

THE SWING ERA

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Introduction

Since Swing came up with the beat of ragtime, it became the essence of various styles of music and a synonym for Jazz. But what makes *Swing* so different? Which famous bandleaders helped to develop *Swing*? Of which basic elements does this special style of *Jazz* consist of?

There are early hints to the existence of the term “Swing” . Scott Joplin wrote in his *Ragtime Exercises* in 1908:

“Play slowly until you catch the Swing”

According to Robert S. Gold’s *Jazz Encyclopedia*, the term “Swing” can be traced to the year 1888.

During the 1920’s, the expressions “sweet” and “hot” were in use among musicians to distinguish between several styles of music, but both were used in the context of Jazz. The word “Swing” was only a verb employed to describe the basic Jazz quality: good Jazz-Music should “swing”. The expression “hot music” was regarded as a bit immoral, so the phrase “Swing Music” became popular. “Swing” was the answer to the American love of bigness which became visible in the big Harlem Bands. During the years of Prohibition, Jazz gave room for the people to expand. At the end of the depression, “hot music” and Big Bands became popular among college kids.

Benny Goodman

One famous bandleader was Benny Goodman. In his autobiography, *The Kingdom of Swing*, he describes the difference between Swing and the kind of Jazz Music that was played before:

"It was about this time, or maybe just a little earlier, that large bands became standardized with five brass, four saxes, and four rhythm. Ten men used to be considered the limit of even a large dance orchestra."

There were huge differences in size. The number of musicians grew from around five to more than twelve. The music sounded smoother and more flowing.

The standard Swing Band was divided into the following sections:

- brass - five musicians
- reeds - four musicians
- rhythm - four musicians

Musicians were backed up by the rhythm section with a steady pulse. The saxophones played together as one voice, and the five brass were the second voice. The three trumpets and two trombones followed different lines. These two voices made up the basic Swing Big Band. This special sound was developed in the early Twenties by Don Redman and Fletcher Henderson. A hot solo line was harmonized and written out for the whole section. Later, West African patterns of call-and-response occurred, keeping the two sections answering each other. There were still hot solos on top, accompanied by a suitable arranged background. The repeated phrases, played by the brass and reed sections, were called *riffs*.

Riffs were dressed up by European harmony. The four saxophones repeated a phrase in five part harmony, and the brass section replied with a phrase. Each musician had to be able to “swing” separately as well as with his section.. The quality of the music depended much on the arrangement. Benny Goodman described how important an arrangement is for the success of a Jazz Band:

"Up to that time the only kind of arrangements that the public had paid much attention to, so far as knowing who was responsible for them was concerned, were the elaborate ones such as Ferde Grofe's for Whiteman.

But the art of making an arrangement a band can play with swing - and I am convinced it is an art - one that really helps a solo player to get off, and gives him the right background to work against - that's something that very few musicians can do. The whole idea is that the ensemble passages where the whole band is playing together or one section has the lead, have to be written in more or less the same style that a soloist would use if he were improvising. That is, what Fletcher really could do so wonderfully was to take a tune like “Sometimes I'm Happy” and really improvise on it himself, with the exception of certain parts of various choruses which would be marked solo trumpet or solo tenor or solo clarinet. Even here the background for the rest of the band would be in the same consistent vein, so that the whole thing really hung together and sounded unified.

Then, too, the arranger's choice of the different key changes is very important, and the order in which the solos are placed, so that the arrangement works up to a climax. In all these respects, Fletcher's ideas were far ahead of anybody else's at the time..."

First, bandleaders struggled to increase the size of their bands. The "sweet" dance bands succeeded in building themselves up to nine men and a violinist. These so-called "Mickey-Mouse bands" used arrangements with little improvising that offered no creative problems.

But even among the highly gifted Jazz musicians only a few were able to read music. Some of them were hired by bands just to play the solo, because collective improvisation had led to an unpleasant style of music. But even Fletcher Henderson had problems making his band play together as a team. The problem was finally solved by the great arrangements of Don Redman. In these days the music sounded rough and out-of-tune for some people, but we would regard it today as swinging.

Benny Goodman was the right man to deal with a new style of Jazz and became one of the most talented musicians, although the clarinet at first did not seem to be suitable to gain real success in a Jazz Band.

