

# A Journey in the Groove

An Insider's Perspective of Jazz Performance

By Don Braden

There are many ways to experience a Jazz performance. I think the best way overall is to relax and let the music take you where it takes you. Let the rhythm move your body and the sounds resonate with your mind and soul. We musicians pour ourselves into the music so that it can be experienced in this way. Sometimes musicians and audience alike are transported to a place none expected. That's one of the really special things about Jazz!

We professional Jazz musicians train for years to become masters of our instruments. Our objective is to make our instrument an extension of our voice, so that we may express ourselves in as free a way as possible. There are many elements to that expression, some of which are conscious and planned, and others are spontaneous and mystical. Part of the beauty of Jazz music is that there are such varied combination of these elements; this allows tremendous individual creativity and expressiveness, variety, and even growth and expansion of the Jazz genre itself.

Yet, as powerful as Jazz musicians are, Jazz music at its core is also a team effort. We players who express those elements must work together and synchronize in real time. The most important part of that synchrony is the basic **groove**, known in general as "swing", which is a signature aspect of Jazz. That, and the many other ways to synchronize (form-wise, harmonically, melodically, dynamically, etc.), are based in the specific history and traditions of the Jazz language.

## What is Jazz?

The Jazz tradition spans over 100 years, and has so many different kinds of sounds that it is practically impossible to give a precise verbal definition. The totality of the music is the definition. Most (but not all) professional Jazz musicians can come to some agreement about what music is Jazz and who the Jazz Masters are. That set of master practitioners and their music is huge, which is a testament to the depth and breadth of the tradition itself, but I believe they are linked by what I call the "Journey in the Groove".

I therefore choose "Journey in the Groove" as my definition of Jazz because this short phrase distills what I have experienced and observed about the music as a professional Jazz player. With most Jazz music, there is always a journey and there's always a groove! This phrase can also be connected to practically all the elements of Jazz performance, including these:

- Rhythm (Swing!)
- Individuality of Sound
- Emotion and Soul
- Improvisation
- Creativity
- Teamwork
- Leadership
- Motivic Development
- Harmony
- Call and Response
- Contrast
- Instrumental Technique
- Humility
- Ego
- Discipline
- Democracy
- Listening
- Interaction

## The Power of Jazz Music

The energy and strength – the power – of Jazz music is, to my mind, a direct result of the spirit of those West Africans who survived the Middle Passage on the way to America to become slaves. It is important to remember that many of the weakest perished, leaving the strongest. Their progeny are the founders of Black church music, the Blues, and among other styles, Jazz, and necessarily imbued that music with their power. These various styles have therefore had a profound effect on American music over the decades. Along with that power – which allowed

their progenitors to survive some of the most appalling conditions imaginable, and that allowed them themselves to withstand the horrors of slavery – these early African Americans imprinted all their music with aesthetic and cultural qualities that were based in the music and sounds of their ancestors' homeland. Since drumming and percussion – and dance – were (and are) important in African culture, rhythm would ultimately be a defining element of the music of these people.

## It Don't Mean a Thing Without That...

Swing rhythm is a form of syncopated 8th note rhythm (as opposed to straight 8th note rhythm) and is the cornerstone of the Jazz sound. It sounds hip, energetic, upbeat, and makes you want to snap your fingers, clap your hands, tap your feet or dance. Over the course of Jazz evolution, the “swing feel” has grown to become a collection of approaches to musical and rhythmic phrasing that can be individualized for personal expression, or organized in various ways for group expression. The bottom line, however, is that the swing feeling is intended to inspire motion.

Early Jazz music was *the* dance music of the 1920's through the 1940's. The beboppers, led by Charlie “Bird” Parker, John Birks “Dizzy” Gillespie and others, began the process of moving the music from the dance hall to the concert hall. But even at the faster tempi typified by bebop and some later jazz music, the swing feeling was in abundance. Charlie Parker was the main innovator of individual swing phrasing for linear improvisation. He also pioneered improvising based on chord-based musical lines rather than the melody of the tune, while maintaining the swing feeling. There have been many other master players that have added to the specific techniques of linear swing, but Bird is the godfather!

One of the wonderful things about Jazz is that the swing feeling readily connects with other rhythmic styles -- “Latin” and Funk for example -- and thus Jazz has been richly expanded. Whatever the specific style though, the main thing for us players is that we feel the sense of synchrony and motion, then we're in the “groove”, and our improvisation can be at its best.

## The Journey of Improvisation

Improvisation is one of the other cornerstones of Jazz. It can seem very mysterious, but from a musician's perspective, Jazz improv is not unlike conversation. (In fact, for some people listening to some types of Jazz is akin to listening to a verbal language they don't understand, and is comparably frustrating!) A tune could be considered a “topic” (that's what keeps everyone in a band focused), and various soloists take turns expressing themselves, similar to the way each participant in a discussion takes turns contributing his or her point of view. They may have pre-prepared some of what they say, or they may be inspired to create something new at any moment. Fellow bandmates (who are also improvising, along with the soloist) respond, support and sometimes instigate, just as could happen in talking. Like a good conversation, things go where they go – that's the “journey”... If the participants are synchronized, they are on a “Journey in the Groove”!

## A Tune Map

The journey of a Jazz performance can take any direction, but there are some standard general approaches. It is useful to note the basic general structure of a Jazz tune:

Intro – Head – Interlude – Solos – Trading – Interlude – Out Head – Outro or Ending.

This is only a basic structure, but variations on it apply to a surprisingly high percentage of jazz tunes in performance, both live and on recordings. If you are new to Jazz performance, learning to distinguish the various sections will help you better share in the journey.

Here are some other specific things for which to listen or watch during a Jazz performance:

- As always: the feeling of the rhythm (the “Groove”)

- The emotions and energies of the players
- The variety and subtleties of sounds of their instruments
- Interactiveness – rhythmically, melodically and harmonically – especially within the rhythm section (piano/guitar, bass, and drums), and between the soloist and rhythm section.
- The melody of the piece (typically at or near the beginning and/or ending of the “journey”), and how its components are used during the improvisation
- The use of themes (motifs) or patterns (melodic, harmonic or rhythmic)
- The harmonic and rhythmic form of the piece
- Cadences (when the band “lands” together)
- The variety of signals (musical, verbal and visual) that musicians use
- How musicians recover if something goes awry

## Maximize the Experience

Go to a live Jazz performance whenever possible. Recordings are great, but musicians need an audience; that interaction between audience and musicians is inspiring and healing for everyone. Try to hear as many Jazz Masters as possible before they pass on!

When going to a Jazz performance, always try to hear at least two sets. So many things affect a performance, so a minimum of two sets gives the listener the best shot at experiencing one or more “magic” moments. Be patient if the music seems too hard; *listen to a variety of master players to get used to the sound of Jazz.*

If you play or have played an instrument, try to relate what you hear to something you may already know. Jazz players routinely use scales – even basic major scales believe it or not – diatonic patterns and arpeggios in their solos. Also, they may use a recognizable song as an improvisational vehicle.

**Most important of all: Feel free to let your body move. That’s really what Jazz is about; you can’t go on any “journey” without moving!**

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**Don Braden, Music Director, Litchfield Jazz Camp**

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