Chapter 1

In the Beginning: Entering the World of Jazz

In This Chapter

- Surveying jazz’s traits and roots
- Knowing some elements of jazz theory
- Looking at jazz’s instruments
- Traveling through jazz history
- Growing into a jazz fan
- Becoming a jazz musician

You may not own many jazz CDs now, and you may not think you know anything about jazz. Yet the music is such a part of the American experience that it creeps in from the periphery through radio, film, television, and live performances you come across by accident, through friends who unexpectedly have jazz playing in their homes, and, these days, via hundreds of Web sites.

In the pages ahead, you dive deep into the music. In this chapter, I describe the lay of the land of jazz, giving you details that point you in different directions, and you visit the beginnings of jazz and the theory behind the music. You also take a trip through the land of instruments — how does jazz get its sound? On your journey to becoming a fan, you meet the great players and discover a bit about playing jazz yourself. By the time your travels come to an end in this chapter, you may know which styles and periods of jazz you want to visit first in the rest of the book.

Delving into Jazz’s Characteristics and Roots

Most likely, you know jazz when you hear it, but you may not be able to describe it. Jazz’s signature traits include improvisation, individual voices, swing, and syncopation.
Improvisation is when a jazz musician invents what he plays — often gathering inspiration from the melody or chords of a song but sometimes creating completely from scratch.

Individual voices combine quantity of notes, phrasing, speed, tone, and subtleties such as bending strings on a guitar or varieties of breathing on a horn.

Swing refers to jazz’s relentless forward momentum, a beat that makes you want to move or dance or pound your hands on a table.

How I fell in love with jazz

My relationship with jazz began in ninth grade with Dave Brubeck, as I learned to pound out those strange 5/4 patterns on the drum set I chose because Ringo Starr had one. It was my first experience with music different than and more challenging than four-beats-to-the-bar rock and pop. Now I had to count in fives. 1-2-3-4-5. As I pumped that basic beat out on bass drum, I learned how to split my brain so my hands could move in separate syncopated patterns. It wasn’t easy, but I learned how to do it before I learned how to juggle three tennis balls.

But it wasn’t until high school when I really fell in love with jazz, and the object of my affection was Miles Davis. Given the rock and roll context of my stadium concert teen years, Miles was the logical place to begin, with funky beats and electric guitars and a horn filtered through loud electronic effects.

In between these experiences, I was touched by jazz in other random ways that fit the music’s bigger picture now but didn’t then because I couldn’t see it.

My good friend and jazz jam partner took lessons from a cool black pianist named Wilbur Barranco. At the time, mostly what I knew about him was that he told my friend to “watch the little finger” — meaning that even the pinkie must play its part on the piano. In recent years, I found his name in small type on records he made with Charlie Parker.

In high school, I briefly dated a girl who knew a guy who played in a big band led by a trumpeter named Maynard Ferguson. From photos I knew he had a big shock of white hair, and from television knew he was flamboyant and could hit amazingly high notes. Later, I learned he was part of a big band continuum that began in the swing era.

One night before I could drive, my mom dropped me off at a jazz festival in Berkeley, California, at the open-air Greek Theatre. I remember an excited guy in the audience chanting, “John Coltrane, John Coltrane, John Coltrane, John Coltrane . . . ” It didn’t mean anything to me at the time, but it stayed in my head, and today, I realize that the concert took place only two or three years after the great saxophonist’s death, so I was present when Coltrane’s memory was alive and many fans had first-hand experience of his music. From that moment I began to realize that jazz and its fans were a special group, tightly bonded by the music, and that listening to live jazz could become a sort of spiritual experience. Jazz’s mix of musical sophistication and emotional intensity is what keeps me in love with the music.
Syncopation is the way jazz musicians place notes and accents before and after the beat in ways that emphasize the beat and keep it moving. Syncopation is what makes jazz sound so different from the more regular rhythms of classical or pop music.

Sometimes one of these elements is more prevalent than the others, or a key element is entirely absent. One rule about jazz is that there aren’t many rules. However, whether you listen to Louis Armstrong’s early music, Benny Goodman’s swing band, Charlie Parker’s bebop, Miles Davis’s cool jazz, or John Coltrane’s spiritual flights, you can usually find these key ingredients. (I cover all these folks in Part II.)

So now you may be wondering: How exactly did jazz begin? It’s a complicated story with many footnotes, but jazz was born in New Orleans around the turn of the 20th century when African Americans started mixing their culture with European instruments and elements of classical music. Elemental rhythms and soulful vocals, as well as all manner of drums and instruments including horns and pre-banjos, came straight out of Africa. Blues that originated among slaves and gospel from black churches were two other key ingredients. From Europe came Adolphe Sax’s invention (guess which instrument he created?) and other brass instruments, as well as pianos that were a part of many low- and middle-income households and classical music that was a part of one’s education in certain circles.

Chapter 2 is full of additional information on the traits and roots of jazz.

Getting the Lowdown on Jazz Theory

Good jazz hits you at an emotional level, but it’s also technically complex and challenging music. Many jazz tunes use either the 12-measure structure of blues, or the 32-measure structure of popular songs. Knowing how these structures work, as well as a little about the rhythms that propel good jazz, and the ways in which jazz musicians improvise, helps you gain a deeper appreciation of the music. (I cover jazz theory in Chapter 3.)

Familiarizing Yourself with the Instruments of Jazz

Although any instrument can be used to play jazz, some instruments on which new styles of jazz were invented include the following: basses, drums, pianos, trumpets, and saxophones. Every one of these instruments has its heroes in every era, and that’s because these instruments are best suited to the roles required in jazz.
Basses, drums, and pianos come together as rhythm sections that propel the music. Pianists can also play chords and melodies.

