

# Portrait of the Swing Era

A PREFACE  
BY ERNIE SMITH

Conventional jazz history generally demarcates the Swing Era as a time between, roughly, 1935 and 1945. Actually, these dates reflect academic convenience more than reality when one takes into account both the music's incubation and later transitional periods. Nevertheless, the hugely successful Palomar Ballroom engagement in Los Angeles on August 21, 1935, of the still struggling Benny Goodman Orchestra is regarded as the start of a period when the public acceptance of jazz broke precedent with the past.

These years were dominated by a remarkable run of creative musicianship and its rare melding with taste. This wedding of commerce and art, if you will, was unique in many ways and left a lasting influence on mainstream American life and culture.

High art, generally speaking, is a vanguard form of expression that advances the frontiers of a culture. When significant modifications occur in the social and economic structure of society, they are almost inevitably accompanied by changes in the nature and quality, not only of high art, but also of the

## Portrait of the Swing Era

popular arts. America's 1929 Wall Street stock-market crash sent the country into a deep, long, economic slump that resulted in the Great Depression of some ten years' duration. Popular music and jazz, which seemed to have paused in development, were actually going through an important transition. Even before 1929, popularizers in the form of arrangers, vocalists, and dance bands were steadily moving what had been a largely improvisational endeavor at the hands of small groups of musicians toward the next big change.

The early, post-World War I bands, which catered to the commercial interests of social dancers, often played easily obtainable stock arrangements and were feeding the interests of a fast-growing, dance-obsessed public. These popular dance bands were led by, among others, Art Hickman, Paul Specht, The California Ramblers, Abe Lyman, Ted Lewis, Vincent Lopez, Roger Wolfe Kahn, Jean Goldkette, and particularly, Paul Whiteman who employed the pioneering arranging talents of Ferde Grofé and Bill Challis. The orchestras of Wilbur Sweatman, Carroll Dickerson, Charles Elgar, Erskine Tate, The Missouriians, and Sammy Stewart had reputations in vaudeville or theatre and were somewhat divorced from the dance but cannot be discounted because of their role in shaping public musical taste for "hot" music, thereby contributing to the emergence of big-band jazz.

Following World War I, dance bands played to a dancing public that continued expanding right through the Prohibition years of the Roaring Twenties. The Charleston, in all its variations, and the Fox trot reigned supreme. Couples were one- and two-stepping on hundreds of dance spaces all over the land. Punishing dance marathons regularly made news. Records produced by a burgeoning recording industry rap-

idly spread the infection, which eventually leaped across the Atlantic. English dance band picked up the beat, however tempered, for, say, a tea dance at the genteel Savoy or Mayfair Hotel. But it took the World War II influx of thousands of jitterbugging GIs to capture the imagination and kindle a fire under the feet of the “jiving” Brittishers.

Aspiring band leaders and musicians, noting the success of these earlier orchestras, began to form dance bands whose demands for jazz-based music produced a cadre of innovative composer-player-arrangers who laid the stylistic foundation for the soon-to-emerge swing bands. Most of these talented musicians were African American, although there were a number of notable exceptions. Gene Gifford, who was the main arranger for the Casa Loma Orchestra, Joseph “Fud” Livingston, Dean Kincaide, and Isham Jones, who lead a band of his own, were some of the white talents whose arrangements were both inspiring and influential. But the more innovative, powerful ideas that furthered the development of orchestral jazz, that is, “swing,” emerged from the African-American experience: Jelly Roll Morton, Duke Ellington, Don Redman, John Nesbitt, Jimmy Mundy, Edgar Sampson, Benny Carter, Eddie Durham, Mary Lou Williamson, Horace Henderson, and Sy Oliver. Fletcher Henderson, who led a succession of pioneering and highly influential dance orchestras from about 1934 to 1939, was key in the creation of an environment within which it was possible for idealistic jazz musicians to play interesting, exciting, and challenging orchestrations, that were, at the same time, commercially viable. These musicians introduced, among other things, writing for specific orchestra sections—trumpets and trombones (brass), the clarinets and saxophones (reeds)—while at the same time

## Portrait of the Swing Era

providing opportunities for brilliant soloists to display their virtuosity. Through some very fundamental changes in the rhythm section, the stage was set for what was to come.

