

An abbreviated history of Jazz Drumming

About this episode

This episode introduces audiences and young musicians alike to the history and lineage of jazz drumming 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 drums have been explored and expanded by some of the instrument's most creative masters.

The 1920s & 30s (Early Jazz)

C. Webb, Jo Jones, Sid Catlett, Sonny Greer

The 1940s (Be-Bop!)

Buddy Rich, Gene Krupa, Kenny Clarke, Max Roach

The 1950s (Hard Bop)

Art Blakey, Philly Joe Jones, Art Taylor, Jimmy Cobb

The 1960s (Post Bop)

Roy Haynes, Elvin Jones, Tony Williams, Billy Higgins

The 1970s (The Electric Revolution)

Jack DeJohnette, Ed Blackwell, Paul Motian, Lenny White, Billy Cobham

The 1980s, 90s & 2000s (The Acoustic Renaissance)

Steve Gadd, Jeff "Tain" Watts, Ralph Peterson, Carl Allen, Lewis Nash, Marvin "Smitty" Smith, Dennis Chambers, Brian Blade, Eric Harland

Learning objectives

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

Preparatory activities

Listen to the masters!

Listen to examples of jazz drummers featured in the episode on the Audio Playlist which can be found on the episode homepage online at 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 drums in jazz?
- How have drummers contributed to the sound and evolution of the art form?
- How do the featured musicians describe notable masters of the drums, or specific bands and/or albums throughout the eras that resonate with them?

Exploration questions/ activities:

Below are brief synopses of the style/sound/innovations of the drums and some of the instrument's most creative masters through the eras. The descriptions summarize and reflect the unique perspectives of some of today's greatest practitioners of the instrument featured in this episode: Carl Allen, Jonathan Barber, Jeremy Dutton, and Marcus Gilmore. 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 jazz drumming styles changed through the different eras? How did they stay the same?
- Did the sound/style of a particular drummer or specific era appeal to you?

EARLY JAZZ: 1920s & 30s

Because early jazz functioned primarily as dance music, drummers were generally required to stay in the background and play a supportive quarter-note pulse on the bass and snare drums to maintain a song's tempo and make the music swing and the audience dance. But, as jazz evolved, the role of the drummers evolved, as well. Among the most central contributors to early jazz drumming were Count Basie's Jo Jones, Louis Armstrong's Big "Sid" Catlett, and Duke Ellington's Sonny Greer.

In this segment, the musicians featured in the episode first described the role of the drums in early jazz. In the big band era, the bass drum was more prominent and "was more to be felt rather than heard" (Marcus Gilmore). The big band period was "really all about entertainment" (Carl Allen) and the jazz bands were "like big productions... (with) these massive drum kits (with the) bass drum, and toms and cymbals, chimes and tympanies" (Jonathan Barber). Then, there was a more condensed drum configuration used in the clubs.

In terms of time keeping, drummers were moving toward the cymbal, whereas earlier, many drummers had been keeping time on the snare drum or the hi-hat. They "moved the pattern to the ride (which) starts this whole revolution in terms of the time keeping in the bass drum getting softer," and no longer "emphasizing all four beats every time" (Jeremy Dutton). "The way they were using bass drums for accents was a little different, too" (Marcus Gilmore), which changed the sound and feel of the music.

The featured musicians continued by describing some of the great drummers of the early jazz era:

Chick Webb

Defining Style and Characteristics:

- In 1931, Webb's band became the house band at the legendary Savoy Ballroom.
- Webb became one of the best regarded bandleaders of the new swing style.
- Drummer Buddy Rich cited Chick Webb as an influence.
- In 1935, Webb began featuring a teenage Ella Fitzgerald as a guest vocalist.
- "Webb had a superb feel, and had the ability to make the whole band swing." (Jeremy Dutton)

"They used to do these (big band) battles, and Chick Webb had his own big band and all of the drummers who were...in the other bands, would talk about how sometimes Chick would just come in there 'and tear us down'. He was just that good."
– Jeremy Dutton

Papa Jo Jones

Defining Style and Characteristics:

- One of the first drummers to promote the use of brushes on drums.
- Shifted the role of timekeeping from the bass drum to the hi-hat cymbal.
- With Count Basie, he played in one of the first "really great rhythm section that is similar to what we see as rhythm sections these days – bass, guitar, piano, and drums." (Marcus Gilmore).
- Actively recorded with a who's who of jazz luminaries throughout the 1970's.

