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Colin Rensch

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Operation Swing: How Jazz Helped to Win WWII

Colin Rensch Twitter: @ColinRensch

Departments of Music and History, Mellon Scholars, Hope College

Project Overview

Names like Glenn Miller and Benny Goodman are inextricably linked to the Swing Era and were at the height of their favor during World War II. Songs like “In the Mood” and “Don’t Sit Under the Apple Tree” can be viewed as simply the popular songs of the day, but their importance reaches far beyond the scope of popular media. There already exists an immense body of knowledge in the areas of jazz history and World War II history, but the knowledge base on the history of jazz within the scope of the second World War is limited. My research contributes to the field by showing how the performance and symbolism of jazz as well as certain key jazz musicians helped to win the war in a real sense. My position is that jazz music, and swing in particular, made a significant positive contribution to the war effort, and that, besides guns and ammunition, jazz was used as a weapon in the war. The GIs’ favorite jazz songs helped to keep their love for America strong, the selling of war-bonds was aided by the performance of jazz at concerts and on the radio, and jazz music was a major source of pro-American propaganda that was used to actively “fight” the enemy. World War II and the new world order worked to bring significant changes to the world of jazz as well.



Topics Covered

- The incorporation of swing into United Service Organization (USO) and war bond concerts
- Racial and Ethnic Cooperation
- The symbolic importance of jazz as a democratic art form
- Glenn Miller and the role of bandleaders and musicians in the war

Swingin’ for Cash

The performance of swing as part of USO and war-bond fundraising concerts was critical to the war effort. These were concerts that benefited soldiers and helped to fund the war, bringing together famous musicians, black and white. Many classic jazz recordings are taken from such events as *Esquire* magazines "All-American Concert" series with artists like Louis Armstrong and Benny Goodman. The concert was the yearly highlight of “*Esquire*’s annual swing [music] poll” a contest giving awards for the best songs of the year. The artists of the winning songs would perform them at the showcase concert in New York City, raising money for the Navy League and war loan drive. These concert drew record numbers and helped to make significant financial contributions to the war effort.

It was hoped that these concerts would, in President Roosevelt’s words, help to “promote [the] tolerance of minority groups . . . by showing their cultural contributions to . . . American life.” Prior to the civil rights movement the “toleration of minority groups” was hardly ever pursued. There were, however, a few successful musical endeavors during the war that attempted to reconcile racial and ethnic differences. Benny Goodman, for example, led a successful campaign to raise money for Russian war relief. Russia was socially, religiously, and politically very different than the US, and Goodman, a Jewish man and jazz musician, led the charge for relief. The success of Goodman’s efforts resulted from temporary racial and ethnic cooperation in the face of a common international enemy.



Musicians and Bandleaders

Famous American bandleaders like Artie Shaw (at right) and Glenn Miller enlisted in the armed forces and led jazz service bands. About patriotic duty Miller, leading the Army Air Force Band pictured at far left, said that he had an “obligation to lend as much support as [he could] to winning the war,” to defend “the freedom and the democratic way of life” in America. Shaw’s Navy Band performed so close to the front lines that enemy aircraft fired near them on multiple occasions. It might seem unusual for these celebrities to put themselves in so much danger, but Shaw and Miller realized the impact that their music had on the troops. In addition to the involvement of bandleaders, musicians like saxophonist Lester Young and pianist Dave Brubeck donned uniforms and put their talents to work for Uncle Sam.

Major Glenn Miller’s Army Air Force Band also recorded for the radio broadcasts of the Allied Forces Network at least thirteen times a week. One such radio program Miller helped to create was *The German Wehrmacht Hour*. These weekly broadcasts featured a female narrator, Ilse, who would interview Miller in German (pictured above) and ask him to perform his swing songs with German lyrics. These broadcasts were transmitted into enemy territory and were created to gain American sympathy.

Study Conclusions

During World War II, jazz made a significant contribution to the war effort by helping to sustain troop morale, helping in the collection of war funds, and standing for the ideals of a democratic nation. Jazz music did not train better soldiers, direct strategy, or prevent the loss of life, but it did help to keep soldiers and civilians focused on what needed protecting: freedom. In Dave Brubeck’s words “Jazz is the thing that expresses the United States, it expresses freedom.” Soldiers accepted it as such, Americans back home accepted it as such, and so did the rest of the world. People loved jazz because the war had taken away so many freedoms, but jazz gave them the hope of the restoration of these freedoms.

The war had an equally strong impact on the whole of jazz. World War II produced chaos, horror, and atrocity such as the world had never seen. The Holocaust, the bombing of civilian areas, and the use of the atomic bomb all changed the public’s perception of war, and this change was felt in the world of jazz. Just as General Douglas MacArthur had great difficulty adjusting to the new age of war, so jazz musicians like Louis Armstrong struggled to accept the new age of jazz. Music has and always will maintain a strong cultural connection to the events of history, and the role of jazz in WWII is just one of many examples of this connection.



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