

A Brief History of Jazz Guitar

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Early Jazz

The stringed, chord-playing rhythm instrument typical of early jazz ensembles was the banjo. This was due to the fact that the banjo was much louder than guitars of the time and could be heard in groups which included military band-style instruments such as brass, saxes, clarinets, and drums -- the most common instruments in early jazz. The demand for guitars by jazz musicians, and the general worldwide rise in the popularity of the guitar in the early 20th century induced luthiers to begin building louder guitars which would be useful in a variety of musical settings. Perhaps the most important of these was the Gibson L5, an acoustic archtop guitar which was first produced in 1923 and is considered by many to be the first real "jazz" guitar. The L5 was played by such pioneering jazz guitarists as Eddie Lang. Slowly, through the 1930s, the guitar began to displace the banjo as the primary chordal rhythm instrument in jazz music as it offered the potential to voice chords of greater harmonic complexity, and its somewhat more muted tone blended well with the acoustic bass (bass viol) which, by this time, had almost completely replaced the tuba as the dominant bass instrument in jazz music (still known as the "upright" bass in jazz parlance).

Advent of Electric Guitar

The next important development in jazz guitar came in the mid to late 1930s with the advent of electrical amplification. Although not the first commercial producer to do so, Gibson began manufacturing the first successfully-marketed electric guitar the ES150 (actually an acoustic archtop fitted with a guitar pickup), in 1936. The potential of the electric guitar was subsequently propelled into the consciousness of jazz (and blues) guitarists everywhere by the early jazz guitar genius, Charlie Christian. Christian was among the first (and certainly the most acclaimed) to use the amplified guitar (a Gibson ES150) to improvise horn-like, single line melodies in the jazz context. His playing was heard by millions in the dazzling recordings he cut with Benny Goodman (recordings which, by the way, continue to astound listeners and guitarists).

From the Rhythm Section to the Front Line

During the late 1930s and through the 1940s -- the heyday of big band jazz and swing music -- the guitar was an important rhythm section instrument and some guitarists, such as Freddie Green of Count Basie's band, thoroughly mastered the

technique of jazz rhythm guitar accompaniment. Few of the big bands, however, featured (amplified) guitar solo work which was more at home in the small combo context. The most important jazz guitar soloists of this period included the French Gypsy virtuoso Django Reinhart, best known for his recordings with Stephane Grappelli, and Oscar Moore who was featured with Nat "King" Cole's trio.

It wasn't until the large-scale emergence of small combo jazz in the post-WWII period that the guitar as a versatile jazz instrument (meaning it was equally at home in the rhythm section or as featured melodic instrument) began to really take off. In the hands of increasingly sophisticated players like Kenny Burrell, Herb Ellis, Barney Kessel, Jimmy Raney, Tal Farlow, etc., who had thoroughly absorbed the language of bebop, the guitar began to catch the interest of players, critics, and fans as a "serious" jazz instrument. Improved electric instruments such as Gibson's ES175 (released in 1949), put the guitar solidly out in front and, when combined with the talents of players whose knowledge and facility had reached previously-unknown heights (such as Wes Montgomery, Joe Pass, and Jim Hall), some of the most exciting and important music of the late 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s was produced. These players became prototypical of what is today generally thought of as the modern jazz guitarist, laying the foundation for most jazz guitarists who followed.

The Guitar in Jazz Fusion

As traditional jazz music declined in popularity beginning roughly in the early 1960s, the heyday of jazz guitar seemed to be at an end. Many fine players retired or changed careers and manufacturers discontinued or scaled back their production of archtop hollow body guitars opting instead to focus on the more popular (and inexpensive) solid body guitars. Other jazz guitarists, like Grant Green and Wes Montgomery, turned to applying their skills to essentially pop- or R&B-based forms. However, other -- often younger -- jazz musicians saw this transition as an opportunity to explore new forms and new venues. They sought to capitalize on the surge of electric popular genres such as blues, rock, and funk to reach new audiences and further their careers. Trumpeter and bandleader Miles Davis was probably the most influential figure of this period. From these experiments the form which came to be known as "jazz fusion" emerged. Guitarists in the fusion realm looked not to earlier jazz guitarists for their inspiration, but to popular guitarists of the day, most notably Jimi Hendrix. By combining ("fusing") the post-bop harmonic and melodic language of musicians such as John Coltrane, McCoy Tyner, Ornette Coleman, and Miles Davis with a hard-edged (and usually very loud) rock tone, guitarists such as John

