

## African Instrumental Principles in American Jazz: Cross-Cultural Innovation and Living Musical Logics

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**Abstract:** Jazz did not develop in isolation. Its harmonic structures, rhythmic sensibilities, and improvisational approaches draw from African musical traditions that have evolved over more than a century of cultural exchange. Although substantial scholarship has examined this connection, studies remain dispersed across historical, technical, and cultural perspectives, with few accounts tracing how these influences have continuously adapted over time. This review brings the literature together to show that African instrumental principles operate as living musical logics, flexible and evolving frameworks that have guided cross-cultural innovation from early jazz to its contemporary global expressions. A thematic synthesis identifies five recurring strands: diasporic transmission and historical roots; rhythmic innovation and improvisation; hybridity and instrumental adaptation; cultural identity and social resistance; and contemporary extensions and global impact. Across these areas, jazz demonstrates transformative continuity, as African-derived rhythms, communal practices, and aesthetic approaches are continually reinterpreted within new social and instrumental contexts. The review provides a unified lens for understanding jazz as a dynamic dialogue rooted in African traditions and highlights directions for future research on its ongoing evolution.

**Keywords:** African musical principles, jazz history, diaspora, cross-cultural innovation, living musical logics.

### INTRODUCTION

Jazz is widely celebrated as an American art form, often termed "America's classical music" (Arnold-Forster, 2017; Henry, 2021). While this designation signals its cultural stature, it can understate the genre's hybrid origins. Jazz developed through sustained interaction between West African musical sensibilities, particularly rhythmic complexity, improvisation, and communal performance, and European harmonic systems. This synthesis took shape within the everyday expressive cultures of Black Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Floyd, 2000; Gridley & Rave, 1984).

Scholarship on jazz's African lineage spans multiple disciplinary traditions. Historical studies trace how African musical elements, often described as retentions, moved through spirituals, work songs, and the blues into early jazz practices (Floyd, 2000; Maultsby, 1990). Ethnomusicological research examines how West African rhythmic principles, including polyrhythm and timeline patterns, support key jazz features such as swing, syncopation, and ensemble interaction (Jones, 1959; Stewart, 2010). Cultural and sociological work situates jazz within Black expressive life, emphasizing identity formation, social commentary, and resistance across major historical moments such as the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights era (Early, 2016; Gridley, 2008). Recent scholarship extends this discussion by tracing the global circulation of

African-derived musical logics through contemporary genres, including Afrobeats, suggesting continuing transatlantic exchange (Ayodele, 2024; Jack & Sunday-Kanu, 2024).

Despite these contributions, studies that foreground historical continuity (Floyd, 2000), technical structure (Stewart, 2010), sociopolitical meaning (Gridley, 2008), and global circulation (Ayodele, 2024) are often treated as separate conversations. This separation makes it harder to appreciate how African musical principles, such as rhythmic organization, improvisational logic, expressive tone, and collective performance, interact as a connected, adaptable system within jazz. The field therefore needs a synthesis that links diasporic transmission, musical hybridity, identity formation, and global reinvention into a unified narrative of African musical thought as a sustaining force in jazz. To address this gap, this narrative review synthesizes scholarship on African musical principles through the lens of living musical logics, defined as adaptable frameworks for organizing rhythm, improvisation, and ensemble practice that persist across time, instruments, and cultural contexts. These logics include polyrhythms, group improvisation, expressive tone, and collective performance, which can be reinterpreted and transformed across new settings. The concept builds on Friedman's (2018, p. 2) notion of music as a "noise of remembering" and Agawu's (2016, p. 2) idea of an "African

imagination," emphasizing continuity through adaptation rather than static inheritance. Through an inductive synthesis of the literature, five interrelated themes emerged that structure the discussion: diasporic transmission and historical roots; rhythmic innovation and improvisation; hybridity and instrumental adaptation; cultural identity and social resistance; and contemporary extensions and global impacts. Together, these themes show how African musical logics have shaped jazz historically and continue to guide its evolution and global influence.

