

A Brief, Verbal Definition of Jazz

Jazz is a distinctively American art music that began to evolve in the early 1920s, and

(1) that was created and developed by African Americans working with numerous musical influences and in response to the American social milieu to which they were subjected, and

(2) that exhibits a set of musical characteristics some of which are always present in jazz.

Although this definition is clearly inadequate — both because of its brevity and because it leaves out the the specific characteristics of the music — there are some insights we can draw from it. First, jazz was born out of conflict — the conflict African-Americans experienced with their social and political environment. Even after slavery, discrimination was still prevalent. Another prominent feature is the total lack of physical and expressive freedom of black people in this country. In the 19th and earliest 20th Century expressions of individuality, an activity which suggest freedom or equality with white people, could result in imprisonment or even lynching. This led to the development of a music that attempts to deal with conflict by beautifying it, protesting it, or simply expressing it all in musical terms. It is for this reason the jazz has often been described as a music of protest. Jazz is uniquely conducive to freedom of personal expression and individualism, perhaps a response to the

lack of these rights in the everyday life of the American
“Negro.”