Trumpets and saxophones carry melodies or improvise with a sound that easily carries over the band. The sound of these horns sometimes resembles the sound of a human voice, which is probably one reason why these instruments convey emotions most effectively.

Head to Chapter 4 for details about these instruments and a few others used in jazz, such as trombones, clarinets, flutes, guitars, vibraphones, and organs.

**Meeting Jazz Greats throughout History**

Hundreds of musicians make up the history of jazz, but a handful of talented players stand out as essential innovators at key turning points. By following this line of musicians, you can fill in the rest of the music’s history around them:

**Louis Armstrong**: He was the hero of New Orleans jazz and made jazz’s first important recordings in New Orleans in the ’20s.

**Benny Goodman**: Goodman was an icon of big band swing in the 1930s — a great clarinetist and leader and one of the first to feature black and white musicians together in a popular jazz ensemble.

**Duke Ellington**: As a leader in the 1930s, he took the art of the big band to new heights with his composing and arranging, and he was a phenomenal pianist who made important recordings with musicians ranging from bassist Jimmy Blanton to avant garde saxophonist John Coltrane.

**Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker**: These two men were players primarily responsible for inventing bebop — a form of speedy, mostly improvised jazz — in the 1940s.

**Miles Davis**: Davis played an important part in several styles of jazz beginning with bebop in the 1940s and continuing through laidback cool jazz, electric jazz, jazz rock, and synthesized jazz. His interpretations of compositions such as Gershwin’s *Porgy & Bess* and dozens of popular songs set a high standard for soloists.

**John Coltrane**: In the 1960s, Coltrane opened the door to free improvisation and influences from around the world.

**Ornette Coleman**: He took improvisation in the 1960s to the edge of the jazz universe.

And jazz continued to flourish beyond the 1960s. The ’70s brought more electric jazz, as pianists Chick Corea and Herbie Hancock experimented with synthesizers, Miles Davis assimilated funk, rock, and soul; and the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians in Chicago gave freely improvised music a rallying point.
Meanwhile, Latin music had a significant impact on jazz beginning with Jelly Roll Morton’s “Spanish tinge,” continuing with Dizzy Gillespie’s use of Latin rhythms, and the emergence of Latin jazz giants like Tito Puente.

In recent years, jazz musicians collaborated with all sorts of players from other genres. For example:

- Dave Brubeck performed with symphony orchestras.
- Saxophonist Joshua Redman performed with the Rolling Stones.
- Herbie Hancock recorded with rock stars Carlos Santana and Sting.

Dozens of original artists over the years have contributed masterful music, from Bix Beiderbecke to Lester Young, and musicians whose names cover the entire middle of the alphabet. In Part II, I provide you with a brief history of jazz from its humble beginnings to the exciting artists of today.

Jazz can’t be divided into neatly defined periods. While distinct styles emerged in certain eras, many musicians crossed from one era into the next, radically redefining their approach. Players in the forefront include Miles Davis and Coleman Hawkins. In every style of jazz, you can usually hear elements from earlier eras. Also, remember that the history I provide is only a simple abstraction of what really happened. For almost every example, there’s a counter example. Still, a basic history gives you a framework for understanding the music, whether everyone agrees on the parts of the frame.

**Becoming a Fan**

Jazz has rules and theories, but the best jazz is music that hits you at a gut level. If you haven’t heard much jazz but you’re a patient fan of music, all you need to do is spend an hour listening to any of jazz’s hundreds of important recordings. You don’t have to be a rocket scientist to connect with Thelonious Monk, Charles Mingus, or Betty Carter. All it takes is a willingness to listen and withholding judgment until the music gets inside your head.

In Part III of this book, I give you tips on appreciating jazz to its fullest:

- Chapter 11 has details on recognizing how jazz has seeped into popular culture, from films and advertising to fashion, literature, and beyond.
- I help you throw a jazzy dinner party in Chapter 12, with advice on décor, playlists, jazz talk, and more.
- There’s nothing quite like a live jazz concert; in Chapter 13, I give you a survival guide for attending shows in clubs and concert halls.
- Ready to hit the road? Chapter 14 is full of facts on jazz festivals in the United States and around the world.
Although reading a book like this may help you decide what kind of jazz you like, how to build a collection, and where to hear live jazz, becoming a fan is largely a personal journey guided by your own intuitions and tastes. That’s the beauty of jazz. There’s something for everyone.

**Playing Your Heart Out**

If you develop a passion for jazz or even an obsession, you may want to start playing it. Listening to some of the greats makes that idea seem intimidating, but after you select an instrument, take some lessons, and practice. You can begin playing a simple blues-based jazz song within weeks. If the bug hits hard enough, you may be surprised what you can do after a year. Check out Chapter 15 for plenty of handy advice for aspiring jazz musicians, such as selecting an instrument, finding a teacher, and studying music in college.

Chapter 16 is the place to go if you want to take your musicianship to the next level: joining an established band or starting your own. I give you tips on recruiting members, being a respected leader, playing well with others, and selecting music to play. I also show you how to publicize your band, land cool gigs, prepare for a performance, and hit the road with minimum hassle.

Eventually, you may find yourself acquiring more CDs and audio equipment and adding shelves to house your jazz collection, and you may even decide to install a home studio where you can play and record your own music. There’s nothing like the feeling of making music yourself with a few friends. It’s one thing to listen; it’s quite another to play and to feel the music actually flowing through your body, into your instrument, and out into the world.

Thanks to affordable digital recording and easy distribution via the Internet, today’s jazz musicians can pursue individual styles and make a living without having to sell millions of CDs. Many successful players today play gigs, sell CDs and books online, and send newsletters to their growing personal mailing lists. In Chapter 17, I discuss the use of today’s technology to record jazz at home and sell it online.