

Advanced English: Understanding Jazz

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Academic year 2025-2026 - **Language Department** - Autumn semester.

This course is meant for students of the advanced C1 and C2 levels. Theme-based language classes aim at developing written and oral skills through the study of a specific topic.

Course Objectives

This is a 12-week course that offers an in-depth exploration of the history of jazz music, tracing its roots from African American musical traditions to its emergence as a global phenomenon.

The main objectives of this course are:

- Introducing Jazz: its roots in New Orleans, New York City
- Guiding the students to understand the role of jazz as a social and political phenomenon
- Expanding the student's knowledge of key figures in the history of the music.

Background

Jazz is America's classical music. But it's much more than a music genre: jazz is not only a musical style but also a cultural movement that has played a significant role in social and political dialogues, particularly regarding issues of race and identity in the United States. It continues to inspire and influence artists around the world, making it a vital part of global music culture. Jazz music is the greatest representation of democracy because it affords the opportunity, or allows for, individual freedom, but with respect to the group. In this way, jazz showcases the tremendous individual and collective effort required to create anything of wide and lasting value. Jazz and democracy in the US run on parallel paths: The Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution cast a bright light when they appeared on the world stage, but the same Americans who invented jazz lived in the shadow of that light. Nonetheless, as a musical art form, jazz reflects the best of the country's spirit. In jazz performance, audiences can witness aural representations of democracy, equality, freedom of speech, and a system of checks and balances between equally powerful members of the band, each one leading at various times. Jazz is democracy in sonic motion.

Course Description

This course examines the intricate relationship between jazz music and democratic ideals in the United States. Through interactive lectures, listening sessions and discussions, students will be introduced to key artists, styles, and cultural contexts that shaped jazz over the decades.

Organization

Week 1: Introduction to Jazz

- Overview of course objectives and structure
- What is jazz? Defining the genre
- Historical context: African American musical traditions.

Week 2: The Birth of Jazz (1890s - 1920s)

- New Orleans: The birthplace of jazz
- Key figures: Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton
- The role of blues and ragtime in shaping jazz.

Week 3: The Jazz Age (1920s)

- The Harlem Renaissance and jazz's cultural significance
- Prohibition and the rise of speakeasies
- Key artists: Duke Ellington, Bessie Smith.

Week 4: Swing Era (1930s - 1940s)

- The big band phenomenon and racial integration
- Key figures: Count Basie, Benny Goodman
- The cultural impact of swing music
- Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan.

Week 5: The Birth of Bebop (1940s)

- Transition from jazz as dance music to jazz as an art form
- Key artists: Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk
- Theoretical frameworks of bebop.

Week 6: Cool Jazz and West Coast Jazz (1950s)

- Characteristics and key figures: Miles Davis, Chet Baker
- The influence of classical music on jazz.

Week 7: Jazz and Civil Rights (1960s)

- Jazz as a form of protest and expression
- Key figures: John Coltrane, Max Roach
- The connection between jazz and social movements.

Week 8: Free Jazz and Avant-Garde (1960s - 1970s)

- Breaking traditional forms: Ornette Coleman, Sun Ra
- Exploration of improvisation and experimentation.

Week 9: Fusion and the 1970s

- The blending of jazz with rock and funk
- Key artists: Herbie Hancock, Weather Report
- The evolution of jazz in popular culture.

Week 10: Contemporary Jazz (1980s - Present)

- The return to acoustic forms vs. electronic influences
- Key figures: Wynton Marsalis, Esperanza Spalding
- The globalization of jazz and its diverse influences.

Week 11: Jazz in Europe

- From Bud powell to Steve Lacy
- Jazz in Paris.

Week 12: Final Presentations and Course Reflection

- Student presentations on chosen jazz artists or sub-genres
- Course's wrap-up.

Skills Focus

Throughout the course, the students will **listen** to music, as well as to several interviews with jazz historians, and jazz musicians.

They will **read** excerpts from 'Moving to Higher ground' (Wynton Marsalis) as well as from other sources.

Furthermore, they will be requested to critique (in **writing and in class, orally**) music heard in class.

Finally, they will have to give a presentation on a related topic of their choice, discuss and take questions from their peers.

Please note that no previous knowledge of jazz is required. This is NOT a class for musicians.