Certainly, but the early 1930s, the gradual replacement of the rhythmically-limiting tuba and staccato-sounding banjo with the plucked, upright bass and the more melodic, softer strum of the guitar resulted in a major change from the jerky, stop-time rhythms of the Charleston era. Most importantly, beat-keeping by the drummer went to the more shimmering, flowing, sound of the ride cymbal, the high hat, and the continuous whisk of wire brushes across the snare drum. Thus, with each of the four beats getting equal emphasis (4/4 time), the rhythm became more fluid and constant. There were other changes, of course, but these were most crucial to the pulse that drove swing bands. To this mix can be added the arrangers' new approaches, such as the call-and-response patterns embodied in the riffing passages of one section against another—brass against reeds and so forth—with star soloist improvisations soaring over these same riff figures. Additional touches like crescendos ending in brass smears followed by sudden orchestral breaks with only the rhythm sections audible, the unison saxophone passages, the breaks; all went into creating music that made the impulse to dance virtually irresistible. The best of the Lindy Hoppers, sensitive to these devices, used steps and dance patterns that not only reflected the music, but also provided counterpoint. Thus, the lead in a Lindy partnership had to act as choreographer. This made it important to understand the band's style and be familiar with its arrangements. An aspiring Lindy dancer who is insensitive to these swing band tenets, is doomed to a rather mechanical, though acceptable, version of the dance. A good understand-

ing of what big-band swing is about on the other hand, can result in a most satisfying experience on the dance floor without the need to resort to air steps. This later addition to the Lindy gave the Savoy Ballroom dancers, like Whitey's Lindy Hoppers, a decided edge in competitions such as New York City's annual Harvest Moon Ball. Add to this the sheer exhilaration of moving with a swing-sympathetic and sensitive partner, opportunities for injecting humor and whimsy, a chance to "get down in the alley" when the mood is right and to insert personal improvisational steps and touches, and you have Lindy dancing at its best.

"Big band" and "dance band" were terms used to describe Swing Era orchestras, which, generally, had swelled to a standard fourteen or sixteen pieces by this time. Their music could range from the sweet genteel bounce of a society band to the uncomplicated, but driving, blues-oriented swing of the Count Basie Band. While most of these bands catered to the whole of the dancing community, the distinction between them was based on the segment to which their music appealed. Dance bands such as Irving Aarson's, Jan Garber's, Eddie Duchin's, Meyer Davis's, Sammy Kay's, Freddie Martin's, or Guy Lombardo's (when Lombardo played the Savoy Ballroom, strangely enough, he established an attendance record), were very successful with the conservative social dance because they offered a dependable but unchallenging beat. These dancers are best described as favoring a style that leaned heavily on the Irene and Vernon Castle school, on English ballroom dancing, and on other European standards of social dance.

At the other end of the spectrum were the hard swinging organizations of Count Basie, Lucky Millinder, Benny Goodman, Andy Kirk, Chick Webb (the long time Savoy

## Portrait of the Swing Era

house band), Jimmie Lunceford, Erskine Hawkins, Horace Henderson, Jay McShann, among others, whose pushing-the-beat music not only generated the heat and challenge so necessary for inspired Lindy dancing but also hastened the departure of some accepted norms of dance etiquette.

