

# An abbreviated history of Jazz Piano

## About this episode

This episode introduces the history and lineage of jazz piano and how conceptual and technical approaches to the instrument have evolved throughout the history of the art form and the extent to which the technical and expressive capabilities of the instrument have been explored and expanded by some of the instrument's most creative masters.

### The 1920s (Early Jazz)

Jellyroll Morton, Fletcher Henderson, Earl "Fatha" Hines, Lil Hardin Armstrong, James P. Johnson

### The 1930s (Big Band Era)

Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Teddy Wilson, Fats Waller

### The 1940s (Be-Bop!)

Thelonious Monk, Bud Powell, Mary Lou Williams, Art Tatum, Hank Jones

### The 1950s (Hard Bop)

Horace Silver, Red Garland, Sonny Clark, Oscar Peterson, Ahmad Jamal

### The 1960s (Post-Bop)

Wynton Kelly, McCoy Tyner, Herbie Hancock, Bill Evans, Andrew Hill, Cecil Taylor

### The 1970s (The Electric Revolution)

Chick Corea, Keith Jarrett, Joe Zawinul, Herbie Hancock

### The 1980s, 90s and 2000s (The Acoustic Renaissance to the Present)

Kenny Kirkland, Geri Allen, Mulgrew Miller, Renee Rosnes, Brad Mehldau, Jason Moran, Robert Glasper

## Learning objectives

- Learn about the role of the piano in jazz
- Learn about the history and lineage of jazz piano from the 1920s through the present
- Learn about how conceptual and technical approaches to the piano have evolved through the history of the artform
- Learn about how the most creative masters of the piano have explored and expanded the technical and expressive capabilities of the piano

## Preparatory activities

### Listen to the masters!

Listen to examples of jazz pianists featured in the episode on the Audio Playlist which can be found on the episode homepage online at [jazzreach.org](http://jazzreach.org).

### Be on the lookout!

Prompt the students to listen for the featured musicians discussing the following topics during the episode and/or assign different students to follow specific musicians as they watch the episode. (See the list of the musicians featured in this episode in the summary below.)

- What is the role of the piano in jazz?
- How have pianists contributed to the sound and evolution of the art form?
- How do featured musicians describe notable masters of the piano, or specific bands and albums throughout the eras that resonate with them?

### Exploration questions/activities

Below are brief synopses of the primary trailblazing pianists from the eras based on the unique perspectives of some of today's greatest practitioners of the instrument featured in the episode: Luis Perdomo, Helen Sung, Manuel Valera, and Miki Yamanaka. (Many of the musicians transcend multiple eras of the music – they are included below primarily in the order in which they appear in the episode.) Use these descriptions before, during, or after viewing the episode to reinforce the material!

### Use the information below and from the episode to discuss the following:

- What did you notice about how the piano styles changed through the different eras? How did they stay the same?
- Did the sound/style of a particular pianist or specific era appeal to you?

## THE 1920s - EARLY JAZZ

### Jelly Roll Morton

#### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- His sound embodied the many musical influences found in New Orleans
- Played the styles of ragtime and jazz
- He was the first arranger for jazz music, notating sheet music for his compositions.
- Known for the distinctive riffs he played in his left hand.
- His composition “Jelly Roll Blues”, published in 1915, is one of the first published jazz compositions.

*The pianists after ragtime – it was an uneasy fit within the band because it was so dominant, it didn't really need the other instruments to play. When you listen to Jelly Roll Morton and those early recordings with his Hot Peppers, when he solos, everybody else just drops out because he's still playing a lot of the ragtime/stride stuff in his left hand, which includes the bass note.*

– Helen Sung

### Scott Joplin

#### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Perhaps the first jazz composer
- Known as the “father of ragtime piano”.
- “Practicing Joplin's music gives you a foundation for the left hand.” (Luis Perdomo).
- Wrote over 100 ragtime pieces, one ragtime ballet, and two operas.
- His composition “Maple Leaf Rag” became ragtime's most popular and most influential hit.

