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How Bebop Came to Be: The Early History of Modern Jazz

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Abstract
Bebop, despite its rather short lifespan, would become a key influence for every style that came after it. Bebop's effects on improvisation, group structure, and harmony would be felt throughout jazz for decades to come, and the best known musicians of the bebop era are still regarded as some of the finest jazz musicians to ever take the stage. But the characteristics of bebop can easily be determined from the music itself. [*excerpt*]

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Comments
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How Bebop Came to Be:
The Early History of Modern Jazz

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Bebop, despite its rather short lifespan, would become a key influence for every style that came after it. Bebop's effects on improvisation, group structure, and harmony would be felt throughout jazz for decades to come, and the best known musicians of the bebop era are still regarded as some of the finest jazz musicians to ever take the stage. But the characteristics of bebop can easily be determined from the music itself.

Before bebop emerged as the most prominent form of jazz, swing was the foremost style of jazz that was played. Swing was, while certainly not without musical merit, intended to be popular dance music, palatable to a mainstream audience. In fact, the swing style was intrinsically linked to dancing; its steady four-beat meter and moderate tempo was meant to cater to dancing crowds. Swing bands were also characterized by their large size and greater reliance upon written music in comparison to earlier jazz bands. However, despite this increased reliance, the most successful swing bands were able to find ways to balance clear, easily identifiable melodies and opportunities for their players to improvise.[1]

Another reason certain swing bands found success was, unfortunately, race. Black bands generally had much more difficulty finding success than their white counterparts. White bands were able to secure jobs such as sponsored radio programs or long-term jobs in popular performance locations in New York City. Black bands, on the other hand, were forced to keep traveling year round in order to make a living, even the most famous bands like Duke Ellington's

[1] Gary Giddins and Scott DeVeaux, *Jazz* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), 171-176.

and Cab Calloway's. The constant travel and the racism these bands encountered wore down many musicians.[2]

At the same time, many of the musicians in these bands were looking to break away from the rather rigid structure of the big bands. The swing bands of the time were centered on the bandleader, who served as the representative of the band. At the same time, talented players within these bands sought to make a name for themselves, and the most effective way to accomplish this was to impress the audience with improvised solos. If a musician could gain enough fame through his solos, he could potentially earn a record deal or start his own band. However, it was in a band leader's best interests to keep talented musicians in their band, lest those musicians leave and their group suffers. As such, bandleaders attempted to provide opportunities for talented soloists to shine without letting them stand out too much. Bandleaders would create arrangements that featured their soloists, in addition to forming small groups that provided additional solo opportunities. Nevertheless, many talented soloists began to feel constrained by the structure of big bands by the beginning of the 1940s, so they began to leave the big bands to attempt to find success on their own merits, using their ideas about improvisation and soloing.[3]

Even before these musicians began leaving the swing orchestras, they had already begun experimenting with their ideas regarding improvisation at jam sessions in nightclubs throughout New York City. One of the most popular was Minton's Playhouse, which was located in Harlem. Many musicians who were to become some of bebop's greatest innovators, such as Charlie Parker and Kenny Clarke, began by playing during the jam sessions and cutting contests that were held there, experimenting with new harmonic and melodic ideas, continually pushing

[2] Gary Giddins and Scott DeVeaux, *Jazz* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), 300.
[3] Marc Myers, *Why Jazz Happened*(Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 14-15

their musical skills further until they were equal or superior to the other musicians who came to the nightclubs. The ideas that would come to define bebop would, in fact, be first invented and refined within these jam sessions.[4]

Bebop, while still rooted in the same traditions that swing grew from, would ultimately sound very different from its predecessor, even in its early stages. This new form of jazz was based around small combos, as opposed to the large ensembles of the swing era. Considering that many musicians who joined the bebop movement left swing ensembles so they could be featured more prominently, this change was especially fitting; in a small ensemble, it is easier to find time within a piece to display one's individual talents than within a large ensemble. In fact, featuring individual musicians as soloists was one of bebop's foremost traits; the musicians typically only played together at the beginning and ending of a piece as they stated the main theme. Another one of the defining qualities of bebop are its solos, which were technically demanding, featuring a high density of notes and a high tempo. Bebop also commonly featured complex harmonies which changed frequently. Chords were often altered from their standard forms as notes were removed and added, creating dissonances which sounded strange to the audiences of the time.[5] Compared to the relatively simple music of the swing era, the increase in complexity and musical freedom was a very significant change that would result in very different sounding music that had a significantly greater focus upon improvisation, technical skill, and individual achievement.

