

# SWING MUSIC

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SWING-MUSIC is for the layman just a new name for what another generation called jazz. It serves not infrequently, even among its intellectual amateurs and estheticians, to distinguish jazz of some artistic value from the routine commercial product. Among the professionals, however, it means a certain kind of rhythm. In defining the nature of that rhythm I am going to write a brief history of popular dance-steps and their music from the beginning of jazz, around 1912, to the present day.



Primitive, or pre-swing, jazz is definable as an ostinato of equally-accented percussive quarter-note chords (these take care of rhythm and harmony) supporting a highly syncopated melodic line.

I am defining here dance-jazz as it was to be heard almost anywhere between 1912 and 1932. The introduction into popular dance-music of the jazz-formula, or unvarying accent, was a basic simplification that made possible an added complexity in the ornamental and expressive structure.\*

Elsewhere in print are lists of musical means and devices commonly employed in jazz performance. All I care to recall here is that an ostinato of percussive quarter-note chords was their basic support both rhythmically and harmonically.

Swing-music is based on an ostinato of a different kind. Its rhythm (to use the language of poetic versification) is a rhythm of quantities and not a rhythm of accents or stresses.

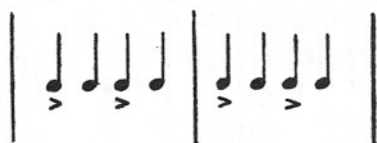
Let us examine dance-rhythms a little and see how it got that way.

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\*Stravinsky's *Sacre du Printemps*, written in 1912, exploits an identical procedure. (It begins, by the way, with a "hot" solo for bassoon on high C.) The *Danse des Adolescents* begins with equally-accented percussive chords to which are added irregularly-placed *sfz* stresses and, later, hot solos in non-vertical counterpoint. The contrast between control and spontaneity is the most striking thing of its kind in classical music.

I mention the parallel to show that the dissociation of rhythm from beat took place in different kinds of music and on two continents at the same time. It was nobody's invention.

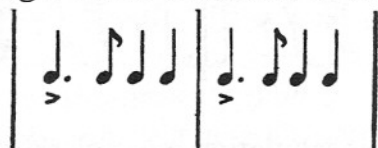
Pre-jazz Rag-time Two-step.



Jazz fox-trot. Basic simplification.



Tango. Enter the Latin influence.



Parisian tango. Takes on jazz-accent.



Charleston. Jazz takes a tango accent.



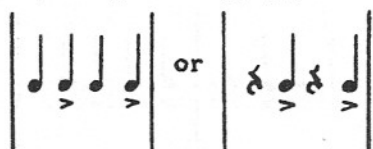
Rumba. Spanish America goes Negroid.



Biguine. Spain is buried in the jungle.

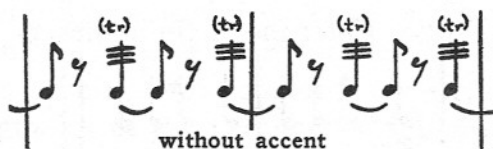


## Lindy Hop. Swing approaches.



## Continental. Swing is here.

Spain is restored to the dance-floor and Africa to her drums, while the richest fancies of European melodic and harmonic styles have a field-day of uncontrolled improvisation through the good agency of our old friend the two-step.



Let us examine this tabulation more closely. All these dances are of new-world origin. The tango is a modern name for an Argentine version of the nineteenth century Habanera (from Havana). The two-step (a characteristic U. S. dance) is a 4/4 (alla breve) version of the Boston, as distinguished from the Viennese, or whirling waltz. Hesitations, Maxixes, Barn-Dances, Turkey Trots, Lame Ducks, the superb and buoyant Castle Walk, were all new-world steps. The fusion of the Hispanic, Anglo-Celtic and Negroid elements of all these into a single formula was a twenty-years' dance-war. It was fought out in Paris mostly, where the pure Hispanic and the pure Anglo-Celtic elements could meet on friendly but neutral ground. Each side, as we shall see, had its Negro troops.

By 1918 Anglo-America had stripped herself down to the fox-trot and the one-step, Latin-America to the tango. In the mid-twenties the battle was still a stale-mate. The French tax-laws obliged all night clubs to have both kinds of orchestras, and American trumpet players were fraternizing with Argentines at the bar. The two sides didn't mix their musical efforts much, but the tango unconsciously equalized its accents.

The folks back home were getting bored with all this undramatic trench war. The United States went wild first, and when the dust died down, it was evident that their new wildness, the

Charleston, had somewhere or other acquired a suspiciously Hispanic accent. (It had long been the custom of W. C. Handy and the Mississippi Valley school to use a tango-bass in the middle section of a Blues number.)

Then Latin-America got jittery too. She went Negroid and fancy in the form of Rumbas and Biguines. The original Habanera down-beat reappeared along with floor-length dresses and the old Boston waltz. The U. S. countered with the even fancier Lindy Hop and a return to the pre-war two-step (off the beat).

