

A Celebration of Jazz in a Dark Decade

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The 1930s - the dark American decade. The word itself, "the Thirties" - still carries with it a consciousness of despair, of uncertainty, of a darkness of the American spirit and of a challenge to the American soul. It was a decade in which the nation for that moment lost the hopes and the relentless optimism that had brought it through a century and a half of its expansive history. It is also a decade that is once again a subject of searching discussion and analysis, since some of what happened in those deeply troubled years can be compared to the moment of economic crisis that America is experiencing now. If today is different from that earlier period of despair it is only because the lights have not been entirely extinguished. Today's crisis looms as darkly, but it is still the uncertain darkness of 1929, when there was still the belief that the setback was momentary: We have not yet slipped into the dark collapse of 1930 and 1931. Did the nation learn any lessons from this early tremor? We will know in the next few months whether our own government's intervention this time - a step that was missing in the uncertainties of 1929 - can stop the slide and what we are experiencing will be only a blip in a cyclic chart of many such irregularities.

Just the mention of the one most dramatic event that heralded the beginning of the storm - the Stock Market crash and the collapse of the era of reckless financial speculation of October 28, 1929 - is enough to bring the moment back to us. Even Variety Magazine, the theatre and entertainment industry weekly that was generally uninterested in the vagaries of Wall Street speculation, expressed its dismay with a show-business headline, "Wall Street Lays An Egg." The reality of the situation however, then as today, was more complicated.

The economic situation of American farmers had already weakened in 1928 with a collapse of farm prices, and this was in a period when nearly half of the American population was still living on farms. The slide in farm income dragged land values, and ultimately home values down with it. The tearing of the nation's economic fabric was so severe that the stock market's crash the next year was almost irrelevant. The stock market, in fact, had nearly recovered by 1931, while the nation through this same period was falling into the trough of 25 to 30 percent unemployment, an estimated 10,000 banks failing across the country, and cities reduced to printing their own scrip to replace the currency that no one had anyway.

It is also true that much of what we associate with the Depression has become so familiar that it no longer shocks us - though it is still sobering to return to the period, if only briefly. We all know the familiar gray photographs of lines of men waiting for any available work, of men in their best suits selling apples on the street, of anxious women in thin dresses looking hopelessly over the heads of confused children. When I thought about writing something about this era for the conference I realized myself that I had seen these images too often. If I wanted to return to the early years of the Depression, I would have to go back to that

moment itself - to go more deeply into the stories that had been repeated so often that the details had begun to blur. Before I began to write anything I decided to spend a few days in the newspaper files of the New York Public Library.

I arbitrarily chose Baltimore and its morning daily *The Baltimore Sun*, since it seemed more typical of the America I remembered from growing up as I had in Pittsburgh during these same years. Within a few moments I was back in a world that was even more troubled than any of the newer social or economic histories I was familiar with. The standard histories of those months don't remind you that there were other clouds looming on an already disturbing horizon. The *Sun's* readers were troubled by the rise of European fascism. There was widespread coverage of Hitler's assumption of power in Germany, the Nazi attacks on the Jews, and their proclamation of the creation of a Master Race. Fascism itself had appeared in several nations with its challenge to the assumptions of the steady progress of Democracy. In the mid-thirties there was dismay over the Italian fascists' invasion of Ethiopia. Although the financial issues of the period were complex, anyone reading the articles that succeeded each other on the front pages would find a sophisticated coverage of the collapse of the Gold Standard, the intense debate over the Smoot-Hawkey Tariff Act, which would only bring new problems, and the conflicted strategies of the world's industries as they searched wildly for some path that would lead them to economic recovery.

What I found filling the front pages, however, was something else. It was news from an America that had little resemblance to the familiar image of huddled workers standing in the shadows of shuttered factories that had become the accepted portrait of the times. It was some days before I could shake off the impressions of what I found myself reading. What is almost never emphasized in discussions of the economic issues facing the United States through these years was that the country had erupted in violence. The country seemed on the verge of social collapse.

Here is some of the news that leaped out at me as I wheeled through the reels of microfilm in the quiet library.

Image: A collage of articles illustrating the widespread violence.

Image: An illustration of armed "deputies" preparing to fire on strikers.

We must always remember that every step the government considered to find some way that would lead out of the mess had to be projected against this frightening reality. In the year 1934, five years after the Market collapse, one and a half million workers took part in more than eighteen hundred strikes. When a striking worker was killed by the police in Minneapolis, one hundred thousand people joined the funeral procession. On July 5, 1934 two workers were shot to death in the strike of the Longshoreman's Union and eleven days later, July 16, the entire city of San Francisco was closed by a general strike of the city's workers.

