

# How Jazz Works

## What Happens When a Jazz Band Plays?

### About this episode

For many, hearing jazz for the first time can seem like watching a foreign film without subtitles or being served a plate of food that doesn't look, smell or taste familiar. However, in many instances, all we need is some foundational information and guidance before things begin to make sense and become more relatable, appreciated, understood and (hopefully) enjoyed.

In this episode, some of today's top jazz artists will help break down and clarify what's happening when a jazz band plays and explore the function and role of each individual member and how they work together to make a cohesive, creative and collectively felt musical statement.

### Learning objectives

- Learn about the collective function of the members of the rhythm section and the roles of its individual members
- Understand and appreciate the role of collaboration and teamwork in our lives
- Learn about what it means to "solo" and/ or improvise and how improvised solos are central to making jazz
- Learn about the role the audience plays in a jazz performance

### Preparatory activities

#### What do you know?

Discuss any of the following musical concepts mentioned by the musicians in the episode – melody, harmony, rhythm, improvisation, solo, "comping" vs. soloing – to see what students know and how they define them.

### Be on the lookout!

Prompt the students to listen for topics covered in the episode as a basis for discussing the “Exploration Questions” below. Select a few from the list and/or assign different students to listen for different topics as they watch the episode.

- What are the functions of the piano, bass, and drums in the rhythm section?
- What are some characteristics of great rhythm section musicians?
- How do musicians in the rhythm section react, respond, and communicate with each other?
- How does the rhythm support the improvising soloist?
- What does it feel like to play jazz?
- What is the role of the audience in jazz?
- Why do audience members applaud after solos?
- How is jazz misunderstood and what can be gained from knowing more about the music?

## Explorations questions/activities

### Learn about the collective function of the rhythm section and the roles of its individual members:

#### The Rhythm Section

Is the bedrock of a jazz band (and most bands of any genre) and typically includes the piano, bass, and drums. As a collective unit, the rhythm section works together to deliver a unified pulse, feeling, groove and momentum to the music and through creative collaboration, makes the band sound good and the audience want to move and dance.

#### The Piano

The pianist’s primary role in a jazz ensemble is to play chords – groupings of notes played together – which outline the harmonic structure or form of a song. By playing the chords in a syncopated, rhythmic fashion (a technique known as “comping”), the pianist also contributes to the feeling and momentum of the music while playing a supportive harmonic role for improvising soloists.

#### The Bass

The primary role of the bassist is to play “TIME” which means to maintain a song’s pulse and tempo in a steady, “swinging” manner that produces a feeling of groove, “bounce,” momentum and forward motion. While keeping time, the bassist must also select notes that distinctly outline a song’s harmonic structure and that complement the chords that the pianist and improvising soloists are playing. Therefore, the bassist’s role is both rhythmic and harmonic.

#### The Drums

Like the bassist, the drummer must also play “TIME” in order to maintain a song’s pulse and tempo in a steady, “swinging” manner that produces a feeling of groove, “bounce,” momentum and forward motion. This requires the drummer to work very closely with the bassist to ensure that their respective “beats” or interpretation of “time” are in sync with one another.

### Use the information above and from the episode to discuss the following:

- What are the functions of the instruments in the rhythm section?
- Which instrument from the rhythm section would you want to play and why?

## Understand and appreciate the role of collaboration and teamwork in our lives

### Teamwork is Essential to Making Great Music!

Listening, communication, collaboration, and teamwork are all essential and required of any high-functioning rhythm section and ensemble.

In the episode, pianist Lawrence Fields characterized teamwork in the jazz ensemble in the quote below. Use this quote as a basis for conversation about the concept of teamwork and collaboration.

*Ultimately teamwork is about balancing, and the balance can shift through the course of the song. It doesn't mean that everybody is always playing exactly the same role. Balance can also be determined by what you don't play, or what you give somebody the space to play, or when you allow someone else to take a prominent role vs. when you interject yourself to take a prominent role.*

— Lawrence Fields (6:28 in the episode)

- When and how is teamwork required of all of us in our everyday lives?
- Beyond the music-making context, discuss some everyday scenarios where teamwork and collaboration are necessary if not critical (e.g. family life at home, a professional kitchen, driving in traffic, playing various team sports, filmmaking, professional theatre or dance groups, construction of homes and buildings, businesses of all sizes).
- Can you think of some examples of shifting roles, finding balance, and/or allowing space in activities you participate in (e.g. conversations and interactions with friends and family, playing volleyball, running or swimming relays on a track or swim team, acting in a play)?

## Learn about what it means to “solo” and/or “improvise” and how improvised solos are central to making jazz

Improvisation is central to making jazz. Historically and to this day, the “bandstand” for jazz musicians offers a platform where, through rhythm and tune, they’re able to express their truths, unfurl their souls, tell their stories and have their say – in the immediacy of the moment.

Much like some of the democratic ideals and principles on which our nation was founded, jazz musicians place a premium on freedom of expression and the notion that only through creative collaboration [with fellow bandmates] can individual self-realization be achieved.

With this in mind, playing jazz and improvising requires a collective, unified effort of all participants and is generally structured like this:

- Band chooses to play a song that all members know and are familiar with (i.e. key, form, groove, tempo, harmonic structure).
- Band leader establishes the tempo and counts the band in.
- Band plays the melody (a specified number of “bars” or “measures”).
- After the melody, improvisation begins! By maintaining the song’s form, tempo and groove, the rhythm section supports and accompanies soloists (typically saxophonists, trumpeters and trombones among other brass and/or woodwind instruments). Soloists play over the song’s “form” as many times as they choose. One time through the form is called a “chorus.” Members of the rhythm section will also solo as they wish. Who solos and when are decisions that are generally made in the moment!
- After all ensemble members have played their solos, the band then reprises the melody once or twice and ends the song together.