## METHODOLOGY

This narrative review employs an interpretive synthesis to examine the integration of African musical principles within the American jazz tradition. The selection process prioritized literature that bridges musicological technique and socio-cultural history.

Relevant literature was identified through structured searches in JSTOR, Project MUSE, and Google Scholar. Search strings included combinations of "African musical retentions," "jazz improvisation," "diasporic identity," and "rhythmic hybridity." Citation tracking from foundational texts, including Floyd (2000) and Jones (1959), was used to locate additional relevant sources.

The review focused on peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly monographs, and academic dissertations. Sources were selected for their direct engagement with living musical logics, the adaptive principles of African music, rather than for biographical or commercial accounts. Preference was given to interdisciplinary studies integrating ethnomusicology with cultural and historical perspectives.

Each source was qualitatively appraised for its contribution to understanding African musical continuity and adaptation. A thematic synthesis approach was used: recurring arguments, concepts, and frameworks were coded to identify patterns in how scholars describe the survival and transformation of West African musical structures. These patterns guided the construction of the interpretive narrative presented in the subsequent sections.

## THEMATIC ANALYSIS

### Diasporic Transmission and Historical Roots

The forced migration of African peoples did more than transport bodies; it carried enduring musical memory. This section looks at how West African

musical ideas, called 'living musical logics' here, traveled across the Atlantic, survived the pressures of slavery, and became the foundation for a new musical genre. This process was not a simple transfer of traditions but a daily struggle to keep something alive when almost everything else has been taken. Through these creative choices, African musical principles blended with new influences and available materials and became foundational to the emergence of jazz (Friedman, 2018; Maultsby, 1990).

Research shows that the Middle Passage should not be viewed as a clean break but as the beginning of a diasporic circuit of rituals and remembrances carried forward by enslaved Africans themselves (Diouf & Nwankwo, 2010). In the face of displacement, violence, and uncertainty, they relied on what Friedman (2018) calls a portable archive of cultural memory, held not in written records but in the body and the mind. This archive was sustained through communal, event-centered musical practices, where rhythm became a shared resource for remembering, teaching, and maintaining connection. In these moments of collective sound-making, rhythm acted as a sonic embodiment of oral traditions that anchored individuals to one another and to a remembered home, even under conditions designed to erase such ties (Ayodele, 2024). The survival of these musical ideas depended on adapting to harsh conditions. When traditional instruments were banned, key principles lived through body-based practices such as the Ring Shout. Floyd Jr. (2000) describes this practice as a crucible in which African polyrhythms were preserved through repeated acts of dance, handclapping, and call-and-response singing performed by the community itself. Over time, these movements and sounds became embedded in the body, forming what Diouf and Nwankwo (2010) identify as embodied muscle memory. Through daily repetition and shared participation, rhythmic knowledge endured even after the instruments that once carried it were taken away.

The historical roots of jazz grew out of a long process of adaptation and creativity. Farley (2011) shows how the Jazz Preservation Act defined jazz as a Black American art form, embedding collective memory and cultural heritage into national identity. By recognizing jazz as both a product of struggle and a classical art, the Act institutionalized the transmission of shared musical memory across generations, where traditions such

as work songs and spirituals carried stories, feelings, and collective experience into new expressions.

Scholars debate whether jazz developed directly from specific African rhythms (Jones, 1959; Floyd, 2000) or whether musicians reshaped broader African musical ideas using the resources available (Maultsby, 1990; Friedman, 2018). This debate highlights that musicians actively created jazz from memory and tradition while also drawing on preserved cultural objects, showing how the music emerged through both preservation and innovation.

Early jazz in New Orleans shows the results of this process. Musicians combined African musical ideas with European instruments and harmonies to create a style that was new but still deeply connected to what they had inherited (Schuller, 1968). Gridley and Rave (1984) note how African influences appear in the way instruments were played, with strong rhythms, expressive tones, and pitch bending like African speech patterns. This music was not simply copying the past. It was a way for musicians to express an African-inspired worldview focused on community, improvisation, and shared experience. In making jazz, musicians kept memory alive, using their skills and creativity to show the Black experience in America (Floyd, 2000).

