

The Invention of Jazz

The origins of jazz are complex and involve many people and influences, but there are several key figures who are often credited with its development:



Charles "Buddy" Bolden

Born in New Orleans in 1877, Bolden is often recognized as the first person to play jazz. He played the cornet in dance halls during the day and in Storyville, New Orleans' red light district, at night. Bolden was known for his ability to improvise and put audiences into a trance. However, his career ended abruptly when on March 13, 1907 after his third arrest for assault and or unstable mental behavior, Bolden was committed to the institution known as the State Insane Asylum in Jackson, La. He would spend the rest of his life there. The recording industry was pretty much non-existent during Buddy's time; therefore there are no audio recordings of the Father of Jazz Music. Bolden was a distant memory by the time the new music coming out of New Orleans was christened jazz in 1916. He had been in the mental asylum for more than a decade by the time the first jazz record was released in 1918. He was at the institution when Louis Armstrong and his Hot Five became world famous in the mid-1920s. And in 1931, the same year Armstrong made his triumphant return to his hometown for the first time since leaving for Chicago in 1922, Bolden died at the mental institution. His music legacy had been mostly forgotten, except by the men and women who remembered being there when he took New Orleans by storm around the turn of the century.

Jazz Facts...

1. Jazz actually started out as pop dance music. While most people today consider it a genre of the elite and well-established, its roots are quite the opposite. A combination of ragtime, European chamber elements, marching band music and blues, jazz exploded into the American music scene in the 1920s and became the most popular music form of the era. Need proof? Take it from the writer F. Scott Fitzgerald, credited with popularizing the term "the Jazz Age" and whose novel, *The Great Gatsby* (1925), epitomized this decadent, tumultuous period.

2. No one really knows how the word "jazz" came about. In fact, since it was originally a slang word, it was sometimes spelt as "jas", "jass", "jaz", even "jazz". One of the most popular theories is that it was first used as a baseball term to mean verve, vim, and fighting spirit.

3. Jazz musicians "turn off" a part of their brains during improvisation. Here's some food for thought. According to a study conducted by two professors from John Hopkins University, when jazz musicians improvise, their brains turn off the dorsolateral prefrontal and lateral orbital regions linked to self-censoring, inhibition and introspection, and turn on the medial prefrontal cortex—the part of the brain that lets self-expression flow. Findings also show activity in the language areas of the brain when two musicians are having a "musical conversation". Even if you're not a jazz musician, listening to jazz stimulates your mind since the brain mimics the pulsating rhythms of improvisation—it's kind of like a "monkey see, monkey do" situation. If you're looking for new ways to spur your child's creativity and critical thinking, jazz is one way to go.

4. A jazz performance is full of secret hand and body signals. Secret signals? Say what?! With so many things happening on stage, musicians communicate with each other non-verbally. They usually cue the end of their solos with nods, or the end of the piece by pointing their fingers at their heads (meaning it's time to play the "head" – the main theme or original melody of a song). The next time you're at a jazz performance, see if you can spot any "sign language"!

5. The piano trio is the most common jazz configuration. It has often been said to represent the essence of jazz in the most condensed yet effective way. A piano trio consisting of piano, bass and drums takes full advantage of swing, interaction, and dynamics.

6. While many consider jazz a relic, it is well on its way to making a glorious comeback in mainstream music. Musicians such as Kendrick Lamar, Flying Lotus, Grammy award winners Robert Glasper and Esperanza Spalding, among others, are bringing it back through their own musical fusions that range from Jazz Age-inspired “hot jazz”, hip-hop-infused hybrids, to world jazz. Did you know that Flying Lotus, an experimental multi-genre producer, electronic musician, DJ and rapper, is the grand-nephew of jazz legend John Coltrane?

7. Jazz is one of the most hybrid forms of music. Because it is free-spirited and spontaneous, jazz has come a long way since it was first introduced. It has spawned different styles such as bebop, big band, swing, Latin jazz, dixieland, gypsy jazz, and bossa nova jazz, and also encompasses contemporary sub-genres including free jazz, acid jazz, and soul jazz.

