Essay on the Big Band Era in American Music

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The Big Band era was an important period in time for music and culture within the United States. The purpose of the present sample essay provided by Ulitus is to discuss the Big Band era in greater depth. The essay will be broken up into four primary parts. The first part will consist of a general overview of the era itself. After this, it will consider some of the key features of the music of the Big Band Era. Then, it will proceed to a discussion of one of the key musicians of this era: Duke Ellington. Finally, the essay will reflect on the historical situation of the Big Band era, as well as the ongoing significance of this era for American history within the context of the present day.

**Overview of the Big Band Era**

To start with, then, it is worth pointing out that the Big Band era is also commonly known as the Swing era. As All Music has written: "'Big band music' as a concept for music fans is identified with most with the swing era, although there were large, jazz-oriented dance bands before the swing era of the 1930s and '40s, and large jazz-oriented concert bands after the swing era" (para. 1). Conceptually, then, big band music tends to slide into the related categories of swing music and jazz music, with it often being somewhat difficult to draw a clear line between these genres of music. Moreover, the classification of big band music itself as such can often obscure real differences between the various musicians and performers who fall under that umbrella—some of whom may be more different from each other than either of them are from musicians or performers in a different era altogether.

What can be said for certain, however, is that big band music is associated with the Big Band era, and the Big Band era specifically refers to the decades of the 1930s and the 1940s within America—and even more specifically, it generally refers to the historical period between the Great Depression and World War II. (The era is sometimes extended, though, partially back into the 20s and partially onward into the 50s. Big band music, like jazz and related genres of music, would seem to be traceable to the African American community within the United States. As Gordon et al. have written:

Drawing its origins back to New Orleans in 1898, following the end of the Spanish-American war, African-Americans interested in becoming musicians purchased instruments from decommissioned military bands. These self-taught African-Americans played unconventionally which provided new sounds and different scales to a growing musical genre. (para. 2)

This was the humble beginning of what would later come to be known as big band music.

**The Music of the Era**

Regarding big band music itself, the name of the genre is fairly self-explanatory: "Big Band refers to a jazz group of ten or more musicians, usually featuring at least three trumpets, two or more trombones, for or more saxophones, and 'rhythm section' of accompanists playing some combination of piano, guitar, bass, and drums" (para. 1). In short, big band music is produced by a literally big band: unlike most contemporary rock bands, for example, that only have four or five members, big band groups generally had a dozen or so members, and possibly more. This not only enhances the sheer volume of the music produced by the band, it also allows for possibilities of complexity and innovation that may not possible when fewer musicians are involved. (Most rock songs, for example, have rather simple rhythm and instrumentation, relative to much of the music produced by big band, swing, or jazz groups.)

Lussier has delineated some of the main skills that are needed in order to play effective within a big band group, from the perspective of a jazz educator. These include: "sight-reading (in a variety of styles), section playing, woodwind doubles for saxophonists, endurance for brass players, playing accurately and in tune, successfully performing a broad range of repertoire and performing with world-class artists" (para. 2). Some of these skills are, of course, shared in common by all musicians. Big band musicians in particular, though, would need endurance in order to have the energy to perform and sustain the style of music produced by big band groups; and they would also need to be good and working well and learning to adapt within a wide range of group settings, since the nature of big band music is such that a musician within the genre may play with several different groups over the course of his career or even at the same time within a given section of his career.

**Key Musician: Duke Ellington**

One key example of a big band musician is Duke Ellington. As the Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica have written: "One of the originators of big-band jazz, Ellington led his band for more than half a century, composed thousands of scores, and created on of the most distinctive ensemble sounds in all of Western music" (para. 1). Ellington's own instrument was a piano; and the reference to his career as a bandleader is a characteristic feature of jazz music in general and big band music in particular: several other musicians within a given group may come and go, but the bandleader is generally the lynchpin who holds together the identity of the group as a whole. Ellington was one of the most innovative of the bandleaders within the Big Band era; he was born in 1899 and died in 1974, meaning that a prominent part of his professional musical career overlapped with the paradigmatic era of the big bands, which again was primarily the 1930s and 1940s.