*Joplin said that his style came about because his music was slower than the other pianists. . . . And, it (his music) was a bridge between classical music and jazz. – Manuel Valera*



## Earl “Fatha” Hines

### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- “The style of the modern piano came from Earl Hines” (Dizzy Gillespie)
- Transitioned the piano away from the timekeeper role by playing horn-like single note lines rather than syncopated chords.
- Hines’ Orchestra featured young Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker.
- Performed alongside and recorded with Louis Armstrong.
- His playing style was a gateway to bebop.

*Some people think that he is the foundation of all modern jazz piano. – Helen Sung*

## THE 1930s – BIG BAND ERA

### Teddy Wilson

#### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Known as the definitive swing pianist.
- Performed and recorded with Louis Armstrong, Lena Horne, Benny Goodman, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald and many more.
- Among his contributions to the evolution of jazz piano was giving the bass part to the bass players, freeing up the pianist to explore comping.
- Featured vocalist Billie Holiday on his 1949 recording *Teddy Wilson Featuring Billie Holiday*

*“He had beautiful technique and expanded what the pianist does making the piano into a more soloistic instrument.” – Helen Sung*

### Duke Ellington

#### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Was the leader of the Duke Ellington Orchestra from 1923 – 1974.
- Known to be one of the most significant composers within jazz.

- Ellington wrote or collaborated on over 1000 compositions, many of which became popular pieces (i.e “Mood Indigo” and “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing)”)

- Well-known for his orchestra’s recurring performances at the Cotton Club in Harlem, NYC.

*“The orchestra/big band was his instrument. And his playing was really perfect for the way he wrote for the orchestra. It’s very subtle and very sparse.” – Manuel Valera*

### Count Basie

#### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Basie was a pianist, organist, bandleader and composer.
- Formed the Count Basie Orchestra in 1935 and led the group for almost 50 years.
- His orchestra featured renowned players such as saxophonist Lester Young, guitarist Freddie Green and trumpeter Harry “Sweets” Edison.
- Considered an innovator as a bandleader, arranger and composer.

*“He’s known for his witty statements in conversation with the big band. Waiting for his moment to play - in the spaces when the orchestra “lays out” (stops playing) - had the effect of making a bigger impression with the piano, drawing your attention, and making you listen more closely. He was also known for his witty statements in conversation with the big band” – Helen Sung*

### Fats Waller

#### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Waller was a jazz pianist, organist, composer, violinist, singer and comic.
- An innovator of the Harlem stride style.
- Composed such hits as “Ain’t Misbehavin” and “Honeysuckle Rose”.
- His sound was joyful and he had the ability to make his playing seem effortless.

- Became one of the most popular performers of his era, frequently touring internationally.

*“When you go to play those same notes that he played, some of those transcriptions, there’s some stuff that you have to practice for months to actually sound half as natural as the way he was making it sound. . . . You put on a recording of Fats Waller and right away you start smiling.”*

– Luis Perdomo

## THE 1940s – BE-BOP

### Bud Powell

#### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- An innovator of bebop piano.
- Thelonious Monk was Powell’s biggest mentor.
- Recorded alongside Charlie Parker, Art Blakey, Dexter Gordon, and many others.
- Known for his signature comping style with jagged left-hand voices meeting bebop lines in his right hand.

*“There was only one guy who used to intimidate Bird [Charlie Parker], and that was Bud Powell.”*

– Luis Perdomo

### Art Tatum

#### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- His technical facility on piano is regarded as perhaps the best in jazz history.
- Tatum extended the vocabulary of jazz piano beyond his early stride influences and introduced reharmonization and bitonality.
- “He is considered The Jazz Pianist. In my view, there’s Art Tatum, and then from there comes everybody else.” (Luis Perdomo)
- Influenced and imitated by many pianists and artists who played other instruments.

