

An introduction to early jazz

A short explanation for musicians and listeners

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For the past forty years, most musicians have encountered jazz and swing music by participating in high school and college “stage bands”, typically 18-piece big bands with instrumentation similar to the later Count Basie Band: four trumpets, four trombones, five saxophones, guitar, bass, piano and drums. This size band is large enough to justify a separate class, and fits nicely into the curriculum, and most band instructors have the experience to teach the music academically.

While I have had many happy hours reading and playing the recent charts of Sammy Nestico and Dave Wolpe and the classic charts of Jerry Gray and Glenn Miller, almost none of my big band experience prepared me for playing more extemporaneous early jazz, also called traditional jazz, or “dixieland”.

The keepers of this flame are the traditional jazz societies scattered about the country, largely because it has not interested most high school and college jazz educators. As a member of several jazz societies, I must say that you will never meet a friendlier group of people, and that they are eager to have new players enter the world of traditional jazz. So if you have even the slightest interest in the “jass” music that was the foundation of all swing and modern jazz, read on. Playing it could become a source of great personal enjoyment and satisfaction.

Some of the differences between early jazz and swing

Most historians agree that jazz grew out of ragtime into a distinct style from about 1900 to 1915. While the city of New Orleans takes most of the credit, it appears that jazz was developing all around the country from San Francisco to New York City during this time. It was party music, generally considered disreputable.

Some characteristics of early jazz include:

- **“Hot” music.** Early jazz is deliberately “hot”, enthusiastic, up beat. It is filled with bright swinging tempos, sudden musical breaks, and “freak” effects, such as half-valving, mutes, glissandos and growls. It is frankly exhibitionist, emotional, and entertaining, in contrast to the “cool” music style of later bebop.
- **Small bands.** It was common in New Orleans at the turn of the century to book any engagement that came along with “short bands” of 2, 3, or 4 musicians. Today we think of the classic early jazz band as five (Original Dixieland Band, clarinet, cornet, trombone, piano, drums) or six (cornet, clarinet, trombone, banjo or guitar, tuba or string bass, and drums.) There have also been many successful 7 and 8 piece

dixieland bands which added a second cornet (King Oliver, Lu Watters) or a saxophone (Eddie Condon's Summa Cum Laude group).

- **Expressive and free style.** Much of early jazz was not arranged music, but allowed each player to develop his own part. It combined players with varying musical abilities, but the one thing they had in common was the ability to listen to other players and have spontaneous musical “conversations” with them. Jelly Roll Morton was a sophisticated pianist and composer, while Louis Armstrong and Sidney Bechet could barely read music, yet they had the ability to “hear” the appropriate harmony and solo lines.
- **Three and four part polyphony.** Music theory classes cover two-part counterpoint thoroughly; lightly dismiss the possibility of three-part polyphony, and then go on to the rules of parallel four-part harmony. Early jazz is unique in that it fosters spontaneous three-part counterpoint (clarinet, cornet, trombone) and often adds a fourth voice to that (typically alto sax or tenor sax.) Of course, everything then depends on the abilities and sensitivity of the individual players.
- **Individual freedom.** Each player in a spontaneous style dixieland band has a great deal of freedom: what harmonies to play, when to play and when to lay out, what solos to play, and at what dynamics. So while there is great freedom for the musician, there is also much more responsibility for the total ensemble effect. It also follows that the best spontaneous traditional jazz bands have players who fully understand the chordal structure of the songs they play, whether from chord symbols or by ear.
- **Everyone is a soloist.** Big bands typically rely on one solo player in each section, while everyone is expected to be a jazz soloist in a dixieland band.
- **Clarinets have a prominent role.** Perhaps because saxophones were comparatively expensive, most early New Orleans reed players played older Albert system clarinets. Sidney Bechet brought the straight soprano sax to the forefront as a solo instrument in the 1920s. In the early days of megaphone recording, the bass saxophone was easier to record than the string bass. So today at a traditional jazz festival, you will still hear more clarinets, soprano and bass saxophones than the other common members of the saxophone family. Of course, there have been many great traditional jazz saxophone players in history, including Frankie Trumbauer (C Melody); Jimmy Dorsey (Alto); Bud Freeman, and Eddie Miller (Tenor), so if you are a sax player, don't despair.
- **A folk and popular music.** Early jazz may be disdained by music academicians partly because it grew from folk roots. The twelve-bar blues form underlies many traditional jazz tunes. And during the period from 1917 to 1929, the “Jazz Age”, early jazz was America's popular music. As the song went, “The world's jazz crazy, and so am I.” In other words, early jazz has no pedigree, and no pretense. It began because musicians loved to play it and the young “jazzers” of the 1920s loved to dance to it.

