



Dizzy Gillespie, 1955. Photograph by [Carl Van Vechten](#).
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Gillespie, Dizzy (21 Oct. 1917-6 Jan. 1993), jazz trumpeter, bandleader, and composer, was born John Birks Gillespie in Cheraw, South Carolina, the son of James Gillespie, a mason and musician, and Lottie Powe. Gillespie's father kept his fellow band members' instruments at their home, and thus from his toddler years onward Gillespie had an opportunity to experiment with sounds. He entered Robert Smalls public school in 1922. He was as naughty as he was brilliant, and accounts of fighting, showing off, and mischief extend from his youth into adulthood.

From mid-1927, when Gillespie's father died, the family lived in poverty. Gillespie studied trombone in the third grade but began to double on trumpet, borrowing a friend's instrument. He became Cheraw's best musician, playing trumpet or cornet. A long-standing feature of Gillespie's playing was evident even then, as a teenage companion, trombonist Norman Powe, recalled: "It was a very fast style. . . . He didn't have a tone. He doesn't have a good tone now, but his execution outweighs all that."

In 1933 Gillespie graduated from the ninth grade at Robert Smalls and received a full scholarship to play trumpet at the Laurinburg Institute in Laurinburg, North Carolina. He studied agriculture and played on the football team, until he realized the danger it presented to his mouth and hands.

In the spring of 1935 Gillespie's family moved to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and without finishing school, he joined them that summer and began playing professionally. He practiced piano and trumpet with Bill Doggett, each taking turns on the other's instrument; this activity exemplified his relentless devotion to music and to pushing his abilities forward. In 1935 he joined Frankie Fairfax's band, in which he began to be called "Dizzy," a name that obviously suited his behavior and musical ideas. In 1937 he moved to New York City. After sitting in with bands at the Savoy Ballroom, he replaced [Frankie Newton](#) in Teddy Hill's big band on the strength of his ability to imitate the playing of [Roy Eldridge](#), whom Newton had replaced. Gillespie recorded and toured Europe with Hill's orchestra and also performed with pianist Edgar Hayes's big band, the Savoy Sultans, and flutist Alberto Socarras's Latin band.

On the recommendation of trumpeter and Cuban expatriate Mario Bauzá, who stimulated Gillespie's later interest in bringing Afro-Cuban dance music into jazz, Gillespie joined [Cab Calloway](#)'s band in the summer of 1939. In September he recorded with [Lionel Hampton](#), contributing a muted solo on "Hot Mallets." His unmuted solos on Calloway's recordings "Pickin' the Cabbage"--which Gillespie also composed and arranged--"Bye Bye Blues," and "Boo-Wah Boo-Wah," all from 1940, give early evidence of the continuous velocity and harmonic brashness that would characterize his mature soloing.

On 9 May 1940, while with Calloway in Boston, Gillespie married Lorraine Lynch, a dancer who in their fifty-two years together provided a rock-steady foil for Gillespie's impetuosity; they had no children. That same year he met alto saxophonist [Charlie Parker](#) in Kansas City. While participating in jam sessions at Minton's Playhouse in Harlem, Gillespie entered a close friendship with pianist [Thelonious Monk](#), with whom he traded ideas. These and similar jam sessions at Monroe's Uptown House in Harlem served as venues for the development of bebop. "Stardust" and "Kerouac," homemade recordings from Minton's and Monroe's in May 1941, document Gillespie's experiments with a new improvisational style, although their value is perhaps more historical than musical.

In the fall of 1941 Gillespie got into a fight with Calloway and knifed the bandleader in the posterior, thereby ending their musical affiliation. Gillespie performed in Boston with [Chick Webb](#)'s big band, which had continued under [Ella Fitzgerald](#)'s leadership after Webb's death in 1939; in New York with [Coleman Hawkins](#)'s band and Benny Carter's band; and in Toronto with [Charlie Barnet](#)'s big band. While with Carter, Gillespie composed "A Night in Tunisia." He next joined [Les Hite](#)'s big band, with which he recorded a solo on "Jersey Bounce" in June 1942. During the summer he was a member of [Lucky Millinder](#)'s big band. "Little John Special," recorded by Millinder in July, features Gillespie's trumpeting; its arrangement incorporates a melody that became the bebop theme "Salt Peanuts."

