

Bernd Rohrmann

retired professor, social science research.

snailmail: 94 Fenwick St, Carlton-Nth, VIC 3054, Australia

e-Mail: mail@rohrmannspace.net.



The history of "swing" music - a brief essay

presented at MMEFF-2019 - 18-09-19.

Intro

Well, this is neither a plain nor an easy matter - - what is it, the issue "**swing**" within jazz music? Yet it is a vital matter, because that was the focus of My Music Events For Friends this year, in 2019.

In this essay, I will in its first section deal with efforts to describe what "swing" is, and what jazz authors have pointed out as essential features when jazz bands play in this style..Then there are four specific sections devoted to distinctive musicians which I see as truly crucial for the development of "swing" music. Finally, a reflective outlook about "is swing within jazz music still flourishing" shall end the essay.

The design is to enrich the texts with a large number of pictures. Plus, in the essay's staging, a few original historic records were played.

The essay started with this swing music piece as my "*Welcome*"

🎵 Song "At the woodshoppers ball"

=> *that song will be available in the folder "Swing Music" on this website*

Then - - here are 7 pictures of pertinent music, and my stance.

Early jazzband trying to sway



Is this "swing" music? NO, but guitar and bass could, a bit.

Louis Armstrong's Hot-7



Is this "swing" music? NO, not, or *not yet* - yet Armstrong was 'on the way'.

Wild modern music explorations



Does this indicate "swing" music? NO, certainly not, too 'modern'.

Rolling Stones



Does this indicate "swing" music? Blues yes, swing NOT.

Musicians & dancer - Historic painting



Does this indicate "swing" music? Dancing & music are clearly linked, so: YES.

Mighty band with intense singer



Does this indicate "swing" music? Singers of flamboyant style may need it, so YES.

Early big band - cartoon



Does this indicate "swing" music? YES - big bands were a "place of birth" for swing.

Notion

So, what is actually "swing"? Well there is no generally accepted definition, because people talking about it may have musical or social factors in mind. In the following, I will just present what I said during MMEFF-2019:

- ❖ Swing was the dominant feature of jazz from around 1933 to around 1946.
- ❖ The word "swing" appeared first in the title of a famous Duke Ellington tune from 1932 called "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing".
- ❖ Technically the concept refers to strong and weak pulses within the rhythm structure of a song, which is far less marching-bands like.
- ❖ Many perspectives refer to the impact of swing music on the audience.
- ❖ The beat is both complex and clever, resulting in a smooth beat, and "the phrasing flows".
- ❖ Swing prompts a visceral response like foot-tapping.
- ❖ It provides 'pulse' in one's mind.
- ❖ Rhythmic elements excite dancers and listeners to move in time to jazz music.
- ❖ It creates a sound which nowadays is called "groove".

To amuse you - what I learned when getting familiar with jazz, around 1960, was this: "Swing is when your foot-tapping is so intense that the shoe strings fly open!"

Now I'll try to get focussed in this essay about "swing"! At least 20 musicians or bands were essential - and I have decided to present just 4 of them, the ones which I rate as crucial.

These are Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Bennie Goodman and Billie Holiday.

- © During the presentations at MMEFF-2019, for each musician one of his/her historic records was played on my Yamaha machine (listed below)..



The originals were recorded between 1936 and 1945.

Count Basie





- > Life: 1904-1984 (79 years)
- > pianist & band leader
- > modest background, parents occasional musicians
- > became full-level piano player in 1919, many jobs after 1925
- > founded his Count Basie Orchestra in 1935
- > seen as crucial founder for "swing", based on his rhythm group, who were Walter Page (bass), Freddie Green (guitar), Jo Jones (drums)
- > countless CBO records, plus CB combos
- > sparse yet intense piano style
- > bebop features "so long as it made sense"
- > strictly required "it all has to have feeling"
- 🎵 presented song: "Swinging the blues"
- => *that song will be available in the folder "Swing Music" on this website*
- > *Rating*: widely rated as the real father of swing music; always kept a strict rhythmic pulse of his band