*“Art Tatum is the pianist that puts all pianists to shame. If you feel like you’re really sounding good, put some Art Tatum on and you’ll be like, ‘alright, back to the shed.’”* – Manuel Valera

### Mary Lou Williams

#### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Williams wrote hundreds of compositions, and arranged and recorded over 100 records.
- Williams was a friend and mentor to Thelonious Monk, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Tadd Dameron, Budd Powell and more.
- Adapted and changed throughout each era of jazz both in her compositions and her improvisation.

- Known as the “first lady of the jazz keyboard”

*“She’s got the groove!”* – Miki Yamanaka

### Thelonious Monk

#### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Had a unique improvisational style, making his sound unmistakable.
- His compositions often featured dissonances and angular melodic twists.
- Composed such classic compositions as “Round Midnight”, “Straight No Chaser”, and “Blue Monk”.
- Well-known to have a distinctive look, including suits, eccentric hats, and sunglasses.
- Was idiosyncratic in nature, and would sometimes dance on the bandstand while the rest of the ensemble was playing.

*Thelonious Monk was a creative and unique composer and pianist who, as Miki Yamanaka described, “doesn’t sound like anybody else. If you listen to him you know who he is.” His rhythms were surprising and dazzling, his composed melodies had unusual leaps, and, as Manuel Valera described, his style “was super peculiar because he improvises over the melody as well as the harmony, whereas the others were improvising mostly over the harmony.”*

*“Thelonious Monk’s rhythms were really really strong. To the point that he could play what you call a wrong note, but if you play with the right rhythms, it will make it sound good.”* – Luis Perdomo

## THE 1950s - HARD BOP!

### Ahmad Jamal

#### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Jamal has been one of the most successful jazz trio band leaders for nearly six decades.
- Well-known for his lightness of touch, and use of space within his improvisation and statement of melodies.
- Introduced new concepts in trio arranging, including an extensive use of vamps.
- Influential Jamal albums include “At the Pershing: But Not For Me”, “Poinciana”, and many more.

*“He had a very strong idea of what he wanted his band to sound like. He brought the arrangement and the band followed suit. . . . When I hear (his) trio, I hear the arrangement. To me that’s the star. . . . His approach to the art of trio playing has classical concepts in his arranging. Really well thought out, vey musical” – Helen Sung*

### Oscar Peterson

#### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Called the “Maharaja of the keyboard” by Duke Ellington
- Released over 200 recordings and won seven Grammy awards.
- Well-known for the powerful command of his trio, Peterson also performed in a duo context alongside such notable players as Joe Pass, Sam Jones and Herbie Hancock.
- Known as “The king of inside swing.”

*The way that he can play the piano, so fast and so tingly, yet so powerful at the same time.*  
– Miki Yamanaka

### Red Garland

#### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Popularized the block chord style of piano playing.

- Was a member of Miles Davis’ first great quintet.
- Had a clear touch and an amazing feel in the right hand
- Performed and recorded alongside John Coltrane, Curtis Fuller, Jackie McLean and many more.

*“I used to listen to Red Garland a lot because he just eases my heart because I’m a really excited person all of the time. . . . I think the contribution that he made to the development of jazz is that it is okay to be simple.” – Miki Yamanaka*

### Bobby Timmons

#### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Is most associated with the soul jazz style that he helped initiate.
- Was a member of Art Blakey’s Jazz Messengers
- Played extensively with Cannonball Adderley’s band
- Composed such acclaimed compositions as “Moanin’”, and “Dat Dere”.
- Much like Red Garland, Timmons used the block chords style.

*“He was awesome. His little tiny arrangements of all of those standards and he wrote a bunch of (his own) tunes. He did such a great part to creating the arranged sound of the piano trio that still exists now.” – Miki Yamanaka*

### Horace Silver

#### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- One of the largest influences of the hard bop style
- Co-led Art Blakey’s Jazz Messengers until 1956
- He was known for his style of comping using the left hand to give an extra push to the rhythm section
- [He said] “so much with less notes than other pianists.” (Luis Perdomo)
- Compositions such as “Nica’s Dream”,

“Doodlin’”, and “Peace” became jazz standards.

