

Dizzy Gillespie Biography Mini-Unit



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Dizzy Gillespie Biography

Dizzy Gillespie was an American jazz musician who rose to fame during the 1940s. He was born as John Birks Gillespie in 1917 to James and Lottie Gillespie. As the youngest of seven children, Dizzy spent a lot of his time playing around with other kids. He was a fast learner, eventually skipping two grades in school and taking classes alongside his older brother.

Dizzy discovered music early in life, thanks to his regular trips to the local church and his father's second job as a bandleader. During the week, his father kept all of the band's musical instruments in the house, so Dizzy practiced playing all kinds of instruments, including the piano and the drums. He even made his own rhythm instrument once using a wooden brush and a mallet.

The Gillespies lived in a small town in South Carolina named Cheraw. When Dizzy was growing up, black people and white people were not supposed to talk to one another. After he turned ten, he was no longer allowed to play with one of his best friends, a young white boy in the neighborhood. Dizzy was sad and confused about why the color of his skin mattered so

much. He decided that, when he got older, he would leave Cheraw and go live up North.

In 1927, Dizzy's father died suddenly from an asthma attack, leaving his mother to care for the four children who still lived at home. While Lottie worked several jobs to make ends meet, all the children, including Dizzy, had to go pick cotton for money. Dizzy hated picking cotton because it was such a hard job to do and because he didn't get paid much. One time Dizzy spent all day in the cotton fields and only earned 8 cents!

When one of his teachers decided to form a school band, Dizzy jumped at the chance to join. By this time, he was in fifth grade and he wanted to play the trombone. The problem was that Dizzy was too small to slide the trombone out correctly. But he kept trying and he eventually learned how to play it. A couple of years later, Dizzy started playing the trumpet and he stuck with that instrument for the rest of his life.



Tom Marcello: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Even though the school band was organized, most of the students had to learn to play the instruments on their own. Since Dizzy was learning how to play the trumpet by himself, he was never taught to hold his cheeks in while he blew into the horn. As a result,

whenever he played, Dizzy's cheeks stuck out like balloons! Even when he got older, he decided to keep playing like that. It became his signature style.

Thanks to the efforts of one of Cheraw's wealthy residents, Dizzy got a scholarship to the Laurinburg Institute, a black boarding school located about 30 miles from his hometown. At the school, Dizzy had the time he needed to practice his trumpet. He also took the opportunity to improve his piano-playing skills.



Carl van Vechten: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

After about three years at the institute, Dizzy moved to Philadelphia with his family. While he was there, he started playing in Frankie Fairfax's band where he earned his lifelong nickname "Dizzy" because of his onstage antics and jokes. Dizzy honed his own musical style after listening to the band's lead trumpet player, Charlie Shavers.

In 1937, Dizzy moved to New York, looking for an opportunity to play to larger audiences. He soon got his chance, touring extensively with the Teddy Hill Band. During his time with the group, Dizzy got to play gigs in Europe, including stops in France and Great Britain. When he got back to New York, Dizzy received

an invitation to join the world-famous big band led by Cab Calloway.

He played with Calloway's band for two years until an argument with the bandleader resulted in his dismissal from the group. Eventually, Cab and Dizzy made up and became friends for life.



William P. Gottlieb: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Playing in Cab Calloway's band allowed Dizzy to work with many of the jazz greats of the era, including Charlie Parker, Thelonius Monk, and singer Ella Fitzgerald. In his free time, Dizzy spent hours playing with some of these musicians and working on a developing style of jazz called "bebop". He debuted his version of this new sound in the original song "A Night in Tunisia", which he wrote in 1942. The song became a hit, eventually being included in over 500 different CDs.

In the following years, Dizzy's foray into bebop inspired many other musicians of the time to learn from him. After performing with Dizzy, singer Ella Fitzgerald developed an interest in bebop and preferred to sing in that style afterwards. Dizzy also taught pianist Max Roach and trumpeter Miles Davis the basics of bebop.