In between were bands of every stripe that produced very acceptable, sometimes even exciting, dance music that appealed to most dancers including the Lindy Hoppers—Glenn Miller, Gene Krupa, Larry Clinton, Glen Gray, Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey, Harry James, Artie Shaw, Noble Sissle, Jan Savitt (whose shuffle rhythm seemed to appeal to the Shag dancer), and Bob Crosby. They played a balance of ballads and novelty vocals along with memorable swing instrumentals. Oddly enough, the music of Duke Ellington, one of the giants and seminal figures in jazz and American music, created problematic music for the better Lindy dancers. When he chose to appeal directly to them, Ellington could produce a swinging “C-Jam Blues,” “In a Mellotone,” or “Take the A Train.” But many of his exciting compositions were filled with strange and interesting harmonies, surprising juxtapositions, and shifting rhythms and were sprinkled throughout with dissonances. These made some of Ellington’s greatest works unacceptable pieces for the avid Lindy Hopper. Duke’s resistance to being categorized as just a swing band often cost him the admiration of the best of the Lindy Hoppers.

Many earlier dance bands relied on easily obtainable stock arrangements with alterations here and there to add interest. In order to inject hot or peppy touches, leaders employed individual musicians with established reputations as good, jazz-driven, improvisatory players who were expected to raise the jazz standard of many bands to dancer’s expectations. This

form of dance music was played in a variety of venues such as speakeasies, cabarets, hotels, restaurants, and later, along the ballroom circuit or in nightclub dance casinos. What was accepted as a form of pure jazz was still largely perceived as African American in origin, but black musicians, with some exceptions, rarely had the opportunity to play directly for downtown whites. Those white folks with a developed taste for hot music or some other aspect of black culture, made frequent visits uptown, to experience the real thing on home ground. Black urban enclaves such as Chicago's South Side; the Central Avenue district in Los Angeles; Kansas City, St. Louis, Omaha, Atlanta, and, particularly, New York's Harlem, were but a few that served as magnets for the culturally curious.

Harlem's Cotton Club and Small's Paradise, the Grand Terrace in Chicago, the Sebastian's Cotton Club in the Los Angeles area drew a steady stream of white patronage. The Savoy was the first ballroom to integrate. These inquisitive whites included, among others, hot music devotees, musicians looking for fresh ideas, songwriters seeking inspiration, artists and literati, dancers who wanted to be on the cutting edge, show business folk, thinking liberals and intellectuals, people seeking new entertainments, and slumming thrill seekers. All were acting (unconsciously or consciously) as a kind of pollinator. For whatever purpose, they would introduce what they heard uptown into their own downtown environments. This cross-fertilization reached a crescendo in the years between the 1920s and mid-'30s, a period of fecundity in African-American culture known as the Harlem Renaissance. A cynical observation by many Harlem residents at the time was that "Harlem was ours during the day but belonged to the white folks at night."

## Portrait of the Swing Era

Although black bands, such as those led by Fletcher Henderson, had played for white dancers at New York's Roseland Ballroom in 1924, with the young, trumpet playing jazz genius Louis Armstrong in the brass section, there was still a considerable cultural gap between uptown and downtown. Not so much within the groups with specific musical tastes but between African-American culture and that of the downtown mass public. Mainstream Americans still regarded uptown as a mysterious sub-culture filled with a people and imagery reflective of the years of slavery and the minstrel era. It often took time for the evolving and innovative ideas in art, music, and dance within the black community to seep out into the American mainstream. Marshall Stearns defined this time gap, or crossover period, as a kind of cultural lag. The rapid development of the phonograph, recordings, radio, and motion pictures lessened the time it took for the cross-fertilization process to show its impact on white culture. As long as the two cultures remained so separate more pollinators, both white and black, were needed.