Sidney Bechet, Jonny Dodds and Jimmy Noone had already developed certain clarinet styles but none of them was able to create such a special sound like Benny Goodman.

Benny Goodman first appeared on radio in NBC's *National Biscuit Program*. He had put together a really good band for this event: Jack Lacey (trombone), leading saxophonist Claude Thornhill and George van Eps (guitar).

After a depressing appearance at *Billy Roses Music Hall* Goodman went on tour with a band based on his radio-orchestra: Gene Krupa (rhythm), Jess Stacy (piano), Ralph Muzillo and Nate Kazebier (trumpet). Although the reeds and trombones were not that famous the band was perfectly able to play together and create a really swinging sound.

Swing first was an expression for Jazz and a synonym for the special beat, sound and feeling of rhythm the bands were creating. The arrangements of Fletcher Henderson helped Benny Goodman reach a level that only few other bands had archived before. More and more people became interested in his music, because of the special sound of the band. Fletcher's arrangements created the overall impression of a *jam session*. Each section sounded like a

soloist. Even tunes like "Goody Goody" or "You can't put the Wool over my Eyes" became interesting to hear if arranged by Fletcher and played by Goodman. This was the beginning of a new Big Band Style, which had influence on all other Jazz Bands.

Benny Goodman's success meant much more than the fame of a single person. It was a long-term influence, which prepared the way for other musicians. At a concert at the Hollywood *Palomar Ballroom*, which became an overwhelming success for Goodman, not only his band, but the whole style of music they represented was paid homage to. Other bands that adopted the Goodman style also became successful and people used to call this special style of Jazz "Swing". Luckily some of these bands were really good and did not only try to make profit of Goodman's success. So they helped developing the new Swing Style.

After making records under their own names, Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey had a band with twelve musicians: two trumpets, three trombones, three Saxes and four rhythm. This is one saxophone short of the standard Swing instrumentation, a style somewhere between Hal Kemp and the Casa Loma band. The rhythm was of the "shuffle" variety and the arrangements sounded heavy.

Apart from Henderson's, also Black Bands, led by Chick Webb, Earl Hines, Cecil Scott, William McKinney, Charlie Johnson, Luis Russell, and, of course, Duke Ellington became popular. Before 1935, when Goodman appeared on the scene, Cab Calloway, Jimmie Lunceford, Teddy Hill, Les Hite, Andy Kirk, Don Redman, and especially Bennie Moten joined these bands. This music was swinging, relaxed, powerful, but for the most part unheard. Benny Goodman himself describes the basic difference between the colored bands and his band:

"That's why I am such a bug on accuracy in performance, about playing in tune, and with just the proper note values in the written parts. I wanted it to sound as exact as the band possibly could make it."

For Goodman, the most important thing to create swing in a band was the drummer. So he hired Gene Krupa.

Two other white Bands were well known: The Dorsey Brothers and the Casa Loma band.

Casa Loma

The Casa Loma band had the same instrumentation as the Dorseys, but no star soloist. The band learned to read harmonized solos and play *riffs*. They also used call-and-response. Arranger Gene Gifford had been inspired by Blues and Gospel singing of the Southwest.

The “five brass, four saxes and four rhythm bands” became standard.

Bennie Moten’s Kansas City band (piano: Count Basie) combined *riff* patterns and solo work: The leaders of the brass and reed sections invent series of ascending riffs on the spur of the movement which the entire section starts to play. The *riffs* build back and forth between the sections and become more and more complex. But even the *riffs* were not allowed to interfere the flowing rhythm. The guitar was substituted for the banjo. The bass played melodic figures and “walked”. These innovations became standard five or six years later.

Among the colleges the *Casa Loma Band* became famous and was supported by Goodman:

"Since the Casa Loma was so popular with the college kids, it was tough trying to sell a sweet band against them, and he had the idea of building up some young band that would go into the same field, playing the kind of music that the youngsters liked."

In 1930 the average small-town white boy who loved Jazz only listened to the *Casa Loma Band*. They played Swinging Jazz - mixed with a large amount of engaging sweet music such as “Smoke Rings” and “In the Still of the Night” - on records, in ballrooms and on radio. As the first big white Swing Band they had an enormous influence on the East.

