

them into nouns—that is, into *things*, marketable objects that can be promoted, sold, and bought by a mass audience.)

Between 1935 and 1945 hundreds of large dance orchestras—the best known of them directed by celebrity bandleaders such as Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Glenn Miller—dominated the national hit parade. These *big bands* appeared nightly on radio, their performances transmitted coast to coast from hotels and ballrooms in the big cities. Their music was featured on *jukeboxes*, coin-operated record players installed in nightclubs and restaurants. Many of the bands crisscrossed the country in busses, playing for dances and concerts at local dance halls, theaters, and colleges. The big bands were essentially a big-city phenomenon, a symbol of sophistication and up-to-dateness, and their occasional tour appearances in small towns generated a great deal of excitement. (In this sense the big bands played a role similar to traveling minstrel and vaudeville shows, which had largely died out by the late 1920s.)

Swing music was part of a broader cultural and aesthetic movement that included dance styles, modes of dress, and even architecture. Gradually supplanting the intimate cabarets of the 1920s, huge ballrooms, designed to cater to a larger and more diverse audience, sprang up during the 1930s. These new dance halls were constructed in keeping with the taste of the times, complete with streamlined modern designs of chrome, steel, and glass, evoking the power and forward momentum of airplanes and diesel trains. Photographs of dance bands taken during the big-band era also indicate a shift in visual presentation, from the publicity shots of 1920s “syncopated orchestras,” in which musicians mugged and struck unusual poses, to the sleek, sophisticated, and erudite image of swing bands and bandleaders, adorned in fine suits and scholarly eyeglasses.

Swing music also played an important economic role. Record sales in the United States had plummeted from the 1921 high of \$106 million in retail sales to only \$6 million in 1933 (a decline of over 90 percent). By the late 1930s, largely as a result of the popularity of swing, the record industry had begun to recover: between 1935 and 1945 well over half of the records that sold more than a million copies were made by big dance bands. It is no exaggeration to state that swing music pulled the American music industry out of the Great Depression.

SWING MUSIC AND AMERICAN CULTURE

Swing music provides us with a window onto the cultural values and social changes of the New Deal era.² The basic ethos of swing music was one of unfettered enjoyment, “swinging,” “having a ball.” (This “let’s party” attitude was doubtless encouraged by the repeal of Prohibition in 1933.) Like the voting bloc that elected Franklin D. Roosevelt to four terms in office, the audience for swing spanned the social boundaries that separated ethnic groups, natives and immigrants, southerners and northerners, city dwellers and country folk, the working class, the expand-

2. The New Deal was an ambitious set of public programs put into place by the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt and designed to pull the country out of the economic depression of the early 1930s.

ing middle class, and progressive members of the educated elite. Democratic in spirit, swing music was actually quite regimented in performance—planned and written down in advance by professional arrangers, and often read note-by-note by musicians, with relatively little room for individual improvisation. This highly structured way of making music—a shift from the ideal of collective improvisation that had characterized early New Orleans jazz—has been correlated by some scholars with the increasing bureaucratization of American life during the New Deal era, including the growth of government institutions, labor unions, and big business.

If this connection between music and society seems a bit far-fetched—after all, many dance bands of the 1920s also played from written arrangements and improvised little—it certainly cannot be denied that the big-band era saw the growth of bureaucracy in the music industry. The swing craze was controlled and, at least in part, manufactured by large New York-based *booking agencies*, corporations formed to represent professional musicians and promote their music. The largest of these was MCA (Music Corporation of America), which, after barely surviving the depression, rose to become the dominant booking agency for big dance bands. MCA and other agencies served as liaisons between the bands, radio networks, and commercial advertisers. (Most successful bands had a set of official sponsors, including tobacco, beer, and automobile companies.) The agencies also managed the bafflingly complex logistics of nationwide tours. In 1937, when total profits from the swing music industry reached \$80 million, \$15 million went to the booking agencies. It is perhaps no wonder that MCA—cold, efficient, and businesslike—was viewed with a mixture of appreciation and distrust by musicians, who called the corporation the “Star Spangled Octopus.” (These large booking agencies continue to play an important—some would say oppressive—role in the music business today.)

During the swing era network radio was the most important means of promoting popular music. A big band simply could not hope to achieve any significant level of popularity without constant radio exposure. Swing bands appeared live on remote broadcasts from dance halls and hotels, as well as on regularly scheduled studio-based programs. Interestingly, some of the most desirable places for a swing band to perform were hotels and ballrooms where they might actually expect to lose money. These venues were important because they had a “wire”—a connection to a local radio station—which allowed them to be used for live broadcasting. (The most famous of these “remote” venues was the Pennsylvania Hotel in New York City, which played an important role in launching the careers of Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, Glenn Miller, and other top bandleaders.)