The glaring headlines brought back my own perception of the mood that filled the streets of America's industrial cities, in the Appalachian coal mining areas, in the port cities of West Coast, and even on the farms, as striking farmers attempted to prevent milk from coming

to the market in an effort to drive up the prices they were paid for their raw product. One of my most haunting memories from those times in Pittsburgh is coming home from school and finding a young worker cowering behind the bushes in front of our house, beaten and bleeding from the street rioting between the roving bands of strikers and the company-hired strike breakers. His face was red and swollen and his frightened eyes darted around at any sound from the street behind us.

In the newspaper articles there was generally an assumption that there was Communist influence behind some of the worker's militancy, and it was clear that the success of the Russian struggle against the repression of the Tsars provided the strikers with a vivid example of what they perceived as the success of their aims. Many of the union leaders cast their thought in terms of a class struggle and their union members responded to the same rhetoric. The Soviet government still was waiting official recognition by the United States, but it was already in the third year of a Five-Year Plan which called for ambitious economic development at the same that the American economy entered the Depression. The seeming success of the Soviet Union's collective effort was upsetting to many American assumptions and American writers like Lincoln Steffens were returning from visits to the country with proclamations that they "had seen the future and it works."

In 1930 a number of African American musicians and actors who were active in the Harlem Renaissance were brought to Moscow to participate in a film about the new era, and although most of them returned to the United States after a brief stay the poet Langston Hughes remained in Moscow for a year, and on his return wrote a series of fiery poems proclaiming his belief in the new Communist world. After he was brought before the House Un-American Activities Committee in the 1940s the poems were quietly dropped from his collections and weren't reprinted until after his death.

Hughes was only one of many young intellectuals, black and white, who were drawn to the Party during these years. The Communist Party was in the forefront of the fighting in many of the industrial actions, and for many of its early supporters their disillusion with the Party came not because of a disagreement over goals but because the American members of the party finally understood that they were being used in an expansion of Soviet power. In the unprecedented violence of the 1930s the Communists were the only large group of white Americans who took to the streets in defense of black freedom. The decision by the party in 1934 that African American music was a people's expression and could be incorporated into the larger social struggle led to an active support for black musicians and artists throughout the country. One of the tragedies of the death of blues singer Robert Johnson was that just at the time that he was murdered in Mississippi he had been invited to perform at a concert in New York City, and posters were already printed including his name. The sponsor of the concert, through a cover organization, was the Communist party.

Racism was an accepted part of American life in the 1930s, and in many states the myriad laws and covenants that determined the conditions of African American had created a society that could only be described as apartheid, and it was an apartheid enforced by continuing violence. As I went through the pages of the *Sun* in October, 1931, I found I could follow, almost as a scenario, a sequence of events that was as frightening as it was familiar.

Image: Collage of articles covering the arrest of an African American suspected of assaulting an elderly white woman.

Image: The headlines the next day announcing his lynching.

Image: The disturbed reporting of the aftermath, including a drawing that is captioned as a rerun of the first appearance of the same drawing in answer to a lynching a year before.

It is hard not to see images of such violence without feeling a visceral response to the cruelty and the hypocrisy that they represent. I know in Atlanta there is still a lingering sense of guilt over the lynching of the Jewish businessman Leo Frank in 1915. What I have found almost as disturbing as the violence itself is that in the popular culture there was a determined avoidance of any reference to this climate of violence. Even the blues, which is often praised for its raw honesty, avoids overt references to the racism and the racial violence that was at the core of the problems faced by African Americans, although it was obvious that the problems that lay at the roots of the social tragedy the blues described were in part the product of American racism.

It is obvious that whatever their own personal feelings about racial issues America's popular song composers and their lyricists accepted the music industry's unwritten law that virtually every social issue except patriotism lay outside their concerns, and they did nothing to lift the weight of racial discrimination that stifled every aspect of African American life in the United States. Certainly part of the emotional rejection of the classic American songbook by a younger and angrier generation of singers and writers in the 1960s was the consistent refusal of the previous generations of composers or lyricists to respond in any way to the realities of American life. As I'm sure many of you have experienced, when we return to this pre-War period as scholars we are continually forced to make judgments about the kind of passive racist taunting that was woven into the common entertainment vocabulary. When I was growing up I laughed at the song "Lazybones" that Johnny Mercer wrote with Hoagy Carmichael, even though I was vaguely conscious that Carmichael's early renditions of the lyrics in his classic muted southern dialect could be interpreted as singling out a black individual as the song's subject and that the lyrics could be thought of repeating common racial stereotypes.

