

## ACTIVITY ONE: JAZZ AND SELF-DISCOVERY

In his autobiography\*, the great New Orleans musician Sidney Bechet expressed his belief that music was a guide for self-discovery for African Americans after the Civil War: “They needed the music more than ever now; it was like they were trying to find out in this music what they were supposed to do with this freedom. ... They had learned it wasn’t just white people the music had to reach to, nor even to their own people, but straight out to life and what a man does with his life when it finally is his.”

Bechet explained that jazz incorporated all of the African-American music that had come before: Jazz “wasn’t just spirituals or blues or ragtime, but everything all at once, each one putting something over on the other.”

On a separate piece of paper describe how jazz may have been a guide for African Americans. What elements of the African-American experience are expressed through jazz? How could jazz have been a means for self-discovery for African Americans? To what degree is jazz a means of expression for all Americans? What is the significance of Bechet’s second quote? How did incorporating different musical styles help jazz become a means for self-discovery?

\*Sidney Bechet, *Treat It Gentle: An Autobiography* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2002)

## ACTIVITY TWO: LISTEN UP!

### Listening One

The blues has been a constant source of inspiration throughout the history of jazz. Each succeeding generation of jazz musicians has continued to draw upon, return to, and reinvent the blues in countless variations. Listen to each of the following excerpts. Compare and contrast the different performances. Take note of the use of bent notes, unusual timbre or sound quality, dynamics, and unusual rhythms. Can you make any generalizations about the approach to blues soloing within each musical period?

- Jelly Roll Morton, “Original Jelly Roll Blues”  
🔊 **CD1: Track 12**
- Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong, “St. Louis Blues”  
🔊 **CD1: Track 24**
- King Oliver and Louis Armstrong, “Chimes Blues”  
🔊 **CD1: Track 21**
- Louis Armstrong, “West End Blues”  
🔊 **CD1: Track 25**


- Billy Eckstine and his Orchestra, “Blowin’ the Blues Away”  
🔊 **CD2: Track 1**
- Charlie Parker, “Parker’s Mood”  
🔊 **CD2: Track 3**
- Clifford Brown, “Blues Walk”  
🔊 **CD2: Track 12**
- Nicholas Payton, “Whoopin’ Blues”  
🔊 **CD2: Track 39**

### Listening Two

Listen to these improvised solos from different periods in jazz history. What techniques does each soloist use to project his or her own creativity and personality onto the music? In what ways are the soloists similar, and how do they differ? How does each soloist embellish or depart from the written melody? Do the performers engage in collective improvisation, do they play alone, or do they play solos to a fixed, written accompaniment?

- Louis Armstrong, “West End Blues” and “Lazy River”  
🔊 **CD1: Tracks 25–26**
- Art Tatum, “Get Happy”  
🔊 **CD1: Track 34**
- Charlie Parker’s Reboppers, “Ko Ko”  
🔊 **CD2: Track 2**
- Ella Fitzgerald, “How High the Moon”  
🔊 **CD1: Track 45**
- Sarah Vaughan, “Shulie a Bop”  
🔊 **CD2: Track 11**
- Sonny Rollins Quartet, “St. Thomas”  
🔊 **CD2: Track 14**
- John Coltrane Quartet, “Giant Steps”  
🔊 **CD2: Track 22**
- Eric Dolphy, “Out to Lunch”  
🔊 **CD2: Track 27**
- Dave Douglas, “Penelope”  
🔊 **CD2: Track 41**

### Listening Three

Listen to John Coltrane’s recording of  “My Favorite Things” (CD2: Track 43). How does the band establish a musical context for the soloist? How does Coltrane rework the melody of the tune? What effect does the change from minor to major tonality have on the development of the improvisations?

## ACTIVITY THREE: INDEPENDENT RESEARCH

1. Research examples of improvisation in other art forms, such as comedy, theater, and dance. Also, gather information on improvisation in other musical genres besides jazz, such as Indian music, rock, freestyle rap, and contemporary avant-garde music. Compare and contrast the use of improvisation in these art forms with improvisation in jazz. Which characteristics are similar, and which are different?

2. Though you can’t really see jazz, it is a music with a highly visual element. The people, places, and moods of jazz have long inspired visual artists to translate the music into something you can see. Photographer Roy DeCarava says that when he’s working in a darkened jazz club, his finger on the shutter button of his camera, he feels like an improvising jazz musician himself, trying to capture the feelings and thoughts of the moment. Painter Romare Bearden also considered himself an improviser, creating rhythms and melodies on the canvas that felt spontaneous. Using the curriculum **slide show** as well as various online resources (see some examples below), research how painters, photographers, and graphic designers have translated the elements of jazz—the blues, call and response, syncopated rhythms, and improvisatory spirit—as well as the places in which jazz is played and nurtured, into evocative pieces of art. In addition to DeCarava and Bearden, artists to consider include Jean-Michel Basquiat, Stuart Davis, Aaron Douglass, William P. Gottlieb, Norman Lewis, Piet Mondrian, Henri Matisse, Jackson Pollack, and Niklaus Troxler.

#### Online Resources:

Brooklyn Museum:

*Street to Studio: The Art of Jean-Michel Basquiat*  
[www.basquiatonline.org](http://www.basquiatonline.org)

Online News Hour with Jim Lehrer: “Romare Bearden”  
[www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/romarebearden/index.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/romarebearden/index.html)

Metropolitan Museum of Art:

*Romare Bearden, Let’s Walk the Block*  
[www.metmuseum.org/explore/the\\_block/index\\_flash.html](http://www.metmuseum.org/explore/the_block/index_flash.html)

*William P. Gottlieb: Photographs from the Golden Age*  
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wghtml/wghome.html>

Museum of Modern Art:

[www.moma.org](http://www.moma.org)

Online News Hour with Jim Lehrer:

“Jackson Pollack, Jack the Dripper”  
[www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/jan-june99/pollock\\_1-11.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/jan-june99/pollock_1-11.html)

*Niklaus Troxler, Graphic Design*

[www.troxlerart.ch](http://www.troxlerart.ch)

3. Take the opportunity to attend a live jazz performance by professional or student musicians in your area and write a report about the show, using the following questions as guides: How do the musicians interact with each other; are they listening and responding appropriately? What is their repertoire—jazz standards, original compositions, or music drawn from some other source? What fundamental elements of jazz do you hear in their music—the blues, improvisation, and swing? If possible, arrange to interview a few of the musicians and report on their backgrounds, influences, and musical goals or accomplishments.