



Lesson: Understanding Improvisation in Early Jazz Styles

Middle/High School

STANDARDS: California

Chronological and Spatial Skills

1. Students place key events and people of the historical era they are studying in a chronological sequence and within a spatial context; they interpret time lines.
2. Students correctly apply terms related to time, including *past, present, future, decade, century, and generation*.
3. Students explain how the present is connected to the past, identifying both similarities and differences, and how some things change over time and while others remain the same.

Historical Interpretation

1. Students summarize the key events of the era they are studying and explain the historical contexts of those events.
2. Students identify the human and physical characteristics of the places they are studying and explain how those features form the unique character of those places.
3. Students identify and interpret the multiple causes and effects of historical events.

U.S History and Geography

5.4 Students understand the political, religious, social, and economic institutions that evolved in the [colonial era](#).

5.8 Students trace the colonization, immigration, and settlement patterns of the American people from [1789 to the mid-1800s](#), with emphasis on the role of economic incentives, effects of the physical and political geography, and transportation systems.

English: Writing

- .2 Create multiple-paragraph expository compositions:
 - a. Establish a topic, important ideas, or events in sequence or chronological order.
 - b. Provide details and transitional expressions that link one paragraph to another in a clear line of thought.
 - c. Offer a concluding paragraph that summarizes important ideas and details.

Research and Technology



1.4 Create simple documents by using [electronic media](#) and employing organizational features (e.g., passwords, entry and pull-down menus, word searches, a thesaurus, spell checks).

1.0 Writing Strategies

Students write clear, coherent, and focused essays. The writing exhibits the students' awareness of the audience and purpose. Essays contain formal introductions, supporting evidence, and conclusions. Students' progress through the stages of the writing process as needed.

Evaluation and Revision

1.6 Edit and revise manuscripts to improve the meaning and focus of writing by adding, deleting, consolidating, clarifying, and rearranging words and sentences.

2.3 Write research reports about important ideas, issues, or events by using the following guidelines:

- a. Frame questions that direct the investigation.
- b. Establish a controlling idea or topic.
- c. Develop the topic with simple facts, details, examples, and explanations.

Social Studies: Understanding History of Jazz

Motivation: Students will gain an understanding of improvisation by listening to two recorded versions of *When the Saints Go Marching In*, learning the song, and creating their own improvised performances of the song.

Group Activity:

1. Introduce the song *When the Saints Go Marching In* from the Preservation Hall Jazz Band recording. The recording is 8 minutes long; have students clap along, snap fingers, “air play” the instruments that take a solo, count how many times the song is played in this arrangement.
2. Explain “Dixieland jazz.” Some points to make: 1) this style of jazz originated in the south, “Dixie-land” 2) between 5 and 8 players were in the group 3) there was one person on each part 4) these jazz musicians generally did not read music 5) there was a great deal of improvisation involved.



3. Watch the section in Joy2Learn - Jazz on History of Jazz/Origins of Jazz/ Funeral and Church Music. Pay particular attention to the video of the funeral procession at the end. Discuss (in a large group or in small groups) how this music is different from that you might expect to hear at a funeral.

4. Hand out the sheet music for *When the Saints Go Marching In*. Have students sing through the song 3 or 4 times exactly as written. Notice the chordal structure of the piece.

5. Listen to the Louis Armstrong recording of *When the Saints Go Marching In*. Compare the two versions of the song. What instruments did you hear in version 1? version 2? Which instrumentation do you prefer and why? Keep the goal of the piece in mind when answering this question, and use specific vocabulary concerning dynamics, timbre, tempo, etc.

6. Watch the section in Joy2Learn - Jazz on Nuts and Bolts of Jazz/Improvisation. Take time to have the students write the “three three’s of improvising”:

I

- 1) Make up something at the spur of the moment
- 2) Use what you have available to make music
- 3) Put your feelings and personality into what you are playing

II

- 1) Imitation (play what you hear)
- 2) Change rhythms and melodies in a playful fashion
- 3) Use slurs, vibratos, trills and other sound effects

III

- 1) Know the form of the song
- 2) Stay in the groove
- 3) Listen and respond appropriately

7. Return to the two recordings. In small groups, discuss how the musicians demonstrated the “three three’s of improvising.”

8. Sing the song once again as a class. In the same small groups (from #7), practice the song utilizing one of the “three three’s”. Use any instruments available. Perform as a group in the style of the recordings heard (have the entire group sing the song as written, then one of the small groups improvise, whole group sing, small group improvise, etc.)

Individual Activity:

Watch the section on Joy2Learn - Jazz - Jazz Musicians/[Louis Armstrong](#). Discuss how he learned to play the cornet and why he had to improvise.



There are many biographies about [Louis Armstrong](#); have students research his life and report on their research (suggestions: aural report, aural/audio report, performance in his style, power point presentation). Have students Answer the question from “Things to Think About - Jazz Musicians” - Why do jazz musicians revere [Louis Armstrong](#)?

Have students research female jazz vocalists like [Ella Fitzgerald](#), [Billie Holiday](#), [Sarah Vaughn](#), [Peggy Lee](#), and [Nina Simone](#). How did their lives differ from the lives of male jazz musicians? How does the fact that they are all vocalists reflect the cultural climate at the time?

Find images of jazz musicians at places like [Preservation Hall](#), [Birdland](#), and the [Apollo](#). What do the images tell you about the culture of jazz? How? What song do you think is being played in each image? Why? Do you see how jazz influenced the image? How about how the image influenced jazz?

With a small group, create and record a different version for *When the Saints Go Marching In*, or any other folk song/spiritual. Use whatever instruments are available, and whatever instruments that the group can play (Remember, the voice is an instrument!).

Answer/discuss the question in “Things to Think About - Nuts and Bolts of Jazz” - How does jazz, especially the blues, reflect life? Consider what Marsalis said about a conversation being an improvisation.

Wynton Marsalis makes the statement (in *Improvisation*) that improvisation is “the thing that makes jazz the music of freedom.” Do you agree with this statement? Why/why not? Discuss.