"Jo Jones starts incorporating the hi hat, ... bringing that into the band and making that a significant part of time keeping, but also soloistically bringing timbres and different textures in a way... of making things more melodic." – Jeremy Dutton

"I always felt like he never wasted a note when he was playing. Everything was very intentional. Everything meant something and had a purpose and had such a flow." – Jonathan Barber

Big Sid Catlett

Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Catlett was a versatile player who adapted from playing the early jazz drumming style to bebop.
- Catlett performed with Benny Carter, Fletcher Henderson's Big Band and Don Redman throughout the 1930s
- Between 1938 - 1942, Catlett played with Louis Armstrong.
- Successfully transitioning into bebop playing, Catlett featured on Dizzy Gillespie's progressive recordings in 1945
- Louie Bellson, Shelly Manne and Kenny Washington cite Catlett is an influence.

"Big Sid Catlett is different,...bringing the drums up from a musical standpoint (and) beyond just being a time keeping thing that the whole band rides on. He's giving that melodic sense while he's playing time, but also in his solos he has this melodic flow ..." – Jeremy Dutton

Sonny Greer

Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Best known for his work with Duke Ellington.
- Ellington's first drummer, Greer was there at Ellington's earliest dates at the Cotton Club.
- After his tenure with Ellington, Greer played alongside Johnny Hodges, Red Allen, and Brooks Kerr.
- Greer appeared on 7 essential recordings with Duke Ellington, and countless other albums as a notable sideman.

“Sonny Greer – without losing the feel, without losing the virtuosity and ability to really accent things, without losing melodic content, he somehow synthesized all of these different elements to really accentuate these great Duke Ellington charts that are very involved and different from the time...” – Jeremy Dutton

THE 1940s: BE-BOP!

By the 1940's the trumpeter, Dizzy Gillespie and alto saxophonist, Charlie Parker, along with a small contingent of other like-minded explorers, were expanding the boundaries of jazz improvisation and developing the groundbreaking style of jazz known as “Be-Bop.” Drummers Max Roach and Kenny Clarke were two virtuosic drummers at the center of the be-bop movement. They expanded the role, sound and function of the jazz drummer and lay the groundwork for how modern jazz would be played moving forward.

Here is what some of the drummers featured in the episode had to say about Be-Bop:

“The tempos were getting faster. The bands are getting smaller. The music is getting more complex.” – Jeremy Dutton

The complexity of the rhythms and those tempos alienated other musicians from being a part of it so it was kind of like ‘this is our own private club.’” – Carl Allen

Kenny Clarke

Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Clarke’s nickname was “Klook”.
- A major innovator of the bebop style of drumming.
- Pioneered using the ride-cymbal to keep time rather than using the hi-hat.
- Played on many of Miles Davis’ early albums, as well as many Dizzy Gillespie classics.
- Remained actively playing until 1983.

“Kenny Clark was the guy who was credited for the ride cymbal as we know it now, playing time on the ride. Prior to that a lot of the guys in the big bands were playing time on the hi-hat.” – Carl Allen

Max Roach

Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Roach was a pioneer of bebop playing.
- His debut album as a bandleader The Max Roach Quartet featuring Hank Mobley was released in 1953
- Performed actively in bands led by Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Thelonious, Coleman Hawkins, Bud Powell and Miles Davis
- While drummers before him would play an open solo, when Max Roach soloed, he was “keeping the actual form of the composition he was playing” (Marcus Gilmore).
- In 1962, Roach recorded the album Money Jungle, a collaboration with Mingus and Duke Ellington, it is generally regarded as one of the finest trio albums ever recorded.

Max Roach played through many styles and with many generations of musicians. He had incredible phrasing and his playing was both melodic and harmonic.

“(Max Roach) said to me everything you play is a single, double or multiple bounce. And that was the beginning of me understanding the concept that everything complicated is a compilation of simple things.” – Carl Allen

THE 1950s: HARD BOP!

When the art form moved into the 1950's, the “be-bop standard of excellence” and virtuosity was transcended and elevated to even greater heights by a new, young generation of visionary drummers that included Art Blakey, Philly Joe Jones, Jimmy Cobb, and Art Taylor. They forged exciting new approaches to the instrument and pathways to achieving distinct, highly

personalized sounds, concepts, and musical identities.

“One of the things that came with the bebop to the hard bop with the tempos slowing down, (was) that you started to hear more of the individual shape of the drummer’s ride patterns. You didn’t hear that as much during the bebop period because it’s hard to hear and feel it when everything was at those breakneck tempos. It also allowed for the music to have another kind of personality. Where it became more individualized. Where composers were able to have their own voices... In the hard bop period it kind of opened things up. It took it back to dancing, in my opinion.” – Carl Allen

Philly Joe Jones

Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Began his career as the house drummer for the New York City nightclub Cafe Society.
- Jones performed and recorded with the Miles Davis Quintet from 1955-1958
- From 1958 on, Jones worked as a bandleader, and released his debut album *Blues For Dracula*.
- Jones continued working as a sideman alongside Bill Evans, Hank Mobley, Chet Baker, John Coltrane and many more.
- Continued performing until his death in 1985.