Unfortunately, just as bebop was beginning to reach maturity, it encountered a rather significant barrier – the American Federation of Musician's ban on recording, which began in 1942 and would not officially end until 1944. The AFM felt threatened by advances in

[4] Gary Giddins and Scott DeVeaux, *Jazz* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), 296-297.
[5] Marc Myers, *Why Jazz Happened* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 11.

technology, such as radio, the jukebox, and Warner Bros. "Vitaphone" system, which was designed to provide music to accompany films. These technologies utilized recorded performances, putting musicians out of work; in fact, between 50 and 60 percent of AFM members were unemployed by 1942.[6] The AFM in particular saw radio as a major threat, as much of what radio stations played was recorded music. The AFM, however, could not target radio directly, as radio was seen as a wartime necessity by the U.S. government, both for public morale and military success in World War II. The AFM instead opted for a different tactic – the union banned its members, which included the vast majority of professional musicians, from recording with any of the major record companies of the day. The logic behind this move was that the recording industry provided radio with most of the music it played. As such, by focusing their efforts upon the record industry, they could affect the policies of the radio industry as well. The radio ban would ultimately last until 1944; while one of the three major record companies of the day, Decca, agreed to the AFM's demands for additional royalties from record sales, as early as 1943, RCA Victor and Colombia, the other two large record companies, would not agree to the AFM's terms until 1944.[7]

Unfortunately, the years of the recording ban were some of the most important years of bebop's development. Before the ban, bebop was just beginning to develop the qualities that would define it, and after the ban, bebop would be a fully-formed genre. As such, the developing years of bebop and the transition out of the swing era have been left almost completely unrecorded, leaving a gap in the musical history of jazz. However, how much of that development would have actually been recorded is rather doubtful. As previously stated, many

[6] Marc Myers, *Why Jazz Happened* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 20.
[7] Scott DeVeaux, "Bebop and the Recording Industry: the 1942 AFM Recording Ban Reconsidered," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* Vol. 41 No. 1 (Spring 1988): 128-129, http://www.jstor.org/stable/831753

musicians developed their innovations at jam sessions, like those at Milton's Playhouse. While several of those famed jam sessions were recorded, and some of those recordings still survive, this was not a normal occurrence. As Scott DeVeaux recounts,

> "…the musicians simply had no intention of having this music recorded. Jam sessions, even those in night clubs, were essentially private affairs, a kind of informal backstage conservatory for the profession. Musicians were delighted and amused to hear their improvisations played back for them… but could scarcely have been pleased with the thought that these sprawling and often uneven performances would ever represent them before the general public."[8]

As such, it is likely that much of the development of bebop would never have been recorded. A few more records featuring early bebop may have been released, but this is also unlikely. Due to the United States' participation in the war, resources such as shellac, which was used to create records, were in short supply. Records that featured small jazz combos, such as those that played bebop, were modest but steady sellers and cost very little to record. However, with the shortage of materials, record companies only wanted to produce records that were certain to sell extremely well. As such, the number of opportunities that small combos had to record had already decreased significantly before the recording ban.[9] While more bebop records would exist if the recording ban had not occurred, they would not reflect the same innovations that were displayed during jam sessions. In fact, it is possible that the recording ban actually helped the development of bebop. By not having to concern themselves with producing commercially viable records, musicians were able to focus on further developing bebop. Of

[8] Scott DeVeaux, "Bebop and the Recording Industry: the 1942 AFM Recording Ban Reconsidered," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* Vol. 41 No. 1 (Spring 1988): 132, http://www.jstor.org/stable/831753
[9] Scott DeVeaux, "Bebop and the Recording Industry: the 1942 AFM Recording Ban Reconsidered," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* Vol. 41 No. 1 (Spring 1988): 143-145, http://www.jstor.org/stable/831753

course, this also made it more difficult for artists to make a living, due to the general lack of recording opportunities.[10]

Regardless of the ban's effects, there exist many important bebop recordings, both for historic and musical reasons. Tenor saxophonist Coleman Hawkins is credited with creating the first commercial bebop recording, an album called *Rainbow Mist*¸ which finished recording in May of 1944.[11] The album was recorded for a small label, Apollo Records, and featured some of jazz's future icons, including trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie and drummer Max Roach.[12] Another important recording from Hawkins was his rendition of the song "Body and Soul". While not technically fitting into the bebop genre, Hawkins' solo on the song was revolutionary, as the whole song is almost entirely comprised of a three-minute improvised solo from Hawkins, serving as an inspiration to bebop musicians and a preview of what the genre would bring.[13]

Another groundbreaking recording would come from one of bebop's most recognizable figures, and one who was heavily influenced by Hawkins. Charlie Parker's "Ko Ko" was based on the song "Cherokee" by Ray Noble. The story goes that, while reviewing the chord changes in the original song, Parker realized that even the most dissonant notes could be made to work within the structure of a chord. This discovery revolutionized his approach to solos, leading to his distinctive style of soloing that featured masterful displays of technical prowess and unique melodic ideas. The title change came when Parker, along with his "Re-boppers" quintet, was recording the song for Savoy Records. An abandoned first take was meant to be a standard recording of "Cherokee", including the song's melody. However, this take was stopped during

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[10] Peter Rutkoff and William Scott, "Bebop: Modern New York Jazz", *The Kenyon Review* New Series Vol. 18 No. 2 (Spring 1996): 116, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4337359
[11] John S. Davis, *Historical Dictionary of Jazz* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2012), xix.
[12] Marc Myers, *Why Jazz Happened* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 10-11.
[13] Gary Giddins and Scott DeVeaux, *Jazz*(New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), 245-247.

the first chorus. The second, final take dropped the melody in favor of allowing Parker to solo for the majority of the song. While the song's high tempo and Parker's often dizzying solo can make it difficult for listeners to determine his musical direction, it becomes clear upon repeatedly listening to the song that Parker is not playing random notes, but is actually integrating melodic ideas into his solo.[14] Parker's legendary solo turned a last-second decision into one of the greatest songs to come out of the bebop era, and a true jazz classic.

Another one of Parker's influences was tenor saxophonist Lester Young. A veteran of the big band era, Young was best known for performing with Count Basie's orchestra, which he became a full-time member of in 1934; he would stay with Basie's band until the late 1930s. Afterwards, he would move to New York in order to form his own ensembles, and would continue performing until his death in 1959 due to a combination of a variety of mental issues and alcoholism.[15] Young's style served as an effective contrast to Coleman Hawkins', who was one of Young's contemporaries. While Hawkins style was focused on displaying his technical ability, as he did in "Body and Soul", Young played with a smooth, steady tone, and was fond of using silence effectively, in addition to playing behind the beat.[16]

Young, too, would also experiment with bebop, although more extensively than Hawkins. One of his best known songs as a solo artist was "Lester Leaps In"[17], which serves as a surprisingly strong example of the bebop style while also displaying Young's own unique style as an instrumentalist. In contrast to Parker's style, Young's playing features melodic ideas that are clear to the listener from the start, in addition to having a far lower note count in general.

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[14] Gary Giddins and Scott DeVeaux, *Jazz* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), 307-311.
[15] John S. Davis, *Historical Dictionary of Jazz* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 390-391.
[16] Peter Rutkoff and William Scott, "Bebop: Modern New York Jazz", *The Kenyon Review* New Series Vol. 18 No. 2 (Spring 1996): 99-101, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4337359
[17] Lester Young, "Lester Leaps In", *Lester Leaps In* (ASV Living Era: 1995). Compact Disc.

However, Young's soloing certainly shows the sort of free rhythm and dexterity that bebop musicians were known for. An additional point of comparison to Parker, and more specifically "Ko Ko", comes from the song's structure. In contrast to Parker's near-constant stream of notes, Young uses silence in his playing rather frequently, allowing for the brass and piano to fill the space using short riffs and, in the piano's case, small solos. However, despite the differences to Parker's piece, "Lester Leaps In" is very much in the bebop tradition. The song is entirely focused upon soloists, save for the opening and the brass riffs, which feature a small group of horns. Stop-time is a fairly frequent and noticeable occurrence, drawing even more attention to Young's solos. Combined with the song's upbeat, bouncy tempo, the musicians' rhythmically inventive melodies, and the usage of a very small ensemble, "Lester Leaps In" serves as a clear, easy to understand demonstration of bebop, despite being significantly more relaxed than "Ko Ko."

Of course, saxophonists were not the only performers to have a significant effect upon bebop. Dizzy Gillespie was, along with Charlie Parker, the most famous of bebop's great musicians. A trumpeter who got his start playing in swing orchestras under various bandleaders, including Frankie Fairfax and Cab Calloway, Gillespie understood bebop very early on, and in fact was one of the codifiers of the style. His records, along with Parker's, would be transcribed and closely examined by many musicians so that they could understand Gillespie and Parker's musical innovations, creating an increase in the number of bebop musicians.[18] Unlike many of his contemporaries, Gillespie would live a long life, and would spend many of his later years experimenting with new sounds and ideas, including Afro-Cuban jazz and placing bebop in a big

[18] Marc Myers, *Why Jazz Happened* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 31.

band setting. Gillespie is considered to be not only one of the greatest bebop musicians, but also one of the greatest musicians to ever play jazz.[19]