The enthusiastic and perceptive jazz gadabout and strong civil-rights advocate, John Hammond, was one such influential pollinator. He worked tirelessly to bring uptown musical development, its innovators and practitioners, and black social concerns, to the attention of downtown sensibilities. There were others of course, Carl Van Vechten, Stanley Dance, Helen Oakley, and Marshall Stearns, but Hammond was particularly enthusiastic about black jazz. Through his well-developed network and connections within the recording industry and the press, with both black and white entrepreneurial booking agents, band leaders, and club owners he was able to translate his enthusiasm into positive action. In addition, the pioneer-

ing output of so many uptown bands such as Fletcher Henderson's, Don Redman's, and Duke Ellington's, to mention only three, resulted in a gradual and inexorable success of swing music. As a result, jazz and social dancing, both solidly linked, would swing hand-in-hand into the Swing Era. The Black Bottom, the Charleston, and many animal dances like the Bunny Hug, Grizzly Bear, and Turkey Trot, were either giving way or being absorbed piecemeal by the gradual development of a new uptown dance that reflected the fresh spirit of swing and suited the music perfectly. That dance was the Savoy-created Lindy Hop.

Americans experienced dance crazes with some regularity through the Ragtime years and the Jazz Age, but nothing quite compared to what happened during the Swing Era. Social dancing became serious business indeed. An entire generation took to the Harlem-born, Savoy-style Lindy Hop (or Jitterbug) and later, the Big Apple, Truckin', Peckin', the Boogie Woogie, the Suzi-Q, the Shag, and the Shim Sham, although some of these dances and steps had their roots in earlier generations of dance from other regions of the country. The heavily blues-oriented music played in hundreds of juke joints and honky tonks in the South and Southwest profoundly affected dance steps and styles that came North with migrating blacks who were seeking more hospitable surroundings and greater economic opportunity.

Additional cross-fertilization was evident in the rise of Western Swing in the early 1930s, a music that drew upon country, popular, and jazz. Stressing a strong beat with jazz-like improvisations on the steel guitar and bowed fiddle, it was heard in dance halls along the Gulf Coast and throughout the Southwest, particularly in Oklahoma and Texas, and eventually,

## Portrait of the Swing Era

as far east as Kentucky. Ideal for dancing, a lively mixture of traditional country square dancing, ballroom, the Fox Trot, and, in later years, the addition of the Lindy Hop—like moves and patterns, it was immensely popular with regional dancers.

One can only speculate as to how profound an effect this sort of cultural cross-fertilization had on American social dance. But without a doubt, whatever the mix, it was pronounced and original. A popular dance comes into being as the result of a long, complex process, and, because it is vernacular, as in the case of the Lindy Hop, its finite origins can be virtually impossible to trace. There was mention of the Texas Tommy, along with other dances, that the older musicians described as having some similarities to the Lindy Hop. But this much we can be positive about, Swing music spurred its development, and the best place to hear that music and see the dance performed was in Harlem at the Savoy Ballroom, which opened for business on March 12, 1926, while the Charleston era was winding down.

The beginnings of the Lindy Hop can be seen in *After Seben*, a ten minute short subject filmed in 1928 and released by Paramount in 1929. It starred the minstrel show-trained dancer James Barton, who, in kinky wig and blackface, introduced three pairs of champion dancers recruited from the Savoy Ballroom. They were among the Savoy dancing elite whose acknowledged “King,” George “Shorty” Snowden, was one of the dancers. They appeared in a sequence staged as a dance competition with Snowden and his partner dancing last. Snowden was extraordinarily riveting as they danced to a hot rendition of “Sweet Sue,” played by Chick Webb and his orchestra. Although these seminal dancers used steps associated with the now-departing Charleston and the even earlier

Cakewalk, they also employed some new but well-developed and recognizable steps, including the swing-out or breakaway, a key dance maneuver that was to become the cornerstone step of the Lindy Hop. Snowden was not only a sensational dancer but an inventive one, and a number of steps are attributed to him, one bearing his name—the “Shorty George”—which Count Basie immortalized with a 1938 recording.