It is the jazz of the 1930s, the new swing music, which left its imprint on American society as much as its songs. The decade came to be termed "The Swing Era." Throughout the uneasy years the popular song writers responded to some of the story of the decade's troubled times, though the story was often told through innuendo, humor and metaphor. Racism and industrial violence were off limits but losing your job was a trope of popular entertainment. In the 1920s the center of the American music industry was the Brill Building north of Times Square in Manhattan where many of the large music publishers had their offices. Until the mid-1920s, in fact, the revenue for publishing sheet music versions of popular hits was much larger than the revenue from phonograph record sales, and the songs were sung by the legion of vaudeville entertainers who hurried from office to office in the building looking for new and

hopefully trendy material. Not only did the sheet music sales continue to be strong, even in the Depression years, there were new areas of copyright income from licensing their songs for film and theatrical use. The Brill Building was a warren of small offices, all of them with pianos, and there was a continuous din of music. It was the clanging pianos and the nervous voices demonstrating the new melodies that gave the building its nickname - "Tin Pan Alley."

Though most of Tin Pan Alley's publications were inconsequential as the name implies, the crisis was so severe and it cut so deeply into the national ethos that many of its songs still have an emotional relevance. It was these songs that defined the personal dreams and anxieties even more than they defined the complexities of the economic situation. Like so much that is found in any popular culture they function as metaphor for complex responses that are left purposely vague. Anyone who has spent any time in the fertile world of American popular music from these years can immediately think of songs that explicitly tell the story of the hard times: "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime," "I Can't Give You Anything But Love, Baby (Love's the Only Thing I've Plenty of, Baby)," "I Found a Million Dollar Baby (In a Five and Ten Cents Store)" or "Pennies from Heaven." When Franklin D. Roosevelt was inaugurated in 1932 and announced the emergency relief programs of his first months in office, Hollywood responded with "We're In the Money," in the film *Gold Diggers of 1933*. The more subtle songs from the era that turned to metaphor to deal with the unforgiving realities often were vague and on one level many of them seemed to be appeared to be purely escapist, songs like "Sunny Side of the Street," "The World is Waiting for the Sunrise" or "Over the Rainbow." Some of these songs, however, continue to have an emotional relevance for our own generation. The message with "Over the Rainbow" came in the verse.

"When all the world is a hopeless jumble
and the raindrops tumble all around,
Heaven opens a magic lane.
When all the clouds darken up the sky-way,
there's a rainbow to be found."

One of the most widely sold recordings in the South, among both black and white buyers was the Louisiana tenor Gene Austin's "My Blue Heaven," released in the late 1920s. The song's lyrics presented an equally vague dream of a home that was somewhere to be found, though the somewhere was never defined. In Mississippi in the mid-1930s it was the most popular song in the repertoire of Robert Johnson.

Many songs from this period that seem to be without reference to anything more pressing than ardent affection occasionally turn out to have a more specific agenda. I think nearly everyone has heard Otis Redding's impassioned performance of the song "Try A Little Tenderness" recorded for Stax Records in 1967. Over the insistent back-up rhythm of Booker T and the M.G.s and the shouting of the Stax horns, what Redding is singing is a tender Depression melody imported from England. He probably remembered it from the hit American recording by Bing Crosby that appeared when he was still a boy. The chorus opens,

"She may be weary, Women do get weary
Wearing the same shabby dress,

And when she's weary,
 Try a little tenderness.
 You know she's waiting,
 Just anticipating
 Things she may never possess,
 While she's without them, try a little tenderness."

The shadow of racial violence that haunted the decade also made its way into song lyrics. "Strange Fruit", which Billie Holiday recorded in 1939, is considered the first to protest against the lynchings that still shook the country, but even earlier is the song "Supper Time," by Irving Berlin, which Ethel Waters presented in a Broadway musical in 1931. In many of the popular songs the despair of the times was concealed behind a curtain of personal emotion.

For the jazz music itself, which had been scorned as disreputable cabaret music of only a few years before, the thirties saw a new creative excitement and a new social role. Jazz had become a celebration at a moment when the nation seemed to have little else to celebrate.

