

Swing and Big Bands

Speaker: David Sharp

While jazz in 1920s Chicago was based in the instrumentation of New Orleans jazz, the trend in New York City and in Harlem was towards larger bands. Jazz musicians began to form ensembles of between 10 and 15 players. Many of these bands were modeled after the large society dance orchestras of Paul Whiteman and others. These earliest “big bands” played in vaudeville shows, in dance halls, and in speakeasies. These bands developed a new style called Swing that took America and the world by storm. In this unit, we will also examine another important phenomena – the emergence of the jazz singer.

By the early 1930s, thousands of big bands of varying size and styles played regularly in ballrooms and dance halls throughout the country. Swing, as the dance and jazz style was known as, became so popular in the mid-1930s through the early-1940s that this period in American history is commonly referred to as the “big band” or “swing” era. Many swing musicians and bandleaders became international superstars. Bands led by Jimmie Lunceford, Chick Webb, Artie Shaw, Cab Calloway, and Benny Goodman, launched a dance craze via radio and records that swept across the United States and Europe as well. Bands such as these played in thousands of ballrooms all over the country. Other more commercial bands, such as the Glenn Miller Orchestra and the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra, became immensely popular, particularly during the World War II years.

Because of the larger size of bands, music usually had to be written down in some fashion. Composers and arrangers now became important components in the success of a band. The development of the big band as a jazz medium took place during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, and is largely attributed to the bands led by Fletcher Henderson and the great Duke Ellington. Henderson, along with his chief arranger Don Redman, introduced written scores and arrangements into jazz and helped to develop the basic big band format.

Numerous gifted individual soloists emerged during the swing era such as tenor saxophonist Coleman Hawkins; cornetist Rex Stewart; trumpeter Roy Eldridge; the Belgian guitarist Django Reinhardt; pianists Erroll Garner, Art Tatum, and Nat Cole; and many of Duke Ellington’s sidemen.

At the same time, a different style of swing and big band jazz was developing in Kansas City and was epitomized by the bands of Bennie Moten, Jay McShann, and Count Basie. These bands were more blues oriented and had a direct impact on modern jazz styles and on rhythm and blues.

Profound developments in jazz improvisation and in instrumental techniques also took place during the swing era. *[Watch “Take the ‘A’ Train” with Harry James and Buddy Rich]*

General Characteristics of Swing and Big Band Jazz

- At first, bands varied in the number and combination of instruments they used, but by the 1940s a standard big band instrumentation had developed that is still seen today in the modern jazz orchestra.

Sax Section:	5 Saxophones (2 alto saxes, 2 tenor saxes, 1 baritone sax) Saxophonists were often called upon to double on clarinet and (in later styles) flute
Brass Section:	4 Trumpets and 3-4 Trombones Brass players often used various types of mutes
Rhythm Section:	Piano, String Bass, Drum Set, and sometimes a Guitar The earliest bands in the 1920s usually used tuba rather than a string bass and a banjo instead of a guitar

- Because of the emphasis on dance music, swing is characterized by a strong sense of swing feel: a steady 4/4 beat, syncopated and swing 8th-note figures, and a growing importance of walking bass lines.
- There is a greater emphasis on ensemble playing in big band music. Musicians generally had to have a high level of musicianship, including sight-reading abilities, a solid command of their instrument with good intonation, and tone control.
- Different from New-Orleans based styles, where horn players basically improvised their own melodies, was an emphasis on what we call homophonic textures in the horns, in other words harmonized melodies and accompaniments. Section solis where one section such as the saxophones are featured, and full ensemble tutti where all of the horns play together in harmony.
- Melodies are often based on riffs (short repeated melodic fragments). Riffs, sometimes improvised by ensemble members, were often used to accompany soloists.
- Arrangements often end with an exciting full ensemble statement called a shout chorus.
- Improvising soloists are incorporated within the written arrangements.
- During the swing era, showmanship was often vital to a band's popular success. Musicians often dressed alike and sometimes used choreographed moves. Bands were also known for their individual theme songs.

Some Notable New York Swing Era Big Bands

The "prototype" of the jazz big band was a group led by pianist Fletcher Henderson (1898-1952). In 1922, Henderson organized an eleven piece band that was noted for its cohesive ensemble sound with the addition of "hot" soloists. Henderson's chief arrangers were alto saxophonists Don Redman and Benny Carter, two of the architects of big band arranging techniques. The band gradually grew larger over the next few years until Henderson disbanded the group in 1934 to become a freelance arranger.

