

THE *Bluffer's*[®] GUIDE TO

JAZZ

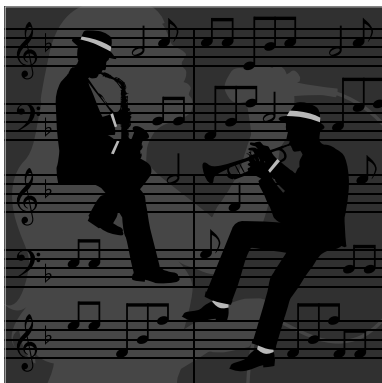
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NEW EDITION

THE *Bluffer's*[®] GUIDE TO

JAZZ



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CONTENTS

All That Jazz	5
Back to the Roots	9
Early Influences	19
Where the Roots Flourished	29
The Modern Era	39
Horn Blowers	47
They Got Rhythm	63
Other Jazz Utensils	71
More Bluffing Essentials	77
Jazz Talkin'	87
Need-to-know Albums	97
Glossary	105



If you've always assumed that
Ruby Braff was a female wrestler
and Randy Brecker is a kind of
aphrodisiac muesli, don't be put off.

ALL THAT JAZZ

Jazz is a good subject for bluffing because whoever happens to contradict you is almost certainly bluffing as well. This is because no one seems to know for certain how, where or why it all began. So your theories should, in theory, be as good as anyone else's. You may also hold the most outrageous critical opinions (for example, that Bunk Johnson was a fluent and inventive trumpet player, or that Jelly Roll Morton was a model of modesty and self-effacement), and citizens of the jazz world, far from regarding you as a nutter, will declare respect for your viewpoint and earnestly discuss the basis of your contentions.

However, there are three notes of caution. The earnest jazz enthusiast is as earnest as anyone you are ever likely to meet, so:

1. Never make jokes about jazz. If you do, make them with a fairly straight face or, at most, a slightly apologetic smile.
2. Whatever line you take, stick to it – no matter where it might lead you.

3. Don't agree with anyone completely. You might generously concur now and then in moderate mutual admiration of the art of Dink Johnson (or whoever is in the frame), but make sure that it is for different reasons. Total agreement will only lead to a reputation for indifference and might even raise suspicion.

One advantage of jazz over other kinds of music is that you don't have to listen to it if you don't want to. And plenty of people who do listen to it don't actually listen either, because they have their own agenda. While the music is being played, live or on record, they are arguing, very loudly, about how – or even if – the contents of rare and crackling old 78s and battered LPs should be transferred to CD. They are questioning whether this or that presenter/editor/columnist/authority knows what he or she is talking about.

They are pontificating on matters such as exactly when Louis Armstrong stopped being great, why Miles Davis was the way he was, what Anthony Braxton's geometric titles really mean, and why it can't be jazz without a banjo. They are asking whoever is sitting next to them which two Blue Note sleeves were designed by Andy Warhol, and whether David Stone Martin's sleeves were often better than the music within them.

This chatter used to die down only during a bass solo when it was suddenly apparent that everything had gone comparatively quiet. But then bass players realised that the subtlety and brilliance of their playing was being masked by the sound of other instruments, so they fought

back by purchasing amplifiers of their own and winding up the wick to suit themselves. Any chatter during a drum solo is usually pointless as it is too noisy even to hear your own bickering.

Do feel free to join in all this innocent fun. After all, there is no reason not to, and it's one way to advance your own credentials. If you've always assumed that Ruby Braff was a female wrestler and Randy Brecker is a kind of aphrodisiac muesli, don't be put off. Ignorance has never deterred others, and in this kind of verbal skirmishing, he who hesitates is defeated. So, get in there and grab your share of pontification.

This short but definitive guide sets out to conduct you through the main danger zones encountered in jazz discussions, and to equip you with a vocabulary and an evasive technique that will minimise the risk of being rumbled as a bluffer. It will give you a few easy-to-learn hints and techniques designed to allow you to be accepted as a jazz aficionado of rare ability and experience. But it will do more. It will give provide you with the tools to impress legions of marvelling listeners with your knowledge and insight – without anyone discovering that before reading it you didn't know the difference between a trumpophone and a mobile phone.



