

## Listening to Jazz

As with any style or type of music, knowing what to listen for and how to listen are important if one is to get the most enjoyment from it. The inherent problem with most jazz is that it involves improvisation which most people do not understand. However with the knowledge from this lesson and some "active" listening you will find it becomes easier and more enjoyable.

### THE RHYTHM SECTION

In lesson one we learned that most jazz performances do not need a conductor and the tempo/speed of a piece remains constant. One of the main reasons for this is that most jazz performances include some kind of a rhythm section. Whether it is a small group, like a quintet or a large group, like a jazz band, there is a group of players that are primarily responsible for keeping the tempo steady. Of course every player, (as you will learn later) is responsible for playing "in time" and maintaining the tempo, it is the rhythm section that lays the foundation and provides the rhythmic stability.

The standard rhythm section consists of a piano, a bass and a set of drums. Or in other words, a pianist, a bass player and a drummer. There are also many rhythm sections that use a guitar. Each of these instruments have a specific role to play in providing the support for the soloists. They, of course, can and often be employed as a soloist as well. You might have guessed from the nature of the instrument what role each plays and you would probably be right.

### BASS

This can be either an acoustic (wooden) bass or an electric bass. The function is the same. The bass is responsible for providing the foundation for the chords that the piano is playing and the soloist is improvising over. There are many styles of bass playing but one of the most common is what we call "walking" bass. This simply means that the bass player is playing one note on every beat of the measure. This provides a very solid under-pinning for the rest of the group. It should be noted that the bass player is playing "pizzicato" almost all the time. This means he is plucking the strings rather than using a bow. The notes he selects to play are often the most important notes in the chords of the accompaniment.

### PIANO

You guessed it. The piano is mainly responsible for the harmony due to the fact that it can play more than one note at a time. The chords (multiple notes) are played in a rhythmic fashion that is up to the discretion of the player and is known as "comping". This is short for "accompanying". The pianist can also choose various ways to play the chords based on how many notes he puts in a single chord. All pianists have their own way of "comping". The piano is a very special instrument in that it can perform more than one function at a time. If a pianist is soloing he will play the solo (melody) most often in the right hand while keeping the chords going in the left hand. If it is a solo piano performance the player can even play the bass part as well.

### DRUM SET

There is probably no instrument that is more complex than the drum set. There are many nicknames for the drums; skins, tubs, drum kit, etc. The complexity comes from the fact that there are so many different possibilities. Some drummers have very large "kits" with multiple drums and up to 7 or 8 cymbals. Each part of the drum set has a function that, with practice you can pinpoint. Cymbals: There are many, many types and sizes of cymbals. There is no area that creates more discussion and disagreement among drummers than the choice of cymbals. Because each cymbal is hand-made, each one has a unique sound. There are three basic cymbals that most drummers would not be caught dead without. They are the ride cymbal, the crash cymbal

and the hi-hat cymbals. The ride cymbal is as its name denotes. Continuous "ride" rhythms are played by the right hand on this cymbal. It is an integral part of making the group "swing" and provides a great deal of drive. The crash cymbal is used primarily for certain accents and for musical climaxes in the piece. This cymbal is generally heavier (thicker) than a ride cymbal. The hi-hat cymbals are unique in that there are two of them that, through a mechanical linkage, come together with a "chick" sound and are played with the left foot. This is THE most important part of the drum set. The hi-hat cymbals generally play on the 2nd and 4th beats of every measure and provide wonderful stability to the rest of the drum set and its interaction with the rest of the group.

## DRUMS

Here again, the variety of available drums is mind boggling. The basic drums used are the snare drum, the bass drum and the tom-tom.

The snare drum is used differently in the various styles but can be considered to be a time keeper to a large extent. However, accents on the snare drum are very common. The bass drum is largely responsible for the "kicks", or heavy accents that occur. Some drummers use it as a time keeper by playing lightly on every beat.

The tom-toms also come in a vast variety of sizes. There are generally two types: floor toms that sit on legs on the floor and mounted toms that are attached to the drum set in some way.

All the instruments of the rhythm section, whether by themselves, or with a group have the responsibility for the basic style and feel of a performance and to support the soloist.

## PERFORMANCE PRACTICES

Although at first it might be hard to follow a jazz performance, there are some very standard practices that will enable you to understand what is happening. Most performance practices have simply evolved over the years and follow common sense rules of balance. Remember these are general rules and you can always find some exceptions.

The first thing that a jazz group will do, in this, a duo, is to play the melody of the song. If it is a blues, they will almost always play the melody twice. This melody is referred to as the "head". Following the playing of the "head" each player will begin his or her improvising. You can think of the improvising as a new melody over the chords of the tune stated at the beginning. The order of who goes when is generally decided at the time of the performance and will change from night to night. One complete playing of the tune or an improvisation on the tune is called a "chorus". In the case of the blues, one chorus would be 12 bars/measures, two choruses, 24 bars and so on. In an AABA tune one chorus would be 32 bars, two choruses, 64 bars and so on. This is an excellent way to keep your place in the music. Another way is to hum the melody (if you know it) under the improvisation. Remember that the improvisation is based on the original melody played at the beginning. After each individual has soloed, then in many cases something called "trading fours" takes place. This is simply splitting up the chorus among the players and taking turn soloing for four bars. In many instances the players will try to expand upon what the player before them has just played. In the case of an AABA tune the players generally trade 8 bars rather than 4 because that is the basic structure of the tune. After trading fours they usually give the drummer a solo which still follows the format of the tune. It is not simply an extended solo with no limits. Then to bring it to a successful close they return to the melody and play it twice. This makes for a very satisfying and logical performance. This basic format can be found, with some variation, in every jazz performance.