



# HOW TO LISTEN TO JAZZ

≡ Ted Gioia ≡

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# How to Listen to Jazz

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== Ted Gioia ==

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For my brother Dana, *il miglior fabbro*

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“Listening is the most important thing  
in music.”

—Duke Ellington

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## *Introduction*

What could be more mysterious than a work of music? When aliens arrive from their distant galaxy, they won't have much trouble understanding our food, sex, and politics—those all make perfect sense. But they will scratch their green scaly heads at why people plug music into their ears or get up and dance when the band starts to play. *Captain, we are unable to decipher the messages hidden in these three-minute bursts of sound, and the earthlings refuse to give us the code.* The sci-fi movies have it all wrong: extraterrestrials won't waste time blowing up the Eiffel Tower and the White House. They will be too busy trying to figure out the significance of a Bach fugue, the rituals of the electronic dance music scene, and the rules of jazz improvisation.

And that jazz performance may puzzle them most of all. What could be stranger than a band playing the *identical* song, night after night, but making it *different* each time? How do you crack that code? How do you pinpoint the epicenter of the elusive quality known as *swing*, praised so

lavishly by jazz fans but so resistant to explication or measurement? How do you grasp the structure of an idiom in which so much seems spontaneous, made up on the spot, and performed with headlong passion, yet is obviously driven by rock-solid ground rules and shaped by revered traditions? Above all, how do you penetrate the essence of a practice so imponderable that, when jazz icon Fats Waller was asked to define it, he allegedly warned, “If you have to ask, don’t mess with it.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet there’s something almost as mysterious as jazz: namely, jazz critics. Who are these expert listeners, empowered to translate strange and wonderful sounds into a verbal description, assign a score or grade—*this hot new record gets four stars!*—and then move on to the next song? Music, by definition, begins where linguistic meaning stops, yet these critics earn their living by breaching the boundary, reducing melodies to words, and somehow convincing the rest of us to give credence to their judgments. Aliens will certainly kidnap a few of these critics, plug them into the truth machine, and force them to explain the secret meanings of human music-making.

Of course, many earthlings are equally puzzled by critics. Where *do* those stars and scores come from? And the critics don’t add to their credibility by their antics. Those well-known movie reviewers who decided to compress their erudite assessments into a hand gesture—thumbs up or thumbs down, like spectators at a gladiator show—didn’t

do themselves or their profession any favors. Is it really that easy to be a critic? And what conclusion do we reach when we see one critic offer the thumbs up and the other give the thumbs down? If reviewing had any objective standards, and wasn't mere whim and opinion, wouldn't they agree most of the time?

The general public also holds a deep-seated suspicion, not entirely without justification, that the 'serious' critics despise precisely those works of art that most people love. Box-office hits, best sellers, chart-topping singles—they all are treated with scorn by these elitists, who then turn around and praise to the hilt some esoteric work no reasonable person would ever enjoy. Readers are often left wondering whether the authors aren't simply trying to impress them with their hipness or faux sophistication, rather than offer an honest appraisal of the work at hand.

Critics add to this distrust by making their process seem opaque and mysterious. They are very quick to give a ranking to a work, assigning stars or scores or thumbs, but rarely tell us how these scales are constructed or what priorities are involved in their application. Music magazines publish countless reviews touting four- and five-star albums, and dismissing the inferior two- and three-star alternatives, but where do we find an in-depth description of the ranking system itself? What values do these rankings embody? What assumptions are built into the scores and rankings? If music fans probe deeper into the process, they encounter lots

of specifics about individual recordings but almost nothing about how critical judgments are formed.

Even though I have worked for many years as a critic, I still know what it's like to be a novice puzzled by the arcane aspects of the reviewer's craft. In my mid-thirties, I lived in Napa for a year, and in order to have intelligent conversations with my neighbors—almost all of them worked in the wine industry—I decided to improve my knowledge of grapes and vintages. This was a pleasant field of study, but I took it seriously and even shelled out some hard-earned cash to subscribe to a pricey newsletter by the influential wine connoisseur Robert Parker. Much to my surprise, I learned not only about wine but also some new twists on criticism. The sheer variety of ways he could describe the taste of a wine was stunning. *With mouthwatering black and blue fruits distinctly tinged by fruit pits, smoked meat, chalk, and a medicinal iodine note, this formidably concentrated wine never forgets its duty to refresh.* I could read a hundred or more of his short assessments of vintages at a sitting, and would soon forget about the wines, so lost was I in admiration of the many ways Parker had found to capture their ineffable qualities in words. How many ways can you describe the flavor of fermented grape juice? Parker never seemed to exhaust the possibilities, and at his best his descriptions possessed a certain wry poetry and metaphorical insight. I was writing a book on the history of jazz during that time in Napa, and I am convinced to this day that my own ability

to describe music was improved by this immersion in wine culture and criticism.

