

Jazz Greats

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JAZZ GREATS



Written by Linda Johns

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Early jazz was mostly upbeat music meant for dancing.

The Roots of Jazz

Can you name a kind of music that was invented in America? It's a kind of music that gets people moving. It can be fast and wild, or it can be slow and **melodic**. It's even older than rock and roll.

Think of a trumpet, saxophone, clarinet, drums, and other instruments blending together. Think of a beat that gets your foot tapping and your hands clapping.

Did you think of jazz? If you did, you're absolutely right. Jazz music began in the United States in the early 20th century. But its roots go back to before the Civil War.

Jazz is built on a long tradition of African-American music. Some of it is inspired by the music that slaves created while living in slave **quarters** in the southern United States. African Americans who were slaves found that music was one of the only ways to express their thoughts, ideas, and their desire for freedom. Another style of music called *blues music* also came from this African-American tradition. Blues and jazz styles of music often blend and overlap with each other.

Some of the music was full of sadness; some of it was full of joy. Sometimes people used their voices as instruments, and sometimes they made their own instruments, such as an early version of a banjo. Some of the songs were memorized and passed along from **plantation** to plantation. Much of the music was **improvised**; people invented it as they went along.



Early African-American music led to jazz, rock, blues, and hip-hop.



Jazz performers often improvise together in a kind of joyful game.

Today, improvisation is still at the heart of jazz. Musicians get together and “jam,” or make things up as they go along. They might start with a song they all know, but each musician adds a little bit here and a little bit there, and soon they have a song that’s completely unique.

Today, many of the great names in jazz are African Americans. Let’s meet a few of the most famous jazz performers.

Louis Armstrong



Many people consider Louis Armstrong to be the greatest musician of the 20th century. Some call him the “Father of Jazz.” He didn’t invent jazz music, but he played it in a way that made people fall in love with it. His music made people happy—they’d never heard someone play a trumpet like he did.

Louis Armstrong started out playing a fast style of jazz called Dixieland. Later he experimented with many different styles.

Louis Armstrong was from a poor family in New Orleans, Louisiana. As a child he’d stand outside dance clubs and listen to the lively music being played inside. When he was thirteen years old, he bought a second-hand cornet, a kind of horn. When he was in his twenties, Louis switched to playing trumpet.



Louis Armstrong was rarely without his trumpet.



While singing scat, the singer becomes part of the band.

Louis was the first person to record **scat** music. Scat is when the singer uses the voice as an instrument, singing syllables instead of whole words. It might sound like nonsense, but a good singer makes scat sound incredible.

What inspired Louis to invent scat singing? Well . . . he said he dropped his sheet music during a recording session! He couldn’t remember the words, but he knew he had to keep going, so he started singing syllables. Louis’s scat style sounded great, and soon other jazz musicians were copying it.



Armstrong's performances were enjoyed by audiences of all races and nationalities.

"Music's my language," Louis once said. He traveled all over the world with his trumpet. He couldn't speak other languages, but everyone understood Louis Armstrong when he blew on his horn.



Louis Armstrong

Born: 1901 in New Orleans, Louisiana

Instrument: Trumpet, vocals

First recording: Age 22

First band: Louis Armstrong and His Hot Five

Popular songs: "Hello, Dolly," "What a Wonderful World," "Mack the Knife"

Died: July 6, 1971



Ella Fitzgerald



Louis Armstrong may have invented scat, but Ella Fitzgerald took that style of singing and did amazing things with her voice. Ella's voice was her instrument.



Ella Fitzgerald

Born: 1917 in Newport News, Virginia

Popular Songs: "Stompin' at the Savoy," "A-Tisket, A-Tasket"

Awards: Thirteen Grammy Awards; National Medal of Arts for Lifetime Achievement (1987)

Died: June 15, 1996



Ella started singing at jazz clubs in Harlem, in New York, when she was just seventeen years old. She wanted to be a tap dancer, and she'd entered a talent contest at the famous Apollo Theater. She didn't think her dancing would **woo** the crowd, so she started singing instead. It was her first time singing in public, and she won the talent contest.



The Apollo Theater, where many African-American performers get their start, even today, and (left) Arnett Cobb and Walter Buchanan on the Apollo stage



Ella captured many hearts with her warm, versatile voice.

Ella went on to sing at popular clubs all over the country—and all over the world. She was a regular at the Savoy, one of the hottest jazz clubs in New York City. She started singing with **bebop** bands, a kind of jazz that first became popular in the 1940s. Bebop has a beat that makes you want to move, and Ella's voice moved with the beat. The whole time she was singing bebop and scat, Ella improvised. She got on stage with some of the best jazz musicians in the world and jammed.

Some people call Ella Fitzgerald the “Queen of Scat.” In 1979 she was named one of the most talented American performers who has ever lived. In 1987, she won the National Medal of Arts. Listen to her sing “A-Tisket, A-Tasket” and you’ll hear why she’s the Queen of Scat.