Celebration? Why would I use term "Celebration" to characterize the distinctive styles and the achievement of jazz during this decade? The mood of the country was troubled, frightened, despairing, but its popular music was bright, excited, sophisticated, brilliantly virtuosistic. But more than anything else it was optimistic. There is no sound of the 1930s more joyous than the headlong rush of one of the great new bands performing one of their intricate arrangements at a breathtaking tempo.

The word Celebration itself brings up the immediate question, what was jazz celebrating? It is obvious from their excitement and the innovation of their new styles that on an immediate level what the young jazz musicians were celebrating was their music itself. Jazz now had assumed its new name, "Swing," and in those first swing years there was a heady assumption that the old jazz of the 1920s had now become as anachronistic to new listeners, as ragtime and the cakewalk, the predecessors of early jazz, had become already. What the swing musicians were enjoying was a new assessment of their role in American society. Before the first small groups from New Orleans introduced their "peppy" dance music to the cabarets of Chicago and New York in 1915 and 1917, no one ever knew the name of an ordinary cabaret musician, but by 1930 all of that had changed.

When the second New Orleans band arrived in Chicago, they spent their first week playing in the kind of long dusters that people who were driving the early automobiles wore out on the road. Only fifteen years later, as members of the new swing bands, many of the same musicians were dressed in exotic costumes and accompanying elaborate stage shows in the lavish new movie palaces. Music magazines printed their pictures on the covers; now the first books and serious articles were appearing about jazz. Along with the attention came income from recording sessions and for the first time as dance orchestra musicians they made money. As we can see from the band photos and musicians portraits of the 1930s, the world of swing was as elaborate a fantasy as the world of Hollywood's musical films.

Image: Collage of band photos

Image: Collage featuring Duke Ellington

Image: Collage with theatre marquee advertising Benny Goodman

The new swing bands toured tirelessly, and their audience soon extended everywhere in the United States. Overnight all of Europe became part of the swing world. The bands of the 1920s had usually spent months or even years at the same jobs, often playing for entire seasons at a single restaurant or city dance palace, often on summer fair grounds or seaside resorts. The bandleader Paul Whiteman, however, was in such demand that his thirty-five piece symphonic jazz spectacle journeyed tirelessly from city to city, appearing in one sold out theater after another. Within a few years the swing bands had evolved into a comprehensive theater presentation, staying for only a week or even part of a week in any theater. In the 1930s the only nationally known group not to play the new circuit was the fine orchestra of the brilliant pianist Earl Hines who remained at one venue, the Grand Terrace Ballroom in Chicago. Virtually all of the major nightclubs and dance palaces in the country were under the control of organized crime, and the criminal syndicate that controlled both the ballroom and the orchestra liked having Hines and his musicians in town.

As I read the music reviews or listen to the recordings of the times I also sense in the excitement and the tempestuous energy of the new swing that the bands were celebrating something else as well. American society had undergone its own upheaval in the 1920s. Women had begun to work outside the home, they had discarded the modest clothing that their mothers had worn, and since some of them were now earning money there was a new interest in their wants and their attitudes from the advertising world. Even though most still were tied to their home there had been a perceptible, and for many men, upsetting shift toward a measure of independence for American women. What was just as significant, women had begun to express their sexuality in their dress and their social manner. Skirts were shorter and women no longer left the dining table when the men began to smoke. The songs of the "Torch Song" era advertised a new sexuality availability of young women and also their sense of vulnerability as they left the homes where their parents had screened the young men who were permitted inside the door. One of the most touching songs of the period is the ballad mirroring this new vulnerability, "This Is My First Affair (So Please Be Kind)." In the 1960s the shift of sexual attitudes was accelerated by the appearance of the birth control pill in 1963. In the early 1920s Margaret Sanger introduced the new contraceptive device the diaphragm, the first method available to women to control their reproductive life themselves. Its use was restricted, but condoms were now available in most ordinary drug stores, and they became part of the lore of the times.

In the 1920s the automobile also freed American families from their dependence on local transportation or if they were rich, from their carriages. With the automobile it was possible for couples to have more privacy than they could have in their family living rooms, which for many couples had been the only place they were expected to meet. By the end of the decade nearly every household had a radio, even if they still didn't have enough money for running water. Now there was an array of widely advertised products to help women with the work in their homes, from electric mixers to vacuum cleaners and refrigerators. For Americans

a new life was opening out its promise, even if they couldn't afford it now, it was there waiting, somewhere over the rainbow.

The music of the 1930s was the mirror of this new life, and in its energy and optimism it was celebrating new, freer, personal attitudes, new technologies and their promise, just as it celebrated the possibility of optimism itself. This, for me, is what also is suggested by the word "celebration." It is also obvious that with its insistent brightness, its energy, and its enthusiasm the new music was fighting its own personal battle against the spectacle of despair that was the background for every aspect of American life in this decade.

