Show #6 Swing Era

Music of the Swing Era began in the early 1930s and continued until the mid 1940s. It is was the most popular kind of jazz music in the 20th century, and was the “popular” music of its day. Because it was often played by ten or more musicians, it is sometimes called the “Big Band Era.” This term can be misleading, however, because Swing Era music can be played by combos also. Here are some of the musical distinctions between Swing Era jazz and Early Jazz.

- Saxophones became much more popular than the clarinet. (Even though many Big Band leaders were clarinetists!)
- Musicians are swinging more smoothly, and there is generally a more “horizontal” feel to the music rhythmically. Ensembles and soloists had begun incorporating the swing feel of Louis Armstrong into their own playing.
- Upright bass is more common than tuba.
- Collective improvisation is less prevalent.
- Bands organized into sections. i.e. brass (trumpet and trombone), saxes and rhythm sections.
- The arranger assumes a much greater role in order to organize the music for the larger aggregate of players.
- A soli is when a section of the band plays a harmonized melodic line. For instance in Duke Ellington’s “Cottontail” the fifth chorus is a saxophone soli.

Fletcher Henderson

Fletcher Henderson was one of the first big band arrangers. He is credited with developing block voicing. (Some maintain that Don Redmond was, in fact, the arranger who developed block voicing technique. Though this may be true, for the purposes of this class, we will maintain that Fletcher Henderson was the originator of the technique.) That is, harmonizing a melody with other notes, usually played my like instruments to comprise a soli. He employed a “Call and Response” style, usually between the brass and saxophones. Mr. Henderson was one of the principal arrangers for Benny Goodman, one of the most popular and successful musicians in the 20th century. Henderson’s style was instrumental in the success of the Goodman Orchestra. Benny Goodman was very supportive of Fletcher Henderson and acknowledged his contributions.

Red Hot Jazz has a fair, brief take: [http://www.redhotjazz.com/fletcher.html](http://www.redhotjazz.com/fletcher.html)
Count Basie
Pianist, band leader, and occasional composer/arranger William “Count” Basie led one of the most significant and swinging big bands. In the early 1930s he featured tenor saxophonist Lester Young, and important influence on improvising jazz musicians.

Basie style is considered a “Riffing” or “Head Chart” style. That it, the players might layer different made up riffs to create and arrangement rather than relying on thoroughly written out charts. This style is also called “Kansas City” style, particularly in contrast to the arrangements of many of the New York Bands like Henderson’s, Ellington’s, and Goodman’s. Basie also lightened up the “comping” (short for accompanying) role of pianists when backing up soloists.

The “All-American Rhythm Section” of Basie’s late 1930s and early 1940s band was comprised of:

- Basie, of course, on piano
- Freddie Green on guitar
- Walter Page on bass
- Papa Jo Jones on drums

This rhythm section was able to create a swinging, even tempo and generate a jubilant feeling without playing loud. They were able to mesh and blend the sounds of their various instruments into one unified whole – one beautiful swinging unit.

Freddie Green played “rhythm guitar.” That is, three or four note voicings on the quarter note pulse. He had a magical manner of doing this that propelled the music forward even though he blended perfectly with the other members of the rhythm section.

Walter Page is considered the first proponents of the walking style of bass playing. He was able to play each beat evenly with a present, vibrant sound.

Papa Jo Jones had a loose, softer mode of swinging. He would “feather” the bass drum. That is, play it so softly that is was felt rather than heard. He occasionally would leave the bass drum out and/or use it for accents, a technique that was prescient of the Bop era to follow. He uses brushes or sticks on the high hat cymbals with a technique that smoothed out the “jerkiness” of previous eras.

And a more reliable academic look: [http://www.pbs.org/jazz/biography/artist_id_basie_count.htm](http://www.pbs.org/jazz/biography/artist_id_basie_count.htm)

As mentioned previously, tenor saxophonist Lester Young (nickname: “Prez”) was an extremely important voice in the Swing Era. He was a star soloist in Basie’s early ensembles.

His style is often contrasted with that of another influential Swing Era Musician, **Coleman Hawkins**.

Hawkins is considered the first important tenor saxophone soloist, earning the title “Father of the Tenor Saxophone.” He was one of the first to investigate the harmonic motion that underlined most tunes that jazz musicians were using for their improvisations. Because of this ability to “outline changes,” his playing is considered “vertical” in nature.

**Lester Young**’s approach was much more linear, and he had a unique manner of phrasing which was not as symmetrical as many players of the time. He had a “cooler” sound than Coleman Hawkins, and his defined sense of melody leads us to label his approach “horizontal.”

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>Coleman Hawkins</strong></th>
<th><strong>Lester Young</strong></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tone/Timbre</td>
<td>Warm, heavy</td>
<td>cool, light, hollow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vibrato</td>
<td>pretty heavy</td>
<td>slower than Hawkins’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvisatory</td>
<td>harmonic, vertical</td>
<td>melodic, horizontal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approach</td>
<td>complex</td>
<td>less complex than Hawkins</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Played with: Fletcher Henderson  Count Basie

And Lester Young: http://www.pbs.org/jazz/biography/artist_id_young_lester.htm

**Benny Goodman**

Goodman was a clarinetist and band leader of both combos and big bands. He had great technical fluency on the clarinet, and was quite disciplined in his practice routine. Goodman was one of the most famous musicians of the Swing Era, and his popularity extended beyond the category of jazz music. He was known as the “King of Swing,” a name that he tolerated with his normal cynicism. He respected Fletcher Henderson and acknowledged that Henderson’s arrangements were an extremely important component of the Goodman Orchestra’s success.

One of the qualities Goodman’s band brought to the table was embracing the black bands’ mode of playing. This included the swinging rhythmic feel, the arrangers’ style, and the importance of improvisation within the arrangements. Goodman grew up in a ghetto of Chicago in very poverty stricken circumstances, sometime not even eating anything on a given day. He listened to and grew up listening to the bands on Chicago’s south side and loved that music. Goodman had this to say about the type of band he wanted:

“I was interested only in jazz. I wanted to play dance music in a free and musical style – in other words, in the way that most good musician wanted to play, but weren’t allowed to on the ordinary job . . . the kind of music I liked to play (and did, whenever I had the opportunity) was something real and genuine which the public would go for if they had chance to hear it. . . . No white band had yet gotten together a good rhythm section that would kick out . . . or swing . . . using arrangements that fit in with this idea, which would give the men a chance to play solos and express the music in their own individual way.

Goodman was one of the first to break the color barrier of white and black musicians playing together in concert settings. He employed pianist Teddy Wilson, guitarist Charlie Christian, and vibraharpist Lionel Hampton in his combos, and, occasionally in his big band. It is said that Goodman was one of the few white bands of the Era to embrace the rhythmic and improvisatory elements of the “hot” or black bands.

A good academic source on Goodman:
And a cursory look from the folks at Red Hot Jazz:

http://www.redhotjazz.com/goodman.html

Goodman’s official site is odd but abundant:

http://www.bennygoodman.com/about/biography.html