KS5

AQA, OCR, Edexcel & Eduqas: a Jazz Primer, Part 2

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by Jonathan James

INTRODUCTION

In part one of this two-part jazz resource (*Music Teacher*, March 2017), we traced how jazz evolved from humble beginnings as a folk music into being the mainstream popular music of its day. By 1945, where we left off, the Glenn Miller Orchestra had become the sound of America, rallying record-breaking crowds and symbolising free-world values.

One Glenn Miller dance at the London Palladium attracted over 6,750 people.

The jazz community had never had it so good. Bandleaders such as Glenn Miller, Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman and Count Basie were musical idols. And yet there was a growing sentiment that the highly organised, impressively arranged swing bands were no longer true to the spirit of jazz. The genre had, after all, always thrived as a counterculture, giving a voice to the oppressed. Could this music really belong to the white-dominated establishment? What had happened to its founding identity?

New factions inevitably appeared. Bebop, cool and hard bop all kicked back against the mainstream. And this fascinating reboot in the history of jazz is where we pick up in the second part of this primer.

As before, the aim is to give A level students and teachers a concise overview of the main artists and ideas that shaped jazz's development, this time from 1945 to the present day. The resource is accompanied by a Spotify playlist and features the following artists and areas from the A level specifications:

AQA AoS5	OCR AoS3	Eduqas AoSD
Charlie Parker Miles Davis Gwilym Simcock	Charlie Parker Miles Davis John Coltrane Stanley Clarke	Bebop Cool jazz

Resources

- *The History of Jazz* by Ted Gioia (OUP) is still the go-to classic for a rigorous overview.
- *Jazz* by Scott Deveaux and Gary Giddins (Norton) is another good introduction to the genre.
- Ian Carr's *Miles Davis: the Definitive Biography* (Harper Collins) has remained top of its class, as has Gary Giddins's *Celebrating Bird: the Triumph of Charlie Parker* (University of Minnesota).
- The BBC documentary *1959: The Year that Changed Jazz* is available in its entirety on YouTube.

CHANGES AFOOT

Swing had found its groove by the late 1920s and was the main expression of jazz for the next two decades. Of course, there was great inventiveness and creativity within the movement itself, and some of Ellington's most imaginative and groundbreaking compositions date from the 1940s (eg 'Black, Brown and Beige'). But there was also a growing perception that swing was getting stuck in a rut. Touring bands would repeat the same numbers night in night out, playing eight-bar breaks in an otherwise strictly regimented arrangement. Even those brief solos began to become formulae, like a well-rehearsed pivot on a parade ground.

This sense of stultification, coupled with the demise of many of the bands through their members being conscripted into the war effort from 1935, began to weaken swing's stronghold. Although dance bands were the staple entertainment for troops on foreign frontlines, back at home the future of swing was beginning to look less certain.

'I've found a new baby'

Listen to Count Basie's 1942 track 'I've found a new baby' and you'll hear all the classic traits of the Kansas City swing style: finger-clicking off-beats and a light step. Count Basie is keeping the bounce going on the piano and Benny Goodman leads the fray with trademark jauntiness on his clarinet. And then something new happens. Charlie Christian takes a solo on his guitar.

First, guitar solos were not the norm – the instrument was usually relegated to keeping time in the backline – so Benny Goodman deserves a nod here in allowing Christian to take a front-row seat. Secondly, Christian makes the most of the limelight by doing something original and unexpected. After the suave flow of Goodman's lines, his solo stutters, growing from short phrases into long ones. Crucially, several of the gestures don't fit with the chords beneath, deliberately introducing discordant notes. Where Goodman sweeps through chromatic passing notes back into the home chord, Christian lets the 'wrong' notes hang, so that they become the defining feature of the solo. He'd begun to loosen the edges in an otherwise typically tight structure.

