

The Bebop Revolution in Jazz

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The bebop style of jazz is a pivotal invention in twentieth-century American popular music - an outgrowth of the rhythmic and harmonic experiments of young African-American jazz musicians. At first a source of controversy because of its unorthodox approach, bebop eventually gained widespread acceptance as the foundation of "modern" jazz, and it continues to influence jazz musicians. The process of its creation was solidly grounded in New York City.

Because of its emphasis on improvisation, jazz has maintained a strong tradition of creative invention throughout its history. This tradition has encouraged jazz musicians to cultivate new musical ideas, based on innovative uses of harmony, rhythm, timbre and instrumentation. Jazz has thus encompassed a continually evolving diversity of individual and collective styles over the past century. The emphasis on improvisation has made live performance a crucial element of the innovation process. During the 1st half of the 20th century the available technology limited the length of the improvisations and live performance served as the primary showcase for jazz musicians' talents. Because performance opportunities for the most talented musicians were concentrated in the entertainment districts of major cities, the creation of new jazz styles became strongly associated with places, such as New Orleans, Chicago, Kansas City, and New York City.

Bebop emerged during the 1940s as a reaction "Swing" and as an expression of artistic innovation within a community of younger African-American jazz musicians. Certain jazz clubs in Harlem provided a setting for experimentation that culminated in the bebop style. The style's subsequent popularization occurred in jazz clubs in midtown Manhattan, at first along 52nd Street and later on nearby sections of Broadway.

The Cultural Background

The origins of bebop can be traced to a number of social and cultural influences that motivated the musical innovators during the early 1940s. Jazz originated around the beginning of the twentieth century among African-American musicians who creatively fused several musical traditions: older folk forms, like the blues, rooted in African-American culture; syncopated dance music, a rapidly growing fad among urban audiences; and marching band music, which enjoyed great popularity at the time. Although they used European instruments, the jazz innovators drew heavily on their African roots into their playing, including complex rhythms, flexibility of pitch, polyphonic melodic structures, call-and-response patterns, and collective improvisation. The resulting amalgam of styles and influences at first resisted standardization, and as a result the early jazz player's depended more on their individuality of expression than on their mastery of traditional standards of musicianship. Musical innovation thus became a basic feature of jazz as a form, and a hallmark of its best players during the 1920s and 1930s.

By the late 1930s and early 1940s many younger musicians began to find that the commercially dominant form of jazz at the time, the big-band "swing" style, failed to provide an outlet for their musical creativity. Swing became widely popular because of its appeal as dance music. Solo improvisation remained an important element, but swing bands adopted structured musical arrangements suited to popular dance styles. For some musicians, the commercial success of swing eventually led to unwanted constraints: formulaic rhythms, simple harmonies, dependence on traditional melodic structures, and too little room for individual expression. Younger musicians who ignored those constraints found themselves out of favor with bandleaders, older musicians and most audiences. Kenny Clarke, one of the founders of bebop, began to experiment in the late 1930s with the drum kit as a separate musical voice rather than as a device for keeping time. His unorthodox use of rhythmic accents and patterns led to him being fired from his band, after other players complained that he kept "breaking up" the music's tempo. The popularity of swing in the 1930s thus produced a growing tension between commercial demands and the desire to develop new creative ideas.

Constraints on the mobility of African-Americans lessened after World War I. There was a large movement

of blacks from the rural South to cities in the North. Newly formed organizations like the NAACP and the Urban League worked to expand opportunities for the African-American. Developments in the arts, exemplified by the Harlem Renaissance, signaled the vitality of African-American culture in the 1920s and 1930s; and blacks achieved prominence both in popular culture and the "high" arts. The musicianship of young black jazz musicians improved over their previous generations. Consequently, they began to redefine their goals as musicians.

African-American jazz musicians were growing increasingly resentful of the social conventions that limited their opportunities. During the swing era, nearly all jazz bands were racially segregated. Though some white bandleaders did have "mixed" bands, segregation remained the rule. Audiences too were separated by race, and black jazz musicians often played in establishments where they would not be welcome as customers. Black musicians earned less than their white counterparts. While several black bands had achieved widespread popularity, under the leadership of Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, and Count Basie, they did not match the commercial success of the popular white bands.