8. Jazz and Indian classical music share more in common than you think. Like jazz, Indian classical music—defined by its two systems, hindustani and carnatic—allows for extended improvisations and dazzling displays of melodic and rhythmic virtuosity. Both genres have pulse-oriented rhythms and modes.

In fact, saxophonist John Coltrane and guitarist John McLaughlin are just some of the many jazz musicians who were heavily influenced by it. The former was drawn to hindustani music because of revered sitar player Ravi Shankar (credited for single-handedly popularizing Indian music in the West), while the latter was influenced by carnatic music, as evidenced by his music groups The Mahavishnu Orchestra and Shakti (which featured big names, such as carnatic violinist L. Shankar, *tabla* player Zakir Hussain, *mridangam* player R. Raghavan, and *ghatam* player T. H. "Vikku" Vinayakram).

9. If not for jazz, dance styles such as the Charleston, black bottom, Argentine tango, and the trot would not have made their way into the dance halls of America. The birth of jazz gave rise to public music and dance halls, which brought social dancing up a notch from the classic waltz and tango. Inspired by the highly expressive nature of the music, new dance styles were constantly created or introduced.

10. Jazz boosts your creativity and productivity at work, relieves stress, and increases your immunity. Did you know that listening to jazz activates theta brain waves (4-8 hertz), the most highly creative brain wave? They inspire new insights and solutions to unresolved problems—or to put it plainly, they bring about “eureka!” moments. Jazz is also just as effective at reducing anxiety as a massage and, according to a *Time* magazine article, has the same restorative effect as total silence. Listening to it for 30 minutes can also improve your immunoglobulin A (IgA) levels, which prevents viral and bacterial infections!

11. Before the saxophone became synonymous with the image of the jazz musician, its distant cousin, the clarinet, was a much more popular instrument. The clarinet was once the dominant instrument in jazz; it defined the sound of the swing era and was known by its nickname, ‘licorice stick’. When the saxophone first appeared, many jazz musicians were adverse to it.

12. The term "hipster" was derived from one of the terms unique to jazz. You’ve heard of the term “jazz cats”, which refers to jazz musicians. But before they adopted the nickname, did you know that they called each other “alligators”, or “gate” for short? In fact, this is just one of many terms that are unique to jazz. “Hep” was a popular term in the 1930s used to describe someone who is cool and knowledgeable: a hepster/hep cat. The term “hipster” was derived from this.

A Selected Jazz History Playlist

Original Dixieland Jazz Band - Livery Stable Blues The first jazz record released February 26, 1917. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=So-iDJiKMHQ>

Solo Flight - Charlie Christian w/ Benny Goodman & His Orchestra 1941
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wfa5CEX4ZkY>

Ornithology by Charlie Parker 1948
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fsAMAlaas94>

Errol Garner - You'd Be So Nice To Come Home To 1956
<https://youtu.be/gLe8F9MXGCw?si=RKdf6Zfo6jvgfefN>

Miles Davis & John Coltrane - Kind of Blue August 17, 1959
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FEPFH-gz3wE>

Giant Steps - John Coltrane 1960
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=30FTr6G53VU>

Les McCann, Eddie Harris - Compared to What (Live at Montreux Jazz Festival, June 21 or 22, 1969)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pejJxEs_v-s

Miles Davis - Pharaoh's Dance (Bitches Brew LP 1970)
Universally recognized as the very first "Jazz Fusion" recording melding jazz, rock, pop and soul influences.
<https://youtu.be/WtORTuLJw7o?si=ic0RWOiEr9JnRbrY>

Watermelon Man - Herbie Hancock 1973
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ppJQKfqhFfE>

Havona - Weather Report 1977
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HEU-m_KVuYI

Yellowjackets - Intrigue 2022
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OVNyLd8I8gA>

Nina Burmi | Mishra Bhairavi Thumri | Indian Classical Music
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kfBvz2rG-NI>