As the Lindy developed, the best of the Savoy Lindy Hoppers, who favored the original floor version, seemed to be in constant motion with steps strung together into connected patterns that produced a non-stop, but beautifully controlled, and often, superbly elegant, partner dance. One remained loose and flexible from the hips down. It was not until Benny Goodman’s ascendancy to the King of Swing that white mainstream kids adopted the dance en masse (the cultural lag again). These kids tended to emphasize strength with more hopping, verticality, bounce, and arm pumping, rather than the smooth, horizontal flow of the uptown original. The term Jitterbug came into use to describe these dancers, a combination word that had a black origin, often with meanings other than dance, for instance, Jitter Sauce, meaning liquor, and Jitter Bug, one who likes to drink liquor. In 1934 Cab Calloway wrote a tune called “Jitter Bug,” which predates the white Lindy explosion in 1936. Jitterbug became synonymous with Lindy Hop, and the two terms were used interchangeably. Then, to later dancers and dance historians, the Jitterbug and its parent the Lindy Hop, although virtually identical in basic execution, again became two distinctly different dances as the Jitterbug came to be defined by its verticality, its hopping up and down. It brings to mind Jimmie Lunceford’s 1939 hit recording “‘Taint What You Do (It’s the Way that ‘Cha Do It).” This writer

## Portrait of the Swing Era

learned to dance the Lindy in Pittsburgh where the term Lindy Hop was rarely, if ever, used. When seeking a suitable partner at any ballroom, one generally asked, “Do you Jitterbug?” or “Do you fast dance?” A dance evening would generally include a “Jitterbug Special.”

Gunther Schuller offers a crucial insight into Lindy dancing. Although apologetic for the lack of real expertise in the subject, he nevertheless possesses, not only a good ear for swing but a sharp eye as well when he notes:

It is my impression from viewing films of dancers in the Swing era that in fast numbers, white dancers were much more vertical in their movements, vigorously bobbing up and down, while black dancers were much more horizontal and wide-ranging. This verticality and stiffness had its exact corollary in the drumming of most white drummers, until the likes of Dave Tough and Buddy rich came along.<sup>1</sup>

To this, I can only add—Amen!

As both swing music and the Lindy Hop’s popularity soared, ballrooms, both large and small, opened everywhere across the land and, like movie palaces, the architecture and interiors often had exotic influences. Spanish-Moorish touches, red velvet or gilt borrowed from Europe’s French and Italian palaces, and ceilings with moving clouds and twinkling stars turned some of these recreational spaces into dance-floored marvels of baroque splendor. A patron could be transported into a wonderful world that combined exciting music with a fantasy environment. Major urban centers possessed more than one such dance palace, but even small towns could boast of a dance hall. They sprang up on oceanfront boardwalks, in metro-

---

<sup>1</sup> Schuller, Gunther, *The Swing Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 241n.

politan suburbs, or in popular amusement parks. Lavish, elegant, ballrooms such as Harlem's block-long Savoy, Roseland in New York's Times Square area, or the Aragon and Trianon in Chicago, not to mention the Palomar and Palladium in Los Angeles, packed in hundreds and thousands of dancers nightly. And everywhere, the Savoy Lindy Hop, or some altered version of it reigned supreme. Some ballrooms, like the Savoy, offered two bands so the music never stopped. As further appeasement to the enormous public appetite for a social evening, most nightclubs would provide a small postage-sized dance floor, ringed with tables and seating, offering a swing-trio, quartet, or other combination, but at the very least, a juke box, to provide the necessary music. Frank Dailey's Meadowbrook in Cedar Grove, New Jersey, and the Glen Island Casino in New Rochelle, New York, showcased big-name bands for their dancing patronage. With the automobile as a cheap, well-established means of getting about, traveling to out-of-town spots, called roadhouses, became common. These places provided food and drink and a dance floor with some sort of swing music, either live or recorded, and became popular after-hours extensions for those wishing to dance beyond the closing time of regular ballrooms. Regional dance bands and swing aggregations, popular with the local dance population, flourished and were enough in demand to provide comfortable livings for hometown musicians, who either by choice or chance, did not make it on to the national dance-band circuit. Dancing to recordings at school gymnasiums, church meeting rooms, lodges, YMCAs, social clubs, bar-and-grills of every variety, and one's own home where alternatives to the formality and expense of big ballrooms. Dancers, whether Lindy or otherwise, were not great

## Portrait of the Swing Era

consumers of liquor because drinking could seriously interfere with one's ability to execute moves and steps. Therefore, soft drinks became popular thirst quenchers.