*“I wouldn’t call it a chord, but there’s like a little rumble that he would do in the lower part of the piano with his hand. It wasn’t even a chord, . . . it sounded like a drum.”* – Luis Perdomo

## THE 1960s - POST-BOP!

### Wynton Kelly

#### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Known for his blues-based playing and his singular approach to swing.
- Rose to prominence as the pianist for Dinah Washington and later for Dizzy Gillespie.
- Performed and recorded with such artists as Cannonball Adderley, John Coltrane, Wes Montgomery and Sonny Rollins.
- Kelly attracted attention as part of Miles Davis’ band in 1959, appearing on Davis’ acclaimed album “Kind of Blue”.

His playing was swinging and focused, with a bluesy, down-to-earth feeling. He played in the middle of the beat, rather than behind the beat, which gave his style a more relaxed feel.

*“The way he listened to other people, the way he accompanies, it’s just such a high level of music making.”* – Miki Yamanaka

### McCoy Tyner

#### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Known for his prodigious technique, playing rapid pentatonics and fifths at the bottom part of the piano.
- Perhaps best known for his work in the John Coltrane Quartet from 1960 - 1965.
- Tyner’s releases as a bandleader include such hits as Inception, The Real McCoy, and Time For Tyner.
- Tyner is revered as one of the most influential pianists of his decade and is widely imitated.

His style “opened up a lot of people’s ears.”  
(Miki Yamanaka)

*“He created something new. I would trace: Ellington, Monk, McCoy Tyner.”* – Helen Sung

### Bill Evans

#### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Known for his tender touch, innovative harmonies and his stunning, and deliberate, use of space.
- Evans rose to prominence as a member of Miles Davis’ sextet, and was featured in Davis’ Kind of Blue
- He is most associated with his legendary trio featuring bassist Scott LaFaro and drummer Paul Motian,
- His Sunday at the Village Vanguard is considered one of the quintessential trio album releases.
- Many Evans compositions became jazz standards including “Waltz For Debby” and “Nardis”.

### Andrew Hill

#### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Hill recorded for Blue Note Records for nearly a decade, creating a dozen albums
- He rose to prominence as an accompanist for Dinah Washington, and then with Roland Kirk’s quartet.
- Hill’s albums featured such post-bop greats as Joe Chambers, Eric Dolphy, Bobby Hutcherson, and Freddie Hubbard.
- Hill’s style was marked by a unique approach to rhythm and phrasing

*“The way he sees rhythm and the way he plays over his tunes, it’s actually really hard to do. It’s very detail oriented. But not in the standard by any way. Sort of like Monk.”* – Manuel Valera



## Cecil Taylor

### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Taylor was a pioneer of the free jazz movement.
- He had an energetic, physical approach to performance, resulting in complex improvisation.
- One of the first to introduce tonal clusters and intricate polyrhythms into the jazz language.
- Had a stunning degree of intention and precision within music that was very eccentric in nature, and at times seemed frenetic.

He was a virtuoso pianist and transcribing his music, as described by Luis Perdomo, reveals that “he’s actually hitting the same notes over and over. It’s not random. He’s actually really really playing certain notes.”

*“To some degree Cecil Taylor is kind of like Jackson Pollack. Same era. Jackson Pollock used unorthodox techniques. So did Cecil Taylor. . . . He was possibly the most famous avant garde pianist.”* – Manuel Valera

## THE 1970s - THE ELECTRIC REVOLUTION

### Herbie Hancock

#### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Well-known for his wide harmonic palate and laid back feel.
- Started his career performing with Donald Byrd and then joined the Miles Davis Quintet.
- One of the first to incorporate the use of synthesizers into jazz music
- His album *Headhunters* is one of the most influential jazz-funk albums of all time.
- Many Hancock compositions including “Cantaloupe Island”, “Watermelon Man”, and “Maiden Voyage” have become jazz standards.