### **Rhythmic Innovation: Polyrythms and Improvisation as Living Logics**

At the heart of African influence on jazz lies a revolutionary approach to rhythm and time, forming one of the genre's main living logics. Schuller (1968) called this jazz's essential harmonic and rhythmic syntax. Rhythm in jazz is not mere background support; it is a rich, interconnected way musicians think together and communicate through sound. In West African music, rhythm serves both structural and philosophical purposes. Jones (1959) describes it as multiple independent rhythmic patterns, often called cross-rhythms, unfolding simultaneously over a steady pulse. This layered way of feeling and moving through rhythm (Frishkopf, 2021) gave jazz its distinctive pulse and opened a vibrant space where musicians could speak, respond, and create in the moment.

When ensemble-based polyrythms entered American jazz, they produced what Stewart (2010) calls nested looping structures. Individual instruments cycle at different lengths, so a 12-beat

horn line might unfold over a 16-beat drum pattern, generating a constantly shifting, nonlinear sense of time. This layered rhythmic foundation sparks boundless improvisation, inviting musicians to weave their souls into the music's pulsing heart. Berliner (1994) explains that jazz improvisation is highly structured rather than random. Musicians build extensive phrase vocabularies through oral tradition and community learning, reflecting West African teaching methods. They manipulate these phrases in real time within overlapping cycles. In this way, rhythm becomes the heartbeat of African-style jazz, a language that carries stories, emotions, and messages (Ayodele, 2024).

The logic of improvisation also embodies agency and consciousness. Sarkin and Sarkin (2024) note that improvisation represents freedom, offering a way to defy rigid, oppressive structures imposed on Black life. Duranti and Burrell (2004) describe improvisation as a deeply personal journey, a path where musicians discover hidden harmonies and bring their own musical voice to life. At the same time, other studies indicate that improvisation relies on careful training and structured mastery (Berliner, 1994; Stewart, 2010). Some scholars celebrate the freedom and personal expression that improvisation allows, while others highlight the precision and skill it demands. Taken together, these perspectives reveal improvisation as a rich, multi-layered living logic, where creativity and discipline coexist in a dynamic, human-centered dialogue.

Mastering polyrythms is itself an act of intellectual resistance, challenging stereotypes that label Black music as simple or chaotic (Frishkopf, 2021; Stewart, 2010). This logic, in which time is cyclical, interaction is layered (Givan, 2016), and creation is both communal and individual, defines jazz's innovative core. It demanded new ways of playing and performing, laying out the foundation for the deep hybridity that shapes the genre's distinctive sound.

### **Hybridity and Instrumental Adaptation**

The living musical logics of rhythm and improvisation did more than influence American jazz; they reshaped and expanded the very instruments through which the music spoke. This section explores hybridity, showing how African musical ideas were applied to European instruments, creating techniques and sounds that define jazz. This process was not passive blending but an active reimagining, giving Western

instruments an African voice and expressive power (Ayodele, 2024).

The clearest examples come from the adaptation of ensemble principles to solo instruments. Master drummers such as Art Blakey, Max Roach, and Ed Blackwell brought the interlocking patterns of Ghanaian drum ensembles to the modern drum kit, using snare, toms, and cymbals to replicate lead drums, support drums, and timeline bells (Boulos, 2021). In the same way, African pianism treated the piano as a form of chromatic percussion (Ofuani, 2014). Composers such as Christian Onyeji used the keyboard to evoke layered African textures, with the right hand imitating metallic oge bells and the left hand replicating drum patterns. Randy Weston exemplified this approach through his percussive piano style, which reflected his Pan-African engagement with African musical traditions (Williams, 2021).