If you feel like suggesting that the word ‘jazz’ is derived from the African-American word ‘jizz’, meaning a certain horizontal exercise, then there’s nothing to stop you.

BACK TO THE ROOTS

The glorious thing about jazz is that there is neither a universally accepted definition of the word nor a factually provable account of the music's origins.

You might want to maintain, for instance, that the word 'jazz' is simply a corruption of 'jars', arising from the fact that an improvised, percussive sort of music was first played by the people of what became The Gambia. They used glass jars, washed ashore in 1756 after a consignment of Frank Cooper's Oxford marmalade went down off West Africa, striking them with dried vulture bones. Always be specific about stuff like this; it adds conviction, and such detailed knowledge should deter contradiction. Even if it's patent nonsense.

Or if you feel like suggesting that the word 'jazz' is derived from the African-American word 'jizz', meaning a certain horizontal exercise, then there's nothing to stop you. Unless you happen to be talking to the likes of jazz historians such as Paul Oliver, Alyn Shipton or Scott Yanow, who will likely have embarked on some even more abstruse theory before you can get a word in.

You could point out that more recent research has revealed that, contrary to popular belief, jazz really began in 1846 when a famous Belgian called Adolphe Sax invented the saxophone. For years Sax was the only famous Belgian. He originally had the military and circus band market in mind, but there was a decidedly hepcat (*see* 'Glossary') element in his make-up. Contemporary accounts claimed that when he was developing the instrument, blowing experimental licks in his workshop, he sounded like an amalgam of Lester Young, Charlie Parker, Sidney Bechet, Gerry Mulligan, Paul Desmond and, er, others. Sadly, this is mere hearsay – not helped by the fact that none of these noted jazz musicians had yet been born.

Ironically, early practitioners of so-called classic jazz repudiated the saxophone, probably because they suspected that in years to come certain critics would make menacing noises about the purity of the music being sullied by its blaringly intrusive sound.

You could easily quote an example of this prophecy being fulfilled when fundamentalist post-war British jazz critic Rex Harris wrote sniffily: 'The tenor-saxophonist Coleman Hawkins possessed great powers of improvisation which, had they been canalised into a different medium of expression, e.g., the clarinet, might well have secured him a permanent place in jazz.' (*Jazz*, Pelican Books, 1952.) When 'The Hawk' came across this, he was said to have been deeply affected, declaring: 'Oh, my goodness gracious, if I'd had the faintest inkling of this, I'd have taken better care of the old liquorice stick.' Or words to that effect.

Then there is the music itself. You might perhaps have wondered about all those interminable bass and drum solos. Long ago, bass players and drummers established inalienable rights to self-indulgent solo displays, often of inordinate length and tediousness. This is mainly because, given the bulky nature of the tools of their trade, only the bass player and the drummer were likely to possess their own transport. Their ownership of cars meant that when it came to getting a lift home other members of the band were beholden to them. Thus did fear of being stranded come to outweigh artistic scruples. (A notable exception to this general principle was one-time Humphrey Lyttelton bassist, Brian Brocklehurst, who cheerfully pedalled from gig to gig carrying the big fiddle on his bike.)



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Be very wary of bluffing with genuine jazz musicians. They aren't likely to be bothered with the Gambian theory of the origins of jazz or Sax's experimental riffing. Apart from the union rate for the job, their main preoccupation is with the chord sequences. One horn blower, reputed

to be 'Slusher' Treadwell, not only knew every chord of every tune in the band's repertoire but also had the knack of enunciating some of them while actually playing his instrument. This is no mean accomplishment. Hold an egg cup so that its bowl covers your lips and try saying clearly, out of the side of your mouth, 'Don't forget the G seventh.'

JAZZ TYPES

There are really only three kinds of jazz that you need to know about:

1. **Traditional** Jazz conceived and recorded before 1940; mostly a collective improvisation based loosely on 'When the Saints Go Marching In'.
2. **Modern** Jazz conceived and recorded since 1940.