In 1936, the Goodman band took the place of the *Casa Loma Band* on the well-paid *Camel Caravan Show*. His band was a blend of several qualities and therefore was successful. They had one-night local engagements as well as radio programs in the studios with big, commercial orchestras led by B.A.Rolfe, Rubinoff, Al Goodman or Johnny Green. Goodman had learned how to read music, which meant more jobs.

In those days, if a musician wanted to record a popular tune, the music publishers insisted on using a “stock arrangement” which would make the melody recognizable. He might be permitted to record a tune of his own, played “hot”, if he signed away the rights to the recording supervisors. Sometimes artists even had to play in an old-fashioned style, which would be sure to sell.

Count Basie

In 1935, Bill ("Count") Basie began to build up his own band. One year later, they played at the *Reno Club* in Kansas City. “At the Reno Club imported scotch was fifteen cents a shot, domestic ten cents and a hot-dog stand was located next to the bar” Count Basie recalls: “We played from nine o’clock in the evening to five or six the next morning and the boys in the band got eighteen dollars a week and I got twenty-one.”

MCA booked Basie for a trial run at the *Grand Terrace Ballroom* in Chicago, but nothing much happened. Then the band was brought to the *Famous Door* on New York's 52nd Street. On the way to New York, Basie augmented his band from nine to fifteen men:

“I wanted my fifteen-piece band to work together just like those nine pieces did. I wanted fifteen men to think and play the same way. I wanted those four trumpets and three trombones to bite with real guts. But I wanted that bite to be just as tasty and subtle as if it were the three brass. I said that the minute the brass got out of hand and blared and screeched...there'd be some changes made.”

Aided by the groundbreaking success of Benny Goodman and the managing of Williard Alexander, the Basie Band with its more relaxed and powerful beat became an immediate and lasting success. In a short time, Basie was influencing Goodman deeply. Goodman adopted Basie's numbers, such as “One O'Clock Jump”. The Basie Band accomplished a revolution in Jazz. Specially, the Basie piano style, with its frequent openings for the bass, led to modern Jazz piano styles. The style of drummer Jo Jones, who rode the high-hat, left its mark on Bop drummers. And the relaxed style of tenor saxophonist Lester Young helped to produce the “cool” school of Jazz. Saxophonist Dexter Gordon stopped playing his instrument for two years, after he heard Lester Young and Goodman said: "This is the first time that I've heard a tenor sax played the way it should be and not overblown”.

The Basie Band developed the use of the “head riff” (the improvised unison phrase, tossed back and forth by brass and reed sections) to the level of fine art.

The next ten years, Swing Music made big money and bandleaders became as popular as movie stars. Goodman's “King Porter Stomp” was recorded in 1935, Bob Crosby's “Dixieland Shuffle” in 1936, Tommy Dorsey's “Marie” in 1937, Artie Shaw's “Begin the Beguine” in 1938 and Glenn Millers “In the Mood” in 1939. Charlie Bennet paid homage to Duke Ellington and Count Basie by recording “The Duke's Idea” and “The Count's Idea”.

The most significant time for Jazz were certainly the years around 1932. The basic materials and forms of Jazz had been explored. It had evolved aesthetic, stylistic and technical criteria. Louis Armstrong had developed a new rhythmic language for Jazz, which he was now in the process of expanding and elaborating. Duke Ellington had archived his style and gathered around him the people that were to play important parts in his orchestra's future development. Bennie Moten had established another concept of orchestral Jazz and set the stage for a further

development by Count Basie. Fletcher Henderson had by 1932 evolved an orchestral arranging concept, which later was to influence the popular music scene.

Jobs were scarce at that time the bands struggled with financial problems, often losing their soloists or even breaking up altogether. Indeed the demise of a number of leading orchestras made room for new ones. Young talents appeared on the scene. At the end of 1935 some Americans were rid of Guy Lombardo, Hal Kemp and all the other styles of Jazz. The beginning of the Swing Era gave proof to the fact that music never reaches a standstill as long as there are young innovative talents.

