

Teacher Guide—Unit 10

The Swing Era

The Swing Era straddles a turbulent era in America, highlighted by the Great Depression and World War II. In the midst of these worldwide calamities, jazz music (now completely mainstream and called “swing”) offered an escape with its high energy, sunny outlook, and danceable beat. Starting in 1935, “big bands” consisting of 18 or more musicians became the most popular vehicle for bringing swing to the masses. These bands and their leaders helped usher in a new era of respectability for jazz and broke down racial barriers that, in the past, had prevented black and white musicians from performing together on the same stage.

Discussion Topics

1. The Popularity of Swing

Question: Why did big band swing become so popular in troubled times like the Great Depression and World War II?

Sample Answers: a) Swing music had a high-energy, danceable beat that provided fun in the face of tough times; b) The energy, passion, and romance of big band swing offered hope for a better future; c) Swing musicians played a big role in the war effort.

2. The War Effort—During World War II, the entire country participated in the “war effort,” part of which meant rationing everyday items like gasoline, metal, and rubber.

Question: How did jazz and swing musicians play a part in the “war effort” that engulfed America during World War II?

Sample Answers: a) Swing musicians produced special recordings, radio broadcasts, and concert tours for the troops; b) The happy feel of swing music helped lift the spirits of America’s allies in Europe and Asia; c) After the war, swing music was a very effective tool for winning over the hearts and minds of defeated enemies like Germany and Japan.

3. Important Big Band Leaders—Although many important musicians figured into the popularity of swing, three big band leaders (Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman, and Count Basie) were responsible for key changes in the evolution of jazz and the way it was played.

Question: Name one or two important contributions that each of the following big band leaders made to the evolution of jazz during the Swing Era.

Sample Answers relating to Duke Ellington: a) Ellington was a brilliant composer—his compositions helped turn jazz into a unique art form like classical music; b) In the 1920s, Ellington’s radio broadcasts from the famous Cotton Club in Harlem spread the sound of jazz.

Sample Answers relating to Benny Goodman: a) Goodman organized the first major jazz concert at Carnegie Hall, which was traditionally reserved for classical music only; b) Goodman used his star power to integrate his band, allowing black and white musicians to perform together in public for the first time.

Sample Answers relating to Count Basie: a) Basie’s rhythm section established a unique “4-beat” pulse that delivered an incredible forward momentum loved by dancers, yet simultaneously felt “laid back”; b) This “pulse” would become the blueprint for the feel of jazz—it represents what we mean when we say a particular piece of music “swings.”

4. **Instrumentalists versus Singers**—Initially, singers in a big band were considered of secondary importance. During World War II, however, the sentimental and romantic ballads that featured singers proved tremendously popular with the public. As recording technology allowed singers to put more feeling and subtlety into their performances, music industry executives realized singers, as opposed to bands, were the path to a more profitable future.

Question: Why did the role of singers become more important during the big band era?

Sample Answers: a) The romantic ballads they sang became popular with the public; b) Technology improved, allowing them to sing with more subtlety and feeling in recordings.

For Further Study

Key Terms

- “Underground”
- “Mainstream”
- Big Band
- The Great Depression
- Benny Goodman
- Integration
- War Effort
- Cotton Club
- 2-beat/4-beat
- “Crooner”/“Canary”

Important Swing Era Musicians and Vocalists

- Duke Ellington
- Cab Calloway
- Benny Goodman
- The Andrews Sisters
- Billie Holiday
- Ella Fitzgerald
- Count Basie
- Woody Herman
- Gene Krupa
- Frank Sinatra
- Sarah Vaughan
- Peggy Lee