

20 Jazz Masterpieces You Should Hear

By [William Edgar](#)

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Jazz is a uniquely American art form, a story born out of the experience of African American people. Several tributaries have flowed into the main river we call jazz: spirituals, gospel, blues, and ragtime, to name a few. Styles vary greatly, from the laidback subtlety of Count Basie's piano to the frenzy of Charlie Parker's bebop saxophone, and so many more. Some jazz artists have achieved worldwide fame. Others remain relatively anonymous. Many of the legends have "moved on up a little higher," as Mahalia Jackson memorably described death. Still, the music goes on.

Even among jazz fans, few understand its spiritual nature. The best jazz (as I explain in *A Supreme Love: The Music of Jazz and the Hope of the Gospel*) reflects the narrative—familiar among people shaped by the Christian gospel—that moves from deep misery to inextinguishable joy.

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If you're a Christian who likes the idea of jazz but doesn't know where to start in a journey of appreciating the form, here are some suggestions of "essential" jazz recordings. The chronologically ordered list below is very partial. But perhaps it will inspire you to delve more deeply into this beautiful art form. You can listen to these selections in a special playlist on Spotify or Apple Music.

Scott Joplin, 'Maple Leaf Rag' (1899)

This is the masterpiece of the greatest of all the ragtime pianists. Unlike the feverish popular impression of rag music, Joplin's compositions are poised, calm, and deeply artistic. This 1970 version by Joshua Rifkin gives the idea. Often pianists quip that ragtime is easy until they try to play it!

Jelly Roll Morton, 'Black Bottom Stomp' (1926)

Here is a masterpiece by the great New Orleans innovator Ferdinand Joseph LaMothe, known as Jelly Roll Morton. This quintessential early jazz piece is rendered by Morton's Red Hot Peppers. As the title implies, it connects jazz to the dance. Its variety and swing are astonishing.

Louis Armstrong, 'West End Blues' (1928)

Composed by King Oliver, this classic 12-bar blues opens with a remarkable solo trumpet cadenza by Armstrong. He recorded it with his Hot Five ensemble, a cast of jazz legends. The West End was the last train stop in the popular Lake Pontchartrain section of Orleans Parish, Louisiana. The piece established jazz as a "legit" art form.

Robert Johnson, 'Crossroad Blues' (1936)

The King of the Delta Blues died at 27 but not before leaving his mark on this illustrious genre. Eric Clapton, Bob Dylan, Keith Richards, and Robert Plant are part of his legacy. Even today his music has a timeless quality. The crossroad in question is a place where Johnson is said to have met the Devil, leading to a Faustian bargain to give him greater prowess on the guitar. It may reflect an old African story of the Devil as the white man.

Duke Ellington, 'Take the "A" Train' (1939)

Composed by Ellington's collaborator, Billy Strayhorn, "A' Train" has been recorded hundreds of times. Named after the New York City subway line connecting Harlem to Bedford Stuyvesant, the song became Ellington's signature orchestral piece. It displays the combination of showmanship and musicality so characteristic of the Duke's performances.

Coleman Hawkins, 'Body and Soul' (1939)

Hawkins moved the tenor sax from an orchestral horn section to a solo instrument, as demonstrated in his version of the jazz standard "Body and Soul." His tenor sax solo only refers to the notes of the melody sporadically—providing instead a creative "riff" on the chords.

Billie Holiday, 'Strange Fruit' (1939)

One of the most heartbreaking songs ever recorded, the subject of "Strange Fruit" is the horrifying brutality of lynching in the U.S. South. The "fruit" is black bodies hanging from trees. The FBI tried to shut down the song and ruin Holiday, but she went on to sing it. Its message needed to be heard.

Dizzy Gillespie, 'A Night in Tunisia' (1945)

A defining piece at the beginnings of bebop, this song has a Caribbean feeling, with the bass a rising and falling series of eighth notes. This instrumental version, recorded at the Town Hall in New York, features an astonishing series of solos by the jazz greats of the day, including Charlie Parker.

