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### What Is Jazz?: Exploring The Question

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## WHAT IS JAZZ?: EXPLORING THE QUESTION

### Overview

In surveying the history of jazz, it becomes apparent that the music cannot be accurately contained within one descriptive box. While the history presents a single name that terms the music as jazz, it demonstrates many styles, or genres, of the music. The styles are typically introduced chronologically, e.g., early jazz, swing era, bebop, hard bop, cool jazz, modal jazz, the avant-garde, jazz fusion, smooth jazz, etc... Remarkably, these genres can be further divided as offshoots of one, or several combined. Understandably, questions arise trying to make sense of how a single name can uniformly categorize so much different sounding music.

What is jazz? This seems to be the overriding question to which the semester pursues answers. There is a statement given to this question circulating the anecdotal archive of the history. Louis Armstrong said, "If you have to ask what jazz is, you'll never know." This is a telling statement regardless of its origin. (Armstrong may not have been the first to express this notion.) The implication is that jazz cannot be explained, or more deeply, its essence cannot be explained. One should know rather intuitively, meaning that one should just feel or sense it. Another quote attributed to Armstrong sheds more light. "The memory of things gone is important to a jazz musician. Things like old folks singing in the moonlight in the back yard on a hot night, or something said long ago." Memories reflect our experiences, and our experiences influence our feelings. This is a good start to answering the question posed - What is jazz?

Having discussed the *elements of jazz*, we are familiar with the terms *improvisation* and *swing*. These two elements have a symbiotic relationship in jazz. Improvisation is the music statement; swing is the feel with which it is stated. The success of a jazz performance can depend upon the depth of the improvisation, and how well it swings. While not all jazz is improvised, a large percentage of it is; and while not all jazz swings (many argue it all should), a large percentage does. Based on these statements, much performed jazz contains both elements. Improvisation and swing do go hand in hand, but swing is the more personal of the two. Yes. A musician's feelings influence the choice of notes, but those notes are coming from tangible constructs of music - scales, chords, and intervals. The swing component comes from a deeper place within the musician. While swing can be explained in tangible terms as a musically notated "swing feel," the notation is generic at best. Different jazz musicians swing their music, well, differently compared to one another. There is a learning process that involves copying another musician, but this should only serve as a springboard. An ultimate goal of any

jazz musician is finding their own voice, making their musical statements in a personalized way. This comes from the soul.

### **Task**

*The Cradle is Rocking* (1968) and *This Cat Can Play Anything* (1977) are films that do more than profile New Orleans jazz musicians George “Kid Sheik” Colar and Emanuel “Manny” Sayles, respectively. They convey the message that jazz goes beyond the notes we hear. Jazz is a “feeling.” It is a way of life that transcends the countless hours a musician spends practicing. The scenic content of both films communicates this idea through narration, dialogue, and imagery to various literal and metaphoric extents.

In an essay of 500-600 words, discuss the way jazz is presented as a “feeling” based upon scenic content in both films.

Organize your essay in a way that presents the information clearly. You may want to present information from one film, followed by the other. This is easier to manage than skipping between both films. If you decide to skip back and forth then be sure the path of information can be easily followed. Either way, it is important that the structure of your essay is cohesive. Make use of time markers in order to clarify scenes. Please adhere to the rules of grammar and spelling.

Both films are linked here twice. Once from the site [folkstreams.net](http://www.folkstreams.net)., and once from YouTube where they are posted on the official [folkstreams.net](http://www.folkstreams.net) channel. Information about the Folkstreams site is given below in Resources.

“The Cradle Is Rocking”

<http://www.folkstreams.net/film-detail.php?id=208>

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

“This Cat Can Play Anything”

<https://www.folkstreams.net/film-detail.php?id=226>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hkC2L3er1FI>

### **Thoughts to Consider**

When doing this assignment, it is important to keep in mind that a primary objective for this course is to establish a foundation on which you can build an appreciation for jazz.

Part of the appreciation will come from getting to know some of its players from a more personal perspective.

These films portray George “Kid Sheik” Colar and Emanuel “Manny” Sayles intimately as they are each telling their own story. We are given a firsthand view of their experiences as musicians, and more importantly, as human beings. We would expect the former to be a part of our study of the music; but how does the latter play into it?

George “Kid Sheik” Colar (1908-1996) and Emanuel “Manny” Sayles (1907-1986) are both New Orleans musicians. They were born into the new music called jazz. Both became fixtures on the early jazz scene in and out of New Orleans. They played the early jazz style their entire lives. Why is it important to consider the words of these two musicians when exploring the question that gives title to this assignment?

### **Resources**

The films that are presented for this assignment are found on the website **folkstreams.net**. This site’s mission statement is “to find, preserve, contextualize, and stream documentary films on American folklife.”

Its entire message, history, and partners can be found here: **<http://www.folkstreams.net/about.php>**.

Film rights information from the site reads as follows:

All titles in Folkstreams are protected by copyright.

These rights are mostly held by the filmmaker(s). The filmmakers have granted Folkstreams permission to stream their work for users to watch free of charge on their home computers. But for other permissions like downloading, using the footage in other projects or videos, or projecting the streams in a classroom or institution, the user should apply to **Folkstreams** or to the filmmaker, whose film may available as a high quality DVD from a distributor.

Copying and embedding is permitted ONLY for the short trailers on **[youtube.com/folkstreamer](http://youtube.com/folkstreamer)**. This is to facilitate sharing the clip via e-mail to bring attention to the film.

These short clips are licensed under the Creative Commons (**[creativecommons.org](http://creativecommons.org)**) agreement which requires:

- attribution (you must acknowledge the copyright holder)
- noncommercial use only
- no derivative work (the clip cannot be changed).

“The Cradle Is Rocking”

**Film by:** [Frank DeCola](#)

**Produced by:** Anthony Loeb

**Cinematographer:** Tom Davenport

**Sound:** Nigel Noble

**Editor:** Frank DeCola

**Other Credits:** Produced by the United States Information Agency in the early years of the Kennedy Administration.

**Original Format:** Film: 35mm

©1968, USIA

12 mins, Black & White

“This Cat Can Play Anything”

**Film by:** [Andrew Kolker](#), [Stevenson Palfi](#), [Eddie Kurtz](#)

**Produced by:** Stevenson Palfi with Andrew Kolker and Eddie Kurtz

**Cinematographer:** Andrew Kolker

**Sound:** Eddie Kurtz

**Editor:** Andrew Kolker, Eddie Kurtz, Stevenson Palfi

**Other Credits:** Jazz consultants: Richard Allen, Al Rose, Allen Jaffe.

**Funding:** Louisiana State Arts Council, New Orleans Bicentennial Commission, New York State Arts Council, The National Endowment for the Arts

**Original Format:** 3/4 inch videotape: U-matic

©1977 New Orleans Video Access Center

29 mins, Color



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