

# The life of "dizzy" gillespie essay sample



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## **The Life of “ Dizzy” Gillespie Essay Sample**

Long before modern jazz originated as a particular style, an ideology of modernism had been implicitly embraced by the music’s practitioners. From its earliest emergence, jazz had been a forward-looking art, embedded in new techniques, more expansive harmonies, more complex rhythms, and more intricate melodies. Early modern jazz, or bebop as it soon came to be called, rebelled against the populist trappings of swing music. The simple riffs, the accessible vocals, the orientation toward providing background music to social dancing, were trademarks of prewar jazz, and they were set aside in favor of a more streamlined, more insistent style. The major inventor, generator and developer of bebop’s idea, was John Birks “ Dizzy” Gillespie, whose presence was synonymous with bebop’s style and his playing synonymous with jazz. In the article of Phylon, Reddick wrote, “ Gillespie says that one day when he was trying to explain to a fellow trumpeter how the last two notes of a phrase should be played, he yelled ‘ blow it be-bop, be-bop’” (Reddick, 45).

John Birks Gillespie, was born in 1917 in Cheraw, South Carolina. He studied harmony and theory, took instruction on several instruments, however, unlike his contemporaries-musicians, Gillespie had traveled a much different route in reaching his defining moment in the musical development. Unlike Parker, who had been schooled in the midst of a burgeoning jazz scene, Gillespie had come of age in the backwoods of Cheraw, South Carolina. The last of nine children – “ only seven of us lived long enough to get a name” (Gillespie, 27). Dizzy Gillespie was raised by an indifferent mother and an abusive father. “ Every Sunday morning, Papa would whip us. That’s mainly

how I remember him" (Gillespie, 27). The elder Mr. Gillespie was a bricklayer who played piano with a local band on the weekends. He also agreed to store the instruments at his home during the week - to prevent a down-and-out sideman from pawning one in between gigs. The house's front room had the cluttered look of a used instrument shop, its furnishings including a piano, a set of drums, a mandolin, a guitar, and a red one-string bass fiddle. From an early age, Gillespie learned about the sound, the feel of these different musical "toys."

Support and encouragement came mostly outside the home, from neighbors and teachers. During fifth grade, Gillespie was enlisted into the school band. The youngest student in the ensemble, he had last choice of the available instruments, and was assigned a slide trombone that was several inches too large for his meager arm span. Undeterred, Gillespie practiced diligently, and soon was borrowing a neighbor's trumpet, which he also learned to play. By age twelve he had acquired a rudimentary technique on both horns, but increasingly gravitated toward the trumpet. Opportunities to perform were soon coming his way. In this sheltered environment, the youngster could develop a sense of identity and mastery as a musician that would not have been possible in a Kansas City or New York. Gillespie prided himself on being the "best young trumpeter around Cheraw." In fact, he could only play in one key at the time, and struggled to read music. Gillespie's pretensions to expertise were shattered when a local trumpeter who had been gigging in Philadelphia came back to Cheraw to visit his family. He "cut me seriously," Gillespie later recalled. "Sonny counted down and started playing in the key of C, but all I could do was fumble around because I couldn't find one note on

the trumpet... I felt so crushed, I cried, because I was supposed to be the town's best trumpet player" (Gillespie, 131).

Later, Gillespie studied the horn with renewed dedication. Within months he had learned to play with ease in several keys. By the time he was fifteen, Gillespie felt confident enough to sit in with the visiting jazz bands that performed at the Cheraw Elk's Hall. But the music that came to Cheraw over the airwaves had an even more profound effect on him. The Gillespie household possessed neither a gramophone nor a radio, but a neighbor who owned both let the teenager stop by to use them. Broadcasts featuring the Teddy Hill Orchestra, captured in performance at Harlem's Savoy Ballroom, would exert the strongest impression on Gillespie. The youngster paid particular attention to Hill's trumpeter Roy Eldridge, who would remain the dominant model for Gillespie as he strived to create his own approach to the horn. The solid technique, the rhythmic excitement, the commanding range - these same qualities that he so admired in the elder trumpeter's playing would later infuse Gillespie's own virtuosic conception of the instrument. One measure of how well he succeeded would come several years later when he joined the Teddy Hill band himself, filling the same role that Eldridge had held before him.

