

Section 5 ♦ THE BLUE NOTE ERA (1958-1968)

THE ERA

When mainstream media speaks of the 1960s, it usually focuses on drug use, the flower children, and demonstrations. True, these things were part of the era, but they were not all that was going on. Many forces and new ideas were merging at a rapid pace—socially, politically and artistically. At several points in time, it felt like our society was being torn apart.

For jazz fans, it was a particularly significant time. The masters of the swing era, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Woody Herman, and others, were still amongst us and continued to refine their art. The beboppers, led by Dizzy Gillespie, were still going strong. All these musicians were major influences on the innovators of the '60s, who forged a new version of jazz that was both wonderous and perplexing at times.

Thelonious Monk, along with Charles Mingus and Roland Kirk were creating their own unique variations of the jazz language. Even more so, Miles Davis, John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman were taking us where no man (or woman) had gone before. It was a time of immense and rapid growth for jazz. These were indeed “giant steps,” so vast that sometimes a person could be overwhelmed by it all and feel relief when more mainstream musicians like Cannonball Adderley, Horace Silver or Art Blakey came to town. But no matter what the style of jazz, it seemed that everyone in the '60s was playing at their peak.

Blue Note Records, led by Francis Lion, was probably the trailblazer of the era, but we should not forget the contributions of Riverside, Prestige, Atlantic, Impulse and Fantasy Records. Good compilations of some of their best recordings are available from each of these labels.

In many ways, this era was the heyday of modern jazz, a time when jazz music was still primarily the expression of a living culture—black America. It might be hard to convey to someone who wasn't there, but in those days when a soloist got up in front of a jazz audience, there was often a feeling that he was telling everybody's story, not just his own. The energy that flowed between the band and the audience was definitely a two-way street and it brought the music to unparalleled heights. We can only hope that things are cyclical and that something like those days will come around again.

THE MUSICAL INNOVATIONS

Even without considering “free jazz,” the 1960s brought some dramatic changes to the structure of jazz music. To a large extent, these innovations are still the bread and butter of most jazz groups today.

1. Group Sound - The focus in a bebop band of the 1940s and '50s was primarily the soloist. During the course of the late 1950s and early '60s, however, the sound of the whole group became a much more prominent part of the mix. In part, this was a result of improvements in recording technique, spearheaded by engineer Rudy van Gelder's Blue Note and Impulse recordings. But even more than that, the rhythm section in jazz (often left in the dust by Diz and Bird) came into its own, and tunes began to be crafted around the moods created by the piano, bass and drums.

2. Composition and Arrangement - The moods created in this era of jazz were much more changeable from tune to tune (and even within a single tune) than previously—with greater reliance on Latin rhythms, pre-arranged rhythm section figures, different sections with different time feels within one tune, etc. The compositions themselves were less predictable, more unique expressions of the composer's artistic vision, as opposed to just being vehicles to blow on. The advent of the long-playing 33rpm record, starting in the 1950s and solidly in place by the '60s, meant that jazz groups could stretch out on records, like they did in live performances, without bumping up against previous time restrictions. This also helped foster bands being able to make a compositional statement with each tune, in addition to the solos.

3. **Harmonic and Rhythmic Sophistication** - The '60s brought a new level of harmonic and rhythmic complexity to the music—with greater use of altered chords and unusual chord progressions, the use of extended sections of tunes where one or two modes were improvised on instead of continuously changing chords, and a more sophisticated and diverse sense of what constituted “swinging.” The bands of Bill Evans, John Coltrane and Miles Davis—in addition to the more mainstream Blue Note groups led by Horace Silver, Joe Henderson, Freddie Hubbard, McCoy Tyner, Lee Morgan, Bobby Hutcherson, Art Blakey and others— together created the “gold standard” that jazz musicians to this day all try to live up to.