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Wedding Music and Entertainment guides

A Guide to Choosing a Jazz Band

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Quality Music and Entertainment

How Do I Choose a Jazz Band?

Prima Artists receive several enquiries daily for details of Jazz Bands & responding appropriately is always difficult as there are so many different types of Jazz & so many different kinds of Jazz Bands & everyone has a different idea of what a 'Jazz Band' is!

It is always useful to know what kind of environment and event the band will be required to play for – for instance as background music at a reception, or at an open air event, for dancing, in concert or as cabaret.

A good way to generally define the types of Jazz Band which are available is to think historically and consider the styles of the eras of Jazz and also some of the other styles which overlap Jazz.

Dixieland, New Orleans, Traditional Jazz Bands

This style was firmly established in the 1920's and the bands are usually from three to six or eight pieces. A three piece band of this era is often made up of Sousaphone (the large tuba like instrument which wraps around the body and with a large skywards facing bell), Banjo and a melody instrument (Trumpet, Clarinet, Sax or Trombone). This kind of band is mobile and adds a 'Mardi Gras' flavour to any event. A full traditional jazz band is typically made up of Piano (or Guitar/Banjo), Bass, Drums, Trumpet, Clarinet and Trombone. Probably the definitive band of this era was that of Louis Armstrong while examples of the style in the UK are the bands of Kenny Ball, Acker Bilk, Terry Lightfoot, The Big Chris Barber Band and Humphrey Littleton and there are a great many others perhaps not so famous available for wedding and other performances.

Hot Club Jazz Bands

Moving on slightly, another popular style of jazz from the 20's and 30's is that made popular by Django Reinhardt, whose group consisted of Violin, one or two Guitars and sometimes Double Bass. In the thirties this style became popular in France at the Hot Club in Paris. Many people are familiar with the work of Stephane Grappelli, the music violinist who was popular on record and TV almost up to his death during the nineties. This particularly joyous, listenable and entertaining jazz form is highly suitable for receptions and there are duo, trios and quartets performing this style in the UK. It does still offer a French flavour. A definitive example of this jazz form is Grappelli's recording of 'Sweet Georgia Brown'. One particularly fine exponent of this style in the UK is the Hot Club Trio.

'Savoy' Jazz, Period Jazz

To the purist much of this is not really jazz at all but a commercial form of dance music from the 1930's. However, it is highly entertaining and reminiscent of a bygone age and very suitable for themeing an event in that decade. Good examples of bands currently playing this style in the UK are, among others, The Piccadilly Dance Orchestra, The Pasadena Roof Orchestra and The Cotton Club Orchestra. These bands often include repertoire from jazz icons rooted in that era such as Duke Ellington.

Big Band, Swing

Usually played by a band consisting of four Trumpets, four Trombones, five Saxophones and a rhythm section of Piano, Bass, Drums and Guitar, the music emerged in the 30's and flourished into the 40's. Many people think of the music of Glenn Miller as being typical of this style but other bands, at least as significant, were, Count Basie, Benny Goodman, Duke Ellington, Artie Shaw and Tommy Dorsey (with whom Frank Sinatra established his career). This form of jazz is arguably the most popular and enduring of all. Dances such as the jitterbug and jive grew around this music. The repertoire is largely made up of the 'American Standard Songbook' (Songs by Gershwin, Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, Rogers and Hart etc.) together with the instrumental classics associated with the bands mentioned above. There are many bands of this kind in the UK of world class standard which include the BBC Big Band, The Syd Lawrence Orchestra and others. In

addition there are many bands recreating the music of Glenn Miller and others and some bands with special arrangements from around 10 pieces playing in 'big' band style.

Mainstream Jazz Bands

This term applies to jazz which started in the 1940's and probably resulted from the demise of the huge number of big bands which had existed up to then. The style is largely swing in the style of a 1930's-40's big band but by a smaller group.

Jump Jive, Swing Bands

This is really a crossover style of jazz of the big band era and rhythm and blues. Its influence can be heard in Rock 'n' Roll. It is typically 'hot and swinging' with a driving back beat. The bands are from five to nine pieces and include horns in the line up. Much of the repertoire currently played is from bands of the late forties and early fifties especially Louis Jordan (the musical 'Five Guys Named Mo' consists of entirely of Jordan's songs) and Louis Prima. There has been a huge revival in this kind of music over the past few years because of it's 'good time' shuffling beat and its very danceable style. Leading exponents of this style in the UK include Ray Gelato's Giants, Blue Harlem and OohBop Sh'Bam Much material recorded by artists such as Van Morrison and Georgie Fame could be considered as representing this kind of jazz.

Modern Jazz, Cool Jazz, Dinner Jazz & Smooth Jazz

In the context of planning an event, this category is very broad and encompasses music from the forties, fifties and sixties and even later and is invariably played by smaller groups from a duo up to around six pieces. The material can include 'American Standards' (see below) in a smooth swing style along with Latin American influences such as Bossa Nova and Samba. The music is often used as reception music or as a background to dining. Cool, Sophisticated jazz is always popular and there are a great number of bands available offering different variation of line up and repertoire and which can include in any combination trumpet, Saxophone, Flute, Piano, bass, Drums, Guitar and Vocalist. Some of these bands also play covers of other styles and offer classic pop dance sets.

Rat Pack and 'The Great American Song Book'

The Great American Song Book was originally a term used to refer to the work of the Five Major songwriters of 'standards' from American musicals and movies of the twenties, thirties, forties and fifties - Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, Jerome Kern, Cole Porter and Richard Rogers. The catalogue was added to by many others later - Sammy Cahn and Harold Arlen and many others. These vocal songs mostly in swing style and with a strong lyric content were not only part of the jazz scene of their day but also the popular music of their time. There are many fine vocal jazz groups (often pianist/vocalist bass and drums) available for weddings and events Think Harry Connick Jamie Cullum and Diana Krall ! The Rat Pack as most people know was the Vegas 'club' or circle of friends of hard drinking entertainers in the early fifties. Joey Bishop (comedian) Peter Lawford (actor and one time brother in law of JFK), plus Sammy Davis Jnr , Dean Martin and Frank Sinatra. The Rat Pack made films together and performed in cabaret both impromptu and rehearsed performances. The songs associated with these artists have become known in recent years as Rat Pack songs. In reality they are from the Great American Song Book and the greatest performances of these songs were by Sinatra, Tony Bennet and others. Examples and Options on our Rat Pack Theme Page.

Crossover Jazz - Fusion Jazz - Acid Jazz - Latin Jazz

Jazz, along with Rhythm and Blues has transferred its influences to many other music types including Pop and Rock and the resulting music styles have in turn passed their own nuances back into jazz There is a whole generation of popular and entertaining jazz in a funky tight and danceable style from the past thirty years and the boundaries become hazy so that a band who describe themselves as a Soul or R & B band may be described by some people as a jazz band. Other 'crossover' fusion styles include Latin Jazz or Salsa,

Indo Jazz and Afro Jazz (good styles to consider at a multicultural event). See our 'World Music' options in our web site.

All of this is intended to help clients define what they are looking for in a 'jazz band' as part of the entertainment at an event or function and is by no means an authoritative potted history of jazz !!

When enquiring about booking a jazz band it is useful to mention some songs & repertoire, the artists whose material you expect to be covered when requesting details of band from your Entertainment Consultant or Agent.

There is a cross section of some of the best jazz groups available for weddings and events in our web site on our Jazz Pages and More in our Rat Pack Section and representing all of the above.

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- Live Dance Music at your Wedding Reception
- The Ceremony— Music Options
- Cabaret and Entertainment Options

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