

Prof. Smey

Class 25 Notes, Thurs May 2

## Cool Jazz, Avant Garde and Beyond

After bebop we looked at some of the trends in jazz from the 50s all the way to the present. These are not necessarily historical periods that follow one after the other – instead, they are “movements” that tend to co-exist. You can still go to Smalls on West 10<sup>th</sup> and hear excellent bebop, or you can hear avant-garde jazz at The Stone at the New School on 13<sup>th</sup>. You can even go hear historical recreations of big band music at Lincoln Center.

Remember that anything in **bold type** is something that I might ask about in the quiz. Anything else is just here in case you are interested.

## Miles Davis

Probably the most important figure in this later part of jazz history is trumpet player and bandleader **Miles Davis**. We’ve already heard him in his younger years as a bebop musician, playing alongside Charlie Parker on recordings such as “Ornithology.” Eventually he became the leader of his own bebop groups as well.

As time goes on, Miles acts as the most important trendsetter in jazz. He joins the “cool jazz” trend and eventually kicks off the move into jazz-rock fusion. Thus, unlike most of our historical figures who belong pretty clearly in one main category, Davis spans at least three of them.

## Cool Jazz – 50s onward

Cool jazz is simply jazz that is more relaxed and laid-back than bebop. In class I often refer to this as “cigarette-smoking music” or “Mad Men music.” The cool movement originated with a group of mostly white musicians from California (such as Gerry Mulligan and Chet Baker), but it was perhaps legitimized when Miles Davis collaborated with these guys on a project called *Birth of the Cool*. These sessions were originally released as 78rpm singles in 1949-50 and compiled into a long-playing album in 1957.

Davis’s *Kind of Blue* [1959] is a hugely influential album that is both “cool” and *modal*, another important development. Modal music avoids the frequent chord changes that are present in most jazz. Instead, it tends to hang out on a single chord and scale for long stretches of time. Thus, people playing modal jazz are free to relax a little bit and just “jam” on one scale. (This

scale is usually not the typical major or minor scale found in classical music, but rather a more exotic kind of scale called a “mode.” Hence the term “modal” music.)

For the quiz we will learn “All Blues” from *Kind of Blue*.

## Avant-Garde Jazz – 50s onward

The term “avant-garde” refers to art that might be described as “experimental” or “pushing the envelope.” One might feel that such work is “difficult,” “weird,” or “extreme.” There are some artistic and musical movements that were avant-garde in their day but now seem quite mainstream and normal, but other avant-garde artists will probably be forever viewed as eccentric or provocative.

We looked at the first prominent figure in avant-garde jazz, pianist **Cecil Taylor**. In class we will also look at the music of John Coltrane who could also be put in this category.

Cecil Taylor’s music for piano is both “*atonal*” and “*free*.”

**Atonal** music refers to music that intentionally avoids any underlying sense of a key. It also tends to avoid the familiar sound of triads which are the basis of most tonal music, instead exploring new, dissonant combinations of notes.

**Free Jazz** refers to music that is pure improvisation. It is performed without a pre-arranged underlying structure such as a chord progression. Free jazz musicians instead prefer to listen to each other and create a wholly spontaneous new structure – often they simply sit down and “just start playing” without any discussion whatsoever.

(I’ve also put up [a bonus page on alto saxophonist Ornette Coleman](#), whose music is “free” but not necessarily “atonal.”)

Tenor saxophonist John Coltrane began as a bebop musician and was always known as a skilled improviser. (He appears on our quiz recording of “All Blues,” for example, beginning his solo around the 6:15 mark.) In the 1960s he began to make recordings that were somewhat avant-garde. These performances were notable for their unprecedented stamina and ferocity. They would feature long (10- to 20-minute) solos which would gradually build in intensity, and the tunes were often modal, hanging out on a single chord or scale for long stretches of time. Overall his music was thought to have a meditative or trance-like effect. People in the U.S. in the 1960s were very interested in Black Nationalism, alternative spiritual ideas, and consciousness-altering substances, and Coltrane’s music seemed to be the ideal complement to all of these trends.

## Fusion – 70s onward

As rock music surged in popularity jazz musicians began playing a hybrid of rock and jazz known as “fusion.” Once again **Miles Davis** was at the center of this evolution of style. We watched a documentary clip about his experience at the 1969 Newport Jazz Festival and his exposure to acts such as Sly and the Family Stone. Then we listened to a few clips from his 1970 album *Bitches Brew*.

For the quiz we will learn “Spanish Key” from *Bitches Brew*.

## Post-Modern Eclecticism – 90s onward

The idea of “post-modernism” is that we are at the end of history, or, at least, that history does not need to “progress” forward in a straight line. Thus, a post-modern artist feels free to survey everything that has existed in the past and pick and choose which elements he or she will use, often putting them together in new combinations.

Alto saxophonist and composer **John Zorn** as an example of someone who creates dozens and dozens of projects with different concepts, each seemingly unrelated to the last one. In class we usually watch a performance of *Cobra*, a “game piece” which I would explain as a “free jazz traffic control system.” We hear a track from *Naked City*, his somewhat humorous rock band that liked to smash together different music styles in abrupt juxtapositions. And, we listen to his *Masada* quartet which plays jazz compositions influenced by the Jewish tradition of Klezmer music.

