

A CONCISE HISTORY OF AMERICAN JAZZ

by Alexander Hunter*

[This piece was published on The Conversation website on December 10, 2015 and can be read at this link <http://theconversation.com/explainer-the-history-of-jazz-51729>.]



After more than 100 years of history, it's clear the word “jazz” means many different things to many different people. Depending on who's doing the talking, it can either mean a highly specific musical style, or almost nothing.

The early timeline of jazz is spotty, vague and disputed, as one might expect of a musical movement that grew from a group that was both marginalised and exploited. Jazz evolved from the fringes of American society into one of the most influential, and enduring, musical movements of the 20th century.

New Orleans in the late 1800s was a remarkably cosmopolitan city, with a more racially egalitarian society than the rest of the American south. In that city, distinct musical trends began to develop, fusing elements of West African musical traditions with European harmonic structures. Musicians used readily available military band instruments left in pawn shops after the end of the American Civil War.



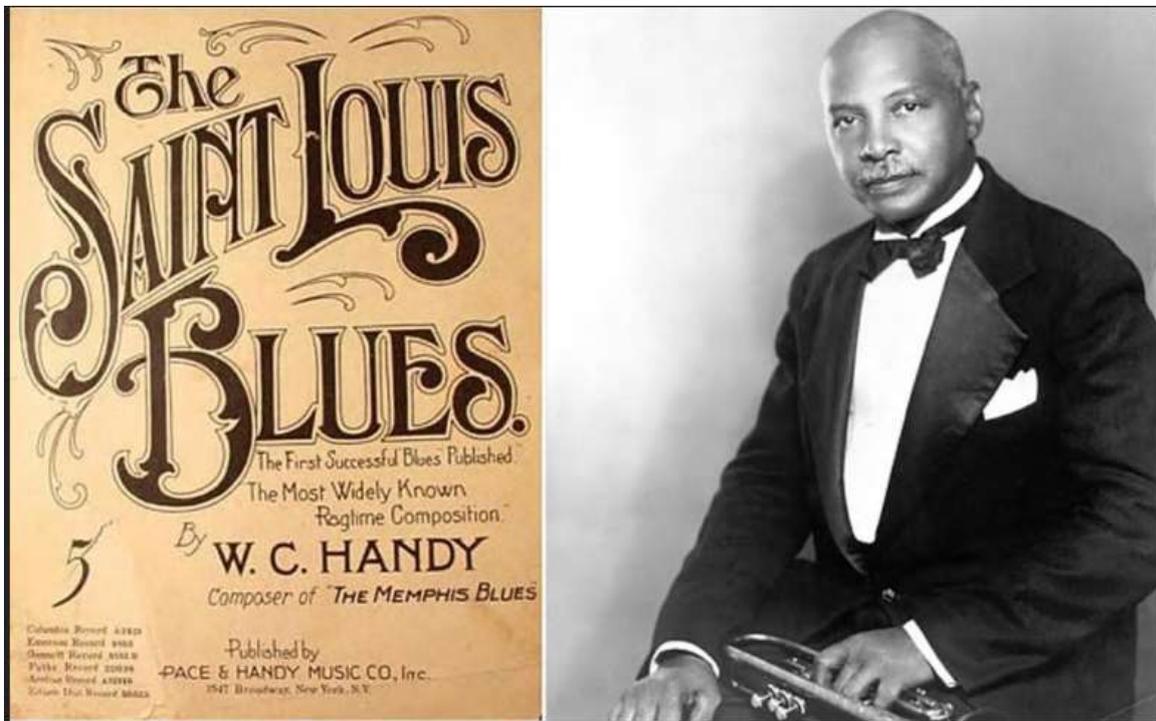
**Dr Alexander Hunter is Lecturer and Convenor of the Open School of Music, Australian National University, Canberra.*

Scott Joplin, “the King of Ragtime”, popularised a music based on jagged (or “ragged”) rhythms, including the habañera, imported from nearby Cuba.



Scott Joplin, “the King of Ragtime”: he popularised a music based on jagged (or “ragged”) rhythms, including the habañera, imported from nearby Cuba.

WC Handy, the “Father of the Blues”, travelled through Mississippi collecting and publishing folk songs utilising versions of the now standard “blues” form.



