

By 1931 Jazz was one of the most successful types of popular music. How do you account for its appeal?



Jazz first came about in the late 1890s in North America. Derived from the music of the swing era, it was catchy, with a strong beat and rhythm. Early jazz (New Orleans jazz) used more improvisation than modern jazz, and often had several musicians taking turns to improvise over a given chord sequence. When first created, jazz was not very popular, but the emergence of traditional jazz in the 1930s brought about new techniques and new followers. In the 1940s there was a major revival of New Orleans jazz, and the music of Joe “King” Oliver and Jelly Roll Morton, as well as surviving pioneers such as Bunk Johnson was recorded and celebrated by many, including contemporary artists such as Lu Watters. Today, the term ‘Traditional jazz’ is also used to describe earlier and influential styles such as ragtime, boogie-woogie, and Harlem stride piano, all of which made significant contributions to the development of jazz.

Soon after traditional jazz was introduced, the big band era began, spanning roughly from 1935-1945. This era of jazz brought about the scoring of jazz music, written for at least 10 instrumentalists, with occasional improvisations, over pre-scored and arranged chord notations. This period also brought the introduction of new sections of the jazz orchestra, such as a stronger percussion area, and more modern guitars, as opposed to the original banjos. The big band era was composed of larger jazz orchestras (hence the title big band era) of at least 20 people, and the introduction of jazz bands that performed for people to dance to, appropriately entitled ‘Dance Bands’. This is when jazz started becoming the popular music to dance and listen to, for all ages, but particularly for teenagers and young adults. Jazz was starting to replace classical orchestras and concerts everywhere, taking over the concert halls and radios.

Perhaps the reason jazz was becoming so popular was the fact that it was so new to everybody. Even though some of the features – such as antiphony – were taken from classical music, the use of off beat rhythms and syncopation was quite new. Although syncopation was used in classical music occasionally, it didn’t match the extent to which syncopation was used in Jazz music, where it was used over square rhythms (today’s term ‘square’ was taken from the name for someone who liked classical music over jazz – because of the square rhythms used instead of syncopated rhythms).

Big band and Mainstream jazz were the derivation of today’s popular music market. The music had to be good to dance to, with a strong beat and sense of rhythm, and most of all, it had to appeal to the audience of music lovers. In the Mainstream period (spanning from around 1935 – 1960), vocal jazz also played a huge part. Singers such as Frank Sinatra, Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald managed to take popular music and add jazz inflections to create a mix known as mainstream jazz. However, mainstream jazz also applied to the work of contemporary musicians.

Although fans of jazz around the 1950s went to see their favourite artists to admire their skill with music, by the mid 1950s, fans were starting to flock to jazz concerts because of the way they idolised the musicians’ lifestyle, or because of a physical attraction (the basis of today’s popular music market). This is when Rock ‘n’ Roll started to take over jazz as the popular commercial music,

introducing the aspect of monetary desire, eventually making the amount of money owned more important than the talent in most cases.

In conclusion, jazz has appealed to people ever since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the swing/jazz era to many people before that time, because of the ability to easily dance to it, the strong beat and the catchy rhythms. It was the same features of jazz that attracted people, the traditional three front line instruments improvisation over a piano and bass or guitar/banjo accompaniment (as is demonstrated in Rockin' in Rhythm) and the interesting mix of scored music and improvisation that drove classical music fans away.