One of the earliest big band recordings made by the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra, was "The Stampede." It is very representative of the 1920s jazz sound in New York. The arrangement by Don Redman achieves great variety by pitting sections of the band (brass and woodwinds) against one another with the addition of lively improvised solos by cornetist Rex Stewart, tenor saxophonist Coleman Hawkins (this being one of the earliest recorded saxophone solos ever), trumpeter Russell Smith, and Henderson himself on piano. The off-beat banjo figures, tuba, and a clarinet trio are indicative of the early big band sound. *[Listen to "The Stampede" by Fletcher Henderson & His Orchestra]*

One of the most exciting New York black dance bands during the 1930s was the Jimmie Lunceford Orchestra, a favorite at New York ballrooms. Its polished and energetic sound emphasized instrumental color and dynamic contrasts with a very danceable beat. The band included many great swing soloists including alto saxophonist Willie Smith, trombonist Trummy Young, and the high-note trumpet playing of Snooky Young (who, in later years, was a member of Doc Severinson's Tonight Show Band).

The "Lunceford Special" is a composition based on an AABA 32-bar standard song form, a structure that is very common in American popular music, and is a typical swing big band arrangement beginning with an introduction, followed by the main melody, then a sequence of different improvising soloists. It ends with an exciting shout chorus where all of the horns play together in a very powerful way. *[Listen to "Lunceford Special" by Jimmie Lunceford and His Orchestra]*

Bandleader and clarinetist Benny Goodman (1909-1986) led the most popular jazz-oriented dance band of the swing era. A virtuoso clarinetist in both jazz and "classical" music, Goodman and his big band achieved such worldwide fame that he was called the "King of Swing."

Goodman began his career as a freelance saxophonist and clarinet player in his hometown of Chicago. Because of his extensive formal training in "classical" music, Goodman was in high demand as a freelance musician because of his exceptional sight-reading abilities and musicianship. He played with some of the great white Chicago/Dixieland bands of the 1920s, including a popular dance band led by drummer Ben Pollack. He eventually moved to New York City and in 1932 organized his first big band.

John Hammond, the extremely influential talent scout and promoter (who throughout his life boosted the careers of such diverse artists as Billie Holiday, Aretha Franklin, Stevie Ray Vaughn, and Bruce Springsteen), discovered the Benny Goodman band and was responsible for much of the success of the group. In 1935, Hammond set-up a weekly radio program featuring the Goodman band called *Let's Dance*, which was heard by millions of listeners throughout the country. Goodman became a household name, and with the band's extensive touring schedule, initiated the phenomenal swing dance craze of the late 1930s. *[Watch "Sing, Sing, Sing" by Benny Goodman and his Orchestra from "Hollywood Hotel"]*

On January 16, 1938, the Goodman band was featured at New York City's Carnegie Hall in what is considered the first formal jazz concert. The concert marked the acceptance of jazz as a legitimate art form. Legend has it that the idea to present the Goodman band in concert at Carnegie Hall began as a publicity stunt by John Hammond and Benny Goodman's publicist, Wynn Nathanson. Certainly, the idea of playing jazz in a concert hall and at Carnegie Hall of all places was revolutionary because at that time, Carnegie Hall was a bastion of musical propriety. Goodman was initially hesitant about the concert, fearing that "hot jazz" would fall flat before audiences accustomed to the "classical music" that was usually presented there. Nevertheless, the concert was a huge success. It was broadcast throughout the country and was recorded. *[Listen to "Don't Be That Way" by Benny Goodman and His Orchestra]*

In addition to his well-rehearsed and hard driving big band, Goodman was interested in small group jazz. During the 1930s, he led a series of outstanding combos that anticipated later jazz styles. These small groups were also credited for being the first racially mixed ensembles in American popular music, and

featured such great talent as the light and graceful pianist Teddy Wilson; Lionel Hampton, the first significant soloist on the vibraphone; and the pioneering electric guitarist Charlie Christian.

In later years, Goodman continued to record and tour the world, including the Soviet Union. In 1955, actor Steve Allen portrayed Goodman in the Academy-Award winning motion-picture *The Benny Goodman Story* which featured many of Goodman's famous sidemen.

