Big Bands and Swing
General Characteristics

**Swing**

- Refers to the music of large dance bands that played written arrangements, occasionally using improvised solos.
- 1930 - 1940 the Swing Era
- Music was played by bands of 10 or more musicians so it is also called
  - “The big band era”, in 1937 - 18,000 musicians were on the road
  - Jazz was the most listened-to music in the world

**Difference with early jazz**

- Larger ensemble, greater use of written arrangements
- Saxophones were more common in swing
- Upright (acoustic) bass more common
- Collective improvisation was RARE in swing
- Overall rhythmic feeling was smoother
- Swing musicians usually showed a higher level of instrumental proficiency in terms of speed, agility, tone control and playing in tune
Beginning of the Swing Era

Swing Jazz Arrangements

- To write specific notes for each instrument to play in every measure
  - “Riffs” - short, repeated refrains or phrases
- The arranger decides who is playing what and gives it to the copyist
- Larger group of musicians required an arrangement

“Sweet” music vs. “Hot” jazz

- ”Sweet” – less improvisation, medium tempos, primarily for high class society dance parties, retained at least a lightly swinging feel but prized melody above all else
- “Hot” – more daring, experimental, faster, greater solo improvisation, rhythmic drive, and blues feeling
Beginning of the Swing Era

Instrumentation

• 10 or more musicians grouped into four sections
  ✷ Saxophone section
    ✷ 2 altos, 2 tenors, later on 1 baritone
    ✷ Sometimes musicians would alternate with clarinets and flutes
  ✷ Brass - Trumpet section
    ✷ 4 trumpets - The 1st was responsible for the highest notes and eventually the 2nd for most of the jazz solos
  ✷ Brass - Trombone section
    ✷ 4 trombones; later a fifth Bass trombone was often added
  ✷ Rhythm section
    ✷ 1 drummer, 1 bass player, 1 piano player and 1 guitar player
The Rhythm Section

**PIANO**

- **“Comping”**
  - Accompanying the soloist, playing chords, complimenting and supporting the soloist

- **Piano solo**
  - The right hand plays an improvised melodic line while the left hand “comps”

**BASS**

- Acoustic bass played through an amplifier

- Almost always plays pizzicato (plucking the strings)

- Almost always plays either a “walking bass” or a two-beat bass line
The Rhythm Section

Drum Set
- Timekeeper
  - Provides a regular pulse and swing feel
- Controls the volume, texture and mood of the ensemble
- Right hand
  - Plays ride rhythms on the ride cymbal
- Left hand
  - Provides accents on snare, toms, cymbals
- Left foot
  - Plays the hi-hat (open and closed)
- Right foot
  - Plays the bass drum usually on every beat

Guitar
- Timekeeper
  - Provide a regular pulse as rhythm guitar
- Comping piano-like
- Electric guitar
  - Solos
  - Additional harmonic function
  - Able to perform melodic lines
Early Big Bands

Paul Whiteman

- Billed as “The King of Jazz” – something he never pretended he was
- Orchestrating jazz - popular appeal
  - “Whispering” huge hit, sold 2.5 million copies, 200 times more than any of the Armstrong/Oliver would sell
- Became most celebrated and most imitated in America, launching a whole new trend in society dance music
Early Big Bands

🌟 Fletcher Henderson Big Band

► “The King of the Black Jazz”

◆ Credited with creating the pattern for swing arrangements which consists of:
  - Independent use of trumpet, trombone, saxophone, and rhythm section, with use of soloist
◆ Bandleader, pianist, arranger
◆ The arranging technique of Don Redman
◆ Benny Goodman gained huge success with his arrangements
Big Band Period
Benny Goodman

- Bandleader, clarinet
  - “The King of Swing”
  - Led the most popular jazz-oriented big band
  - True virtuoso on the clarinet
  - The first band to perform jazz concert in Carnegie Hall

“Sing, Sing, Sing” - one of the definitive songs of the big band and swing era, often most associated with Benny Goodman
Benny Goodman

Goodman, a wise businessman, caught Henderson in 1929 when the stock market crashed. He purchased all of Henderson's song books, and hired Henderson's band members to teach his musicians how to play the music.

The combination of Goodman's solid clarinet playing, the Henderson charts, and the well-rehearsed band made Goodman a rising star in the mid-1930s, earning him the title “King of Swing.”
Benny Goodman

Goodman's band was the 1st to integrated black and white musicians to publicly perform

- “I am selling not prejudice or integration but music” B.G.

