

Swing Era: 1920s – 1940s

The swing era is set apart from all other eras in jazz in that it is perhaps the best defined, and also most popular, era in the history of jazz music. Sometimes referred to as the “big band” era, the bands and orchestras of the day featured many musicians, who produced a “big” sound.

“It has been said that all of jazz is in some sense a variation on the music of Louis Armstrong, and that was never truer than in the music of the “Swing” era. The various melodies, riffs, and solos that all the bands played had strong roots in what Armstrong had codified.”
(Schoenberg, Loren: Swing Style)

We see now the extent to which Armstrong influenced big band music. His trumpet playing during the early days of “jazz” music contributed to the overall understanding of what swing “should” sound like.

One popular radio program called “Your Hit Parade” had particular success beginning in 1935, and running well into the 1940s. Some featured performers on this program included Frank Sinatra and Judy Garland. Other “big names” from the big band era include Glenn Miller (The Glenn Miller Orchestra), Duke Ellington, Tommy Dorsey, Benny Goodman, Count Basie, and Stan Kenton.

Jazz has never had a better home than a big band. The emphasis between what was set and what was created on the spot varied from band to band, each emphasizing its particular strengths. During their heyday, from the mid-30's through the mid-40's, the big bands were an indispensable part of our popular culture. There were literally dozens of first-rate bands touring the country 52 weeks a year. Never again did popular culture and jazz intersect in such a fashion. These bands represented something intrinsically American — all hands working together, spontaneously creating an entity and identity larger than the mere sum of its parts. A decade before Jackie Robinson broke the color line in the major leagues, black and white musicians were joining forces before an ultimately accepting public. Jazz music transcended boundaries in both music, as well as in human relations.

Featured Swing Era Composer:

Duke Ellington (1899–1974)

Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington was the most prolific composer of the twentieth century in terms of both number of compositions and variety of forms. His development was one of the most spectacular in the history of music, underscored by more than fifty years of sustained achievement as an artist and an entertainer. He is considered by many to be America's greatest composer, bandleader, and recording artist.

The extent of Ellington's innovations helped to redefine the various forms in which he worked. He synthesized many of the elements of American music — the minstrel song, ragtime, Tin Pan Alley tunes, the blues, and American appropriations of the European music tradition — into a consistent style with which, though technically complex, has a directness and a simplicity of expression largely absent from the purported art music of the twentieth century. Ellington's first great achievements came in the three-minute song form, and he later wrote music for all kinds of settings: the ballroom, the comedy stage, the nightclub, the movie house, the theater, the concert hall, and the cathedral. His blues writing resulted in new conceptions of form, harmony, and melody, and he became the master of the romantic ballad and created numerous works that featured the great soloists in his jazz orchestra.

By the early 1940s, Ellington experimented with extended composition and his orchestra toured the US and Europe extensively. In 1943, Ellington inaugurated a series of annual concerts at Carnegie Hall with the premiere of *Black, Brown, and Beige*. He continued to expand the scope of his compositions and activities as a bandleader throughout his life. His foreign tours became increasingly frequent and successful; his travel experiences served as the inspiration for his many works about people, places and trains. He wrote nearly two thousand compositions before his death in 1974.