There were other notable New York-based swing bands such as the band led by the powerful drummer Chick Webb. Along with Gene Krupa, Webb established the drums as a solo instrument. His big band worked considerably at Manhattan's Savoy Ballroom, one of the largest and most famous ballrooms in America. The Chick Webb Band also featured Ella Fitzgerald, who became an influential jazz vocalist known particularly for her acrobatic scat singing. Clarinetist Artie Shaw, whose playing was often compared to that of Goodman's, also led a very popular jazz-oriented big band. *[Watch "Class in Swing" by Artie Shaw and His Orchestra]*

In the late 1930s, many of the more commercial (primarily white) swing bands gained tremendous success including bands led by Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey, and Charlie Barnet. Their music was influenced by the jazz-oriented bands, but had somewhat less of a focus on jazz improvisation.

By the early 1940s, there were big bands that were incorporating the newer and modern "bebop" language into their music. Vocalist Billy Eckstine led a band during the 1940s of "young lions," many of whom went on to pioneer modern jazz techniques, including Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Art Blakey, Gene Ammons, and vocalist Sarah Vaughan. Pianist Claude Thornhill led an influential big band, though relatively short lived, that was known for its harmonically sophisticated and delicate sound that included two very influential young "modern" arrangers – Gil Evans and Gerry Mulligan. In California, the bands of Woody Herman and Stan Kenton were experimenting with ultra-modern sounds – what came to be called "progressive" jazz. All of these bands were important in establishing the standards for the contemporary jazz orchestra.

Kansas City

While much of the focus of the swing era was on the bands based out of New York City, there were thousands of local bands throughout the country called territory bands. These bands ranged from commercial white society bands (sometimes called "sweet bands") to the more rough and blues-oriented black bands. Many of the best black bands were from the Midwest and Southwestern regions of the United States.

Kansas City, Missouri was an important musical center during the 1920s and 1930s for black territory bands. Tom Pendergast, the corrupt mayor of the city, opened up much of the city to vice including prostitution, gambling, and 24-hour liquor laws. Much like turn-of-the-century New Orleans, Kansas City became a "hotbed" for entertainment. There were numerous establishments for musicians to host jam sessions and play for dances. Because musicians here were somewhat removed from the more refined music developments taking place in New York City and in the other big urban centers, they devised a unique style rooted in the blues.

The black dance bands out of Kansas City played with a marked simplicity and often performed what are called head arrangements – tunes that were collectively composed by members of the ensemble and not written down. Structured on simple and repeating riffs, these tunes were usually based on simple song forms or the 12-bar blues.

The first band out of Kansas City that achieved national prominence was the Bennie Moten Orchestra. In 1932, the band traveled to the East Coast and made the first notable recordings of Kansas City jazz. Although their recordings had little success at first, they displayed a vibrant new sound and approach to swing. The band included a young pianist by the name of William “Count” Basie.

Count Basie was born in Red Bank, New Jersey in 1904 and learned the piano stylings of Fats Waller, one of the great stride pianists and entertainers of the 1920s and 30s. While traveling on the black vaudeville circuit in 1927, he became stranded in Kansas City. Loving the music he heard there, he quit the show and remained in Kansas City. He soon played with Walter Page’s Blue Devils and then Moten’s group. In 1934, Basie left Moten to form his own group. When Moten died unexpectedly in 1935, Basie’s nine-piece Barons of Rhythm expanded to a 14-piece band and picked up Moten’s house gig at the famous Reno Club.

The new Count Basie Orchestra was very popular in Kansas City, but relatively unknown outside of it. Late one night while in Chicago, talent scout John Hammond heard a distant broadcast on his car radio from the Reno Club and immediately drove to Kansas City and signed Basie to a record deal. The Count Basie Orchestra’s infectious relaxed style, yet full of punch and verve, was an immediate nationwide hit.

What made the Basie band different from most of the other bands of the time was its emphasis on simplicity and swing feel. Basie organized a rhythm section that expressed an easygoing and deeply swinging quality. Often referred to as the “All-American Rhythm Section,” this group laid the foundation for modern rhythm section accompaniment. Basie, who was an excellent stride and boogie-woogie pianist, began to use more space and silence in his accompaniments, often just “splashing” a chord here and there and exploiting the instrument’s high register. Guitarist Freddie Green, strummed crisp and even stokes on each beat and became the master of rhythm guitar techniques. Bassist Walter Page developed the walking bass style and was one of the first bass players in jazz “to be heard more than just felt.” Drummer Jo Jones played in a looser manner and with a quieter bass drum, and put more emphasis on ride rhythms, often playing on the hi-hat.