Gillespie led a small group at the Down Beat Club in Philadelphia, and Parker--who by that time had also become active at Minton's and Monroe's--began sitting in; no recordings survive to document how far they had progressed toward the bop style. Gillespie and Parker then joined pianist [Earl Hines](#)'s big band late in 1942. In September 1943 Gillespie returned to New York to play with Coleman Hawkins and then, very briefly, in [Duke Ellington](#)'s big band.

Over the winter of 1943 to 1944 Gillespie co-led a bebop combo with bassist [Oscar Pettiford](#) at the Onyx Club; Max Roach played drums. On 16 February 1944 Gillespie composed and recorded "Woody 'n' You," its theme based on a harmonic progression that he had learned from Monk. After a dispute among the leaders, Gillespie moved across Fifty-second Street to the Yacht Club (soon renamed the Downbeat Club), where he co-led with tenor saxophonist [Budd Johnson](#); Roach remained as the drummer. Gillespie also served as music director for [Billy Eckstine](#)'s big band; his arrangement of "Good Jelly Blues," recorded by Eckstine in April 1944, incorporated rapid, nervous, spiky accompaniments exemplifying a new conception of big-band instrumental countermelody superimposed on an otherwise largely conventional big-band blues performance. The trumpeter toured with Eckstine during the latter half of 1944, and he may be heard soloing above the ensemble on "Blowin' the Blues Away," recorded in December.

Gillespie's seminal bebop performances and recordings emerged in 1945 and 1946, largely in collaboration with Parker. Their quintet appearances at the Three Deuces Club in April and May 1945 had a strong impact on the New York jazz community, but it was of course their recordings that quickly generated a stylistic upheaval nationally and internationally among a whole generation of musicians and listeners. These recordings demonstrated an audaciousness and freedom from convention that at the time had no parallel in jazz. Joined in the next few years by further notable sessions from Parker (apart from Gillespie), Monk, [Bud Powell](#), and [Tadd Dameron](#), the first full-blown bop recordings possess a quirky originality that was (perhaps necessarily) lacking in the bop revival predominant in jazz from the 1980s onward, and thus the path-breaking sessions remain, permanently, among the central documents of the style. These tracks include "Groovin' High," "Dizzy Atmosphere," "Salt Peanuts," "Shaw 'Nuff," and "Hot House," all from 1945, and "Confirmation," "52nd Street Theme," "A Night in Tunisia," "Anthropology," "Oop Bop Sh'Bam," and "One Bass Hit" (pt. 1), all from 1946 and without Parker.

Even as Gillespie was creating historic small-group performances, he sought to lead a big band. His first orchestra, formed in the summer of 1945, met with little success, and he returned to combo work at the Three Deuces (Dec. 1945), Billy Berg's in Los Angeles (Jan.-Feb. 1946), and the Spotlite in New York (Mar. 1946). By this time bebop had acquired some popularity, and in Gillespie's case the impact of his recordings and musical performances was furthered by extramusical considerations: his talent as a comedian and his fashionable appearance, incorporating goatee, beret, and sunglasses. Despite his flamboyance, he remained passionately dedicated to developing an emotionally high-charged but nonetheless intellectually challenging style that would be accepted as serious concert music, not dance music.

In June, while still at the Spotlite, Gillespie formed a new big band to which Gil Fuller, Gillespie, and pianist [John Lewis](#) contributed arrangements; in addition, Eckstine lent several of Tadd Dameron's

arrangements, including "Our Delight," recorded in June. In July the orchestra recorded a sloppy attempt to have the trumpets perform wildly difficult bebop melodies in unison, "Things to Come"; Lewis's "One Bass Hit" (pt. 2); and a clever put-down of the incompetent hipster, "He Beeped When He Shoulda Bopped." Soon thereafter they made the film *Jivin' in Bebop* (1947).

Gillespie's big band toured from mid-1946 through 1947, with Ella Fitzgerald joining late in 1946 to help make the band more acceptable to southern audiences. In August 1947 the big band recorded "Two Bass Hit" and one of Gillespie's funniest bop nonsense lyrics, "Oop-pop-a-da." With the hiring of conga player [Chano Pozo](#) that fall, Gillespie made substantial progress toward uniting jazz and Afro-Cuban dance music, although conflicts between the band's swing rhythms and Pozo's rhythmic conception were not resolved. Recordings from December include Dameron's "Cool Breeze" and "Good Bait"; "Cubana Be, Cubana Bop," co-composed by George Russell, Gillespie, and Pozo; and "Manteca," by Fuller, Gillespie, and Pozo.

