

Selected Readings in the History of Jazz

Reading One—From “Things to Come: Swing Bands, Bebop, and the Rise of a Postwar Jazz Scene,” by Lewis Ehrenberg; in Recasting America, edited by Larry May (University of Chicago Press, 1989, pp.221-222).

“[The] rise of bop music as the major jazz innovation of the era was as much a change in style as it represented a significant perceptual shift in the world. Initially, this new musical form found expression after the war as the entire band world plunged into musical and social turmoil. ‘The musicians were so good,’ observed trumpeter Red Rodney, ‘yet we were so screwed up. It was a period of being very bugged.’ ...As swing bands declined in the late 1940s, the music world fragmented into warring cults, each side portraying itself as the true heir of jazz. The war erupted among Dixieland revivalists who sought greater individualism and natural freedom in past music, white and black boppers who sought these values in a contemporary musical mode, and the remaining proponents of swing, the popular jazz sound of the 1930s and war years. Partisans hurled charges of ‘Nazism’, ‘Fascism’, and “commercialism” at each other...*Ebony*[magazine] declared: the long war between boppist and anti-boppist factions was almost political in its defenses. Boppists likened themselves to revolutionary leftists, their opponents as money-grabbing capitalists.”

Reading Two—From “Things to Come: Swing Bands, Bebop, and the Rise of a Postwar Jazz Scene,” by Lewis Ehrenberg; in Recasting America, edited by Larry May (University of Chicago Press, 1989, pp.226-227).

“[The] repeal of Prohibition had the most dramatic impact [as a stimulant to the band business]...soon swing’s power attracted young high school and college dancers and listeners as radio, records, theaters and even conservative hotels joined in...a new group of bandleaders took advantage of the possibilities to end the dominance of the ‘society’ bands and establish a more jazz-oriented and democratic ethos in American music...bringing jazz, with all its irreverence and honesty, into the mainstream...a new group of bandleaders took advantage of these possibilities...Goodman was even different physically, contrary to what everybody expected in a band leader: no glamour, no sex appeal but a well-grounded musician...Unlike the homogenous, hierarchical groups of the sweet era, the swing bands celebrated the fact that the jazz world was one of the most egalitarian and pluralistic realms in American life...swing was profoundly cosmopolitan, including blacks, Jews, Italians, Poles, Irish and Protestants as leaders, players, and singers. It had wealthy Charlie Barnett, who rejected his background to lead the exciting jazz life, and Artie Shaw, the former Arthur Arshawsky, who sought in big-band success an American alternative to his parents’ Jewish identity...the big swing bands fostered what Frank Sinatra called ‘collaboration, brotherhood and sharing rough times’. In this context, swing offered a new model of social democracy and group life and in turn attracted players of mixed backgrounds and varied social groupings.”

Reading Three—From “Things to Come: Swing Bands, Bebop, and the Rise of a Postwar Jazz Scene,” by Lewis Ehrenberg; in Recasting America, edited by Larry May (University of Chicago Press 1989 pp. 235-236).

“According to [promoter] Billy Rose, show business was to make us love what is good in America and hate what Hitler and the minor thugs around him stand for. Swing musicians thus stood for ‘home’ values and became symbols of a war to defend the American way.... Musicians enlisted in the armed forces, joined USO tours and bond rallies and made V-discs...In a total war dominated by large-scale bureaucracy and rigid military hierarchy, air force Major Glenn Miller fused the spontaneity of popular culture and a new social purpose. No longer was swing an outsider to the establishment. Rather, Miller superbly wove together swing and nationalism. Under Miller’s lead, the music became more organized as well as more sentimental....Miller became an officer, his band a military orchestra, and his style an ‘arranged’ one, where the coordination of the group meant players’ roles were laid out from on high and improvisation was severely diminished....in Miller’s hands, the regimentation of the armed services began to curb the ecstatic rhythm of the music, and the lyrics became more expressive of personal security and happiness...Miller also consciously shaped his band in an all-American image by demanding that his singers adopt the look of innocent boys and girls from the heartland. Yet, while the band included musicians of ethnic extraction, whom he stereotyped as proper for certain instruments, it excluded blacks.”

Reading Four—From “Things to Come: Swing Bands, Bebop, and the Rise of a Postwar Jazz Scene,” by Lewis Ehrenberg; in Recasting America, edited by Larry May (University of Chicago Press, 1989, pp.236-37).

“Disaffection from swing,...reached its apogee in bebop, a musical style that matured among young black performers during the war years and then spread to younger white players...the new music-called bop for blacks, progressive for whites-represented a revolt against the dreams of their swing fathers. Significantly, many white ‘progressives’ were ex-army men, restless under military authority, and uncomfortable in the postwar musical world...These younger men saw a world that was highly regimented and threatening to one’s individuality, and they confronted a moribund swing tradition. Accordingly, many boppers, white and black, felt alienated from organized society...On all fronts, the war magnified awareness among young blacks of their secondary racial and economic status in the new national culture symbolized by Glenn Miller’s band. To some, the war ended possibilities of social reform of American life. Fighting a racist foe in a segregated army pointed out the hypocrisy of national ideals of unity...[the new music] was a protest against the failed expectations of the past, particularly those embodied in swing...[bop] is a profound criticism of the failure of swing’s ecstatic hopes for a modern America rooted in pluralism and individualism...many boppers considered the music business inherently racist because whites had prospered with black music while most black bands had not.”