Yet even after months of reading Parker's newsletter, I still couldn't explain the difference between a wine he assigned eighty-five points and another vintage that rated ninety-five. I enjoyed his prose, and even more I enjoyed the wines. But though I tasted the vintages, and concurred that he had guided me to many an outstanding bottle, I could only vaguely grasp what kinds of finely calibrated standards he had applied before writing the few sentences he used to describe them.

Yet as I look back on my own writings on music—which could now fill a shelf—I realize that I am just as guilty as Robert Parker and the thumbs-up-and-down movie critics. I've offered both praise and put-downs to many an artist over the years, but I've never actually outlined in detail the standards I apply in making these evaluations. I've sometimes made a few general comments on my process, but hardly with the degree of specificity the subject deserves.

And I'm not the only one. I've read hundreds of books on jazz, but I can't recall any critic actually explaining, at a detailed and granular level, what they were listening *for*. Sure, they talk about musicians and albums, and techniques and styles, but do they ever really invite readers inside the head of a critic (a scary thought!) and allow them to watch along as the evidence is sifted and assessments and decisions are made?

With that in mind, I've tried to lay bare my own process of listening in the pages ahead. I do this not just as a personal confession, or even as a guide to music appreciation—although both of those purposes are served—but also because this kind of close listening is the source of my pleasure as a consumer of music. My hope is that your enjoyment will also be deepened by these same listening strategies. Later we will move on to look at the structure and styles of jazz, and explore the leading practitioners of the idiom, but all this presupposes that we have some consensus on what we are trying to hear in this body of work. Listening is the foundation; everything else builds out of this starting point. Certainly some of what follows is subjective, but my hope is that you will walk away with a realization that this kind of deep critical listening and judgment is built on more than just personal taste, but draws on clear standards *inherent in the music itself* and how it has evolved. The music itself makes certain demands on the listeners, and the critic who articulates these demands has left subjectivity behind, at least to some degree.

You may come to disagree with some of the assessments and suggestions laid out here—and, in truth, all rules (my own included) have exceptions—but in even that instance, the process of grappling with them may serve to open your ears and expand your horizons. In any event, the views shared below were hard earned, things I grasped only after years or decades of studying the music. My hope is that by putting them down in writing I will help you enter more deeply into the mysterious process of 'appreciating' jazz.

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ONE

## The Mystery of Rhythm

LET ME START WITH A PARABLE.

A young scholar decides to devote his life to the study of African rhythms. He moves to Ghana, where he learns under the tutelage of more than a dozen master drummers. He eventually spends a full decade immersed in the musical traditions and practices of the region, but he supplements these teachings with other sources of learning, whether in the halls of Yale University or in the traditional communities of Haiti and other destinations of the African diaspora. With each passing year, his expertise grows, and eventually he becomes much more than a scholar. He is a full-fledged practitioner who now carries on the tradition himself.

But when our expert returns to the United States, he finds it difficult to convey the essence of these practices to outsiders. He tries to teach students how to play the Dagomba drums, and they ask him the simplest question of all:



“How do I know when to enter? When do I start playing?” In Western music, there is an easy answer. The conductor waves a baton, or a bandleader counts off the beat, or the musical score provides a cue. But entering into the ongoing flow of a West African musical performance is a much different matter.

“I found that if I tried to demonstrate how to enter with one drum by counting from another drum’s beat, I could not do it,” our scholar admits in frustration. No amount of analysis or rule-making solves his problem. Finally, he realizes that the obstacle can be overcome only by moving away from analysis and entering into the realm of feeling. “The only way to begin correctly,” he eventually discovers, “was to listen a moment and then start right in.”<sup>1</sup>

*Listen a moment and then start right in.* There has to be more, no? A decade of apprenticeship, and this is the take-away? Yet this was the solution, beguiling in its apparent simplicity.