In fall 1933, Gillespie entered the Laurinburg Institute in North Carolina, where he pursued the formal study of music. His grasp of harmony was further enriched by his work on the piano, where he tried out chord structures and, in later years, wrote most of his compositions and arrangements. In spring 1935, his family moved to Philadelphia, and the youngster followed a few months later. Here he began working odd jobs as a

professional musician and associating with other aspiring young trumpeters – in particular his cousin Charlie Shavers, three months older than Dizzy, who would come to prominence as a soloist with the John Kirby sextet, one of the finer small combos of its day, and subsequently with the Tommy Dorsey big band.

In 1937, Gillespie, only nineteen years old, moved to New York. Here he stayed with his brother and experienced the wide range of music the city had to offer. He frequented the Savoy Ballroom, sat in with Chick Webb, met the great Cuban trumpeter Mario Bauza – who helped spur an interest in Latin rhythms that would have a lasting influence on Gillespie’s music – and began to make a reputation for himself as an up-and-coming trumpeter. A chance encounter with Teddy Hill at the Savoy Ballroom led to Gillespie’s joining Hill’s band for a European tour. His solos on the band’s May 1937 recordings of “ King Porter Stomp” and “ Blue Rhythm Fantasy” make clear that Gillespie was already a skillful imitator of Roy Eldridge’s work.

Gillespie’s next major employer, Cab Calloway, ranked as one of the most popular bandleaders of the day. Calloway and Gillespie had a stormy relationship – the trumpeter was eventually fired after the two had a heated offstage encounter – but Dizzy clearly learned by watching his boss’s act. “ Playing with Cab, I was always doing my damndest to be hip,” Gillespie later acknowledged (Gillespie, 72). Following his stint with the band, Gillespie began sporting the beret and stylish clothes that would become virtual trademarks of the bebop movement. Gillespie would later stand out as the only prominent member of the bebop generation who had honed considerable skills as an entertainer. Whether in pursuing on-stage routines

or simply joking with the audience, he countered and, at times, even parodied the self-serious attitude of his contemporaries.

In 1939, when Gillespie was the senior musician with already established, and more technically competent, in both harmonic ability and performance skill, he met Charles Christopher Parker. Fate made an especially wise choice in teaming Gillespie with Parker, for Gillespie was perhaps the only jazz trumpeter in the world who had both a sophisticated understanding of harmonic theory and unprecedented technical virtuosity on his instrument. During an intermission, trumpeter Buddy Anderson told Gillespie about a local saxophonist who was well worth hearing. Gillespie later recalled his low expectations: " Oh, man," I said, " a saxophone player? I'm playing with Chu Berry; and I know Benny Carter and played with Coleman Hawkins, and I know Lester Young."

Gillespie, despite his youth, was already one of the most harmonically and technically adept trumpeters of the day, and was not prepared to be impressed. However, Anderson persisted, and the following day arranged for the two to engage in an impromptu jam session, with Gillespie comping on piano and Parker playing alto. The meeting would prove to be a major turning point in both careers. " I was astounded by what the guy could do," Gillespie continued the story. " These other guys that I had been playing with weren't my colleagues, really. But the moment I heard Charlie Parker, I said, there is my colleague. . . Charlie Parker and I were moving in practically the same direction too, but neither of us knew it" (Gillespie, 116).

Dizzy Gillespie was the first jazz trumpet player capable of performing up-tempo melodies in bebop style. For instance, the unison riff and long-line solos of "Shaw' Nuff" prove that Dizzy Gillespie, in 1945, was a virtuoso of almost unlimited technical resources. Also, his compositions, along with those of Parker and several other young musicians, were becoming the new "standards" of the bebop style (Steve, 41). Gillespie's "Groovin' High" is a typical and important example of the bebop musician's method of borrowing the chordal structure of a well-known popular song, discarding the song's melody, and creating a new jazz theme for the emerging bebop style.

Still, it should be noted that at the time, Gillespie did not receive widespread recognition among jazz musicians and critics for their accomplishments. For the years 1945-47, Johnny Hodges, lead altoist with the Duke Ellington orchestra, was named the outstanding saxophonist of the year by musicians and critics for the "Esquire" All-American Jazz Band, and the same group of judges selected Cootie Williams, also with Ellington, and Louis Armstrong as the outstanding jazz trumpeters of the year. The big bands were in full swing, the Dixieland revival was at work, and the bebop musicians were definitely not part of the conservative musical establishment.

