

# Towards the jazz avant-garde:

Contexts and directions

# Bebop

- Name comes from nonsense syllables used in scat-singing
- Style of instrumental jazz prevalent c. 1945-1960
- Role of jazz musician as *serious* musician (no longer the entertainer)
- Smaller ensembles more common: rhythm section of bass, drums and piano, plus trumpet and saxophone  
(as opposed to swing orchestras of 14+ musicians)
- Stylistic changes: no longer dance music (as in swing era)!  
Music for attentive listening
- Musicians: Charlie Parker (the Bird), Thelonious Monk, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Dizzy Gillespie

- Listen: Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, 'Ornithology'  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-U9XsYqRwY>

Charlie Parker, 'Koko'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=okrNwE6GI70>

Charlie Parker, 'Confirmation'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zV6y1f7CU-A>

- Thelonious Monk, 'Round Midnight'  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lKayR1oqC7w>

# Bebop characteristics

- Fast, complex chord changes,
- dazzling fast melodies with asymmetrical phrasings
- Form: typically a 'head' (the statement of the song) followed by improvisation
- improvisations based on harmonic structure
- virtuosic solos

# Bebop's discontents

- Based on harmonic structures, bebop is quite formulaic
- Musicians wanted to explore other musical approaches with greater freedom.

# Towards a freer jazz

- 1959 – a big year in jazz
- Miles Davis, *A Kind of Blue*
  - Modal jazz, e.g. ‘So What’

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qNcPwrfK9tY>
- Ornette Coleman, *The Shape of Jazz to Come*
  - No piano or guitar
  - Abandons use of chord structures
  - E.g. ‘Lonely Woman’

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OIllyCOABYDU>

- Other notable albums of 1959:

Charlie Mingus, *Ah Um* (reimagining of big band recalling Dixieland heterophony, freer roles of band members than fixed arrangements of swing era big bands)

John Coltrane’s *Giant Steps* (recorded in 1959, released in 1960. Introduces Coltrane changes – harmonic progressions based on relationships of intervals of a third – and ‘sheets of sound’)

# The jazz avant-garde: approaches

By moving away from traditional sixteen- and thirty-two-bar song structures, standard chord progressions, and the general rules of tonal harmonic practice, they [the jazz avant-garde] opened up new possibilities for improvisation by drawing on non-Western music; experimenting with tonality, flexible parameters, and variable rhythms; and developing forms of collective improvisation based on linear rather than harmonic qualities. The music may or may not have a tonal center; it may have a fixed pulse or some recurring rhythmic pattern, or the music may be suspended "out of time"; and there may be composed themes or pre-arranged rules for improvisation. In other words, free jazz is hardly chaos, and it certainly is not uniform.

Robin D.G. Kelley, 'New Monastery: Monk and the Jazz Avant-Garde', *Black Music Research Journal*, 19(2), 137.

# The jazz as (perpetual) avant-garde

Rather than view the avant-garde as a specific era in jazz history, authors like Robin D.G. Kelley and Salim Washington has argued that jazz is in a perpetual state of avant-garde:

‘Jazz at its best has always been a perpetual avant-garde movement in at least two ways. Jazz musicians have conducted a continuous search for expansion of the formal parameters available for artistic expression and have often related these breakthroughs in “structures of feeling” to a simultaneous yearning for progress in the concomitant social arrangements of its society.’

Salim Washington, *Uptown Conversation*, 28.



# The avant-garde's second other: commercial popular music

# From rhythm and blues to rock 'n' roll

For an early history of commercialization and popularization of rhythm and blues: watch documentary on Chess Records:

Part 1

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pFbny5oToD4>

Part II

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v79YtTYRbKs>

Part III

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QfK6kWYJmUE>

Part IV

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FuV5\\_9G3Fcc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FuV5_9G3Fcc)

Muddy Waters, 'I can't be satisfied'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vTgwDknZIkA>

Chuck Berry, 'Roll over Beethoven' (1956)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EOrMg3pY7hw>

Elvis Presley, 'Hound Dog' (1956) – a cover of Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton's 1952 hit:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lzQ8GDBA8I>

Elvis Presley, 'Jailhouse Rock' (1957)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gj0Rz-uP4Mk>

# The Beatles' Stockhausen tribute



- Stockhausen, *Gesang der Jünglingen* (1956)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y1Psx24n3rM>

The Beatles, 'Tomorrow Never Knows' from *Revolver* (1966)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Z9cnZkqWvU>