For those who devote the better part of a lifetime to the study of music, stories like this one are humbling. They testify to a magical element in the music, especially in its rhythmic essence, that eludes intellectualization. This aspect of the music must be felt, and if it isn’t felt, academic dissection is futile. The scholar must become more than a scholar to grasp it, and the student determined to follow on the same path must be willing to leave pedagogy behind and embrace something so elusive that, at times, it can hardly be described.

But all parables come with an implicit lesson, and there is one in this story. Our tale—a story from the real life of John Miller Chernoff, one of the most discerning experts on African rhythm and drumming—testifies to the power of *listening*. In our parable, hearing trumps analysis. And if this superiority of the ear over the brain humbles the trained musicologist, it also should give a dose of encouragement to the outsider who doesn't know the terminology and codified procedures of the aural arts. Listening, not jargon, is the path into the heart of music. And if we listen at a deep enough level, we enter into the magic of the song—no degrees or formal credentials required.

This book is built on the notion that careful listening can demystify virtually all of the intricacies and marvels of jazz. This is not to demean the benefits of formal music study or classroom learning. Yet we do well to remember that the people who first gave us jazz did so without much formal study—and, in some instances, with none at all. But they knew how to *listen*. And, like Chernoff and his students, they learned to use that capacity as a touchstone in unlocking their own creative potential.

In a similar manner, we do well to recall that the African musical traditions at the root of jazz rarely distinguished between performers and audiences. All members of the community participated in its musical life. Those raised in these cultures would reject the notion that special training or skills might be required to join in the exhilaration and excitement of music-making. In this tradition, there are no

outsiders. Everyone has the capability to grasp the music at its most essential level. But there is one inescapable requirement: they must listen, and listen deeply.

These considerations are important in assessing all aspects of jazz, but especially when dealing with its quasi-magical rhythmic essence. Science has expanded considerably our knowledge of the properties of rhythm in recent decades. We can now isolate and measure the impact of rhythm on our brainwaves, our hormones, our immune system, and other aspects of our physiology.<sup>2</sup> But these studies have only deepened the mystery. Why does our body respond so powerfully to the beat? Why don't dogs, for example, match their body movements to external rhythms? Why don't chimpanzees or cats or horses dance to the beat? They don't, and you can't train them to do so. Yet every human society and community provides an outlet for this irresistible response to rhythm—sometimes even relying on it as a pathway to the divine. This propensity is hardwired into our bodies, perhaps into our souls, but do we even know where to start in assessing its aesthetic dimensions?

So here, at the very outset of this book, we run into a huge problem. We need to start with the first and most important ingredient in jazz, its ecstatic rhythmic quality. This is the most difficult aspect of the music to circumscribe and almost impossible to convey in words. Yet if you learn how to listen deeply to this aspect of jazz, you will have made a huge step toward grasping the essentials of the music. So

let's try to unlock the mystery of jazz rhythm. To do that I need to lay bare my own approach to hearing the beat and share the techniques and attitudes that have helped me in my own attempts to penetrate its magic.

### **The Pulse (or Swing) of Jazz**

The first thing I listen for is the degree of rhythmic cohesion between the different musicians in the band. Some jazz critics might describe this as *swing*. Certainly that's part of it, at least in most jazz performances. But there is something more than mere finger-tapping momentum involved here. In the great jazz bands, you can hear the individual members lock together rhythmically in a pleasing way that involves an uncanny degree of give-and-take, but with a kind of quirkiness that resists specific definition. If you listen to the most innovative rhythm sections—for example, the Count Basie band from the prewar years, the Bill Evans trio from the early 1960s, the Miles Davis and John Coltrane groups from the mid-1960s, or ensembles led by Vijay Iyer, Brad Mehldau, and Jason Moran in the current day—you hear a paradoxical type of cooperation taking place in real time. The musicians are adapting to each other but also insisting on their own prerogatives. They are somehow accommodating and demanding at the same time. This pleasing give-and-take results in a holistic synergy that emerges from the blending of individual personalities. The pulse of the music feels alive and potent.

At the other extreme, you can hear amateur bands struggling to achieve this same degree of effortless cohesion. And you can perhaps learn more about swing from listening to the bands that fail to achieve it. Frequently in the pages ahead, I will advise you to seek out and listen to lesser-skilled musicians. You are probably skeptical, and I can hardly blame you. Has any music appreciation teacher ever focused on inferior performances? But I'm convinced that only by listening long and hard to second-rate performers will you ever really appreciate what the world-class artists have achieved. Fortunately this is easy to do nowadays—just go to YouTube and do a search on “student jazz band.” If you listen to a dozen or so beginning and intermediate bands, you will grasp the gap between them and the top-notch professional ensembles. The single biggest limitation of these groups is the awkwardness with which they blend together. You can hear the tension in their playing. You can feel viscerally the sluggishness in their swing. Like a car that needs a tune-up, they aren't operating on all cylinders.

