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# Jazz Appreciation

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## Notes on setting up a JAG (Jazz Appreciation Group)

Firstly, how are you going to show your appreciation of jazz? This may appear to be a silly question, as, like me, you may have assumed that a U3A Jazz Appreciation Group primarily would be a recorded music group. But recently I was put in my place by one group that wanted to have all its meetings at venues where live music was performed. Their intention was to gather at bars and pubs where live jazz was performed and, in the longer run, try to form their own band. I was impressed but I have to say that that is the first such group I have encountered. There are also a very few JAGs whose members aim to *play* jazz rather than listen to it, but 99% of JAGs are record recital groups.

So, on the assumption that you are going to focus on recorded music (but, please not exclusively – see my point 7 below), here are a few thoughts:-

1. How many of you are there? This dictates where you will meet - hired venue or someone's home.
2. Programme - who will decide what music is listened to.

Frequently it's the leader (many groups are benevolent dictatorships) but sometimes it's decided democratically. The best arrangement (in my view) is one in which the group agrees what will be the subject of the next few meetings, and individual group members take turns in presenting the programme. There are a number of different ways of designing a programme. First, decide on your monthly format (doesn't HAVE to be monthly; I have come across fortnightly and even the odd weekly group). Are you going to spend all of the 2 hours on the theme; or are you going to say have 30 – 40 minutes chat about stuff you've seen, heard, CDs bought, gigs attended or forthcoming gigs, things not to miss on BBC 4 or Radio 3. Then, after a cup of tea/coffee or G&T, devote the second hour to the meeting's theme. Both work well. It depends on the chemistry of the group.

Next – themes or subjects for meetings. Many groups simply take a musician and do a presentation on his/her work. Some I have come across do it alphabetically – Armstrong to Zawinul/Zurke/Ziggy Elman. Can be a bit mechanical (and when you get to X who is there, other than stretching a point to include Xavier Cugat). Some groups rely on a member with a particular collection of/interest in a musician to volunteer. In a few groups, the benevolent dictator will design and present every meeting's programme. These tend to be groups where people come to listen rather than debate.

But there are other ways of designing a programme.

- Who's recently died (more and more, sadly) – do a retrospective.
- Or there's genres – boogie and stride piano, Cuban music, British New Orleans revival, West Coast Cool, Western Swing (why not ?), Kansas City, Mainstream, different 'schools' (eg all the ex Basie guys, all the ex Ellington guys, Austin High School Gang) Euro jazz, big band singers.

Or how about the impact of Scots on British jazz. Jazz/pop crossover – Look at what the Rolling Stones did, or Bryan Ferry, even Humph with Radiohead.

- Or there are song writers – do The Great American songbook as a whole ( but that’s a very broad subject) or do a writer from that group – Hoagy Carmichael, Ellington, Jerome Kern, Harold Arlen, Fields & McHugh, Porter, Berlin, Gershwin. Or more recent ones – like Bacharach and Hal David, Johnny Mandel. Lennon & McCartney
- Instruments (especially odder ones – accordion, harpsichord, cello) . Try jazzing the Classics – very popular in the Thirties.
- Chart shows - I did a jazz top 20 – i.e. the 20 most recorded jazz numbers. No 20 I think was St Louis Blues and no. 1 perhaps surprisingly was Body & Soul. Gives you the chance to pick 20 very different versions of 20 very familiar tunes. Google Top 100 Jazz albums ever and see what comes up (there are quite a few very different ideas) or track down the Daily Telegraph’s list of a few years ago.
- Another one that works is Desert Island Discs. Get people to bring in some of the 8 discs they’d take to Kirsty Young’s island and make them say why.
- A variant on the above is ‘My personal journey in jazz’. Individuals will talk about the music that first got them into jazz, and play tracks that illustrate their developing interest in the music.
- The work of Arrangers – very important in jazz.
- Follow a particular musician and see (and play tracks from) the bands etc he worked with. For ex – pianist Hank Jones, trumpeter Charlie Shavers.
- A particular year – what was happening jazz-wise in say 1959. Might need a bit of research but that can be enjoyable in itself.
- For something that’s a bit more fun – jazz through songs about food; jazz through songs about trains; Christmas jazz.

Do try and get group participation. Did they like a track? Why ?

In some groups (a minority), the member doing the presentation produces and hands out a track list. This works in a structured environment –in some of the groups I’ve attended, you’ve no idea how far down your play-list you’ll get in your time allotted.

Some groups publish a list of topics addressed in their U3A newsletter, website or magazine, so as to whet the interest of people considering joining.

