

# FROM NEW ORLEANS TO THE WORLD: THE GLOBAL JOURNEY OF JAZZ MUSIC

Nidhi Jha<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Rashmika Mishra<sup>2</sup>

1 Research Scholar, Department of Vocal Music, Faculty of Performing Arts, Banaras Hindu University

2 Assistant Professor, Section of Vocal Music, Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi

 [Read the Article Online](#)



 [Cite this Article](#)

Published on 01 June, 2026

Jha, N. and Mishra, R. (2026). From New Orleans to the World: The Global Journey of Jazz Music. Swar Sindhu, 14(1), 251-254.

## ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the historical development and global influence of jazz music, tracing its origins from African American musical traditions in New Orleans to its position as an internationally recognized art form. Jazz emerged from the cultural experiences of African Americans in the nineteenth century, deeply influenced by African rhythms, collective performance practices, blues traditions, and improvisation. Early blues styles, particularly country blues and classic blues, played a crucial role in shaping jazz through the use of blue notes, expressive vocal techniques, and rhythmic flexibility.*

*The study examines jazz as both a musical and cultural practice that challenged traditional European musical aesthetics based on fixed notation, formal structure, and artistic hierarchy. Unlike classical music, jazz emphasized improvisation, spontaneity, and collective creativity, allowing musicians to reshape melodies and rhythms during performance. New Orleans ensembles developed collective improvisation techniques that later influenced modern jazz forms, including free jazz movements of the twentieth century. It also analyzes the role of sound recording and mass media in the worldwide dissemination of jazz. Recordings transformed jazz into a globally accessible musical form and encouraged new ways of listening, interpreting, and interacting with music. Through recordings, radio, and modern media technologies, jazz crossed cultural and national boundaries, influencing numerous musical genres, including rock, rhythm and blues, and contemporary popular music.*

*In addition, the research discusses the place of jazz within popular-music studies and debates surrounding its classification as folk, popular, or art music. Finally, the paper highlights the transformation of jazz in the millennium era, where technological advancements, electronic instruments, and global fusion styles continue to reshape the genre. Despite these changes, jazz remains a powerful symbol of creativity, cultural exchange, and musical freedom, preserving its identity through improvisation and innovation across generations and cultures.*

**Keyword:** Jazz Music, Blues Tradition, Improvisation, African American Culture, Sound Recording, Global Music Dissemination

## Introduction

It was February 21, 1819 Benjamin Latrobe saw collective dancers, few playing percussion instruments and the instruments were the same as the characteristics of indigenous African music. In this group an elderly black man sits and holds a large cylindrical drum. He uses his fingers and the edge of his hand and jabs repeatedly at the drumhead. The drum is very big around a foot in diameter and probably made from animal skin. The throbbing pulsation with rapid sharp strokes continues and another drummer holding his instrument between his knees joins in playing with the same staccato attack. There are people who pluck a stringed instrument while sitting on the ground. The instruments are made up of Calabash. One voice joins the other and a dance of seeming contradictions accompanies the musical give - and -take. The dance is performed by dark skinned people of America in a circular group. It all started in New Orleans.



Early jazz instrument made up of calabash



Collection of Jazz instruments

## Country Blues and Classic Blues

The blues before its recognition as music was a distinct style of music in African American communities. The blues did not emerge as a major force in the recording industry until the 1920s but it traced back to the former slave states back to the nineteenth century. Early blues found its most fertile breeding ground in rural areas and the most impoverished parts of the country.

The most characteristic component of blues are found in its distinctive melodic lines, which emphasize the so-called blue notes often described as the use of both the major and minor third in the vocal line, along with the flatted seventh; flatted fifth was a later addition to it but became prominent as a blue note. The most traditional style of blues typically relies on just a vocal line with guitar accompaniment. The country blues tradition mostly linked the singer accompanied by solo guitar back to earlier African traditions. It was usually the male accompanying himself on the guitar, it shows the closest ties to African precedents, a more acculturated variant of this music relying primarily on female vocalists would exert greater influence on early jazz. The songs of the great women blues singers of the 1920s and 1930s sometimes referred to as “classic blues”.

## Jazz being a musical practice and its improvisation

Since jazz emerged from its geographical origins it has travelled back and forth across the

disputed terrain between high and low culture, variously located as folk, popular, art music and permutations. Its shifting position makes it a particularly instructive vehicle through which to study the matrix of cultural politics, the balances of power that determine which cultural forms carry authority. The migrations of jazz within musical politics and aesthetics depend upon negotiations between text (the particular jazz performance) and context (the physical and cultural space within which it is situated). The Eurocentric arbitration of musical value by the end of the nineteenth century was predicated on the stability of the musical text and of its relationship with context. Jazz appeared to demolish this model. As aurally based improvisation, in performance the ‘text’ evaded fixity, and the sites and conditions of performance blurred the distinction between art and social practice, music and noise. Even preserved on a sound recording, its formal components were scarcely intelligible in established musical terms such as background/foreground,

melody/harmony and structural coherence. Jazz was a site of unruliness. Early jazz musicians learned reportery primarily by ear, assimilating both the melody and its phrasing and articulation in one process. New Orleans brass bands and string bands embellished familiar tunes by paraphrasing and syncopating the melodies. New Orleans ensembles passed the melody from instrument to, creating continuous textures of collective improvisation. At the beginning of 1920s, concerts became the preferred melody instrument.