## The Conservative Movement in Jazz – 80s onward

Finally we usually back-track to the 80s and look at the emergence of **Wynton Marsalis** as an advocate for a very specific vision of jazz. Marsalis is a trumpet player, bandleader and composer who comes from a family of very prestigious jazz musicians. (His father, Ellis Marsalis, was a pianist who used to run the jazz program at the University of New Orleans. The two of them made one very lovely record together called *Marsalis Standard Time Vol. 3* which I highly recommend.) Marsalis came to New York to study trumpet at Juilliard, and emerged as a very skilled musician who could play Classical music as well as lead his own jazz groups. He eventually became the founding artistic director for Jazz at Lincoln Center, an institution that offers a whole season of historically-informed jazz performances each year.

Marsalis and some others have been vocal critics of both the avant-garde and fusion movements in jazz. To put it bluntly, they argue that these styles of music are not jazz at all. They think that jazz requires certain qualities that these movements lack – a swinging rhythmic

groove, blues inflection, and a sophisticated underlying chord progression that provides a “framework” for improvisation.

Some avant-garde, fusion and eclectic-style musicians seem to have taken Marsalis’s criticism to heart, avoiding the j-word and instead describing what they do as “improvised music,” “creative music,” “ecstatic music” and so on.

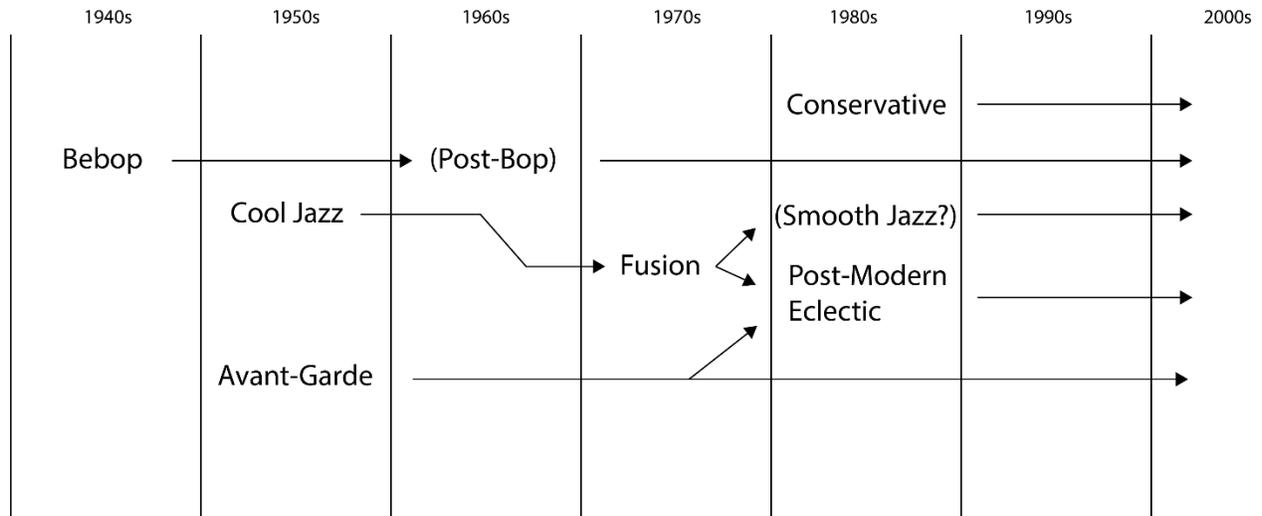
### The Present – Still Pretty “Eclectic”

I usually wrap up this session by playing a few more tracks from recent years. In general I would say that we are still in an “eclectic” era where people pick and choose what they are going to do and often change direction with each project. Few people are as aggressively experimental as John Zorn, but there is still a sense that you can define the parameters of your music any way you want and you don’t have to worry about what it is “supposed” to be like.

One recent trend is for jazz musicians to cover rock, pop, and hip hop tunes in a more traditional acoustic jazz format. This is sort of a return to the bebop practice of playing *standards*, pop tunes that everybody knew, and it is a smart way to attract younger listeners. In class (if there is time) I usually play Vijay Iyer’s version of M.I.A.s “Galang” and Robert Glasper’s version of Radiohead’s “Everything in its Right Place.”

### An experiment: My jazz trends map

So, how does all this fit together? I’ve tried to map out the way these trends happened in time and the way they interact. You don’t have to study this diagram if you don’t want to.



So, classic Bop like Diz and Bird still basically exists, but as it evolves and picks up more influences it is more correct to call it “Post-Bop.”

Miles Davis actually made a pretty smooth transition from the Cool and Modal Jazz to Fusion, so we've got that mapped as a continuous line. *Kind of Blue* [1959] is his hugely successful cool + modal album, and *In a Silent Way* [1969] is kind of the missing link on the way to fusion. It is still pretty chill but has a subtle Motown flavor in there.

Classic Fusion from the 70s is kind of gnarly and funky, but in the 80s it got very slick and commercial. This eventually leads to the "smooth jazz" stylings of people like Kenny G, which you can play in the background in offices and hotel lobbies and stuff.

We've got a lot of arrows feeding into the Post-Modern Eclectic style. This makes sense because, by definition, an eclectic musician is drawing on all sorts of things.

This is all probably headache-inducing if you aren't a jazz fan. Sorry. The bottom line is that a lot of the things we are talking about in this unit are "trends" or "styles," and they tend to co-exist, influence each other, and evolve into new styles as time goes on.