



Jazz in America

Early Jazz and the Swing Era

- I. Early Jazz (AKA “Dixieland”)
 - A. Early Jazz (“Dixieland”) developed in the early 20th century (1900–1928);* its four main influences were ragtime, military brass bands, the blues, and gospel music.
 1. The usual instrumentation of a Dixieland band was (and still is) trumpet (or cornet), clarinet, trombone, piano, string bass (or tuba), drums, and banjo (or guitar).
 2. The primary feature of Dixieland jazz is “collective improvisation,” that is, rather than each musician taking a solo in turn (as in most styles of jazz today), Dixieland jazz musicians all improvise at the same time.
 3. Each instrument has its own specific role:
 - a. trumpet or cornet: plays the melody (jazzed up)
 - b. clarinet: adds to (embellishes) the melody
 - c. trombone: usually embellishes the bass line but sometimes plays the melody; plays “afterbeats” (adding to the rhythm) and sound effects such as “smears” and “slides”
 - d. piano and banjo (or guitar): play chords
 - e. string bass or tuba: plays the bass line
 - f. drums: keeps the beat steady and swinging
 4. Dixieland bands (excluding piano and using tuba rather than string bass) were originally small marching bands.
 5. Besides playing for dances and parties, in the early 1900s Dixieland bands would also play for funerals (marching along with the procession) in celebration of the life of the departed.
 6. There were few long solos in Dixieland jazz until the appearance of trumpeter **Louis Armstrong**.
 - a. Louis Armstrong was the first great jazz soloist (improviser) and one of the most important figures in jazz history.
 - b. There are those who say that without Louis Armstrong, there would be no jazz today.
 7. Almost all early Dixieland jazz musicians were African American; **Bix Beiderbecke** was a notable exception.
 - a. Interestingly, the very first jazz record was made by an all white group known as the Original Dixieland Jass Band (this group spelled jazz “jass”).
 - b. It was entitled “Livery Stable Blues” and was recorded in 1917.
 - c. Most early jazz recordings were made on brittle hard plastic (shellac) records called 78s; the number 78 referred to the number of revolutions per minute (RPM) that the record would make when played on a record player of the day.
 - B. Cultural Implications
 1. The collective improvisation of Dixieland jazz represented, in part, African Americans’ newfound freedom.
 - a. African Americans were no longer slaves and celebrated their newfound freedom through jazz improvisation, playing whatever they wanted; they were not “restricted” to notes written on a page, but instead could play whatever they “heard” in their hearts and minds (the music was not read, it was played “by ear”).
 - b. Freedom was and continues to be an integral issue regarding all styles of jazz.
 2. Early Jazz made its way from New Orleans to Chicago, to New York, to the rest of the country, to the rest of the world.
 3. Dixieland was the musical backdrop of city life during the Roaring Twenties (AKA the “Jazz Age”) and the early years of the Harlem Renaissance.
- II. 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 Dixieland 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)

* 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.

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, i.e., swing bands were dance bands.
 5. “Call and Response” was 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 answer is the response (like a musical conversation); 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”)
 7. Although the Swing Era was dominated by big bands, there were a few important small groups as well, including the Benny Goodman Trio, Quartet, and Sextet (Benny also had a big band).
- B. Cultural Implications
1. After the Stock Market Crash of 1929, swing helped the country through the Great Depression, creating escape from economic realities via swing dancing.
 2. Jazz reached new levels of sophistication in the Swing Era as an outgrowth of America’s need for self-esteem following the Great Depression.
 3. Swing served as a major morale booster during World War II.
 4. Race Relations
 - a. In an era when racial integration was not accepted by American society in general, jazz’s social liberalism was represented by racial integration in several important swing bands. Perhaps for the first time, it did not matter what color you were, just how well you could play and what you had inside.
 - b. The first important interracial groups were the Benny Goodman Trio, Quartet, Sextet, and Big Band, all of which were formed in 1935 (prior to this time, most jazz groups were either all white or all black).
 5. Swing, especially Duke Ellington’s music of the early 1930s, was the musical backdrop during the later years of the Harlem Renaissance.
 6. Jazz was (and remains) a symbol of urban American energy, optimism, and resilience.