Coleman 'Bean' Hawkins had begun to find a similar freedom with his tenor sax solos too, going beyond the usual paraphrasing of the main tune into more searching shapes. Hawkins was no pioneer and, if anything, was more known for his classic swing playing – which made his occasional breaks from the established style all the more notable. His solo on 'Body and Soul' is a celebrated example. Fellow tenor sax player Lester Young managed a similar balance with his solos, occasionally stepping into new waters. Slowly, cracks were appearing in the accepted practices of swing.

THE BIRTH OF BEBOP

Smaller combos flourished during the Second World War, when swing bands – which typically required a minimum of 14 players – couldn't be formed due to player shortages. And this smaller, chamber format provided the perfect crucible for forging new sounds. Leading the experiments were two brilliant musicians, matched in technique and harmonic inventiveness: Dizzy Gillespie on trumpet, and Charlie 'Bird' Parker on alto sax. At the heart of their exploration was a desire to move away from the white-dominated mainstream sound of swing and to create an elite brand of art music that would return to the founding principle of jazz: improvisatory freedom. The name given to this emerging sub-style was bebop.

HOW DID BEBOP GET ITS NAME?

As a scat singer, if you were to vocalise the typical 'long-short-long-short' rhythms of a swing solo, you would normally sing 'bebop bebop' or even 'rebop rebop'. Somehow this onomatopoeic unit got picked to represent the new sound of Gillespie and Parker.

There's an irony that such a radical departure in jazz should be represented by the very generic rhythm of the mainstream genre that it was departing from. But that wasn't the point. Bebop, or just bop as it was later known, *sounded* like something fresh and cool, despite its etymological origins.

Listening to early tracks by Parker, Gillespie, Monk and others from the 1940s, certain characteristics of the bebop sound become apparent:

- The harmonies use more extensions and altered notes.
- Correspondingly, the melodies are more chromatic and less linear, using angular intervals.
- The rhythm is more fluid, with the kick-drum used for accents rather than to hold a groove.
- The phrasing of melodic lines and improvisations is less symmetrical, even deliberately asymmetrical compared to the swing style.
- There is more emphasis given to the solos within the structure.

- The tempos tend to be fast and aggressive, allowing the soloist to show off their technical brilliance.
- The texture is more complex and freer.

This all led to an edgier sound, with more unpredictability and greater freedom. It also meant you'd be hard pressed to whistle along to a lot of the 'heads' (chorus tunes), unlike before. This was not music to be danced to as much as to be listened to. Consequently, it didn't land so easily with the audience. The *New Yorker* in 1959 summed up bebop as a 'tight, rude sound' that was 'harsh, jerky and unattractive'.

Louis Armstrong referred to bebop as 'this modern malice'.

Bebop split the jazz community into the old and the new, those who preferred to stick with the American songbook and swing classics, and those keen for change. It became the signature sound of the hipster movement. The artists' dress code reinforced the cool image: in place of the swing band tuxedo were loose-fitting suits, berets and wing-collar shirts. The goatee was the final stamp of sophistication.

With this hipster identity came a musical aloofness. One of the founding bebop drummers, Kenny Clarke, recalls how the repertoire itself became a means of putting off unworthy newcomers:

> **'We'd play "Epistrophy" just to keep the other guys off the stand because we knew they couldn't make those chord changes. We kept the riff-raff out and built our clique on new chords.'**

HIPS AND SQUARES

'On 52nd Street [in New York] every night of the week it was possible to hear the new music that was splitting musicians and public into two factions: the 'hip' people who understood it (or at least claimed to) and the 'squares' who reviled and abused it. It was an explosive musical climate.' Ian Carr, biographer of Miles Davis

Did bebop kill swing?

If you were to press pause here, you'd be forgiven for thinking bebop spelt the end to jazz as a mainstream movement. But swing was already being overtaken by the new sounds of rock 'n' roll. In fact, bebop ensured jazz kept its integrity and helped the whole form reinvent itself, coming up in the process with a language and a set of practices that remain current today. For example, it was bebop artists who came up with the format of playing the head, taking extended solos (making these the main feature), and then reiterating the head at the end.

