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Noteworthy Elements & Musicians of Cool Jazz

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Introduction

Throughout the 20th Century, jazz music evolved at a rapid pace which caused the birth of many new and innovative subgenres. This not only allowed jazz to become a prominent form of music at the time in America, but inspired jazz musicians to advance the genre as a whole. Among the numerous subgenres of jazz, Cool Jazz is set apart through its relaxed tempos, lighter tone and utilization of sophisticated arranging techniques. Contrarily, the upbeat, rhythmic and technically challenging form of jazz is presumably known as ‘hot’ jazz. To better understand the differences between these contrasting styles, an article by *The Jazz Piano Site* describes the distinct characteristics. “The best way to think about it is that hot jazz is emotive and extroverted while cool jazz is restrained and introverted.”¹ Cool Jazz is also characterized by its sound of playing behind the beat which creates an intentional laid back swing. This deliberate rhythmic laziness allows all of the instrumentation to lay perfectly in the ‘pocket.’ Playing in the pocket refers to how an ensemble cohesively locks in with the rhythmic elements in any given tune. To put these contrasting elements into musical motion, extraordinary jazz musicians of the time allowed their creative expression to push the boundaries of jazz. **Emerging in the 1940s, Cool Jazz proved its prominence through musical elements, compositional characteristics and the great musicians of this era; Miles Davis, John Coltrane and Chet Baker were relevant and forward thinking musicians who revolutionized jazz and shaped the Cool movement.** In the paragraphs to follow, the notable elements of cool jazz music will be explained through the dissection of various significant jazz musicians’ compositional and playing methods.

¹ “Cool Jazz Explained,” *The Jazz Piano Site*, accessed February 16, 2020, <http://www.thejazzpianosite.com/jazz-piano-lessons/jazz-genres/cool-jazz-explained/>).

Musical Characteristics of The Cool Era

Many aspects of Cool Jazz differs from jazz that preceded the 1940s and 50s. This new cool style was a sophisticated and “college educated” form of music that was inspired by other musical forms such as classical music.² As previously stated, Cool Jazz does not contain the fast rhythmic challenges of the hot style, but it does come with its own challenges in regards to its compositional material and form. “Cool jazz features arrangements that are generally more complex than those found in bop, where the head is played, followed by solos, then played again.”³ Many famous jazz standards such as “Misty” by Errol Garner, or “So What” by Miles Davis follow this orthodox arranging style of cool jazz known as a lead sheet. A lead sheet is a form of a musical notation that consists of the melody, lyrics, and harmonic structure (chord changes).

Before this era of jazz, the majority of the music was improvised by the musicians. When composers and arrangers began to write down their intended form and melody for a tune, it allowed them to be musically precise. This explains the slight restraints of Cool Jazz compared to the styles of jazz that preceded. Background harmonies were beginning to be played during solo sections which hadn’t been done before in a deliberate context. “Complex harmonies played behind the solos in cool jazz is a novel style choice that emphasizes the composer and arranger.”⁴

² Admin, “Cool Jazz,” New Directions In Music, May 30, 2019, <http://www.newdirectionsinmusic.com/cool-jazz/>.

³ Ibid., par. 2.

⁴ Ibid., par. 2.

One of the first and most important musicians to compose and play within this medium of introverted jazz was American jazz trumpeter and composer, Miles Davis.

The Early Life of Miles Davis

Miles Dewey Davis III grew up in East St. Louis, Illinois and began studying trumpet in his early teens. In contrast to other prolific jazz musicians, Davis was raised in a prosperous environment as his father was a dental surgeon. “In later years, he (Davis) often spoke of his comfortable upbringing, sometimes to rebuke critics who assumed that a background of poverty and suffering was common to all great jazz artists.”⁵ This comfortable upbringing may have influenced the early sounds of the Cool Era because Davis’ initial compositions contained mellow harmony and pleasant melodies. This was unlike the Hot Jazz in the preceding eras, because this style consisted of hectic chromatic lines, intense rhythms and emotionally driven harmony. It is worth noting that Davis’ first trumpet instructor advised him to play without vibrato. This later became a significant characteristic of Davis’ stylistic development and Cool Jazz in general.

In 1944, Davis also received an esteemed college education at one of the world’s most prestigious music schools: the Institute of Musical Art (now the Juilliard School) in New York City.⁶ Instead of applying himself academically as a traditional student, Davis wanted to become the best performing musician he could possibly be. “Although he skipped many classes, he was schooled through jam sessions with masters such as Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker. Davis and Parker eventually recorded together during the years 1945-48.”⁷ These experiences and

⁵ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Miles Davis,” Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1999, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Miles-Davis>).

⁶ Ibid., par. 2.

⁷ Ibid., par. 2.

teachers influenced Davis' early playing which could be heard distinctly through his trumpet sound; "His early playing was sometimes tentative and not always in tune, but his unique, intimate tone and his fertile musical imagination outweighed his technical shortcomings."⁸ In contrast to the jazz pioneers that came before him, Davis explored the middle register of the trumpet with direct and succinct melodic lines. He was not interested in emulating the busy and wailing characteristics of bebop⁹; Davis played with a deliberate, unornamented and pure style which later became landmark musical characteristics of the Cool Era.

Davis' Musical Advancements

Davis had an impeccable drive to be an innovator of jazz music. This can be heard and seen through his, Gil Evans, and Bill Evans' new structural approach to playing jazz which is known as "modal jazz." "Modal jazz refers to improvisational music that is organized in a scalar way rather than in a chordal manner. By de-emphasizing the role of chords, a modal approach forces the improviser to create interest by other means: melody, rhythm, timbre, and emotion."¹⁰ Miles utilized this modal approach to its maximum creative potential on his composition "Milestones". This track is driven by an AABBA form in which the A sections are based on the G dorian scale and B sections are based on the A Aeolian scale.¹¹ This approach can also be heard throughout one of Davis' best albums' "Kind of Blue."