The 1930s also saw the appearance of radio shows featuring phonograph records rather than live performances. The most famous of these were the *Make Believe Ballroom* shows, broadcast from New York and Los Angeles. These shows featured *disc jockeys*, radio personalities who spun records and attempted to create the ambience of a live broadcast from a hotel. The first Top 10 radio show was *Your Hit Parade*, sponsored by Lucky Strike Cigarettes. Introduced in 1935, the show began with the following announcement:

Your Hit Parade! We don’t pick ‘em, we just play ‘em. From North, South, East and West, we check the songs you dance to . . . the sales of the records that you buy . . . and the sheet music you play. And then, knowing your preferences, we bring you the top hits of the week!

The announcement of top hit songs began with a dramatic drum roll and ended with the performance of “the top song in the country, Number One on Your Lucky Strike Hit Parade.” This show, one of the most popular of the radio era, is the ancestor of the Top 40 shows of the rock ‘n’ roll era and MTV’s music video countdown. (Very few radio stations featured African American disc jockeys during the swing era. The first well-known black DJ was Jack Cooper, who began broadcasting in Chicago in the late 1930s. There were few others until after World War II.)

As is often the case with popular music, swing was put to all sorts of political uses. Some left-wing activists saw swing music as a utopian embodiment of racial democracy and the common interests of working people. Other leftists regarded it with suspicion, seeing its mass popularity and the fervor of its fans as possible precursors of totalitarianism. Conservative commentators decried swing as an outgrowth and intensification of the moral decline marked by the ragtime and jazz crazes of the 1910s and 1920s. One prominent psychiatrist blamed a wave of sex crimes on the music, while another played Tommy Dorsey records for monkeys and gorillas, reporting that the former enjoyed swing, while the latter—being largely terrestrial, not arboreal primates—did not. Religious authorities were generally not thrilled with the new music or the often acrobatic styles of dance that it accompanied, called “jitterbugging” (see below). In 1938 Archbishop Beckman of New York went so far as to argue that “we permit, if not endorse, by our criminal indifference, ‘jam sessions,’ ‘jitter-bugs,’ and cannibalistic rhythm orgies to occupy a place in our social scheme of things, wooing our youth along the primrose path to hell!” (*The New York Times*, Oct. 26, 1938, p. 20).

These criticisms of swing—with their references to sexual deviance, animals, and cannibalism—echo the racist tone of attacks on syncopated dance music during the 1920s, which we discussed back in Chapter 3. American society remained segregated along racial lines, even as the country spent hundreds of thousands of lives and billions of dollars fighting World War II. (It is ironic that the while the war was ostensibly an attempt to save the free world from the racism of the Nazis, the U.S. Army itself remained largely segregated.) On the other hand, personal relationships and the exchange of stylistic influences between black and white musicians had on the whole become more direct and intimate. Although ballrooms remained segregated in certain parts of the country, photographs of big-band concerts and dances during the late 1930s and the war years provide evidence that big-city swing audiences were also decidedly mixed in racial terms. Some of the most popular white swing bands met with success at Negro venues such as Harlem’s Apollo Theater, while the most successful African American dance bands always counted substantial numbers of white fans among their audiences.

The influence of black English on the speech of white youth also became more direct during this period. Terms such as “cool,” “hip,” “with it,” and “in the groove” evoked a particular attitude or stance toward life—aware, sensually attuned, and in control of the situation—that has its roots in a distinctive African American aesthetic of personal comportment. (Linguists have traced the etymology of the term “hepcat” to “hipikat,” a term used by the Wolof people of Senegal to describe a person who is particularly finely attuned to his surroundings, literally a person with his “eyes wide open.” Many words in American English—including “jazz”—appear to have roots in African languages.)