Reading Five—From The Birth of Bebop, by Scott DeVeaux (University of California Press, 1997, pp. 237-38).

“It was during [the war years] that militancy began to take root, that ‘the seeds of the protest movements of the 1950s and 1960s were sown’ as James Baldwin later put it: ‘The treatment accorded the Negro during the Second World War marks, for me, a turning point in the Negro’s relation to America. ...a certain hope died, a certain respect for white Americans faded.’

The place of black musicians in this picture is not easy to draw. The several hundred musicians who staffed the major dance orchestras were anomalous in any reckoning of black labor in the early 1940s. By virtue of their special skills and their unique access to the broader white market, they constituted a tiny and privileged professional elite. They lived and worked in a world apart. While the mass of black people were undergoing an enormous and often painful economic transformation, black jazz musicians preserved and even strengthened a status they had earned years before. The vast changes in the economy and social fabric affected them mainly insofar as it changed the nature of their audiences and the conditions of their work. At the same time their very visibility, prosperity, and social freedom made black musicians lightning rods for social change. During a time when the status of black men and women was threatening to change more rapidly than at any time since Reconstruction, successful black musicians became volatile symbols: rallying points of pride for the black community (and its white supporters) or targets for abuse and violence by those desperately trying to preserve the old order. The growing acceptability of jazz as an ‘indigenous American art’ represented the first possibility... Innumerable instances of repression illustrated the second possibility. This explosive combination... provided the unique and potent social subtext for bebop.”

Reading Six—From Jazz in American Culture, by Burton W. Peretti (Chicago, 1997, pp.88-92).

“Jazz was affected by changing intellectual currents...Just as money and populations shifted dramatically with the war, so did Americans’ ideas about their nation’s role in the world and the nature of their society. Isolationism had dominated twenties and thirties American foreign policy. As war fears grew, opposition to U.S. involvement had been strong on college campuses(which were also hotbeds of swing)...While the Japanese sneak attack on Pearl Harbor silenced[isolationist calls for a ‘Fortress America’ policy], their mistrust of foreigners, radicals and New Dealers lingered on...African Americans had not been isolationist or radical but they became the most militant ethnic group because of the war...In 1941 the Congress on Racial Equality pioneered nonviolent resistance to segregation....A. Philip Randolph threatened a March on Washington and compelled Roosevelt to ban discrimination in war industry hiring. Older blacks, bitter with memories of the last world war, were profoundly skeptical about the merits of service in World War II. One editor declared that “our war is not with Hitler but with the Hitlers at home.” Hundreds of the leading jazz musicians experienced the tensions and violence of wartime service life. Players who had been deeply influenced by a biracial professional subculture were brought into contact with servicemen who did not share their sensitivities and attitudes. The stress and hostility of wartime worsened tensions in the segregated armed services where anti-Semitism and other prejudices also flared. Swing dances on bases, at home and abroad, were marred by frequent fights growing out of ethnic and racial liaisons. Perhaps the most famous fracas occurred in 1943 in nightclubs on the East Side of Los Angeles, between young white, Mexican, and black ‘zoot suiters’(a costume favored by male African American swing dancers) and white soldiers and sailors.”

Reading Seven—From Jazz in American Culture, by Burton W. Peretti (Chicago, 1997, pp.93-94).

“On balance, military service did little for jazz, only serving to emphasize how harshly the music’s biracial, intellectually open, and fundamentally creative spirit was treated in wartime. The ordeal of the great tenor saxophonist Lester Young clearly illustrated this....Shy and introverted, given to speaking in a convoluted private slang, Young had used heroin before the war as a means of escape from professional pressures. Somehow he passed muster with his draft board in 1944 but was not assigned to a band (few black service bands were funded). Cut off from his playing, he was unable to cope with military discipline or the physical demands of training, and the routine racism of white soldiers encouraged him to be insubordinate. Young’s habit of speaking in nonsense phrases, while famed in jazz circles, enraged his officers. Caught in the act of shooting heroin, Young was court-martialed, sentenced to several months’ detention (but given no treatment for his addiction), and given a dishonorable discharge. After the war his improvisational skills steadily declined, and he relied more and more on stock formulas...Young was a notable victim of accelerating social change and violence during the war, and his suffering was a moving testament to the passing of an era in which urban guilds and communities and steady employment nurtured fragile jazz musicians.”