The first popular “jazz big band” was the Paul Whiteman Band of the 1920s, which played a heavily arranged symphonic style with room for hot soloists like Bix Beiderbecke (cornet) and Joe Venuti (violin). (Today curiously, neither big band fans nor dixieland fans care much for the music of Paul Whiteman.) But in the early 1930s other jazz bands such as Duke Ellington's and Benny Moten's grew steadily from 6 players, to 8, to 10, then 12 and 14, gradually adding horns to each section. First it was three reeds, then a second cornet, and finally full sections. Don Redman and Fletcher Henderson first arrived at the style of sectional arranging that we take for granted in today's big band and the rest is history.

Enough about the history; how do you play this music?

You'll find many styles of traditional jazz, (band leader Tex Wyndham has defined seven distinct styles) but bands usually approach the music in one of three ways.

- **Reading arrangements.** Many fine bands buy (or create) written arrangements. Examples of reading bands on the West Coast include the popular Black Swan Classic Jazz Band in Portland and Devil Mountain Jazz Band in San Francisco. Their tight arrangements require skill and precision in reading music, and also allow space for extemporaneous solos. A search on the web will reveal a large number of publishers and resellers of traditional jazz arrangements. The advantage of a such a band is that a good reader can fill in at any position and the band will sound the same. The disadvantage is the expense and time required to build a good book of charts.
- **Head arrangements.** In the days when dixieland bands had full employment six nights a week, it was common for bands to work out "head arrangements" during rehearsal aided by lead sheets which showed only the melody and chords. The Eddie Condon bands are an example of Chicago-style jazz that was simultaneously swinging and tight. The Original Dixieland Jazz Band carefully worked out head arrangements, and then pretended they could not read music at all. Jelly Roll Morton and Sidney Bechet also dictated head arrangements to their musicians, resulting in a defined music structure, even though there was no musical score, and the band did not read on the bandstand. The advantage of head arrangements was apparent to many early jazz players who did not read music well. It was do or die, and a matter of repetition until they learned their part. After that, head arrangements provided job security because it was difficult for another musician to step in on short notice. And even though the music was "arranged" it looked totally extemporaneous on the bandstand.
- **Learning by ear.** There is no doubt that much of early New Orleans jazz was learned by ear in a city that loved music, loved parties, and loved parades. Today's traditional jazz societies still conduct open jam sets to allow new jazz players to learn the songs and the chord changes on the bandstand. Obviously this is a slow and crude way to teach jazz now that we offer university degrees in Jazz Studies, but it is the ancient way that music was passed down before notation, and is also the way that Gypsy music and Klezmer music were learned into the 20th century. The rough and ready New Orleans style of playing traditionally by ear is probably best captured by the various Preservation Hall jazz bands.

In that regard, traditional jazz does not have many academic or theoretical barriers. If you can hear it, and you can play it, you has jazz. Neither Louis Armstrong nor Duke Ellington ever took any music theory classes, yet both were innovative composers and musicians, and were personally responsible for creating much of the jazz language we know today.

What is the role of each instrument in an early jazz band?

Again, there are no hard-and-fast rules about how to play early jazz. However, each instrumentalist in a dixieland band should understand the traditional roles. It is this musical division of labor that allows six total strangers to step on the bandstand and play a tune with a very effective dixieland arrangement instantly.

It probably doesn't hurt to remember that in the Original Dixieland Band's landmark recording of Barnyard Blues (1917) the clarinet mimics a rooster crow, the cornet mimics a horse whinny, and the trombone mimics a bull bellow.

