

# The Early Musical Ingredients of Jazz

---

## 1. Introduction

Over its lifetime Jazz has had many influences on modern music. These musical influences can be seen from modern “art” music, such as Stravinsky’s *Ebony Concerto* [Stravinsky 1945], through to 21<sup>st</sup> Century electronic composers, such as Amon Tobin [Tobin 2002]. But where did the original art of “Jazz” develop from, and what were its influences?

In this paper the early elements that are the musical ingredients of Jazz will be discussed, both in relation to their historical and musical issues. This argument will be split into two sections the first dealing with the African influences, and the second with European ones. Then a final overview and conclusions will be given.

## 2. African Influences

Throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries millions of black people indigenous to Africa were brought to America to be forced to work as slaves. Most of these people were taken from the tribes that populated the west coast of Africa (coast nearest to America), tribes such as the Yoruba, Ibo, Ashanti and others [Tirro 1993]. The first Jazz musical ideas were created by black people who were direct descendants of these slaves, and therefore direct descendants of these original African tribes [Schuller 1986]. Historically Jazz is known to have originated in a city in the south of America, called “New Orleans”. New Orleans was a busy port, and due to this became a melting pot for a large amount of different types, races and nationalities of people.

This is true with its location in the south of America (near the plantation fields) meant that it had a large amount of heavily repressed and segregated people, especially black people. In order to control the large amount of black people present in the south of America, tribal drumming and drum gatherings were outlawed by specific legislation [Tirro 1993]. The only place in which this legislation was lifted was in the Place Congo square (Congo square) in the black district of New Orleans. In the Place Congo slaves would gather to sing, dance and most importantly play percussive instruments, such as gourds, jew's-harps, and many differing drums, keeping the musical tradition of their African tribes alive. It was this tradition and heritage that profoundly influenced the music created at that time, and therefore profoundly influenced early Jazz music [Tirro 1993].

With the above taken into account it seems sensible that a discussion into the musical influences of Jazz, should start with research into the similarities or parallels between the music of west coast African tribes, and early Jazz music. It is the rhythm and improvisation of Jazz that most strongly distinguishes it from the rest of Western music, and also relates it to African roots [Schuller 1986]. In 1956 A. M Jones, an English musicologist completed his study into African music. This study was the one of the most absolute investigations into the area and serves as a suitable text for this research. In his research he concluded that the patterns and structures present in the rhythm of African tribal music is contrapuntal and based around polymetric and polyrhythmic time relationships. He also went on to further prove through the use of analytical listening, that the rhythms used were based on additive principles, and improvised within a highly complex and strict set of musical regulations [Jones 1956]. The main resultant characteristic of African rhythm that should be focused on when searching for influences to Jazz is the strong sense of swing, or a regular steady pulse. This pulse is not out in front like the strong 1,2,3,4 1,2,3,4 of Western marching music for example, but subtly hidden behind complex rhythms and downbeat accentuation. This creates music in which perfect rhythmical balance is achieved with a more equalised inflection. Take the example of the Jazz musician snapping his fingers to the second and fourth beat of a four beat pattern, therefore accenting the normally weak downbeats [Schuller 1986].

The over effect of this “swing” is that the created music holds a strong driven rhythm as the most important aspect, unlike its European counter part in which melody takes the lead [Priestley 1988].

It is also important to note that the complex improvised rhythmical accentuation also creates cross-rhythms between players. This causes the downbeats of each player to fall at separate times creating a large amount of syncopation in the perceived rhythm. These two mentioned rhythmical techniques of Swing and Syncopation can be found in nearly all recordings of African music, such as *African Drums* [Folkways], *Anthologie de la Vie Africaine* [Ducretet-Thomson], and the Yarum Praise Song [Yarum 1890].

The reason why the above characteristics of African tribal music have been discussed in this section, is that they are both present (be in a lesser extent) in the musical style of Jazz. Firstly the precursor to Jazz, Ragtime will be considered. It can be shown easily by comparing the recordings of early Ragtime composers such as Scott Joplin [Joplin 1904] with the above African music, that there are strong similarities. In the Ragtime recordings the melodic accents can be seen to fall in between the beats of the accompanying left hand, therefore creating a syncopation in which the melody anticipates the beat. This creates an overall effect that, similar to that of the African tribal drumming, accents the beat. This results in music that is very easy to move to [Berlin 1980], or as Scott Joplin put it is “weird and intoxicating” [Joplin 1901]. Ragtime though has no “swing” instead using straight divisions of the beat. Also it is important to note that Ragtime is not as improvised as the African music examples. If now examples of early Jazz (such as the Original Dixieland Jazz Band [OBJB 1917]) are compared to the African musical example it can be seen that the Jazz musical styles incorporate the syncopation mentioned above but now with the “swing” and improvisation features declared as well. It is actually these three elements from African music that create the most strongly noticed characteristics of Jazz music, the syncopated, swung rhythm, and the essential use of improvisation.

