

Freedom Within the Form: What Jazz Teaches Us About Democracy

“Jazz doesn’t work because everyone agrees.....it works because everyone listens.”

Improvisation- Individual rights and freedoms

Swing- Collectively working together for the common good and balance

Blues- Minding sadness but knowing it won’t last forever and finding the optimism in it all

Positive Transformation is the goal

Bebop Musicians

Charlie Parker

Dizzy Gillespie

Thelonious Monk

Tool Kit

Developed Thinking

Framework Building

Flexibility with intention

Civic Engagement

Civic engagement is working to improve your community and society by participating in both political and non-political activities, using your knowledge, skills, and motivation to address public concerns and promote the common good, from voting and volunteering to advocating for policies or organizing neighbors. It's about building community and making a difference in the quality of life for everyone.

What are you trying to say and to whom?

Must it be said, Why and what will be the impact?

The Federal vs the State Constitution

Alabama’s Constitution (2022) is over **400,000 words** the longest state constitution in the U.S.

Vermont’s Constitution is about **9,000 words**

The **U.S. Constitution**, written in 1787, is intentionally concise, with about **7,600 words** (including the 27 amendments)

Jazz teaches us:

How to listen

How to lead and follow

How to disagree productively

How to belong without losing individuality

Democracy and its Principals

1. Voice

The right of individuals to **express opinions**

Representation, free speech, voting

In jazz terms: **improvisation and individual solos**

2. Participation

Active engagement in the civic process

Not just having rights, but **using them**

In jazz terms: **listening, comping, responding, supporting**

3. Accountability

Responsibility to the group and shared rules

Transparency, rule of law, mutual respect

In jazz terms: **time, form, structure, and ensemble responsibility**

Compositions that reflect Freedom & Democracy in Jazz

"Freedom Jazz Dance" – Eddie Harris (1965)

A complex, rhythmically free composition that challenges conventional structures, symbolizing improvisational freedom.

"A Love Supreme" – John Coltrane (1965)

Spiritual and improvisational freedom; Coltrane explores personal and musical liberation through intense expression.

"The Freedom Suite" – Sonny Rollins (1958)

Explicitly political work addressing civil rights, combining musical and social freedom.

"We Insist! Freedom Now Suite" – Max Roach & Abbey Lincoln (1960)

Explicitly civil rights oriented; the album celebrates freedom and addresses the African American struggle for equality.

"The Democracy Suite" is a major jazz composition by **Ted Nash**, released in **2017**.

"Moanin'" – Art Blakey & The Jazz Messengers (1958)

Hard bop anthem embodying collective expression and resilience; often interpreted as a statement of communal empowerment.

"Lift Every Voice and Sing" written by James Weldon Johnson music by his brother 1900

Known as the Black National Anthem, jazz renditions celebrate democracy, freedom, and African American cultural heritage.

"We Shall Overcome"- **Charles Albert Tindley** (African American Methodist minister and gospel songwriter) (1900)

Amazing Grace- John Newton (1772) Slave trader turned who later became an Anglican minister and an outspoken **abolitionist**.

Democracy Websites

<https://www.jazzdemocracy.com/>

<https://www.jazzstudiesonline.org/>

<https://jazz.org/education/>