In 1948 Gillespie's Afro-Cuban bebop orchestra toured Europe and the South. After Pozo was shot to death in a brawl, Gillespie hired other conga players but found it impossible to re-create Pozo's musicianship and showmanship, although he never stopped trying. He retained a lifetime love for Afro-Cuban rhythms.

By 1949 the novelty of bebop was wearing off, and many swing-era big bands were failing. Gillespie tried to make his group more commercially acceptable by emphasizing rhythm and blues and comedic elements of his repertoire, but the quality of his performances and recordings declined substantially. He disbanded in May 1950. He led a sextet in New York early in 1951 and then in Detroit recorded his blues theme "Birk's Works" for his new label, Dee Gee Records, cofounded with Dave Usher. The label was active mainly in 1951, recording Gillespie's band and [Milt Jackson's](#) quartet.

The early 1950s brought occasional reunions with Parker. In June 1950 their quintet recorded "An Oscar for Treadwell" and "Bloomdido," and in March 1951 they appeared at Birdland. At year's end, or early in 1952, they performed "Hot House" with Parker on television for *Down Beat* magazine's jazz awards. On 15 May 1953 Gillespie participated in an acrimonious reunion with Parker, pianist Bud Powell, and Roach for a concert at Massey Hall in Toronto. Their bassist, [Charles Mingus](#), recorded the quintet. Despite its extremely low fidelity, the album *Jazz at Massey Hall* captures brilliant playing by Gillespie, who was never daunted by a clash of egos.

The same year, the bell of his trumpet was bent upward when it fell off its stand. Gillespie liked the resulting sound and had a new instrument designed in this manner. A bent horn and bulging cheeks--this facial characteristic had begun to emerge in 1947--became his unique trademark thereafter.

Through the 1960s Gillespie continued to be busy with recording dates and tours, both in the United States and abroad. In July 1954 he played at the first Newport Jazz Festival, and two years later he led a big band at the initial New York Jazz Festival. He had taken the big band on tours sponsored by the State Department earlier in 1956 to the Near East and Central Asia and to South America, after Congressman [Adam Clayton Powell](#), representative of the New York district encompassing Harlem, had proposed that jazz, with Gillespie as its spokesman, represent the United States as a cultural vanguard in the Cold War. Meanwhile, Gillespie taught at the Lenox (Mass.) School of Jazz and toured with Jazz at the Philharmonic (both 1956-1958).

Among recordings of note during this period are the album *Diz and Getz* (1953); *Afro* (1954), which included Gillespie's composition "Con Alma"; *Dizzy Meets Sonny* (1956), with [Sonny Stitt](#); *For Musicians Only* (1956); and *Duets with Sonny Rollins and Sonny Stitt* and *Sonny Side Up* (both 1957), the latter featuring a virtuosic romp through "The Eternal Triangle" ("I Got Rhythm").

Gillespie became involved with films, too. In 1956 he and his quintet made a film short titled *Date*

with Dizzy. In 1962, again with the quintet, he appeared on the television program "Jazz Casual." The group then made soundtracks for the Academy Award-winning cartoon *The Hole* (1962), the film *The Cool World* (1963), and the cartoon *The Hat* (1964). *Dizzy Gillespie* (1965) illustrates his work with [Stan Kenton's](#) Los Angeles Neophonic Orchestra, and in 1967 he appeared with [Carmen McRae](#) in the documentary film *Monterey Jazz Festival*.

His energy never seemed to flag, and in 1964, while still immersed in music, Gillespie ran for president. Fully aware of the problems of being an African-American star in the world of entertainment, he had over the years approached this predicament in an ambiguous way, taking actions that ranged from clowning to the expression of a near-revolutionary artistic temperament. In this presidential bid, by far the most overt expression of his politics (which were usually private), his principal motivations seemed to be a desire for publicity, to help sustain his career at a time when bop was being overwhelmed by free jazz and rock music, and, of course, a desire to express his dedication to civil rights issues at a climactic time in that movement. Later, in 1968, he adopted the Baha'i faith.