The value placed on innovation in jazz, combined with the changing outlook of younger black musicians, fostered the development of new forms of musical expression. During the late 1930s young musicians began to experiment with new ideas and approaches. Working independently of one another, alto saxophonist Charlie Parker and trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, two of the most important leaders of bebop, became increasingly interested in extending the harmonic language of jazz. By employing altered and substitute chords, they began to use improvisation to rework and expand a song's original harmonic structure. They also developed the technique to play complex improvisations containing asymmetrical accents and phrases at very rapid tempos. Similar experiments were being done by pianists Bud Powell and Thelonious Monk who were using angular melodic figures and dissonant chords, abandoning the simple riff-based melodies of swing; and drummer Kenny Clarke introduced complex approaches to jazz rhythm using off-beat rhythmic punctuations on the snare and bass drum.

These attempts to develop new musical strategies did not have an immediate impact. During the 1930s, these young and innovative musicians had little contact with one another, and generally worked on their new ideas in isolation. Musicians who strayed too far from the "normal" had difficulty finding work. The early innovations that lay the groundwork for bebop thus evolved more or less independently. Only after these musicians began to interact regularly with each other did these innovations begin to develop into a recognizable style.

Given the collective, improvisatory character of jazz and its strong emphasis on live performance, such interactions could occur only during performances. The emergence of bebop as a coherent musical style thus required the congregation of a community of innovators in a locale that supported musical experimentation.

New York City

The late 1930s and early 1940s saw innovators like Gillespie and Parker spending more time in New York. This was partly to find regular work and also to develop their ideas with other innovative players. By the early 1940s, a large group of young musicians interested in new approaches in jazz were living in Manhattan. In the words of drummer Max Roach, these young innovators "*started forming a camaraderie.... There was so much activity in New York at that particular period, musically speaking*".

A number of factors attracted this critical mass of innovators to New York. New York had become the nation's undisputed jazz capital and jazz musicians considered it to be the ultimate proving ground. As the home of many popular jazz bands and important performance venues, New York also offered the most attractive employment opportunities in jazz. For these reasons a majority of young musicians, hoping to make a name for themselves in jazz, ended up there. For the jazz innovator New York City represented the most likely place to encounter other skilled musicians interested in new musical approaches.

From a broader perspective, New York City had also clearly emerged as the leading center of innovation in "high" culture in the United States, and a major center for popular culture. Of more specific relevance to jazz musicians, New York had become the primary geographical focus of creative developments in urban

African-American culture since the 1920s and the days of the Harlem Renaissance. A major factor in the city's cultural status was the presence of large intellectual and bohemian communities with varied and dynamic cultural tastes. These cosmopolitan and racially diverse audiences provided significant support for music and the arts. As a result, innovative jazz musicians were generally able to find receptive audiences in New York.

The city's role as the nation's cultural capital and the leading center for jazz also produced a wide range of performance opportunities for jazz musicians. It enabled innovative musicians to earn a reasonable living playing established musical styles in mainstream outlets, such as theater orchestras and the larger clubs and ballrooms, while still having access to less formal settings where they could try out new musical approaches. This practice in fact became routine among many of Manhattan's jazz musicians, as described by Max Roach:

During that period you worked in all-white clubs in New York City from nine to three, and then went uptown to the after-hours spots, and you worked from four to eight. That's when I met Bud Powell and Al Tinney and all those people. And we became friends and started workin' together, playin' together, jammin' together.

Harlem

Among the various districts of New York City, Harlem provided a likely environment for musical experimentation. While black jazz musicians worked throughout the city, most of those living in Manhattan resided in Harlem, the city's predominant African-American neighborhood. They often played together at home exchanging ideas freely. Dizzy Gillespie's apartment on 7th Avenue was an especially popular site for such gatherings. According to saxophonist Budd Johnson,

We used to hang around up at Dizzy's at 2040 7th Avenue, and all the musicians used to come up there. Dizzy was sort of like a school also, and used to sit down at the piano, and of course, he was playing the modern [chord] changes.

Billy Eckstine, who in the mid-1940s established one of the first bebop-oriented big bands, describes:

.....when we all lived in 2040 7th Avenue, and Diz lived right up over me and Shadow [Wilson, a prominent drummer], we were all right in--well, Christ, it was a musician's building, and Diz had an old upright piano in his house, and it was a constant upstairs sitting at the piano and working out things.

