

BIG BAND MUSIC: The rise and fall

This essay discusses the rise and fall of big band music. It includes a back ground to the music industry of the 30's and 40's, as well as a lengthy discussion on World War II and its side effects. 8 pages long.

BIG BAND MUSIC

INTRODUCTION

Big band music solely occupied the Billboard Hot 100 charts, the world's most important music indicator, between 1930-1955 longer than any other style of music in the twentieth century. The only two runners up were Rock & Roll and Disco, which dominated the charts between 1956-1959 and 1976-1979 respectively. Despite these statistics, big band music fell and this study will attempt to explain the elements that led to its fall.

This essay will begin with a description of the rise of big band music in order to provide the reader with a back ground to the music industry of the 30's and 40's. The discussion will focus on the fall of big band music and its association with World War II.

ORIGINS

Big Band music evolved out of the Jazz band era of the twenties. The 20's experienced a talent boom producing musicians like Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Jelly Roll Morton, Fats Waller, and King Oliver, amongst others, which coupled with the Harlem Renaissance, made available many musicians transforming the average five member Jazz bands into bigger bands. In fact the origins of big band comes from bands like Duke Ellington's enlarged band at the Cotton Club In Harlem, Earl Hines big band in Chicago, and Louis Armstrong at the Savoy in Harlem. These were just known as bigger bands but "BIG" band music was specifically associated with the white bands and musically meant anything with two cornets, a trombone, and three saxophones. Therefore as the bands got bigger along with the arrival of a new generation of musicians, the sounds changed according to the bandleader's instrument.

Big Band music's sounds and styles were built around their leaders and their instruments, for example, Benny Goodman's clarinet, Tommy Dorsey's trombone, Harry James' trumpet, and Gene Kruppa's drums. The musical director which often involved the leaders themselves established how a musical style would be presented, what kind of sound the band would have, and who would play the role of sideman in the band. As for Big band's middle name "swing music", it came from Duke Ellington's title song in 1932 "It don't mean a thing if it Ain't Got That Swing" which provided swing music with its anthem as well as a new name for Jazz music.

BIG BAND'S APPEAL

Big Band's musical success rested in its simple and easily understood dance rhythms along with its ability to possess you, when heard live. Big Bands were the first large musical orchestras to be made accessible to the masses which providing a new musical experience. This new experience despite the film craze, which was thirty years young, attracted the masses unlike any other style of music had done before. Coinciding with the music and film craze came the "Hollywood Musical" film which combined both music and film creating a wide spread interest in dance. Therefore as both the big band craze and film craze occurred, it was only a matter of time before both film and music combined to create the Hollywood Musical.

Film, therefore, created its first dance team Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers who were responsible for popularising dance and turning it into a craze which was called "Romantic Love", that is love demonstrated through dance. Dance was inherently tied to big band music, which made dance stars, from Hollywood Musicals, necessary. Therefore film and the music industry were inseparable between 1930-the mid fifties which made the entertainment industry work as a whole thus making it much stronger and durable. The film and music industries were linked because, the music styles that were used were similar and secondly, the entertainers of that era were trained in vaudeville which meant that they could sing, act and dance,

sometimes including playing an instrument, effectively. James Cagney, Judy Garland, Mickey Rooney, Gene Kelly, Frank Sinatra, Doris Day, and Fred Astaire just to name a few.

WORLD WAR II AND BIG BAND MUSIC

Big band music depended on three elements in its musical style; bands had to tour regularly to be seen live, their sounds had to be danceable, and there had to be unity within the band. Therefore, to bring about the fall of big band music, one had to disrupt these elements which would deprive big band of its most appealing factor: a community of musicians playing danceable rhythms, live.

World War II led to big band's fall by bleeding the industry of its musicians, grounding big band tours, and by creating physiological changes that caused divisions within the industry which shattered its united community. World War II first attack on the big band industry came by its demand of manpower, which drained the band's talent. In 1941 186 theatres were built on army and navy bases, along with "The Flying Showboat" which transported entertainers to tour the Caribbean, Puerto Rico, and British Guyana. In 1942 many big band leaders, such as Artie Shaw, Eddy Duchin, Glenn Miller, and Bob Crosby, entered the armed forces, not to mention the individual musicians who were enlisted. Another wave of artists, of whom the first to go over seas was Al Jolson, were busy selling war bonds, such as Tommy Dorsey, Cab Calloway, and a host of other Hollywood stars. Last but not least Bob Hope decided to offer a traveling show for soldiers on the home front by broadcasting a radio show from a different camp every week.