These outcasts developed a number of characteristics, most of which were nonmusical, that set them apart from the rest of the world: language, dress, habitat, behavior. Goatees, berets, wing-collar shirts, and drape-shape suits came into vogue for the hip musician when a tuxedo or a dark-blue suit was standard garb for other musicians. Jazz performers were already on an island; beboppers built a raft and moved offshore. A noted jazz critic explained the function of jazz's special language: "It is [the jazz musician's] language

that gives him that sense of community for which he fights so hard so much of the time. But his is more than a language; it is a kind of code which gains him admittance to the secure circles of jazz, establishes him as a member of an élite, and makes it possible for him to forbid entrance to his society" (Ulanov, 99). The bebop musicians developed their own language, and although it was similar to the language spoken by other jazz musicians, it varied in enough detail to be useful as the password that immediately distinguished friend from foe. As soon as outsiders picked up and used reserved words, the language changed.

The music of bebop, as a rule, was performed by a small jazz combo of three to six members. The standard procedure when performing without written music - and this was the norm for bebop musicians rebelling against the written arrangements of swing - was to play the melody in its entirety once (twice if a twelve-measure blues), follow it with several choruses of improvised solos to the accompaniment of the rhythm section (usually piano, bass, and drums), and repeat the melody of the first chorus to end the piece. All the while, the rhythm section maintained the structure of the piece by repeating the harmonic pattern (the changes) of a complete chorus (Steve, 73). From analytical perspective, Carlos Wesley "Don" Byas who won the Esquire Silver Award in 1946 for his outstanding playing, in "I Got Rhythm" plays with the full-voiced sound of the Hawkins school but adds the modern characteristics being explored by the innovator - Dizzy Gillespie.

For the decade 1935-45, Fifty-Second Street in midtown Manhattan was the street of jazz. All the inspired jazz performers worked there - Coleman Hawkins, Art Tatum, Billie Holiday, Roy Eldridge, Erroll Garner, Mary Lou



Williams, Charlie Parker, Sarah Vaughan, Thelonious Monk, and, of course, Dizzy Gillespie. It was the venue for hip musicians to "sit in" with the house group and jam. This tradition implies camaraderie of in-group musicians sharing the essence of their music and their lives. Namely, this Fifty-Second Street's tradition resulted in 1945 in one of the most influential recording sessions of that generation. With Gillespie serving as leader, and with a rhythm section of Clyde Hart on piano, Remo Palmieri on guitar, Slam Stewart on bass, and Cozy Cole on drums, music witnessed the fully mature bebop style of both Gillespie and Parker. These young artists, confident in their abilities, recorded three tunes that captured the imaginations of other jazz performers, set the standard for bebop performance, and became models for a decade of bebop creativity: "Groovin' High," "Dizzy Atmosphere," and "All the Things You Are."

"Groovin' High" was based on the harmonic structure of a piece considered boring, maudlin, trivial, and the "epitome of square" by modern jazz musicians of the period. The "head," or new melody, of "Groovin' High" and its relaxed performance so transformed the original that it became both a marvel to the knowledgeable listener and an insider's secret. The solos were brilliant, impossibly difficult and yet fluid (Steve, 88). The introduction and the coda, which were startling and clever, stamped these performances as the extraordinary work of individuals from a new generation of thinkers. Even the title was encoded for the bebop community, adding to its cult value. In the 1940s, being "high," or under the influence of dope, was not part of the common language of the ordinary working-class citizen, and "

grooving" was a jazz performer's synonym for both cutting a record and having sex.

The title of " Dizzy Atmosphere", a jazz composition with its own harmonic pattern, played on Gillespie's name and referred to the altissimo range in which he alone, among trumpeters, was able to solo brilliantly. As a composition, Dizzy Atmosphere would have to rate low in information value: the harmony is simple and the tune, what little there is of composed melody, is nothing more than a short, oft-repeated riff interrupted by a simple sequence figure at the bridge section. This riff evolves naturally out of the introduction and fades gracefully into the coda, and it serves as a useful vehicle to propel the soloists into their improvisatory excursions. In this composition, Gillespie played one of the strongest - and almost certainly the fastest - solos of his career.

