

CHAPTER SIX: “IN THE MOOD”: THE SWING ERA, 1935–1945

Chapter Outline

I. Swing Music and American Culture

A. The Swing Era: 1935–45

1. Beginning in 1935, a new style of jazz-inspired music called “swing” transformed American popular music.
2. Initially developed in the late 1920s by black dance bands in New York, Chicago, and Kansas City
3. The word “swing” (like “jazz,” “blues,” and “rock ’n’ roll”) derives from African American English.
 - a) First used as a verb for the fluid, rocking rhythmic momentum created by well-played music, the term was used by extension to refer to an emotional state characterized by a sense of freedom, vitality, and enjoyment.
 - b) References to “swing” and “swinging” are common in the titles and lyrics of jazz records made during the 1920s and early 1930s.
 - c) Around 1935, the music industry began to use “swing” as a proper noun—the name of a defined musical genre.

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4. Between 1935 and 1945, hundreds of large dance orchestras directed by celebrity bandleaders dominated the national hit parade:

- a) Benny Goodman
- b) Tommy Dorsey
- c) Duke Ellington
- d) Count Basie
- e) Glenn Miller

5. These big bands appeared nightly on radio, their performances transmitted coast to coast from hotels and ballrooms in the big cities.

6. Their music was featured on jukeboxes.

7. Many of the bands crisscrossed the country in buses, playing for dances and concerts at local dance halls, theaters, and colleges.

8. The big bands were essentially a big-city phenomenon, a symbol of sophistication and modernity.

9. Their occasional tour appearances in small towns generated a great deal of excitement.

10. Swing music was part of a broader cultural and aesthetic movement that included dance styles, modes of dress, and even architecture.

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11. Huge ballrooms and dance halls replaced the intimate cabarets of the 1930s.

12. Swing orchestras exuded a much more sleek and sophisticated image than that of the syncopated dance orchestras of the 1920s.

13. Swing music also played an important economic role.

a) Record sales in the United States had plummeted from the 1921 high of \$106 million in retail sales to only \$6 million in 1933 (a decline of over 90 percent).

b) By the late 1930s, largely as a result of the popularity of swing, the record industry had begun to recover: between 1935 and 1945, well over half of the records that sold more than a million copies were made by big dance bands.

c) Swing music pulled the American music industry out of the Great Depression.

B. Dance styles

1. The dance styles that paralleled swing music provide further evidence of the increasing centrality of black styles and sensibilities in American popular culture.

2. The lindy hop

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- a) Beginning in the late 1920s, dancers at the Savoy Ballroom in New York City—located on Harlem’s “main stem,” Lenox Avenue—began to develop a style called the “lindy hop.”
- b) Named in honor of Charles Lindbergh’s solo transatlantic flight (1927)
- c) The lindy differed from the popular jazz dance styles of the early 1920s—the bunny hug, turkey trot, and fox-trot—in several important ways.

(1) Whereas the older dances emphasized bouncy, up-and-down movements, the lindy was smoother, with more fluid, horizontal movements.

(2) The lindy provided greater scope for improvisation, including the “breakaway,” a moment when dancers would part company and dance solo, exhibiting their skill.

- d) The clothing worn by dancers matched the streamlined and somewhat formal aesthetic of the new ballrooms.

(1) Loose clothes were not only hip in appearance but also perfectly suited for the acrobatic moves of the lindy hop.

C. Harlem

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1. New York’s Harlem had many famous nightclubs and dance halls:
 - a) The Savoy Ballroom
 - b) The Cotton Club
 - c) The Apollo Theater
2. Originally populated by European immigrant groups
3. By the late 1920s, Harlem was home to a substantial, well-educated, and relatively prosperous black middle class.
4. It could be argued that Harlem was the portal through which black styles and sensibilities entered American mass culture from the 1920s through the 1940s.
5. “Black and tan” nightclubs like the Cotton Club were generally owned and operated by Italian and Jewish mobsters.
 - a) The Cotton Club’s audiences were predominantly white, including people with a genuine interest in jazz music and other aspects of cosmopolitan black culture, and others who came to Harlem in search of something akin to an exotic tourist experience (a practice called “slumming”).
6. The most successful dance orchestras at the Cotton Club—led by Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway—provided musical accompaniment for stage

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acts featuring scantily clad “brown beauties,” men in ape costumes, and jungle scenery.

7. This scene—with black performers presenting caricatures of themselves to white consumers—is in some ways reminiscent of nineteenth-century minstrelsy.