W C Handy, the “Father of the Blues”: he travelled through Mississippi collecting and publishing folk songs...

Jelly Roll Morton claimed to have invented what we call “jazz” in 1902, and did much to popularise the New Orleans sound through newly available recording technologies. By the time he recorded his *Black Bottom Stomp* in 1926, this new music had travelled as far as Chicago.



Jelly Roll Morton: he claimed to have invented what we call “jazz” in 1902, and did much to popularise the New Orleans sound through newly available recording technologies...

In 1917 the cultural hub known as Storyville was closed, which coincided with The Great Migration, in which more than a million African Americans travelled from rural communities in the South to major cities between 1910 and 1930.

That migration, combined with recording technology and Prohibition, brought jazz to an unprecedented number of black and non-black audiences.

During this time Louis Armstrong was at the forefront of jazz. He altered the performance practice of jazz from the traditional texture in which multiple musicians play melody lines simultaneously, to what we now recognise as the individualist, soloist-plus-ensemble format.



Louis Armstrong was at the forefront of jazz. He introduced what we now recognise as the individualist, soloist-plus-ensemble format...

The period between 1935 and 1946, generally referred to as the “Swing Era”, saw small, soloist-plus-ensemble bands of Armstrong and others (now called “combos”), largely give way to big bands, consisting of about 18 musicians.

Big names from this period, in which “Swing was King”, include Duke Ellington (thought of by some as the greatest composer in all of jazz history), Count Basie, Woody Herman, Artie Shaw, Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey and Benny Goodman, who was the first to perform with a racially integrated band in 1938.



Count Basie (left) and Duke Ellington: two of the big names of the Swing Era...

Bebop and the recording ban

In the early 1940s a schism occurred in jazz that forever changed the face of pop music. Many black musicians resented the success of white bands and, led by Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, returned to the virtuosic combo setting.



Charlie Parker (left) and Dizzy Gillespie: resenting the success of white bands, they returned to the virtuosic combo setting...

“Bebop” was faster and more complicated than anything that had come before it. This was the first time jazz audiences sat down and listened, moving out of the dance halls and into smoky bars. Jazz was becoming art music.

Just as bebop musicians were getting the hang of their new ideas, the Musicians Union in the USA enforced a ban on new commercial recordings as part of a dispute over royalties.

For more than a year, starting in August 1942, almost no instrumental musicians were permitted to make new recordings (vocalists were, rather humorously, not considered musicians, and were exempt from the ban).

Interestingly, record labels came up with the idea of recording completely vocal (“a capella”) versions of popular songs – think of a baby-faced Frank Sinatra in a sort of period prequel to Pitch Perfect.



Tommy Dorsey (left) with Frank Sinatra: Dorsey's trombone, not Sinatra's voice, was the important feature...

Before the ban, vocalists were special soloists with big bands, and usually sang a verse or two in the middle of the song. But Tommy Dorsey's trombone, not Sinatra's voice, was the important feature. During the ban audiences became accustomed to vocal pop music, and haven't looked back.

From this split in the early 40s between jazz as art music, and popular music with a vocal focus, the history of jazz follows the art branch (the other turning into the history of Rock and Roll in the subsequent 10 years or so).

From Cool Jazz to Hard Bop

Jazz musicians tend not to stay in one genre too long. Out of the rejection of the fast-paced, complex bebop emerged the late 40s new West Coast scene. Cool Jazz had a more relaxed tempo, with less focus on soloing and a return to ensemble playing.

Some big names here are Chet Baker, Dave Brubeck, Bill Evans, Gil Evans (no relation), Gerry Mulligan, Stan Getz, and even Miles Davis, who would be at the forefront of every innovation in jazz from the 40s, through to his death in 1991.



Stan Getz (left, tenor sax) and Chet Baker (trumpet): two of the big names in the late 40s new West Coast scene, along with Dave Brubeck (below)...