In fact, despite the startling new language, bebop artists were initially keen to revitalise old, well-trusted jazz forms. It wasn't a case of reinventing everything from the roots up. The first bebop performances were mainly based on different forms of the blues, or free improvisation over familiar jazz changes (chord progressions) such as those found in 'I got rhythm'. Parker recorded 175 different versions of the blues in his lifetime. Under the bonnet, the same old engine was ticking away.

'The greatest recording session in modern jazz history'

This was the humble claim of Savoy recording studio as they brought together some of New York's hottest talents to capture the new bebop sound. The roster included Charlie Parker on alto, a 19-year-old newcomer called Miles Davis on trumpet, Max Roach on drums and an uncredited Dizzy Gillespie on piano (due to a last minute no-show from Thelonious Monk).

The young Miles Davis struggled to keep pace with the breakneck playing of Charlie Parker on sax, and on 'Koko', Dizzy Gillespie had to be drafted in instead. 'Koko' (not to confused with Duke Ellington's 'Ko-Ko') starts with a swift unison statement before Gillespie and Parker have a duel. Then Parker tears into a typically fluid, acrobatic solo with hardly any pause for breath. It all seems so effortless. The opening salvos return, this time with a punchy little coda that wrongfoots the listener with its offbeat ending. The whole number flies by in just under three minutes.

CHARLIE PARKER'S FAMOUS NICKNAME

The story goes that Charlie Parker was named 'Bird' or 'Yardbird' for one of two reasons:

1. He accidentally ran over a chicken, or 'yardbird', while on tour.
2. Or, more probably, because his playing was like a bird in flight, untrammelled and free.

Underneath all the busy passagework of 'Koko' is actually the well-known set of chords from Ray Noble's 'Cherokee'. The Spotify playlist accompanying this resource allows you a direct comparison. It's a typical bebop sleight-of-hand, creating the new through reinventing the old.

In 'Koko' and the other tracks on this seminal album, Charlie Parker plays with his trademark dexterity and demonstrates why he changed the perception of what was possible on his instrument. He set the benchmark for all to follow. Not everyone was attracted to his furious flurries (an incredible 340bpm on 'Bird Gets the Worm') and endless spools of notes, but everybody respected the talent behind it. What was driving Parker's sound was a restlessness and a boredom with routine. He recounts in Nat Shapiro's book *Hear Me Talkin' to Ya* how he found the new language for 'Koko':

> **'That night I was working over "Cherokee" and as I did, I found that by using the higher intervals of the chord as a melody line and backing them with appropriately related changes, I could play the things I'd been hearing. I came alive.'**

Where older swing artists would see, say, a D7 chord in the leadsheet and start encircling the C or E (7th or 9th) for their solo, Parker would reach higher, hitting a G sharp (sharp 11th) or B flat (flat 13th). From here he could play 'out', ie using notes not related to the fundamental chord, while flitting in and out of the harmony just enough to connect to the underlying structure and make harmonic sense. This is a fundamental practice in the bebop solo.

The price for flying so high was, as for many jazz greats, a perilous addiction to drugs and recurring bouts of depression. Parker attempted suicide twice, once by ingesting iodine, which caused horrible ulceration. His death marked the passing of a legend whose bright talent hid much darkness.

Miles Davis on Parker's legacy: 'You can summarise the history of jazz in four words: Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker.'

Dizzie Gillespie and Bud Powell matched Parker in the technical mastery of their instruments and the sheer energy of their solos, and you can imagine the testosterone-laden competition between them as they tried to outdo each other on stage and on record. Picture Gillespie, purple with exertion and with his puffed-out cheeks and neck, responding to Bird's solo in 'Shaw 'nuff' from the eponymous album of 1945. He screams in at the top of his instrument and then stays up there, not dropping a single note as he helter-skelters around the chords. He plays like a hit of adrenaline.

