


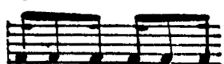
JAZZ STRUCTURE AND INFLUENCE

AARON COPLAND

ALTHOUGH jazz has been many months now in the hands of professional theorists I have seen nowhere a study of its influence upon non-commercial composers. Its structure, which interests me most as a musician, has received so little attention that it seems to have been avoided. Paul Whiteman admits this in his recent book: "Comparatively little has been written in an analytical way about jazz." And when asked "What is jazz?" he says: "I have been dodging this question for years because I haven't been able to figure out an adequate answer." Speaking exactly, no one else has. In certain quarters it has been suggested that the jazz band created jazz. This is confusing color with substance. Although the jazz band is largely responsible for the present day perfection of the idiom, in the beginning it merely added a distinctive color to what already existed.

One point has been generally made and agreed upon: that the essential character of jazz is its rhythm. Yet no one has carefully analyzed even this. Virgil Thomson has wisely said: "Jazz is a certain way of sounding two rhythms at once . . . a counterpoint of regular against irregular beats." These discerning but epigrammatic investigations have been carried a little though not much farther by Don Knowlton in an article in Harper's (April 1926). Henry O. Osgood in his book, *So This is Jazz*, begins by complimenting Mr. Thomson on his definition: "Jazz, in brief, is a compound of (a) the fox trot rhythm . . . and (b) a syncopated melody over this rhythm." But a few pages later he insists: "Jazz is not to be bound by Mr. Thomson's fox trot rhythm, and . . . it is obvious that syncopation, while a frequent characteristic of jazz, is by no means an essential factor." He concludes: "It is the spirit of the music, not the mechanics of its frame . . . that determines whether or not it is jazz."

This seems to me to be far from the truth. I had rather not let jazz pass too easily as indefinable without first inspecting its structure. There may be some connection between Mr. Osgood's attitude and that of most Americans, who believe too confidently that they can tell jazz from what isn't jazz and let it go at that. Such vagueness will do nothing toward a real understanding of it; on the other hand the very first move toward understanding requires precisely what Mr. Osgood by implication advises against, a study of the mechanics of its frame. And this can best be accomplished by considering its origin and development.

It began, I suppose, on some negro's dull tomtom in Africa; it descended through the spirituals, some of which are as much jazz as Gershwin's newest song. Its nearer ancestor is, of course, ragtime. The rhythmic foundation of ragtime is an unchanging 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 bass in quick tempo (stressing the most obvious beats the first and third)—just as 1 - 2 - 3 is the rhythmic foundation of the waltz. Over the ragtime bass is carried invariably one of two rhythms, sometimes both: either the dotted eighth followed by a sixteenth:  or this most ordinary syncopation:  The former of these produced the characteristic ragtime jerk which is perhaps remembered from *Everybody's Doin' It*. Ragtime is much inferior to jazz and musically uninteresting; it consists of old formulas familiar in the classics which were rediscovered one day and overworked.

Modern jazz began with the fox trot. For this new dance the four-quarter bass was used as in ragtime but at a considerably slower pace and miraculously improved by accenting the least obvious beats, the second and fourth—1 - 2 - 3 - 4. With this was combined another rhythmic element, sometimes in the melody but by no means always there, which is generally supposed to be a kind of 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 and is always written:



This notation, however, is deceptive, as Mr. Knowlton has pointed out. His article reveals the practice followed by popular music publishers of writing extremely complex jazz compositions very simply so as to sell them more easily to the

musically uneducated. He was the first to show that this jazz rhythm is in reality much subtler than in its printed form and is properly expressed thus:



Therefore it contains no syncopation; it is instead a rhythm of four quarters split into eight eighths and is arranged thus: 1-2-3: 1-2-3-4-5, or even more precisely: 1-2-3: 1-2-3: 1-2. Put this over the four-quarter bass:



and you have the play of two independent rhythms within the space of one measure. It is the beginning, it is a molecule of jazz.

Whatever melody is subjected to this procedure comes out jazzed. This explains the widespread facile reincarnation of classic tunes as song and dance hits: It also explains Mr. Whiteman's remark: "Jazz is not as yet the thing said, it is the manner of saying it." And it should make clear to Mr. Osgood how a melody he cites, that of *I'm Always Chasing Rainbows*, can show no signs of jazz and yet be jazz. It is not the melody which determines this point, but the interplay of rhythms around, above and under it.