What were the effects of the Swing Era on mainstream culture? Fashion and dress might be a place to begin. With the youthful fan, or Jitterbug, what one wore loudly spoke to the preoccupation of the world of swing. Some attire was reflective of musicians or band vocalists because much of the era's young people were ardent about the energetic dances the music spawned. As the number-one dance, the Lindy Hop, described as choreographed swing music, had its own dress codes. The rolled stockings of the Roaring Twenties flapper gave way to Swing Era bobby socks, saddle shoes, sweaters, and skirts, which were flared at the bottom to permit vigorous execution of Lindy steps. When women wished to appear more dressy, a one or two-piece dress, blouse, hosiery, and ankle-strap, the medium heeled shoes were the vogue. Males, much more the peacocks, often borrowed from the dress styles of musicians, sporting pleated, pegged trousers, wide at the knees and narrow at the cuffs, a key chain looped from belt to pocket, and a double-breasted suit jacket of a one-button roll style with wide, padded shoulders. This tailoring referred to the suit-jacket lapel that was pressed into a long, soft roll that closed low at the waist with a single button: "the neat pleat with a drape shape." Cardigan sport jackets were also popular, with evenly spaced, vertical striped neckties, which could be, with studied casualness, carelessly left to dangle outside of one's jacket to establish Swing Era nonchalance. Pork-pie hats à la Lester Young, Coleman Hawkins, Gene Krupa, Duke Ellington, Roy Eldridge, and scores of swing musicians, became the chapeau of choice. The flashy, outrageous zoot suit,

a Harlem-favored extreme popularized by such charismatic figures as band leader-vocalist Cab Calloway, was worn by a small number of devotees and lasted into the 1950s where post-swing hipsters and the Latinos of Los Angeles took up the style as their fashion statement. A candidate for the quintessential icon of the era is the male hepcat—decked out in full-dress swing attire, a zoot suit topped off with a wide-brimmed hat, standing with knees slightly bent, shoulders a bit hunched, arms at the side with his index fingers pointing down along the seams of his trousers to sharp-toed, wing-tipped, brown and white Florsheim shoes, and looking enigmatically detached, content, and “sent.”

One could usually distinguish, by attire, between the collegiate, the urban dweller, the well-to-do, and the rest of the Lindy crowd. College campus swingers and eastern Shag dancers favored the bobby-sox, saddle-shoe, clean-cut look, while the urban hepcat went for the sophisticated, sharp look. These styles changed a great deal with America’s entry into World War II. In order to conserve precious fabric needed for uniforms, parachutes, and other wartime use, tailoring eliminated not only pleats and generous knee room for trousers, but cuffs as well. Shoulder padding and jacket lengths also suffered. Ladies’ nylon hose were replaced with tan leg paints. War-time measures affected everything, from shellac for records to gasoline for automobiles. Big bands lost men to the draft and the rapidly expanding armed forces.

If the garment industry profited by tailoring apparel to Swing Era fashion, Hollywood also knew a good thing when it heard it. The studios hoped to hear cash-register jingle through exploitation of this new musical craze. Swing became big box office. Hollywood produced over fifty films with “swing” in