The dance styles that paralleled swing music provide further evidence of the in-

creasing centrality of black styles and sensibilities in American popular culture. Beginning in the late 1920s, dancers at the Savoy Ballroom in New York City—located on Harlem’s “main stem,” Lenox Avenue—began to develop a style called the lindy hop, named in honor of Charles Lindbergh’s solo transatlantic flight (1927). The lindy differed from the popular jazz dance styles of the early 1920s—the bunny hug, turkey trot, and fox-trot—in several important ways. While the older dances emphasized bouncy, up-and-down movements, the lindy was smoother, with more fluid horizontal movements. In addition, the lindy provided greater scope for improvisation, including the “breakaway,” a moment when dancers would part company and dance solo, exhibiting their skill. (The Savoy Ballroom had a special section of the dance floor, called the “Cat’s Corner,” set aside for these displays.) Gradually, this virtuosic element of the lindy became more prominent, including judolike “airsteps,” in which the man would spin his partner, slide her between his arched legs, flip her over his back, and so on. The clothing worn by dancers matched the streamlined and somewhat formal aesthetic of the new ballrooms: expensive (or at least expensive-looking) jackets, ties, and loose trousers for the men, billowing skirts and silk blouses for the women. (Loose clothes were not only “hip” in appearance but also perfectly suited for the acrobatic moves of the lindy hop.)

It is impossible to discuss the development of swing music, the lindy hop, or the clothing and speech styles with which they were associated without some reference to New York’s Harlem and its famous nightclubs and dance halls, including the Savoy Ballroom, the Cotton Club, and the Apollo Theater. Originally populated by European immigrant groups, Harlem was by the late 1920s home to a substantial, well-educated, and relatively prosperous black middle class. Much of the attention of scholars has focused on the “high art” aspects of the “New Negro” movement, later called the Harlem Renaissance, exemplified by the poetry of Langston Hughes and the paintings of Aaron Douglas. However, the cultural energy and creativity of black New York was also expressed through popular cultural forms, both in live performance and over the mass media. It could be argued that Harlem was the portal through which black styles and sensibilities entered American mass culture from the 1920s through the 1940s.

Although the creative impulses of the Harlem Renaissance came mainly from the black middle class, “black and tan” nightclubs like the Cotton Club were generally owned and operated by Italian and Jewish mobsters. The Cotton Club’s audiences were predominantly white, including people with a genuine interest in jazz music and other aspects of cosmopolitan black culture, and others who came to Harlem in search of something akin to an exotic tourist experience (a practice called “slumming”). The most successful dance orchestras at the Cotton Club—led by Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway—provided musical accompaniment for stage acts featuring scantily clad “brown beauties,” men in ape costumes, and jungle scenery. This scene—with black performers presenting caricatures of themselves to white consumers—is in some ways reminiscent of nineteenth-century minstrelsy. However, the steady income provided by the well-known Harlem nightclubs and dance halls provided many black musicians with an opportunity to develop successful careers in music.

On the one hand, it can be argued that the swing era—a period in which black people often attended concerts by white dance bands, and whites began to study and imitate black culture with greater passion and in greater numbers than ever

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before—did represent a step forward in cultural communication across racial boundaries. At the same time, we must recognize that this was not a relationship of full equality. Only a handful of dance bands were racially integrated (Benny Goodman was a pioneer in this regard), and even the most popular of black dance bands faced serious economic and social disadvantages vis-à-vis their white competitors. Between 1935 and 1945 the four most popular big bands led by white musicians—the Tommy Dorsey, Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller, and Jimmy Dorsey Orchestras—racked up a total of 292 Top 10 records, of which 65 were Number One hits. By way of contrast, the four most popular black swing orchestras—led by Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Jimmy Lunceford, and Chick Webb—scored only 32 Top 10 hits, 3 of which made it to Number One on the charts. While these figures may reflect broad differences in the economic status of black and white Americans, they were also shaped by the black musicians' difficulty in getting equal airtime on the radio, and in having their records included among the selections on the coin-operated jukeboxes that sprang up in thousands of restaurants and nightclubs across the country during this period.

Finally, although swing is regarded today as nostalgic music, it is important to remember that its core audience initially consisted of college-age adults and teenagers. Avid young dancers called "jitterbugs" studied the recordings of their favorite bands, spent hours perfecting dance steps, formed fan clubs, bought fan magazines, and sometimes trailed their favorite bands from town to town. (As you might expect, the swing craze was regarded with suspicion by many parents, who continued to patronize the older-style "sweet" bands led by musicians like Guy Lombardo.) In general, the big bands brought a youthful energy back to American popular music. At its best, swing was an exciting, brash, vital music, inspired by black aesthetics and consonant with the growing optimism of a nation emerging from a devastating economic depression. Although most of the big bands vanished from the scene after World War II, the musical and cultural influence of swing continued to be strongly felt in postwar rhythm & blues and country and western music (see Chapter 7), and eventually, in rock 'n' roll (see Chapter 8).