8. The steady income provided by the well-known Harlem nightclubs and dance halls provided many black musicians with an opportunity to develop successful careers in music.

D. Black and white in the swing era

1. The swing era represented a step forward in cultural communication across racial boundaries.

a) Black people often attended concerts by white dance bands.

b) White people began to study and imitate black culture with greater passion and in greater numbers than ever before.

2. Not a relationship of full equality

a) Only a handful of dance bands were racially integrated.

b) Even the most popular black dance bands faced serious economic and social disadvantages.

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3. Between 1935 and 1945, the four most popular big bands led by white musicians racked up a total of 292 Top 10 records, of which 65 were Number One hits.

4. The four most popular black swing orchestras scored only thirty-two Top 10 hits, three of which made it to Number One on the charts.

5. These figures reflect

a) broad differences in the economic status of black and white Americans,

b) black musicians' difficulty in getting equal airtime on the radio, and

c) black musicians' difficulty in having their records included among the selections in coin-operated jukeboxes.

E. Big band brought a youthful energy back to American popular music.

1. Its core audience initially consisted of college-age adults and teenagers.

2. Swing was an exciting, brash, vital music, inspired by black aesthetics and consonant with the growing optimism of a nation emerging from a devastating economic depression.

F. Features of big-band swing music

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1. There are a number of differences between swing and the jazz-tinged syncopated dance music that preceded it in the 1910s and 1920s.
 - a) One of the signal features of swing music
 - b) Central to African American musical traditions such as gospel music and the blues
 - c) Beginning in the late 1920s, black dance band arrangers began to apply this principle to ensemble writing, treating the brass and reed instruments as separate sections and setting them off against one another.
 - d) This basic approach—in which “conversations” were set up between parts of a band—was later adopted by white bands.
3. The rhythmic organization or “feel” of swing music differed from that of earlier dance styles.
 - a) Rather than the “boom-chick” two-beat rhythms of much syncopated dance band music of the 1920s—correlated with the erect postures and largely up-and-down movements of the fox-trot and other popular dances—the rhythmic feeling of swing music is more continuous and flowing.

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b) This effect is created by having the bass play on all four beats in a measure, rather than just the first and third beats, a technique referred to by jazz musicians as “walking” the bass.

c) The drummer adds to this effect by playing all four beats with the bass drum pedal (a technique called “four on the floor”) and playing a regular tapping pattern on the largest cymbal (a “ride” cymbal).

d) In some bands, the guitarist would also play chords on every beat. In addition to this steady pulse, a good swinging groove depended on accents on the offbeats, that is, the second and fourth beats of each four-beat measure.

e) These offbeat accents might be supplied by the rhythm section or by the horn arrangements.

f) This combination of a steady, fluid pulse with an accent or “push” on every other beat creates the basic conditions for swinging.

G. Listening: “Wrappin’ It Up”

1. Music and arrangement by Fletcher Henderson
2. Recorded in 1934 in New York, performed by Fletcher Henderson and His Orchestra

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3. The Henderson band is considerably larger than most syncopated dance bands of the 1920s (eight or nine musicians).
 - a) Henderson’s big band comprises five brass instruments (three trumpets and two trombones), four reed instruments (saxophones and clarinets), and a rhythm section consisting of piano, bass, drums, and guitar, a total of thirteen musicians.
 - b) This expansion of the dance band was correlated with the development of an ensemble sound that was smoother, fuller sounding, and in structural terms, simpler than the polyphonic, collectively improvised style of New Orleans jazz.
 - c) To be sure, the influence of the rich orchestral textures developed by James Reese Europe and Paul Whiteman is evident in many big-band recordings of the swing era.
 - d) However, big-band arrangers used the expanded instrumental resources of their ensembles in a manner different from most syncopated orchestras of the 1920s.
4. “Wrappin’ It Up” has all of the characteristics of swing:
 - a) A big, full, smooth ensemble texture
 - b) Lots of call-and-response patterns between the brass and reeds

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c) A steady, flowing groove, with the bass, drums, and guitar playing on all four beats, while giving a slight push to the second and fourth beats

5. Big-band arrangements commonly drew on musical structures that should by now be familiar to us: the twelve-bar blues form and the thirty-two-bar Tin Pan Alley song form.

a) The basic structure of Fletcher Henderson’s “Wrappin’ It Up” is ABAC.

(1) Each section is eight measures (and each measure, as is typical of swing music, is four beats).

(2) It should be fairly easy to hear the basic structure of the arrangement, since the beats are emphasized by the rhythm section.