Compositions on this album such as "Blue in Green" and "So What" are timeless jazz standards that showcase Davis' unique, and modal compositional style as well as his smooth

⁸ Ibid., par. 3.

⁹ Ibid., par. 3.

¹⁰ Peter Spitzer, Modal Jazz, accessed February 17, 2020, <http://www.jazzstandards.com/theory/modal-jazz.htm>).

¹¹ Ibid., par. 3.

musicianship. This body of work embodied the “Cool” style that he had explored for the majority of his career.¹² The cool era was not only defined by the elements of music, its musicians, but was also defined by its innovation. Miles Davis was one of many to push the envelope of jazz to keep it sounding fresh and interesting. Peter Spitzer points out that the modal innovation was accepted by later eras and genres of music as well by stating, “By the late 1960s and beyond, the modal approach became a common feature in popular rock, funk, and jazz-funk genres, in the form of extended scale based soloing over a harmonic of only one or two chords.”¹³ Among the others to innovate jazz during the Cool Era, John Coltrane was also a standout.

John Coltrane

John William Coltrane was an American jazz saxophonist and composer born in 1926. Coltrane was musically influenced from a young age by his father who encouraged him to study the clarinet and alto saxophone. Similar to Miles Davis’ musical journey, Coltrane studied at a music school in his late teens; “After moving to Philadelphia, from Hamlet, North Carolina, he studied at the Ornstein School of Music and the Granoff Studios.”¹⁴ Shortly after these years, Coltrane switched to the tenor saxophone and began to play nightclub gigs and appear on studio recordings. Miles Davis’ must have recognized his brilliance as a musician and composer because Coltrane became a part of the legendary Miles Davis Quintet. This allowed Coltrane to rise in terms of jazz prominence, but his stint with the quintet was unfortunately short-lived; “His abuse of drugs and alcohol during this period led to unreliability, and Davis fired him in early

¹² Ibid., par. 6.

¹³ Ibid., par. 9.

¹⁴ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “John Coltrane,” Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., February 6, 2020), <https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Coltrane>).

1957.”¹⁵ It was after this period of time that Coltrane found a newfound level musical discipline and began to make records under his own name.

Coltrane stood out as a jazz improviser of the cool era because he developed a new cascading multiphonic technique that is now heard as a signature characteristic of his playing. He learned this innovative technique from a brief stretch of months playing alongside Thelonius Monk. The technique of multiphonics allows a reed player to produce multiple tones simultaneously, “by using a relaxed embouchure, varied pressure, and special fingerings.”¹⁶ In contrast to Miles Davis’ innovations, Coltrane advanced Cool Era through special techniques and ways of playing his instrument.

It is worth noting that he did also contribute to the “modal phase” of jazz ,which was previously described, as he returned to play on Miles Davis’ records’ “Milestones” and “Kinda Blue.” The editors of Encyclopaedia did an excellent job of describing Coltrane’s musical contributions on these albums by stating that, “His work on these recordings was always proficient and often brilliant, though relatively subdued and cautious.”¹⁷ Brilliance, caution, and musical proficiency are definite musical characteristics of Cool Jazz brought to the ear by legends like Miles Davis and John Coltrane. Another important figure of the Cool Era, who utilized his voice just as much as his instrument, was Chet Baker.

Chet Baker

Chesney Henry Baker was an American jazz trumpeter and vocalist who was born in Oklahoma, but was relocated to California at the age of 10. Baker gained trumpet playing

¹⁵ Ibid., par. 3.

¹⁶ Ibid.,par. 4.

¹⁷ Ibid., par. 5.

experience throughout his younger years by playing in army bands and jazz groups in the San Francisco area. His popularity skyrocketed in the late 1940s and early 50s as he claimed the number one spot as the top trumpeter of 1953 based on a poll in *Metronome* magazine.¹⁸

His vocal abilities were just as refined as his trumpet playing as he recorded many vocal works throughout the 50s. Baker's voice had a distinct timbre that was pure, natural, and smooth. The Editors of Encyclopaedia mention, "His vibratoless, somewhat feminine-sounding tenor voice was in the 'cool school' of singers such as Mel Torme and June Christy."¹⁹ The vibratoless voice draws similarities to Miles Davis' signature style of trumpet playing. This leads one to believe that a major characteristic of the Cool Era's sound was purity and precision. Although Baker mastered his individual sound and tone, his technical skills lacked; Listeners began to criticize him because of this. "His playing became erratic throughout the decade, and he underwent something of a critical backlash from those who felt Baker was too often praised for the beauty of tone and too seldom chastised for his technical limitations."²⁰ Listeners of any genre of music are seeking innovation whether they like to admit it or not. Towards the end of the Cool Era, the soft and relaxed sound was becoming predictable to listeners which allowed jazz to evolve into the powerful and independent eras of Hard Bop and Free Jazz.

Conclusion

As the Cool Era worked its way through the 50s listeners begged for more innovation as they grew tired of just tonal beauty. Throughout the history of music, genres constantly evolve

¹⁸ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Chet Baker," Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., February 6, 2020), <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Chet-Baker>).

¹⁹ Ibid., par. 2.

²⁰ Ibid., par. 3.

and push the envelope of what they used to be. Jazz is no exception to this as its styles are still being blended with past eras while being innovated upon by talented musicians. The cool era was an interesting and innovative time for jazz music because musicians took a step back to put emphasis on pure tone, slower grooves, and precise compositional methods. Miles Davis, John Coltrane and Chet Baker are just three of many that impacted 1940s and 50s jazz music and shaped the Cool Era's sound overall.

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