It is not actually possible, though many critics try to do it, to like or support both Trad and Mod. It is akin to saying that you support both the Conservative and Labour parties at the same time. So decide which you uphold and decry the other on every occasion; or, if you can't make up your mind what you like, stroke your chin and judiciously say you prefer:

3. **Mainstream** Jazz of a sort of Lib-Dem persuasion, or 'middle of the road'. The term was conjured up one restless night by the eminent critic Stanley Dance after an evening at a jam session involving Duke Ellington and members of his band, together with Brad Gowans, Horsecollar Draper and Eddie Condon. Lost for a word

to describe what he heard he sought to dignify the proceedings by calling it ‘mainstream’.

JAZZ HISTORY

Compared with institutions such as pawnbroking and opera, jazz is too young to have much history, which hasn’t stopped it accumulating a quite disproportionate body of myth, fable and legend. If it were not for a few solid and unassailable truths like Fats Waller, Pinetop Smith’s death certificate, Ronnie Scott’s club and Thelonious Monk’s version of ‘Nice Work If You Can Get it’, one might suspect that the jazz press had made the whole thing up. The truth is, only 75% of it was made up, chiefly by Jelly Roll Morton (1890-1941), with a few inept contributions from Bunk Johnson and sundry mendacious jazzmen.

A myth of Morton’s making that could have been very helpful was his declaration that he personally invented jazz in 1902. Even his business card modestly proclaimed him as ‘Inventor of Jazz and Stomps’. If the so-called experts had had the sense to go along with his claim, jazz would have a concise, tidy history and we should be free to concentrate on listening to the music instead of arguing about it. Jazz history books would have been able to divide events neatly into AM and PM – ante-Morton and post-Morton.

Always remember: the fabric of the history of jazz is liberally embroidered with names, a roll call from Irving Aaronson to Mike Zwerin. Never heard of them? Don’t worry; your audience is unlikely to have done, either. In between, just to keep it interesting and to make it harder

for newcomers to crack the code, are numerous other characters, many of whom probably didn't exist at all. You might like to keep in conversational reserve a reference to Stavín' Chain, a genuine jazz-sounding name so marginal as to be practically off the page. Elsewhere we offer a fine bargain selection of names such as Nesuhi Ertegun, Eustern Woodfork, Husk O'Hare, Ishman Bracey, Hociel Tebo, Porridge Foot Pete, Deaf Rhubarb Blenkinsop, John Fallstitch, Wim Poppink and Cornelius Plumb. You are perfectly entitled to disbelieve any or all of these, but you have to admit they have tremendous potential to lend colour to a conversation. And, believe it or not, some of them have actually figured in some quite respectable CD inlays.

The name that is totally unavoidable in jazz history is good old **Jelly Roll Morton**, about whom it is imperative to know a handful of basic facts – such as that he was a pimp, a gambler, a pool shark and a small-time hustler involved in lots of dubious enterprises; he also had a diamond set into one of his front teeth. His given first name was Ferdinand (and his original surname was Lamothe or Le Menthe, which he changed to Morton because he didn't like being called 'Frenchy'). He acquired the nickname 'Jelly Roll' which, like 90% of all names and words used in jazz, has more to do with sexual prowess than musical ability. The common belief is that Morton must have been rather good at it, but not according to his widow, who recalled, somewhere or other, that he was rather less than outstanding in this department.

Once you've absorbed all of this vital information,

you need to store a few trifles, e.g., that he was one of the first musicians to compose pieces specifically for jazz performance; that he was a superb, if occasionally prim-sounding, piano player and a very skilled bandleader; and that while he irritated people with his boasting, he irritated them even more by proving that much of what he bragged about was true. Moreover, he did it all (hear him on those famous interviews with Alan Lomax) with the avuncular charm of a real Southern gentleman.

Morton was born in New Orleans and consistently lied about his age, perversely claiming to be older than he really was. He let people assume he had been born in 1885, and it wasn't until 1985 when his 100th anniversary celebrations were in full swing that fresh research suggested that his true birthdate was 1890.

Bunk Johnson was another who was economical with the truth concerning his real age, insisting he was born earlier than he was. What helped him with this fiction was that he actually looked old, even as a young man. He persuaded a few eager pioneer historians to believe him, and the record is being set straight only now by learned gentlemen at various US universities.