The Count Basie Orchestra included a plethora of impressive soloists including trumpeters Buck Clayton and Harry “Sweets” Edison, saxophonists Herschel Evans and Don Byas, trombonists Al Grey and Dickie Wells, and especially tenor saxophonist Lester “Prez” Young. Young was noted for his relaxed rhythmic approach, smooth melodic improvisations, and lighter tone quality than most tenor saxophonists at the time.

Basie’s signature song and biggest hit, the “One O’Clock Jump” is a definitive example of a 12-bar blues head arrangement based on simple riffs. Tunes like this were collectively composed by all of the band members. Contrast is achieved by the varying of riffs and accompanying textures. During the last three choruses, each of the three horn sections – saxophones, trumpets, and trombones – play a different riff

in a layering effect. The piece also exemplifies the relaxed swing feel of the Basie rhythm section. *[Listen to “One O’Clock Jump” by Count Basie and His Orchestra]*

Later Basie bands played more formal arrangements and many masterful arrangers wrote for them including Neil Hefti, Ernie Wilkins, Sammy Nestico, and Quincy Jones. Basie also collaborated with numerous jazz and popular entertainers including vocalists Joe Williams, Frank Sinatra, and Judy Garland. Basie managed to keep his group together until his death in 1984. The Basie band survives today as a “ghost band” led by various alumni of the Basie organization. *[Watch “Every Day I Have the Blues” by Count Basie and His Orchestra featuring Joe Williams]*

Another one of the most important proponents of Kansas City jazz was pianist and vocalist Jay (“Hootie”) McShann (1909-2006). McShann’s piano style is deeply rooted in the blues and in boogie-woogie, and his singing was definitive of the Kansas City shouting style. He led a band dubbed as “The Band That Swings the Blues” during the late 1930s and early 1940s that included alto saxophonist Charlie Parker – the next great innovator in jazz.

Swing Era Vocalists

The swing era was also characterized by the arrival of the jazz vocalist. Almost all bands featured singers to some extent. Singers such as Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Anita O’Day, and the American idol Frank Sinatra began their careers as big band vocalists. There were many individual styles of singing during the period, from strictly commercial interpretations to scatting and the blues.

Probably the single most important swing era vocalist was Billie Holiday. Holiday modeled much of her style after Louis Armstrong and cultivated a very free approach to rhythm and phrasing that was akin to that of an instrumental soloist. “Lady Day,” as she was often known, became the model for the American female jazz and popular singer.

Born in Philadelphia in 1915, her childhood was very tragic. She was abandoned by her mother as a young child and was raised with family in Baltimore. As a teen, she worked as a prostitute and began a battle with drugs that plagued her much of her life. She was discovered by John Hammond in 1933 who introduced her to Benny Goodman. Although she performed with numerous big bands, including Artie Shaw, Lionel Hampton, Teddy Wilson, and Count Basie, most of her hundreds of recordings are with small groups.

Holiday was a great interpreter of standard songs who interjected the feeling of the blues. She sang with an extremely relaxed and laid-back style – almost behind the beat – manner. She often retained the words to a song, but either paraphrased the original melody, or completely improvised a new melody. Holiday’s style was strongly influenced by the lyrical phrasing of tenor saxophonist Lester Young, with whom she collaborated with on numerous occasions. *[Listen to “Georgia on My Mind” by Billie Holiday and Her Orchestra]* and *[Watch “Fine and Mellow” by Billie Holiday]*

Representing the other end of the stylistic spectrum from Billie Holiday was the incomparable Ella Fitzgerald. Ella sang with a buoyancy and energy that was unmatched. From slow, lamenting ballads to up-tempo bebop tunes, she conveyed subtle moods with a wide-ranging, virtuosic voice with a child-like

quality at times. Ella was probably best known for her phenomenal scat-singing, singing as if she was an instrumentalist. *[Listen to “Flying Home” by Ella Fitzgerald with the Vic Schoen Orchestra]*

© David Sharp and Indian Hills Community College