

Improvisation.

2. Solo and collective improvisation.

The element of improvisation in jazz is sometimes described in terms of the relationship between the members of the ensemble. Generally speaking, attention is concentrated on individual musicians, who, in the succession of choruses (statements of and variations on a theme) that make up the most common form of jazz performance, play (or “take”) solos; a solo normally consists of a single chorus or a continuous succession of choruses during which the player improvises on the harmonies (maybe also to a greater or lesser degree the melody) of the theme, while some or all of the other musicians provide an accompaniment. The terms “solo,” “to play a solo,” and “soloist” are therefore often used as synonyms for “improvisation,” “to improvise,” and “improviser.” This conflation of meanings can, however, be misleading: not all solos are improvised and not all improvisations are played by soloists. For example, the accompaniment played by some or all of the ensemble while a soloist improvises may itself to some extent be improvised: in jazz that contains no element of written arrangement the musicians are restricted, if at all, only by the fixed chord sequence and metric structure of the theme, and each may elaborate the harmonies and rhythms at will, as is appropriate to his role within the ensemble. In such a context it is the nature of the improvisation – the freedom of invention, virtuosity, and ornamental elaboration allowed by his function – and not the mere fact of improvising that distinguishes the soloist from the accompanists.

The degree to which an accompaniment is improvised increases as the framework on which a piece is based becomes less and less rigidly fixed. In a performance by a big band, for example, the accompanists often play from written arrangements and only the soloist is free to improvise; in a bop quartet, playing without music but working on an existing theme, the members of the ensemble have considerable freedom in the choice of harmonies and rhythms; in modal jazz the defining feature is a slow-moving or static harmonic base which the soloist may or may not reinforce; in free jazz the restrictions are fewer still, the style being characterized chiefly by the lack of fixed elements such as tonality, chord sequences, and, sometimes, meter.

The use of the term “collective improvisation” is related to the concepts of soloist and accompanists. Where these functions are sharply differentiated the term is not normally used, even though all or most of the players may be improvising more or less freely. It is commonly applied in contexts where some or all members of a group participate in simultaneous improvisation of equal or comparable “weight,” for example New Orleans jazz (in which it is used chiefly of reeds and brass) and its related styles, and free jazz; it does not preclude the presence of a soloist but it implies a degree of equality among all the players in the ensemble.

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