Trumpet players have rarely played in such a consistently high register as Gillespie did. Quoted in Ian Carr's biography, Miles Davis had the following revelation:

> **'I asked Dizzy, "Why can't I play high like you?" "Because you can't hear up there," he said. "You hear in the middle register." He told me what he's playing is just an octave above what I do.'**

Gillespie even tried to apply the hell-for-leather speeds of his small combo to the larger format of his All Stars big band, releasing an astonishingly fast-paced album in 1946 called *Things to Come*. The title track gives you a sense of the limitations of that experiment, with the ensemble being stretched to breaking point. Notes are ghosted over at this searing speed, so the overall effect is a breathless blur.

INTERLUDE

A name that doesn't feature on any of the boards' specifications is that of pianist and visionary Thelonious Monk. Yet for many he is the embodiment of bebop, from his stubborn resistance to conventions through to quirky deconstructions of blues and swing. Listening to Monk can be an uncomfortable experience, but that was an essential part of his art. His awkward, apparently simplistic style at the keys belied a very creative mind. A Monk solo always surprises and is filled with notes that, on the face of it, shouldn't belong – and yet somehow work within the context of his inimitable style.

Listening to tracks such as 'Evidence' or 'Misterioso' you are struck by the artless touch, the perversely angular solo lines, the splashed notes, apparently random harmonies and rhythmic tugs-of-war. People described him looking for the 'notes between the keys', as if hammering at the keyboard was a way of overturning the stone and seeing what lay beneath.

The notes themselves take on a strange neutrality when hit like this, becoming raw musical elements, artifacts in a greater puzzle. Monk was an eccentric original who pushed the boundaries of what was harmonically and rhythmically possible, seemingly without even trying, and enriched the bebop language hugely in the process.

THE BIRTH OF THE COOL

Students who aren't used to listening to the busy language of bebop often find it impenetrable. It can be the equivalent of listening to the thicket of notes and thorny textures of a Ligeti concerto, or an interminably long shred in a prog rock guitar solo. If so, they can be reassured of being in good company. Many listeners and players of the day complained about the relentless busyness and frenzied tempos, and sought refuge in new styles.

One such refuge was at the opposite end of the musical spectrum, in a style that was about the space between the notes and a 'less-is-more' lyricism. This was the 'cool' sound, spearheaded by Miles Davis, Lee Konitz and others.

In 1949, Capitol records brought together Miles Davis and the Claude Thornill band to play through some arrangements by upcoming stars Gil Evans and Gerry Mulligan. It was an unusual ensemble, including classical instruments such as French horn and tuba. 'Boplicity' is a good representation of the new sound:

- The harmonies blend beautifully.
- The feel is laid-back, with everybody playing slightly behind the beat.
- The solos are about tone and leaving space.

There are plenty more up-tempo numbers on the album *Birth of the Cool*, but after the hectic scramble of bebop, this was like a big breath out, a step back from the edge to take in a new view.

Gil Evans describes the sound as 'hanging like a cloud'. 'Boplicity' was his favourite arrangement.

Reactions and counter-reactions

The nonet recordings on *Birth of the Cool* established Miles Davis as a talent to be taken seriously. It was his moment of stepping out of the shadow of Charlie Parker and becoming a bandleader in his own right. The sound of 'cool' inspired a movement on the west coast in the 1950s that favoured similar space and the emphasis on tone and feel. Stan Getz, Gerry Mulligan and eventually Chet Baker became the main faces of this west coast jazz scene, benefiting from long radio air-play and lucrative recording deals. Generally, their music was a lot more melodic and easier on the ears than bebop. Jazz had recovered its commercial appeal.

On the east coast, meanwhile, the west coast sound was characterised as too European and too 'white' (for which, read 'effete'). Black artists such as pianist Horace Silver, drummer Art Blakey and bassist Charles Mingus argued for a return to the soul of jazz as found in gospel and blues. This led to the funky grooves of the so-called 'hard bop' sound, where the elaborate arrangements and smoothness of west coast jazz were eschewed in favour of a fresher, hot-jazz sound.

