

Swing Jazz

Introductory Essay

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Jazz reached the height of its popularity with the American public during the Swing era, beginning in the dark days of the Depression and continuing through the victorious end of World War II. Also known as the Big Band sound, Swing jazz was characterized by its strong rhythmic drive and by an orchestral “call and response” between different sections of the ensemble. The rhythm section – piano, bass, drums and guitar – maintained the swinging dance beat, while trumpets, trombones and woodwinds, and later, vocals, were often scored to play together and provide the emotional focus of the piece. This arrangement resulted in a “conversational” style among sections that arrangers exploited to maximum affect. By performing their music with increasingly complex arrangements for ever larger orchestras, Swing musicians helped erode the wall between our definitions of popular music and the art music generally labeled “classical.”

The first great artists of Swing were African American. By the early 1930s, Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington, and Jimmy Lunceford had begun to blend the “hot” rhythms of New Orleans into the dance music of urban America in the black jazz clubs of Kansas City and Harlem. Although white jazz musicians had been taking inspiration from African American artists for at least three decades, by the 1940s a new generation of white musicians and dancers were deeply invested in the music that Duke Ellington christened “Swing” with his 1932 hit record, “It Don’t Mean a Thing If It Ain’t Got That Swing.” In 1935 white bandleader and clarinetist Benny Goodman led swing into the popular mainstream, but only after he began playing the arrangements he purchased from Fletcher Henderson. Goodman would go on to gather an extraordinary group of performers into his high-profile band, including Henderson, Gene Krupa, Lionel Hampton, Peggy Lee and Stan Getz. His decision to integrate his group with black musicians helped begin the slow process of integrating the music industry.

At its height in the years before World War II, Swing jazz was America’s most pervasive and popular musical genre. If Ken Burns’ documentary series *Jazz*, is correct in its interpretation of the story of Swing as a music that helped America remake the world during and after World War II, then the history of Swing must also be seen as preparing the way for the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s. Knowing that a wider and increasingly diverse population of Americans was taking African American musicians seriously fueled a growing conviction that equality was a real possibility. As black soldiers shipping off to Europe and the Pacific during World War II were demanding greater respect and tolerance in the armed forces, black Americans at home called for a “Double V” – Victory abroad for America over Germany and Japan and Victory over racism for black Americans at home.

As Americans danced to Swing bands during the 1940s, a new space for female musicians also opened up. Sherrie Tucker, author of *Swing Shift: “All-Girl” Bands of the 1940s*, and Greta Schiller and Andrea Weiss, directors of *The International Sweethearts of Rhythm*, demonstrate how the outbreak of World War II gave women the unprecedented opportunity to perform music publicly for large audiences. The International Sweethearts of Rhythm was one of many “all-girl” bands that toured the country when most of their male peers were in the military. For the first time, female musicians in America consistently proved that they could play trumpets, saxophones, and drums with as much expertise as men. Sadly, many of the great jazzwomen of the 1940s and 1950s were written out of all but the most recent jazz histories. Thanks to Tucker’s book and the film by Schiller and Weiss, we now know their unique and historically important stories.

Not all Americans were enchanted by the widespread success and influence of Swing jazz and the challenges to social norms it represented. For example, although the races were generally kept separate at Swing performances, there were consistent expressions of outrage at the energetic dancing that accompanied concerts and persistent criticism of the influence of Swing music on young people. Young white women were especially targeted by those who considered Swing a “mulatto” music and wanted to preserve a fantasy of white purity on the dance floor and the bandstand.

White America’s conflicted response to the rise of Swing and its connection to black culture is clearly articulated in *The Benny Goodman Story* (1955), a Hollywood film aimed at whites with fond memories of the Swing Era. This film presents a set of common myths about jazz. In an early scene, the teenaged Benny is playing with a mediocre white dance band on a riverboat. Wandering to another part of the boat, he hears a band of black New Orleans musicians under the direction of the Creole trombonist Kid Ory (played in the film by the real Kid Ory). Benny has never heard such compelling music, and when he quizzes Ory, the trombonist says, “We just play what we feel,” a statement that perpetuates the myth that the pioneers of jazz were not trained musicians but primitive people who naively expressed their feelings through music. Endowed with the license to play from his feelings, young Benny immediately becomes an accomplished jazz improviser as he plays along with Ory’s group. Later in the film, after Benny has become a successful bandleader, Ory reappears to tell him that he has “the best band I ever heard anyplace!” Like many other films about white jazz musicians, *The Benny Goodman Story* found a way to diminish the real achievements of black jazz artists, who were most definitely not playing a music that was an unmediated expression of their feelings. The film also suggests that white artists like Goodman created a music that surpassed anything created by their African American predecessors.

Jazz historians today consistently celebrate Ellington, Henderson, and other African American musicians as the most sophisticated and compelling musicians of the Swing Era. But white Swing musicians like Goodman also contributed to the evolution of the genre. There is no denying the authenticity and appeal of Swing jazz, even if that appeal ended with the new affluence of the post-war years. While many jazz musicians broke away from Swing to develop Bebop jazz, the young white denizens of the Swing dance halls in the 1940s married, raised children, and moved to the suburbs. They would soon prefer a night in front of the black-and-white television set to a night dancing to black or white Swing bands. And just as Swing dancers had scandalized their parents with their commitment to “mulatto music,” these same people would be scandalized in turn when their children began dancing to the ‘dangerous’ rock and roll music of Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry.