

A man wearing a red shirt and a dark hat is smiling broadly, looking towards the right. The background is dark with some red lighting.

JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER PRESENTS

A woman with dark hair, wearing a blue sleeveless top, is smiling and looking towards the camera. Her hands are slightly raised in a gesture.

WHAT IS JAZZ?

A black and white photograph of a man in a suit playing a trumpet. He has a joyful expression, with his mouth wide open as if blowing into the instrument.

MARCUS
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2025/26 MARCUS PERFORMING ARTS CENTER
STUDENT MATINEE SERIES

Study Guide

jazz and democracy

BIG IDEAS IN JAZZ AND DEMOCRACY FOR CLASSROOM EXPLORATION

DEMOCRACY • a system in which everyone can vote and share in making decisions.

CITIZEN • a member of a community, having rights, privileges as well as obligations.

FREEDOM • the right to do what you want, to make your own decisions, and express your own opinions.

BLUES • an African American music developed in the South during the mid-1800s. It is the foundation of most American popular music. The blues is capable of expressing a wide range of emotions, often including sadness or loss.

IMPROVISATION • the act of making something up on the spur of the moment.

SWING • the basic rhythmic attitude of jazz. When a whole band is swinging it means everyone is listening to and balancing with one another while still expressing their unique personalities. Swing also refers to a specific style of jazz for dancing featuring large ensembles.

“Jazz calls us to engage with our national identity. It gives expression to the beauty of democracy and of personal freedom and of choosing to embrace the humanity of all types of people. It really is what American democracy is supposed to be.”

WYNTON MARSALIS

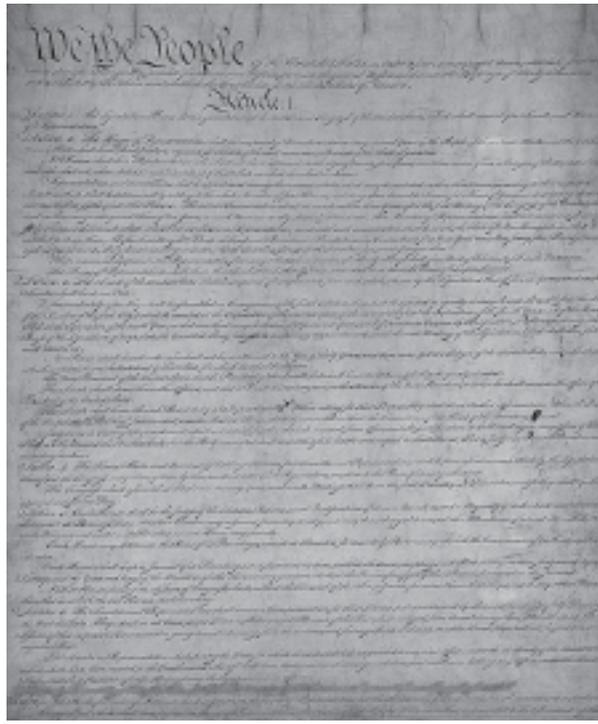
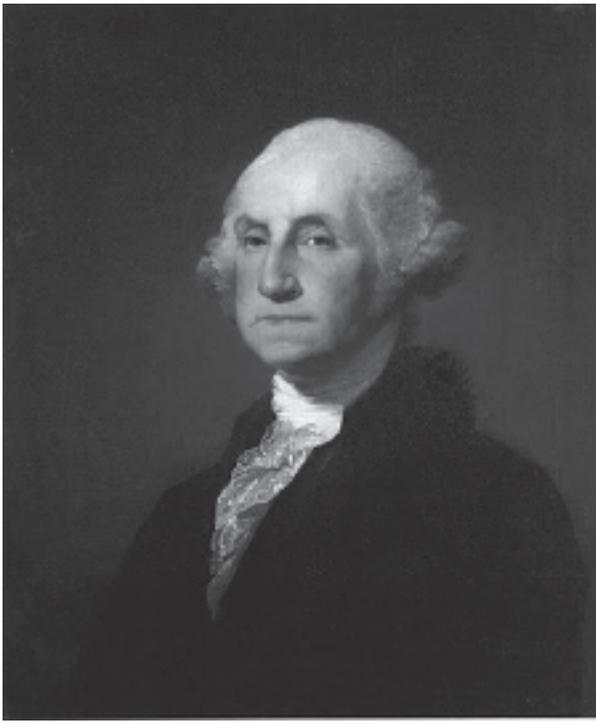


JAZZ AND DEMOCRACY PLAYLIST

Back O' Town Blues—Louis Armstrong
Bourbon Street Parade—Louis Armstrong
Canal Street Blues—Louis Armstrong
Mahogany Hall Stomp—Louis Armstrong
New Orleans Function (Flee as the Bird /Didn't He Ramble)—Louis Armstrong
Struttin' With Some Barbecue—Louis Armstrong
St. James Infirmary—Louis Armstrong
Tiger Rag—Louis Armstrong
West End Blues—Louis Armstrong
When the Saints Go Marching In—Louis Armstrong
Every Day I Have the Blues—Count Basie featuring Joe Williams
Caravan—Duke Ellington
Creole Love Call—Duke Ellington
In a Mellow Tone—Duke Ellington
It Don't Mean A Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)—Duke Ellington
Things Ain't What They Used To Be—Duke Ellington
Down by the Riverside—Mahalia Jackson
After You've Gone—Bessie Smith
Backwater Blues—Bessie Smith
Careless Love Blues—Bessie Smith
St. Louis Blues—Bessie Smith

"If the freedom of speech is taken away then dumb and silent we may be led, like sheep to the slaughter."

GEORGE WASHINGTON



Left • George Washington presided over the Constitutional Convention that drafted the U.S. Constitution and was the first president of the United States.

Right • The U.S. Constitution

JAZZ AND DEMOCRACY

American democracy was designed from the very beginning around the idea of personal freedom. These key phrases from early American history—“*We the People*,” “*E Pluribus Unum*” and “*A More Perfect Union*”—have served as important themes for our nation since its founding.

“*We the People*” are the first three words of the United States Constitution and highlight the truly revolutionary nature of the American historical enterprise in placing unprecedented faith in the ability of its citizens to establish a republic:

“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

“*E Pluribus Unum*” (Latin for “Out of Many, One,”) was inscribed in 1776 on the face of the Seal of the United States. Long considered the official motto of the United States, “*E Pluribus Unum*” was as important in the 18th century as it is today in establishing an ideal for the nation—that many, different peoples could come together to form one society.

“*A More Perfect Union*” is a phrase that appears in the first section of the U.S. Constitution. This idea captures the aspirations of the early republic to continue to improve over time, a difficult and challenging project, both then and now.

These ideas are relevant to the world of jazz as well: a group of diverse musicians negotiating in time to create a collective expression that reflects the unique personalities and values of each individual for the good of everyone. The traditions of experimentation and improvisation in jazz resemble the innovative approach of America’s democracy in placing so much faith in its people and in striving to invent something new, different, and perhaps, even better.



“Jazz is the musical interplay of blues-based melodies, harmonies, rhythms, and textures in the motion of an improvised groove.”

WYNTON MARSALIS

WHAT IS JAZZ?

Jazz grew out of the African-American community in turn of the 20th century New Orleans. It is a mingling of the musical expressions of all the people who came to the United States by choice or by force—people from Africa, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean—as well as those already living in America. Jazz musicians brought their traditions together (with special emphasis on the blues, church spirituals and ragtime) in a new, universal language. Through the blues, jazz musicians showed that the sorrows common to us all could be overcome with optimism and humor. Through improvisation they celebrated newfound expressive freedom. And through the joyous rhythms of swing, they taught the many different people of New Orleans that they could work together with feeling and style.

Jazz spoke to all Americans and quickly spread upriver to St. Louis, Kansas City, Chicago, New York, and beyond. In the 1920s new technologies like radio, the phonograph and talking motion pictures made it possible for millions to hear jazz across America and around the world. The propulsive rhythms of swing invited these new listeners to tell their stories too. As new generations of musicians filled the music with the depth of their personality, jazz evolved from small groups of early jazz to the brassy big bands of the swing era, the flashy virtuosity of bebop, to laid-back cool jazz, to fusion, free jazz and far beyond.

Jazz has since become a part of every American’s birthright, a timeless symbol of individualism and ingenuity, democracy and inclusiveness. At its very core, this music affirms our belief in community, in love, and in the dignity of human life. And if we let it, jazz can teach us—in ways beyond our imagination—exactly who we are, where we have been, and where we should be going.

THE FUNDAMENTALS OF JAZZ

A definition of jazz must include reference to the importance of the blues, swing, and improvisation. These three ingredients, plus melody, harmony, texture, and rhythm, are the fundamental elements of jazz. No one can deny that jazz is American music. Most people will also agree that jazz is a combination of the music of Europeans, Africans, and other cultures.

BLUES

The blues has many definitions; it is a type of music, a musical form, a harmonic language, an attitude towards playing music, a collection of sounds. Mostly though, the blues is a feeling; whether it's happy, sad, or somewhere in between, its intention is always the same: to make you feel better, not worse, to cheer you up, not bring you down. Playing the blues is like getting vaccinated. When you get a vaccination for small pox, for example, the doctor gives you small pox in a little dosage. Then your body produces the defenses to fight the disease. Similarly, if you want to get rid of the blues, you play the blues.

The blues was born out of the religious, work, and social music of African Americans in the South during the late 1800s. It has since become the foundation of American popular music, including rhythm and blues, rock 'n' roll, country, and all periods and styles of jazz.

SWING

Swing is the basic rhythmic attitude of jazz. When a whole band is swinging it means everyone is listening to and balancing with one another. Similar to a working Democracy, swing allows us to express our unique personalities while respecting each other in the context of a group.

Swing is expressed as a rhythm with a tension between a top duple rhythm and a bottom triplet rhythm. The bottom rhythm is a steady 4/4—often called “four on the floor”—outlined by the walking bass. This four has extra emphasis on beats 2 and 4 (counted one, TWO, three, FOUR, one, TWO, three FOUR, etc.). The top rhythm is a triplet 6/8 rhythm expressed by the drummer's ride cymbal (counted one-two-three-four-five-six, one-two-three-four-five-six, etc.). The propulsive tension between these two rhythms, played together in balance, is the foundation of swing.

Swing also refers to a specific jazz style that evolved in the mid-1930s, a period of time known as the Swing Era. It is characterized by large ensembles that play complex arrangements meant for dancing.

IMPROVISATION

Improvisation is the spontaneous creation of music. When a musician improvises, he or she invents music at the moment of performance, building on the existing theme and structure of the music. Jazz generally consists of a combination of composed, arranged and improvised elements, though the proportions of one to the other may vary. During a jazz performance, the ensemble plays a chorus or succession of choruses during which an individual player has the opportunity to improvise a solo.

In collective improvisation, two or more members of a group improvise at the same time. Improvisation, both collective and solo, builds a relationship between the members of the ensemble, helping them to “talk” to one another and express their personalities. In other words, improvisation is what makes jazz the music of freedom.



Jazz innovator
Louis Armstrong

LOUIS ARMSTRONG

Trumpet player and singer Louis Armstrong is considered the most important improviser in jazz. With his infectious, wide grin and instantly recognizable gravelly voice, he won the hearts of people everywhere.

“My whole life has been happiness,” Armstrong liked to say, and for more than half a century he managed to make everyone who heard him feel that no matter how bad things got, everything was bound to turn out all right, after all. But his warm, unaffected presence sometimes masked the fact that he was the preeminent American musical revolutionary of his century.

Armstrong grew up in a poor family in a rough section of New Orleans. He started working at a very young age to support his family, singing on street corners for pennies, working on a junk wagon, cleaning graves for tips, and selling coal. His travels around the city introduced him to all kinds of music, from the blues played in the Storyville honky tonks to the brass bands accompanying the New Orleans parades and funerals. The music that surrounded him was a great source of inspiration. He received his first formal music instruction in the Colored Waif’s Home for Boys, where he was confined for a year and a half as punishment for firing a pistol into the air on New Year’s Eve.

As the young Armstrong began to perform with pick-up bands in small clubs and play funerals and parades around New Orleans, he captured the attention and respect of some of older established musicians. Joe “King” Oliver, one of the finest trumpet players around, became Armstrong’s mentor. In 1922, Oliver invited Armstrong to Chicago to play second cornet in his Creole Jazz Band. As a member of Oliver’s band, Armstrong began his lifetime of touring and recording. In 1924, he moved on to New York City to play with the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra at the Roseland Ballroom. The power and virtuosity of his playing on his own “Hot Five” and “Hot Seven” recordings made between 1925 and 1929 demonstrated that jazz could be a soloist’s art.

Along the way he extended the range of his instrument, fused the sound of the blues with the American popular song, brought to American singing the same irresistible drive he’d brought to instrumental jazz, and became the beloved ambassador of America’s music throughout the world. Armstrong’s innovations influenced every instrumentalist and every singer who followed him. He was, as the trumpet player Max Kaminsky wrote, “the heir of all that had gone before and the father of all that was to come.”



Composer, pianist, and bandleader Edward Kennedy 'Duke' Ellington

DUKE ELLINGTON

“If jazz means anything,” DUKE ELLINGTON once said, “it is freedom of expression.” No one in the history of jazz expressed himself more freely—or with more variety or swing or sophistication. He was a masterful pianist but his real instrument was the orchestra he led for half a century.

