



Why Jazz?: A Concise Guide

By Kevin Whitehead

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What was the first jazz record? Are jazz solos really improvised? How did jazz lay the groundwork for rock and country music? In *Why Jazz?*, author and NPR jazz critic Kevin Whitehead provides lively, insightful answers to these and many other fascinating questions, offering an entertaining guide for both novice listeners and long-time fans.

Organized chronologically in a convenient question and answer format, this terrific resource makes jazz accessible to a broad audience, and especially to readers who've found the music bewildering or best left to the experts. Yet *Why Jazz?* is much more than an informative Q&A; it concisely traces the century-old history of this American and global art form, from its beginnings in New Orleans up through the current postmodern period. Whitehead provides brief profiles of the archetypal figures of jazz--from Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington to Wynton Marsalis and John Zorn--and illuminates their contributions as musicians, performers, and composers. Also highlighted are the building blocks of the jazz sound--call and response, rhythmic contrasts, personalized performance techniques and improvisation--and discussion of how visionary musicians have reinterpreted these elements to continually redefine jazz, ushering in the swing era, bebop, cool jazz, hard bop, and the avant-garde. Along the way, *Why Jazz?* provides helpful plain-English descriptions of musical terminology and techniques, from "blue notes" to "conducted improvising." And unlike other histories which haphazardly cover the stylistic branches of jazz that emerged after the 1960s, *Why Jazz?* groups latter-day musical trends by decade, the better to place them in historical context.

Whether read in self-contained sections or as a continuous narrative, this compact reference presents a trove of essential information that belongs on the shelf of anyone who's ever been interested in jazz.

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Why Jazz?: A Concise Guide By Kevin Whitehead Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #628384 in Books
- Published on: 2011-01-03
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 5.70" h x .80" w x 8.10" l, .72 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 184 pages

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Editorial Review

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Whitehead delivers a survey of the genre that's painfully simple for even the casual jazz fan but readable enough to pull in neophytes, especially those who catch Whitehead's jazz reviews on NPR's Fresh Air. The information—a brief tutorial on how the music works, followed by a historical survey of jazz—is delivered in bite-size pieces presented in Q&A format. Sample questions: "What material do jazz musicians play?" "What is stride piano?" "What is cool jazz?" "How are modern jazz musicians educated?" If the questions are simplistic, Whitehead still covers a lot of bases: jazz theory, origins of the genre, seminal figures, subgenres, and, helpfully, "postmodern" jazz. A nice, light primer that might be useful as collateral reading for beginning jazz-appreciation classes. --Alan Moores

Review

"Whitehead's concise responses deliver the answers that reveal his deep knowledge of the music and sharp style. Even readers who never touched a piano will be able to follow his summation of why bebop was such a radical departure. This book belongs on the syllabus of all introductory jazz courses." --*Downbeat*,

Editors' Pick

"Whitehead is a pithy writer, stylish without getting sidetracked by his own cleverness." --
[ChicagoReader.com](#)

"It used to be said that anyone who immediately appreciated new and different musical approaches in jazz "had ears." Mr. Whitehead has ears, and a catholicity of taste to accurately describe, although not necessarily subscribe to, different kinds of jazz. He possesses the critical tools to differentiate between the authentic and the bogus, and he has a clear writing style that enables him (for the most part) to write about complicated music in an understandable way....Mr. Whitehead manages to offer informed, concise and jargon-free insights into every kind of jazz and every important innovator, and does so in a reader-friendly style that should appeal to jazz fans and those who simply want to learn a bit more about the music." --*The Washington Times*

"Whitehead poses many substantive and important questions about the origins of the music, its substance, its major innovators, and its principal ebbs and flows. His answers are mini-essays on these topics, most of which have been carefully pared to a minimum of clear and smart words...The brevity of this book ought not be confused with a lack of substance. Whitehead's tone is conversational, engaging, and direct, and he deserves plenty of credit for an original concept...But perhaps the best thing for me about the book is the ambition of the last chapter, "Jazz After 1980," in which Whitehead sorts out the trends and innovators of the

past 30 years in just 27 pages - a remarkable achievement that shows how carefully he listens and how cogently he judges." --The Arts Fuse

"A breezy read in question-and-answer format, and it's as necessary as ever these days, as distant as jazz has become to the general population." --Patrick Jarenwattananon, NPR's "A Blog Supreme"

"With remarkable precision and polish, he traces the lineaments of each genre, discerns the significance of key figures, explains the anatomy of sound, and sketches the important venues - making this a useful reference for a puzzled or curious audience." --*Books and Culture*

"An admirably concise primer in Q&A format that covers lots of ground without being preachy." --
FinancialTimes.com

"Despite its brevity it functions as effectively, in its way, as vaster tomes by the likes of Gary Giddins or Alyn Shipton because Whitehead is a succinct, amusing summarist (part of the gig as longtime National Public Radio critic) and commands a broad appreciation and experience of the music...He's concerned with brass tacks and nails points with precision, deftly handling the jazz education debate or the crux of George Russell's Lydian chromatic concept." --*DownBeat*

About the Author

Kevin Whitehead is the longtime jazz critic for National Public Radio's "Fresh Air" and has written about jazz for many publications, including the *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Down Beat*, and the *Village Voice*. He is the author of *New Dutch Swing* (1998), and his essays have appeared in such collections as *Da Capo Best Music Writing 2006*, *Jazz: The First Century*, and *The Cartoon Music Book*.

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