This adaptive logic extended beyond percussion and piano to melodic instruments. Jazz musicians treated horns and strings like percussion, emphasizing attack, decay, and rhythmic phrasing rather than just pure tone (Gridley & Rave, 1984). Growls, bends, and blue notes on brass and woodwinds reflected the African emphasis on vocalized tone, allowing the instrument to “speak” (Maultsby, 1990). Even in the electric era, Miles Davis used wah-wah pedals and synthesizers to produce sounds reminiscent of African talking drums or animal calls (Magee, 2007).

In the 21st century, hybridity has moved beyond physically adapting instruments to reimagining them in the recording studio. Modern production enables musicians and producers to transform musical tools, such as the West African kora. Through multi-tracking, electronic effects, and intercultural collaboration, they weave the kora’s polyphonic patterns into the jazz ensemble, allowing it to exist as a living, integrated part of the music rather than a mere addition (Charry, 2000; Hickson, 2021). Production breaks down, amplifies, and embeds these complex patterns within global soundscapes, demonstrating that living musical logics adapt not only to instruments but also to contemporary technologies.

Scholars agree that hybridity exists, but they interpret it differently. Musicologists examine how musicians brought African principles to life on European instruments, transforming them into expressive voices for diasporic creativity (Gridley & Rave, 1984; Boulos, 2021). Cultural theorists,

however, frame it as an act of reclamation. Magee (2007) and Agawu (2016) show how musicians reworked Western musical tools and idioms, transforming them into vehicles for African and diasporic expression. Through this ongoing adaptation, moving from drum kit to piano, from horn to synthesizer, and now into digital audio workstations, instruments and technology have become spaces of innovation. They reflect cross-cultural dialogue and highlight one of jazz’s central roles: asserting identity, preserving heritage, and resisting oppression.

### **Cultural Identity, Philosophy, and Social Resistance**

Jazz, shaped within the African diaspora, has long served as a powerful means to build cultural identity, convey philosophical ideas, and resist oppression. Moreover, the living musical logics of rhythm, improvisation, and hybridity connect deeply to the social and political agency of Black communities. From its earliest days, sustaining African musical principles was more than preservation and represented a defiant gesture, allowing musicians and communities to assert their humanity under oppression (Maultsby, 1990; Floyd Jr., 2000).

The music created a sonic refuge, allowing musicians a space to assert their humanity and intellectual depth despite systemic racism. Sarkin and Sarkin (2024) describe jazz as a transformative force, a soundtrack for struggle, showing how its improvisational nature modeled autonomy and creative freedom even under oppressive conditions. This resistance was particularly visible during the Civil Rights era, when musicians such as Charles Mingus, through *Fables of Faubus*, and Max Roach, through the *Freedom Now Suite*, created politically charged works. However, academic research warns against the idea that free jazz as a whole came directly from the fight for civil rights (Gridley, 2008). As Berliner (1994) notes, the bandstand became a site of authority and respect within the jazz community, granting musicians recognition and power often denied outside it.

Resistance also appeared in subtler, yet equally powerful ways through assertions of cultural identity and cosmopolitanism. For example, composers turned to African rhythms as a strategy to reclaim artistic authority and assert cultural ownership (Ofuani, 2014). Arnold-Forster (2017) highlights how Dr. Billy Taylor championed jazz as America’s classical music, not to fit European



traditions but as a courageous statement of Black creativity and pride deeply rooted in the spirit of the Black Arts Movement. Through initiatives like Jazzmobile, Taylor returned this celebrated art form to the Black communities that had nurtured it, using music as a living tool for social uplift, education, and empowerment.

For musicians like Randy Weston, exploring African musical roots was not just an artistic choice but part of a Pan-Africanist mission tied to global decolonization (Williams, 2021). In the same way, African American jazz musicians in interwar Paris used their music to craft a cosmopolitan identity, gaining recognition and opportunities denied to them in the United States while representing Black excellence on a global stage (Gillett, 2010). Beyond social positioning, their rhythms and improvisations carried deeper meaning. Musicians drew on body-based techniques to assert agency under pressure, and improvisation became a path for exploring and expressing their inner selves (Diouf & Nwankwo, 2010; Duranti & Burrell, 2004). Together, these practices show that jazz was not only music but also a living expression of resilience, identity, and philosophical engagement.

