



Jazz: America's Original Diversity Success Story

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Long before the Civil Rights Act, long before Brown vs. The Board of Education, and long before President Truman's integration of the armed forces, black and white jazz musicians were breaking social taboos in order to share and learn from each other. In the 1920s white musicians in Chicago would head down to the south side after their gigs for after hours jam sessions with black musicians. In the 1930s Benny Goodman, perhaps the most popular band leader of the time, added black musicians to his all-white big band — a revolutionary step for diversity in the workplace. In the 1950s Stan Getz collaborated with Brazilian musicians to create a new musical style — Bossa Nova. Then

as now, Jazz possesses a culture that thrives, indeed benefits, from diversity. Jazz is America's original diversity success story.

For almost 100 years, jazz has led white to black, black to white, Western to Eastern, American to European, Northern to Southern, visceral to cerebral. In Jazz, working with, and learning from people of diverse cultures is a core value. What led these musicians to embrace diversity decades before it became the concept that we know today? How has that embrace led to jazz's evolution, strength, and constant change and innovation? And, what can the rest of us learn from the Jazz example?

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HOW A NEW MUSIC WAS BORN

Completely new forms of music are rare throughout history. So how did this new form, this uniquely *American* form, of music come into being? We can look to America's "melting pot" tradition for the answer. The creation of jazz was due to a melting pot of sorts. Put simply, jazz was allowed by the coming together of European musical tradition and African musical tradition. European music featured advanced harmonic and melodic elements while African music was very advanced rhythmically and had other unique properties that European tradition didn't. By combining elements of these two *unlike* traditions a new music was born.

di·verse:

(2) composed of distinct or unlike elements or qualities

Perhaps through this fusion jazz acquired one of its significant traits — acculturation. That is, adopting and absorbing characteristics from the music of other cultures. Because of this trait, rather than remaining stagnant, jazz has been extremely innovative and has created many distinct sub styles since the original Dixieland music that came out of New Orleans in the early 1900s. In its growth it has looked to all kinds of European music, as well as Cuban and Brazilian music, marching music, blues, Broadway, Gospel, country, Indian, Jewish klezmer, and Arabic music. In a brilliant display of acculturation, jazz in

the late 1960s and 70s even borrowed from the offspring it gave birth to — Rock and Roll — and created jazz-rock fusion.

This trait — this culture — of borrowing from virtually any other kind of music, has led individual jazz musicians to not only accept diversity, not only embrace it, but to **proactively seek it out**. Just like those white musicians in Chicago sought out their south side counter parts, just as black jazz musicians in 1940s and 50s looked to Stravinsky, Dvorak, and Debussy, today this trend continues. For example, the last record Miles Davis made before he died (in the early 1990s) mixed jazz with hip-hop music. In the jazz tradition, Miles was always looking for new sources of inspiration.

WHY SEEK DIVERSITY?

The motivation for jazz musicians to seek out diversity is simple – because it makes them better. It enhances their ability to express themselves, differentiate themselves, and find a unique voice. This last point – achieving a recognizable, unique voice – is perhaps the vanguard of jazz accomplishment. And it is no easy task. The primary way for a player to develop a distinct sound is to blend as many influences as possible and find a personal combination that no one else has. Clearly it is in musician's self-interest to seek out diversity.

To understand the need to diversify, the demands on jazz musicians must be understood. Jazz musicians are not only expected to try to find their own unique style – to sound unlike everyone else – they are supposed to continually find new depths, avoid repetition, and frequently reinvent themselves. The nature of jazz improvisation is not to play a scripted part, not even to play a predictable part, but to break new ground – to surprise the audience and the even the player him or herself. Given that there are only twelve notes in the Western scale, this may sound

like an insurmountable task.

From my experience it is extremely difficult to find these new required depths. To succeed musicians have to combine emotion, knowledge, technique, experience, spirit, and risk taking. They have to have a "well" within. To draw from this well, there has to be a lot of water to tap. The more variety of techniques you have available (which come from diverse influences), the more you can vary your expression and continue to get different.

HOW TO PROACTIVELY SEEK DIVERSITY

As established, jazz musicians are part of a culture that proactively seeks diversity. They seek influence from other cultures by listening to records, learning songs, reading about musicians from other cultures, and by seeking to hear, meet, and learn from a broad range of fellow musicians.

Minneapolis-based Saxophonist Doug Little gives us two great examples of proactively seeking diversity. He recently spent time in Cuba and has been studying Cuban music and looking to find new ideas from it. So what is he finding?

"While the greatest challenges in jazz involve melody and harmony," Little says, "Cuban and Latin music challenge you rhythmically. The rhythm provides the interest and excitement. As you might imagine, I'm focusing a lot more on rhythmic development now than I was before."

However, Little didn't need to travel outside our borders to find cross-cultural pollination. He recalls time he spent playing with African-American blues singer Big Walter Smith, "I learned that the blues has its own set of values that are different from jazz. Blues is all about the feel and the sound. Playing a lot of notes, like you might in jazz, is usually not appropriate. I remember Big Walter would say 'don't play so many notes, just play me the melody.'" Thus, Little's musicianship, his approach, his sound, has been shaped by the influence of Big Walter and the blues.

For jazz musicians, European Classical music has always been a hugely important source for harmonic and melodic ideas as well as for instrumentation. Classical technique has also been influential as virtuosity is often associated with the great jazz improvisers. Some of the important early innovators of jazz were classically trained

in Europe and brought their ideas back with them. Jazz musicians continued to look across the Atlantic as the new music developed and today Classical music still provides a vast source for ideas.

Pianist Mary Louise Knutson studied classical music before becoming an accomplished jazz improviser. The European approach has affected her in two ways. "First, my Classical training influences how I hear music. I listen with a large scope – focusing on dynamics, articulation, orchestration, and interaction."

"In addition, people often comment on my touch. Classical taught me to use a wide range of articulation that adds diversity to my playing. I use a range of attack, dynamics, and speed which are techniques, values, I learned from the European tradition."

DIVERSITY IN ACTION

Jazz musicians approach learning with "open ears." They study, emulate, and ultimately incorporate techniques and sensibilities from other cultures, mix that with their own strong individuality, strengths, and primary culture. Without this approach the music of jazz would have stagnated eighty years ago. Because of it, the music has been blessed with a thriving, passionate, evolving force. In jazz you can find influence from

cultures all over the world, yet it remains, above all, uniquely American.

While the issue of diversity is now visible on the radar of human resources management, it is in its infancy in much of corporate America. In many professional and business magazines there is talk of what diversity means, what its implications are, how to implement diversity programs. Proving the business case for diversity is another hot topic.

Jazz has been successfully practicing diversity for nearly a hundred years. It is clear how it has impacted and benefited the development of the music, provided the music with innovative vigor, and benefited countless individual jazz musicians (not to mention the listeners!). Perhaps it's time for the business world to ask – what is there in the jazz diversity model that we can learn from?

AUTHOR

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