Charlie ‘Bird’ Parker, ‘Ko-Ko’ (1945)

Based on the Ray Noble song “Cherokee,” this tour de force is played at a vertiginous tempo—a showcase for bebop’s phrasing and melodic array. What keeps it from sounding like a monotonous hurried series of solos is the phrasing, with carefully placed accents and discreetly executed shapes.

Art Tatum, ‘Hallelujah’ (1950)

Words fail to describe the musical superiority, compelling rhythm, and chord selection of this recording by the greatest of all jazz pianists. Though he excelled at stride piano, Tatum synthesized numerous styles into a glorious whole. “Hallelujah” was composed by Vincent Youmans and found its way into the Broadway musical *Hit the Deck* in 1927. If you sing it you’ll “shoo the blues away.”

Erroll Garner, ‘Autumn Leaves’ (1955)

Master pianist Erroll Louis Garner plays this classic with great artistry. The song is from his 1955 live album, *Concert By the Sea*, perhaps the best collection of Garner’s virtuoso recital work. In addition to his memorable renditions of the timeless American Songbook, he was a considerable composer, having penned such pieces as “Misty” and “Erroll’s Bounce.”

Miles Davis, *Kind of Blue* (1959)

Many of the individual songs on this album have become classics, including “So What?” “Freddie the Freeloader,” “Blue in Green,” and “All Blues.” Musicians include Julian “Cannonball” Adderley, Bill Evans, and John Coltrane. The sound is “modal,” sounding more like Gregorian chant than Mozart. It may be the best-selling jazz album of all time.

John Coltrane, ‘Giant Steps’ (1960)

This is the lead piece in the revolutionary album by the same name. The unusual chord progressions have made it into a showcase for the music called “the new thing.” Coltrane was an experimenter, often using a plastic saxophone.

Bessie Griffin, ‘Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child’ (1961)

Spirituals are at the origins of jazz. The “black” way of singing them lends a beauty that pierces the heart. Bessie Griffin (née Arlette B. Broil, 1922–1989) was raised Baptist and was a protégée of Mahalia Jackson. The “motherless child” is the archetypal African American during slavery, abandoned yet with a grain of hope.

John Coltrane, *A Love Supreme* (1965)

After his spiritual renewal, John Coltrane expressed his gratitude to God for his new life, resulting in the four-song collection known as *A Love Supreme*: “Acknowledgement,” “Resolution,” “Pursuance,” and “Psalm.” On saxophone, Coltrane leads a quartet that also includes McCoy Tyner (keys), Jimmy Garrison (bass), and Elvin Jones (percussion).

Aretha Franklin, ‘Precious Lord’ (1965)

The Queen of Soul grew up in the church. Her rendition of Thomas A. Dorsey’s masterpiece conveys the passion and the faith of a suffering people. Its exquisite simplicity tells us much about the black believer’s quiet confidence in God. Aretha’s live album, *Amazing Grace*, is widely considered the greatest gospel concert of all time.

Nina Simone, ‘I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free’ (1967)

Nina Simone’s version of Billy Taylor’s classic reveals the depths of the desire to be free—a universal desire but one especially resonant for black people. The song served as an anthem of sorts during the 1960s Civil Rights Movement.

Keith Jarrett, ‘Spiral Dance’ (1974)

One of the masterpieces of eccentric, multitalented Keith Jarrett, “Spiral Dance” combines the exotic sounds of Jan Garbarek with Palle Danielsson on bass and Jon Christensen on percussion. Though it hovers around the same key and same sounds, there is great variety in this modern jazz creation by a contemporary master.

Joe Pass and Ella Fitzgerald, ‘Duets in Hanover’ (1975)

Two geniuses on their instruments, guitar and voice. Individually they’re superb. Together they’re incomparable. The combination of talents from very different backgrounds (watch on YouTube) is remarkable, proving the point that creativity in jazz cannot be programmed.

Monty Alexander, ‘Renewal’ (2016)

One of the most memorable compositions of Jamaican-born piano wizard Monty Alexander, “Renewal” signifies a spiritual renewal he experienced some years back. Accompanied by Ed Thigpen on drums and Robert Thomas Jr. on hand drums, the simple but thoughtful melody is complemented by a syncopated rhythm.

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