These initiatives drained the music industry of its best musicians, which it depended on for its survival. The musicians played a large role in building up moral, which congress recognised by giving Irving Berlin the congressional gold medal for writing music, which contributed to the over all war effort. But while they were doing so their home based industry was weakened allowing other styles of music, like bebop, to rise. The musicians were winning the war abroad but loosing hold of their industry at home.

There were also material drains on the industry of which gas and transportation shortages played their part in grounding big band touring. This led big band leaders to volunteer in the army's musical tours principally to keep their bands together. To make matters worst the recording industry come to a halt because both the military and recording industry needed shellac and as military concerns got priority, record production was disrupted.

Furthermore disputes among the Federation of musicians led to a recording ban from 1942-1944 leaving record production at a stand still. The difficulties with record production during the war deprived jazz music of documentation. Big bands, with their association to dance which could transmit music to dance halls across the country, then turned to radio, for exposure, accepting lower salaries hoping to make more money when they returned on the road. However while big bands were playing on the radio they were not playing for a live audience which deprived big band music of its most appealing factor.

The loss of manpower and material resources restricted big band music of its most appealing characteristics, that is, 20-30 of the top musicians traveling to nightspots for their one-night gigs. Even though there were 200 different big bands in the forties, wartime demands deprived the big bands industry of some of their major bandleaders.

The ideological changes were sentimental and opportunistic and brought about division within the industry which destroyed its community. These changes caused emphasis to shift from musicians to singers, encouraged bands to diminish in size, and helped individualistic forms of jazz music to rise.

The opportunistic changes during the war occurred when a few musicians and singers, who escaped the draft, saw the opportunity to exploit the law of supply and demand by demanding higher salaries. Higher salaries made it too expensive for big bands to resume going on the road after the war because the bands were forced to ask too much money to pay musicians.

The sentimental changes during the war also caused a more dramatic change. The demand for sentimental music began during the Great Depression creating the transition from jazz band's roaring twenties to the big band's sentimental thirties. However, sentimental change, during World War II shifted emphasis from

instrumental big band music to singer's voices. People often preferred to listen to Frank Sinatra and by the end of the war, the music world was a singer's world. However, despite the fact that singers gained importance, controlling almost every position in the charts between 1947-1955. Big band orchestrations still dominated as the principle style of music during this era.

THE END OF AN ERA

The fall of Big Band evolved and occurred over time. World War II began this epic fall by causing a disruption of its continuity and by creating divisions within the industry. However the post World War era also played its role in big band music's fall by introducing a new form of jazz called bebop. Musically, bebop was composed of long phrases, unexpected pauses; melody accentuated by drums and its band size was smaller as opposed to big bands large orchestras. This trend of smaller bands began during World War II when traveling was difficult and salaries began to rise, band leaders opted for creating trios, quartets, quintets, of which Louis Armstrong and the Hot fives is a classic example. Bebop was a manifestation of musicians who wanted solo space in their concert performances. The musicians that escaped the draft began acting like spoiled brats, calling for solo space thus destroying big band music's community. One could say that bebop developed when musicians got tired of repetition during the swing era and essentially grew out of the after hour jam sessions that also developed during World War II.

Bebop was jazz music in an intellectualised sense in that very few people could understand it let alone dance to the music. Bebop was in fact so complicated to perform, for most musicians, that a reaction against it created the jazz style known as "Cool Jazz" which was bebop in a simplified manner. In essence because nobody could understand the music, let alone dance to it, many audiences turned their backs on jazz music clearing the road for rock & roll music. Although, bebop filtered down through all facets of the entertainment & advertisement industry, the music was never fully excepted by the public. Big Band music was the last time that jazz music dominated the BillBoard charts. Bebop paved the way for jazz music's exit from the mainstream charts and many wonder whether jazz music could ever make it to the top again.

CONCLUSION

Big band music fell when World War II drafted its best musicians, grounded its tours, and halted its record production. While the industry was burdened by the war a few lucky musicians, who avoided the draft, further weakened the industry by making salary demands that would restrict big bands live tours after the war. World War II disrupted the big band industry's continuity, which gave rise to other jazz music styles like bebop. The rise of bebop was significant because the mass audience lost its appeal for jazz because bebop could not be understood and did not have danceable rhythms. This led Rock & Roll to become the dominant style of music and permanently severed jazz music from the pop charts.

by Pierre Hobson