Big Band Swing

En route to rock & roll, boogie-woogie helped turn jazz into swing music and put the *rhythm* in rhythm & blues. In the early 1930's, the New Orleans style of "Dixieland" jazz gave way to bigger bands and a more dance-oriented style pioneered by Fletcher Henderson in New York and Benny Moten and Count Basie in Kansas City (along with the great and unclassifiable Duke Ellington). Big band "swing" music was a pop phenomenon by the late 1930's, helped along by the lessening effects of the Depression and by a mania for dancing that swept the country in the years before and during World War II. The popularity of swing music was also aided by the repeal of Prohibition in 1933, which brought liquor—and jazz—out of the speakeasies and into the ballrooms and dance halls.

Swing music was one more example in a long line of black styles adopted by white audiences and white artists. Not surprisingly, the most commercially successful big bands were led by white bandleaders who had learned the lessens of the originators well, including Paul Whitehead, who was dubbed the "King of Jazz" in the twenties, and swing era stars Glenn Miller, Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey, and Benny Goodman, the nominal "King of Swing." (To his credit, Goodman was acutely aware of the racial bias that pronounced him the "King," and helped fight it by bringing black players into his bands and leading the fight to integrate jazz. He was helped and encouraged in this by producer and talent scout John Hammond, who organized the "Spirituals to Swing" concerts and played a major role in promoting the careers of Goodman, Count Basie, Billie Holiday and many others, including later discoveries like Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, Aretha Franklin and Stevie Ray Vaughan.)

The big bands were made up of many players divided into brass, reed and rhythm sections. A typical line-up consisted of five brass players (trumpets and trombones), four reed players (saxophones and clarinets) and a four-man rhythm section made up of piano, guitar, bass and drums. (As rock's detractors were fond of pointing out, the basic rock band lineup was merely the *rhythm* section of a swing band.) Big bands were often broken down into smaller units as well, such as those led by Count Basie and Benny Goodman, that retained the rhythmic drive of the large groups and formed the foundation for the rhythm & blues bands of the late forties. Not all "swing" bands could really swing, however, and many concentrated instead on commercial novelties, polite dance numbers ("society music") and sweet sentimental favorites in the mode made famous by Paul Whiteman, Guy Lombardo and Lawrence Welk. But the most popular bands knew how to move a dance crowd, and the terms "big band" and "swing" became virtually interchangeable.

Swing music's lively dance rhythm was built over evenly stressed, four-to-the-bar beats that produced a more fluid rhythmic feel than the two-beat, "oom-pah" march of ragtime and Dixieland, a change of feel highlighted by the switch from tubas and banjos to string basses and guitars. The beats were often emphasized by a "walking" bass line that moved up and down the scale, or accelerated to double-time (eight-to-the-bar) by a boogie-woogie bass. Swing music featured plenty of hot soloists but was largely driven by tight, harmonized melodies played by entire instrumental sections, punctuated by short melodic fragments—"riffs"—that were tossed back and forth between sections in a propulsive call-and-response. (Glenn Miller's "In the Mood" is a good, famous example of riffing sections laid over a 12-bar blues, and a driving bass and dance beat.)

For an exciting few years, the stars of the swing bands were the *bands* themselves—the tight, intricately woven playing of the entire ensemble—and the instrumental soloists, including bandleaders like trombonist Glenn Miller on trombone and clarinetist Benny Goodman, and spotlighted band members: saxophonists Lester Young and Coleman Hawkins, trumpeter Roy Eldridge, drummers Gene Krupa and Buddy Rich, and guitarists Eddie Durham and Charlie Christian were among the many great players who gave swing music a personal stamp and, in the latter cases, helped bring the electric guitar to prominence as a featured solo instrument.

Big band swing was, at first, primarily a non-vocal instrumental form crafted by the bandleaders and arrangers (to the great consternation of the Tin Pan Alley songwriters and publishing houses). Even when singers were included, they were merely considered "featured vocalists" and did not necessarily stand out in the public's mind any more than, say, a trumpet soloist. (Indeed, much of the art of big band singing lay in making the voice an "instrument" and mastering all the subtle nuances of tone and phrasing displayed by the great instrumental soloists.) The focus inevitably changed with the arrival of great voices able to blend the popular song tradition with the jazz depth and rhythmic drive of swing. The featured vocalists eventually became the real stars, as great singers like Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Ethel Waters and Sarah Vaughan rose to fame with various shadings of jazz, blues and popular styles.

Frank Sinatra

Once again it took a white artist to move a mass audience: Frank Sinatra set off an outpouring of hysterical adulation unmatched until Elvis came along. Sinatra (1915 - 1998) rose to prominence during the World War II years as the featured soloist with the Harry James and Tommy Dorsey big bands. His success did much to shift the focus from the band leaders and instrumentalists to the star singers, while the sheer unprecedented *level* of his success defined new goals for all popular entertainers. Rock & roll may have learned its most important musical lessons elsewhere, but its measure of success came from the riches of the pop charts and the adoration of the pop audience—and Sinatra represented the ultimate measure of that success (just as Elvis defined the goals for the Beatles, and they in turn defined the goals, or fantasies, for everyone since). Along with Bing Crosby's cool croon, Sinatra served as a model and measuring stick for popular singers, including a good many envious rockers who couldn't hope to match his sublime sense of melody and timing but did manage to capture a bit of his streetwise New Jersey swagger. After an awkward initial transition from teen heartthrob to adult entertainer, Sinatra matured into an incomparable artist and avid rock & roll hater, presiding over Las Vegas and the Rat Pack at the other end of American popular culture. At least he earned the right to scoff: his lush 1950's collaborations with arranger Nelson Riddle stood outside and above the fray, unmoved either by rock & roll or by the generic banalities that had consumed mainstream popular music.

Nat "King" Cole

One of the first black artists to achieve widespread popularity with white listeners was Nat "King" Cole. Nat Cole was born in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1919, but he defined his sound and established his career in California, where the Nat Cole Trio

pioneered a soft and intimate "club blues" jazz style built around an intimate interplay between the guitar, bass and Cole's smooth singing and piano playing, occasionally augmented by lightly brushed drums, that served as a model for other scaled-down "lounge" groups. Cole's style included uptempo numbers like "Straighten Up and Fly Right" and "Route 66" that were the very definition of hepcat cool, but he moved in an increasingly middle-of-the-road direction in the late forties and early fifties with string-drenched hits like "Mona Lisa," "Too Young," "Unforgettable" and the ever-popular "Christmas Song" ("Chestnuts roasting on an open fire").[i]

Cole's clear-voiced, crooning interpretations of sentimental standards made him quite a rarity for his time—a black artist more popular with white audiences than with black, though the sophisticated stylings and romance of his music were beyond the experience and interest of the teenage market. His wide appeal and gracious manner did not place him beyond the hatred of racist bigots, however. Cole was dragged from the stage and savagely beaten during a 1956 concert in Birmingham, in his home state of Alabama.

Nat "King" Cole remained enormously popular with the adult market until his death from lung cancer in 1965. His 1950's recordings with arranger Nelson Riddle stand with those of Capitol Records labelmate Frank Sinatra as high-water marks of orchestral pop music.

---

[i]Cole's 1951 recording of "Unforgettable" was revived four decades later in an overdubbed "duet" with daughter Natalie Cole.