## Aesthetic frame

Art music, its aesthetics, its most powerfully authorised production, performance and consumption protocols, and its public discourses, are the musical realisation of these overlapping ideologies of the scopical, intellectual control and product fetishism. The privileged event of art music, the concert performance, is the social ritualisation of the convergence. To speak of a concert performance as ‘spectacle’ is clearly not to distinguish it from other forms of music performance. Stadium rock, for example, is one of the most visually theatricalised of all musical events. It is, however, a question of the relative emphases, of the balance with other criteria, and the content of the spectacle. Both the art music and the stadium rock concert are highly attentive to the appearance of the musical event, but they constitute a window on two very different kinds of visual statements. The rock concert relinquishes its purchase on the highest peaks of artistic seriousness by presenting a staged spectacle of unruliness and abandoned physicality, stylised anarchy that blurs the distinctions between performers and audiences (from aisle-jiving to mosh-pit). The rock spectacle is a ritualised refusal of other traditional components of the paradigm which defines ‘serious’ artistic achievement.

jazz movement of the sixties, with the difference (among others) that conventional concepts of tonality were now abandoned. Even so, its exponents frequently invoked the New Orleans tradition of collective improvisation as a model in terms of both form and social mission (see, for example, Wilmer, 41). Both traditional and free jazz are represented most sparsely in institutionalized support systems such as education, funding and media coverage. Continuous collective improvisation is both a formal musical skill involving the cultivation of a distinctive aural alertness, and a vehicle for a form of musical socialisation, which is peripheral to the tradition of the artist-as-individual, as ‘soloist’. Collectivity does not construct the heroic individualism central to the aesthetics which equate artistic worth with formal virtuosity. Improvisation, especially polyphonic, also destabilises a major structural principle by which romantic and modernist artworks anchor themselves in, and confirm, their milieu: the figure/ground model. ‘Where’s the Melody?’ asked the title of Martin Williams’ introduction to jazz, reflecting the nervous disorientation of many suspicious newcomers to the music. It is also singularly difficult to accommodate collective improvisation in a text-centred ethos, simply because it is so resistant to notation. As ‘improvisation’ (and this of

course is as true of a bop solo as of traditionalist polyphony), it cannot be written down beforehand; but as 'collective' it is virtually impossible to transcribe later from a recording (see Munn, 101). The intractability of collective improvisation to the form of a scored 'opus', as well as the effacement of individual virtuosic 'genius', the democratic dispersal of power in a collectivity, constitute radical disadvantages in any attempts it may make to secure legitimacy as high art.

### **Art-music discourse and jazz practices: dissemination**

By the 1920s, jazz was linked with the sound recording so closely that an advertisement in the Australian journal *Graphic* on 20 January 1921 described the Melola record player as being 'as effective as a full jazz band'. In this partnership, which represented the displacement of traditional musical practices by twentieth-century mass culture, jazz was already in tension with artistic values inherited from the nineteenth century. In many ways the sound recording became the jazz equivalent of art music's score. Nonetheless, there are differences which also help to account for the lower status of jazz.

Of course, art music also enjoyed the benefits of the sound recording, but the recording determined the meaning of jazz to a far greater extent than it did in classical music, which had already situated itself aesthetically and politically through the more respectable authority of the score. For most of the world, however, jazz was first encountered and therefore inextricably linked with sound recording, and had no pre-existing purchase within the score-based nineteenth-century musical aesthetics which continue to dominate artistic standards. As in the case of live performance, the global generation of jazz was primarily by acoustic rather than visual means

The fact that it was thus indiscriminately accessible on a global scale to the musically illiterate helped to lodge it in the category of 'mass culture'. This was seen by its opponents as evidence of its pernicious homogenising influence. The truth is by no means so simple. The art-music score, with its aura of sacral inviolability, constrains democratic interventions and reinterpretations. And the way in which the score is realised in the traditional concert setting reproduces that regimentation in social practice. Focussed cognitive attentiveness is equally the approved protocol for domestic listening to classical recordings. All this is in the interests of a higher aesthetic (as well, however, as serving a political economy). By contrast, jazz is an example of music which are performed and listened to (publicly and privately) in conditions which encourage interaction and

reinterpretation. The recording also shifted attention away from composer and fixed or closed score, to performer and variable, open-ended performance. Mass mediations (historically the most symbiotic medium for jazz beyond earshot) place musical meanings up for grabs. The sound itself can be rearranged at the whim of the listener: by singing along, playing tracks in different orders, transferred, spliced, sampled. It can be listened to under a wide range of social conditions with personalised codings. The person sitting in a living room or car has greater freedom to mediate her/his individuality through a recording than the audience in a classical music concert. Indeed, it is precisely this – not homogenisation – which is antipathetic to the dominant aesthetic. While all musics, from 'art' to 'pop', are technologically accessible to such interventions, such unauthorised reconstructions of form and meaning are inherently offensive to an aesthetic tradition of privileged genius, transcendence and permanence.