Duke Ellington



If talking about Jazz, one has to mention one name: Duke Ellington. During the first years of his career he and his musicians played *Blues* and his special piano style was perfect *Ragtime*. But all the music he played at that time cannot be categorized that simply. Already in the years before the depression he

played "serious" Jazz and even kept his music on a high level when Jazz became more and more commercialized. Ellington made profit of the Swing Era, but was already successful before Benny Goodman became famous. Nearly from his first appearance on stage at the *Cotton Club* in 1927 he was known as a gifted composer and bandleader.

Duke Ellington attracted attention at highschool as a painter and was offered a scholarship of *New York Pratt Institute*. In 1917 he left highschool some month before his 18th birthday, because he was fascinated by music. First of all he played nothing but *Ragtime*, imitating

Luckey Roberts. He did not have any practice except some piano lessons at his mother. Ellington got his first job at the *Poodle Dog Café*, where he composed his first tune "The Soda Fountain Rag". As often as possible he played together with the newcomers of his quarter to learn more and more about Jazz-improvisation. At the *True Reformers Hall* Toby Hardwick, Arthur Whetsel and Elmer Snowden belonged to Duke's band. In addition to that he played the piano in Russell Wooding's Big Band. The thing he liked most was to play in small bands, travelling around in the Washington area playing in several bars and clubs.

Duke Ellington joined bands like Lewis Thomas, Daniel Doy and Oliver "Doc" Perry. Later he made up his own band: Toby Hardwick (this time C-Saxophone), Whetsel, Snowden, three Miller brothers and William Greer. His engagement at Wilbur Sweatman was soon canceled because of Duke's urge for improvisation.

Fats Waller heard the band in Washington and Duke, Toby, Sonny, Whetsel and Snowden followed him to New York. But there was no real engagement, only some promises. Singer Aida Smith tried hard for them and so Duke got a job at Barron Wilkin's nightclub. It was an expensive club, ran by Bert Williams and heavy-weight champion Jack Johnson. By playing encouraging Jazz the band got more and more supporters. Six months later they moved to the *Hollywood Café* at 49th street.

At the *Hollywood* Duke succeeded in playing variations on traditional Jazz themes. The rhythm section was joined by guitar player Freddie Guy. Charlie Irvis played the trombone in a really impressive manner creating new sounds and effects. People used to call this style "Jungle Music". The band was ready for *Bohemia* and *Park Avenue*.

At the end of 1924 Bubber Miley joined Ellington's band. He was a very happy and funny man and so was his way of playing the trumpet. Miley was born in New York and grew up with Bobby Stark, Freddie Jenkins and Benny Carter at 62nd Street. He was influenced by southern black music. The solo in "Black and Tan Fantasy" (one of Ellington's first famous tunes) was derived from Spiritual Music. Bubber was also inspired by the sounds of trains, organs, choirs and the atmosphere of night clubs. This style was improved until 1926, when Joe Nanton joined them for a short time.

Nanton was called "Tricky Sam". He got engaged some month after Cootie Williams to replace Charlie Irvis. Tricky was charming and sang with a high voice, whereas Cootie had a very deep bass voice.

The most famous tune of the band was "East St. Louis Toodle-oo". It had been created by Bubber and was a very good example for his swelling melody lines. The band was aware of the fact that "Toodle-oo" was something special. So they recorded it several times for *Vocalion*, *Brunswick*, *Columbia* and *Victor*. Bubbers "Black and Tan Fantasy" was also a musical treasure. It contained various changes of mood to show Bubber's and Trickys talent for multicolored sounds. The background was formed by Duke's melody-phrases and Bubber added his "buzzing" solos.

In June 1926 a new saxophonist joined them: Harry Carney. The reed section gained more importance within the band. They recorded "Creole love Call", "The Blues I love to Sing" and, together with Adelaide Hall "Blackbirds Revue".

From 1927 to 1932 the band made several records. First they were called "Duke Ellington and his Kentucky Club Orchestra", later "Duke Ellington and his Cotton Club Orchestra". The band was expanded by Barney Bigard (clarinet), Johnny Hodges and Freddy Jenkins. Barney had played at King Oliver and Luis Russell before and stayed for twelve years at Duke.

During their engagement at the *Cotton Club* they made a movie called "Black and Tan Fantasy". The overall mood of the tune was illustrated by several light-effects. In 1930 the band traveled to Hollywood to take part in the movie "Check and Double Check".

