Swing

Howard Spring

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(1) A way of playing music that results in a feeling of forward motion or momentum, often accompanied by a propensity to embody the music in some form of rhythmic movement.

When music swings, it is usually the result of a combination of characteristics related to musical pulse, how that pulse is divided, phrasing, and articulation. Each of these is open to variation on both the individual and the ensemble level. In other words there are different degrees and kinds of swing depending on the interplay of these characteristics and their interpretation.

Although jazz musicians value an even tempo through a strict synchronization of the musical pulse, in practice the pulse can be articulated and placed differently on a micro-rhythmic level by different players in the same band at the same time. Some musicians typically play on the front end of the beat creating an edgy sense of time; others articulate notes on the back end of the beat resulting in a laid-back sense of time; still others play in the center of the beat, or "in the pocket." These micro-rhythmic variations can occur within a single performance.

At the level of pulse, offbeat notes are often accented through frequency of use, percussive articulation, and by placing them at salient points in the melodic phrase (the last note of a phrase, prominent metric and melodic positions). At the level of meter, traditionally weak beats are stressed.

Musicians may also create a swing feeling by playing asymmetrical eighth notes (swing eighth notes). Although pedagogical practice in jazz performance starting in the mid-20th century and descriptions by jazz musicians characterize this asymmetry as a division of the beat into eighth note triplets—where the first and third eighth notes are played so that the ratio of an on-the-beat to an offbeat note is two to one—research indicates that this ratio can vary according to different factors, among them tempo, instrument, individual style, phrasing, and group chemistry. Legato articulation is generally preferred in a series of swing eighth notes. Accented offbeats are typically slurred into on-the-beat notes, although this can vary within acceptable limits.

(2) A popular form of social dance music played by jazz musicians, mostly during the 1930s and 40s. It is characterized by four-to-the-bar rhythms, guitar and pizzicato double bass in the rhythm section, riff-based arrangements, and assertive drumming.

Typically swing bands were larger than earlier jazz ensembles. They started with around 10 or 11 players during the late 1920s and had increased to 17 by the early 1940s. These ensembles were divided into choirs of like instruments called sections. The brass section consisted of trumpets and trombones, although the latter eventually constituted their own section. The reeds section comprised musicians doubling on clarinets and saxophones in the late 1920s and early 30s, but came to be dominated by saxophones by the late 1930s. The rhythm section was made up of double bass, guitar, piano, and drums.

Arrangers wrote “made-to-measure” scores for specific bands, standardized scores, known as stock arrangements, meant for commercial publishers, or a combination of both. At times they used ideas taken from orally constructed “head” arrangements. They composed soli sections, backgrounds, call-and-response sections, and riff-based choruses. These added interest to the music while providing drive and momentum for the dancers. Some important arrangers include Don Redman, Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington, Benny Carter, Jimmy Mundy, and Sy Oliver. Swing arrangers also left musical space for improvisation, which remained an important part of swing performance for top improvisers of this period including Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, Benny Goodman, Roy Eldridge, Jimmy Blanton, and Charlie Christian.

Rhythm sections played a four-beat rhythm in contrast to the brass-bass and banjo two-beat rhythms typical of pre-swing jazz. Drummers became more active, underpinning rhythmic figures played by the wind instruments, setting-up different parts of the arrangements, and in general using the noisier timbres of the cymbals to articulate the pulse.

Although swing as a historical style coincided in many ways with swing as a musical practice (as described above), the practice remained the norm for jazz performance after swing had ceased to be a popular style. Bebop and post-bop musicians swing.

Swing began to take shape around 1928 and had become fairly well established by 1932. The main catalyst for this change was the emergence of a new social dance, the Lindy hop , which more than earlier social dances emphasized four-to-the-bar rhythms and a high degree of physical vigor. Musicians responded to these changes by providing four-to-the-bar rhythms, driving riff-based arrangements, and more exciting drumming, which in turn spurred social dancers to new levels of physical elaboration and vigor (*See* Swing dances). The mutual responses of dancers and musicians continued to inform changes in both the dance and the music into the 1930s. The new style was also made possible by changes in media. Electronic recording provided the instrumental and performance conditions that led to swing. Guitar, pizzicato double bass, and predominant drumming were difficult to record with pre-1926 acoustic recording technology whereas post-1926 electronic recording made it possible to capture the sound of these instruments with some degree of fidelity. Radio broadcasting aided the dissemination of both the music and the dance and allowed access to previous performance practices.

During the transitional period between 1928 and 1932 such African American arrangers and bandleaders as Fletcher Henderson, Ellington, and Bennie Moten experimented with different combinations and permutations of the timbral and rhythmic features that eventually resulted in swing. By 1932 the style was in place and gaining popularity. It became a national fad in 1935 when Benny Goodman’s band brought a particular brand of swing to white teenagers, one that combined the performance practices of the great African American bands, such as those led by Henderson and Chick Webb, with modern arrangements of current pop songs.

As a result of this new popularity the number of bands increased significantly. They continued to be divided into two major stylistic categories although many bands could play in both. “Sweet” bands played conventional dance music (*See* Sweet dance music); “hot” bands featured hard-driving swing. The latter included those of Artie Shaw, Goodman, Jimmie Lunceford, Cab Calloway, Ellington, and Count Basie.

Swing music was part of a broader swing subculture during the 1930s and 40s that included fans and social dancers ("jitterbugs"), young jazz entrepreneurs such as John Hammond, jazz record collectors, new mass market magazines such as *Downbeat*, and a growing coterie of jazz critics. But as wildly popular as it was during the 1930s and 40s, its reception was not without controversy. For some it represented a commercial debasing of "real" jazz—that is, New Orleans jazz.

By the late 1940s swing's popularity had waned considerably due to the rising costs of traveling with a large band, the development of the pop-song industry, and the formulaic predictability of late swing. The emergence of rhythm-and-blues that appealed to social dancers on the one hand, and the appearance of bebop that took jazz into the realm of art on the other, filled the vacuum left by swing's decline.

The early study of swing was characterized by the analysis of style and the genres of biography and autobiography, music appreciation, and criticism. In the last 25 to 30 years, research has gone on to examine the social meaning and role of swing in its relation to popular culture, national identity, technology, politics, commerce, race, gender, class, generation, and modernity.

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