(3) “Wrappin’ It Up” begins with an eight-measure introduction, in which the call-and-response relationship between the reeds and brass is established from the first moment.

(4) In the first measure, the brass plays a syncopated figure, which is answered in the second measure by the reeds.

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(5) Measures 3 and 4 repeat this exchange. In the next two measures (5 and 6), the brass and reeds exchange even shorter figures (two beats in length), and everyone joins together in the last two bars (measures 7 and 8), launching us into the main body of the arrangement.

(6) The rest of the “chart” presents the thirty-two bar ABAC form four times with all sorts of interesting variations, including adding an extra measure on the first and third times through the form (see listening chart).

(7) Working with a few basic musical ideas and techniques, Henderson holds our interest, alternating call-and-response patterns between the brass and reeds with soli scoring, musical passages in which a group of instruments play a melody together, often in harmony. (In swing arrangements, these soli passages often sound like improvised solos that have been written down for multiple instruments.)

(8) There are also three improvised solos, over various types of backgrounds played by the other instruments.

6. Fletcher Henderson’s “Wrappin’ It Up” is a great example not only of the rhythmic flow and texture of swing music but also of the balance

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between simplicity and complexity that characterizes the best big-band arranging.

7. The arrangement was later provided to Benny Goodman, who recorded it in 1938.

II. Benny Goodman: The King of Swing

A. Benny Goodman (1909–86)

1. Born in Chicago, the son of working-class Eastern European Jewish immigrants
2. Made his first records under his own name in 1927
3. Freelance musician during the depression years

B. His career was boosted by John Hammond (1910–87).

1. Hammond, an influential jazz enthusiast and promoter, was an A&R (artists and repertoire) man with Columbia Records.
2. Hammond arranged Goodman’s first recording dates with Columbia and pushed the band in the direction of the more strongly jazz-influenced music played by most black dance bands.

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3. Hammond also helped Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Count Basie, and (much later) Aretha Franklin, Bob Dylan, and Bruce Springsteen receive recording contracts with Columbia Records.

C. In 1934, the Goodman Band appeared on the NBC radio show *Let's Dance*.

D. The Goodman Band embarked on a tour in summer 1935.

1. The tour did not begin successfully.
2. Audiences were not interested in the “hot” arrangements that the band wanted to play.
3. The tour bottomed out in Denver; audiences wanted their money back.
4. The band was a huge success when it reached California and performed at the Palomar Ballroom.
 - a) West Coast audiences had heard the band on the *Let's Dance* radio show.
5. This success signaled the birth of the swing era.

III. Big-Band Blues: Count Basie, Duke Ellington, and Glenn Miller

A. William “Count” Basie (1904–84)

1. Of all the big bands, Basie’s was the most closely associated with the blues tradition.

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2. Born in New Jersey
3. Had early experience as a piano player and bandleader in Kansas City, Missouri

B. Kansas City

1. In the 1920s, Kansas City was in many ways still a frontier town.
2. The city had a famously crooked mayor (“Boss” Pendergast); his administration encouraged a lively, and illegal, nightclub scene.
3. Many of the greatest jazz musicians honed their improvisational skills in Kansas City at competitive all-night jam sessions or cutting sessions.
4. These Olympian contests provided a chance for budding virtuosos to test their musical skills and endurance against one another.
5. During the 1920s and early 1930s, black dance bands in Kansas City had developed their own distinctive approach to playing hot dance music.
 - a) Territory bands such as the Bennie Moten Orchestra and Andy Kirk’s Blue Devils toured the American Southwest, developing a hard-swinging, powerful style with lots of room for improvised solos.

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- b) The Kansas City style was more closely linked to the country blues tradition than the style of the New York bands, and it relied more heavily on riffs.
- c) Few of the jazz musicians in Kansas City had the formal music education of East Coast musicians and often played with a looser, less precise feeling.
- d) Kansas City musicians relied heavily on “head charts,” arrangements that evolved during jam sessions and were written down only later.
- e) In rhythmic terms, the Kansas City bands tended to swing more intensely and with greater abandon than the East Coast dance bands.

C. One important influence on the rhythmic conception of the Kansas City bands was the boogie-woogie blues piano tradition.