Even in Europe their records were known and regarded as art and in America there were thousands of "Hot Collectors", who purchased every single record of the band.

Duke's music became more tender and polished. He engaged former Armstrong-Band-member Lawrence Brown and Juan Tizol who created a smooth brass-sound and added it by Latin-elements. The sound was also extended by the use of Maracas. For the first time, Duke was able to express his idea of music in a perfect way, because now the band was good enough to put all his expectations into action.

Singer Ivy Anderson was born in Oklahoma and educated in a California convent. She was one of the most versatile female singers Jazz has ever brought out. Anderson had sung on respectable stages in nightclubs and revues just like "Shuffle Along". In 1931 she joined Duke Ellington and left him in 1941 because she suffered of asthma. After she had left the band, several singers were engaged, but no one could become a real successor of Ivy Anderson. Ivy's most popular songs were "It Don't Mean a Thing if It Ain't Got that Swing", "Stormy Weather", "Killin' Myself" and many more. If Duke did not play his own compositions his band recorded songs from Harold Arlen and Ted Koehler (lyrics). Duke's main sources of

income were his three-minute tunes like "Sophisticated Lady" which became a bestseller. Other famous songs were "Jubilee Stomp", "Saratoga Swing" and "Saturday Night Function". In "Tiger Rag" the band sounded more like Fletcher Henderson than Duke Ellington but the solos were perfectly the sound of Duke's orchestra. Duke Ellington tried to get away from the three-minute-tunes, but the ten-inch-record did not allow longer recordings. These songs were build in a very perfect manner each solo stood at the right place and had the correct length to fit the whole record.

No other Jazz Band has sold as many records as Duke Ellington and got so much supporters like him. Other musicians regarded his records as a musical proclamation. Duke however was not totally satisfied with himself: there were too much difficulties in business and organization and he was not convinced about the fact that he had succeeded in Jazz Business. There was only one solution for him: a vacation to Europe.

In early 1933 the band went over to England. Everywhere Ellington was celebrated like a star and he was introduced to the Prince of Wales and the Duke of York. He regained self-confidence and came back to America with the intention to multiply his activities.

In autumn 1933 the band went on tour to the South of the United States. Except some racial discrimination they were welcomed just like in Europe. Duke Ellington went to Hollywood to act in some dozens of *Paramount* movies and to play at the *Cotton Club*. In the movie "Murder at the Vanities" the band played their own variation on Liszt's "Second Hungarian Rhapsody" which was now called "Ebony Rhapsody". In Mae West's "Belle of the Nineties" they played two lovely songs together with Ivy Anderson: "Troubled Waters" and "My Old Flame".

On the way back to the East the band recorded "Daybreak Express", a kind of musical train-ride. Another important record was "Solitude" which emulated the success of "Sophisticated Lady". Back in Hollywood in 1934 Duke switched over from *Victor* to the record-company *Brunswick*. Again he recorded "Solitude" and "Moonglow". The four-part composition "Reminiscing in Tempo" became the most successful record in 1935. This song is the story about himself and his life as a musician. The upcoming Swing Era brought further attention to his special style of music. Ellington was celebrated at the Chicago Urban Room. After "Trumpet in Spades" and "Yearning for Love" he recorded some *jam sessions* and revived "The Birmingham Breakdown" and "East St. Louis Toodle-oo".

Appreciating the Swing Era and the revival of Jazz Duke Ellington wrote "Exposition Swing" and "Stepping into Swing Society". It was hard to decide who really had stepped into this society. Anyhow the Duke-musicians felt familiar in the new style of music. Other bands regarded Swing as their own creation but each phrase or style had in a way its origin in Duke Ellington's music.

Jimmie Lunceford and some other Bands



Another famous musician was Jimmie Lunceford. He founded his first band at Memphis, Tennessee. Later he discovered Sy Oliver and so defined his style of music: two-beat-stresses, clumsy harmonies and syncopation - a last tribute to Dixieland Style.

