The Story of Jazz

narrated by Langston Hughes

with Documentary Recordings

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THE STORY OF JAZZ

SIDE I
Band 1. BEGINNINGS

Band 2. THE BLUES
Introduction, St. Louis Blues, Ma Rainey, Perdido Street Blues.

SIDE II
CHARACTERISTICS
A Break, A Riff, Boogie Woogie; Bix Biederbecke, Duke Ellington, Earl Hines, Dizzy Gillespie, Lennie Tristano, Teenagers, Mary Lou Williams.

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The people of New Orleans heard all this music. They began to put it together into a music of their own, always syncopating the rhythms a little bit more, ever a little bit more, influenced no doubt by the Congo drums. Jelly Roll Morton took the theme of an old French quadrille and transformed it into a piece which he called "The Tiger Rag".

Borrowing from the rhythms around them and the swing of the levee songs, the colored marching bands of New Orleans put into their street marches lively strains like these:

That's a Bank Johnson's Original Superior Band playing "Down By The River".

In the late 1800's in a town farther up the Mississippi River----Sedalia, Missouri----a man named Scott Joplin began to popularize on the piano this new syncopated music. He called his music ragtime. He composed many such pieces himself, his best known being "The Maple Leaf Rag", and he made many player-piano rolls, sold by the thousands throughout the country:

This is Scott Joplin himself playing one of his original rags:

Louis Armstrong of New Orleans, born on the 4th of July, 1901, as a young man, played his trumpet on the Mississippi River boats. Into "Louis'" playing crept the blue notes of the field hollers and plantation songs he'd heard----and the brightness of ragtime----and the loneliness of the big old muddy river----and the happiness of dancing people on the boats where he played. Louis put these things all together, lifted his horn to his lips, and played like this:

That's Louis!!! His nickname is Batchmo.....

All through his early music run the strains of the blues.

Side 1, Band 2
Nobody knows who first made up the songs called the blues.....But their three line, 12-bar form has since become a standard pattern in American music.....Certainly the blues show traces of the work songs, the field hollers, and the plantation cries of the Deep South.....The blues.....Maybe one hot day, a man was working in a rice field when a song came into his head, then out of his mouth----a song.....with words......perhaps like this:

Oh, the sun is so hot And the day is so doggone long......

Then, when he couldn't think of anything else right away to go with it, he repeated the same lines:

Yes, the sun is so hot And the day is so doggone long......

But, by that time, maybe he had a new thought, so he sang:

And that is the reason I'm singing this doggone song.

Something like that must have happened the day the first hollers was born, for that is the pattern of the blues----a 12-bar musical pattern----one long line of four bars which is repeated, words and music, then a third line of four bars to rhyme lyrically with the first two lines that are always the same. The melody and beat of the blues are not unlike those of a field holler. Perhaps thousands of blues were made up in this way in the fields or on the levees----to relieve the monotony of working, to express some thought passing through the singer's mind, or just for fun.....Then, one day in Memphis, W. C. Handy wrote down the first composed blues, "The Memphis Blues", around 1912. And a few years later, he wrote his famous, "St. Louis Blues".

Travelling singers like Ma Rainey, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and Bessie Smith began to sing their blues far and wide.....This is the great Ma Rainey in 1923 singing "The Travelling Blues".

The blues, mingling with the rhythms of the African drums of Congo Square, the field hollers and levee songs, ragtime and the syncopation of the New Orleans marching bands, all merging and mingling in the early New Orleans and Dixieland jazz, that was to form the basis and set the patterns for all the other kinds of jazz that were to come:

That's the "Perdido Street Blues" played by the New Orleans Wanderers.....Dixieland jazz.....George Mitchell, cornet.....Johnny Dodds, clarinet.....Lil Armstrong, piano.....Johnny St. Cyr, banjo.....and Kid Ory's trombone.....Recorded in Chicago, 1926.....That's jazz!
Jazz music has certain characteristics.

(16) WOLVERINE BLUES

That’s a break.... A break is a very brief syncopated interlude, usually of two to four bars, between musical phrases. In an unwritten jazz, the breaks are often improvised.... Now, you listen for another break.... You’re listening to Jelly Roll Morton, piano, Johnny Dodds, clarinet, and Baby Dodds, playing the "Wolverine Blues"..... They’re probably improvising on an old theme!

