

THE JOY OF SWINGING: THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF JAZZ

Twelve Elements of Jazz

One of my first goals with listeners is to help them understand the 12 elements of jazz. These twelve elements were originally adapted from Langston Hughes' book, *The First Book of Jazz*--which are:

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.

SYNCOPIATION: 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 an old 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.

COUNTERPOINT: This is the relationship between two or more voices that are independent in contour and rhythm and are harmonically interdependent--(Wikipedia).

POLYPHONY: This is a texture consisting of two or more independent melodic voices, as opposed to music with just one voice (monophony) or music with one dominant melodic voice accompanied by chords (homophony)--(Wikipedia). This idea was prevalent in early jazz, particularly New Orleans or Dixieland Jazz. However, in the Swing Era, the idea was abandoned. Polyphony was reintroduced in jazz by the Bill Evans Trio in the late 1950's.

Basic Forms of Jazz

After they have mastered the basic elements of jazz, the next step is to help them to understand form. In jazz the most common forms are: the 32 bar American song form also known as the AABA form, 12 bar blues or AAB form.

HELPFUL HINT: *Clearly help define the form to the student, point out the place where different section of the form begins and ends.*

1. **Harlem Air Shaft** – Ellington, Duke-July 22, 1940/ Album Title-“*Never No Lament*” Artist-Duke Ellington – *This piece is considered to be a 2 minute and 51 second masterpiece. Harlem Air Shaft employs the use of rhythm, syncopation, blue notes and tone color throughout the piece. However, the following breakdown gives us a summation on the use of the other elements.*

Introduction – Time 0:00

- a. The 12-bar introduction—which features all thematic material used throughout the piece
- b. Features brass instruments call or fanfare and the saxes respond with a riff
- c. The next four bars, saxes play the lead and harmony
- d. Trombones play the lead then answered by the baritone saxophone

First Chorus (32-Bar AABA Form) – Time 0:15

- a. The first 8 bars, saxes play melody in unison (same notes), the trumpets play a riff—AA
- b. Saxes play the melody (call) harmonized—which trombonist Trick Sam replies improvising (response) -- B
- c. The last A is the same as the first 2 As -- A

Second Chorus (32-Bar AABA Form) – Time 0:56

- a. Rhythm Section stops playing (break), saxes play a harmonized break, the trumpet enters improvising—AA
- b. Saxes play a riff while the trumpet improvises on top -- B
- c. Rhythm Section stops playing (break), saxes play a harmonized break, the trumpet enters improvising -- A

Third Chorus (32-Bar AABA Form) – Time 1:35

- a. Trombone play a harmonized gospel melody, while the clarinet improvises on top—AA
- b. Trumpets join the trombones to repeat a background while the clarinet continues to improvise -- B
- c. The saxophones play a riff, the trumpets repeat a riff in harmony while the clarinet continues to improvise (polyphony) – A

Fourth Chorus (32-Bar AABA Form) – Time 2:14

- a. Horns play softly a syncopated riff in the low register while the clarinet improvises and in the fifth bar the trumpet begins to improvise and continues in the entire second A—AA
- b. The band continues to play a riff which is the call to the trumpet’s improvised response -- B
- c. The brass section plays a call (shout), the saxophones respond repeatedly with a riff, while the clarinet improvises over this section. The saxophones begin a new riff, the clarinet begins to improvise in the high register, the piece ends with a sustained chord (harmony) from the brass and finishing with a low note from the baritone saxophone (counter-point)-- A