Any of us who write about jazz in the '20s or '30s, find ourselves describing the music that made its way onto phonograph records, and basing our judgments on the recordings themselves. For jazz this presents some difficulties. We have the advantage of knowing which of the styles of any period nurtured the next generation's music, but it's also necessary to understand this bias and try to listen to the music on its own terms. T. S. Eliot wrote something I keep tacked close to my computer screen when I have to write about music from different eras. He wrote, "Art never improves, but the conditions of art change continuously." I would make only one change in what he wrote, I find that every artistic style that achieves a mature form goes through a gestation process, and within its own stylistic boundaries it does begin to do what it does better. However we look at the jazz that fed into the new swing era we sometimes have the uncomfortable sensation of being before a rotating kaleidoscope that changes as we try to get a fix on it. By 1930 the cabaret musicians of the previous decade had put themselves through a complex transformative exercise. They had absorbed the new rhythms, they had adapted a new instrument, the saxophone, to a role in the orchestral ensemble, they had eased the violin out of its accustomed role as the orchestra's melodic voice, they had learned a new and challenging harmonic palette, and the band singers had evolved from a vocal style that depended on stage projection to a more personal, more immediate method of singing that the new microphones made possible. The music that was created in this fusion of heat and rhythm would last virtually without change for thirty years, and it was only the emergence of music utilizing new instruments like the electric guitar, and prophesying an even freer era of sexuality that ended the reign of the long swing celebration.

Although the recordings and a handful of film clips are all that is left as a record of the music of these earlier decades, there is one aspect of the recordings of the period that causes considerable difficulty in making any kind of judgments about the jazz styles that nurtured the swing of the 1930s. The problem was created by the racial perceptions of the time, the underlying racist attitudes that shadowed every area of American life. Here, for once, the sensitivity of the record companies to this disturbing reality worked to the benefit of the black artists. The record companies divided their catalogs into racial marketing categories, with listings of recordings by black and white artists usually introduced separately. Because of the accepted idea that African Americans were born with rhythm, the black bands were recorded playing their jazz material, and the singles were sold as "Hot Dance Novelties." The white musicians often came into the studio to be handed the music to a new song for which the producer of the recording date owned the copyright, and the record was released as a "New Song Favorite." The recorded documentation of the music fails to show the range and diversity of the musicians' talents.

As dance band musicians, both white and black orchestras played the standard variety of familiar songs and dance rhythms, from the waltz to the foxtrot. The great tenor saxophone soloist Coleman Hawkins spent many years on the bandstand of the Roseland Ballroom in New York as a member of Fletcher Henderson's black orchestra, and he complained that they never got to record any of their waltzes, insisting "we played really pretty waltzes."

The stereotyping of the two orchestral styles also led to some awkward confrontations. One night at the Roseland the Henderson Orchestra was involved in a "Battle of the Bands" with the Gene Goldkette Orchestra from Detroit, which was a white band. Goldkette's office had collected most of the important jazz soloists working in the Midwest, including cornetist Bix Beiderbecke and saxophonist Frankie Trumbauer, but the Goldkette musicians found themselves working in the recording studio under an even more serious handicap than even racial stereotyping. Their record producer not only insisted on the usual formula of new song favorites, he also disliked trumpet solos, so the band's greatest soloist, the cornetist Beiderbecke, was lost on most of the arrangements they recorded. They were only permitted to do one jazz arrangement, an uptempo piece titled "Pretty Girl" that featured their New Orleans bass player Steve Brown. The band's musicians only persuaded the producer to let them record it by reminding him that it was their most requested number at their shows. Henderson's Orchestra featured strong soloists, but they were casual about the arrangements and they took their superiority for granted. Reminiscing later about the band battle with the Goldkette musicians, Hawkins maintained, with some pain, "They creamed us! Those tight-assed white boys creamed us!"