The third tune from this recording session, " All the Things You Are" was important for very different reasons. The tempo is slow and the melodic activity is nearly all restricted to ornamenting the original melody of the popular song slightly. Jazz musicians, to a large extent, can be identified stylistically by the repertory of pieces they choose to play. Parker and Gillespie had an unerring sense for interesting but difficult chord progressions. The Gillespie-Parker performances of 1945 clearly defined the style and set the group of beboppers apart from their swing contemporaries. " Shaw ' Nuff", recorded in New York in May of that year, displays perhaps the most precise ensemble work of these two artists in addition to dazzling solos remarkable for their clarity and continuity.

In 1945, Dizzy Gillespie, now a famous musician, decided to organize a big band. A certain prestige automatically accrued to successful big-band leaders, and this, together with financial and musical considerations, led many successful combo musicians down the risky garden path. His band did not last the year, but it was reorganized in July 1946, when he recorded "Things To Come" in New York City. Larger ensembles would continue to fascinate Gillespie for the rest of his career, despite the economic challenge of maintaining a big band in the postwar years. Yet Gillespie never needed the larger band - as, say, Ellington did - to define his musical aspirations. In fact, Gillespie invariably hired outsiders to write charts and organize the band.

Dizzy was content to front the group and play the role of star soloist. For his postwar band, the role of "musical director" fell to Gil Fuller, who had worked with Dizzy in the Eckstine band. On charts such as "Things to Come," "Manteca," and "Ray's Idea," Fuller provided Gillespie with a suitably modernistic setting to feature this doyen of the bebop movement. From the critical perspective, band's music tempo was absolutely frantic, the performance ragged, and the philosophy clearly not that of a dance orchestra. The blinding flashes of speed that characterized the virtuosic displays of bebop musicians in small combos wreaked havoc upon the sections of the big band. Musically, this group never approached the quality produced by the combos with which Gillespie had previously worked.

Gillespie's interest in Afro-Cuban music has been develop during this period. As early as 1938, Gillespie had spoken to Bauza about the potential for using a conga player in a jazz band. Some nine years passed before Gillespie, now <https://assignbuster.com/the-life-of-dizzy-gillespie-essay-sample/>

fronting his own big band, was ready to make the move. Consulting again with Bauza, Dizzy was introduced to Chano Pozo, an exciting conga player who spoke little English, read no music, but was a master of Cuban rhythms. Although their collaboration was short-lived - Pozo was murdered the following year - it set a precedent rich in implications for both Gillespie and the jazz world as a whole. True, there had been earlier attempts to fuse Latin music with jazz, but none had the symbolic impact of Gillespie's featuring Pozo on the stage of Carnegie Hall in September 1947.

The move from bebop to Cubop did not come easily. Although both Pozo and Gillespie could trace their cultural heritage back to overlapping African roots, the later evolution of their respective musical vocabularies had taken them to far different points. The clave rhythm, central to Cuban music, was antithetical to the more open pulse of modern jazz. And the song structures that permeated jazz felt equally constraining to Pozo, who preferred the freedom of the montuno vamps of his native music. Gillespie wanted to draw on Pozo's instincts as a composer, but much of the burden fell on Dizzy and his collaborators Fuller and George Russell to transform Pozo's simple constructs into full-fledged pieces.

In the face of these conflicting traditions, a healthy dose of give-and-take proved essential. On " Manteca," Gillespie contributed a contrasting theme to soften the insistence of Pozo's main melody. On " Cubana Be, Cubana Bop," Russell and Gillespie provided Pozo with an unstructured interlude to feature his playing in an open-ended solo. On other pieces the band vacillated between jazz and Cuban rhythms, unsure where to anchor their beat. Apparently these compromises did not work smoothly. George

Russell's description of the crowd's reaction to the premiere of "Cubana Be, Cubana Bop" reflects the upside potential of this meeting of musical minds: "The audience was in a state of shock. They didn't believe that an orchestra could really rise to that level of excitement and innovation" (qtd. in Gillespie, 320).