You can likely now see why it doesn't really matter if you occasionally throw in a few dubious nuggets masquerading as facts. Jazz history totters on the shaky ground of misinformation. Nevertheless, it is always a good thing to have a few firm facts handy, and one we know for certain is that the first jazz recording was made in 1917 by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band (*see* 'Horn Blowers').

UP THE RIVER AND ALL THAT JAZZ

Jazz, according to one popular and largely unverifiable theory, was invented in New Orleans around 1am on 17 November 1887, the creation of a Creole barber's assistant called **Thermidus Brown**, known to acquaintances and admirers alike as 'Jazz-bo' on account of his being such a snappy dresser. He was tootling on a battered cornet, bought in 1867 from an ex-Civil War bandsman called Ephraim Draper. As always, by 1am he had succumbed to the influence of local rye whisky and began to mistime his phrases, giving the tune a strangely propulsive sort of quality. This greatly excited the customers in 'Loopy' Dumaine's lakeside crawfish restaurant where he was playing at the time. Later authorities came to define what he was doing as syncopation, but to Thermidus it was simply an inner memory of the banjo rhythms from the old plantation where he served his time as a slave in his younger days. This might be plausible had he been sober enough to remember anything.

We don't know much about Thermidus, except that his father was a mule-breaker called Brown and that he was born in New Orleans circa 1847. On 5 July 1894 he was aboard a riverboat en route for St Louis, where he was apparently going to invent ragtime. But at 2am, drunk, of course, he fell overboard and drowned.

You can afford to look sorrowful if recounting this story and, if you feel bold enough, you might even start humming 'Ol' Man River'. And if you really want to push your luck, sing:

*He mus' know sumpin'
But don't say nuthin'...*

...which might be good advice for you.

Despite Thermidus's tragic demise, local dance-band musicians had picked up the exciting new sounds that he'd created and by 1897 or so they were to be heard everywhere in New Orleans. One player worth noting was the ex-editor of a scandal sheet known as *The Cricket* (rare copies of which now sell for thousands of dollars). This renegade journalist-turned-jazzman was one **Charles 'Buddy' Bolden**.

Buddy's main – indeed his only – claim to fame was the loudness of his playing – it being said, with the straightest of faces, that he could be heard '14 miles away on a clear night'. As nobody who was 14 miles away at the time has ever come forward to verify this, it is yet another jazz legend that has to be treated with a modicum of suspicion. Proclaim it anyway if the subject of loudness comes up.

The would-be jazz bluffer may already sense the deep and treacherous currents of moonshine that ebb and flow beneath the surface of jazz history. The options are to express an unshakeable belief in these legends (a standpoint taken by many writers of jazz books); or to condemn them as being obviously ridiculous (as difficult an argument to uphold as trying to maintain that Noah never built an ark).

The next thing that happened to jazz was that it went 'up the river'. This is a useful phrase to bandy about and will ensure nods of knowing approval from anyone who has

heard it and not had a clue what it meant. It is nonetheless a vital moment in the evolution of jazz and so you must pretend to be *au fait* with the circumstances surrounding it. Again, only the faintest vestiges of the truth have been hinted at here. The fact is that an unscrupulous individual with the doom-laden name of Fate Marable, who had come from Paducah, Kentucky, and was a third-rate exponent of the steam calliope (an inefficient instrument which suffered – as you can see in old silent films – from leaky valves), began to feel that New Orleans was getting overcrowded with jazz musicians. Especially the good ones like Louis Armstrong. So, for a modest sum, he bought himself the right to act as a sort of employment agent for hiring jazz musicians to play on riverboats that plied up and down the Mississippi.

He paid them enough to tempt them to make the journey upstream to far-flung places like St Louis, knowing that they would never be able to afford to get back. Which left things much better for his clients in New Orleans. He would lure the unsuspecting riverboat mugs with posters that made Chicago look like a bracing seaside town and off they would go, hoping to find fame and fortune, with a one-way ticket in one hand and an instrument case in the other. None of them knew that, back home in Paducah, he had once run a travel agency.