1. Sprang up during the early twentieth century in the “southwest territory” states of Texas, Arkansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma and became a popular fad during the big-band era
2. Developed in the environment of the barrelhouses, rowdy nightspots patronized by the men who worked in the lumber and turpentine camps of the area

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3. Solo pianists, a cheap and readily available form of entertainment, responded to the rowdy environment of the barrelhouses by developing a powerful style that could be heard over the crowd noise.
4. In boogie-woogie performances, the pianist typically plays a repeated pattern with his left hand, down in the low range of the piano, while improvising polyrhythmic patterns in his right hand.
5. The greatest boogie-woogie piano players—men like Pete Johnson, Albert Ammons, Meade Lux Lewis, and Pine Top Smith—were said to have “a left hand like God,” an admiring reference to the volume, steadiness, and authority of their bass patterns.
6. Big-band musicians from Kansas City were strongly influenced by the boogie-woogie style, especially its rhythmic drive and heavy reliance on riffs.
7. During the war, boogie-woogie became a national fad, spawning a series of hit records—“Boogie Woogie,” “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy,” and even “The Boogie Woogie Piggy.”
8. The genre was later to exert a strong influence on rock ’n’ roll, via the influence of “southwestern” musicians such as Big Joe Turner and Jerry Lee Lewis.

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D. In 1936, John Hammond, who had recently helped start Benny Goodman’s career, heard Count Basie’s band on a late-night short-wave radio show in Chicago.

1. Excited by the band’s loose but energetic sound, Hammond worked to sign Basie on with MCA and to secure engagements in Chicago and New York City.
2. Although the band’s rough-hewn style did not catch on immediately, Hammond was able to get Basie a recording contract with Decca, a new record company interested in capitalizing on the swing craze.

E. “One O’Clock Jump,” written by count Basie and Harry James; performed by the Count Basie and His Orchestra, recorded in 1937 by Decca

1. The Count Basie Orchestra’s theme song
2. Excellent example of the Kansas City bands’ relaxed but energetic rhythmic approach
3. Emphasis on jazz improvisation
4. Reliance on informal and flexible head arrangements
5. Structure of the tune: ten choruses of twelve-bar blues
6. The basic arranging technique involves heavy use of riffs and call-and-response patterns, divided between the brass and reeds

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7. A succession of improvised jazz solos
8. The closest thing to a melody, in the sense that the term would be used in the Tin Pan Alley songwriting tradition, does not appear until the next-to-last chorus.
9. The recording begins with an eight-bar piano boogie-woogie introduction and two improvised twelve-bar blues choruses by Basie.
10. Then there is a key change, the band enters, and we hear a series of solos, on saxophone, trombone, saxophone again, and trumpet, each supported by background riffs.
 - a) Although this section seems largely improvised, it is worth noting that the order of solos alternates between reeds and brass, and that each reed instrument is supported by brass, and vice versa.
11. After these solos, Basie plays another chorus in his famous and elegant “two-fingered” style, and then the entire band comes in.
12. The final three choruses of riffs are what identify “One O’Clock Jump” for swing fans and musicians alike.
13. This is an important point, for while riffs were one of several important techniques for East Coast arrangers such as Fletcher Henderson, here the basic identity of the piece lies in its riffs, continually tossed back and forth between the brass and reeds.

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14. In a piece like this, the horns seem almost to become part of the rhythm section—their function is less to play a melody than to help propel the music along with greater and greater intensity.

F. Edward Kennedy (Duke) Ellington (1899–1974)

1. Widely regarded as one of the most important American musicians of the twentieth century
2. Born in Washington, D.C., the son of a navy blueprint maker, Ellington came from a middle-class background and received formal musical training at a young age.
3. As a kid, he hung around the bars and pool halls where ragtime pianists played.
4. His first band, The Washingtonians, played syncopated dance music in New York in the early 1920s.
5. In 1923, an expanded and improved version of the band debuted at a Broadway nightspot called the Kentucky Club.
6. Three years later, Ellington’s band was heard by a song publisher and promoter named Irving Mills, who arranged a recording contract for them.
7. From 1927 to 1931, The Ellington band appeared at the Cotton Club in Harlem.

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a) The band often had to accompany “exotic” revues, and Ellington developed a style that he called “jungle music,” characterized by

(1) dense textures,

(2) unusual harmonies, and

(3) muted, growling sounds in the brass.

(4) While this style reinforced the stereotypes of black culture that many of the white patrons of the Cotton Club came to see and hear, it also provided Ellington with the basis for a unique approach to arranging for the big band.

8. Individualistic approach to writing

a) Ellington experimented with the same basic musical resources as other big-band arrangers.

(1) Devised unusual musical forms

(2) Combined instruments in unusual ways

(3) Created complex, distinctive tone colors

(4) Wrote for extreme registers of instruments

(5) Wrote dissonant chord voicings

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b) Ellington’s experiments were aided by the remarkable stability of his band; he grew to know the individual players’ strengths and weaknesses and often wrote parts specifically for particular musicians.

c) Even though Ellington was well respected as a composer, and had some big hits like “I Let a Song Go Out of My Heart” (Number One, 1938), he had less commercial success than other band leaders.

d) Ellington’s idiosyncratic approach meant that his band enjoyed less commercial success than more mainstream-sounding dance orchestras.

G. Listening: “Ko-Ko”

1. Music and arrangement by Ellington, 1937
2. Form: twelve-bar blues with eight-measure introductory section
3. Overall mood of this recording is not the typical happy, upbeat feel of most swing music.
4. Ensemble sound is dark and thickly textured.

H. Glenn Miller (1904–44)

1. Trombonist/bandleader

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2. From 1939 until 1942, the Miller Orchestra was the most popular dance band in the world, breaking records for record sales and concert attendance.
3. Most of his songs are still popular with swing dancers.
4. Miller developed a peppy, clean-sounding style that appealed to small-town Midwestern people as well as to the big-city, East and West Coast constituency.
5. Miller Joined the Army Air Corps in 1942.
 - a) Led a band in the military
 - b) Was killed during World War II when his plane went down over the English Channel in 1944

I. Listening: “In the Mood”

1. Glenn Miller and His Orchestra (1939)
2. Number One on the charts for twelve weeks
3. Best-known recording of the swing era
4. Tune based on a short riff featured in the saxophones
5. Twelve-bar blues with an eight-bar bridge

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6. Famous improvised trumpet solo, later transcribed and permanently written in the music
7. “Trick” ending, with the band getting quieter and quieter and then exploding into a big finish

IV. ASCAP, the AFM, and the Decline of the Big Bands

A. Decline of the big bands

1. The swing era lasted almost exactly a decade, ending almost as suddenly as it had begun.
2. By the close of 1946, many of the top dance bands in the country had either broken up or formed smaller, more economical units.
3. The sudden decline of the big bands was related to changes in the music business as well as shifts in popular musical taste.

B. The big bands were also adversely affected by a series of struggles among powerful institutions in the music business, including record companies, radio networks, music licensing agencies, and the musicians’ union.

1. The big radio networks were feuding with ASCAP over royalties.
2. In 1940, the radio networks formed a rival licensing agency, Broadcast Music Incorporated (BMI).

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- a) BMI allowed songwriters outside of Tin Pan Alley to collect royalties from the use of their songs in the broadcast media.
 - b) This boosted country and western and rhythm & blues musicians.
3. In 1941, ASCAP called a strike, withdrawing the rights to broadcast any material composed by its members.
4. In 1942, the American Federation of Musicians called a strike against the recording companies.
- a) No major record company recorded instrumentalists for over a year.
 - b) Decca and Capital signed agreements with the union in 1943, but Victor and Columbia did not sign an agreement until 1944.
5. In the end, the strike put many dance band musicians out of work.
6. The strike helped create conditions that led to the success of rhythm & blues and country and western music after World War I.
- V. Country Music in the Swing Era: Roy Acuff, Singing Cowboys, and Western Swing
- A. Although the big bands dominated the pop charts, the appeal of so-called hillbilly performers and their music, based in Anglo-American folk traditions, continued to grow between 1935 and 1945.

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1. Millions of white southerners migrated in search of industrial employment, forming enclaves in urban centers and creating a new urban audience for hillbilly music.
 2. At the same time, the appeal of country music also appears to have spread among many people who were not born in the South.
 3. Listeners throughout the country were exposed to country music on the radio.
 - a) Far-reaching fifty-thousand-watt stations were located just across the border in Mexico, and in North American cities such as Fort Worth (WBAP), Chicago (WLS), and Nashville (WSM).
 - b) By the end of World War II, there were over six hundred hillbilly radio programs on the air nationwide.
- B. A number of other factors contributed to the expansion of country music during the war.
1. The formation of BMI provided opportunities for country songwriters to publish their compositions and to receive royalties.
 2. The American Federation of Musicians’ recording ban, which kept union members out of the studios, created more recording opportunities for hillbilly musicians, most of whom were not allowed to join the union.

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3. New record companies such as Capitol Records, based in Los Angeles, achieved success in part because of their large rosters of country recording artists.

4. A number of small independent record labels (“indies”) specializing in hillbilly music also sprang up during the war, particularly in towns such as Nashville, Cincinnati, and Los Angeles, which had large populations of southern migrants.

5. After the recording ban ended, major companies began to pay more attention to country music, and popular mainstream artists such as Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters released bestselling versions of country songs.

6. By the close of the war, the American music industry had awakened to the commercial potential of country music, which by some estimates provided nearly a third of its total revenues.

7. The war helped expand the audience for country music, not only by stimulating rural-urban migration on the home front, but also by bringing millions of servicemen from the North and Midwest into more intimate contact with their southern-born counterparts.

8. Although coresidence did not automatically confer musical brotherhood, many Americans who had previously paid little or no attention to hillbilly music began to develop a taste for it.

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9. Music was played over the Armed Forces radio network, on “V-discs” (“victory discs”) produced by the U.S. government for servicemen, and at USO concerts designed to boost the morale of the troops.

a) Music rooted in the old traditions of the American South played an important role in the daily lives of servicemen and had a profound and lasting impact on their musical sensibilities

10. Themes of sentimentality, morality, and patriotism, already prominent in hillbilly recordings of the 1920s, played an important role in country music’s popularity during the war.

C. Roy Claxton Acuff (1903–92)

1. The most popular hillbilly singer of the swing era
2. Began his career with a traveling medicine show
3. In 1935, formed his own band, the Crazy Tennesseans
4. In 1938, joined the regular cast of WSM’s *Grand Ole Opry* and soon became its biggest star
5. Acuff performed in a style that was self-consciously rooted in southern folk music.

a) He sang old-timey songs in a sincere, unaffected style with a pronounced southern twang.

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- b) His band used instruments derived from the southern string band tradition, including the fiddle, banjo, and guitar.
6. Acuff was a traditionalist, accepting only innovations that fit within the framework of musical traditions he had learned growing up in Tennessee.
7. Acuff’s rise to fame was in large part due to the popularity of two songs that are still closely associated with him:
- a) “Wabash Cannon Ball”
 - b) “Great Speckled Bird”
8. “Great Speckled Bird”
- a) Widely regarded as the national anthem of country and western music
 - b) Acuff’s first hit record
 - c) Recorded in Chicago in 1936
 - d) Acuff’s rendition crossed over to the mainstream pop charts, reaching Number Thirteen on the Billboard Hit Parade in 1938.
 - e) Acuff’s recording is actually titled “Great Speckle Bird.”

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- f) The huge commercial success of Acuff’s recording of “Great Speckled Bird” is largely due to the song’s religious theme.
- g) During a time of profound change, in which millions of families were uprooted from a rural way of life, the church became a touchstone of moral and cultural continuity.

9. Lyrics

- a) Composed by a southern preacher
- b) Portray the church as an embattled group of individuals
- c) The speckled bird is a metaphor for the church, a sign of God’s Word (as inscribed in the Bible), and a vehicle for the salvation of the faithful.
- d) Based on Jeremiah 12:9, “Mine heritage is unto me as a speckled bird, the birds round about are against her.”

10. Listening: “Great Speckled Bird”

- a) Written by Reverend Guy Smith; performed by Roy Acuff and His Crazy Tennesseans
- b) Recorded in 1936

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*What a beautiful thought I am thinking
Concerning a Great Speckled Bird
Remember her name is recorded
On the pages of God's holy word
With all the other birds flocking 'round her
She is so despised by the squad
The Great Speckled Bird is the Bible
Representing the great Church of God . . .
When He cometh descending from Heaven
On the clouds as he writes in His Word
I'll be joyfully carried to meet Him
On the wings of that Great Speckled Bird*

c) Traditional ethos of “Great Speckled Bird”

- (1) One source of its great appeal to southern-born listeners
- (2) Reinforced by Acuff's straightforward, unadorned vocal performance
- (3) Form of the song derived from the strophic pattern of Anglo-American ballad singing
- (4) Sixteen-bar strophe performed a total of five times

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(5) The melody of “Great Speckled Bird” is similar to that of “I’m Thinking Tonight of My Blue Eyes,” a song popularized by the Carter Family; its familiarity to many of Acuff’s listeners may account in part for its success.

11. Technology in “Great Speckled Bird”

- a) Acuff, although known as a folksy, down-home country singer was not averse to trying new technologies within the string band tradition.
- b) His recording of “Great Speckled Bird” features a new version of the standard six-string guitar called the dobro, which used a round metal plate (a resonator) to amplify the sound of the strings.
- c) On this recording, the blunt edge of a steel knife is used to play melodic patterns on the dobro, allowing the player to glide between pitches, interweaving with the singer’s voice. (This technique, pioneered by Hawai’ian and African American guitarists in the early twentieth century, is called “bottleneck guitar.”)