Reading Eight—From Benny Goodman and the Swing Era by James Lincoln Collier Oxford University Press 1989 pp.276, 306

“ The Selective Service draft began in 1940, and as the musicians were exactly the young men who the army was looking for, the draft very quickly began to disrupt the swing bands generally, creating an increasingly competitive scramble for the best men, and not incidentally driving salaries up to levels that would have astonished the players who had staffed the swing bands only a few years earlier....Tommy Dorsey complain[ed] ‘I’m paying this kid trumpet player \$500 a week, and he can’t even blow his nose’...the swing band sidemen tended to be nomads, leaving bands for more money, over a real or fancied injury, for women who wanted them at home, because they were tired of the road or just on a whim....in October 1942, the government put limits on travel, and the next month introduced gas rationing. Space on trains jammed with servicemen being moved around the country was at a premium, and over the next months tires and other replacement parts for buses and cars became harder and harder to get. When it came to a choice, the government had to see that workers driving to war plants had what was needed to keep their cars moving—no new cars were made after 1941—rather than keep a swing band on the road....Yet despite everything, for those leaders who could keep going, and for the musicians who managed to stay out of the armed forces, the war years were a time of prosperity. Bookers were desperate for any kind of entertainment and willing to pay what they had to. There was a lot of money around. People working in war plants, especially those with critical skills, like welders and machinists, could command huge salaries, and in any case millions of workers were putting in a lot of overtime at [fantastic salaries]. There was little to spend one’s money on. There was a *carpe diem* spirit in the air. Who knew when you, or your boy friend, would be drafted and shipped off to fight and perhaps die?”

Reading Nine—Statement by Dave Brubeck; in Reading Jazz, edited by David Meltzer (Mercury House, 1993, pp. 205-206).

“The continuity of jazz history had been violently disrupted by World War II. Musicians who had served their apprenticeship by playing all kinds of jobs in all styles of jazz and were approaching the age for serious contributions to jazz were in the service. There was a demand for entertainment and a dearth of competent musicians. Crusading bop was the center of creative activity. Consequently, the newcomers to jazz patterned their music so directly after [Charlie] Parker, [Dizzy] Gillespie, [Miles] Davis and the other leaders that much of the music of this and of the postwar era degenerated into an endless repetition of bop clichés. Thus, the complex, highly individual styles perfected by Parker and a handful of great bop musicians unwittingly determined the course of jazz history. Their return to ‘raw emotions’ is a saving landmark in the tradition of jazz.... Though jazz has struggled through a period of rejection and disfavor, many of us who were overseas during the war returned to the United States with confidence in its future as an important contribution to world music. We had witnessed for ourselves the powerful symbol of freedom jazz had become in Nazi Germany—and the role it had played toward liberation in the French Underground, Sweden and England. There was a vitality in jazz—a basic universal dream implicit in its free expression of the individual—that made it an important music not only to Americans, but to the world.... There is need now for historical perspective and a conscious acceptance of the jazz tradition. The returning veterans who crowded the music conservatories to study under the G.I. Bill offered us a new hope.... Many of the jazz greats have been completely unaware of their roles, and in their freedom from classical restraint have succeeded so well in expressing their own individuality that they have touched upon the universal.”

Reading Ten—Statement by Duke Ellington; in Writing Jazz, edited by David Meltzer (Mercury House, 1999, pp.146-147, p.152).

“Well, when the war came along, a few years back, people wondered whether music was going to be one of the casualties. Would it have to take a back seat for a while? Would we have to sacrifice it at a time when bombs and bullets had an A-1 priority over Boogie-Woogie and Bach? I think these last few years have proved that music doesn’t kick up its heels and call it quits under crisis. Music is staying by popular request of the fighting men and the folks they left behind. And that goes for all music....Swing is my beat. Not jazz in the popular sense of the word, which usually means a chatty combination of instruments knocking out a tune. Swing, as I like to make it and play it, is an expression of sentiment and ideas-modern ideas. It’s the kind of music that catches the rhythm of the way people feel and live today. It’s American music because it grew out of our folk music, picking up a little from every section of the country....The music of my race is something more than the ‘American idiom’. It is the result of our transplantation to American soil, and was our reaction in the plantation days to the tyranny we endured. What we could not say openly we expressed in music, and what we know as ‘jazz’ is something more than just dance music. When we dance it is not a mere diversion or social accomplishment. It expresses our personality, and right down in us, our souls react to the elemental but eternal rhythm, and the dance is timeless.”

Reading Eleven—Statement by Dizzy Gillespie; in Writing Jazz, edited by David Meltzer (Mercury House, 1999, pp.189, 192).

“Beboppers were by no means fools. For a generation of Americans and young people around the world, who reached maturity during the 1940s, bebop symbolized a rebellion against the rigidities of the old order, an outcry for change in almost every field, especially in music. The bopper wanted to impress the world with a new stamp, the uniquely modern design of a new generation coming of age... We never wished to be restricted to just an American context, for we were creators in an art form which grew from universal roots and which had proved it possessed universal appeal. Damn right! We refused to accept racism, poverty, or economic exploitation, nor would we live out uncreative humdrum lives merely for the sake of survival. But there was nothing unpatriotic about it. If America wouldn't honor its Constitution and respect us as men, we couldn't give a s--- about the American way [in response to the suggestion that beboppers tended to express unpatriotic attitudes regarding segregation, economic injustice, and the American way of life].”