Duke Ellington

- > Life: 1899-1974 (75 years)
- > pianist & band leader
- > highly productive composer; he also created longer pieces, including several suites
- > both parents were pianists
- > career began when he was 16, band leader since 1926
- > prime time of the D.E. orchestra from 1931, lasting decades



© 🎵 presented song: "Rumpus in Richmond"

⇒ that song will be available in the folder "Swing Music" on this website

- > his funeral attended by 12,000 people at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.
- > Ella Fitzgerald (the most famous jazz singer) said: "It's a very sad day. A genius has passed"
- > *Praised* for inventive use of the orchestra, and his charisma
- > *Rated* as "best-known orchestral unit in the history of jazz"

Bennie Goodman



- > Life: 1909 - 1986 (77 years)
- > clarinet player & bandleader

- > called "king of swing"
 - > parents: very poor Jewish emigrants from Russian Empire
 - > heard Jonnie Dodds and Jimmie Noone when a young boy.
 - > 1926 professional player, 1932 first own band
 - > assessed for around 1935 "catalyst for the swing era"
 - > 1938 concert in Carnegie Hall in NY - fundamental event; regarded as one of the most significant concerts in jazz history, because of the venue, and the set-up of his musicians
 - > always included high-level black musicians in his bands
- 🎵 presented song: "Roll 'Em"
- ⇒ *that song will be available in the folder "Swing Music" on this website*
- > beside his big band, many recordings with his combos
 - > in 1950 brief link to bebop music
 - > recorded also classical music, including Mozart
 - > personality: perceived as very demanding and at times arrogant
 - > *whatsoever* - he is/was surely the best clarinet player I know of

Billie Holiday



- > The B.H. tale is both- a very impressive and a very sad one.
- > Life: 1915-1959 ~ 44 years.
- > Real name: Eleanora Fagan.
- > Growing up in Baltimore, very difficult childhood.
- > Father left, mother very poor, was sometimes prostitute.

- > Dropped out of school when 11.
- > Used local contexts to learn singing.
- > First gigs 1929, in night clubs.



- > Became a star around 1935.
- > Musicians she recorded with: Teddy Wilson, Bennie Goodman, Count Basie, Artie Shaw.
- > Quite a few hit records, until 1945.

🎵 presented song: "I love my man"

=> *that song will be available in the folder "Swing Music" on this website*

- > By the 1950s, her drug abuse, drinking, and relationships with abusive men caused her health to deteriorate significantly.
- > Gigs became rare.
- > 1959 diagnosed with cirrhosis
- > she then soon died, lonely & poor, in a hospital.
- > Finally, here is an *appraisal* which I fully share

Seminal influence on jazz music and pop singing. Her vocal style, strongly inspired by jazz instrumentalists, pioneered a new way of manipulating, phrasing and tempo.

She was known for her unique vocal delivery and improvisational skills.

Outlook

There were quite a few further jazz bands which excelled in "swing", such as Jimmy & Tommy Dorsey, Woody Herman, Glen Miller, Artie Shaw. Yet from 1946 onwards "swing" lost popularity, for different reasons: Modern jazz, including bebop jazz and cool jazz, became dominant; there was a wave towards simplistic dance bands; and rock'n'roll came to life. So - - was "swing" now dead?



No, it wasn't, fortunately in my view. The vivid style of swing music stayed very much alive, and it became almost essential for bands which focussed on dancing.



And - surprise surprise - there were even women bands playing swinging jazz - great!

By the way, several classical swing bands, as the ones of Count Basie or Duke Ellington, were continued even after the death of their founders.

It seems to me that neither modern jazz bands nor rock bands, regardless of their stunning enrichment of music, can "swing", and that's what many music lovers enjoy immensely. And therefore I believe that "swing" music is *not* dying...

So, "Bye-Bye" I said at the end, with another swing music slice:

© 🎵 Song "Savoy blues"

=> *that song will be available in the folder "Swing Music" on this website*



My final dictum:

I suggest, listen to "swing" music, again & again & again - - you may already enjoy it, so go on; or it's new to you, then soon foot-tapping will happen - - animation!