12. Acuff was a shrewd businessman, cofounding a music-publishing company, Acuff-Rose, which went on to make millions of dollars from the expanding postwar market for country songs.

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D. Another important development of the late 1930s and 1940s was the rise of the singing cowboy.

1. The heroic image of the old cowhand—popularized after World War I in cheap dime novels, published collections of cowboy songs, and the movies of silent film stars such as Tom Mix—was adopted by many country musicians during the depression years as a substitute for the often-denigrated image of the hillbilly.

2. Like the South, the Wild West has long been a place in the imagination, a repository of images and stories that Americans tell themselves about their history, traditions, and character.

3. Images of the South in American popular culture, however, whether positive or negative in tone, typically evoke tradition, religious morality, and the past, whereas the West is popularly associated with movement, independence, and the future.

4. From the 1930s through the 1950s, as country musicians sought to reach a wider audience, the term “western” became a substitute for “hillbilly.”

5. Many country singers, whatever their place of birth, wore cowboy hats and shirts, and adopted nicknames such as “Tex,” “Slim,” “Hank,” or the “Lone Cowboy.” (Today, the cowboy image is still evident in the public image of country singers such as Garth Brooks.)

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- E. The first successful singing cowboy was Gene Autry (1907–98)
1. Born in Texas
 2. In the early 1930s, Autry’s musical career received a boost from regular appearances on the *National Barn Dance*, broadcast nationwide from the Chicago radio station WLS.
 3. Autry’s early performances actually included few cowboy songs: he was a hillbilly singer, known for his imitations of Jimmie Rodgers.
 4. The big shift came in 1934, when Autry moved to Hollywood and got a bit part in a cowboy movie.
 5. In a series of over ninety movies for various film companies—including a number of popular serials, the cinematic ancestors of today’s weekly television series—Autry institutionalized the image of the singing cowboy, a heroic figure as adept with his voice and six strings as with a six-shooter.
 6. In his filmed performances and popular recordings, Autry developed a style designed to reach out to a broader audience, with a less pronounced regional accent, a deep baritone voice, and a touch of the crooner’s smoothness.
 7. Like Roy Acuff, but to an even greater degree, Autry was able to score crossover hits in the pop as well as the hillbilly market, and he paved the

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way for other western recording artists, including Roy Rogers, Patsy Montana, Tex Ritter, and the Sons of the Pioneers.

8. In spreading his own fame, Gene Autry helped bring country music to a much wider and more diverse audience—including the millions of fans of cowboy movies—and establish the “western” component of country and western music.

9. By the 1940s, some prominent black popular musicians were making cowboy films, though none of these referred to the very real tradition of nineteenth-century African American cowboys.

F. Sons of the Pioneers

1. The increasing professionalism of country music, and the close links between western themes in popular music and Hollywood films, are particularly evident in the recordings of the vocal group Sons of the Pioneers.

2. The Sons of the Pioneers originated as a vocal trio in 1933, at the instigation of Len Slye (1911–98), who later left the group and became a film and television star under the name Roy Rogers.

3. The group sang in many cowboy movies and represented the cosmopolitan end of western music.

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4. They specialized in sophisticated vocal harmonies, influenced to some degree by the Mills Brothers, and were known for writing their own songs, including “Tumbling Tumbleweeds,” “At the Rainbow’s End,” and “Cool Water,” all composed by group member Bob Nolan.

G. Listening: “Cool Water”

1. Written by Bob Nolan; performed by Sons of the Pioneers, recorded in 1941
2. Bestseller in the country music market
3. Reached Number Twenty-Five on the pop charts
4. Features the vocal trio’s smooth, carefully rehearsed harmonies
5. Lead singing of Bob Nolan, backed by guitar, fiddle, and bass
6. The recording opens with the guitar and fiddle, playing the basic “hook” of the song (“cool, clear water”).
7. Strophic form
 - a) Series of verses, each consisting of a solo line sung by Nolan and a response from the trio
 - b) A repeated chorus, sung in unison by the three men

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8. Example of musical craftsmanship—songwriting, arrangement, and studio recording brought together with the imagery derived from Hollywood to create something that is more than just a song

VERSE 1

SOLO: All day I've faced a barren waste without the taste of water

TRIO: Cool water

SOLO: Old Dan and I with throats burned dry and souls that cry for water

TRIO: Cool clear water

Chorus

*Keep a' movin,' Dan, don't you listen to him, Dan, he's a devil not a man,
and he spreads the burning sand with water*

*Dan, can you see that big green tree where the water's runnin' free and
it's waitin' there for me and you?*

VERSE 2

SOLO: The nights are cool and I'm a fool, each star's a pool of water

TRIO: Cool water

SOLO: But with the dawn I'll wake and yawn and carry on to water

TRIO: Cool, clear water

Chorus

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Verse 3

SOLO: The shadows sway and seem to say, “Tonight we’ll pray for water”

TRIO: Cool water

SOLO: And way up there He’ll hear our prayer and show us where there’s water

TRIO: Cool, clear water

Chorus

SOLO FALSETTO VOICE: Cool, clear water . . .