## Improvisation in Our Daily Lives

### Improvisation

Making it up as we go along – in any context, is a series of decisions, choices and risks that yield (preferably positive) outcomes. By this definition, our most successful decisions are often our most informed decisions, which is to say the more prepared and informed we are, the smarter our decisions and risks tend to be. That said, not all of our choices or decisions will be good decisions; but, if we embrace the notion that mistakes and errors offer unique opportunities to improve and become better, the less fearful we should be of making them.

*Anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new.*

– Albert Einstein

In the episode, Lawrence Fields discussed the concept of improvisation and creating something new in the moment. Use this quote as a basis for a conversation about the relevance of improvisation in daily life.

*One of the most beautiful things about improvised music (is) that every decision that everyone makes in the moment comes together to create something new.*

– Lawrence Fields (22:34 in the episode)

- Brainstorm and discuss examples of how we improvise in our daily lives (e.g. conversational exchanges with friends, family and members of our communities, how we cook or prepare meals, how we interact with and treat the people in our lives, how we drive our cars and negotiate traffic, how we negotiate confrontation or difficult situations).

In the episode, Luques Curtis discussed the concept of self expression. Use this quote as inspiration for a conversation about self-expression and have students share examples from their own lives.

*Where you want to be in jazz is to be able to express yourself and also have a great time doing it and make other people feel great.*

– Luques Curtis (23:44 in the episode)

- Where do you have opportunities for self-expression in your life?
- How do you share it with others?
- How have your choices made other people feel great?

In the episode, Lawrence Fields discussed the relationship between improvisation and taking risks. Use this quote as inspiration for a conversation about what can be learned and discovered by embracing new experiences and taking risks and have students share examples from their own lives.

*I actually think that it's kind of important to improvise music, because if you're never taking any risks, then you're never having moments where things don't work. But, you also never get to anything new."*

– Lawrence Fields (26:45 in the episode)

- What does it mean to take a risk?
- When do you have opportunities to take risks?
- When do you have opportunities to share your ideas?
- What have you learned from taking risks?

## Learn about the role the audience plays in a jazz performance

The musicians described how they give of themselves to the benefit of the audience and the important role that interaction with the audience plays in their performance. For example, audiences generally applaud after every musician's solo as a way to acknowledge the soloists' statement and show their appreciation for their artistry.

What did you learn (from this episode) about the role the audience plays in a jazz performance?

### Summary

Musicians in this Episode: Luques Curtis (bass); Lawrence Fields (piano); Michael Rodriguez (trumpet) Helen Sung (piano)

Vocabulary and Key Concepts from the Episode:

- **Bandstand** – a stage or platform where musicians congregate to perform and play music.
- **Melody** – the notes that comprise the primary statement of a piece of music.
- **Harmony** – the sequence of chords that dictates and supports the emotional intent of a song's melody.
- **Chords** – a group of (typically three or more) notes played together. When playing chords over a song's form, they outline the song's harmonic structure over which soloists improvise.
- **Rhythm** – syncopated patterns or sequences of notes that correlate with the tempo of a song and make it infectious "danceable". In many instances, rhythm also helps identify the cultural origins of a piece of music.
- **Groove** – the propulsive, driving beat of a song that evokes involuntary "head-bobbing" and characterizes its "danceability."
- **Tempo** – the speed of a song as determined by numbers of "beats per minute" (BPM).
- **Playing "Time"** – typically a role assigned to drummers and bassists, "playing time" is the task of maintaining a song's pulse, tempo, and groove in a steady "swinging" manner.
- **Rhythm Section** – the members of a band that play a collective, supportive role in making the music sound and feel good. Typically includes piano, bass and drums – and sometimes guitar and/or auxiliary percussion.
- **Solo** – an opportunity for band members to make a creative, highly personalized musical statement that's fully supported and elevated by the rhythm section and other members of the band.
- **Improvisation** – when musicians make up what they're playing in the heat of the moment. Spontaneous composition.

Brainstorm and discuss audience behavior/etiquette:

- Who has been to a concert/theater performance/etc.?
- What are the best ways to participate as an audience member and show your appreciation for the performers (e.g. being attentive, engaged, responsive, respectful)?
- If you were a performer, how would you want the audience to show their appreciation for your efforts?

- **Bars** – bars are markers of time delineated by a song's tempo and time signature. For example, a song written in 4/4 time will hold four quarter note beats per bar.
- **Chorus** – to solo or improvise a "chorus" is to play one time through the form of a song (from beginning to end). Typically, the entirety of a solo comprises several "choruses."
- **"Comping"** – short for "accompanying," "comping" is to play the chords of a song's form in a syncopated, rhythmic fashion that supports soloists and keeps the music grooving.
- **Dynamics** – the often-shifting volume of any given piece of music from very, very quiet to very, very loud. In the jazz setting, any member of the band can initiate a shift in dynamics as they see fit or so choose – generally a spontaneous decision.
- **Form** – outlines the harmonic structure of a song and is typically a specified number of bars organized in sections (e.g. AABA, ABBA, ABAB. Each "A" and/or "B" section representing a sequence of often 8, 12 or 16 bars).
- **Key** – a system of functionally related chords deriving from the major and minor scales, with a central, gravitational note, called the tonic.

### Audio Playlist

Refer to episode homepage online at [jazzreach.org](http://jazzreach.org)

### Suggested Resources

Refer to episode homepage online at [jazzreach.org](http://jazzreach.org)