Sing, Sing, Sing Essay, Research Paper

SING SING SING

I used to always go over to my grandparent’s house and watch my grandfather go crazy over this “Jazz” music. He explained to me that it wasn’t Jazz unless it swung like the greats. I listened to a song “Sing Sing Sing” the other day from one of my Jazz collections that my grandpa gave to me and realized that their was so much energy and pizzazz in this music. He explained to me that it was all put together by a guy named Benny, and I understood why.

Benny Goodman, born Benjamin David in 1909, one of twelve children, grew up in a Chicago ghetto with his family, who fled Russian anti-Semitism. Encouraged by his father, an immigrant tailor, to learn a musical instrument, Goodman took up the clarinet at a young age. From the start, he displayed an exceptional talent. Before he was in his teens, he had begun performing in public. He received his first true clarinet and musical training from a local synagogue, then continued practice through Hull House, a social-service agency for the under privileged children of the Chicago. The most important of his teachers, at the school, was Franz Schoeppe, a classical instructor from the Chicago Musical College who ignored jazz and stressed in his students the discipline and respect for classical music.

After his father died, fourteen-year-old Benny helped support his family by playing at a Chicago neighborhood dance hall and working locally for two years. In 1925, Gil Rodin, who was then with the band led by Ben Pollack, heard him. Goodman was hired by Pollack, then working in

California, and the following year made a triumphal return to Chicago as featured soloist with the band. Goodman remained with Pollack until 1929, when he became a much in-demand session musician in New York. When the band was between jobs, Goodman jammed with members of the Austin High Gang who introduced him to the New Orleans Rhythm Kings and the Dixieland clarinet style of Leon Rappolo. After his 17th birthday Benny made his first recording with Pollack’s band with the tune, “He’s the Last Word.”

Benny also played in the bands of leaders such as Red Nichols (from 1929 to 1931), Isham Jones, and Ted Lewis. During the early 30s Goodman played in bands led by Red Nichols, Ted Lewis, Sam Lanin and others. In 1934, Goodman led a dance band that performed regularly on the national radio show “Let’s Dance.” His drummer was the urgent and exciting Gene Krupa (Klauber, 1991). When the radio show ended, Goodman took the band on a nationwide tour. In Los Angeles, the band created a sensation,

essentially starting the “swing” era. In fact, Goodman became known as the “King of Swing” (Collier, 1989).

Swing was the dominant idiom of the 1930s and much of the 1940s. Basically, it was a form of dance music played by a large band, and was the medium through which most white Americans first heard Jazz (Schuller,1989). Although the decade 1935-45 was called the Swing Era, swing

arrangements had been played by large bands beginning in the 1920s. Bandleader-arrangers Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington, and, later, Count Basie, worked out arrangements for their 10 to 12 piece bands, which, unlike traditional jazz bands, were divided into instrumental sections.

The rhythm section (piano, guitar, bass, and drums) maintained a steady, even beat; the saxophone and brass sections countered each other with harmonized riffs and repeated figures, with section leaders improvising

over this background (Stewart, 1979).

Utilized almost exclusively for dancing, the music of the big bands borrowed heavily from the techniques introduced by Henderson. Among the most popular bands were those led by Goodman, Glenn Miller, Woody Herman, the Dorsey brothers, and Artie Shaw. As a counterpart of the highly arranged orchestrations of these New York-based bands, a Kansas City swing style developed under the influence of Count Basie and Bennie Moten that emphasized a blues vocabulary and form as well as tempos of breakneck

speed and an overwhelming use of riffs. Among the outstanding soloists associated with Kansas City was Lester Young of the Basie band.

In 1933 Goodman accepted an offer by the legendary producer John Hammond to record for Columbia’s English market, which was more receptive to jazz than were Americans. In that year also, Benny appeared at Bessie

Smith’s last and Billie Holiday’s first recording sessions. Hammond urged Goodman to hire Teddy Wilson and Lionel Hampton for his small combo, which included drummer Gene Krupa; the group became the first interracial jazz

ensemble to perform in public.

On Hammond’s advice in 1934, Goodman purchased from the struggling bandleader Fletcher Henderson several of the hot big-band arrangements that helped to make his band’s reputation. Henderson’s material was tepidly received at first, because fans were accustomed to hearing a white band

play “sweet” music. At a dance in Los Angeles’s Palomar Ballroom on August 21, 1935, Goodman, fed up with the sweet charts, boldly called for Henderson’s flag-wavers. The crowd was wildly enthusiastic. As much as any single event

could have, this performance marked the advent of the Swing Era.

Goodman’s band, using Henderson’s arrangements, thus became the first to achieve mass popularity. Goodman was also the first to integrate his band racially. Whereas the most popular swing bands (those of Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, Glenn Miller, Artie Shaw, and Charlie Barnet) were white,

some black swing bands also came into prominence, especially Ellington’s, Basie’s, and those of Earl Hines and Jimmie Lunceford (Connor and Hicks,1969).

Swing’s popularity had faded by 1945, brought down in part by a financial conflict between ASCAP (the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers) and the radio networks, and in part by a decline in the popularity of ballroom dancing (Dance, 1979).

Goodman also made recordings playing instruments other than clarinet. In 1931, Benny made several recordings on alto sax, such as “Under Your Window,” “One More Time,” and “Morning, Noon and Night.” Goodman also made recordings playing bass clarinet and baritone sax. In classical music Goodman spent several years studying classical music, and frequently played with small chamber groups and became a virtuoso clarinet soloist with

symphony orchestras under such conductors as Bernstein, Toscanini and Ormandy. He performed new orchestral works of Bartok, Stravinsky and Copland.

A complete list of the talented sidemen who played with his band would perhaps be impossible, but included among others, Lionel Hampton, Harry James, Georgie Auld, Ziggy Ellman, Charlie Christian, Red Norvo, Fletcher

Henderson, Gene Krupa, Teddy Wilson, George Wettling, Pee Wee Irwin, Miff Mole, Roy Eldridge, Stan Getz, and Cootie Williams.

“The Benny Goodman Story,” a film made in 1955, depicted Benny Goodman’s life, and Benny recorded the sound track for it. In the 1950s to the 1970s he made several overseas trips and played at selected engagements

with a small band. One such trip was to Russia in 1962. In January 1978 he returned to Carnegie Hall to do a Concert. The tickets all sold out the first day. His last studio recordings were made in January 1986.

References

Collier, J. Benny Goodman and the Swing Era. New York:

West Publishing Company, 1989

Connor, R. and Hicks, W. B. G. on the Record: A Bio-

Discography of Benny Goodman. Englewood Cliffs, NJ:

Prentice Hall. 1969

Dance, S. The World of Swing. New York: Oxford University

Press, 1979.

Klauber, B. The World of Gene Krupa. Belmont, CA:

Wadsworth, 1991.

Schuller, G. The Swing Era. New York: McGraw Hill, 1989.

Stewart, R. Jazz Masters of the ’30s. New York: W.W.

Norton, 1972.