“It sounds effortless when he’s playing... It’s not just the things he’s playing, (but) the way that it feels is buoyant. It’s very connected to the rhythm, but it has a nature of flow to it that I really love.” – Jeremy Dutton

Art Blakey

Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Began his career in the 1940s in the big bands of Fletcher Henderson and Billy Eckstine, and performed with bebop musicians including Charlie Parker and Thelonious Monk.

- In the mid-1950’s, Blakey formed The Jazz Messengers alongside pianist Horace Silver.
- The Jazz Messengers remained an active force for the next 35 years, and became an incubator for young talent, with Blakey at the helm.
- Blakey’s style was marked by an aggressive swing feel similar to that of Chick Webb and Sid Catlett but with bebop sensibilities and an inimitable assertiveness.
- While drummers playing 4 to 8-bar solos was more common, Art Blakey played long solos on the bass drum and “nobody had heard the bass drum like that up until that point” (Carl Allen).

“And obviously with the Jazz messengers, he covers a lot of ground ...in terms of who’s in that band, the music they played and the records they put out. He also has records with Monk. Records with literally everybody that you could think of in terms of jazz royalty.” – Jeremy Dutton

THE 1960s: POST-BOP!

In the 1960’s, new genres and styles of black American music, such as gospel, rhythm & blues, rock & roll and soul music, emerged and captured the imaginations of an energetic, dance-loving youth culture, defining the sound of American popular music. Groove, beats, and rhythms were at the foundation of these fresh new styles of music and it was no coincidence that some of the defining characteristics would permeate the music of some of the era’s most adventurous jazz artists. This included Elvin Jones, Roy Haynes, Billy Higgins, and Tony Williams.

Tony Williams

Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Williams rose to prominence as a member of the Miles Davis Quintet.
- Among the most innovative drummers of the century.
- Williams redefined the role of the jazz rhythm section, introducing the use of polyrhythms and metric modulation.

- Williams was featured on some of the most influential albums of the 20th century including Eric Dolphy's *Out to Lunch*, and Herbie Hancock's *Maiden Voyage*.

- Williams went on to become a pioneer in the jazz fusion movement, with the formation of the groundbreaking band, *Tony Williams Lifetime*.

"He had all the information, but he also had the touch. He had a very clear conceptual approach. He knew what he was going for and that made it come across that much stronger. You hear all the great drummers that came before him in his playing. You hear Max, you hear Art, you hear Roy Haynes, but you also hear the future. You know where it's coming from, but you also hear where it's going. Things will never be the same after this."

– Marcus Gilmore

Elvin Jones

- Jones was perhaps the most celebrated drummer of the 1960s post-bop era.

- From 1960-1966, Jones was a member of the John Coltrane Quartet, recording such groundbreaking works as *My Favorite Things*, *A Love Supreme* and *Live at Birdland*.

- Jones, especially in his work within Coltrane's quartet, is widely considered to have redefined "swing".

- After his work with Coltrane, Jones appeared on some of the most influential albums of the time, including McCoy Tyner's *The Real McCoy* and Wayne Shorter's *Speak No Evil*.

"Elvin Jones was a fearless and driven player who played with John Coltrane. He was "spreading the beat around in a way that sounded really round, and sounded like more than one drummer, kind of like a tribe." – Marcus Gilmore

He played flowing triplets, and created a "rising and falling action" that had "so much power."

–Jeremy Dutton

"He found a place where he could use the ideas that made himself Elvin Jones but to fit so perfectly with the music, at the same time."

– Jonathan Barber

Roy Haynes

Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Haynes is among the most recorded drummers in jazz.

- For nearly 80 years, Haynes has been at the forefront of swing, bebop, jazz fusion and avant-garde jazz.

- Haynes began playing in 1942, and worked with such notable artists as Lester Young, Charlie Parker, Bud Powell and Stan Getz.

- Among the 600+ recordings of Roy Haynes, some classics include *The Amazing Bud Powell*, *Thelonious Monk's Misterioso*, and *Chick Corea's Now He Sings, Now He Sobs*.

Roy Haynes's rhythm was "always clear and clean and precise" (Marcus Gilmore).