Harlem was a major center of jazz performance since the 1920s. Racial conflicts during the 1930s had led several prominent Harlem clubs to relocate to other parts of Manhattan. This significantly reduced the size of white audiences traveling to Harlem to listen to jazz. As a result, Harlem's jazz clubs provided a more "closed" environment for performing, which effectively encouraged the processes of innovation. Finally, Harlem also offered a great diversity of performance outlets, including many informal settings where musicians could play with greater freedom than they had in their paying jobs.

Of particular importance in this context were the so-called after-hours clubs, which were regularly patronized by black musicians wanting to play freely with their peers. Two clubs in particular, Minton's Playhouse and Clarke Monroe's Uptown House, became the specific locales with which bebop became most strongly associated. These two clubs provided a setting for regular but informal interactions among musicians interested in new approaches to jazz. In the words of Dizzy Gillespie,

The creativity in both of those places was fantastic. You could learn a whole lot just by sitting in because all the guys from all parts of the country and all parts of the world used to converge on New York and come to Minton's and after hours go to the Uptown House.

Within these locales, the most creative innovators could play how they wanted, with other innovative musicians, and outside the constraints of their regular jobs. Such opportunities rapidly brought together a critical mass of innovators, drawn to Minton's and Monroe's by the growing reputations of the leading new talents who regularly performed there. Names like Parker, Gillespie and Monk.

A major attraction of Minton's and Monroe's as locales for musical experimentation was that the musicians themselves had control over what was played there. The operators of both clubs provided a small house band with which other musicians were free to play. These club operators adopted this practice because they appreciated the new ideas being developed and also wanted to support the younger musicians. According to Kenny Clarke..... *after former bandleader Teddy Hill took over as manager in 1941, Minton's changed its music policy. Teddy wanted to do something for the guys who had worked with him. He turned out to be a sort of benefactor since work was very scarce at that time. Teddy never tried to tell us how to play. We just played as we felt.*

Hill also set no requirements concerning the scheduling or duration of performances in the back room of Minton's where jam sessions were held. Again according to Clarke, *"Teddy Hill, the manager of Minton's, turned the whole back room over to us"*. Such freedom also existed at Monroe's, where the after-hours jam sessions did not begin until 4:00 a.m., after most other jazz clubs had closed their doors.

The relaxed approach of these clubs made good business sense. Word-of-mouth publicity made the open jam sessions very popular, and attracted large numbers of musicians eager to hear their peers' new ideas and, perhaps, to join in. According to pianist Allen Tinney, the leader of the house band at Monroe's during the early 1940s:

Musicians from the big bands commonly stopped in at the club early in the morning, after finishing their regular jobs. They would all come down after work, and they would sit in, or either they would sit and say, "What the heck are these guys playing?" because it was different.

Carmen McRae, one of the first bebop jazz singers, has stated that Minton's was just a place for cats to jam. *People didn't pay too much attention to what was going on, I mean those people there that weren't musicians. So when you went in you'd see cats half-stewed who weren't paying much mind to what was happening on stage. But the musicians were.* The small house bands, augmented by the unpaid musicians who sat in with them, thus provided an inexpensive form of entertainment, especially given the wartime cabaret tax on public entertainment, which did not apply to small instrumental groups.

Given the degree of control that they enjoyed at Minton's and Monroe's, the young innovators sought ways to control access to performance opportunities there. By incorporating complex innovations into the music played at the jam sessions, they discouraged inferior musicians from participating, thus leaving more room for innovators to develop and share ideas. According to trombonist Trummy Young, this strategy became necessary because of the popularity of the jam sessions at Minton's, which might attract 20 or 30 different musicians hoping to play with the house band. Young claimed that various musicians would meet at Dizzy Gillespie's apartment, where *"they started working on different chord progressions to keep these guys out"*. Gillespie himself confirmed this practice in interviews, claiming:

....that on afternoons before a session, Thelonious Monk and I began to workout some complex variations on chords and the like, and we used them at night to scare away the no-talent guys. After a while, we got more and more interested in what we were doing as music, and, as we began to explore more and more, our music evolved.

Although they may have been less consciously concerned with keeping unskilled musicians off the bandstand, Charlie Parker and guitarist Biddy Fleet reportedly developed a similarly practice during jam sessions at Monroe's Uptown House.