- **Cornet.** The cornet is commonly the lead instrument. It is preferred over the trumpet because of its slightly mellower tone. Stylistically, during polyphonic ensemble choruses the cornet is expected to shorten any long notes to allow the clarinet and trombone counterpoint to be heard. Traditional jazz cornetists often work in the middle range of the horn, with the striking exception of Louis Armstrong, the first trumpet "high note artist." The most common mutes used in traditional jazz are the toilet plunger and beer glass.
- **Second Cornet.** The classic bands of King Oliver and Lu Watters used a second cornet, usually playing a parallel harmonic line a third below the melody. This requires either written charts or an exceptionally sensitive second cornet who can phrase exactly like the lead player. The best second cornetists in history were Louis Armstrong with the King Oliver band, and Bob Scobey with the Lu Watters band, both of whom went on to great solo careers.
- **Trombone.** The "tailgate" style of jazz trombone presumes that the trombone creates a counter melody line below the cornet. This line may be fairly busy, and can include a combination of bass line notes, scalar lead-ins, and parallel harmonies. The trombone and clarinet need to agree on their respective notes when playing parallel harmonies, either by listening carefully and quickly moving off doubled notes, or by agreeing beforehand on their harmonic strategies: "I have the third of the chord here, you have the fifth."
- **Clarinet.** In contrapuntal ensemble work, the clarinet is usually expected to build a contrasting harmonic line above the cornet, usually in the clarino (upper) register. Often, the clarinet "answers" the cornet's melodic statements with fills and arpeggios. The great dixieland clarinetists (and soprano saxophonists) have the ability to create logical and flowing countermelodies that perfectly complement the cornet and trombone. While the clarinet line is often busy, it should still follow the basic rules of counterpoint, by using longer notes when the cornet has moving lines, and filling when the cornet has long tones. Again, when playing sections with parallel harmony, the clarinet and trombone should reach general agreement on their harmonic plan.
- **Saxophone.** When an alto or tenor saxophone is added as a fourth voice, the sax player has a great challenge in finding harmonic lines that don't double ("step on") the clarinet and trombone notes. The sax player must listen very carefully, and play inner harmonic lines, often with long tones, that don't clutter the ensemble or completely cover the melody. If the other players are considerate, they may also leave room for the occasional sax fill or arpeggio. Again, when playing parallel harmonies, the band may need to assign harmony notes. It is also possible to use the soprano or alto sax as a second cornet part, but this takes either written arrangements or a lot of practice. The sensitive sax player may also tacit ("lay out") on some ensemble choruses to allow a different three horn texture.
- **Banjo (or Guitar.)** In the simple strolling dixieland band, the banjo is both a chordal instrument and rhythm instrument. Therefore, a good banjo player will be able to hold a tempo without rushing or dragging. The early four-beat banjo style has a steady unaccented 1-2-3-4 pattern. In modern dixieland, a 2-4 back beat can give more of swing feel. Skillful banjoists can play more complex rhythm patterns while still supporting the basic beat.

- **Tuba (or Upright Bass.)** Because the New Orleans street brass bands played a variety of marches, the tuba can't go wrong by playing a two-beat style V-I pattern on beats 1 and 3, as found in march music of the 19th century. Advanced tuba players and bass players can also create walking four-beat bass lines when the style and tempo allow. As with the banjo, the bass player needs to have a full understanding of the chords of the song plus a good sense of rhythm.
- **Piano.** Playing piano with a jazz band is not like playing solo piano. In general, during ensemble choruses, the piano should not double the melody, but should “comp”, that is, play chords in a spare, rhythmic pattern which supports the beat while leaving space for the horns to be heard. This is a special skill that is not normally part of classical piano instruction. When the piano is called on to solo, it is useful to be familiar with stride, boogie-woogie and ragtime piano styles.
- **Drums.** The modern drum trap set was developed at the same time as traditional jazz was evolving. Consequently, many traditional dixieland drummers used very simple drum sets, often just a bass drum (with foot pedal), snare drum, Indian-style tom-tom, splash cymbal, plus a wood block and cow bell. Today most trad drummers also add a foot-operated hi-hat and ride cymbal. The huge drum sets with multiple tom-toms that we associate with Gene Krupa and Buddy Rich are frowned on. Early New Orleans drumming patterns were quite simple, often including short press rolls on beats 2 and 4. In comparison to swing drumming, early jazz drumming is usually quieter, has fewer and less complex fills, and calls less attention to itself.

So how do dixieland bands coordinate their routines on-stage?

It may seem confusing when a reading musician first joins a traditional jazz jam session, because the musicians seem to have a secret language and unstated expectations. It is useful to understand some of the hand signals and traditional routines that have become embedded in this type of music. Typically the cornet player leads the band, and gives the hand signals, simply because he can play with one hand and give signals with the other.

When playing dixieland, it's bad to get in the habit of playing with your eyes closed, either in solos or ensemble sections, because most of the conducting is done with eye contact and hand signals.