"Roy and Elvin,... one thing they had in common, was the way that they would deal with a perforated bar line. If you had a 4-bar phrase, they weren't necessarily hearing 4 bars of 4 as much as they're just hearing 16 beats. It wouldn't be the stop and start after every measure." – Carl Allen

Billy Higgins

Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Higgins rose to prominence performing with the *Ornette Coleman Quartet* in 1959.

- While a lot of drummers were "comping between the snare and bass drums within the bar line, Higgins would comp on the toms across the bar lines, which was very unusual for the period" (Carl Allen).

- Performed on hundreds of iconic Blue Note Records albums including *Dexter Gordon's Go!*,

Herbie Hancock's *Takin' Off*, and Lee Morgan's *The Sidewinder*.

- Defined the role of the drums with in hard bop and free jazz music.

"It's not surprising to me that he's the most recorded jazz drummer. He just makes everything feel good. As much as we love technique and we love virtuosity, and we love so many things about music. I think the thing that communicates no matter what, is feel." – Jeremy Dutton

THE 1970s: THE ELECTRIC REVOLUTION!

The emergence of electric instruments and advancements in music recording technology, combined with the widening impact of pop music and greater access and exposure to musical styles from all over the world, expanded creative possibilities for visionary jazz artists in the 1970's. These musicians were looking to merge genres, blur stylistic boundaries, and abandon conventional perceptions of what jazz was and could be. Drummers who were at the forefront in the 1970's included Jack DeJohnette, Ed Blackwell, Paul Motian, Bill Cobham, and Lenny White.

Jack DeJohnette

Defining Style and Characteristics:

- DeJohnette is a prolific fusion-era jazz drummer.
- The drummer rose to prominence performing with the Charles Lloyd Quartet and later with the Bill Evans Trio, and then with Miles Davis.
- DeJohnette brought all of the innovations of his predecessors and his own inimitable feel into the modern jazz and jazz fusion age.
- DeJohnette remains active as a bandleader and sideman to this day.

"Jack Dejonette is somebody who is watching Max (Roach), Elvin (Jones), Tony (Williams). He's watching all of these things and he's incorporated these things into his own playing and has his own distinct thing of course. It feels as if its

coming more out of Tony's language. Which, as it turns out, is adaptable to this fusion thing that's happening." – Jeremy Dutton

Billy Cobham

Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Cobham rose to prominence performing with Miles Davis in the 1970s as well as in the jazz fusion group the Mahavishnu Orchestra.
- Cobham incorporated elements of funk and rock into his performance and had an unparalleled precision, intensity and explosive technique.
- Cobham's playing inspired rock and progressive rock drummers such as Bill Bruford of King Crimson, Danny Carey of Tool and drummer Phil Collins.
- Cobham remains an active bandleader and sideman to this day.

"The thing that's interesting about Billy is that ... because he's ambidextrous,... the way (his) ideas start and finish would be completely different. He used to use this gong bass drum, on his far right and it would always amaze me how he could start an idea over there, which is very different. Most guys are starting the idea on the snare or the smaller tom. So it shaped his phrases completely differently which gave them more of a personal identity." – Carl Allen

THE 1980s & 90s - THE ACOUSTIC RENAISSANCE

By the 1980's, jazz had become stylistically fragmented, detached from its roots, and in many ways, culturally eclipsed by far more aggressively promoted, marketed and consumed genres of pop music. Nevertheless, by 1983, a serious, virtuosic young trumpeter from New Orleans named Wynton arrived on the world stage to great fanfare. His mastery of craft, along with his charismatic persona, and deeply felt convictions and ideals, have resonated with and inspired new generations of jazz artists for the last 40 years. Wynton's very first band included the inimitable

drummer, Jeff “Tain” Watts, who himself has had a major impact on the language of jazz drumming. Other notable drummers of the last 30 years include Marvin “Smitty” Smith, Lewis Nash, Ralph Peterson Jr., Herlin Riley, Brian Blade, Greg Hutchinson, and Antonio Sanchez.

“Just thinking about what was happening in the late 70s going into the 80s. It seemed to be a Renaissance of acoustic music. You have people like Jeff “Tain” Watts playing with the Marsalis brothers. Smitty Smith doing a hybrid of things... . The language of the instrument just kept getting more and more vast.” – Marcus Gilmore

Dennis Chambers

Defining Style and Characteristics:

- Chambers began his professional career at 18 years old performing with the funk band Parliament/Funkadelic.
- In 1986, Chambers joined the John Scofield band and has since been one of the most pivotal figures in jazz fusion.
- Chambers has performed and recorded with George Duke, the Brecker Brothers, Santana, John McLaughlin, Mike Stern and many others.
- Chambers remains an active bandleader and sideman to this day.

