

An Introduction to Jazz

Grade 11 | Lesson Plan 4: The Swing Era

Adapted from Jazz in America: The National Jazz Curriculum

TOPICS: The Swing Era (aka the Big Band Era): 1935 - 1945¹

1. Transition from Dixieland
2. Performance Practices
3. Important Figures
4. Cultural Implications

SESSION OBJECTIVES:

The student will:

1. gain a fundamental understanding of the Swing Era
 - a. transition from Dixieland
 - b. performance practices
2. learn the basic definition of several terms associated with jazz
 - a. arrangement
 - b. call and response
 - c. homophony
 - d. intonation
 - e. polyphony
 - f. rhythm section
 - g. soli
 - h. unison vs. harmony
 - i. virtuoso
3. listen to Swing Era recordings

MATERIALS

1. Computer with internet connection
2. Speaker system

Note: This lesson plan includes prompts to play selections from a variety of jazz recordings. Many of the suggested recordings can be found on the Instrumental History of Jazz, which is available as a YouTube playlist, as well as a variety of streaming and/or download outlets including iTunes, Apple Music and Spotify.

INSTRUCTIONAL ACTIVITIES:

The instructor will:

1. discuss the Swing Era
2. play significant Swing Era recordings
 - a. *Wrappin' It Up*, Fletcher Henderson and/or *I Got Rhythm*, Benny Goodman
 - b. *One O'Clock Jump*, Count Basie Orchestra and/or *Jumpin' at the Woodside*, Count Basie Orchestra
 - c. *East St. Louis Toodle-o*, Duke Ellington & His Orchestra and/or *Main Stem*, Duke Ellington & His Orchestra

Content Outline

¹All styles of jazz from Dixieland to contemporary are still being performed and recorded today; all style dates given are the approximations of when each respective style came to the forefront of jazz and experienced its most concentrated development; of course, styles and dates overlap.

I. Transition from Dixieland

A. Written Arrangements

1. by the end of the 1920s, jazz was developing in two complimentary directions
 - a. emphasis on the soloist
 - b. emphasis on the ensemble
2. because of the collective improvisatory nature (all band members improvising at the same time) of Dixieland, the basic structure of this style had to remain simple and the instrumentation had to remain small
3. in order to accommodate more sophisticated music and more musicians in an ensemble, written arrangements became necessary and increasingly common in the late 1920s
4. rather than collective improvisation (an all-out group effort), the conception of how a tune should be arranged (how the instruments should sound together and in what order musical events would occur) became the product of one person's mind: the arranger's
5. although written arrangements all but eliminated collective improvisation, they still provided space for individual soloists to improvise

B. Ensemble size

1. although there were several well-known small swing groups (trios to septets) during the 1930's and early '40s, the era was characterized by the big band
2. the typical 1920's Dixieland group of five to seven members had increased in size to (generally) 15 to 18 in the '30s and early 40's, adding new dimensions to the music²

C. New breed of jazz musicians

1. many were formally educated (e.g., conservatory trained)
2. many came from brass and military bands
3. represented a cross-fertilization between music readers and non-music reading improvisers

D. Jazz moved from New Orleans to Chicago (which had its own style of Dixieland) to New York which became the center of the music world

1. recording companies
2. publishing houses
3. all fields, all styles
4. music business activities

E. Dates

1. beginning of the big bands: 1920-1935
2. the Swing Era: 1935-1945

F. Proliferation of new song forms (e.g., AABA); tunes were now capable of greater harmonic sophistication (i.e., more complex chords) and capable of evolution

G. Spread of radio and recording, making jazz popular (and learnable) throughout the United States

H. Basically jazz moved from the improvised polyphony³ of the Dixieland bands to the homophony⁴ of the big bands

II. Performance Practices

² The size of the big band (i.e., number of musicians) grew gradually from 7 to 9 to 11, etc., culminating in about 17 (give or take a musician or two).

³ *polyphony*: two or more simultaneously played melodies

⁴ *homophony*: single melody played with chordal accompaniment

A. The typical big band had (has) four sections

1. sax section: generally five saxophones (two altos, two tenors, and one baritone); saxophonists usually also played clarinet
2. trumpet section: generally four trumpets
3. trombone section: generally four trombones⁵
4. rhythm section: generally four pieces: piano, bass, guitar, drums

B. Typical arrangements

1. melody played by entire band (or selected members) in unison (all playing the same notes) or in harmony (some playing the melody, some playing notes that harmonize the melody); rhythm section provides accompaniment throughout
2. melody and accompaniment parts would often be played in turn by various sections in the band (determined by the arranger; e.g., saxes play the A section, trumpets play the B section, brass section plays a background part behind a sax solo, etc.)
3. sometimes sections "talk" back and forth, i.e., the saxes play a short passage that is "answered" by the brass and vice versa; this technique is called call and response
4. after melody is played, jazz improvisation follows (accompanied by the rhythm section); background parts played by other band members in unison or harmony (listen to Fletcher Henderson's *Wrappin' It Up* and follow along with listening guide on page 6)⁶
5. simple musical phrases played over and over are called riffs; riffs would often be played by various sections one at a time; entire arrangements could be based on riffs (listen to Count Basie's *One O'Clock Jump* and follow along with listening guide on page 7)

C. Rhythm Section

1. drums
 - a. played simply (played simpler rhythms than Dixieland drummers), making the beat obvious for dancers
 - b. swung, emphasizing second and fourth beat of each measure (where one would snap their fingers)
2. bass
 - a. kept time (along with the drummers)
 - b. played notes on the first and third beats of each measure (two beat style) or on each beat (walking bass)
 - c. notes played outlined the chord progression (i.e., the root of each chord was usually played on the first beat of each measure)
3. piano
 - a. played chords stride style, on every beat, or on every other beat
 - b. comping (i.e., playing chords in a syncopated fashion as to compliment improviser) was not common as it was to become in later styles
 - c. occasionally played melodies and melodic embellishments
4. guitar: played chords, percussively on each beat (listen to the guitar on Count Basie's *One O'Clock Jump*, especially during the piano solo choruses)

D. Swing differs from Dixieland

1. more use of written arrangements
2. wider range of compositional styles; fewer ragtime-like tunes
3. more solo improvisation, less collective improvisation
4. more use of string bass, less use of tuba
5. more use of guitar, no banjo

⁵ The trumpet and trombone sections together are called the *brass section*.

⁶ Background parts were generally written by the arranger as part of the arrangement, however sometimes simple background parts would be improvised in some bands (e.g., Count Basie Orchestra).

6. saxophone is the predominant instrument (replacing trumpet and clarinet)

III. Important Figures

A. Big Bands

1. Count Basie (pianist)
2. Duke Ellington (pianist)
3. Fletcher Henderson (pianist)

B. Swing Combos

1. Art Tatum Trio
2. Benny Goodman Trio, Quartet, and Sextet
3. The Kansas City Seven (Count Basie's small group)

C. Soloists

1. Benny Goodman, clarinet (1909-1986)
2. Coleman Hawkins, tenor saxophone (1904-1969)
3. Lester Young, tenor saxophone (1909-1959)

IV. Cultural Implications of the Swing Era

A. Jazz's most popular period

1. hundreds of professional big bands flourished in the 1930's and early 40s (only a handful are around today in the U.S.; however, thousands of high school, college and community big bands are prevalent around the world)
2. after the stock market crash of 1929, swing helped the United States through the Great Depression, creating escape from economic realities via swing dancing
3. Swing served as a major morale booster during world War II
4. jazz reached new levels of sophistication in the Swing Era as an outgrowth of America's need for self-esteem following the Great Depression
5. because of the weak economy, many recording companies went bankrupt, however, jazz proliferated throughout the country via radio; in the 1930s, over 70 bands had sponsored radio shows (e.g., Let's Dance, Camel Hit Parade, Chesterfield Hour, Coca Cola Spotlight Series, etc.)
6. there were hundreds of performance venues
 - a. ballrooms (e.g., Roseland, Savoy, Cotton Club, Paradise, Blue Room, etc.).
 - b. movies (*Hollywood Hotel*, *The Fabulous Dorseys*, *Swing Fever*, *Orchestra Wives*, etc.)
 - c. hotels (Manhattan Room in the Hotel Pennsylvania, Terrace Room in Hotel New York, Blue Room in the Lincoln Hotel, etc.)
 - d. record companies (Columbia, Decca, RCA Victor)
7. Benny Goodman, a young, white, jazz clarinet virtuoso, resembling young men on college campuses and playing with a mixture of urgency and impeccable European classical intonation and technique, brought jazz to young, educated audiences throughout the country; he was dubbed the King of Swing and sold millions of records

B. Race relations

1. in an era when racial integration was frowned upon by American society in general, jazz's social liberalism was represented by racial integration in several important swing bands; perhaps for the first time, it did not matter what color you were, just how good you could play
2. first important interracial groups: The Benny Goodman Trio, Quartet, Sextet, and Big Band, 1935
3. jazz increased appreciation by both black and white communities for the cultural achievements of African Americans

- C. **The predominant** geographical movement of jazz was from New Orleans to Chicago to New York City
- D. **Radio** was crucial to the spread and popularity of jazz; without the radio, most experts believe jazz would not have survived, let alone flourished
- E. **Jazz was** (and remains) a symbol of urban energy, optimism, and resilience

Wrappin It Up

Form: **A B A C**

- a. CD counter: **introduction:** 0:01-0:08 call and response (brass and saxes)
- b. CD counter: **chorus 1 (ABAC):** 0:09-0:46 head
- A** CD counter: 0:09-0:18 saxes play melody, brass respond
- B** CD counter: 0:19-0:27 saxes play melody, brass respond
- A** CD counter: 0:28-0:36 saxes and trumpets play melody together
- C** CD counter: 0:37-0:46 saxes and trumpets play melody together
- c. CD counter: **chorus 2 (ABAC):** 0:47-1:23 alto sax solo (Hilton Jefferson)
- A** CD counter: 0:47-0:56 improvised sax solo accompanied by simple brass background
- B** CD counter: 0:57-1:05 improvised sax solo continues, brass background
- A** CD counter: 1:06-1:14 improvised sax solo continues, brass background
- C** CD counter: 1:15-1:23 improvised sax solo continues, brass background
- d. CD counter: **chorus 3 (ABAC)** 1:24-2:00 trumpet solo (Red Allen)
- A** CD counter: 1:24-1:32 improvised trumpet solo accompanied by sax section background
- B** CD counter: 1:33-1:41 solo drops out; call and response by brass and saxes
- A** CD counter: 1:42-1:50 improvised trumpet solo continues, sax section background
- C** CD counter: 1:51-2:00 improvised trumpet solo continues, sax section background
- e. CD counter: **chorus 4 (ABAC):** 2:01-2:38 out head (original melody embellished)
- A** CD counter: 2:01-2:10 brass and clarinets¹²
- B** CD counter: 2:11-2:19 improvised clarinet solo (Buster Bailey), simple brass background
- A** CD counter: 2:20-2:28 saxophone soli
- C** CD counter: 2:29-2:38 saxophone and brass soli¹³

One O'Clock Jump

Form: **12 bar blues**

a. CD counter: 0:01-0:10	introduction	piano riff for eight measures
b. CD counter: 0:11-0:27	chorus 1 (12 bars):	piano solo (Count Basie)
c. CD counter: 0:28-0:44	chorus 2 (12 bars):	piano solo continued
d. CD counter: 0:45-1:01	chorus 3 (12 bars):	tenor sax solo (Herschel Evans) background riff: trumpet section (in mutes)
e. CD counter: 1:02-1:18	chorus 4 (12 bars):	trombone solo (George Hunt); background riff: sax section
f. CD counter: 1:19-1:35	chorus 5 (12 bars):	tenor sax solo (Lester Young); background riff: trumpet section (in mutes)
g. CD counter: 1:36-1:52	chorus 6 (12 bars):	trumpet solo (Buck Clayton); background riff: sax section
h. CD counter: 1:53-2:09	chorus 7 (12 bars):	piano solo (Count Basie)
i. CD counter: 2:10-2:26	chorus 8 (12 bars):	melody riff: sax section(head); background riffs: trumpet & trombone sections (call and response)
j. CD counter: 2:27-2:43	chorus 9 (12 bars):	melody riff: sax section(head); background riffs: trumpet & trombone sections (call and response)
k. CD counter: 2:44-3:00	chorus 10 (12 bars):	melody riff: sax section(head) background riffs: trumpet & trombone sections (call and response)