



Dizzy Gillespie

(October 21, 1917 – January 6, 1993)

No one played like Dizzy. His style was much too complex for most artists. It took Jon Faddis's emergence in the 1970s that Dizzy's style was successfully recreated. When Dizzy played, all you saw was question marks out of the on-lookers (many of them musicians themselves). They were trying to figure out how he did what he did. Many would walk away in frustration and move their attention to other artists ([Miles Davis](#), [Fats Navarro](#) etc).



Visually there was no match as well. When other trumpet artist would play with their cheeks tight around the mouthpiece, Dizzy looked like he had a balloon in his mouth hitting octave ranges with such ease. Of course he did not start this way. Like his early partner Charlie Parker, he was learning and growing as

well.



Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker

Even though Dizzy was a big band composer in those early swing years, he really took off when him and Charlie Parker got together during the Bebop days. Just like any other time in history when someone creates, you have the pessimists who complains, the optimist who expected more, then the realist who just adjusted and keep going forward with it no matter how it turned out.



None of the critics ever slowed Dizzie down. He perfected his style to meet his own requirements. If playing like him was hard enough, now his chops were looking like the outside of a bowl and his horn was modified with the bell tilted upward at a 45 degree angle in the air. This gave Dizzie the force he was looking for when he played. He wanted his fans to not only hear but to feel him as well.



Dizzy Gillespie with his bent trumpet, performing in 1988

And you did. Even in his later years critics were amazed by Dizzie's force in his music. He always kept those composing skills tuned. His organizational and leadership skill were just as good as he used them to put together a band that toured the middle east. Raved and well received, the tour branded him with the title as The Ambassador of Jazz.

What I like about his style was the message. Every time I heard him play with such force it was like "Hey, I'm the bad ass here." Or to say "I got this".

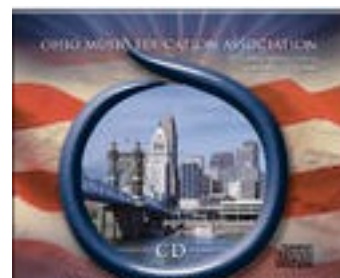


Gillespie performing in 1955

The whole essence of a Gillespie solo was cliff-hanging suspense: the phrases and the angle of the approach were perpetually varied, breakneck runs were followed by pauses, by huge interval leaps, by long, immensely high notes, by slurs and smears and bluesy phrases; he always took listeners by surprise, always shocking them with a new thought. His lightning reflexes and superb ear meant his instrumental execution matched his thoughts in its power and speed. And he was concerned at all times with swing—even taking the most daring liberties with pulse or beat, his phrases never failed to swing. Gillespie's magnificent sense of time and emotional intensity of his playing came from childhood roots. His parents were Methodists, but as a boy he used to sneak off every Sunday to the uninhibited Sanctified Church. He said later, 'The Sanctified Church had

deep significance for me musically. I first learned the significance of rhythm there and all about how music can transport people spiritually.

[Pancreatic cancer](#) got to Dizzie, but unlike his buddy Charlie Parker, he lasted well into his seventies.



Gillespie has been described as the "Sound of Surprise".^[43] *The Rough Guide to Jazz* describes his musical style:

In Gillespie's obituary, Peter Watrous describes his performance style:

In the naturally effervescent Mr. Gillespie, opposites existed. His playing—and he performed constantly until nearly the end of his life—was meteoric, full of virtuosic invention and deadly serious. But with his endlessly funny asides, his huge variety of facial expressions and his natural comic gifts, he was as much a pure entertainer as an accomplished artist."



[Wynton Marsalis](#) summed up Gillespie as a player and teacher:

His playing showcases the importance of intelligence. His rhythmic sophistication was unequalled. He was a master of harmony—and fascinated with studying it. He took in all the music of his youth—from [Roy Eldridge](#) to [Duke Ellington](#)—and

developed a unique style built on complex rhythm and harmony balanced by wit.



Gillespie was so quick-minded, he could create an endless flow of ideas at unusually fast tempo. Nobody had ever even considered playing a trumpet that way, let alone had actually tried. All the musicians respected him because, in addition to outplaying everyone, he knew so much and was so generous with that knowledge."

Bill Sommerville