Also in 1968 he formed a big band for a performance at the Newport Jazz Festival and a European tour. While a member of the Giants of Jazz, which toured in 1971 and 1972, he received the Handel Medallion from New York City for his work with schoolchildren. In 1973 his quintet made yet another film, *Dizzy in Brazil*. But that same year Gillespie collapsed during a nightclub performance from an unidentified stimulant, and at the hospital he was pronounced dead on arrival. He recovered, however, and resumed touring.

In the mid-1970s Gillespie was routinely taking part in the ever-expanding international jazz festival circuit. In 1974 he recorded the album *Dizzy Gillespie's Big Four*, including Joe Pass and Ray Brown. He was featured on the public television program "Soundstage" in the 1976 show "Dizzy Gillespie's Be Bop Reunion." He entertained President Jimmy Carter and the shah of Iran at the White House in November 1977, and the following June, in an unforgettable moment at the White House Jazz Festival, he persuaded Carter to sing a duo on "Salt Peanuts." Over the next decade he made the documentary film short *A Night in Tunisia* (1980) and, still leading a quintet, was the focus of a documentary filmed by John Holland at the International Cuban Jazz Festival, *A Night in Havana: Dizzy Gillespie in Cuba* (1987).

In 1988, when he founded the United Nation Orchestra, he brought together probably his greatest ensemble since the 1940s, including not only Americans but also musicians from the Caribbean and South America. Although his endurance and power as a trumpeter had declined over the previous ten years or so, he was still a force to be reckoned with and clearly the group's most profound soloist. Proof of that can be heard on the disc *Dizzy Gillespie and the United Nation Orchestra: Live at Royal Festival Hall* (1989). Another disc of the same period, *Max Roach and Dizzy Gillespie, Paris, 1989*, captures the drummer and the trumpeter reminiscing as well as performing.

By 1990 Gillespie had won recognition of all kinds, including a plaque presented to him by President [Dwight D. Eisenhower](#) in 1956. In 1989 he was named a Nigerian tribal chieftain. The next year he received the National Medal of Arts, he was made a French Commandeur des Arts et Lettres, and he was awarded the Kennedy Center Honor.

While performing at Kimball's nightclub in San Francisco early in 1992, Gillespie collapsed, reportedly from exhaustion and a flare-up of diabetes; it later became known that he was suffering from pancreatic cancer. He performed for a month at the Blue Note Club in Manhattan in honor of his upcoming seventy-fifth birthday, but he was unable to attend a tribute concert given at the JVC Jazz Festival in New York in July. He died in Englewood, New Jersey.

Gillespie brought to trumpet playing an unprecedented ability to play fast-moving melodies, both written and improvised, above complex chord progressions. In the classic recordings with Parker, a succession of nearly perfect unison statements of extremely difficult themes testifies to his uncanny

knack for matching his trumpet to Parker's alto saxophone. He coupled this facility with an audacious imagination that made his improvisations a musical revelation, rather than merely a technical exercise, as it would become in the hands of disciples such as Jon Faddis and Arturo Sandoval. Gillespie achieved this aim at the expense of timbral nuance, and in this regard he was surpassed by [Miles Davis](#) and by a chain of stylistically related trumpeters stretching from [Fats Navarro](#), [Clifford Brown](#), Donald Byrd, [Lee Morgan](#), Freddie Hubbard, [Woody Shaw](#), and Wynton Marsalis onward, although all of these players (Davis excepted) owed their basic improvisational approach to Gillespie's innovations.

The tone of Gillespie's voice had far less to recommend itself than his trumpeting, and yet he made himself into a credible bebop scat singer. Repeatedly he outshone "better" singers on the strength of his timing and his ability to select appropriate nonsense syllables, translating twisting and jagged bebop instrumental sounds into idiomatic vocalized melody.

Gillespie's most memorable and widely performed composition is "A Night in Tunisia." His lesser-known "Con Alma" deserves special mention for its harmonic ambiguity, whereby a pretty theme moves in a little chordal labyrinth back and forth between two keys without ever settling on either. Far more so than Parker, Gillespie as a composer was deeply concerned with bringing diversity into the sound of his ensembles. This is obvious in his work with big bands amalgamating musical elements of the swing era, bebop, and Afro-Cuban dances. It is also a factor in his conception of small combo bebop, as demonstrated in recordings such as "Groovin' High," in which he ornamented the basic song form with an introduction, two changes of key coupled to breaks in the rhythmic accompaniment, and a dramatic new ending at half the original tempo, and "Salt Peanuts," with its introduction, interludes, and ending. He also created a well-known introduction, interlude, and ending to Monk's "Round Midnight."