His playing was unexpected, had a wide harmonic palate, and a bouncy, laid-back feel,

He was interested in technology and eventually embraced the use of the Fender Rhodes piano (which he didn’t like at first) and made some of his biggest hits and recordings on the instrument.

*“He was a once-in-a-universe pianist.”*  
– Helen Sung

### Chick Corea

#### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Was a member of the Miles Davis Quintet in the late 1960s.
- Incorporated synthesizers, and a Latin-influence to his performance and compositions.
- His album *Now He Sings, Now He Sobs* is considered one of the most influential trio recordings of all time.
- In the 1970’s, he formed his groundbreaking jazz fusion ensemble *Return to Forever*.
- His compositions “Spain”, “500 Miles High”, and “Windows”, among many others, are considered jazz standards.

He is known for his tune-based compositions and his amazing sense of timing. As described by Luis Perdomo, “It’s almost perfect music.”

*“He was like a child in the best sense of the word. So open. So curious.”* – Helen Sung

### Keith Jarrett

#### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Began his career playing in Art Blakey’s *New Jazz Messengers*
- Jarrett went on to perform with Charles Lloyd and with Miles Davis.
- Jarrett brings a harmonic depth and intensity to his solo playing and ensemble playing.
- His improvisation draws from other traditions including Western classical music, gospel, blues, and ethnic folk music,

- His album *The Koln Concert* became the best-selling piano recording in history.

*“He was a person who seemed out of his time to me - the way he lived life and the way his personality is. More of a recluse. I think the person is part of the music.”* – Helen Sung

### **Joe Zawinul and Weather Report**

#### **Defining Style and Characteristics:**

- Zawinul first came to prominence playing with saxophonist Cannonball Adderley
- He went on to play with Miles Davis, and to become one of the creators of jazz fusion
- Co-founder of Weather Report, a jazz fusion band initially including saxophonist Wayne Shorter and bassist Miroslav Vitous.
- Other prominent members at various points included Jaco Pastorius, Peter Erskine and Alex Acuna.

*“It’s like a mini, big band. The way he orchestrates different sounds he wants to put in his music. Stuff coming out of Africa, coming out of Middle Eastern music.”* – Luis Perdomo

### **Herbie Hancock and The Headhunters**

#### **Defining Style and Characteristics:**

- Herbie Hancock formed The Headhunters in 1973
- The Headhunters fused jazz, funk and rock, creating a dynamic sound that captivated audiences.
- The group featured Hancock on keyboards, Bennie Maupin on saxophone and clarinet, Harvey Mason on drums, Paul Jackson on bass and Bill Summers on percussion.

*“It has very delicate and intricate harmonies. It seemed like a more visceral type of music coming straight out of funk, and just grooving.”*  
– Manuel Valera

## **THE 1980s, 1990s AND 2000s – THE ACOUSTIC RENAISSANCE TO THE PRESENT**

### **Kenny Kirkland**

#### **Defining Style and Characteristics:**

- Kirkland was an adventurous player who started as a classical pianist
- Kirkland began his career performing with bassist Miroslav Vitous.
- Kirkland began his long association with Wynton Marsalis in 1980, when the pair recorded Marsalis’ self-titled debut album.
- Kirkland released his debut album *Kenny Kirkland* in 1991

*“It’s not just about his technique. He’s got something that grabs people’s attention.”*  
– Miki Yamanaka

### **Mulgrew Miller**

#### **Defining Style and Characteristics:**

- Notable jazz pianist, composer and educator
- Was a member of the Duke Ellington Orchestra, and the Jazz Messengers
- Accompanied vocalist Betty Carter, and also had stints with Woody Shaw.
- Miller was the pianist for Tony Williams’ Quintet
- He was one of the best composers of the era, who wrote many great songs and was a huge influence on others.

