



Jazz in America

The Swing Era and the Harlem Renaissance

1. The Swing Era
 - A. Big band swing was at the forefront of jazz and underwent its most concentrated growth and development from 1930–1945.*
 1. The Swing Era is also known as the Big Band Era since the number of instruments in these bands was considerably larger than during the previous Early Jazz era.
 2. While any jazz band with 10 or more instruments is considered a big band, the most common number of instruments in a big band was (and still is) 17:
 - a. five saxophones (two alto saxes, two tenor saxes, and one baritone sax)
 - b. four trumpets
 - c. four trombones
 - d. four “rhythm” (piano, bass, drums, guitar)
 3. The majority of the music was written (“arranged”) by an arranger.
 - a. The music was more complex than in the Early Jazz era.
 - b. With so many additional instruments, a lot more organization was required ahead of time.
 - c. Room was made for improvised solos, which were important, but not as important as the arrangement itself and the performance of the ensemble as a whole; solos were relatively short (usually one chorus or less).
 4. Big band swing music was primarily for dancing, that is, swing bands were dance bands.
 5. “Call and Response” was (and still is) a common musical device.
 - a. This is where one section (say, the brass section, i.e., trumpets and trombones) would play a musical phrase and then be “answered” by another section (say, the saxes).
 - b. The first phrase is the call, the next phrase is the response (like a musical conversation, like question and answer); this would often go back and forth a number of times.
 6. Three of the most important figures in the Swing Era were:
 - a. pianist **Duke Ellington**
 - b. pianist **Count Basie**
 - c. clarinetist **Benny Goodman** (known as the “King of Swing”)
 - B. Cultural Implications
 1. Jazz reached new levels of sophistication in the Swing Era as an outgrowth of America’s need for self-esteem following the Great Depression.
 2. Jazz was (and remains) a symbol of urban American energy, optimism, and resilience.
- II. The Harlem Renaissance – A rebirth of the African American arts (1918–1935)
 - A. An Outburst of Creativity
 1. Beginning around 1918, Harlem was home to many African American professionals, including authors, poets, artists, actors, dancers, composers, and musicians.
 2. With a growing sense of racial pride and a desire for social and political equality, a large outpouring of literature, art, and music began to be produced.
 3. Most of the works were based in some way on the experiences of African Americans.
 - B. Contributing Factors
 1. During the Great Migration, African Americans moved from rural areas to northern cities, including New York City’s Harlem neighborhood.
 2. African Americans wanted their thoughts and ideas to be heard in their own words via the arts (literature, dance, drama, visual arts, and music).
 - C. Harlem was home to two of the most important African American organizations:
 1. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was founded in 1909 to help advance the rights of African Americans.
 2. The National Urban League was founded in 1910 to help African Americans address the economic and social problems they encountered as they resettled in the urban North.

* All styles of jazz from Early Jazz to contemporary are still being performed and recorded today. The style dates given are approximations of when each respective style came to the forefront of jazz and experienced its most concentrated development; of course, styles and dates overlap.

D. Important Figures

1. authors – Alain Locke, W.E.B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey, James Weldon Johnson
2. poets – Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay
3. artists – William H. Johnson, Aaron Douglas, Jacob Lawrence
4. actors – Josephine Baker, Paul Robeson, Charles Gilpin, Ethel Waters
5. composers – Duke Ellington, Eubie Blake, William Grant Still
6. musicians – Cab Calloway, Ella Fitzgerald, Fats Waller, Billie Holiday, Duke Ellington

E. Jazz during the Harlem Renaissance

1. The Harlem Renaissance was about giving a voice to the experiences of African Americans, and nothing gave expression to the African American experience better than jazz.
2. Jazz was born out of the Black experience in America, basically fusing African and European musical traditions.
3. Jazz evolved from slave work songs, spirituals (religious Black American folk songs), blues, brass band music, and ragtime.
4. Jazz, more than any other music, has been intimately linked with legal and social equality for all, particularly African Americans.
5. Harlem was the place to hear the top big bands of the day, including those led by:
 - a. **Fletcher Henderson** (piano)
 - b. **Duke Ellington** (piano)
 - c. **Cab Calloway** (vocal)
 - d. **Benny Goodman** (clarinet)
6. Radio Broadcasts
 - a. Some of the very first coast-to-coast radio broadcasts were from Harlem ballrooms.
 - b. Listeners all over America heard the music of Duke Ellington's Orchestra as it was broadcast live from The Cotton Club, the most famous of Harlem ballrooms throughout the 1920s and 1930s.
 - c. The market for jazz was stimulated, both locally and nationally, through radio broadcasts.
7. Cultural Implications
 - a. As the New York elite began attending jazz clubs, jazz became viewed as a sophisticated art form.
 - b. The Harlem Renaissance helped bring the United States one step closer to integration.
 - c. The Harlem Renaissance brought attention to literary and artistic works by African Americans. Jazz, especially, was an important ingredient in a developing appreciation for their artistic talent.