### **Popular-music studies and jazz**

Certainly it has produced a hybrid, decentred discourse. While representatives of jazz were seeking a position within the art-music firmament, that aesthetic itself was under increasing critique with the emergence of popular-music studies. The latter specifically provided a counter-discourse to traditional musicology, drawing upon such fields as cultural studies and ethnomusicology.

Jazz's history of general marginalization and condemnation by the art-music establishment, this begs the question: why not? To some extent answers have already been provided. While cultural and popular-music studies have certainly evolved to a large extent as a reaction against established arts scholarship, they are nonetheless institutionalized in the same framework of Enlightenment intellectual traditions modelled on the knowledge/power/ocularcentrism axes. Although critiques of such traditions, they predominantly remain prisoners of its mental tropes of 'perspectives', 'horizons', 'viewpoints' and 'envisionings'. The resilience of the 'power' agenda in scholarly discourse will also impose the same limits on radicalism, producing the same blindspots as are found in its contestants.

Apart from such fundamental patterns, there are more particular reasons for the relative silence of jazz in popular-music scholarship. The tension between the two converges on the word 'popular' in a particular historical moment. The meaning of 'popular' in relation to culture in general and music in particular has itself been a major debate in the literature. There seems to be no satisfactory way of defining the term that corresponds to the powerful but inchoate understanding that drives its study; clearly there is such an understanding, or its various definitions would not be so vigorously debated.

'Popular' as 'liked by many' does not work. It is equally clear that it cannot be identified simply in the formal properties of a product. It possesses the characteristics of a process, of signifying practices, of negotiating spaces, of means of dissemination and consumption (see Storey, Strinati and Middleton). The point here is that by any definition, and by the logic of popular-music theory, the history and practices of jazz are substantially (if not wholly) case studies in 'popular music.'

## Conclusion

In practice, however, the territory thus designated has been colonised almost entirely by rock, post-rock and its derivatives. This is analogous to traditional musicology's tacit assumption that 'music' equals 'art music'. Tacitly, 'popular music' has coalesced with 'pop music'. The reasons are to some extent based in jazz practices, which manifested a level of improvisation which, its supporters in particular insisted, distinguished it significantly from rock. It became more difficult to sustain this distinction in relation to later developments in pop, however, particularly when jazz musicians themselves entered into crossover projects. Such developments unmasked the political and historical factors which opened the gap between jazz and post-rock. First, they disclosed the fact that the gap was more between the discourses than the practices. In practice, there has been a dynamic interaction between jazz, rock and pop, including sharing of blues forms by jazz and proto-rock styles like jump, jive, rockabilly, rhythm-and-blues. Jazz musicians have always been found on what are regarded as rock sessions as well as later more self-conscious exercises in fusion.<sup>9</sup> Many bands and musicians securely located in the pop canon, such as Frank Zappa and Jack Bruce, have enjoyed the highest respect among jazz musicians, and pop figures such as Lou Reed have had a strong attachment to jazz.

The silence of jazz in popular-music studies thus reflects a great deal more about musical discourse than musical practices, though of course some of that discourse itself has been conducted by musicians. New Orleans revivalists in the late fifties, for example, were determined to distance themselves from rock, while John Lennon helped kill the trad boom when he reportedly declared a loathing for traditional jazz. Indeed, these two cases draw our attention to the historical moment at which the space between jazz and popular-music discourse began to open up. Anglophone cultural studies emerged largely as an interrogation of existing cultural hierarchies and assumptions, with Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) paving the way for the seminal work of Raymond Williams, as in *The Long Revolution* (1961). While Hoggart dismissed 'juke box' culture, the redirecting of attention to popular culture under the sponsorship of a radical critique of value set the scene for the emergence of a serious and sympathetic popular-music discourse (Hoggart, 247—8). This was largely initiated by a generation whose enthusiasms were shaped by the popular music of the late fifties and sixties. That is, the development of popular-music studies broadly coincided with the development of pop music itself: both new, both presenting themselves as oppositional

## Reference

- Hoggart, R. (1957). *The uses of literacy*. Chatto & Windus.
- Middleton, R. (1990). *Studying popular music*. Open University Press.
- Munn, T. (1985). *The Australian jazz record book*. Angus & Robertson.
- Storey, J. (1993). *An introductory guide to cultural theory and popular culture*. Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Strinati, D. (1995). *An introduction to theories of popular culture*. Routledge.
- Williams, M. (1964). *Where's the melody?* In *The jazz tradition*. Oxford University Press.
- Wilmer, V. (1977). *As serious as your life: The story of the new jazz*. Allison & Busby.
- Gioia, T. (2011). *The history of jazz* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Berendt, J. E., & Huesmann, G. (2009). *The jazz book: From ragtime to the 21st century* (7th ed.). Lawrence Hill Books.
- Southern, E. (1997). *The music of Black Americans: A history* (3rd ed.). W. W. Norton & Company.