.

The signature solos, that is now at the heart of the music, were virtually non-existent.

As more and more people flocked to New Orleans the friction along racial lines became more visible, and at a point the scene became socially oppressive to the point that lack of opportunities to flourish as musicians became a reality, and a great number of musicians moved to Chicago to experiment with 'their' version of music.

And the Jazz world changed forever!

### IN CHICAGO

Dixieland, although closely related to New Orleans jazz, made use of collective, melodic improvisation and allowed, even focused for solos and incorporated the piano.

The trauma of the two World Wars left scars in the psyche of the Western nations, and the world changed forever because of it.

After World War I ended, people across the world, and not only America, wanted a fresh start and to see an end of tired social customs. And perhaps it was during these times, for the first time, African-American culture became a hot commodity, which did much to elevate the position of community in

movement and individual expression. Perhaps, that is why the innovation that serves as its backdrop influences cultures today, and not necessarily restricted to the American. Jazz is played, with its own local flair, on every continent.

During Prohibition and the economic prosperity of the 1920s, it became the soundtrack in underground speakeasies, where pleasure ruled and outlawed liquor was heavily consumed.

F Scott Fitzgerald captured the essence of the era in 'The Great Gatsby' — the story of a high-profile bootlegger, his lavish parties, and the frivolity of the characters surrounding him.

In Harlem, New York, the music became the part of a cultural renaissance among African-American writers and artists of all kinds and its effect was an everlasting one, even on a global scale.

As for Jazz, it was the swing (1935-1945) that marked a paradigm shift in jazz — from improvisation to notated music, and larger ensembles known as 'big bands.' Because of the size of the ensembles — made up of several horns, reed instruments and percussion — swing

dance music, bop pushed jazz for the first time into art status and out of low culture. The bebop era made way for what musicians now coin as 'cool jazz,' also known as West Coast jazz, which marked a return to arrangements and retained elements of swing.

Today, the deviants of jazz are plentiful; yet, those who seek it from a puritan perspective still find active musicians carrying on the legacy in its truest form.

Yet, in its myriad deviant forms, it is considered a precursor to even rock music. As rock became complex and musicians more skilled, players from both camps began to collaborate further, just as the predecessors of jazz had done. Unfortunately, this hybridisation that has now crystallised into a new form of music, is still not acknowledged by jazz purists.

The story of jazz is not an ancient one, but the tale of the people who contributed to the genesis, and development of this genre, is.

Scholars often attribute the point of its creation to the transatlantic slave-trade. Jazz was the way of these people, enslaved

#2

Before I was into jazz, but listened to a lot of other music, I realised that most songs are way more interesting when the musicians didn't play verses or choruses the same way every time. Different phrasings or rhythms or fills peppered throughout a song, even if the overall structure is the normal verse/chorus/verse/bridge/etc. makes me way more likely to go back to a song.

There are exceptions to this rule but that's a different discussion. I would argue that even the best repetitive songs could be better with a bit more improvised flair.

Jazz is the embodiment of this concept on speed. Nothing is ever played the same way, the players are listening and responding to each other in real time, even the lower-level players are ultra-competent. There's something worth listening to in every piece.

It's astounding that everything in a piece can work so well as a whole without every moment being planned out and then when you focus on a particular instrument, it can blow your mind even when it's just hanging in the background and chilling.

Sure you can find this in other styles sometimes but with decent jazz that's just how it works, it's expected. And the modular makeup of the whole scene, different combinations of players playing the same songs to wildly different effect, swap out one musician for another and everything changes.

In the case of Jazz, I appreciate the balance of structure and freedom, particularly in smaller ensembles. Apart from the form and basic changes/melody of a tune, musicians are free to interpret as they please, especially when it comes to solos.

There's a bittersweet beauty in the knowledge that no two performances of a tune will be quite the same, though I suppose that's also true of other genres to a lesser extent. I guess that's jazz so endlessly fascinating.

— Ahmad G Fakhruddin



required simplified written arrangements. It was repetitious, and pop friendly than other previous forms of jazz.

Bop, or 'bebop', that developed in the post-swing era (c. 1945), shunned the pop-accessibility of its forebear. In bop, the spotlight was on the soloist. The new style was criticised for lacking melody, but today, this is what jazz is most widely associated with.

Faster, abstract and certainly not a

in an estranged land, working in the fields and plantations of the American south, where the seeds of some of the greatest forms of music had their beginnings. And jazz is the one that stands apart as no other genre has absorbed so many traditions, or has inspired so many others.

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