

Jazz Videos

Jazz videos are available in three formats – VHS tape, Laserdisc, and DVD. DVD offers the best quality, DVDs are quite inexpensive, and DVD players are widely available. Players for VHS tape are still around but getting hard to find. Players for Laserdiscs have not been manufactured for at least a decade, and good used ones are very rare. If you're going to buy jazz videos, buy only DVDs.

Buying Jazz DVDs

There are several good on-line sources. I've bought most of my videos from Amazon, and from True Blue Music, which is a division of the highly respected Mosaic Record company (see *About Record Labels*, in the section on CDs). As with any vendor, pay attention to the experience of other buyers. Amazon is quite trustworthy, both with products that they sell themselves, and for products that they list for third party vendors. For third party vendors, a user rating will be provided. Most experienced internet buyers have learned to stick to vendors with ratings of 99%-100%. When you're buying from Amazon directly, spend at least \$25 at a time and take the free shipping option. When buying from third party vendors, prices are often a lot lower, but you'll pay a fixed shipping fee of \$3 per DVD, no matter how many you buy. New jazz DVDs typically sell for about \$15 from Amazon, and for \$6-\$15 from third party vendors. Some rare programs may sell for a lot more.

The Videos We've Studied

Most of the jazz videos we've studied, as well as most others listed here, are available for purchase, but a few are not. Nearly all jazz videos are recordings of television broadcasts, or of live performances. Quality varies from excellent to barely watchable. Many of the DVDs in my collection are part of 8-DVD sets issued under the **Jazz Icons** label. There are five sets so far, all from European broadcasters. All are excellent, and well worth the cost. You should buy complete sets, which are a bit cheaper than buying individual DVDs, and which may introduce you to artists whose music you don't know. You can probably sell or trade DVDs by artists you don't like to friends who do.

There are some other musically interesting series, all of which are sold as individual DVDs. They include:

- The performances programmed by Norman Granz for the 1975 and 1977 Montreaux Jazz festivals, who very likely also arranged for them to be recorded on both audio and video. Video and sound quality is generally pretty good, music varies from good to very good.
- DVDs produced by the New York University Music department, each of which documents a guest artist in residence for a day playing a short set, talking about his music, working with students, and critiquing their work, and with an introduction by Gary Giddens. Artists include Clark Terry, Barry Harris, Phil Woods, Jimmy and Percy Heath, Toots Thielmanns, Benny Golson, and Hank Jones.
- Jazz Casual, a series of half-hour programs produced by Ralph Gleason and broadcast in the early 1960s on KQED-TV, and Jazz Scene USA, a series of half-hour programs produced in Los Angeles, and hosted by Oscar Brown, Jr. Black and white video quality is so-so, audio about the same. Some of the programs are quite interesting musically (especially the Jazz Casuals), some are not.
- Nine hour-long studio produced extravaganzas for US television starring Frank Sinatra over a period of a decade or so, each with one or more interesting guests, usually with an orchestra conducted by Nelson Riddle. One features a small group with Antonio Carlos Jobim, another the Basie band.
- Half-hour and hour-long studio variety shows for US television starring artists like Nat Cole, Judy Garland, Dinah Shore, and Tony Bennett. Jazz artists occasionally turn up as guests.

Some other videos worth owning include:

- ***Jazz on a Summer's Day***, the classic documentary filmed at one of the earliest Newport Jazz Festivals, featuring Louis Armstrong, Mahalia Jackson, Jimmy Guiffre, Thelonius Monk, Anita O'Day, and others.
- ***The Sound of Jazz***, a live 1957 CBS broadcast that was American television's finest hour. Featured musicians were a virtual "who's who" of the giants who were in New York that day – Count Basie, Thelonius Monk, Gerry Mulligan, Ben Webster, Lester Young, Billie Holiday, Jimmy Guiffre, Pee Wee Russell, Coleman Hawkins, Roy Eldridge, Dickie Wells, Nat Pierce, Joe Jones, and Vic Dickinson. Don't expect great picture or sound quality – this was before videotape, when live broadcasts were archived by kinescope, essentially photographing a TV screen with a 16mm film camera. DVD issues omit the Monk segment; I have the Japanese laserdisc with the entire program.
- ***Music in Monk Time*** and ***Celebrating a Master***, two extravaganza concerts produced in the 80s and broadcast by PBS, and featuring many fine jazz artists playing Monk's music. Music in Monk Time includes a few live performances by Monk's quartet with Charlie Rouse. I own the laser discs.
- ***Improvisation***, a two-DVD set of videos produced by Norman Granz between 1944 and 1980. The set includes the classic 1944 short film jointly produced with Gijon Mili that featured Lester Young, their less successful 1950 collaboration that featured Young, Charlie Parker, Bill Harris, and others, excerpts from two Ellington sessions, a trio and the full band, at Cote D'Azur in the early '80s, and numerous interesting interviews with musicians.
- ***Dizzy's Dream Band***, and ***An All Star Tribute to the Master***, two two extravaganza concerts produced in the 80s and broadcast by PBS, with Dizzy and many other fine jazz artists playing his music. I own the laser disc of ***All Star Tribute***, and have not seen a DVD issue.
- ***Count Basie at Carnegie Hall***, a 1981 all-star tribute broadcast on PBS that featured wonderful guest performances by Tony Bennett, Joe Williams, and especially Sarah Vaughan. George Benson was there, but should have stayed home.
- ***Zoot Sims, In a Sentimental Mood***, an intimate trio performance recorded in a Swedish library with a Swedish guitarist and the wonderful American bassist Red Mitchell. Between the tunes, we're treated to excerpts from nicely done interviews with Zoot and Red.
- ***Carmen McRae Live in Japan 1986***, a wonderful performance in a concert hall with her trio, is typical of the excellence of her work before a live audience. There are at least two DVD releases of this material. Buy the one that also includes a stellar performance by the vocal group, ***Manhattan Transfer***, which also happens to be the least expensive.
- ***Les McCann/Eddie Harris Live at Montreaux*** is a well-produced video, and with very good audio) of the exciting performance that produced the hit album, ***Swiss Movement***, and classic ***Compared to What?*** I have this on VHS; I don't think it's on DVD.
- ***We Remember Bird (Charlie Parker)***, two television shows recorded in the fall of 1964 in Berlin and London of an all-star sextet co-led by Sonny Stitt and J J Johnson, with Howard McGhee, Walter Bishop, Jr., Tommy Potter, and Kenny Clarke. All but Stitt played with Parker, and Stitt's playing style on alto saxophone was strongly derived from Parker's.
- ***Gerry Mulligan Art Farmer Quartet Live in Rome*** captured this highly regarded working group (with Bill Crow and Dave Bailey) on stage in 1959 for Italian TV. Everyone is playing great, and Mulligan plays some nice piano on two of the tracks.
- ***Gil Evans and His Orchestra TDK Jazz Club*** is a 1983 performance in a Lugano concert hall by an all-star big band. Gil's music had evolved a lot since his great recordings of the 50s and 60s, incorporating sounds from both the jazz and rock traditions. I've not enjoyed much of Gil's

later music, but this set is an exception. This may be the most satisfying of all recordings by his later bands, a wonderful program, with great ensemble work and great solos. Highly recommended.

- ***One Night With Blue Note*** When new owners began to rebuild Blue Note in 1985, they produced a live concert at New York's Town Hall that featured many of the stars of the original Blue Note label from the 50s and 60s, along with a newly discovered youngster, Stanley Jordan. Most notable among the old timers were Freddie Hubbard, Bobby Hutcherson, Herbie Hancock, Walter Davis, Jr, Kenny Burrell, McCoy Tyner, and Art Blakey. Johnny Griffin, Jackie McLean, Lou Donaldson, Jack DeJohnette, Jimmy Smith, Stanley Turrentine, Grover Washington, Jr, Grady Tate, Tony Williams, Ron Carter, Reggie Workman, and Cecil Taylor are also on hand. The video is well-produced and directed (except for camera movement that gets excessive at times), very good picture quality, and very well edited. Sound is clean, but suffers from an excess of rock and roll production – lots of mics on drums but you can't hear the cymbals, close-miked horns that don't sound very natural, a near total lack of bass, especially with Ron Carter, and a rather harsh, unnatural piano. Except for the lack of bass and cymbals, the instruments are well balanced musically. These relatively minor defects aside, this DVD is well worth owning, especially for the performances of Hubbard (who is on fire), Davis, and Hutcherson, which are the most satisfying by these artists I've seen on video. Netflix has it.

I don't usually like jazz documentaries, especially those that survey many artists on an instrument, primarily because one's view of each is so diluted. There are exceptions. Some I recommend include:

- ***A Great Day in Harlem***, an Oscar-nominated full length feature film produced in 1994 by Jean Bach. documenting the momentous 1958 Art Kane photograph for Esquire magazine. Every great jazz musician was invited to show up at an address on a Harlem street, was invited and the resulting photograph of those who were in New York that day became a classic historic document of the age. Bach combines historic still photos by bassist/photographer Milt Hinton, 8mm film footage taken by his wife Mona, and interviews with the participants, to study the making of the photo, and lives of many of the musicians who were there.
- ***The Dream's On Me***, produced by Clint Eastwood, and dedicated to life and work of the master songwriter Johnny Mercer. Broadcasts from the US and the UK featuring Mercer and the lovely Lena Horne are highlights.
- ***A Life In the Jazz Century***, documents to the life and music of French violinist Stephane Grapelli, produced by his biographer Paul Balmer, and including historic video of legendary gypsy guitarist Django Reinhart and the young George Shearing. The program is overly long, but the historic material and detail about Django more than makes up for it. The biography has the same strengths and faults.
- ***The Universal Mind of Bill Evans*** – Bill and his brother, a music educator, chat about jazz improvisation, and Bill provides musical examples at the piano.
- ***Art Pepper, Notes From a Jazz Survivor*** – Produced a few years before his death, this full length provides an intimate portrait of Art and Laurie Pepper, and includes some decent live performances. Netflix has it.
- ***Trying to Get Good*** documents the life and music of legendary trumpeter, singer, and comedian Jack Sheldon. There's very good video of Jack playing and singing with his big band and a bit of his off-beat comedy, intercut with interviews with Clint Eastwood, Merv Griffin, Billy Crystal, Dave Frishberg, and Johnny Mandel.
- ***Let's Get Lost*** is fashion photographer Bruce Weber's full length study of trumpeter and singer Chet Baker. Sadly, Weber himself gets badly lost, focusing on the contrast between Chet's boyish good looks in the 50s as compared to his haggard appearance during the last years of his