### 3. European Influences

During the American Civil War (1861-1865) many black slaves and ex-slaves were sent to fight in the confrontation. It is widely known that both sides incorporated the use of marching bands to control the rate and speed at which their armies marched at. What is not so known is that there were many black people sent to war that showed strong abilities in the area of music, and that these talents were used within the bands [Tirro 1993]. The marching bands used brass instruments and European melody and harmony, therefore the black people participating within the bands were exposed to previously unknown musical ideologies. Many of the black players quickly became highly proficient with the new European brass instruments and started to fuse their African roots with the newly learnt European styles. When the war finished in 1865 they returned home and began to share the new knowledge and teachings. Within places like New Orleans (mentioned above) a new fusion rose between the slavery song sung by the oppressed refugees from the Mississippi delta and the European style (harmony particularly) [Priestley 1988]. This style was given the name “the Blues” after the blues spirits, or feelings of depression [Oakley 1976]. It was characterised by the use of simple I, IV and V harmonic structure learnt from Western music, but incorporated the strong improvised feel present in African music (mentioned above). It is important to note that African music to this point had no harmony present within it, or at least no fixed diatonic structure such as European music [Schuller 1986]. It is interesting to see that when comparing European music of the time, with the new “Jazz” style that was emerging the African use of the European harmony pertains strongly to the African musical traditions. What is meant by this is that the use of the European harmony in Jazz, and its percussive styles is commanded by the African musical heritage [Schuller 1986]. Due to the fact that the melody within European music is strongly linked with the harmony, it seems sensible to consider that the melody within Jazz music also shares the same relationship. Therefore it is possible to see that the melody while influenced by the European style is again dictated by the African traditions. The “blue note” within a melody line, one of the most important features of “The Blues” and “Jazz” can be seen to as an example to the above situation. West African tribes sing the leading note of a melody flatter than European music, resulting in the creation of the flattened “blue note” [Oakley 1976].

Unlike the rhythm (discussed in the early chapter), the harmony and melody of the Jazz musical style can be shown to be highly influenced by European musical practices. This influence though as shown through the discussion above is strongly directed by the African traditions present in the Jazz pioneers. This results in a European influenced style which is decidedly distinguishable from its European inspiration.

#### 4. Conclusion

The above discussion shows that while the musical style of Jazz has influences from Western, European music, its primary inspiration lies in the roots of African tribal music. In this tribal music the main elements of improvisation, syncopation, swing and rhythm, that characterise and set apart Jazz can be found to be present. Based upon the research above into the people who first pioneered Jazz it really comes as no surprise that these are the conclusions of the discussion. Jazz was an art form created by oppressed black people whose ancestors had been taken from a home land in which the tribal music so closely influenced the development of this style. It seems sensible to expect the same people to create a musical style to make them feel more “at home” and welcomed something which they were not given by the white people whom lived around them.

*"Jazz is something Negroes invented...  
the nobility of the race put into sound ...  
Jazz has all the elements,  
from the spare and penetrating  
to the complex and enveloping." [Marsalis 1985]*

## References

Berlin, E.A, 1980: *Ragtime: a Musical and Cultural History* (University of California Press).

Jones, A.M, 1956: *Studies in African Music*.

Marsalias, Wynton, 1985: *Speech at Grammy Award Ceremony*.

Oakley, Giles, 1976: *The Devil's Music: a History of the Blues* (BBC Press).

Priestley, Brian, 1988: *Jazz on Record* (Elm Tree Books, London).

Schuller, Günther, 1986: *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development* (Oxford University Press).

Tirro, Frank, 1993: *Jazz: A History* (W.W Norton, London).

## Discography

### African

*African Drums* (Folkways).

*Anthologie de la Vie Africaine* (Ducretet-Thomson).

Yarum, 1890: *Yarum Praise Song*.

### Ragtime

Berlin, Irving, 1911: *Alexander's Ragtime Band*.

Joplin, Scott, 1904: *The Original Rags, 1894-1904* (Columbia Records).

### **Early Jazz**

Armstrong, Louis, 1923: *Louis Armstrong* (Riverside).

Original Dixieland Jazz Band, 1917 (Victor Records).

Oliver, King: *King Oliver* (Epic).

Various Artists: *Cylinder Jazz [1913-1927]* (Saydisc).

Various Artists: *History of Classic Jazz, Vol. 4* (Riverside).

Various Artists: *New Orleans Jazz: The Twenties* (RBF).

Various Artists: *Jazz, Vol. 3: New Orleans* (Folkways).

### **Other Music**

Stravinsky, 1945: *Ebony Concerto*.

Tobin, Amon, 2002: *Out From Out Where* (Ninja Tunes).

The Cinematic Orchestra, 2002: *Every Day* (Ninja Tunes).