Gillespie was the most influential jazz trumpeter after [Louis Armstrong](#), the most significant figure in bebop after Charlie Parker, the driving force behind the most successful early efforts to incorporate Latin music into jazz, and--despite his comic excesses--a pivotal figure in the transformation of jazz from dance music to concert music.

Bibliography

Dizzy Gillespie with Al Fraser, *To Be, or Not . . . to Bop: Memoirs* (1979), is excellent for reminiscences from Gillespie and colleagues but lacking in musical insight and highly inaccurate regarding affiliations and chronology. An excellent concise biography of his most significant years is Michael James, *Dizzy Gillespie* (1959), repr. in *Kings of Jazz*, ed. Stanley Green (1978). Other biographies include Raymond Horricks, *Dizzy Gillespie and the Be-bop Revolution* (1984), with discography by Tony Middleton; Juergen Woelfer, *Dizzy Gillespie: Sein Leben, seine Musik, seine Schallplatten* (1987); Barry McRae, *Dizzy Gillespie: His Life and Times* (1988); and Laurent Clarke and Franck Verdun, *Dizzy Atmosphere: Conversations avec Dizzy Gillespie* (1990). Surveys and interviews include Leonard Feather, *Inside Be-bop* (1949; repr. 1977 as *Inside Jazz*); Richard O. Boyer, "Profiles: Bop," *New Yorker*, 3 July 1948, pp. 28-32, 34-37; repr. as "Bop: A Profile of Dizzy," in *Eddie Condon's Treasury of Jazz*, ed. Condon and Richard Gehman (1957); Feather, "John 'Dizzy' Gillespie," in *The Jazz Makers: Essays on the Greats of Jazz*, ed. Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff (1957; repr. 1979); Ira Gitler, *Jazz Masters of the Forties* (1966; repr. 1983); George Hoefer, "The Big Bands: The Glorious Dizzy Gillespie Orchestra," *Down Beat*, 21 Apr. 1966, pp. 27-30, 47; Ralph J. Gleason, *Celebrating the Duke, and Louis, Bessie, Billie, Bird, Carmen, Miles, Dizzy, and Other Heroes* (1975); Cab Calloway and Bryant Rollins, *Of Minnie the Moocher and Me* (1976); Stanley

Dance, *The World of Earl Hines* (1977; repr. 1983); Gene Lees, *Waiting for Dizzy* (1991); and Wayne Enstice and Paul Rubin, *Jazz Spoken Here: Conversations with Twenty-Two Musicians* (1992). For iconography, see Lee Tanner, comp. and ed., *Dizzy: John Birks Gillespie in His 75th Year* (1990); and Dany Gignoux, *Dizzy Gillespie: Fotografien, Photographs* (1993). For musical analysis, see Gary Giddins, *Faces in the Crowd: Players and Writers* (1992); Barry Kernfeld, *What to Listen for in Jazz* (1995); and Thomas Owens, *Bebop: The Music and Its Players* (1995). Jan Evensmo comments on early recordings in *The Trumpets of Dizzy Gillespie, 1927-1943, Irving Randolph, Joe Thomas* (n.d. [1982?]). A catalog of recordings is by Piet Koster and Chris Sellers, *Dizzy Gillespie*, vol. 1: 1937-1953 (1985) and *Dizzy Gillespie*, vol. 2: 1953-1987 (1988). An obituary is in the *New York Times*, 7 Jan. 1993.

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Online Resources

- Dizzy Gillespie in the William P. Gottlieb Collection
[http://memory.loc.gov/libproxy/lib.unc.edu/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/gottlieb:@field\(SUBJ+@band\(Gillespie,+Dizzy,+1917-+\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/libproxy/lib.unc.edu/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/gottlieb:@field(SUBJ+@band(Gillespie,+Dizzy,+1917-+)))
From the Library of Congress's American Memory website. An index of 56 viewable photos in which Gillespie appears.
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