McLaughlin, Larry Coryell, John Abercrombie, and John Scofield fashioned a new language for the guitar and redefined the meaning of the term “jazz guitarist.” Jazz fusion music, for all its excesses, introduced jazz to a new generation of fans and reached audiences in greater numbers than had previously been possible. As the fusion combo was really (in terms of instrumentation) a rock band, this era could be viewed in a sense as a “second wave” of jazz guitar. These guitarists mostly favored solid body instruments (which did not feed back at high volume), stadium-rock-style amplification, and signal processing “effects” such as distortion, wah-wah, and the like.

Resurgence of Traditional Guitar Jazz

By the early 1980s audiences’ enthusiasm for jazz fusion had begun to wane, although it was during this time that guitarist Pat Metheny achieved his greatest commercial success. Metheny’s music from this period drew on a wider range of influences than much of the “fusion” which preceded it – the sounds of blues, country, and “world” music, along with rock and jazz, were evident in the million-selling recordings he made for ECM Records. Metheny played flat top acoustic guitar as much as electric, and favored a softer, more mellow tone liberally seasoned with the signal processing effect known as “chorusing.” Metheny remains (alongside Miles Davis) the most commercially successful modern jazz musician, although some critics might dispute the label “jazz” being applied to much of Metheny’s output.

It was also during this period that audiences began to take notice of a neo-traditional school of jazz spearheaded by the young trumpet prodigy Wynton Marsalis. This “new” movement in jazz sought to reconnect the idiom with its long and illustrious tradition and was, in many respects, a reaction against the excesses and commercialism of jazz fusion. As this movement took hold many of the older generation of jazz guitarists were once again able to earn a living and some returned to touring and recording. The movement likewise gave voice to yet another generation of jazz guitarists. These young guitarists were attracted to, and influenced by, the subtlety and mastery of the great pre-fusion purveyors of guitar jazz (e.g., Wes Montgomery, Kenny Burrell, Joe Pass, Jim Hall, and the like) and endeavored to carry on this long and venerable tradition. Theirs was an evolutionary aesthetic (versus the revolutionary aesthetic of the fusion players). In keeping with such an aesthetic, these guitarists sought a clean and round tone appropriate to the mostly small and acoustic jazz groups that were beginning to take over from the fusion bands. As such they most often played traditional hollow body archtop guitars plugged directly into amplifiers designed to accurately reproduce the guitars’ subtler tones. They eschewed the distortion

and signal processing effects favored by earlier fusion (and contemporary rock) guitarists. (It's worth noting that this was by and large an American movement -- many European jazz guitarists continued to favor rock-oriented tones.) Some of the most prominent guitarists the movement has produced include Bobby Broom, Peter Bernstein, Howard Alden, Russell Malone, and Mark Whitfield.

A side effect of the neo-traditional movement in jazz music was a resurgence of archtop lutherie. By the early 1990s many small independent luthiers had turned their attention to the production of archtop guitars, producing some of the finest (and most expensive) instruments in the guitar's history. Larger manufacturers resumed or ramped up production of hollow body "jazz boxes." Some might consider this period to be a renaissance of jazz guitar.

Jazz Guitar in the 21st Century

In the early part of the 21st century the neo-traditional jazz guitar approach continues to dominate although it is by no means the only approach to the playing of jazz on the guitar. The divergence of jazz styles which began in the 1950s continues to produce much fertile and compelling music which can generally be thought of as "jazz," but which may include few elements of traditional jazz music. Guitarist Steve Kahn for example brings the guitar to Latin jazz. The dance music form known as "acid" jazz has appropriated much from jazz guitarists Grant Green and Wes Montgomery. The commercial form "smooth" jazz which draws heavily from the George Benson lexicon continues to command a large audience, although the question of whether the term "jazz" is misapplied in its case remains controversial. Further, guitarists such as Bill Frisell continue to defy categorization, making it apparent that what we know today as "jazz guitar" is ever-changing, and the term will undoubtedly continue to be redefined by successive generations.

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