Another reaction came from the world of academia, in the form of Boston academic Gunther Schuller. With his so-called 'third stream', he attempted to bring together the worlds of classical contemporary music and avant-garde jazz. The result represents an important loosening of boundaries and an invitation to musicians from different 'tribes' to share in each other's creativity. It's not easy listening, needless to say.

Meanwhile Miles Davis, ever the musical chameleon, managed to straddle both west and east coast developments, while keeping his own inimitable sound. By the 1950s, this signature sound typically comprised:

- playing with a harmon mute, often very close to the mic.
- a breathy tone, but with sudden accents for colour.
- leaving plenty of space, finding the 'sweet note' of a given phrase.
- playing behind the beat.
- phrasing against the underlying structure with disarming simplicity.

Gil Evans noted: 'When people play with mutes it normally sounds relaxed, but with Miles there is this incredible tension…'

The epitome of this sound was to come on *Kind of Blue* (1959), the biggest-selling jazz album of all time. The sextet included an inspired combination of John Coltrane and Cannonball Adderley on tenor and alto sax respectively, the classical thinking of Bill Evans on piano, and the backline of Paul Chambers (bass) and Jimmy Cobb (drums). The album picked up where *Milestones* had left off a year before, exploring a new form of modal jazz where the solo is based on a mode and scalar patterns rather than the chord progression. As with 'Boplicity', the emphasis was on allowing space and an uncluttered texture, with novel voicings for the horns in the head sections.

One of the main characteristics, for example, of 'So What' is its signature voicing, which comprises a stack of 4ths with a 3rd on top:

What is remarkable about *Kind of Blue*, among its many merits, is that the musicians had only the barest sketches of the arrangements before committing them to record. The result is that, despite the elegance of the playing, it still feels genuinely fresh and spontaneous, and that is a large part of its continuing appeal.

COLTRANE, FREE JAZZ AND FUSIONS

One of the many artists that benefited from Miles Davis's quest for finding new space and musical freedom was saxophonist John Coltrane. Coltrane was a genius in the mould of Charlie Parker, capable of restraint but also of unleashing 'sheets of sound' in frighteningly complex runs that were to take sax playing into a new territory. Coltrane described it as 'starting in the middle of the sentence and then going both ways'. For him, improvisation became ultimately a spiritual exercise, an existential exploration that at times would take him into Indian classical thinking, at others to a complete rejection of the known. The transcendental qualities to Coltrane's music have attracted a great body of devotees, some even going as far as to set up the Saint John Coltrane African Orthodox Church in San Francisco.

'My music is the spiritual expression of what I am – my faith, my knowledge, my being.' John Coltrane.

A Love Supreme (1965) and *Ascension* (1966) are free-form meditations, the first with Coltrane's classic quartet and the second with an expanded ensemble of 11 musicians. Inspired by Ornette Coleman's experiments with free jazz, involving collective improvisation where no boundaries are set, both albums represent Coltrane's unwavering commitment to finding new expression in form and language.

Ascension is a bold choice for the OCR board, and represents the more avant-garde end of Coltrane's playing. A good way into his sound and understanding his general development may be to go from *Giant Steps* (1960) and *My Favorite Things* (1961), which comprise innovations on bebop principles, through the Indian-inspired *Impressions* (1963) and award-winning *A Love Supreme* (1965).

Coltrane innovated in each of his albums, often playing in the harsh upper partials of his instrument and using extended techniques, as if he were constantly reaching for the realm of the unplayable. His was a short, drug-addled but intensely imaginative life. He died aged just 40.

Fusions

It seems strange to speak about fusion in what is already a very hybrid form. And yet by the 1940s, a clear canon of jazz standards had been established, and a distinct sound that went with it. In that sense it was ready to be fused with other musical disciplines while retaining its own integrity and distinct identity. Dizzy Gillespie had already started the ball rolling by exploring Afro-Cuban fusion with the conga drummer Chano Pozo. Their 'Manteca' (1947) is the first jazz standard to be explicitly based on a Cuban clave rhythm.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, other jazz artists followed suit and began to embrace wider influences. John McLaughlin continued Coltrane's interest in the east by setting up the Mahavishnu Orchestra. Wayne Shorter fused jazz with rock, funk and pop in the band Weather Report, and Chick Corea, Miles Davis and Herbie Hancock enjoyed high-profile fusions with various elements of electronic music. The results split fans and critics alike, with naysayers calling for a return to earlier, 'purer' forms.