The next step infinitely complicated these, in fact it produced polyrhythms. In employing two rhythms within one measure jazz after all merely did something that had been done before, if we remember, for instance, the use by older composers of 3/4 against 6/8. But the next era in the jazz age—typified by the song *Stumbling*—saw independent rhythms spread over more than one measure, over a series of measures:



Copyright by Leo Feist, Inc., New York City. (Used by permission.)

That is, while the conventional 4/4 bass was retained the melody

was put into 3/4 time. This particular combination of rhythms was probably put to best use by Confrey in his *Kitten on the Keys*:



Copyright 1921 by Jack Mills, Inc., New York City. (Used by permission.)

Within small limits jazz had achieved a new synthesis in music. It was so difficult for ordinary ears and so exhilarating to ordinary sensibilities that the jazz composers, always intent upon their public, dared not use it for more than a few measures at a time. George Gershwin was the composer who took most advantage of the discovery made with *Stumbling*. His *Fascinating Rhythm* is rhythmically not only the most fascinating but the most original jazz song yet composed:



Copyright 1924 by Harms, Inc., New York City. (Used by permission.)

With the introduction of the Charleston the most tyrannical element of our popular music—the evenly rhythmmed bass—was eliminated for the space of a few measures at least. The Charleston consists of the upper fox trot rhythm: 1-2-3: 1-2-3-4-5 used below as well as above instead of the formerly unflagging 1-2-3-4 bass:



This old bondage (the unchanging bass) which has probably brought jazz more musical enemies than any other quality, has been broken in another way by Gershwin in his latest dance hit, *Clap Yo' Hands*. Instead of the 3/4 against 4/4 polyrhythm

which in the brisk competition of Broadway has now become old stuff, he uses this :



Copyright 1926 by Harms, Inc., New York City. (Used by permission.)

That is, he varies a 4/4 rhythm with two measures of 3/4 rhythm. Critically, from the standpoint of all music this may be counted a step backward, a return to processes already familiar—in the Russian folk-song for example; but from the standpoint of jazz it means an advance through the relief it offers from the old relentless 4/4 bass.

Polyrhythms are, as is known, not in themselves an innovation. They have been highly developed among primitive races and have made intermittent, momentary appearances in the works of recent European composers. They have also occurred abundantly in the English madrigals. The madrigal polyrhythms were the result of the madrigal prosody and therefore an intricate deft interknitting in which no single downbeat was too definitely stressed. In a sense, therefore, the madrigal was arrhythmic rather than polyrhythmic. In fact, the Madrigalists were charged by later English generations with lacking a proper sense of rhythm.

But the polyrhythms of jazz are different in quality and effect not only from those of the madrigals but from all others as well. The peculiar excitement they produce by clashing two definitely and regularly marked rhythms is unprecedented in occidental music. Its polyrhythm is the real contribution of jazz.

This has not been appreciated by modern European composers although in other ways our American popular music has to some extent influenced them. In the days of ragtime, Debussy and Stravinsky, in the days of jazz, Ravel, Milhaud, Honegger, Hindemith, Jean Wiener exploited it as an exotic novelty. But with most of them it remained a novelty, a monotonous bass, a whining melody, a glissando on a trombone These tricks soon lost their first charm. Meanwhile, however, at least one

authentic small masterpiece had been inspired in Europe by America, Darius Milhaud's *La Création du Monde*—little known, strangely, in this country. But according to Milhaud himself, jazz is now distinctly *passé* in Europe and not a young composer there is interested in it any longer.

This is not so in America, nor is it going to be. Since jazz is not exotic here but indigenous, since it is the music an American has heard as a child, it will be traceable more and more frequently in his symphonies and concertos. Possibly the chief influence of jazz will be shown in the development of the polyrhythm. This startling new synthesis has provided the American composer with an instrument he should appreciate and utilize. It should stir his imagination; he should see it freed of its present connotations. It may be the substance not only of his fox trots and Charlestons but of his lullabies and nocturnes. He may express through it not always gaiety but love, tragedy, remorse.