H. Western Swing

1. Blended the country string band with blues and jazz
2. The genre developed in Texas and accordingly reflected that state’s diverse musical traditions, including cowboy songs, German and Czech polkas, and Texas-Mexican (Tejano) genres such as corridos (narrative ballads in Spanish), conjunto acordeon (“accordion band” music), and mariachi (“marriage”) music, played by ensembles consisting of violins, guitars, and two or more trumpets.

I. Bob Wills (1905–75)

1. The seminal figure in the national popularization of western swing

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2. A fiddler from East Texas whose musical career ran from the 1920s through the 1960s
3. Raised in a family of fiddle players, Wills played with several dance bands in the Southwest before forming his own group, the Texas Playboys, in 1934.
4. During the late 1930s, the band established itself in Tulsa, Oklahoma, making daily radio appearances, playing nightly in a local ballroom, and going on tours of the “southwest territories.”
5. This geographical area—Oklahoma, Arkansas, Kansas, and Texas—was also home to the boogie-woogie piano blues and the big-band tradition of Count Basie and other black “territory bands,” both of which exerted an influence on western swing.
6. In 1943, after being discharged from the army, Bob Wills relocated to California.
7. There, he opened his own nightclub and attracted huge audiences, composed in part of migrants from the southwest territories who were already familiar with his music.
8. The Texas Playboys’ style became so popular in California that even mainstream swing bands were asked by dancers to add western swing–style numbers to their repertoires.

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9. The heart of the Texas Playboys’ style was southern string band music.

a) Many of Wills’s most popular arrangements were based on old fiddle tunes and other types of dance songs that he had learned as a young man.

b) To this traditional core, he added elements from big-band swing, including call-and-response riffs, and instruments such as trumpets, saxophones, and the drum set.

c) This balance between traditionalism and innovation was the key to Wills’s ability to cross over to the mainstream pop market.

10. Bob Wills’s success was also based on his ability to hire and retain first-rate musicians, many of them versed in blues and jazz as well as hillbilly and cowboy music.

a) Guitarist Leon McAuliffe, responsible for making the electronically amplified steel guitar a permanent part of country and western music

b) Vocalist Tommy Duncan, whose stylistic flexibility and warm baritone voice were an important part of the band’s sound

11. During the Texas Playboys’ performances, Bob Wills acted as impresario, cracking jokes, calling out musicians’ nicknames, and giving out enthusiastic cries and whoops of encouragement.

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J. Listening: “New San Antonio Rose”

1. Written by Bob Wills, performed by Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys, recorded in 1940
2. The Texas Playboys’ biggest hit
3. A country bestseller, reached Number Eleven on the pop charts in 1940
4. AABA, thirty-two-bar structure
5. The performance exemplifies the unique blend of stylistic elements achieved by Wills.
6. The sixteen-piece ensemble combines a string band (fiddle, banjo, and three guitars, including McAuliffe’s electrified steel guitar) with a big band (piano, string bass, drums, two trumpets, and six saxophones).
7. The structure of the song is the AABA, thirty-two-bar form.
 - a) Introduction
 - (1) Big-band swing sound
 - b) A section
 - (1) Played twice by the trumpets and saxophones

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(2) Rhythm section maintains a bouncy dance rhythm

c) Vocal section

(1) The vocal takes us through the entire thirty-two-bar AABA structure of the song

(2) Duncan’s singing supported with soft harmonies in the brass and reeds

(3) Occasionally interrupted by Wills’s trademark vocal interjections

d) B section

(1) Trumpet duet in the style of a Mexican mariachi band

e) A section—concludes the arrangement; a saxophone soli statement of the A section

K. Western swing exerted a permanent influence on country music after World War II

1. Introduction of amplified steel guitar and drum set
2. The incorporation of African American and Latin American musical influences

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3. Emphasis placed on live performances of improvised instrumental solos (called “takeoffs”)