I don't say this with any malice. I've been there. I've lived through this entire struggle myself. Between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five, I spent more than ten thousand hours at the piano, and I know all the mistakes of novice jazz musicians—because I made *every one of them* myself. In fact, the harshest reviews I've ever delivered as a music critic have been directed at myself. I made a number of recordings of my performances in my late teens and early twenties, and later I *destroyed all of them*. As I subsequently

explained my reasons to a curious inquirer: “My musical phrases were fine, except for how they began and how they ended, and everything that came between.” My fingers were dexterous, and I took some pride in my tone control, but many of the most fundamental aspects of musicality came only after much consternation and struggle. Even thinking about this period in my musical education is painful for me nowadays.

I sometimes wish that my accumulated learning had come easier. I’ve spent enough time around musicians with amazing ears and instincts to envy the ease with which they assimilate the jazz craft. When I had the opportunity to play with Stan Getz, I could tell that he instantly heard everything that was happening on the bandstand. If I put an altered note into a chord, he immediately reacted to it. I remember him coming up to me once after we had played “You Stepped Out of a Dream” and commenting: “I liked the way you slipped in that augmented chord.” The fact that he referred to the harmony with that degree of specificity was rare for Getz—it sometimes seemed to me that he still dealt in a pure world of sounds while the rest of us were caught up in our harmonic rules and terminology. But even if I was surprised by the analytical attitude in his comment, I wasn’t at all shocked at his close attention to a very casual and brief substitute chord I had inserted, which had lasted no more than a second or two in the song. Getz’s ears were, in my opinion, one-in-a-million, and I had spent enough time with him to realize that nothing could happen in a

performance that would leave him unprepared. He would respond, and without any need to consider harmonic rules and scale patterns.

I wasn't like that. I have a good ear. Some people might even say I have an outstanding ear. I participated in a study years ago in which my ability to hear and identify intervals was measured, and the researchers told me I was faster at this than anyone they had tested. But I still know that a sizable gap exists between me and someone like Stan Getz or Chet Baker, people who hear everything and don't even have to think about it. They have a biological advantage, plain and simple. I had to draw on different strengths, analytical and methodological skills that I have honed over the years, and I was fortunate that they proved their own value in the long run. But the bottom line is that I learned the jazz craft a day at a time, with much effort expended in the process.

Sometimes I think I became a better teacher and critic because I had to be detailed and systematic in my own learning. Someone once pointed out to me that the best NBA coaches—people such as Phil Jackson, Pat Riley, Gregg Popovich—weren't the most gifted players. When I was a youngster, I saw both Riley and Jackson play, and I can attest that they spent most of the game on the bench. But the very fact that they had to fight for playing time, and work more tenaciously than their colleagues, gave them hard-earned insights that the natural-born geniuses never have to worry about. I feel the same about my own

development as a musician. I learned slowly and carefully, and when (as I will often do in this book) I call attention to the ways an amateurish musician falls short, rest assured that I make this comparison with sympathy and a dose of self-recognition.

But let's get back to swing (or, in this case, the *absence* of swing). This lack of rhythmic cohesion can be easily heard in second-rate jazz bands. And even listeners who don't know much about music will sense it subliminally. They won't get the same kind of satisfaction and enjoyment from the performance. And this is not just the case in fast, finger-snappin' numbers, but even in meditative mood pieces and romantic ballads where the term "swing" perhaps doesn't do justice to the rhythmic character of the music. You may think you know nothing about jazz, but if you take the time to compare amateur and professional bands, you will find that you can soon tell the difference from their varying levels of comfort and confidence in their rhythmic interaction.

Let's now forget about those awkward student bands and turn our attention to the masters of the music. After listening to an amateur ensemble, check out a group of top-tier professionals playing the same song, and marvel at the difference. Can we pinpoint the essence of swing in the music of the premier jazz bands? One way of doing this is to listen to the same performance repeatedly and focus on different instruments with each repetition. If you are seeking out the secret source of swing, a good place to start is



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