For eight years the band had success, from the first engagement at the *Cotton Club* (1934) to 1942. At first the band played tunes like Will Hudsons "White Head" and "Jazzocracy" in the style of *Casa Loma*. When Sy Oliver became Jimmie's arranger in 1935 a series of two-beat tunes started: "My Blue Heaven", "For dancers only", "Margie", "Four or five times", "Swanee River", "Organ Grinder Swing", "Cheatin' on me", "Baby, won't you please come home", etc.

When Sy Oliver switched to Tommy Dorsey he was replaced by Bill Moore Jun.. The two-beat style was added by a special singing technique (famous singer Mary Lou Williams). They recorded "Belgium Stomp", "Chopin Prelude" and "Monotony in four Flats".

The soloist played a subordinate part in Lunceford's arrangements. In spite of this there were several individual sounds in the band. Trummy Young played the trombone, Willie Smith's saxophone sound was admired by the listeners and Eddie Tomkins was famous for his trumpet style.

After white Swing Bands had gained some success, black bands followed. Teddy Hill and Chick Webb from the Harlem Savoy Ballroom were competing against Count Basie. Jimmy Lunceford's successor at the Cotton Club was Duke Ellington. His "Reminiscing in Tempo"

lead to conflict between musicians and amateurs. Several bands imitated his intonation. The Benny Goodman trio became a quartet by engaging Lionel Hampton. Later Cootie Williams, Sidney Catlett and Charlie Christian joined the group.

Artie Shaw tried to imitate Goodman and engaged Billie Holliday as a singer. In 1938, after some experiments with string quartets, Artie created a plain Swing Style ("Begin the Beguine"). There were great soloists playing in the band like Georgie Auld, Les Robinson, Chuck Peterson, Buddy Rich and Bernie Previn. Artie himself played the clarinet. In 1939 Shaw traveled down to Mexico, leaving a job at the *Hotel Pennsylvania*, because he was tired of "the corruption in Jazz Business". A few month later he returned with several violinists and the Mexican song "Frenesi", which made the smooth string sound of his records world famous. In 1942 they played dance music. Some records with smaller ensembles followed.

Summary

There was some confusion about the terms "Jazz" and "Swing" until *Swing* had been acknowledged officially. Critics like Robert Goffin appeared on the scene and understood Swing as commercialization of Jazz. According to them Swing simply consisted of written arrangements, whereas Jazz was improvisation, played by small bands.

Others said that good Jazz, no matter if played by a single musician or a Big Band, has to show the elements of Swing. Namely the "swinging" beat. So both expressions, Jazz and Swing, are synonyms for a special rhythm, harmony and syncopation's. Even among the musicians there was confusion about the meaning of the term Jazz. Some of them started to use the adjective "jazzy" as a synonym for dull and dreary.

Before the word Swing had been spread, there never had been such confusion. Fletcher Henderson and others had, more than twenty years before, made Big Band music, and no one at that time had ever thought of calling it differently than Jazz. But now, during the Swing Era, the same kind of Big Band music was regarded by Goffin as something that had nothing in common with Jazz.

There seems to be no real dividing line between Jazz and Swing. Roy Eldridge regards the two terms as exactly the same. According to him, Swing is only another expression for Jazz. Music is changing and so do the terms and expressions.

Some supporters of early Jazz Music complained that there was too much technique and not enough style in Swing. The following example shows how impossible it seems to separate the

terms Swing and Jazz from each other: Most of the people admired Duke Ellington. His music contained Jazz as well as Swing elements (if definitions are based on the Swing critics). There were arranged passages followed by solos. Some times successful solos later became part of the arrangement.

On the other hand the word Jazz could have been fully replaced by the word Swing. Perhaps "Jazz" had too much tradition to create a complete new expression for it. Today we might call the whole period between 1900 and the 1940's Jazz music, but one could also define it as Ragtime followed by Hot Music, Gutbucket and Swing. The terms cannot really be marked off from each other. Music consists of various styles and elements, which influence each other. If we call it Jazz, we use it as a synonym for all phenomenons and styles of that time.

The influence the Swing Era had on Jazz Music can be compared to the New Orleans period. But no one really believed that the development of Jazz was already over. Some musicians became aware of the fact that there was some other music apart from Jazz and thought little of "hot music". Despite of this, Jazz was still vital and the musicians in the 1950's showed interest in remembering the Swing Era.