



SWING IS THE THING!

by Lori Erickson

Goodman, Basie, Ellington — all these artists played the music.

Even back in the big-band heyday, band leader Benny Goodman couldn't do it. When asked to describe swing music, he called it "as difficult to explain as the Mona Lisa's¹ smile or the nutty hats some people wear—but it's just as stimulating. It remains something you take 5,000 words to explain, then leaves you wondering what it is."

¹ **Mona Lisa:** a portrait painted by Leonardo da Vinci in 1503

While the exact definition may be elusive, swing music—as played by the big bands of the 1930s and '40s—is as uniquely American as baseball and apple pie. The music provided a real-life soundtrack for two of America's most trying eras—the Depression and World War II. An outgrowth of the music played by the dance orchestras of the 1920s, swing was the first form of jazz to be embraced by a mass audience,

dominating the pop charts, dance halls, radio airwaves and concert halls of America for 20 years.

As Goodman said so well, swing is a slippery term. While any music can be played with “swing,” musical historians generally define the genre as jazz music played by a “big band” containing at least 10 musicians. The infectious, up-tempo beat and rich orchestration were—and still are—tailor-made for dancing.

Some Background

Though swing music came of age in the 1930s, its roots go back much earlier to the blending of African and Euro-American musical traditions that flourished in New Orleans in the early 20th century.

Benny Goodman typically gets credit for bringing the music to mainstream America. A master clarinet player, Goodman combined great musicianship with exceptional improvisational² skills. In 1935, the big-band sound was launched onto the national scene when a Los Angeles performance of Goodman and his orchestra drew a frenzied teenage audience. The group was similar to those who would later flock to hear the sounds of Elvis Presley and the Beatles.

During the hard years of the Depression, big-band music provided pleasure and solace for millions, as well as serving an important social function.

As Goodman, Glenn Miller, Count Basie, Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey, Louis Armstrong, Woody Herman, and Artie Shaw played in huge, newly constructed ballrooms across the country, swing developed its own slang, culture and style

of dress—“zoot suits” and two-toned shoes—and young people flocked to dance marathons across the country.

The Duke

Of all the musicians playing swing, the greatest was the legendary Duke Ellington. A musical genius who wrote thousands of compositions, Ellington also excelled at recruiting brilliant musicians.

The Duke’s musical career spanned several decades, from the 1920s until his death in 1974, and gave the world such immortal tunes as “It Don’t Mean A Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing),” “Mood Indigo,” and “Don’t Get Around Much Anymore.”

During World War II, big-band music reached its height of popularity and became a symbol of America for the soldiers fighting abroad. The Andrews Sisters’ “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy” filled the airwaves, and Glenn Miller, one of the most famous band leaders of the day, became a war hero when he was killed in a plane crash after enlisting in the Army. President Franklin Roosevelt even declared that the music could “inspire a fervor for the spiritual values in our way of life and strengthen democracy.”

After The War

The war’s end also brought a surprisingly swift end to swing’s popularity. Television began competing for people’s attention, and returning soldiers were more interested in settling down and raising families than in dancing.

Popular taste also shifted from big bands to individual singers, such as Frank Sinatra, Nat King Cole and Peggy Lee. Jazz also changed, evolving into other forms like bebop, which failed to capture large audiences.

² **improvisational:** performed with little or no preparation

Swing Is the Thing!

Though swing never completely died out, it wasn't until the late 1980s that the music experienced a true rebirth. Young people in cities from Los Angeles to New York led the way, rediscovering dances like the Lindy Hop and the fun of retro clothing shops. And like their grandparents before them, they discovered that there is no better accompaniment to dancing than the toe-tapping sounds of a big band. While old recordings from the 1930s and '40s were dusted off, new singers like Harry Connick Jr., and groups such as The Manhattan Transfer also helped popularize older musical styles and a group with a swinging sound even performed at the Super Bowl.

"I think many younger people are initially attracted to this music because of the fun of dancing to it," says David Miller, host of "Swingin' Down the Lane," a program of big-band music on National Public Radio. "They start with the music being played by contemporary swing bands, and then they discover the originals. These young people eventually come to appreciate what wonderful music was made during the Big Band Era."

Still Swingin'

Today, the blossoming interest in ballroom dance has continued to feed the revival of swing music, with dance clubs forming at colleges around the country.

Fans can even attend week-long summer camps dedicated to swing music and live out fantasies of the Big Band Era. "This is fun, happy, joyous music, and once people are exposed to it—no matter what their age—they're often hooked," says Byron Siegal, owner of Vermont Jazz and Ballroom Vermont summer camps. "We have people coming back year after year to be part of the camps."

While swing music probably won't again dominate the popular musical scene as it once did, the sound remains a vital part of American culture—even though the exact definition has remained elusive for even the best musicians. When Louis Armstrong was asked to define swing, he simply replied, "If you don't know, don't mess with it."

Thankfully, you don't need to be able to define or analyze the music to simply enjoy its enduring appeal.