



The Influence of the Blues on Jazz

The blues and jazz have much in common, from their origins in the African-American communities of the southern United States at the beginning of the 20th century to their spread, through the then-developing media of sound recordings and radio broadcasts, to national and international art forms. Both the blues and jazz have multiple definitions that sometimes go beyond music and speak to the processes and viewpoints that give these revered musical art forms relevance today.

From the perspective of musical structure, jazz as we know it would not exist without the blues. The twelve-bar blues chorus, with its familiar harmonic structure and narrative form, was the single most popular template for early jazz improvisation, as compact yet profound in its way as the sonnet proved to be in the realm of poetry. Early jazz giants including Jelly Roll Morton, King Oliver and Louis Armstrong used blues songs as the foundation for many of their most important creations, while Duke Ellington, despite a half-century of composing that led him to write extended suites and programs of sacred music, continued to employ the blues as the primary template in his arsenal. As jazz evolved and jazz musicians applied more sophisticated ideas of rhythm and harmony, the blues remained a constant, the basis for such influential recordings as Count Basie's "One O'Clock Jump" in the '30s, Thelonious Monk's "Misterioso" in the '40s, Miles Davis' "Walkin'" in the '50s and Herbie Hancock's "Watermelon Man" in the '60s.

From the outset, the blues frequently deviated from its twelve-bar form, and jazz musicians have similarly displayed a willingness to bend the blues to their own devices. Sometimes this means an adjustment of structure, as when Ellington elaborates the form in such compositions as "The Mooche" or "Mood Indigo," or when Miles Davis substitutes scales for chords in "All Blues." Even more frequently, what is involved is the application of blue notes in a scale or blues phrasing to non-blues material. Billie Holiday rarely sang traditional blues songs but performed every ballad with blues feeling. Charlie Parker, whose performance of "Lady, Be Good" with Jazz at the Philharmonic, is a textbook example of turning a pop song blue. These may be the ultimate examples of improvisers steeped in an aura of the blues. Yet, the same could be said regarding such supposed radicals as Ornette Coleman, who retains the raw authenticity of a Robert Johnson in all of his alto saxophone solos, or John Coltrane, who built his masterpiece "A Love Supreme" on a basic blues riff not that far removed from the one underpinning Willie Dixon's "Seventh Son."

The interaction between those considered blues and jazz musicians, respectively, has also been a constant. Mamie Smith, the first blues vocalist to attain popularity through recordings, employed jazz tenor sax pioneer Coleman Hawkins in her group. Bessie Smith, the greatest of the early blues artists, featured a young Louis Armstrong on some of her finest recordings. Count Basie, who once defined jazz as nothing more than swinging the blues, featured blues shouter Jimmy Rushing in his first band, and received a major boost in his comeback 20 years later from the more contemporary blues stylings of Joe Williams. Lionel Hampton's big band of the 1940s introduced blues great Dinah Washington and made hit records including "Hamp's Boogie Woogie" and "Hey! Ba-Ba-Re-Bop" that helped launch rhythm and blues. R&B then begat rock and roll, which ultimately fed the fusion movement in jazz, just as the "soulful" jazz of modernists such as Horace Silver and Bobby Timmons had its impact via funk on more contemporary blues.

With the passing of time, and as both the blues and jazz continue to evolve, the connection remains unbroken. Two of today's leading jazz ensembles, the World Saxophone Quartet and the Mingus Big Band, have linked the blues and politics in recent album titles. Steve Coleman, Greg Osby, Cassandra Wilson and other musicians associated in the M-Base Collective of the 1980s and early 1990s have retained a blues-based focus while incorporating other elements in their personal concepts. Diana Krall, Joshua Redman and other young jazz stars of the day still play the blues, as does every young musician who studies jazz in high school and college courses throughout the world. The bond between the blues and jazz has only been strengthened by the many connotations beyond the musical definitions of these two art forms. When we view the blues as an attitude of facing the uncertainties of existence with a clear vision, a sense of humor and a spirit of resilience, and when we view jazz as a process for ensuring meaningful and spontaneous collective creation, it becomes even clearer that the blues and jazz only reinforce each other.