Dennis Chambers is a musician who exemplified the era, in terms of playing and being influenced by other styles of music beyond jazz. He played “in organ trios, but then also played with Parliament, and Funkadelic for a long time. And then ended up playing with John Scofield” (Marcus Gilmore)

Jazz Drummers: Ever-Evolving

In this concluding segment, the featured musicians shared some final thoughts about the instrument and musicians (see select quotes below). And they listed many of their favorite drummers. They included Justin Brown, Obed Calvaire, Nasheet Waits, Eric McPherson, Eric

Harland, Chris Dave, Kendrick Scott, and Greg Hutchinson. Additional present-day drummers mentioned by the episode narrator were: Nate Smith, Corey Fonville, Justin Brown.

“All of those musicians (from this era) have a wide level of understanding musically and ability and facility. But some choose to go in this direction. Some choose to go in that direction. The key word is that it’s a CHOICE. It something speaks to them. And they really go down this path of – swing is going to be my narrative. Or rock is going to be my narrative.” – Jonathan Barber

“Things change faster. As technology has gotten faster, trends go faster. So things they pass in and out of significance in a few days as opposed to months. That’s the challenge of making a great album now. You’ve got to find a way to tell that story and in general, great story telling is something that never goes out of style.” – Jeremy Dutton

“I’ve often said that every generation that comes along has an obligation to know even more than those that have come before.” – Carl Allen

“There’s a lot of guys in my generation that sound great. A lot of great drummers out now. It seems like the era of the drummer. I feel like it always is because it’s always such a big part of the shape of the music and where things go.” – Marcus Gilmore

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; how they began their musical careers; 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, drummer Carl Allen shared Art Blakey's attitude toward mistakes. Use this quote as a basis for discussions about the inevitability of making mistakes and the importance of learning from your mistakes.

"Art Blakey used to say, a mistake is only a mistake if you don't know what to do with what you've done. If you think about it, jazz records are full of mistakes. But we don't know it because they found something to do with it. And that goes back to being in the moment." – Carl Allen

- Discuss examples of making mistakes in different contexts and responses to making a mistake. How does it make you feel? What did you learn from it?
- Think about examples of turning mistakes into successes.

In the episode, drummer Carl Allen described characteristics of the Be-Bop era. Use his two quotes below to discuss how specific characteristics of music reflect societal trends and/or how historical events impact jazz or other artforms.

"Big bands were all about dancing, entertainment for people and parties... . With bebop, (the musicians felt that) this is kind of something for us. You hear these stories of trumpet players playing with a handkerchief over their hand, so other guys couldn't see the fingerings."
– Carl Allen

"Be-bop also came along because it was kind of a revolt. One of the reasons why the big bands broke up was because... a lot of the musicians were sent off to the war. But then with Be -Bop, part of what they were trying to do was to create something for them."
– Carl Allen

- Discuss differences between the function, sound, and feel of big band music and Be-Bop.
- Explore examples of historical events that impact and influence the evolution of an art form (e.g., big band musicians being sent off to war leading to smaller ensemble of musicians)?

In the episode, several of the featured musicians described how diverse musical styles, and the use of electronics and new recording technologies were greatly impacting the jazz musicians during and around the 1970s. Use the series of quotes below to discuss the innovations and influences of the era.

"So all of this music was happening, you had Changuito, Los Van Van, Lifetime with Jennifer Evers, Mahavishnu. You also had the Meters, Motown music, Fela Kuti, James Brown. And it's all happening at the same time, so you can't act like none of these musicians aren't aware of what's happening in the overall environment."

– Marcus Gilmore

"With the introduction of electronics, into this (jazz) music, it definitely pushed the envelope." – Jonathan Barber

"Amplifiers are coming into play. Music is becoming louder. Recording technology is becoming more advanced." – Jeremy Dutton

"With electronics and rock music, and some of those sensibilities definitely infusing (jazz), because you're paying attention to that, and kind of getting some pieces from there while you're still going through the lineage and then it (becomes) this hybrid thing. As these new genres or styles emerge (funk, rock, fusion) it all gets infused with the lineage."

– Jonathan Barber

- What technological advancements (e.g., music recording technology), instrumental additions (e.g., electronic instruments), and/or musical styles (e.g., funk and rock) impacted jazz during the time?
- Discuss how new technologies or access to new or different tools and materials impact artists and other professionals (e.g., visual artists, filmmakers, chefs).



Musicians in this Episode

Carl Allen, Jonathan Barber, Jeremy Dutton, and
Marcus Gilmore (Drums)