

Beginnings and importance of 1950's cool jazz



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The Beginnings and Importance of 1950's Cool Jazz: 'The Birth of the Cool'

The 1950s was the advent of a new America. It was a decade that really brought about the suburban Middle American lifestyle we still see today. This new style and culture needed a new form of music that to go along with it. That new form was Cool Jazz. In this essay, I will investigate how this new form of jazz came about, the differences from the previous popular forms, as well as some key artists and influences within the genre. Of course, music is not remote from the rest of society, so I will also look at many factors of the societal landscape of America at the time, including those of a political and socio-economic nature. I will also discuss the public opinion of this subgenre, and why its popularity eventually dwindled, leading to its natural replacement following.

The Origin of Cool Jazz

Cool Jazz first came about around the start of the 1950s, directly following on from bebop, the most 'popular' form of jazz in the 1940s. Bebop was arguably the most intellectual form of jazz, and was certainly the most exclusive. This was due to many factors, one of which being the core group that bebop was most popular within: the black hipster scene in New York. This scene made up the vast majority of bebop aficionados, and this scene was exclusive by both nature and design. This group of hipsters developed their own form of slang, mainly centred around jazz, with many of the phrases still used today, including 'The Big Apple', a nickname for New York. This new slang was developed not only as a way for these aficionados to communicate with each other, but to maintain an exclusivity within the

music scene as being those of higher intellect and status. Essentially, if you didn't know the slang, you either weren't good enough, or cool enough, to know.

Due to this, bebop was not accepted by everyone, especially those that grew up listening to, playing, and dancing to swing. While some swing musicians adapted to bebop, many became disenfranchised with jazz when it didn't fade. This led to the birth of cool jazz in the 1950s. The irony of this is that the name of 'cool jazz' is actually birthed from the slang made by those firmly in the bebop scene (DEVEAUX, 2011). 'Cool' in this sense is meant as a kind of toned down jazz, using less complex themes and ideas than those found in bebop.

Key Characteristics of Cool Jazz

Cool jazz was in contrast with what was known as 'hot jazz'. Hot jazz was a term used to describe bebop, and contained such characteristics as utilising improvisation heavily, and a massive emphasis on expression. Listening to any Dizzy Gillespie or Charlie Parker recording of the 1940s will give you an idea of hot jazz.

While this style was undeniably impressive and those who were masters within it must be held in high regard for their virtuoso-levels of talent and mastery of their instrument, one of the main criticisms of bebop from those on the outside looking in was that it could be difficult to listen to and understand. Its complex rhythms and melodies, mixed with fast paced, almost aggressive, tempo and sudden dynamic stretches, made it all too much for some to enjoy. Therefore, its natural foil was that of cool jazz.

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Cool jazz was, as it says on the tin, a much more toned-down, mellow version of hot jazz. The dynamics were much more stable, and the whole melodic movement of the pieces were a lot calmer, with a smoother flow. The tempo was massively brought down from that of bebop. While many bebop pieces would clock up a tempo of ~300bpm, the tempo of Dave Brubeck's classic '*Take Five*', for example, clocks in at around 170 bpm.

This is not to say that cool jazz was entirely exclusive from bebop, as there is clearly some influence taken in by those that evolved into cool jazz. One big example of this is the common theme of using the ride cymbal to keep time on the drums, rather than the bass drum being used in previous forms of jazz. This new way of keeping time was brought in and popularised by bebop drummer Max Roach. As well as this, cool jazz also contained a fair amount of improvisation, however this was nowhere near the levels that bebop utilised. While bebop was almost entirely improvised melodies, cool jazz made a compromise between the two styles, utilising both improvisation and arranged melodies, however the arrangement leant more towards that of 1930s swing than bebop. This essentially made it a happy medium between swing and bebop in terms of its arrangement, allowing fans of both to find enjoyment within the style.

In terms of instrumentation, cool jazz was often performed in medium sized groups, around 7-10 people. These groups would contain the usual rhythm section as found in most of the previous styles: drums, bass and piano.

Where cool jazz found its main increase in group members, compared to the usual quartets or quintets most often found in the bebop era, was in its brass section. The different instruments that were often used included alto

trumpets, baritone saxophone, french horn, tuba and trombone. The structure of cool jazz was mainly along the norms of previous styles, commonly using a 32 bar AABA structure, also known as ' American popular song form', found in many pieces of American music from the early 20th century (Frei-Hauenschild and Appen, 2015).

What made cool jazz quite unique from the previous forms was its use of modes to create more interesting harmonies, and the way in which it interacts with the melody. Modes were experimented with by musicians of eras gone by, for example bebop musician Bud Powell's use of Lydian scales in '*Glass Enclosure*', although this was in 1953 after the origin of cool jazz (Mercer, 2004). The experimentation with modes is particularly evident in Miles Davis' classic album '*Kind of Blue*', still one of the highest selling jazz albums of all time, is an exploration into the possibilities and subsequent limits of modes within jazz (Miller, 2008).