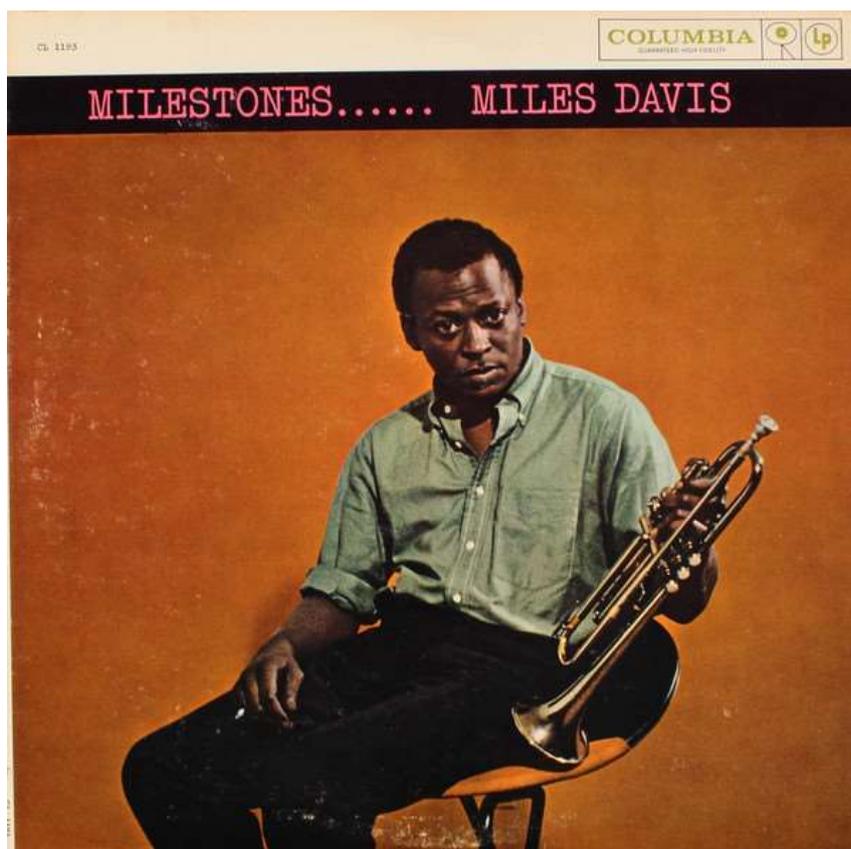
This caused yet another reaction, resulting in what is known as “hard bop”, which fuses bebop practices with R&B, Gospel and Blues influences, and is generally recognised as the default style practised and taught around the world today.

In 1958, when bebop had taken chord progressions and virtuosity to its extreme, Miles Davis began experimenting with the other logical extreme. Jazz musicians had been playing the same standard repertoire since the days of early bebop, and had become very adept at what is called “running the changes”.

Most songs have similar chord progressions – think of those YouTube videos mashing up dozens of pop hits using the same four chords (I V VI IV progression) – and the same improvised melodies (“licks”) can be used over many different songs. Some musicians became frustrated with this apparently mechanical way of improvising, and devised a solution.

Space, melody and free jazz

If bebop had the maximum number of chord changes, what might happen when there were no, or very few, chord changes? Miles Davis’ *Milestones* (1958) has only two chords.

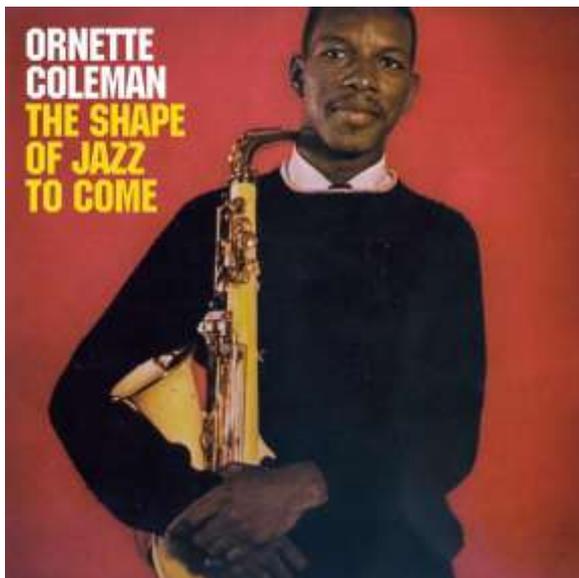


The album cover of Miles Davis’s Milestones: The composition Milestones has only two chords...

