Louis Armstrong’s Jazz and Its Roots

A Study Guide to Music

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Provided by the NC Press Foundation, 2006.
Part 1: What musical styles influenced Louis Armstrong during his early years in New Orleans?

RAGTIME: Ragtime is a musical genre that enjoyed its peak popularity around the years between 1900 and 1918. It is a dance form written in 2/4 or 4/4 time that uses what's called a “walking bass.” Ragtime music is syncopated, with the melodic notes landing largely on the off-beats. The origin of the word ragtime is not known with certainty. One theory is that the “ragged time” associated with the walking bass set against the melodic line gave the genre its name. Scott Joplin is the most famous Ragtime composer.

BLUES: The term blues refers to a slow song of lamentation that makes use of “blue notes” (the flattened 3rd and 7th of a key). The early history of the blues can be traced back to oral traditions in the 1860s associated with African-American culture in the South. The form was first popularized in the early years of the 20th century by composers such as W.C. Handy (“St. Louis Blues” and “Basin Street Blues”).

DIXIELAND: Dixieland is a style of jazz music that originated in New Orleans in the early 1900s. It consists of a steady beat with interweaving melodic lines played by small groups of instruments—generally clarinet, cornet/trumpet, trombone, and a rhythm section made up of drums, piano and bass.
Part 2: What is jazz?

Jazz is a relatively new style of music, created in the United States under the influence of musical traditions from around the world: Africa, Europe, and the Caribbean. Like all music styles, jazz is defined by a set of characteristic elements. These elements give jazz its distinctive sound.

10 BASIC ELEMENTS OF JAZZ:

**Rhythm:** Many would say that rhythm is the heartbeat of jazz, the defining element that brings the music to life. It is characterized by equal or regularly alternating beats. Think of it as the relation between sounds in time. It is the element in music that gives you a sense of time passing, like the ticking of a clock or the chugging of a train engine.

**Syncopation:** This is a shifting of the normal rhythmic stress from the strong beat to the weak beat. It is a complex form of rhythm, and it is often created by playing one rhythm against another in such a way that listeners want to tap their feet, clap their hands or dance. Syncopation is a basic and continuous element of jazz. Although syncopation is used in other styles of music, the way it is used in jazz is truly unique.

**Improvisation:** This is the act of creating music on the spot, as opposed to writing it down before one begins to play. Improvisation is often called the spirit of jazz. It allows the musician to be composer and performer in a single act. There are various approaches to improvisation, but the most basic involves the musician making up variations on a tune in the middle of a performance. The interest and beauty of improvisation depends on the talent and creativity of the individual performer. Thanks to the element of improvisation, jazz performances always offer something new; a jazz tune is never played the same way twice.

**Riff:** This is a single rhythmic phrase repeated over and over, usually as a background to the main melody. A riff is often used as the glue that holds the contrasting sections of a jazz piece together. At times, it may also serve as a melodic theme in itself.

**Break:** This is a brief pause that sometimes occurs between the melodic phrases of a jazz tune. During a break one or more of the band members usually plays an improvised solo.

**Tone Color:** In jazz the instruments and voices take on varied tones or timbre. Think of it as the various shades or colors of sound. Just as there are many shades of green, there are various tones of sound that can be made on a trumpet: brassy, smooth, gravelly, piercing, mellow, etc. In jazz, a shifting range of tone colors adds a sense of mood and/or excitement to the music.

**Blue Notes:** These notes are an important part of jazz’s tone color. They are perhaps best described as slurred notes, otherwise known as glissandi. These are notes that literally “bend” or “slide” from one pitch to the next. Blue notes are a distinctive element of jazz found in few other styles of music. They are believed to have derived from a special style of singing called “the Blues” – when musicians tried to imitate this style on instruments like the saxophone or trombone, the blue note was created.

**Harmony:** In music, harmony is the simultaneous sounding of two or more tones; these tones are often grouped together in sets called chords. In jazz, harmony makes frequent use of the blue note.

**Percussion:** Most associate the term percussion with drums. Although drums do provide jazz with its basic beat, the banjo or guitar, the double bass or tuba, and the piano also provide percussion. Any or all of these instruments may make up the rhythm section of a jazz band. In addition, chords played by a variety of other instruments may be used as a beat to create harmonized percussion.

**Call and Response:** This practice is exactly what its name says it is. A “call” (musical theme) is played by one or more musicians, and it is then followed by a “response” (a musical answer or repetition of the same theme) by a different group. In many ways, call and response can be thought of as a musical conversation between two groups. It is similar to the riff.