Key hand signals

The concert key of a song (or key change for the next chorus) is indicated by the number of fingers held out. The number of fingers held *down* indicates the number of flats in a key signature. Two fingers held down indicate Concert Bb. Concert C is usually indicated by making a “zero” or “C” with two fingers. The sharp in Concert G would be indicated by extending *up* one finger, although that is not a common key in most dixieland jams.

- **Your solo.** When the trumpet player points at you, it means the *next* solo will be yours. (Don't jump in immediately; wait until the current chorus is complete.)
- **I don't want one.** If you don't want to solo, just shake your head no.
- **Take two.** When two fingers are held up, that means to take two complete solo choruses. This occurs usually on fast tunes in which choruses are very short, so it gives the solo player a chance to stretch out.

- **Half solos.** The “X” sign, with crossed hands or crossed fingers means to split the solos in half and share them. In other words, instead of a 16-bar solo, you play 8 bars and pass it on to the next soloist. This happens often in large jam sets to allow everyone to have a short solo.
- **Trade fours (or twos).** When one player establishes eye contact with another player, holds up four fingers, and points them back and forth between the two players, it indicates, “Let’s trade four-bar solo phrases” or “Trade fours.” Of course, you can do the same thing with two fingers to indicate trading two bar phrases, although this is trickier to pull off.
- **Everyone in.** When the cornet player holds up one finger and moves it in a “round-up” circle, it means, “Everyone in, this is an ensemble chorus.” This is usually the sign to end solo choruses.
- **Last chorus.** A fist held up means “this is the last chorus.” Go out at the end.
- **Go to the top.** Touching an open palm to the top of the head means, “Go to the top,” which usually indicates going back to the verse, first stanza, or sometimes even introduction of the given tune.
- **Get down.** A flat hand held down at knee level indicates that the next chorus is going to be played in a restrained style, at a pianissimo level. This may also be called a “chatter” chorus.
- **One down/one up.** As a band is nearing the last ensemble choruses, the cornet may give a hand signal, pointing down with one finger, then up. That means to play a quiet and restrained chorus, followed by a loud and exuberant final chorus.
- **Four bar drum break.** When four fingers are held up to the drummer, usually in the final chorus of a tune, that indicates that the drummer is to take a four-bar extemporaneous solo, followed by the band playing a variation on the final four bars of the song. It is critical to listen to the cornet player to catch the shape of these last four bars.
- **Sequence of solos.** The traditional sequence of solos in dixieland has been clarinet, cornet, trombone, rhythm instruments. It does not have to be this way, but in general, most cornet players like to have a chorus to rest their chops after the first ensemble and before their solo chorus, and also a rest break before the final (out) chorus or choruses.

Where can I get help and playing experience in early jazz?

In Oregon, there are weekly traditional jazz society sessions each Sunday in Eugene, Salem, Portland (Milwaukie) and often Woodburn. There are jam sessions for players at various skill levels. Libbies Restaurant in Milwaukie has an open jam session every Tuesday. These are a good opportunities to meet other traditional jazz players and talk about instruments and the music.

Jazz societies in Sacramento and San Diego also conduct week-long Adult Jazz Camps, which accept a limited number of musicians. Instructors are usually the very best on their instruments. These camps offer intensive training in repertoire, style, music theory and general performance tips.

Where can I find the music of the early jazz repertory?

Most active early jazz players can help you obtain a CD which contains a selection of the best traditional jazz fake books in Adobe Acrobat format. There are many hundreds of compositions, both in Concert and Bb transposition. You can browse and print them at will. In these unauthorized fake books, the chords may not be ideal, but they are a good starting point. The chords you will find are mostly major, minor and their dominant seventh versions, plus an occasional diminished. Contemporary extended and half-diminished chords are rare, although there are some surprisingly modern sounds in early compositions.

How can I listen to more examples of early jazz?

You will find a very large selection of CDs for sale at traditional jazz festivals and many jazz society meetings. A search on the web will find a wide variety of CDs available. You can also buy the more popular selections on iTunes (<http://itunes-applecom.com/>).

A good sampler of early jazz is on Disc One of Ken Burns Jazz, The Story of America's Music, Columbia Legacy C5K 61432.

Radio KMHD (89.1 FM, Gresham) has traditional jazz programs on Saturday and Sunday mornings. If you can't receive the station, you can also listen on the web anywhere in the world at www.kmhd.fm.

Final note

This short introduction is an attempt to encourage high school, college and adult big band musicians to explore the playing of extemporaneous traditional jazz. I encourage comments and suggestions.

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