More consistently than anyone else in jazz history, Ellington showed how great music could simultaneously be shaped by the composer and created on the spot by the players. Each of his almost 2,000 compositions—love songs and dance tunes, ballet and film scores, musical portraits and tone poems, orchestral suites and choral works and more—was crafted to bring out the best in one or another of the extraordinary individuals who traveled the road with him.

Ellington hated what he called “categories,” and refused to conform to anyone else’s notion of what he should be doing. As a result he managed to encompass in his music not only what he once called “Negro feeling put to rhythm and tune” but the rhythm and feeling of his whole country and much of the wider world, as well.



BESSIE SMITH

“BESSIE SMITH was a fabulous deal to watch,” the banjoist Danny Barker remembered. “She was a large pretty woman and she dominated the stage. You didn’t turn your head when she went on. You just watched Bessie.”

Her stage presence may have mesmerized audiences but it was her huge, confident voice, captured on records and capable of conveying every human emotion from grief to joy without a hint of sentimentality or self-pity, that made her the acknowledged Empress of the Blues.

She began her show business career in 1912 as a chorus girl with a touring tent show, Ma Rainey’s Rabbits Foot Minstrels. She was not the first singer to record the blues. That honor went to Mamie Smith (no relation) who set off the blues craze in 1920. But from the time she began to record in 1923, Bessie Smith out-sang and out-sold all her rivals. Great musicians accompanied her—Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet, James P. Johnson and more—but she was always the star, traveling in her own private railroad car, drawing huge crowds wherever African Americans lived, north as well as south, and admired by growing numbers of whites, as well.

Vocalist Bessie Smith

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY • IMPROVISATION

GOALS

Students learn about the process of improvisation through a familiar song. Students examine the concept of form and explore ways to change melody and rhythm while observing structure. Students also explore the group dynamics of an improvising jazz band.

STUDENT DISCUSSION

To reinforce the concept of form and improvisation, ask students to write down their class schedule for the entire week. Explain that this schedule is like a song form in that it is a set pattern. Then brainstorm as a class about what might happen in a week that could change a schedule. Also discuss what might happen each day within a class period, such as a different lunch, or sitting in a different seat that would allow them to change or improvise on their pattern.

After discussion, have each student take their schedule and improvise two more variations (or choruses) for their weekly schedules.

STUDENT ACTIVITY • IMPROVISING ON A FAMILIAR SONG

Write the lyrics of a familiar song such as 'Happy Birthday' on the blackboard. Review the basic melody and rhythm of the song. Then, in groups, have students create their own improvised version of the song vocally or with instruments. Each group might designate one or two students the role of timekeeper/rhythm section. Students might also consider devices like call and response and riffs (short, repeated phrases) in their arrangement, as well as the various vocal inflections.

"The vocabulary of jazz, the basic building blocks of the music, are metaphors for communication. These haven't changed very much since the very early days. Call and response means, I speak and you answer. A break...I stop and let you talk or vice versa. Solos...we each get a chance to expound on the subject. Riffs...we agree. Improvisation... what we say and how we say it. And finally, swing, which means coordinating all this communicating with style and good manners."

WYNTON MARSALIS

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY:

IMPROVISING IN A GROUP: LEAD, HANG, FOLLOW

There's a Latin saying on the U.S. dollar bill, *E Pluribus Unum*. It means 'out of many, one,' and it epitomizes the democratic process of a jazz band. In order to swing, jazz musicians work together for the greater good of the music. They have to balance their own desire to lead and express themselves with those of the rest of the band. Sometimes one soloist will lead while the band follows, then those roles may switch. Other times, a musician will just hang out and wait for the music to welcome them back. In this activity, students will experience leading and following through movement and then on their instruments.

1. Everyone find a partner.
2. Face each other, hands open in front, hands barely touching.
3. Decide who will be the leader and who will be the follower.
4. Let the leader take your hands wherever they lead you.
5. Again your hands are not touching.
6. Now switch roles.
7. Next just hang, if you feel like leading, lead or just follow let it flow. trust.
Reflect: Did you prefer leading, following, or just hanging out?
8. Still in pairs, give each student an Orff or percussion instrument.
9. Set up the 2 instruments so that students can play them while facing each other. Demonstrate and practice a swing rhythm using instruments.
10. Decide who will be the leader and who will be the timekeeper,
11. playing a swing pattern.
12. Play, wordlessly allowing the leadership and timekeeper roles to change over time.

Reflect: How did students know when to change roles? What musical characteristics emerged over the course of the performance (ex: call and response, dynamics, tempo, registers, textures etc.)?



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Special thank you to Jazz at Lincoln Center for providing these study guide materials.