Many other musical innovators would emerge during the bebop era. Drumming in particular was revolutionized, specifically by Kenny Clarke, whose unique style of drumming led to two particular innovations – the ride cymbal being used as the drummer's main tool for defining rhythm and tempo instead of the bass drum, and the idea of "bombs", which are accents placed upon a weak beat using the ride cymbal and bass drum.[20] Bud Powell, considered to be the first bebop pianist, was another highly influential figure. Influenced by Charlie Parker's playing style, Powell would play frequently throughout the 1940s and 1950s.[21] Powell was comfortable in many styles, taking inspiration from his training in stride and classical piano to create his own style which featured surprisingly skilled improvisation.[22] These were, of course, not the only musicians to play and have an influence in the bebop style, as bebop would become the main style of jazz throughout much of the 1940s.[23]

While bebop became very popular among musicians, its public reception was less than favorable. Part of this is likely due to one of the key differences that existed between bebop and swing. Swing, as previously stated, was meant to be popular music, intended for the mainstream public. Bebop, on the other hand, was art music, intended to satisfy the jazz musician with its technical complexity and focus on improvisation.[24] As such, much of the criticism directed toward bebop came from those who were not involved with the movement at the time. The United States' west coast was particularly unreceptive to bebop. Dave Dexter, executive for the

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[19] John S. Davis, *Historical Dictionary of Jazz* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 134-135.
[20] John S. Davis, *Historical Dictionary of Jazz* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 70.
[21] John S. Davis, *Historical Dictionary of Jazz* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 293.
[22] Gary Giddins and Scott DeVeaux, *Jazz* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), 322-323.
[23] Marc Myers, *Why Jazz Happened* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 46.
[24] John S. Davis, *Historical Dictionary of Jazz* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 4.

Capitol record corporation, which had emerged on the west coast shortly before the recording ban began, said that "Beboppers attract attention… by running six thousand notes a minute, bad notes, good notes, in between notes… regardless of the chords."[25] Bebop was also, rather unfortunately, associated with drug use by mainstream audiences, making it very difficult to promote. The actions of the major east coast record companies did little to help matters, as they were often only willing to record bebop if white artists were involved. However, bebop was able to find supporters, not only within the jazz community and the artists involved with the movement, but also those involved with modern classical music, who appreciated bebop's unique approach to melody, which ignored traditional ideas such as arpeggios and proceeding through a musical line primarily by step in favor of frequent leaps and rapid chord changes.[26]

Bebop, however, would not be a long-lasting subgenre of jazz. It and jazz would survive the move away from the mainstream, and would still find an audience. In fact, by the late 1940s, bebop was commonly accepted as the primary style of jazz. However, with growing popularity came a variety of negative side effects. With the release of more records, more musicians learned how to play the once-difficult new style of jazz. These new musicians brought with them a growing amount of familiarity. The innovative qualities that defined bebop in its early years were, unfortunately, beginning to wear away.[27] Additionally, as the decade wore on, musicians began to tire of bebop's rigorous technical demands, and desired to move in new directions musically. These factors would lead to the development of two new styles. One was cool jazz, which would feature a return to arrangement as opposed to bebop's focus on improvisation, along with more linear melodic lines and attempts to find new sounds by using

[25] Marc Myers, *Why Jazz Happened* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 40.
[26] Marc Myers, *Why Jazz Happened* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 41.
[27] Marc Myers, *Why Jazz Happened* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 47.

instruments that were not typically found in jazz. The other, hard bop, would be influenced by both the blues and the growing Rhythm and Blues genre.[28] Both would move away from the technical difficulties that bebop presented, but would keep many of the innovations that bebop brought to jazz, especially in regards to solos.

In fact, bebop would serve as an influence for every genre of jazz that followed, despite its remarkably short lifespan – bebop only served as the main style of jazz for about four years.[29] However, its impact upon ideas such as improvisation and melody would serve as the foundation upon which future styles were built upon. Considering the difficulties that bebop faced in its early years, it is amazing that the style developed enough to become such an important influence to later jazz artists. Bebop was confronted with a lack of mainstream acceptance, a lack of opportunities to create records to spread the style, and accompanying that a lack of income for the artists who performed in the bebop idiom, all threatened to put an end to the style before it had the opportunity to develop. Also interesting is the fact, despite swing's popularity with mainstream audiences, bebop would serve as the foundation for the varieties of jazz that succeeded it. Despite the general trend away from bebop's technical and melodic complexity, the style's influence would continue to be felt for many years after bebop's time as jazz's foremost style had come and gone, and jazz has only become a more unique and varied style of music for it.

[28] John S. Davis, *Historical Dictionary of Jazz* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 4.
[29] Gary Giddins and Scott DeVeaux, *Jazz* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), 335.

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