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Operation Swing: How Jazz Helped to Win World War II

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The incorporation of swing into United
Glenn Miller and the role of bandleaders
to the world of jazz as well.

World War II and the new American propaganda that was used to actively and jazz music was a major source of pro-selling of war besides guns and ammunition, jazz was used as a positive contribution to the war effort, and that, swing in particular, made a significant contribution 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.

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.

Operation Swing: How Jazz Helped to Win WWII
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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 magazine’s “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.

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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.

Sources

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.

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