## Portrait of the Swing Era

the title, testimony to the drawing power of the era's pied piper. Movies were soon serving up every aspect of the Swing Era in dozens of films. Large swing orchestras and small combos, vocalists and vocal groups, star soloists, swing characters spouting swing argot, or "jive," were written into all sorts of screenplays for feature films, short subjects, and even cartoons. Benny Goodman's Orchestra appeared in Paramount's *The Big Broadcast of 1937* and in Warner Brothers 1937 *Hollywood Hotel*, which also spotlighted the original, racially mixed Benny Goodman Quartet with Teddy Wilson, Gene Krupa, and Lionel Hampton. Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Les Hite, Harry James, both Dorsey orchestras, Ella Fitzgerald, Peggy Lee, Fats Waller, and others, appeared in film after film in cameo appearances. Some had dialogue and honest-to-goodness acting roles. As the era gained momentum Hollywood cranked out dozens and dozens of ten- and fifteen-minute short subjects completely given over to one swing aggregation after another, from the Jimmie Lunceford and Gene Krupa orchestras, to Al Cooper and his Savoy Sultans, or the Mills Brothers.

The dancers were drawn from Whitey's Lindy Hoppers, a performance group of amateur but superior, Savoy dancers, organized and nurtured by a perceptive and entrepreneurial Herbert White—a sometime bouncer at the ballroom, who also knew a good thing when he saw it and shaped these dancers into a highly skilled, professional unit. Their initial movie appearance was in the 1937 MGM Marx Brothers' *A Day at the Races* with Duke Ellington's great vocalist Ivie Anderson singing "All God's Children Got Rhythm." These remarkable young dancers provided the film its production number with two or three minutes of spectacular Lindy virtuosity that

still manages to astonish and inspire present day dancers. Current groups such as Sweden's "Rhythm Hotshots" and England's "Jiving Lindy Hoppers" looked to this extraordinary footage not only for inspiration, but also as instruction for their own re-creations. A different mix of Whitey's dancers appeared in the 1944 film *Hellzapoppin'* featuring the zany antics of the comic team Olsen and Johnson. This performance took the aerial-step Lindy to new heights, achieving a kind of Lindy Hop summit that remains unequaled to this day.

By 1940 public high-traffic areas such as amusement arcades, neighborhood bars, taverns, restaurants, bus and train stations, hotel lobbies, and the like, could boast the installation of a new audio-visual device called Panoram, which offered both music and entertainment. This video jukebox wedded two technologies: the ever popular jukebox and movies. By mounting a sixteen millimeter motion-picture projector inside, these coin-operated machines offered three-minute films, called soundies, on large screens, which enabled the viewer to both see and hear the artist of choice. Many of the Swing Era's most popular and important artists appeared in either straight performance or mini-dramatizations of recording hits. Duke Ellington, Gene Krupa, Fats Waller, Cab Calloway, dancer Bill Robinson, vocalists Anita O'Day, Mel Torme, and Whitey's Lindy Hoppers, along with a horde of lesser-known talents, appeared in these minimovies. Adding this film library to the enormous output of the record companies and the daily radio broadcasts (called remotes) from important music and dance locations, provided Americans with a cornucopia of swing material to satisfy not only every taste, but also to keep the swing juggernaut in high gear.

## Portrait of the Swing Era

Broadway took up the beat with *The Hot Mikado* (1939, originally called *The Swing Mikado*); the short-lived *Swingin' the Dream* (1939), which showcased Whitey's dancers; Ellington's *Jump for Joy* (1941), which opened and closed in Los Angeles; and the musical revue *The Seven Lively Arts* (1944), which featured a Benny Goodman all-star group in a specialty spot.

Pioneering disc jockeys such as Al Jarvis and Martin Block, both claiming credit for originating radio's *Make Believe Ballroom*, along with others, were also key to the promotion of swing bands. The *Fitch Bandwagon* and *Coca Cola's Spotlight Bands* were but two, out of many, sponsored radio shows that helped popularize swing.