By the 1930s, alongside the movie theaters with their elaborate stage presentations and the work in the busy recording studios, another venue had become as popular for the bands, though it meant road travel even more grueling than the relentless train journeys Whiteman's musicians had to endure. Universities and colleges began bringing in swing bands for their major dances, for their spring proms and autumn mixers. Through their thousands of late nights trying to sleep on speeding busses and hurrying to set up their music stands in one college auditorium after another, one band did more to introduce America's young dancers to the new music than even the sales of phonograph records. It was the Casa Lorna Orchestra, a cooperative swing band that had its roots in Detroit and was named for a Canadian roadhouse. Their arrangements were done by their guitarist Gene Gifford. Gifford was working with the innovations the arranger Bill Challis had introduced for first the Gene Goldkette Orchestra and then the Paul Whiteman jazz ensemble which had hired the best of the Goldkette musicians, including Trumbauer and Beiderbecke. By 1930 Gifford had formulated an arrangement style that featured most of the new idiom we know as "swing," with its cascading riffs played by the band's brass and reed sections, and the layering of rhythmic accents in the rhythm that culminated in a fortissimo ensemble that pushed the jitterbug specialists out on the dance floor to new frenzies. It wasn't until the arrival of the blues-oriented Count Basie Orchestra from Kansas City in the late 1930s that there was a distinctly new dimension added to the swing structure.

It is always difficult to cross generational dividing lines in popular musical culture, since the music and the social template are inextricably linked, but in the musical context of

1930, the Casa Loma Orchestra was a stunning demonstration of disciplined musicianship and ecstatic ensemble energy which created the setting for the flashing individuality of the soloists. For the first years of the decade they set the standard which the other bands were forced to match. This a Gifford arrangement of an original composition recorded at the beginning of the band's career.

Music clip: "White Jazz" by The Casa Loma Orchestra

Like all of the bands of the time the Casa Loma's were hired to play for dancing and the spectacular energy of their uptempo numbers was generally conserved for a select group of arrangements that were played for the few students who would risk the new jitterbug dance style, as well as the university's jazz fans. The orchestra was also as skilled in the slow numbers.

Music clip: "Smoke Rings" by The Casa Loma Orchestra

Popular music today is largely marketed to reflect the emotional concerns of a teen and subteen audience - which means song lyrics that almost entirely reflect adolescent issues of sexuality and adolescent emotional uncertainties and music constructed on simple harmonic formulas. If we go back and search through the vast output of the gifted generation of song writers emerging in the 1920s and 1930s, among them Johnny Mercer, we find ourselves left with the impression that the United States at this time had no teenagers. There were obviously babies, and their pictures were used everywhere to sell almost anything, and there were adults in their early twenties, who were as often pictured in advertising and popular fiction. There doesn't seem to be anything in between. Teenagers didn't exist until they emerged as a national marketing demographic in the 1950s. They were there, certainly, but the marketing forces did pay any attention to them because they didn't have any money. When prosperity returned and teenagers began living more comfortably off the labor of their parents in the postwar decades, they cast off their modest attire and became an ideal market with nothing to do with their money except buy phonograph records and go to the movies. In contrast, during the Depression years the only Americans who were buying popular phonograph records were those young adults who had some kind of job. Even at 39c, the cost of many releases of popular material, phonograph records cost money.

The music of the 1930s and its celebration of jazz reflects this nearly homogenous adult and generally middle-class audience, which now included emerging African American middle class in major cities like New York and Chicago. Although there continued to be blues recording during the Depression it was specifically produced for local southern markets, using artists known to their audiences and sales were correspondingly small. Even in this market, sales of religious material by the new gospel groups, the vocal quartets already popular in the 1920s, were larger than the sales of blues releases. The urban black middle class audience, like everyone else in the country, was listening to Swing. Their bands were well-known groups like Duke Ellington, Jimmy Lunceford, Luis Russell, Claude Hopkins, and Cab Calloway, who extended their touring to the southern states by presenting their stage shows in segregated theatres. In the late 1930s the elite group of artists was joined by the Count Basie Orchestra from Kansas City.

It was not until the rock revolution of the 1960s and 1970s that one musical style would as completely dominate the American market as swing did during the Depression decade. There continued to be some interest in traditional country styles that had been explored in the 1920s, but in the 1930s some of the best-known young country artists also found swing irresistible. Their response was their own "Western Swing." The bands became larger, they adapted many of the ensemble devices of the swing arrangers to their own instruments, and they also turned to newer instruments. The first electric guitar blues solo was recorded in 1935 by the guitarist in the Texas country western swing band Milton Brown and his Brownies. Into the 1950s one of the best known western swing bands, Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys, continued to have enthusiastic audiences and the group included some of the country style's finest soloists, utilizing them in arrangements that consciously imitated many of the elements of mainstream swing.

