

Small Band Jazz - History And Development Drummers Guide Part One.

Following the Swing era, the size of jazz groups decreased from large Big Band orchestras to much smaller bands. This trend began in the early 1940s and became increasingly pronounced in the late '40s and early '50s. Jazz terminology reflected this shift: terms such as "trio", "quartet", and "quintet", and styles like Be Bop, Cool Jazz, and Avante Garde all suggest a small band (some other later styles include Hard Bop, a more intensified form of Be Bop, and Soul Jazz which featured a Blues & Funk influence). These bands usually consisted of a lead horn player along with a full rhythm section (drums, bass, and piano) and sometimes an additional horn player.

One of the biggest changes in the music was in the approach to improvisation. Though there is improvisation in Big Band music (horn solos or even drum solos in prescribed places), the Big Band genre is primarily based on highly-organized, charted arrangements. A small band, however, tends to follow the form of a song rather than a chart, which leaves a lot of room to stretch. It's important to learn the characteristics of "Jazz form" when studying the small band format. Each song has a melody (the "head") normally played by a horn player and supported by chords on the piano and a walking bass line. After the melody is played, members of the band solo or improvise over the chord progression that supported the original melody. One common form of improvisation here is "trading fours", alternating four bar improvisations between soloists, one of whom is often the drummer.

Following the solo sections of the song, the melody is normally played again, with the tune usually coming to an end following the final statement of the melody. The driving force behind the development of the small band ensemble was the team of saxophonist Charlie Parker and trumpeter Dizzie Gillespie. Their approach to jazz focused on improvisation by all instruments. The hallmarks of this new style, known as Be Bop, were very fast tempos, very fast, complicated harmonic changes, and the use of complex chord 11 extensions." Be Bop featured drumming pioneers such as Max Roach, Roy Haynes, and Philly Jo Jones. By the mid 1950s, musician and composer Miles Davis created what came to be known as Cool Jazz (a more relaxed form of Jazz featuring slower tempos, fewer harmonic changes, and extended songs and solos). Art Blakey, Max Roach, Tony Williams (Miles Davis Quintet), and Joe Morello (Dave Brubeck Quartet) are just four of the drum legends associated with this era.

Shortly after, in the early 1960s, saxophonists John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, and Ornette Coleman led the improvisation-based Avante Garde movement, and employed such famed drummers as Elvin Jones and Billy Higgins. The emphasis here was mostly on improvisation, and the "songs" played by Avante Garde groups were often improvised on the spot. The drumming for Be Bop, Cool Jazz, and Avante Garde has much in common and makes use of many of the same musical ideas. However, the approaches to the three styles are different.

Be Bop usually has busy drumming, tempos ranging up to quarter note equal 300 beats per minute, and a fairly consistent approach. Cool jazz usually requires fewer drum notes, more open space for soloists, and slower tempos, though again it requires a fairly consistent drumming approach. This is important during extended solo sections, especially when the soloist is playing "across the bar."

About the Author

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