Duke Ellington



His name was Edward Ellington, but ever since he was a teenager, people called him “Duke.” He dressed with style and always looked elegant, and he brought style and sophistication to his jazz music, too.

Duke’s childhood piano teacher gave up trying to teach him when he was only seven years old. So he decided to teach himself how to play the piano. Later, he taught himself to read music, too.



Duke Ellington started performing in jazz clubs when he was eighteen years old. When he was twenty-four years old, he moved to New York and started playing at the Cotton Club in Harlem.

Duke was a composer who wrote music that was more melodic than most jazz music in the 1930s and 1940s. He was an exceptional pianist and bandleader, known for his “swing” style.

One of his most popular songs is “Take the ‘A’ Train,” a song he wrote about taking the New York City subway to his home in Harlem. Another well-known song is “It Don’t Mean a Thing,” a song with lyrics that say, “It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing.”

Duke wrote more than one thousand songs during his life. Some of them were complicated jazz symphonies written for entire orchestras. The symphony *Black, Brown, and Beige* is about the history and music of African Americans.

Duke Ellington and His Orchestra is one of the best-known bands in jazz history. They toured many countries. The music that Duke Ellington wrote has been played by countless bands all over the world.



Duke Ellington

Born: 1899 in Washington, D.C.

Career: Composer, bandleader, and pianist.

Band: Duke Ellington and His Orchestra

Well-Known Songs: “Take the ‘A’ Train”

Awards: Lifetime Achievement Award, NARAS*; Presidential Medal of Freedom (1969)

Died: May 24, 1974

*National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences



Other Jazz Greats



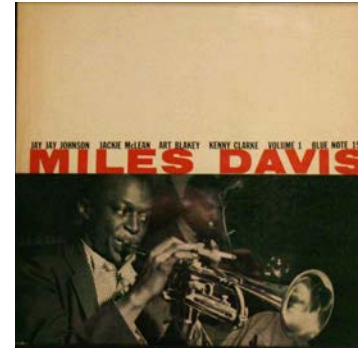
You've met three of the biggest names in jazz—Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Ella Fitzgerald. There are many other jazz artists from the past, some of which we'd like you to meet.

Billie Holiday sang the blues. She did amazing things with her voice. Sometimes she sang slowly and you could hear sadness in her voice. Other times she sang bouncy, energetic songs.



Billie Holiday recorded "Strange Fruit," a heartbreaking song about racism.

Billie toured in the late 1930s with a popular band led by Artie Shaw. All the musicians in Artie Shaw's band were white. Many times, she was not allowed to stay at the same hotel as the rest of the band. Many restaurants would not let her eat with the rest of the band. She was one of the most popular singers in the United States, yet Billie Holiday met racism in many of the cities she visited.

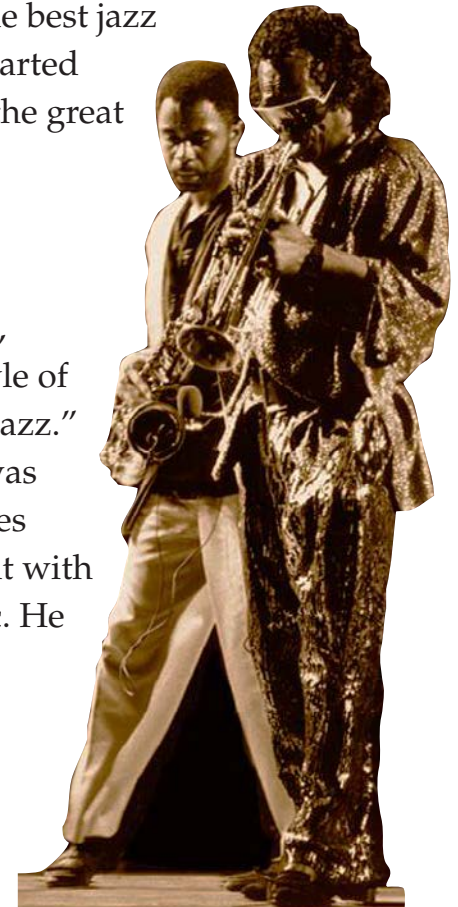


Miles Davis was a trumpet player and a songwriter. His parents sent him to the famous Juilliard School of Music in New York. They wanted their son to study classical music.

But Miles loved jazz. New York City was a great place to hear some of the best jazz in the world. Soon he started jamming with some of the great jazz bands of the 1940s.

In 1945, Miles Davis made one of the first bebop recordings. Later, he invented his own style of jazz and called it "cool jazz." In the 1950s, cool jazz was popular—and cool. Miles continued to experiment with different kinds of music. He was later influenced by rock music.

Miles Davis (right) and Kenny Garrett jamming





Dizzy's distinctive trumpet helped him hear himself better.