Music publications like *Downbeat*, *Metronome*, *Tempo*, *Band Leaders*, and occasionally, *Esquire* were but a few of the magazines that devoted themselves to the swing scene. Song sheets that printed lyrics to most of the Tin Pan Alley hits came out periodically. *Downbeat* inaugurated its annual reader's poll to select fandom's favorite swing artists, while *Metronome* magazine, through a poll of its own, selected musicians for a *Metronome* All-Star Band recording. An imposing body of jazz critics and writers, many who are still with us, came to the fore during the period—reviewing records, concerts, ballroom and nightclub appearances, stage shows that headlined swing talent and keeping the readership aware of what was going on in the world of swing. Important books and articles about the rise of jazz and swing were written during this period. Fans got together and formed hot clubs. Rare record collecting and discographical research became a productive obsession for a dedicated few.

Art and writing reflected the trend. Although not great lit-

erature, novels and fiction drew on the swing life for inspiration. *Jazz Band* by Wyatt Randel, Richard English's *Strictly Ding Dong and Other Swing Stories*, and Dale Curran's *Piano in the Band* with a foreword by Benny Goodman, were a few.<sup>2</sup>

Painters from the world of fine art also found inspiration in the swing scene. The cubist-influenced American, Stuart Davis painted *Swing Landscape* (1938) and the *Mellow Pad* (1945-1951). Both paintings succeeded in making swing visible through the use of hard-edged shapes and bright, crisp color. Piet Mondrian, an emigrant Dutch painter (he and Davis were fellow jazz buffs) reached for the walking-bass figures of Boogie-Woogie, a piano blues style that resurfaced during the Swing Era, when he painted *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-1943) and *Victory Boogie Woogie* (1943-1944). African-American artist Romare Bearden, with a life-long interest in jazz and the blues, painted *At the Savoy* (1974) and a number of works evocative of urban jazz and syncopation in his *4/4 Time* and *Of the Blues* series. New Orleans born Richmond Barthé, another African American, produced a beautifully expressive bronze sculpture *Lindy Hop* (1939) which celebrated the quintessential couple dance of the 1930s and '40s.

Although it did not necessarily begin with the Swing Era, the use of a specialized slang became popular and quickly found its way into everyday language. Originating largely within black communities, or with jazz musicians and the swing milieu in general, its use became essential in establishing oneself as part of the cognoscenti. Both Harlem's Dan Burley and Cab

---

<sup>2</sup> Randel, Wyatt, *Jazz Band* (New York: Greenburg, 1935); English, Richard, *Strictly Ding Dong and Other Swing Stories* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1938); and Curran, Dale, *Piano in the Band* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1940).

## Portrait of the Swing Era

Calloway wrote handbooks that served as guides for the proper use of swing language such as hep (later hip), jive, cat, square, bread (money), chops, solid, blow your top, rugcutter (a swing dancer), riff, killer-diller (an all-stops-out, up-tempo arrangement), and Alligator (sometimes shortened to Gator). The lyrics to Cab Calloway's "the Jumpin' Jive" (1939) was a classic example of the use of swing slang.

Concert halls, first successfully invaded in the 1920s by dance bands led by Vincent Lopez and Paul Whiteman, now saw one swing concert after another fill the seats of these bastions of high culture with excited, cheering, foot-stomping, dancing-in-the-aisles, swing fans. Again, Benny Goodman led the way with his famed 1938 Carnegie Hall Concert. Carnegie Hall also became the stage for two Spirituals to Swing concerts produced by the indefatigable John Hammond in 1938 and 1939, as well as a series of Duke Ellington concerts beginning in 1943. As a Judy Garland vocal in MGM's *Thousands Cheer* (1943) would enthusiastically note, "the joint is really jumpin' in Carnegie Hall."

The Great Depression, during which approximately one-third of Americans were unemployed, was also coincidental with some of the most important years of the Swing Era. Times were difficult. Big Bands and the popularity of social dancing and the Lindy Hop, along with the movies, provided both inexpensive and supremely satisfying recreative social activity for the masses. Swing music and related entertainments played a key role in creating hope and diversion for a population experiencing chronic unemployment, economic despair, and a future full of uncertainties.

Franklin Roosevelt, elected to the presidency in 1933 on a platform that promised Americans a "New Deal," carried the