- Brought jazz out of back rooms into the best night spots, into the greatest theaters where thousands of young people screamed and danced

- “The Battle of the Century” – the cutting contest with Chick Webb’s Big Band
Duke Ellington

Priced as “The Greatest American Composer”

- As a pianist
  - Stride tradition with more developed methods
- As a bandleader, composer
  - Maintained a large ensemble
  - Proved that orchestrating jazz was an art of the highest level
  - Composed more than 2000 compositions
- Numerous Awards
  - Nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 1965, but was turned down.
  - Awarded the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award in 1966.

Duke Ellington
Duke Ellington

As an arranger

- Variety of themes with a given piece of music
- The Ellington orchestra was always made up of the individual talents of his players
  - This is one of important aspects of the Ellington band which allowed individuals to retain their own identities and to expand and explore their own directions
Kansas City Jazz
Kansas City Jazz

Kansas City was busy with musical activity from the early 1920s to about 1938

Political organization called:

- *Pendergast Machine (the new Storyville)*
  - Encouraged nightclub atmosphere
  - Employment and opportunities for jazz musician arose

Kansas City became a jazz Mecca
Kansas City Jazz

Kansas City jazz is distinguished by the following musical elements:

- Extended soloing. Kansas City jam sessions went on well past sunrise, fostering a highly competitive atmosphere and a unique jazz culture in which the goal was to "say something" with one's instrument, rather than simply show off one's technique. It was not uncommon for one "song" to be performed for several hours, with the best musicians often soloing for dozens of choruses at a time.

- So-called "head arrangements". The KC big bands often played by memory, composing and arranging the music collectively, rather than sight-reading as other big bands of the time did. This further contributed to the loose, spontaneous Kansas City sound.

- A heavy blues influence, with KC songs often based around a 12-bar blues structure, rather than the 8-bar jazz standard.

- One of the most recognizable characteristics of Kansas City jazz is frequent, elaborate riffing by the different sections.
  - Riffs were often created - or even improvised - collectively, and took many forms:
    - One section riffing alone, serving as the main focus of the music;
    - One section riffing behind a soloist, adding excitement to the song; or
    - Two or more sections riffing in counterpoint, creating an exciting hard-swinging sound.
Count Basie

**As pianist**

- Fats Waller influenced
- Use of silence with light precisely-timed note choices (less is better than more)
- One of the first examples of comping

Count Basie
Count Basie

- **As pianist**
  - Use of silence with light precisely-timed note choices (less is better than more)
  - One of the first examples of comping

- **Arrangements**
  - Simple musical arrangements, repeated again and again
  - **Head arrangements** learned by ear - “One O’Clock Jump”
    - Collections of complex riffs, memorized in a head arrangement, and punctuated with solos.

- **Rhythm section**
  - One of the most swinging bands in the jazz history
  - His rhythm section was THE rhythm section of the swing era
  - Helped to the modern comping and timekeeping
Other Popular Big Bands
Glenn Miller

Brilliant arranger, outstanding businessman, fine trombone player

He was one of the best-selling recording artists from 1939 to 1942, leading one of the best known "Big Bands".

While traveling to entertain U.S. troops in France during World War II, Miller's plane disappeared in bad weather. His body was never found.

Glenn Miller
Glenn Miller

- Went in debt to start his band…but within 2 years was a millionaire
- Band works the best jobs and recorded often
- Made motion pictures
- Very popular with handful of records
  - Emphasized pretty arrangements and vocals more than improvised solos
  - Sometimes classified as “sweet band” (as opposed to “hot band” or “swing band”)
  - Popular charts: “In the Mood”
    - Closely follows the Kansas city pattern of riffing sections, and is a good example of the Kansas City style after it had been exported to the rest of the world.
Chick Webb was one of the finest jazz drummers of the big band era and also one of the most inspirational. Crippled by spinal tuberculosis, which left him with minimal use of his legs and a hunched back, Webb overcame his handicap to lead one of the hardest swinging orchestras of the 1930s. At less than five feet tall he reigned over the Savoy Ballroom during its heyday.
Chick Webb

Admired drummer for his forceful sense of:
- Swing, Accurate technique, Control of dynamics, Breaks and fills

Couldn’t read music….but memorized the arrangements

Would conduct his band from his drum set

Often credited with the discovery of singer Ella Fitzgerald
- “The First Lady of Swing” – his main vocalist, numerous awards and nationwide success. After his death she inherited the big band.
Chick Webb

Any new Big Band coming to NY had to compete with his band

“The Battles of the Century”

- Benny Goodman - lost
- Count Basie - lost
Jimmie Lunceford

- Alto sax player/band arranger

- Graduated from Fisk University (BMus1926)

- Taught music at Manassas High School, Memphis – in 1927 organized a student jazz band and released its first recording in 1930
Jimmie Lunceford

Lunceford's orchestra, with their tight musicianship and often outrageous humor in their music and lyrics made an ideal band for the club.