*“Mulgrew’s playing is out of this world. He seemed to have a more classic, straight-ahead sound. Masterful accompanist. Amazing soloist. He seemed like he had an old soul.”*  
– Manuel Valera



## Geri Allen

### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- An acclaimed jazz pianist, composer and educator.
- Allen's recording debut came in 1984 with her album *The Printmakers*.
- Allen recorded two albums with the legendary Ornette Coleman.
- The artist composed "For the Healing of the Nations" in 2006, a suite written in tribute to the victims and survivors of the September 11th attacks
- Allen became an associate professor of music at the University of Pittsburgh.

*"She was so capable. On top of her great sense of musicality, it's just really fun to listen to her music."* – Miki Yamanaka

## Brad Mehldau

### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Mehldau toured and recorded while still a student at the New School NYC.
- The pianist was a member of Joshua Redman's Quartet with bassist Christian McBride and drummer Brian Blade.
- Mehldau's piano trio featured bassist Larry Grenadier and drummer Jorge Rossy
- Mehldau incorporates elements of rock music into his post-bop jazz sound.
- The pianist is known for his beautiful control and incredible virtuosity.

*"He intimidates other pianists by his virtuosity. And what's up with that left hand? The two handed, two lines going at the same time. . . . That's another thing that made him amazing – he's coming out of the Be-Bop thing, but he was able to morph it into something new and fresh."* – Manuel Valera

## Robert Glasper

### Defining Style and Characteristics:

- A pianist, record producer, songwriter and arranger.
- Glasper's early trio work featured Damion Reid on drums and either Bob Hurst or Vicente Archer on bass.
- Glasper's playing incorporates neo-soul and hip-hop influences.
- The artist's seminal album *Black Radio* featured a lineup of neo-soul and hip-hop artists including Lupe Fiasco, Bilal, Erykah Badu and Mos Def.
- In 2016, Glasper received attention for his prominent role on Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly*.

*"Before, people would just play their music the way it is, throw a rapper or a DJ on top of it. People like Robert Glasper really mix it together."* – Luis Perdomo

## Further exploration

Have your students choose an era and/ or musician from the episode and conduct research to create a written, oral, or multimedia presentation, including an explanation of why they chose this particular era or artist. They can discuss innovations of the era or by the musician and/or focus on the historical/social/ political/cultural context of the time.

### Here are some possible areas of focus:

- **Choose a musician and conduct research about their personal journey with jazz, their main contributions to jazz history, the characteristics of their style, who their influences were and/or who they influenced.**
- **Provide an overview of one of the eras and look at how music is influenced by the historical, social, political, and/or cultural context of that time.**

In the episode, pianist Helen Sung described the evolution from Be-Bop to Hard Bop. Use this quote as a basis for discussions about the difference between any of the given eras and styles featured in the episode.

*‘Bebop (was) this incredibly intricate, virtuosic, complicated, chromatic style of jazz music. If you go all the way to the end of that spectrum, there’s always going to be a push. That’s life. Just swinging back and forth. Balancing or re-balancing. Just going in a different direction. We call it the hard bop where there was a conscious, or maybe unconscious, who knows, just a re-embracing of the bluesy earthiness of jazz music.’ – Helen Sung (20:45 in the episode)*

- **Beyond the jazz context, discuss the differences of genre/style in other types of music or other art forms, including visual art, dance, and/or theater.**

In the episode, pianist Helen Sung talked about bravery, courage, and how jazz musicians push each other to be better. Use this quote as a basis for conversation about the concept of bravery and courage.

*‘As a musician, you have to be true to what you hear. If anything, it’s just a good push to be more brave and be more courageous for me. I think jazz needs that kind of room for conflict and room for debate. We push each other. We make each other better. I see artists of that generation as examples of just how excellent jazz can be in its totality. Summing up from Jelly Roll Morton all the way to the present.’ – Helen Sung*

- **Beyond the music-making context, discuss some scenarios where bravery and courage are required of us in our everyday lives.**
- **Can you think of some examples healthy conflict and debate in your everyday lives?**

## Musicians in this Episode

Luis Perdomo, Helen Sung, Manuel Valera, and Miki Yamanaka (Piano)