Session Three:
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.

**Humanities Themes**

**Jazz and Equality.** Since its earliest days on the streets of New Orleans, jazz has bridged communities with diverse ethnic, cultural, and social backgrounds, speaking a common musical language that anyone can understand. Jazz has crossed national borders and challenged the status quo and it is an example of how an art form contributes to changing social, economic and class relationships.

**The History of Women Musicians.** Swing during the World War II era offered female jazz musicians (and vocalists) unprecedented opportunities as part of a time period when women also had unprecedented opportunities in other jobs and professions because of the shortage of labor on the home front from men serving in the war effort.

**Jazz as an Art Form.** Jazz has been considered as “art music” and as a part of popular music, especially in the era of Swing jazz. Can jazz be understood as an art as strong as European classical music? Can classical genres of music have an influence on popular music and visa versa.

**Jazz as it Intersects with Other Art Forms.** The importance of Swing dancing to the World War II era generation – particularly dancing by women with a new sense of freedom – is a key element in the history of popular music in the 20th century. How did jazz music influence other forms of art in the 20th Century.

**Discussion Points**

1. How was the evolution of jazz influenced by the Great Depression and World War II?
2. Who were the great innovators of swing jazz and what were the unique contributions of each?
3. What was the appeal of Swing jazz to young people in the 1930’s and 40’s? Why did its appeal cross racial barriers?
4. How was the cultural landscape of America changed by the immense popularity of swing jazz? How were other art forms affected by the invention of swing?
5. Is the best music also the most popular music? How does music become popular? Does the media make music popular, or do consumers decide what is popular? What social, political and technological trends helped to make Swing jazz so popular?
6. What made it possible for a group of 14-19 year old young women musicians from different races to form The International Sweethearts of Rhythm? What motivated them to perform? What obstacles did they face and why were they able to succeed in the way they did? What was happening in 1940’s America that made it possible for them to have an audience?
Suggested Readings
Amiri Baraka, (Leroi Jones), *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*
Scott DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History*
John Clellon Holmes, *The Horn*
Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues*
John Szwed, *Jazz 101: A Complete Guide to Learning and Loving Jazz*
Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: “All-Girl” Bands of the 1940s*

Additional Documentary Films
*A Duke Named Ellington*
DVD, 110 minutes, 1988, part of *American Masters*
Terry Carter
WNET/ American Masters

*Benny Goodman: Adventures in the Kingdom of Swing*
DVD, 60 minutes, 1993, part of *American Masters*
Oren Jacoby
WNET/ American Masters

*The Last of the Blue Devils: The Kansas City Jazz Story*
DVD, 90 minutes, 1993
Matthew Seig
Medici Arts

*Lady Day: The Many Faces of Billie Holiday*
DVD, 60 minutes, 1991, part of *American Masters*
Matthew Seig
WNET / American Masters

*Satchmo: The Life of Louis Armstrong*
DVD, 90 minutes, 2005, part of *Masters of American Music*
Gary Giddins and Kendrick Simmons
PBS Video

*Ella Fitzgerald: Something to Live For*
DVD, 90 minutes, 2005, part of *American Masters*
Charlotte Zwerin
WNET/American Masters

*The Story of Jazz*
DVD, 98 minutes, 1993, from *Masters of American Music*
Matthew Seig
Medici Arts
Swing: Pure Pleasure
DVD, 120 minutes, 2000, Episode Five of Ken Burns’ Jazz
Ken Burns
PBS Video

Dedicated to Chaos
DVD, 120 minutes, 2000, Episode Seven of Ken Burns’ Jazz
Ken Burns
PBS Video

Discography

Ken Burns’ Jazz
[Soundtrack, audio CD, 2000, Columbia/Legacy]. The Story of America’s Music Soundtrack, CD music is a 5-disc set with 94 songs.

Songs featured in Episode 6 include (listed by artist):

Don Albert and His Orchestra
Rockin’ and Swingin’

Louis Armstrong
Memories of You
Love Walked In
Count Basie and His Orchestra
Easy Does It
John’s Idea
Jumpin’ at the Woodside
Lester Leaps In
Out the Window
Every Tub
Doggin’ Around
One O’Clock Jump
Swingin’ the Blues
Swinging at the Daisy Chain
Sent for You Yesterday
Charlie Christian
Grand Slam (Boy Meets Goy)

Duke Ellington and His Orchestra
Riding on a Blue Note
Echoes of Harlem (Cootie’s Concerto)
Ella Fitzgerald
A-Tisket, A-Tasket
Love & Kisses
Sing Me a Swing Song (And Let Me Dance)
Betcha Nickel
I'll Chase the Blues Away

Benny Goodman and His Orchestra
Don't Be That Way
Sing Sing Sing (With a Swing)
Goodbye
Rose Room (In Sunny Roseland)
More Than You Know

Coleman Hawkins
Bouncing with Bean
Body and Soul
I Know That You Know

Billie Holiday
Without Your Love
Easy Living
Strange Fruit
A Sailboat in the Moonlight

Pete Johnson
627 Stomp

Jones-Smith Incorporated
Evenin'
Shoe Shine Boy
Lady Be Good

Andy Kirk and His Clouds of Joy
Little Joe from Chicago

Bennie Moten's Kansas City Orchestra
Moten's Swing

Artie Shaw and His Orchestra
Lady Be Good

Walter Page's Blue Devils
Blue Devil Blues
Joe Turner
Rebecca

Chick Webb and His Orchestra
Harlem Congo
I'll Chase the Blues Away

Mary Lou Williams
Baby Dear

Lester Young
Midnight Symphony
Back to the Land
Without Your Love
A Sailboat in the Moonlight

International Sweethearts of Rhythm
[Hot Licks: 1944-1946, CD, 2006, Sounds of Yesteryear, a compilation of live radio appearances made by The International Sweethearts of Rhythm]

Galvanizing
Sweet Georgia Brown
Central Avenue Boogie
Bugle Call Rag
She's Crazy with the Heat
Jump Children
Vi Vigor
Lady Be Good
Gin Mill Special
Honeysuckle Rose
That Man of Ine
Diggin’ Dykes
Don't Get It Twisted (Maurice King)
Tuxedo Junction
Slightly Frantic
One O’Clock Jump

Online Resources
A Passion for Jazz (jazz education resources), http://www.apassion4jazz.net/
Columbia University’s Center for Jazz Studies, http://www.jazz.columbia.edu/about.html
Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University, http://www.tulane.edu/~lmiller/JazzHome.html
Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
Jazz at Lincoln Center, www.jalc.org
Jazz for Young People Online, www.jazzforyoungpeople.org
Jazz Foundation of America, http://jazzfoundation.org/
Jazz Museum in Harlem, http://www.jazzmuseuminharlem.org/
Jazz Profiles from NPR, npr.org/programs/jazzprofiles
Jazz: A Film by Ken Burns, pbs.org/jazz/index.htm
Music Resource (jazz recordings), doubletimejazz.com/index_new.htm
Smithsonian Jazz, Smithsonian.com