Which brings me to the next point - from where are you going to source your music? Has everyone (or have most members) got a good collection of recorded music. If not, don't forget

1. Public Library.

2. U3A National Office collection in the Resource Centre (if you don't know about this, ring 020 8315 0199 for more information).
  3. Scour charity shops and watch out for public library sell-offs.
  4. If you're looking for a particular track, Amazon (or similar) downloads. At about 69p a go, they're a whole lot cheaper (relatively) than the five bob we used to pay for second hand 78s at Doug Dobell's shop in Charing Cross Road – and the quality's better. eMusic is cheaper than Amazon (42 pence a download) but you have to subscribe.
  5. Spotify is a website where, free of charge, you can listen to an enormous range of music (its better on American music than on European). In return for listening to free music, you have to put up with the advertisements. Go to [www.spotify.com](http://www.spotify.com) and have a look.
3. Obviously you need something to play music on. CD player is essential but don't forget that a lot of people still have masses of vinyl and cassettes (some of us still have a garage-full of 78s!). Something that can play everything is helpful, but not essential.
  4. There's more to recorded music than sound recordings. You can get a whole range of music performances on DVD and watching as well as listening will enhance the appreciation.
  5. If you have access to the Internet, don't overlook YouTube. There are tons of musical clips there. To watch them comfortably, ideally you need a laptop that you can connect to a large screen TV. It's not difficult – even I can do it.
  6. Don't overlook musical films - has anyone in the group got a Lovefilm membership? Use that to borrow films on DVD (again, you'll need a large screen TV for all to watch in comfort).
  7. Don't just stay in & listen. Encourage people to get out and support live music, whether it's top line stars at your nearest big town theatre or the local amateurs at a pub.
  8. Don't just listen to recordings - think about getting the occasional expert speaker in to talk to the group - musician, music critic or writer, that sort of person. If you are a small group, you might want to think about making contact with those of a similar interest in neighbouring U3As before you invite a guest to talk to you - you want a respectable turnout for such an event.
  9. For your own benefit - have a deputy leader. You don't want the group to falter because you are locked into some unavoidable grand parenting duties.
  10. Don't get hung up on "What is Jazz" it really doesn't matter. If people are happy to listen to Georgie Fame or Fats Domino, well, does it matter? R 'n' B is one of the tributaries that lead into that broad river called jazz. So are Hard Bop and Post-bop, Gospel, West African High Life, South African Township, jazz-classical crossover, Cuban & Brazilian music, Blues, Western Swing, London's smart hotel dance bands of the 30s and so on. You may find that your group is 100% of one mind only musically – be it Trad or Free Jazz. Fair enough, but
    - Are you perhaps putting off new members who might like a bit of Fletcher Henderson, Art Blakey or Buena Vista Social Club?
    - Doesn't the 'U' in U3A suggest that we ought, occasionally, to venture out of our comfort zones?

11. You do not need to be an expert. You just need to like and enjoy – especially and above all enjoy the music. Nobody’s going to set an exam paper at the end of a meeting. Your group might, however, find a few very basic reference books useful. Keep an eye open on public library sell-offs and charity shops. And there is always that wonderful second-hand book portal website Abebooks ([www.abebooks.co.uk](http://www.abebooks.co.uk)). I’m not going to provide a prescriptive Required Reading list – it all depends on what you’re interested in. But for general background, try

- Rough Guide to Jazz
- Jazz for Dummies
- Penguin Guide to jazz on CD

If you’re going to seek out live gigs there are magazines and mailing lists that will keep you informed. JazzUK is a small (A5) listings magazine that you can pick up free in public libraries etc or, for a consideration; they will post it to you. Website [www.jazzservices.org.uk](http://www.jazzservices.org.uk)

For the dedicated trader of the New Orleans path, there’s the late Bernie Tyrrell’s listing mag. For £5, they’ll post it to you (I think) 9 times a year. Contact [www.jazznorthwest.co.uk](http://www.jazznorthwest.co.uk) - 44 Rawlins Road, Bradwell Milton Keynes MK13 9DL

Trad-lovers are also well served by John Petters’s jazz and swing mailing list. Contact [tjpost@traditional-jazz.com](mailto:tjpost@traditional-jazz.com)

For coverage of a broad spectrum of jazz styles, some gig information and pages of reviews, I don’t think you can beat Jazz Journal – [www.jazzjournal.co.uk](http://www.jazzjournal.co.uk)

Then there’s Jazzwise magazine. You can subscribe to a free e-newsletter at [www.Jazzwise.com](http://www.Jazzwise.com).

12. If you have Internet access, you will find that there are vast numbers of websites devoted to jazz – as with all websites, they do come with a Health Warning – not all are totally accurate! But you will find that Wikipedia is pretty safe for basic info. I have always found [www.jazzstandards.com](http://www.jazzstandards.com) very useful.

13. Licences – occasionally I am asked whether groups need PRS and PPL (Public Performance Licence). U3A has a blanket PPL licence. This covers the playing of recorded music. So if your group is a record recital group, you are covered. It doesn’t matter whether you meet in someone’s home or a hired venue. PRS licence is needed if you are putting on a live performance or show. Normally the venue – theatre, club, pub, village hall etc – will have such a licence. Indeed, if they are used as venues for live performances, they are required to have such a licence. I have got a fact sheet from U3A National Office on this. If you’d like a copy, get in touch.

14. Have fun and enjoy! If you think that there is any way in which I can (try to) help, please get in touch – [mjo.whitaker666@btinternet.com](mailto:mjo.whitaker666@btinternet.com) or phone 01278 663492

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