One of the principal aspects of bebop was a willingness to experiment with sound. Dizzy showed his own commitment to jazz experimentation throughout his career. In the early 1950s, someone accidentally fell onto his trumpet and caused the end to stand up at an angle. Instead of getting angry, Dizzy tried playing it and decided he liked the way his horn sounded! From then on, he had all of his trumpets built with the bell at an angle.



Heinrich Klaffs: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

In 1956, the U.S. government asked Dizzy and his band to travel the Middle East as cultural ambassadors. Despite the political differences, the people loved jazz and Dizzy made it a point to play with the local musicians along the way, spreading a love of bebop internationally. Later in his career, Dizzy branched into Afro-Cuban music, playing with such artists as Arturo Sandoval, Miriam Makeba, and Chano Pozo.

Dizzy died in 1993. During his career, he received multiple awards, including a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, 14 honorary degrees, and the National Medal of Arts. He was inducted into the Big Band and Jazz Hall of Fame in 1982.

Questions for Review:

1. What was Dizzy Gillespie's birth name?

2. Where did Dizzy grow up?

3. What grade was Dizzy in when he joined his first band?

4. How did Dizzy learn to play the trumpet?

5. What special music school did Dizzy receive a scholarship to attend?

6. How did Dizzy get his nickname?

7. What famous bandleader invited Dizzy to join his band in New York?

8. What original song did Dizzy write in 1942?

9. Name two musicians who learned bebop from Dizzy.

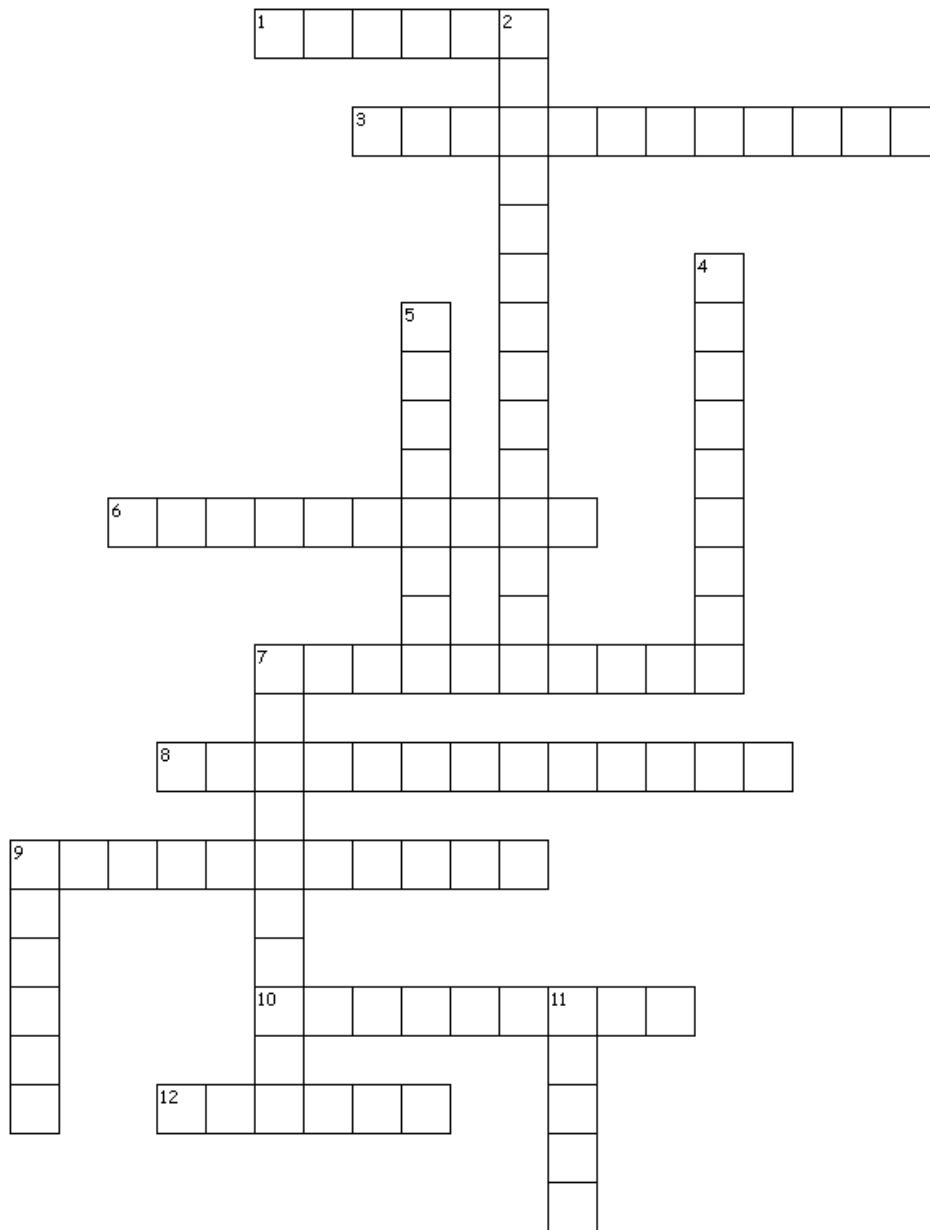
10. What accident befell Dizzy's trumpet?

