

## Did We Do That Or Did It Just Happen?

The 19<sup>th</sup> Century saw jazz develop from folk blues music in the Deep South, to an internationally recognized art form. This process of development incorporated increasingly complex techniques and expressed a wider and more profound range of human emotion and experience. Jazz, although uniquely American in origin, is an art form that combines many different cultural influences and musical traditions such as Classic Blues and Country Blues. Excellent jazz players, such as: Duke Ellington, Jimmy Lunceford, Cab Calloway, Artie Shaw, and Count Basie all came from different parts of the United States with differing backgrounds. However, many of the innovators and leading voices, were black Americans, the descendants of slaves. This concurrence between the black population in the United States and jazz music has led to much political and sociological debate. The essential lines of the dispute put those who see jazz as an art form which transcends questions of race against those who contend jazz as a black product, therefore, belonging to black people. The latter position has, not surprisingly been enthusiastically embraced not only by blacks and the middle-class left throughout America. Although the arguing of claim to Jazz is important, the most important thing to be analyzed is the evolution of Bebop into Jazz.

Although many may put forth the argument that the Swing Era launched the popular artistic status of jazz throughout America, by placing its rhythmic big band sound in the ears and minds of the world, however its successor, bebop, also claimed mainstream status by evolving jazz to a higher level of achievement. When bebop exploded onto the scene as World War II was ending, the rhythmic intricacies, advanced harmonies, and sometimes frantic tempos of the improvisers, seemed an extreme departure from the big dance bands that dominated popular music during the prewar years. Many established jazz musicians, including the Louis Armstrong, condemned the new music as noisy and unswinging. With 50 years of hindsight, however, the change appears much less dramatic. In fact, bebop's musical advances were firmly embedded in, and to a certain extent anticipated by, the best jazz players who preceded it.

Bebop however did implement more significant changes, both musical and nonmusical, with the advent of bop than at any other time in jazz history. With this being said, some of these considerable changes were in technique and attitude toward performances. Consequently, there were also changes of attitude towards the audiences participation. Because of its almost "cut-time" time measures, Bebop became the first jazz style that wasn't performed for the sole purpose of the audiences participation through dancing. Therefore, many Bebop bands faced great changes in

their repertoire. With the change of repertoire and audience participation, there was also a shift away from the widespread popularity of The Swing Era enjoyed to a more elitist listening audience. This elitism also expanded to the actual band members and players of Bebop. If you had been an accomplished swing player during the Swing Era, there was no guarantee that you be able to survive in the expectations of the Bebop musical world. The music's complexity required players to extend their former playing knowledge to newer levels of difficulty and formality. A theoretical foundation began to emerge as players stretched the harmonic boundaries of early jazz styles. Players had to have a greater and more immediate sense of chord recognition, as well as their extensions and possible substitutions. The music was generally fast, demanding execution on individual instruments seldom required by previous styles. It is interesting that bop is today considered the mainstream of jazz style, yet it was not enthusiastically accepted by the jazz community at the time of its emergence.

Bebop marked the stage at which jazz completed its transformation from entertainment into art. Although there was certainly much in jazz music that qualified as art prior to bebop, during the 1930s swing music to a large extent played much the same role as rock music had since the 1950s--entertaining masses of youth. Jazz was usually tied to dancing or to

backing entertainers who sang and danced. Bop marked the point at which both the musicians and their audience became widely conscious that jazz was an art form. For the first time serious listening to the music, especially the improvised solos, became primary. The musicians concerned themselves, for the most part, more with developing the technical aspects of the music and increasing its aesthetic qualities, rather than just creating something that would enlarge their audience, and therefore their wallets. Clearly the pioneers of bebop were originals, not just musically but also original personalities who could not be appropriated or imitated at the time because they placed themselves well outside the mainstream. If society would not recognize black people's artistic achievements, seeking instead to sanitize and assimilate the music that was born of the original African-Americans' experiences in this country, then why should black musicians continue to function within the mainstream?