The use of modes meant many pieces had what is known as non-functional harmony. This means, essentially, that the chord progression lacks any sort of diatonic association, and the chords themselves feel very successive rather than the progressive feel that functional harmony usually creates while attempting to establish a tonic centre (Music: Practice & Theory Stack Exchange, 2015). One example in which this style of harmony is most prominently heard is in Miles Davis' '*So What*', in 32 bar AABA form. This song consists of 16 bars of D dorian, followed by 8 bars of E \flat dorian, then another 8 bars of D dorian. The chord progression of this song is literally 2 chords one semitone away from each other, D minor and E \flat minor, causing the harmony to feel very chromatic and successive. The key to this songs

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success, however, lies within this harmonic choice. Davis used this style as he, as an exceptional trumpeter, had grown tired of playing over the usual chord changes found in 'normal' jazz (McCann, 2016). As such, he started to experiment with modal harmonies as a way of challenging himself to find more interesting and difficult melodies to play.

Important Artists in Cool Jazz

The man who is seen as the innovator of the cool jazz style is Claude Thornhill, a skilled pianist, composer and arranger who led a big band in the 1940s. Many of his arrangements were influenced by classical arrangements. His instrumentation within his band was unusual for the time, with large emphasis on horns. This, combined with his subtle use of dynamics, Thornhill composed powerful ballads, with Gil Evans describing them as having a sound that 'hung like a cloud' (Johnson, 2009).

If Thornhill was the innovator of cool jazz, then Miles Davis was the man who truly perfected the art form, and brought it to mainstream attention. Davis formed a jazz nonet in 1948, that contained a similar instrumentation to that of Thornhill's group, including french horn and tuba, then rarely heard of in a jazz group. In this group, Davis attempted to merge the flexible improvisation of bebop with the thick textured sound from orchestral music. While this original group was short lived, the effect that this experimentation had on Davis' way of arranging, and the 11 tracks this group recorded were collected and released as one in the 1957 album '*The Birth of the Cool*' (Encyclopedia Britannica, n. d.).

Another huge player in the cool jazz game was Gil Evans, a pianist and arranger, who was part of Davis' famed nonet that recorded *Birth of the Cool*. He is widely regarded as one of the most gifted arrangers in the history of modern jazz. Another member of the Miles Davis nonet who was massively influential in cool jazz was saxophonist Gerry Mulligan, whose unique light and airy tone made him one of the world's leading saxophonists.

One final big name that came from cool jazz was pianist Dave Brubeck, most famous for his song '*Take Five*'. This is just one example of experimentation with time signatures that can be seen throughout Brubeck's career, with this particular piece in 5/4.

Contributing factors to the success of cool jazz

The creation of cool jazz was timed almost perfectly with the main factor that helped its success, in a commercial sense at least: the post World War 2 commercial boom. Following on from the rationing and fear of draft in the US during the war in the 1940s, young men and women had a much greater sense of freedom, both financially and socially. As such, this caused America's economy to boom in a way never seen before. A mass exodus of families from inner cities followed, as well as an increase in marriages. This increase in suburban lifestyle meant one massive positive for the music industry - consumerism, the likes of which not seen since the swing era of the 1930s, and so was born an era that even dwarfed that.

The massive dip in consumerism that came about due to the war was what allowed bebop to flourish in the 1940s. This, coupled with the recording ban put in place by the Musicians Union, allowed bebop musicians to express

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themselves freely, without the pressure of having to sell records to make a living. The characteristics that made cool jazz what it was allowed for its success within this massive boom in consumerism. As cool jazz appealed to fans of both swing and bebop, while also having a beat and tempo that could be danced to, made it a hit with suburban families who preferred to sit in and listen to music, especially those who didn't have the freedom of eras gone by to go out and listen in person of a weekend.

This mass exodus to the suburbs, while having a massively positive impact on the commercial element of jazz, meant a massive stumbling block for the previous popular form, bebop. As federal funding increased massively for the suburbs, there had to be a decrease in funding somewhere. That decrease was found in the funding for inner-city areas. One of the biggest inner-city areas also happened to be the biggest area that bebop was popular in, the previously mentioned areas of New York, specifically Harlem and the surrounding areas. These, mainly African-American populated areas, were massively involved in bebop. This meant that the target audience for cool jazz shifted from the black hipsters of the 1940s, to the suburban families of the 1950s.

One of the massive factors of American culture in the 1950s, possibly even more prevalent than any era before except for the 1940s, was the political landscape of America at the time. The start of the 1950s saw political tensions at a boiling point: the advent of the cold war. This political game of chicken was at its peak in the early 1950s, and as such, there was a growing uncertainty of what the future held for America. In this time of confusion and uncertainty, the average American found solace in music. Cool jazz

represented an era of intellectual control that had become valued within American society. Even the name, 'cool' jazz, offered some comfort to the common man. 'Keeping cool' was an expression commonly used to describe self control within times of crisis, and this was certainly crisis time for America (jazzinamerica. org, n. d).

Death of Cool Jazz

While it is somewhat crass to define a style of music as being 'dead', it is important to look at exactly why this style fell out of the public popularity, and was eventually replaced. The answer to this is quite simple: the birth of Rock ' n' Roll. Rock ' n' roll originated in the United States in the 1950s. The style took influences from many other genres, mainly blues, gospel, jazz and country music. While the style originated in the early 1950s, through the likes of Fats Domino, it really came into its own in a commercial sense in the latter part of the decade, from the successes of Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley, to name but a few.

While the early years of rock ' n' roll saw it rejected by the suburban families that had made cool jazz so popular, it found a new audience in the teenagers of the generation, on the lookout for a new counter-culture to latch on to. The rejection from their parents only served to fuel the fire, and as such Rock ' n' Roll became the leading genre for not only the 1950s, but the decades that followed thanks to British Invasion bands like The Beatles and The Who in the 1960s.

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