Swing-music is approaching. Latin-America holds out for a strong down-beat. Anglo-America for a strong off-beat. Latin-America offers a percussive shimmer on its other beats. Anglo-America a rest. Swing-rhythm is the solution. The shimmer is kept, but on the off-beats only, and accents are sacrificed by both sides. The percussive shimmer stops where a beat would be expected to occur, only the beat doesn't occur. The treaty was signed in the form of an international ball-room accomplishment named appropriately for the chief battle-ground and popularized from Hollywood, the Continental.

All the characters of our little history are now happily united. The 4/4 Boston waltz, or two-step, is the new basis of operations. Body-positions and some foot-work are added from the Lindy Hop and the Tango (all passion restrained, however).

The percussive basis of the new music is the West Indian shimmer. Down-beats are expressed only by a cessation of that shimmer. Here, therefore, is the special characteristic of swing-music. It is founded on a pure quantitative (rather than an accentual) rhythm.\*

Melody, harmony and all the thumpy percussion are henceforth liberated from formal rhythmic observances. The melodic instruments are not obliged even to syncopate, either by delay or by anticipation. They are free to improvise continuously or alternatively on the tune (it is more often the harmony that remains fixed than the tune) in that sort of spontaneous lyrical effusion mixed with vocal imitation and pure instrumental virtuosity that the French call so charmingly "le style hot."†

They are not really free not to play "hot;" that is to vary and to contradict the underlying measure at every possible point,

\*Quantitative rhythm is not new in musical art. The merry-go-round, the hurdy-gurdy, and the pipe-organ have only quantitative rhythm.

†The technic of this improvisation was developed from the free two-measure "breaks" of the early Blues.

because a quantitative rhythm is a very powerful and monotonous thing, as impressive and as boring over any length of time as organ-music. Its emotional impassivity incites to emotional wildness, to irregular pattern, to strange timbres, to mysterious outbursts and inexplicable tensions.

It also liberates for free expressive use all the short or thumpy sounds of the percussion section. And few things in music are as expressive as a thump. One cymbal or snare-drum being sufficient to keep up the swing, regularly-placed *sfz* stresses become in themselves a form of hot solo exactly as they do in the *Sacre du Printemps*.

Liberating the percussive banjo, guitar and piano liberates the harmony also from direct rhythmic control. Hence we now have all the emotional elements of the orchestra disengaged from point-counter-point and released for the exercise of modern free polyphony. The steady support underneath of the non-emotional quantitative rhythm, both stimulates and accentuates the superposed emotional expression. The result at its best is indeed sumptuous.

I shall not go into here any detailed recounting of the higher points and qualities of contemporary swing-art. They are discussed fully and vigorously in Monsieur Hugues Panassié's magnificent volume *Le Jazz Hot*.\* You will find there a wealth of fact and discrimination about "le style Chicago" and "le style New Orléans." About the instrumental innovations of Bix Beiderbecke and Muggsy Spanier (good jazz and swing-music have never been Negro monopolies). Of what distinguishes "le style hot" from "le style straight." Of the art of five-part improvisation. Of the diverse merits of the divers famed "solistes hot." Of the difference between real and merely commercial jazz. You will be inducted into an orderly study of the historical and stylistic development of the whole business from Handy to Ellington, with especial attention to the Chicago school, where the categorical German and the spontaneous Negro musicalities united to produce in Louis Armstrong (originally a New Orleans boy) a master of musical art comparable only (and this is my comparison not M. Panassié's) to the great castrati of the eighteenth century. His style of improvisation would seem to have

\**Le Jazz Hot*, by Hugues Panassié, Paris, 1934, Editions R. A. Corrèa, which is soon to appear in an English translation by Lyle and Eleanor Dowling, published by M. Witmark and Sons, New York.

combined the highest reaches of instrumental virtuosity with the most tensely disciplined melodic structure and the most spontaneous emotional expression, all of which in one man you must admit to be pretty rare. You will also learn something (though not really enough) of the fascinating lingo the swing-people use. You will weep tears over the author's efforts to define the word in French, its musical significance being hardly covered by *balancement* and matters being in no way helped by the already-accepted French usage of *swing* as a term in pugilism. You will find all this and many more matters of both historical and esthetic importance discussed in *Le Jazz Hot*, the whole topped off by photographs of great men, indices and a unique bibliography of records.

I cannot compete with M. Panassié in either learning or enthusiasm. I can only come back to what I started out to do, which is to state in these pages (being asked) a definition of swing-music (the estheticians of swing having neglected that point) which I believe to be both original and correct. That definition, to sum it up, is this. Swing-music is a form of two-step in which the rhythm is expressed quantitatively by instruments of no fixed intonation, the melodic, harmonic and purely percussive elements being freed thereby to improvise in free polyphonic style.

*Postscript:*

I haven't stated, I find, just why swing-music swings and beat-music doesn't. Remember the Viennese waltz? Well, the whole story is there. It isn't the strong down-beat that makes a dancer swing. A strong down-beat only makes him whirl. A strong off-beat makes him jerk. A percussive roll or trill is what makes him swing. Give him the roll and no beat and he can neither whirl nor jerk. He can only swing and that lightly, because there is no place for the swing to take him. He can also sit still and listen.