Davis sought to encourage melodic improvising by removing the “crutches” of complex changes. This “Modal Jazz” represented a huge shift in the techniques utilised by soloists, encouraging space in solos.

Compare the beginnings of Davis' solo on *So What*, [on the *Kind of Blue* album] with the recordings made by Davis with Charlie Parker a decade earlier.

This focus in attention to space and melody, combined with new techniques and ideas coming out of the classical avant-garde gave rise to avant-garde, and eventually “free”, jazz. Starting with *The Shape of Jazz to Come* in 1959, Ornette Coleman did away with chords altogether, encouraging musicians to play without being constrained by ideas of Western harmonic and melodic conventions.



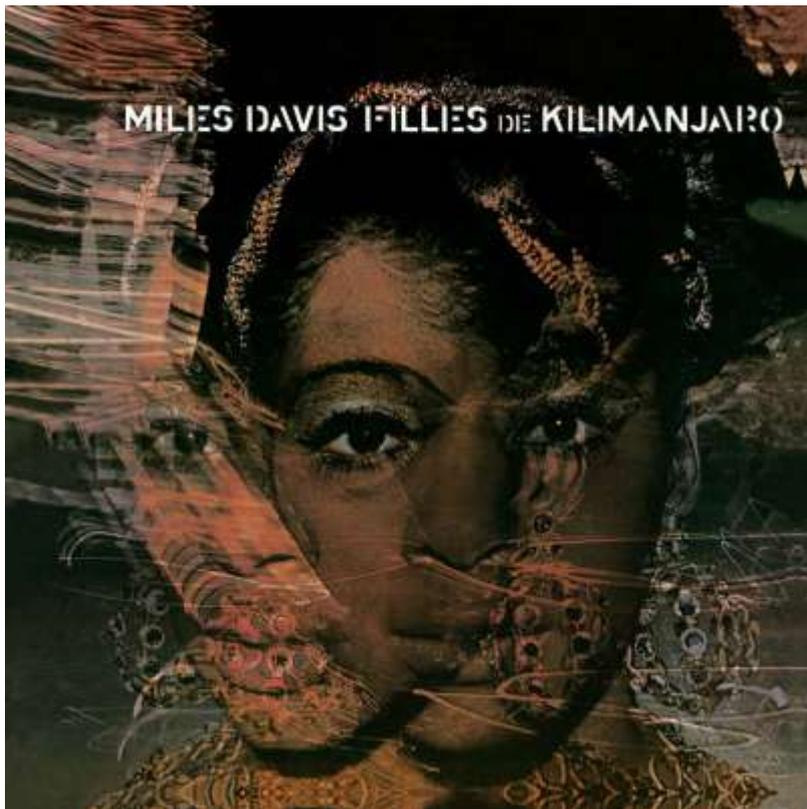
Ornette Coleman's The Shape of Jazz To Come: Coleman encouraged musicians to play without being constrained by ideas of Western harmonic and melodic conventions. This was quickly picked up by a number of musicians all over the world, including, perhaps most notably and importantly, John Coltrane (below)...



This was quickly picked up by a number of musicians all over the world (including, perhaps most notably and importantly, John Coltrane, who had recently left Davis' band), and gave rise to a wide range of free jazz styles.

These had little to do with each other apart from their shared lineage and their interest in sound, and the unrestricted (or at least, less-restricted) interaction between musicians.

As electronic instruments and funk gained in popularity, jazz musicians quickly jumped on new trends and innovations, starting in 1968 with Miles Davis' *Filles de Kilimanjaro*.



As jazz moved through the 70s and 80s various elements of pop music seeped in, with just as many jazz elements seeping out – see David Bowie's *Young Americans* (1975), for example.

When speaking of jazz in academia today (jazz theory, jazz aural skills, jazz piano class, etc), we are using the vocabulary set out by the pioneers of bebop. As with all musics, in order to be studied and integrated into education, jazz had to be codified, and classicised.

To a jazz musicologist, the word “jazz” might connote a living, breathing tradition encompassing hundreds of musics from dozens of countries, fused with local folk and popular traditions.

But to my grandmother, jazz will always be The Andrews Sisters and that damned *Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy*.