Swing had as strong an effect on many of the blues artists who were recording. In Chicago the blues artists for the widely distributed Bluebird Blues line, an inexpensive label owned by RCA Victor, often included jazz soloists in their arrangements and the accompaniments to the songs were augmented with drums and bass. The market now was the juke boxes that had taken over a large share of the cabaret or "tavern" jobs everywhere in the country. Even more visible for the middle class black audience which had little interest in the blues were stylish new vocal groups like the Mills Brothers, who became popular at the end of the 1920s, a male quartet who sang swing arrangements and featured numbers where they performed as an instrumental swing quartet, making all the sounds of the instruments with their mouths. The group made a series of widely sold recordings with Bing Crosby, who was at this point in his career the most successful artist in the country.

During the swing era many young musicians began to feel a sense of resentment at their second-class musical status, despite their glittering success on the stage or in the record shops. They could never forget that both in the United States and in Europe, classical music and its musicians were regarded with a level of respect and attention that no jazz group or swing ensemble ever attained except among their own fervent supporters. From the moment when jazz began to reach larger audiences the unequal status between the two musical worlds had remained a challenge for many jazz artists who attempted to construct some bridge across to what they saw as musical respectability. In February 1924 Paul Whiteman, with his phenomenally successful orchestra presented what was termed a concert of "symphonic jazz composition" at the well-known Aeolian Hall concert off of Times Square in New York City. The centerpiece of the concert was the new concerto for piano and his orchestra that Whiteman had commissioned from a young song writer, George Gershwin. Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, which he premiered as piano soloist, remains unique as the only extended jazz composition to enter the standard classical concert repertoire. This has been a continual source of irritation for many jazz musicians. Gershwin followed with the more ambitious *Concerto in F* in 1925, and in 1928 he premiered the colorful, jazz-tinged orchestral suite *An American in Paris*. The two later compositions also quickly became established as concert works.

Although many in the jazz community shared their annoyance at the success of the *Rhapsody in Blue*, there was even more resentment of Gershwin's success from black artists,

who were affronted that there was so much attention being paid to a jazz work by a young white composer, since they considered jazz to be their unique expression. They had already been upset by the press agency surrounding Paul Whiteman that advertised him as "The King of Jazz," though the title referred to his acknowledged record sales and the success of his concert tours. For nearly two decades his orchestra enjoyed the most widely attended concert career of any American popular ensemble. The same indignation would greet the press agent's descriptions of Benny Goodman as the "King of Swing" when his orchestra late in the 1930s became as dominant in the commercial world of swing as Whiteman's had been the decade before. Already in 1928 a Carnegie Hall concert of newly composed African American music presented an extended jazz composition for piano and orchestra, James P. Johnson's *Yamekraw*, with Fats Waller as the piano soloist, in an effort to right the imbalance.

By the early years of the 1930s, as swing clearly dominated popular musical tastes, there was even more intense competition to reach the classical audience. It represented a new challenge for many musicians, another peak of popularity to be scaled. Throughout the decade a Carnegie Hall concert became the objective of the most ambitious leaders. Duke Ellington was the most active in presenting his orchestra in longer and more ambitious works, like the *Creole Rhapsody* in 1931 and *Reminiscing in Tempo* in 1937. James P. Johnson, whose *Yamekraw* had been featured in Carnegie Hall in 1928, introduced his *Harlem Symphony* in 1937, and at a Carnegie Hall concert in 1938 Paul Whiteman premiered a new Ellington composition *The Blue Belles of Harlem*. Gershwin was now working in Hollywood but he presented his most ambitious work, the opera *Porgy and Bess*, in 1935.

Benny Goodman also was interested in the classical music audience, but he chose not to create longer jazz works. Instead he performed as a soloist for a recording of the Mozart clarinet concerto, and in his most significant contribution to the classical repertoire, in 1938 he commissioned a chamber work for clarinet and small ensemble, *Contrasts*, from the respected Hungarian composer Bela Bartok, which also became a staple concert piece in the modern classical idiom. When Goodman took his orchestra into Carnegie Hall in 1938 they performed their own arrangements in a thunderous concert that for many swing enthusiasts was the apogee of their musical era.