The versatile bassist Stanley Clarke (who features on the OCR syllabus) has remained true to his calling as a fusion artist throughout his life. He was bassist in Chick Corea's groundbreaking fusion group Return to Forever in the 1970s, and ever since has collaborated with artists from all musical backgrounds. His fourth album, *School Days* (1976) was his first big hit and is an accessible fusion of jazz, rock and synthesised sounds.

More recent albums, such as *The Toys of Men* (2009), show an undimmed passion for cross-stylistic experimentation. It defies easy definition in terms of the constituent styles, being more of an artistic collage of musical ideas and influences. Clarke generously gives full reign to the contributing young artists, who include Esperanza Spalding (included in the new Edexcel GCSE specification) on vocals. *The Toys of Men* is a concept album on the theme of war, with the 11-minute title track going through multiple episodes and stylistic variations.

Being naturally pluralistic, jazz has been fused with the flavour of the decade ever since the 1970s, going from punk jazz and acid jazz in the 1980s through to hip-hop influenced nu jazz of the 1990s and beyond. Fusion will doubtless continue as long as there is a commercial appetite for it. Jazz offers such a fertile soil for collaboration.

From the 1980s, though, there was also a concerted return to acoustic jazz and the immediate post-bop period, moving away from the 'smoother' styles that were beginning to proliferate in the easy-listening sections of CD departments and returning instead to the chamber world of trios, quartets and quintets that are such an essential part of jazz's DNA.

WHERE NOW?

It's hard to put a finger on where jazz starts and stops these days. And that is a sign of how far it has been absorbed into the mainstream, as well as of how wide the jazz delta has become. On one end, crooners have had a resurgence (eg Harry Connick Junior, Michael Bublé, Jamie Cullum in ballad mode); on the other, jazz remains as fiercely progressive and uncompromising as ever.

One consistent feature of post-swing jazz history has been the success of the piano trio. There are too many great examples exist to list here, but just consider the popularity of some of the names from the past two decades: Keith Jarrett's trio, the Esbjörn Svensson Trio, The Bad Plus, Brad Mehldau's trio, Phronesis and the Gwilym Simcock trio.

There is something immediately spellbinding, it seems, about the combination of piano, bass and drums. They have a special alchemy, with the piano able to transition seamlessly between its roles in the rhythm section and

as a lead instrument. From the above list, Gwilym Simcock features on the AQA syllabus and is a marvellous example of a highly trained classical and jazz musician who manages to be accessible while pushing new boundaries. In a 2011 article for the *Guardian*, he talked of being keen not to get to trapped in a middle ground:

> **'I get nagging voices in my head sometimes that people are waiting for me to fail, that I'm too conventional, or that I should be more out there and avant-garde. As soon as the idea I'm doing something wrong gets into my head, it needs no second asking, and I can get very down, so it's something I need to grow up about.'**

His solo piano album *Good Days at Schloss Elmau* (2011) is a good introduction to his lyrical and classically inspired style. The optimistic opening track 'These are the Good Days' follows a clear tri-partite form and ends with him reaching to play inside the instrument like a harp-drum. He explains the compositional thinking behind the track very clearly on this YouTube video.

Conclusion

The recurring features in this story of jazz and its currents and counter-currents have been its cultural diversity, the battle for authentic identity, the limitless creativity, and its flexibility and resilience as a genre. We leave this primer with jazz in a healthy state and confident that its future will be filled with the same innovations that have ensured its spectacular and unpredictable course so far. It deserves an ever-expanding presence on the curriculum.