Of course, Ellington is primarily known as a jazz musician; and this once again calls attention to the fact that big band is essentially just a jazz or swing band consisting of many different members. Moreover, Ellington's career itself demonstrates that the concept of big band music itself is by no means an unproblematic one: the quote the Editors again, "Although Ellington's compositional interests and ambitions changed over the decades, his melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic characteristics were for the most part fixed by the late 1930s, when he was a star of the swing era. The broken, eighth-note melodies and arryhthms of bebop had little impact on him" (para. 7). This fundamentally separated Ellington from, for example, other innovators such as John Coltrane, even as he is often generically classified in the same terms as Coltrane. This shows the extent of diversity that exists within big band music itself, to the point that the unity of the genre itself may have more to do with historical factors than to strictly musicological ones.

**Reflection: Historical Significance**

The Big Band Era is situated in a critical period of American history, right in between the Great Depression and World War II. The Great Depression was perhaps one of the darkest times in American history; and after World War II, America emerged as the most powerful nation on the planet. The Big Band era thus saw this fundamental reversal of fortunes for the nation of America—a reversal that in several respects has still sustained to this very day. In this context, it is worth critically exploring the possible relationships between the emergence of big band music on the one hand and the historical situation of that emergence on the other. If it is true, as Marx and Engels suggested, that culture is also a reflection of historical processes and cannot be held completely separate from those processes, then it should be possible to detect some interesting connections between the music and the moment.

Moore, for instance, has stated the following point: "When the United States entered the war in 1941, swing music went to war, too. Jazz music provided comfort for families at home and soldiers abroad. Many musicians were drafted into the military and took their music with them. Some of them led military jazz bands that traveled the world to boost the morale of the troops" (para. 5). In short, big band music had become a fundamental part of American culture within the Big Band era, and when war became a part of the American experience during this time, big band music and the war began to interact with each other. At the very least, this testifies to the fact that big band music was not some sort of fringe phenomenon, the way experimental jazz and such tends to be seen these days. Rather, it was a fundamental part of how America saw itself, to the point that big band music could even be utilized to serve patriotic purposes.

Weinstock has reinforced this point in his own article on this subject: "As World War II approached, there were at least fifty nationally famous big dance bands in the United States and hundreds of others with local reputations. During the war, Swing distinguished itself on the home front as well as overseas, both in uniform and in civics. It was such a positive morale booster that it is arguable whether we could have won the war without it!" (para. 7). It is actually somewhat unclear whether that last statement is literal or hyperbolic in nature. What is clear, however, is that overseas, big band music helped remind soldiers of home, and it also served as a tangible symbol of what they were fighting to defend and protect. Big band music was fundamentally dance music, and this would have likely reminded soldiers of great times that they had had in their lives—times that they would no longer be able to have in the event that they lost the war. At the very least, then, it will be safe to say to big band music contributed to the American war effort in a meaningful way.

Big band music also proved to be one of the key modes of the diffusion of American culture after its emergence. As Gordon et al. have indicated, for example, "Big Band music moved around the world as music always does, through the fans. . . . In certain urban areas the Big Band sound gained enough exposure to be able to inspire musicians in other countries to form their own Big Bands entirely" (para. 5). Clearly, the cultural hegemony of America has only grown ever stronger over the course of the last several decades; and the diffusion of big band music could in a way be read as an early example of this kind of hegemony. This is at least to an extent simply due to the fact that big band music (or swing and jazz more generally) is almost one of the only forms of culture that can be recognized as quintessentially American in nature: it grew within America, on the basis of the historical experience of America, and cannot readily be traced back to European or other predecessors. This fact would also help explain why big band music got intertwined with the American war effort: it really was a distinctively American phenomenon in which the nation could take real and justified pride.

**Conclusion**

In summary, the present essay has consisted of a discussion of the Big Band era in American history and music. After providing an overview of the era, discussing the music of the era, and considering a key musician of the era, the essay shifted into a reflection on the historical significance of the era from a broader perspective. A main conclusion that has been reached here is that the music of the Big Band era became an integral part of American culture during that era, to the point that it even became integrated with the war effort when World War II came around. To an extent, this can be attributed to the fact that big band music was in fact a homegrown American phenomenon with which the nation as a whole could identify itself. This insight almost makes one nostalgic for a similar kind of phenomenon in these more fragmented times.

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