Scholarship on this theme reveals two complementary perspectives. One emphasizes jazz's connection to organized political movements, portraying musicians not only as artists but as activists driving the fight for justice and equality (Gridley, 2008; Early, 2016). Another perspective, developed by sociologists and cultural theorists, highlights everyday forms of resistance, showing that performing a complex Black art form under oppression constitutes a political act (Gillett, 2010; Diouf & Nwankwo, 2010). Consequently, these approaches together illustrate that the living logics of jazz serve both as acts of resistance and pathways for musicians to pursue, express, and embody agency.

### **Contemporary Extensions and Global Impacts**

Beyond its historical roots and instrumental transformations, African-derived musical logics continue to travel, adapt, and inspire creativity across the globe. Moreover, these principles remain vibrant, shaping 21st-century music while honoring their origins. They guide improvisation, ensemble interaction, and cross-cultural dialogue in ways that demonstrate the living, adaptive nature of jazz.

Similarly, the global reach of jazz has created a shared musical language that allows artists to communicate across borders. Henry (2021) shows how jazz has moved through diverse political and social landscapes, blending with local traditions to create new hybrid forms of musical expression. For instance, in Madagascar, Salegy rhythms merge with jazz improvisation to produce a distinctly Malagasy cosmopolitanism (Büdel, 2025). In Uganda, community musicians weave traditional motifs into their music, rekindling cultural pride and bringing communities together through shared sound (Makwa, 2025). These examples illustrate how music carries not just sound but memory, identity, and cultural resilience.

In addition, the music industry and digital tools act as channels and catalysts, helping these musical logics reach new audiences and inspiring artists to adapt, innovate, and collaborate globally. Charry (2000) and Hickson (2021) highlight how recording studios and global music markets act as both gateways and guides, influencing how musicians reimagine Mandé music for international listeners while preserving its cultural essence. Likewise, Ethio-jazz pioneers such as Mulatu Astatke combined pentatonic scales with jazz harmony to craft a transnational sound for the diaspora (League & Shelemay, 2021). In the commercial and digital sphere, Fela Kuti's Afrobeat tradition has evolved into the global phenomenon of Afrobeats. Artists such as Burna Boy and Wizkid draw on polyrhythmic foundations and hybrid instrumentation to express African identity and cultural diplomacy (Jack & Sunday-Kanu, 2024; Yusif, 2024). However, this success also sparks debates about cultural ownership and authenticity, highlighting the tension between celebrating global reach and preserving the political and cultural significance of these musical logics.

Furthermore, outside commercial contexts, living musical logic continues to thrive in avant-garde and educational spaces. Steve Coleman investigates African rhythmic theory through diatonic rhythms and nested structures, advancing jazz into novel creative and intellectual territory (Stewart, 2010). Scholars such as Frishkopf (2021) and Wang, Woramitmitree & Chuangprakhon (2025) emphasize the importance of integrating jazz pedagogy into curricula to foster creativity, collaboration, and inclusivity in music education. In view of this, contemporary relevance demonstrates that living musical logics are not

static; they evolve in concert halls, classrooms, clubs, and digital studios, continuing to express identity, foster dialogue, and fuel artistic innovation worldwide.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this review support a clear conclusion: African influence in jazz is not simply a historical background or a set of borrowed features. It forms the core way music works. Jazz operates as a living system built on African-derived ideas such as layered rhythm, call and response, improvisation, and collective participation. These ideas have remained active over time, adapting to new places, instruments, and social conditions. Continuity in jazz, therefore, comes from change rather than from preserving fixed forms.

This perspective challenges common stories about jazz history. European instruments and harmonic systems did not replace African musical thinking. Instead, they were shaped by it. Jazz's lasting strength lies in how it balances personal expression with group responsibility and freedom with structure. This balance allowed musicians to express identity, respond to social pressure, and build community through sound. In this sense, jazz has always been more than music. It has functioned as a shared social practice through which Black communities remembered the past and imagined new possibilities.

From this viewpoint, hybridity is not a loss of tradition but a source of creativity. Whether through the transformation of the drum kit, the rethinking of the piano as a rhythmic instrument, or the use of digital tools and sampling, each new encounter created space for African musical ideas to take on new forms. Recognizing this process helps move beyond narrow or Eurocentric explanations of influence and places African musical principles at the center of jazz's development.

Overall, the findings show jazz as a flexible and evolving tradition. Its rhythms, improvisational practices, and group interactions are not fixed rules but shared ways of thinking and creating music together. When read alongside the gaps in existing research, these insights highlight jazz as a model of creativity, resilience, and ongoing cultural exchange rather than as a closed historical chapter.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, RESEARCH AND POLICY

This review shows that African musical principles in jazz function as adaptive, living logics across time, space, and technology. While clarifying these processes, it also highlights gaps in scholarship, pointing to directions for both research and practice.

Geographically, jazz studies have focused on West Africa and the Atlantic world, leaving Central, Eastern, and Indian Ocean African connections underexplored. Expanding research to these regions can test the flexibility of the living musical logic framework. The literature also lacks gendered and intersectional perspectives, particularly on women's roles in transmission, pedagogy, and performance. Future work should investigate how musical knowledge is preserved and transformed through women's labor and leadership. Technological transformation is another underdeveloped area. Scholarship has concentrated on live and acoustic performance, but digital tools increasingly shape rhythm, improvisation, and collective authorship. Studies should examine these digitally mediated practices as new sites where musical logic evolves.

Jazz education often prioritizes notation and harmonic analysis over rhythm, ensemble interaction, and aural learning. Educators should restructure curricula to emphasize group rhythm, call-and-response, and shared improvisation, aligning teaching with the music's foundational logic. For performers and composers, meaningful innovation arises from engaging deeply with rhythmic logic rather than superficially borrowing style. Understanding layered time, cyclical forms, and collective improvisation supports hybrid creations that remain grounded in jazz's diasporic principles.

Dominant narratives understate Africa's role in jazz. Cultural institutions should revise histories to reflect adaptation, resilience, and collective creativity, supporting oral histories, community archives, and transnational exchange initiatives. Global music industries must also engage African-derived practices ethically, considering attribution, collaboration, and benefit-sharing to ensure ongoing innovation remains connected to sustaining communities.

## LIMITATIONS

First, the analysis focuses mainly on the United States, where jazz first emerged, even though it also considers global developments. Second, the review highlights themes and theoretical connections without offering the numerical analysis found in a meta-analysis or empirical study. Third, the reliance on English-language sources may exclude important scholarship in French, Portuguese, or African languages, which could limit perspectives on diasporic music histories.

These limitations not only clarify what this review covers but also highlight paths for future research. Scholars might explore African musical principles across a wider range of regions, languages, and historical contexts to see how they are shared, adapted, and continue to influence music around the world.

## CONCLUSION

This review examined how African musical principles function as living, adaptive logics within American jazz. Across five themes, it shows that jazz developed through patterned ways of organizing rhythm, time, and improvisation that remained active even as instruments, performance settings, and audiences changed. In this sense, jazz did not grow by merely adding African elements to an existing form. It grew through African-derived musical thinking that shaped how musicians created, interacted, and renewed music across generations.

The findings also clarify why jazz sustains both stability and change. Its core principles create a shared musical foundation that binds the ensemble together while still leaving room for individual expression, improvisation, and creative exploration. This combination helps explain jazz's lasting expressive power in contexts of spiritual endurance, cultural struggle, and global exchange.

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