- Comedy and vaudeville played a distinct part in Lunceford's presentation. Lunceford's stage shows often included costumes, skits.

- Despite the band's comic veneer, Lunceford always maintained professionalism in the music befitting a former teacher; this professionalism paid off and during the apex of swing in the 1930s, the Orchestra was considered the equal of Duke Ellington's, Earl Hines' or Count Basie's.
Tommy Dorsey

“The sentimental gentleman of Swing”

An American jazz trombonist, trumpeter, and bandleader of the Big Band era.

He was the younger brother of Jimmy Dorsey.
Tommy Dorsey

- Turn the trombone into a singing instrument. His lyrical trombone style became one of the signature sounds of his band and of the Swing Era.

- Introduced Elvis Presley to national television audiences

- One of the greatest drummers ever was his drummer Buddy Rich

- Frank Sinatra achieved his first great success as a vocalist in the Dorsey band and claimed he learned breath control from watching Dorsey play trombone.
Artie Shaw

- Benny Goodman’s greatest rival

- Had hard time dealing with stardom and the business part of being a musician and suddenly quit.

- “Begin the Beguine” – one of the most popular tunes of the Swing era
Artie Shaw

In addition to hiring Buddy Rich, he signed Billie Holiday as his band's vocalist in 1938, becoming the first white bandleader to hire a full-time black female singer.

His band became enormously successful, and his playing was eventually recognized as equal to that of Benny Goodman.

In response to Goodman's nickname, the "King of Swing", Shaw's fans dubbed him the "King of the Clarinet". Shaw, however, felt the titles were reversed. "Benny Goodman played clarinet. I played music," he said.

He is also the author of both fiction and non-fiction writings.
Other Swing Musicians

**Roy Eldridge** - trumpet
- The most daring trumpeter of the 1930’s, nicknamed "Little Jazz"
- The stylistic bridge between Louis Armstrong and Dizzy Gillespie
- Aggressive style and total mastery on the trumpet

**Coleman Hawkins** - tenor sax
- "The Father of Jazz Saxophone"
- Harmonic improviser
- Expanded the vocabulary of tenor sax

**Lester Young** - tenor sax
- His playing was everything Hawkins’ was not "Pres or Prez"
- Paved the way for modern saxophone tone color, phrasing, rhythmic concept
- Bridged the gap between the older style swing (Hawkins) and the new
- Modern style of Charlie Parker
- "The Ultimate melodic improviser"
Other Swing Musicians

**Art Tatum** - piano
- The absolute master of swing keyboard virtuosity
- One of the most widely admired pianists in jazz history
- Usually played alone—so far ahead of other players technically and harmonically
- Enormous impact on jazz history

**Charlie Christian** - guitar
- Mastered what was then almost unexplored world of electric guitar
- Influenced almost all modern jazz guitarists before the rock era

**Mary Lou Williams** – piano
- Pianist, composer, and arranger
  - Had written hundreds of compositions or arrangements, and recorded over a hundred records
  - Williams wrote and arranged for such greats as Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman, and she was friend, mentor, and teacher to Thelonious Monk, Charlie Parker, and Dizzy Gillespie.
- She displayed remarkable versatility and power, and is probably the most influential woman in the history of jazz.
The Demise of Swing

- As a result of the military draft and problems of transportation….the swing era ended quickly

- Would only get jobs that were 1 night stands and would experience a financial loss

- The emergence of rock and roll captures the media and the world
Big Band Legacy “Ghost Bands”

A band of musicians that continues to perform under the name of its leader, even though he or she is dead.

Critics and historians refer to these groups as “ghost bands” because of the absence of their leaders and new personnel.

As a result of nostalgia for the big band style it has kept that style alive today…styles like the Miller and Dorsey bands.

When new arrangements are written, they are usually in the same style/trademarks as the original band.