Improvising means composing as one plays, or making up variations on old themes directly on the instruments being played — rather than from written notes. This was very common among the early jazz players, many of whom could not read or write music. They played by ear, and to them syncopation — or jazzing — just seemed to come naturally, or at least with ease. Now, another thing common to jazz is a riff. Like breaks, riffs are often used.

A riff is a single rhythmic phrase repeated several times, sometimes, over and over, usually as a background to the lead melody.

In this Count Basie piece, listen to the riff at the very beginning of this section, right after the drum beats:

(17) DON’TO MISS YOUR BABY

Hear the repeated rhythm? An ensemble riff..... Now you listen for the riff.....

Now let’s try another record. See how many riffs or breaks you can pick out in this example of Kansas City jazz:

(18) FROGGY BOTTOM

Kansas City — the town that produced such famous jazz players as Bennie Moten, Count Basie, Mary Lou Williams, Buck Clayton, and Andy Kirk whose orchestra is now playing "Froggy Bottom".

Kansas City in the 1920’s and 30’s was also a great town for boogie woogie piano players — as was Chicago — the players travelling all over the West and Southwest — Pine Top Smith, Albert Ammons, Jimmy Yancey, Meade Lux Lewis.

(19) HONKY TONK TRAIN

Boogie woogie is a kind of blues-ragtime with a strong deep powerful rolling bass added. "Trilling the treble and rolling the bass" is the way some players describe boogie woogie. Here is a portion of "Honky Tonk Train" as played by Lewis:

In the early 1920’s when many New Orleans musicians migrated to Chicago, young musicians there like Bix Beiderbecke, Art Hodes, Mezz Mezzrow, Paul Whiteman, and Jimmie McPartland came to hear them nights after night, and tried to learn to play like them. A style of Chicago jazz evolved, of which a good example is Bix Beiderbecke’s...

(20) SOMEBODY STOLE MY GAL

As the old jazz changed into swing, or mellowed into sweet jazz, bands like Benny Berigan’s were popular:

(21) I’M COMING VIRGINIA

In New York one of the groups that became famous in the 1920’s and continues famous to this day, after more than a quarter of a century of playing, is Duke Ellington’s Orchestra.

This is Ellington’s "The Mooche".

(22) THE MOOCHE

Duke Ellington’s band is very popular in Europe. And other American orchestras such as Benny Goodman, Cab Calloway, Glenn Miller, Charlie Barnet, Woody Herman, Tommy Dorsey, and Lionel Hampton’s have won wide popularity. By 1940, jazz — America’s music — had gone everywhere in the world, and people in Paris, and Cairo, and London, and Tokyo had learned to love it, and to play or to try to play it. Earl Hines, whose piano you are hearing now, has played his music in many countries abroad.

(23) 'JUST TOO SOON'

About 1945 a young man named Dizzy Gillespie in New York, along with other musicians like Thelonious Monk, Bud Powell, and Charlie Parker, began to play a somewhat new kind of jazz with clashing chords, dissonances, off-rhythms, and sometimes bongo drums from Cuba furnishing the percussion.

This music came to be called be-bop.

Here is Dizzy Gillespie with Chano Pozo on drums playing "Oppadada".

(24) OPAPADA

After Word War II, many of the big bands disband, and small combinations became popular. Many of these small combos play a cool kind of jazz termed modern or progressive jazz — influenced by all the older forms of jazz, of course — but most directly by bop. Here is such a small combo, Lennie Tristano’s, playing in modern style a blues:

(25) BLUES

People listen to jazz for fun, dance to jazz for fun, and play jazz for fun. From the Congo drums of New Orleans, and the street bands there, and Louis Armstrong to Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman and Lennie Tristano and Dave Brubeck and Dizzy Gillespie and Chet Baker, jazz is fun. And you don’t have to be a musician to play jazz.

These are some teen-agers in the basement of a housing project in New York City playing with just a few sticks on benches, some pop bottles, and a bongo — just for fun:

(26) TEEN-AGERS DRUMMING

Boys making up their own music — just like the old-timers did in long-ago New Orleans — improvising just for fun.

And now, to sign us off, here is Mary Lou Williams at the piano in a great jam session recorded in New York.

They’re playing just for fun.

(27) JOON MILL JAM SESSION

...made in the U. S. A. .......................... Jazz!