A second strategy adopted to control musical interactions was to appoint a gatekeeper, who would decide whether or not visiting musicians would be allowed on the bandstand. To saxophonist Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis, who occasionally fulfilled this role at Minton's, this approach ensured that the most talented musicians gained the most from interactions with their peers:

That particular policeman's job, as I call it, was handed to me by Teddy Hill, who was the manager [of Minton's] at the time. One night he announced that he couldn't manage the club and the bandstand at the same time, and that he felt whoever was the leader [of the band onstage] should be responsible for who played and who didn't.... I had to make this decision, and I agreed to do it.... In some instances I was

labeled as a tyrant, but on the whole the guys appreciated it. The word spread. If you can't play, don't go on Lockjaw's thing, because he'll ask you off. In doing that we got the best musicians. It was most relaxed. You had a chance to hear different stylists, different musicians. It was a big schoolroom and it was pleasant. It was a place to experiment with what you knew.

Again, these practices fostered the exchange of ideas among innovators, and allowed them to focus on new concepts without having to deal with external constraints.

The degree of musician control in Minton's and Monroe's, their location in Harlem, and their operation in the late night and early morning hours tended to make these clubs "closed" or exclusive spaces, open to the cognoscenti but safe from public intrusion or the skepticism of jazz critics, many of whom originally rejected the innovations of bebop. In addition to protecting the early expressions of bebop from dilution by mainstream tastes, this isolation lent the new style a certain exclusivity, giving it a cult-like status. That exclusivity helped to shape bebop's cultural identity as a form of hip musical expression. Its association with Harlem also helped to establish bebop's identity as an African-American innovation. Indeed, one of the often cited motives of bebop's black creators was to develop a style of jazz which, unlike swing, could not easily be appropriated by more commercially successful white musicians. In pianist Mary Lou Williams' words, *"the boppers worked out a music that was hard to steal"*. White musicians did frequent the Harlem after-hours clubs to hear the new music, and some eventually became actively involved in it; but during its formative period, bebop's situation in Harlem helped to preserve its connections to the African-American jazz community.

The Harlem after-hours clubs thus provided locales well suited to the processes of experimentation that gave rise to bebop. However, their unusual hours, their relatively small size, and their location in Harlem all tended to limit bebop's opportunities for public exposure. Those limitations were exacerbated by the ban on recordings instituted in the early 1940s by the American Federation of Musicians. For bebop to become more widely known it had to move out of the after-hours clubs, and out of Harlem. Having formalized important elements of the new style, bebop's creators no longer needed the seclusion of its early hearth. Rather, they needed a stage where bebop could receive wider exposure.

52nd Street

The locale that became bebop's stage was 52nd Street. During the swing era of the 1930s, 52nd Street had become a major center of jazz, part of a larger entertainment district extending across midtown Manhattan. By the 1940s, this district dominated Manhattan's nightlife, consistently attracting larger crowds than did nightspots in Harlem. Since the 1930s, the two blocks of 52nd Street west of Fifth Avenue had developed an especially high density of jazz clubs; this location came to represent the premier proving grounds for jazz musicians before and during World War II. An essential feature of the 52nd Street clubs was the diversity of the jazz styles that they presented. In the words of drummer Shelley Manne,

If you were a jazz historian you could have gone down there and seen and heard, with your own ears, the evolution of the music, right there on the street, and it all made sense. As a result, 52nd Street functioned as center of interaction for the entire jazz community, including both traditionalists and modernists, providing a stage where the developers of bebop could present their music to more diverse audiences of both peers and fans. The jazz clubs on 52nd Street offered few opportunities for informal experimentation, however. The club owners were only interested in major attractions that would draw large audiences. The 52nd Street clubs thus became accessible to bebop only after it had developed into a recognizable style. Indeed, the term "bebop" first became commonly used to describe the new music only after it began to appear on 52nd Street. Before then, its players simply considered it modern jazz.

In an interview concerning the early days of bebop Dizzy Gillespie enthused over the excitement of playing in Harlem, but concluded that

52nd St. was better. Uptown we were just experimenting. By the time we came down [to midtown Manhattan] our ideas were beginning to be accepted. Oh, it took some time, but 52nd St. gave us the rooms to play and the audiences.

Success in these clubs also confirmed the artistic achievements of bebop, an important consideration for its innovators. Not all club owners on 52nd Street were interested in the new style. But the mid-1940s represented a period of significant social and cultural change, especially after the end of World War II, and the evolving tastes of younger audiences demanded new types of entertainment. Perhaps ironically, the "outside" image of bebop, based on its social origins in Harlem and the sense of musical experimentation that it projected, heightened its appeal among a growing popular audience in search of musical novelty. By the mid-1940s, therefore, some mid-town club owners began to hire the early proponents of bebop. Small bands wholly devoted to the new style began to appear regularly on 52nd Street, but performing a more "finished" version of the style that they had experimented on in Harlem.