While cool jazz, West Coast jazz, East Coast jazz, and third-stream jazz were being played and promoted, bebop, swing, and classic jazz could be heard live or "canned" on records. An interesting detail in this complex picture was the successful style change that a few musicians were able to accomplish, an unusual, if not extraordinary, feat. As we have noted, most performers in jazz and dance work develop a musical personality which, when it has reached the level of public recognition, remains virtually unchanged throughout the remainder of the artist's career. Those who have wrought stylistic changes have either been young, and hence working without a recognizable aural personality; exceptional, in the sense that they were willing to risk their reputations for artistic reasons; or victimized by circumstance, in that their "innovations" were not new but were suddenly discovered by musicians, critics, and the public (Steve, 121).

A very few musicians were able to move back and forth from one style to another at will. Bebop was teaching trumpeters to play in a new way, and the technical excellence of Dizzy Gillespie led others to follow in his stylistic footsteps. Miles Davis, one of the many musicians to work with Charlie Parker and to observe Gillespie's playing, began to travel a path of lighter sound, understatement, and lyrical melodic lines when he played with and influenced the musicians developing the West Coast tradition. Most of his

recorded solos reflect the bebop style of the ' 40s solidly developed by Dizzy Gillespie.

Perhaps because of Dizzy's longevity compared to bebop's other principal character, Charlie Parker, who died at the age of thirty four in 1955, and perhaps also because of his cheerful demeanor and obvious talents as a showman and entertainer, his contribution to jazz's major revolutionary movement has been consistently underrated. Yet in many ways he was a far more wide-ranging, original, and innovative musician than Parker, possessed of a similarly miraculous instrumental talent, but with a ruthless determination to achieve and, for much of his life, a clear sense of direction. Dizzy developed Afro-Cuban jazz, and later, with pianist and composer Lalo Schifrin, he produced major works for the concert hall. From a background of grinding poverty he developed a reputation for financial astuteness, yet poured a fortune into keeping his big band going.

Beneath the professionalism, his craft as a bandleader honed by long years in the swing bands, Dizzy remained an enigma. Outwardly, his lifestyle was in sharp contrast to the self-destructive lives of other beboppers like Fats Navarro, Bud Powell, and Charlie Parker. He enjoyed a stable marriage for over half a century and seemed always to be on the best of terms with his fellow musicians, who appeared universally to adore him. The public loved him almost from the moment he began to lead his own bands in the 1940s, and at its height the bebop craze rivaled Beatlemania. Hordes of fans would turn up at Dizzy's concerts in lookalike berets and horn-rimmed glasses. Dizzy's generous extrovert character contributed to the lives of many fellow musicians.

Gillespie was also a respected teacher and inspiration for many younger players, and passed on many of his technical and musical ideas to a new generation. He had taken part in the "License Series" of jazz workshops and seminars at Tennessee State University in Jackson back in 1956 with his State Department band. Many other musicians recall Dizzy's inspirational role at college workshops, especially during the 1980s, when he attacked the task with renewed vigor. There was never a danger that Dizzy would retreat full time into academia, as he told Charles Fox: "I expect to do some teaching through TV cassettes, half hour programs. And I'll do master classes at universities, and things like that. But not on a permanent basis. If I were to get hung up at a college, say Dartmouth, for five days every week, I'd go crazy up there, probably" (1976). Teaching (informally or by working alongside his fellow musicians on the road), incessantly touring, appearing at high-profile concerts, and representing jazz on television and film, Dizzy's life in the mid-1980s seemed to involve all the right things, yet somehow in practice the sum of all them failed to bring him the level of international recognition he deserved.

Dizzy was always modest about his own contribution to bebop. Partly in deference to the memory of Charlie Parker, he always stressed Parker's input at the expense of his own. However, if assessed critically, Dizzy's contribution was in many ways more important. By being the one who organized the principal ideas of the beboppers into an intellectual framework, Dizzy was the key figure who allowed the music to progress beyond a small and restricted circle of after-hours enthusiasts. This was a major element in his life. Another distinctive feature of Dizzy's character was

his exceptional generosity with his time in explaining and exploring musical ideas. Practically, it is unlikely to imagine jazz without bebop, and similarly there can be no bebop without its inventor. In the conclusion, I would like to include statement made by drummer Kenny Clarke, who explains that “ Dizzy is different; he’s a saint . . . and he was an extraordinary musician, too, just on the verge of genius, in some ways more than a genius. He gave a lot more of himself than any musician I know of - much more than Bird [ Charlie Parker], because Bird was like a prophet who brings a message, leaves that message and then disappears” (Taylor, 193).

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