life as a result of his life-long heroin addiction. What Weber misses completely is that even to his very last days, Chet was playing and singing **very** well, as documented on a mult-CD set of a live concert recording a few weeks before his death. This film is worth seeing for the brief snippets of Chet's music (Weber always seems to cut away when Chet has finished a vocal chorus and picks up his horn), and for segments of a wonderfully illuminating (and very funny) interview with trumpeter Jack Sheldon, an early pal of Chet's who had great respect for his music, and who developed a lyrical playing and singing style not unlike Chet's, but refused to travel down the road to addiction.

- ***Round Midnight***, not a documentary, is French director Bernard Tavernier's wonderful portrait of a fictional jazz saxophonist living in exile in Paris (an amalgam of pianist Bud Powell and tenor saxophonist Lester Young) played masterfully by Dexter Gordon, and for which he received an Oscar nomination. Gordon's performance is all the more special because he also created a completely new sound and playing style reminiscent Young's, and that was very different from his own. The cast includes several excellent jazz musicians, including Bobby Hutcherson, Herbie Hancock, and Billy Higgins. This is one of the very few dramatic feature films about a jazz musician that got it right (I can't think of another one). Highly recommended.

Some DVDs to avoid.

- ***Ken Burns Jazz***, which in ten hours treats jazz as an art whose only valid contributors are African Americans, and almost completely ignore the contributions of nearly all the important musicians who were not. A travesty.
- ***Mel Lewis Big Band*** (in Jerusalem) I've always enjoyed Mel's bands, but this performance is a loser. Perhaps they were jet-lagged?
- ***Chet Baker – In a Mellow Mood*** Chet's playing isn't very good and the sound track is awful.
- ***George Shearing – Lullaby of Birdland w/Neal Swainson*** A live performance at a winery, really awful video production – the director has multiple cameras constantly moving and he constantly switches between them – makes this video almost unwatchable.
- ***Lady Sings The Blues*** – a truly awful, phony biopic allegedly about Billie Holiday, but really an attempted star vehicle for Diana Ross.
- ***Bird*** – Clint Eastwood's dramatic biopic about Charlie Parker that seems to talk more about his addiction and his womanizing than his music. Eastwood has always been a good friend to jazz and patron to jazz musicians, and has used jazz quite effectively in several of his films – ***Play Misty For Me*** and ***Bridges of Madison County*** gave hit records to singers ***Roberta Flack*** and ***Johnny Hartmann*** (a decade after his death) – but this one misses the mark.

Renting Jazz Videos

Netflix lists several dozen jazz titles, some as DVDs, some as online videos, and some both ways. If you have their service, search for artists by name.

What DVDs (or CDs) Should I Buy?

One of the best reasons for listening to jazz radio is to learn what artists, and what music by those artists, that you enjoy. Indeed, that's another purpose of this class – to expose you to some great jazz artists and their work, and let you discover what you like. With this in mind, jazz radio stations like KCSM and WDCB are excellent, because they identify the artists and the recording. Keep paper and pencil nearby, and make notes when you hear something that you particularly like. Most jazz radio stations also post a list of the records they have played on their website. It's called a ***playlist***.

Jazz on YouTube

Believe it or not, there's a wealth of great jazz on YouTube. Access it with your computer, or buy a small box called Apple TV (about \$120, you don't need an Apple computer) that connects to the internet via your wired or wireless router, and to an HDMI input of your TV. Apple TV provides easy, free access to your Netflix account (you still have to pay Netflix), YouTube (free), many internet radio stations (free), a lot of downloadable podcasts (some free), and lots of material you can pay for (TV shows and feature films). There are alternatives to Apple TV – Roku makes a box, and some newer model DVD and Blue Ray players offer internet access

It's very easy to find jazz on YouTube – simply search on the name of an artist you enjoy, and start watching. When you finish a video, YouTube will suggest other similar programs. It's easy to spend an evening, and a lot of what you find will be wonderful. Musical and technical quality varies widely, but it's all free, and it's easy to quit one thing and watch something else. When you find something you really enjoy, look for a DVD that you can buy of the material – much of the jazz on YouTube is from a broadcast or from someone's commercial release, and the technical quality will generally be much better on DVD. In general, picture quality on YouTube is better if you access it from Apple TV.