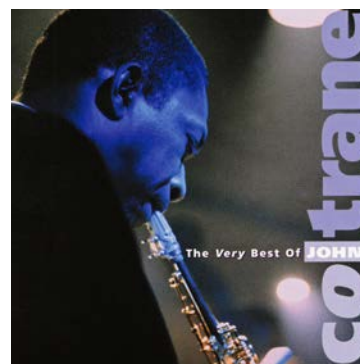
Dizzy Gillespie got his nickname from the way he bounced around, joking and dancing on stage. But the name could have easily been applied to his music as well. His music was noted for its speed, energy, and **spontaneity**. In the 30s and 40s, he collaborated with Thelonius Monk, Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, and saxophonist Charlie Parker. It was a time crowded with **innovators**.

In 1953, someone accidentally fell on Dizzy's trumpet, bending the bell backward. Dizzy found that he liked the sound of the bent trumpet, and from then on, he had trumpets specially built in that shape. His bent trumpet, plus his balloon-like cheeks, became his trademark. Near the end of the twentieth century, Dizzy was widely known and respected. He was even invited to play at the White House.

John Coltrane played tenor saxophone during the 1930s and 1940s in the swing and bebop styles. Like many musicians of the time, he had troubles with drug and alcohol abuse.



But John was fortunate to overcome those troubles in the 1950s. He strongly believed that his religion and faith in God had helped him through his addictions. After conquering these problems, John devoted his music to expressing spirituality and faith.



John Coltrane's music is complex, yet smooth and moving. His most famous recording, "A Love Supreme," is gentle and prayerful, yet it moves with sophisticated rhythms. Later in his life,

John began to experiment with more free-form improvisation that moved away from traditional rhythms and melodies. Some of John's many fans didn't like this music. But this experimental style was the beginning of modern free-form jazz.



Dave Brubeck is one of the most well-known pianists of all time, as well as an accomplished composer. He was born in 1920 in California. His father was a cattle rancher and his mother was a pianist and music

teacher. Even though he played with local dance bands as a teenager, Dave began college with the idea of becoming a veterinarian. He worked as a jazz musician only to pay his way through college. But his love of jazz finally made him decide that he had to make music his life, and he began studying music and composition.

In 1958, he formed the famous Dave Brubeck Quartet. Their hit song “Take Five” was the first ever million-selling jazz tune. The music of Dave Brubeck is still relevant today, and he continued to perform before huge crowds and create new music into his 90s.



The best way to hear jazz is at a live performance.

Jazz Today



Who’s making jazz music today? The answer is: Lots of people!

The jazz style of music has influenced thousands of musicians—even those who do not play jazz. Classical music, rock and roll, and hip-hop all use jazz rhythms, melodies, and improvisational styles. Jazz is also influenced by many other styles of music. Today, jazz performers blend their music with Latin rhythms and instruments, African drumming and singing, Middle Eastern melodies, and music styles from around the world.



Wynton Marsalis (right) and his brother, drummer Jason Marsalis

One popular performer is Wynton Marsalis. He plays the trumpet and performs both jazz and classical music. Wynton has won many Grammy awards and performed at sold-out concerts. The entire Marsalis family consists of talented musicians. Wynton's father, Ellis, is a dedicated pianist and music teacher who taught his sons Wynton, Branford, Delfeayo, and Jason to love and play jazz.

Wynton works to inspire young people to love jazz. He performs in the Jazz for Young People concerts at Lincoln Center in New York.



Many students learn to love jazz through school jazz bands.

Jazz band is a popular activity for many high school students today. Thousands of high school bands compete in a jazz festival in New York City each year. The festival is called *Essentially Ellington*, named after Duke Ellington.

There are many other jazz band festivals for young people. All over the United States, young people are discovering the wonders of jazz.

Explore More

At the Library

The best way to explore jazz is by listening to it. Ask your local librarian to help you search through the library's record and CD collection. Your librarians, teachers, parents, or friends may like and listen to jazz. They can help you pick out albums.

On the Radio

Many radio stations play jazz for all or part of the day. Tune in and try to find one of these stations. Listen to the announcer so that you can learn the musicians' names. See if you hear some of the musicians listed in this book.

On the Internet

- In the address window, type *www.google.com*.
- In the search window, type a word or name you would like to look up, such as *jazz*, *blues*, *Ella Fitzgerald*, or *Wynton Marsalis*. Click on "Google Search."
- Read the colored links. Click on one that looks interesting. When you want to explore more links, click on the "Back" arrow at the top left.
- Try other searches, such as *Dizzy Gillespie*, *Dave Brubeck*, or *Apollo Theater*.

Glossary

bebop	a style of jazz that stresses strong rhythms and beats with fast melodies and improvisations (p. 12)
improvised	made up as one goes along; created instantly (p. 5)
innovators	people who help create, develop, or invent something (p. 17)
melodic	highlighting the tune as opposed to the rhythm or harmony (p. 4)
plantation	a large farm with many workers (p. 5)
quarters	housing for laborers or slaves (p. 5)
scat	singing that uses sounds and syllables instead of whole words (p. 8)
spontaneity	using one's feelings in the moment, rather than planning (p. 17)
woo	win over (p. 11)

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