

Typical Jazz Song Structure

To become comfortable listening to jazz music, it is important to understand the structure, or general format, of a jazz performance. The following structure, while certainly not the exclusive format for a jazz song, is one that is used constantly in jazz music.

The music begins. Often, in jazz a song will get underway with some sort of musical introduction. This introduction generally gets played only at the beginning of the song (although sometimes musicians will re-use the introduction as an outro to end the song). This introduction isn't required, though... sometimes the musicians will dive right into the melody of the song.

After the introduction (if there is one), the melody of the song is usually played. If you're a little fuzzy on the concept of the term "melody", think of it as the notes the vocalist sings in a pop or rock song. Since, in many cases, there is no singer present in a jazz setting, this melody will often be played by the horns. If there are also no horns in the band, the piano or guitar will usually play the melody.

While the melody is being played, the other musicians in the band have certain roles to play. Usually, a band will have an instrument present with the ability to play chords, such as a guitar, or piano, or both. One of these instruments will play the chords to the song underneath the melody. Note that in jazz, guitarists rarely strum chords the way you hear in pop and rock music. Since there is a lot going on in jazz music, playing this way would trample on what everyone else is doing. Rather guitarists tend to play chords in a more minimal, rhythmic manner.

After the melody of the song has been played (if it's a short melody, it sometimes gets played twice), the musicians will often begin their improvised solos. This is the "meat and potatoes" of jazz... improvisation. How musicians improvise is a very complex process, but let's talk about the basics:

Although the band has stopped playing the melody of the song at this point, they ARE still playing the same song. The chords of the song are still going by, but instead of playing the melody again, the musicians are creating their own melodies on the chords of the song. It is important to understand the roles that all the instruments play during this improvisation. During a horn solo, the horn player will improvise new melodies on the chords of the song, while a chord player (a piano or guitar) accompanies him (often called "comping") by playing the chords underneath him. The bass player in the group generally provides the steady beat, as opposed to in pop and rock music, where the beat is generally accented the most by the drummer. The bass player picks out notes that fit the chords, and plays them on his bass, one at a time. This steady beat is often referred to as a "walking bassline" (listen to audio example). The bass provides the "bottom-end" in a jazz band, and if he weren't there, you'd find the music would sound very empty. Often, the drummer will try to "lock in" the beat with the bass player on one of his cymbals, called the "ride cymbal". Generally, the drummer will play rhythms on his other drums that compliment what the soloist and chord player are creating. After the soloist has improvised a few times through the length of the song, he/she will stop playing, and the next soloist will start. This process continues throughout the band, until all of the people who are going to solo have soloed. Then, the band usually will re-state the melody of the song that they played at the beginning, and end the tune.