

Remember When . . .

Big bands proved “It don’t mean a thing if you ain’t got that swing.”

Young people today can use technology to create every sound imaginable. **Do you have any relatives who can make music on their computers?** However, for many of us, American music was never better than in the big band era, when 15 or 20 musicians blended their sounds together, live, with no mistakes or pause buttons. This week, we will talk about the big band sound, and the idea that “It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing.”

The big band era started in the 1920s. These bands played jazz music, but with few solos. They also often contained a string section so they could recreate classical music pieces as well. But this started to change with the introduction of a new genre called swing music. **How was this music different from other jazz?** (*It had a looser rhythm and feel, and was better adapted to dancing.*) By the mid-1930s, many big bands dropped the string section, and let their top musicians have more room for solos. **Did you ever play in a band, either in or out of school? If so, what instrument did you play?**

Each big band had its own unique style. For example, Cab Calloway’s band was bluesy, and served mostly to back up their leader’s hep-cat vocal stylings. Duke Ellington was known for his soaring melodies and complicated arrangements, while Benny Goodman’s big band was more straightforward. **Do you remember what instruments Ellington and Goodman played?** (*Ellington played piano; Goodman played clarinet.*) In 1938, Goodman led the first integrated band of any kind to play at Carnegie Hall. The picture here shows him with vibraphone genius Lionel Hampton. **Do you think this was a major step forward in terms of race relations?** And Glenn Miller’s smooth trombone was everyone’s favorite sound from 1939 to 1944. **What happened to Glenn Miller in 1944?** (*On his way to entertain troops in France during World War Two, his airplane disappeared in bad weather over the English Channel.*)

All big bands relied on how well the instrumental sections worked together.

But they all figured out ways to work in the occasional vocalist.

Some of the greatest singers in U.S. history came out of the big band tradition. Two of them, often considered the greatest American singers of the 20th century, are shown here. **Do you agree about the greatness of Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald? Who else would you include on the list of great American singers?**

As time went on, musical styles changed, and big bands either learned to adapt or dropped out of sight. Bandleader Spike Jones used humor and sound effects with his big band, the City Slickers. Count Basie stayed relevant by incorporating more blues and pop sounds. Many bandleaders found homes on television shows. Skitch Henderson led the band on “The Tonight Show” before retiring and being replaced by his lead trumpet player. **Do you remember the name of this trumpet player?** (*Doc Severinsen.*) And, of course, Lawrence Welk stayed on the airwaves for many years with his orchestra, his accordion, and some of the most wholesome singers in the history of television. **Did you like Lawrence Welk? Why or why not?**

Big bands still exist today, of course. Although they may not be as fashionable as they once were, they can still draw crowds and get people dancing. **Do you think this kind of music will become fashionable again? Why or why not?**
END



CONNECTION IDEAS:

There is never a bad time to watch this clip of Cab Calloway and the Nicholas Brothers from “Stormy Weather,” a number that Fred Astaire thought was the best dance sequence ever filmed: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8yGGtVKrD8>.