The audience for the new swing bands was more unified in its tastes than any audience for American popular music before them, and with this encouragement some of the more adventurous leaders began cautiously to push open the doors to a broader acceptance of black performers. Capitalizing on the avalanche of success that greeted his new orchestra Goodman took the cautious first step of introducing black musicians as part of the band's stage presentation. Pianist Teddy Wilson and vibraphone artist Lionel Hampton were featured with Goodman in small group arrangements performed as a special feature in the middle of the band's longer show. From a modern perspective this can seem like opportunism or even exploitation, but racism was the everyday reality in the United States, and appearing on a stage with black musicians meant that Goodman's orchestra consciously gave up bookings in many areas of the country. Following his lead other white bands followed and soon there were bitter and entirely justified protests from black band leaders that their white competitors were picking off their finest soloists with the larger salaries that they could afford to pay their own musicians. The promising young African American vocalist Lena Home was featured with the

orchestras led by white bandleaders Charlie Barnett and Artie Shaw. Goodman's decision was to have vital long term effects on the acceptance of swing by an international audience, but it can be argued that it had a negative effect on the black jazz world.

For some reason there is little attention paid now to Cab Calloway and his Orchestra, but Calloway probably shouted and danced his way into more white homes than any black performer of the period except Louis Armstrong. Calloway was a gifted, good looking entertainer and singer who was hired to front a fiery Midwest band, the Missourians. The tempos and the solo brilliance of the new group had blown away every New York band, including Duke Ellington, on their arrival in New York, but they found themselves struggling to attract mainstream audiences with their purely jazz repertoire. After he joined the band Calloway dressed in a white tuxedo and sang and danced with so much energy and engaging humor that the Missourians, now known as the Cab Calloway Orchestra, often found themselves watching him themselves as they glanced up from their music stands. His personality was so engaging for white audiences that the orchestra was often used to provide the musical soundtracks for the animated movie cartoons featuring the flapper bombshell Betty Boop. One of the most successful of the Boop cartoons opened with a sequence of Calloway and the orchestra performing, and Calloway's voice continued on through the soundtrack.

In one way it was possible for Calloway to reach these new audiences because he appeared at a new moment of change in the American cultural climate which opened the door wider for the acceptance of black artists. It is almost impossible now for us to comprehend how completely new radios in virtually every home altered American life. In their eagerness to widen their audiences the radio broadcasters opened their studios to every kind of music. The sheer amount of music on the radio is dizzying, but unlike the din of AM radio after World War II with DJ s who were playing recordings, all music broadcast through the 1920s and most of the 1930s was performed live. The stations and their advertisers took a chance on anything they thought might attract listeners, from gypsy orchestras to country blues singers. The Mississippi blues artist B. B. King got his start advertising King Biscuit Flour on a local southern radio station. For the evening hours the swing bands provided most of the music with scripted shows featuring the band's vocalists and instrumental soloists. If the radio was turned up later in the evening there were hours of music for a night of dancing. Cab Calloway and his Orchestra were featured nightly on the national NBC network, while musicians of every style and ability trooped in and out of the studios beginning early in the morning and continuing until after midnight. The weekly *Hit Parade* program, featuring a studio orchestra playing the latest songs was an institution throughout America. For the band musicians the radio jobs meant hurrying from a demanding schedule of five shows during the day at one of the movie palaces and then playing one more show before they finally could go off to a jam session or just to snatch a little sleep.

Image: A collage of radio listings from the 1930s.

There is little agreement about the causes of the Depression, but there is unanimity in identifying the factors that ended the long nightmare. By the end of the 1930s the President succeeded finally in moving the country away from its determined neutrality as Europe moved closer and closer to a renewal of the conflict Americans were certain had ended with a

decisive victory in 1918. American factories began to expand in a new effort at military preparedness and at last there was a surge of industrial jobs at the same time that there was a demand for food to feed a new army. When the Japanese attacked the U. S. fleet in Pearl Harbor at the end of 1941 the nation returned to full prosperity. The swing bands now featured songs that reflected the lonely separation of young American men and women, along with the proud assurances of ultimate victory and celebrations of the heroism of the American fighting men and women. They maintained their dominance of the musical scene, and it was swing that helped the country through the war years. By the 1950s, however, despite the prosperity of the period the economics of keeping large bands on the road ended much of their touring even though the sound of swing rhythms still filled the radios and swing bands accompanied the artists on the shows on the new TV screens.

I suggested earlier that the swing bands in the 1930s had been celebrating the new life styles that the 20s had premiered. Those bands in 1950s were now playing for their own party. As the war became a memory many Americans found themselves enjoying the optimistic life style and the romantic fantasies that the music of the swing bands had prepared the way for. Within the new decade, however, there were already the signs of an emerging new and much younger audience that would turn its back on the unquestioning optimism of the music their parents had known. From a mood of celebration American music moved into an era of questioning and protest, with new musical models and a different consciousness of the contradictions in American society. The celebration of the swing bands ended, but their era and their music had helped lift America through one of the darkest periods of its history.