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African American artists.

Jamming at the Savoy Romare Bearden

Improvisation means figuring out how to do something on the spot, without planning or rehearsing beforehand. When jazz musicians get together for a “jam session,” no sheet music tells them the exact notes to play; no conductor tells them when to start playing and when to stop. The musicians get their cues by listening very carefully to each other as they play their song. Here, the guitarist has stepped forward to take a solo. After playing the melody very simply, he might alter its rhythm, add a flurry of extra notes, or experiment with new harmonies that he hadn’t tried before. None of the other players can predict what he’s going to do, so they have to keep their ears wide open. If the guitar takes the song off in a new direction, the piano, the saxophone, the trumpet, the bass, and the drums have to be able to go along.

Romare Bearden grew up with jazz. As a youngster, he lived near the Savoy Ballroom, a fabulous dance hall in Harlem where thousands of music lovers came to listen to sounds of blues, ragtime, and jazz. Bearden played in several jazz bands himself and approached his own artmaking with the spontaneity of a jazz musician. He rarely made preliminary sketches for his artwork, preferring to improvise as he arranged his colored shapes: “You have to begin somewhere,” he said, “so you put something down. Then you put something else with it, and then you see how that works, and maybe you try something else and so on, and the picture grows in that way. One thing leads to another, and you take the options as they come.” *

Challenge for Students

- Identify the instruments. Which produce sound by blowing? striking? plucking?
- Bearden arranged the musicians and instruments so that they appear to be a tight unit rather than a group of isolated individuals. Where do their shapes touch? Where do the players lean or bend in the same direction? Study how musicians and instruments are arranged on CD covers, then create a new cover for your favorite group.

*Albert Murray, “The Visual Equivalent of the Blues,” in *Romare Bearden: 1970-1980*, ed. Jerald L. Melberg and Milton J. Bloch (Charlotte, North Carolina: Mint Museum Department of Art, 1980), 17-18.

Romare Bearden. *Jamming at the Savoy*. c.1980-1981. Color photo-etching, softground etching, and aquatint. 56.6 x 76.1 cm. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Purchased as the gift of The Committee of Women’s Organizations of Baltimore, BMA 1983.51. Art ©Romare Bearden Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

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