The first such band appeared in late 1943 at the Onyx Club, led by Dizzy Gillespie and bassist Oscar Pettiford. This group received varied reactions from audiences, but it established a precedent for bebop on 52nd Street and other engagements for bebop bands soon followed. In the words of saxophonist Budd Johnson, *"The Street [i.e., 52nd Street] made everybody aware of this new music"*. Support for the new music grew significantly following the appearance of an especially talented band led by Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie at the Three Deuces in 1945. *"It was a fabulous thing,"* according to clarinetist Tony Scott, *"Bird [Parker] and Diz both blowing together and blowing great"*. This band's ability to draw enthusiastic audiences led to an immediate increase in pay, and soon attracted the interest of a recording company. An extended appearance by a band led by Gillespie at the Spotlite Club in 1946 reinforced interest in the new music, and led to the first bebop recordings by a major record label. Issued by RCA Victor under the title "New 52nd Street Jazz" these recordings became the best selling jazz albums of 1946. Enthusiasm for bebop expanded rapidly; and 52nd Street became the primary place to hear the new music. After-hour clubs in Harlem continued to provide a performance outlet as well, but the attention of critics, fans, and musicians centered primarily on 52nd Street and such jazz clubs as the Onyx, the Three Deuces and the Spotlite.

The establishment of bebop in these clubs obviously brought the music before larger audiences. It also helped to disseminate the new style among musicians who had not participated in its development. On 52nd Street, musicians from different backgrounds often played together through spontaneous jam sessions or the more formal process of "sitting in," in which members of the featured band would allow another musician to perform their music with them. Unlike the informal jam sessions in Minton's and Monroe's, on 52nd Street they were much more open. Innovative musicians abandoned the exclusionary tactics employed in Harlem and the older established musicians began to welcome young innovators to join in. According to Shelley Manne, a relative newcomer on the scene in 1945,

When you'd go down the Street at night, you'd go into one place and hear somebody, and play; and then you know another set was going on someplace else, you'd go over there. You didn't even have to ask. The guys would say, "Hey, c'mon and play." It was always that kind of feeling.

Tony Scott had similar experiences:

At that time, everybody used to sit in.... The feeling was so wonderful. Any time you came into a joint, they asked you to join them. If you walked in without your horn, they'd say, "What's your story?"

Such practices in the clubs on 52nd Street produced considerable interaction between bebop's developers and other musicians, and therefore the innovations of bebop came to be more widely accepted.

As the popularity of bebop continued to grow during the mid-to late 1940s, the character of its "stage" in midtown Manhattan also evolved. After the end of World War II, 52nd Street entered a period of decline, partly because of its continuing popularity as an entertainment district, which drew larger and more diverse crowds into the area. To take advantage of this situation, the owners of various nightspots on 52nd Street sought to increase revenues by appealing to an increasingly lower common denominator of taste, and the jazz clubs that had once thrived there were gradually replaced by bars and strip clubs. As the Street's reputation declined, drug dealing and prostitution became increasingly common. Even as 52nd Street became more disreputable, the popularity of bebop continued to grow. Thus, by the late 1940s, a number of new clubs had opened that were explicitly tied to the new music, including Bop City, the Royal Roost (which on its awning carried the nickname "the Metropolitan Bopera House") and Birdland, named in honor of the most celebrated bebopper, Charlie Parker, nicknamed Bird. These clubs were not established on

52nd Street but instead along nearby sections of Broadway.

The clubs on Broadway also represented a new type of locale for bebop, accommodating its growing teenage audience. According to pianist Billy Taylor, both the Royal Roost and Bop City showed a concern about bringing jazz to young people. They had bleachers where [teenagers] could come in for a low admission charge and soda fountains where they could satisfy their thirst. These innovations proved most successful at Birdland.... Not only did teen-agers enjoy the jazz of that period, but they knew all the players and their records.

The increasing dissemination of bebop through recordings and radio lessened the importance of its new stage on Broadway. The Broadway clubs reflected bebop's establishment as the center of modern jazz, but because the new style had become so formalized by the time these clubs opened, they had little impact on its further development. In addition, new movements within modern jazz were beginning to evolve out of bebop by the late 1940s and early 1950s, including "cool" jazz, West Coast jazz and "hard bop," each of which had its own distinct geography.

Reference:

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