11. What special job did the U.S. government give Dizzy in 1956?

12. What kind of music did Dizzy start playing later in his career?

13. What awards and honors did Dizzy receive?

Dizzy Gillespie Crossword



Across

1. European country Dizzy toured in 1937
3. City Dizzy moved to after leaving the institute
6. Institute where Dizzy practiced trumpet
7. Trumpeter Dizzy taught to play bebop
8. Musical group Dizzy toured Europe with
9. Famous bandleader Dizzy played with
10. Musical style Dizzy played later in his career
12. Dizzy's mother's first name

Down

2. Singer who preferred bebop after performing with Dizzy
4. Dizzy's first and middle names
5. First instrument Dizzy played in school band
7. Area of the world Dizzy toured as an ambassador
9. Town where Dizzy grew up
11. Style of jazz Dizzy pioneered

“To Be, or Not...to Bop” Copywork

I'd like to be known as a major messenger to jazz rather than a legendary figure because ... legendary figures can fade.

When you're a major contributor to music, your contribution can't fade.

–from “*To Be, or Not...to Bop*” by
Dizzy Gillespie – p. 491

Questions for Review Answer Key:

1. John Birks Gillespie
2. Cheraw, South Carolina
3. Fifth grade
4. He taught himself.
5. The Laurinburg Institute
6. He was always playing around and joking onstage.
7. Cab Calloway
8. A Night in Tunisia
9. Max Roach and Miles Davis
10. Someone fell onto his trumpet and bent the end backwards.
11. He and his band were asked to travel the Middle East as U.S. Cultural Ambassadors.
12. Afro-Cuban music
13. Dizzy received 14 honorary degrees, a National Medal of Arts, a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, and he was inducted into the Big Band and Jazz Hall of Fame.

Crossword Puzzle Answer Key:

ACROSS:

1. FRANCE
3. PHILADELPHIA
6. LAURINBURG
7. MILESDAVIS
8. TEDDYHILLBAND
9. CABCALLOWAY
10. AFROCUBAN
12. LOTTIE

DOWN:

2. ELLAFITZGERALD
4. JOHNBIRKS
5. TROMBONE
7. MIDDLEEAST
9. CHERAW
11. BEBOP

Bibliography:

*A note to parents – The following books and websites were used in the research for this mini–unit study. However, some of the books listed below are **NOT** children’s books and they feature themes about racism, language, and music that children may not be equipped to handle. Parents are advised to read the books themselves and then choose how to share the information with their children.*

Gillespie, Dizzy; Fraser, Alfred. To Be, or Not...to Bop ©1979
Doubleday & Company, Inc.

Maggin, Donald L. Dizzy: The Life and Times of John Birks Gillespie
©2005 Harper Entertainment

Winter, Jonah; Qualls, Sean. Dizzy ©2006 Arthur A. Levine Books

Dizzy Gillespie.com: <http://www.dizzygillespie.com/>

Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dizzy_Gillespie

Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Night_in_Tunisia

PBS Jazz – Dizzy Gillespie:
http://www.pbs.org/jazz/biography/artist_id_gillespie_dizzy.htm

NPR: <http://www.npr.org/artists/15368367/dizzy-gillespie>