

# History of Afro-American Jazz

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By Cody Smith

What is Jazz and why should I care? These are the type of questions I asked myself when I heard my master's program at the Heidelberg Center for American Studies would be including a course on African American Jazz History in this semester's curriculum. I must admit I have never listened much to jazz before and I generally viewed music as a form of entertainment. Luckily, I had no idea what I was in for.

Over the past several weeks I realized that not only was I ignorant about what jazz actually is, but that I liked many of its most influential musicians. Throughout the class, each of my classmates chose a prominent musician to research and present to us. In doing so, we were introduced to the beginnings of jazz and provided with a narrative on how it developed over the 20<sup>th</sup> century into a national and international phenomenon.

In the second portion of our class, we were given the opportunity to gain a more indepth perspective on jazz by attending events organized by the Enjoy Jazz Festival in the region. By attending these events, we were not only able to learn more about the music's history but also became aware of its continued significance in society.

To my surprise, I also learned of the sociopolitical impacts the music, as well as its creators, had on the United States of America. I learned that its development went hand in hand with the civil rights movement and often provided an artistic outlet for the widespread feelings of anger, fear, and hopelessness felt by blacks in America.

All in all, I am very happy to have had my eyes opened to jazz and the effects it had on history. As an American, it is essential to understand how the ongoing struggle for equality has advanced throughout my country's history, and I feel this course has provided a crucial perspective on a complex development.