



# THE JAZZ AGE AND THE SWING ERA



## ACTIVITY ONE: JAZZ AND THE MODERN AGE

Read the following quotes. On a separate piece of paper describe how the jazz music of the 1920s reflected the cultural, political, and social events of the Jazz Age. Refer to your class notes, the music, and the background essay where possible.

“Jazz is the folk music of the machine age.”  
—Paul Whiteman, bandleader

“The memory of things gone is important to a jazz musician. Things like old folks singing in the moonlight in the back yard on a hot night or something said long ago.”  
—Louis Armstrong, trumpeter and vocalist

“I, of course, wanted to play real jazz. When we played pop tunes, and naturally we had to, I wanted those pops to kick! Not loud and fast, understand, but smoothly and with a definite punch.”  
—Count Basie, pianist and bandleader

“I have discovered three things which have no geographical borders—classical music, American jazz, and applause as the sign of the public’s favor.”  
—Jascha Heifetz, violinist

“What he does is real, and true, and honest, and simple, and even noble. Every time this man puts his trumpet to his lips, even if only to practice three notes, he does it with his whole soul.”  
—Leonard Bernstein, conductor and composer, on Louis Armstrong

## ACTIVITY TWO: LISTEN UP!

### Listening One



The improvised solo is a cornerstone of jazz. Instrumentalists, accompanied by a rhythm section or an entire band, perform spontaneous solos over chord changes (the harmonic structure of a tune). The extended improvised jazz solo developed, in part, from breaks, or short phrases performed while the band stops for one or more measures.

Listen to the following excerpts and observe how the soloists play through the breaks. Count the number of beats or measures per break and note the instruments that solo through the break. How does each soloist approach the break? How do the other instruments support the soloist?

- James Reese Europe’s Hellfighter Band, “Memphis Blues”  
 **CD1: Track 16**
- Jelly Roll Morton, “Black Bottom Stomp”  
 **CD1: Track 11**
- Jelly Roll Morton, “Original Jelly Roll Blues”  
 **CD1: Track 12**
- Count Basie and his Orchestra, “Jumpin’ at the Woodside”  
 **CD1: Track 36**






### Listening Two

Stride pianists used their left hand to play low bass notes on beats 1 and 3 and chords in the middle register on beats 2 and 4. At the same time, they would play melody or improvise with their right hand. Listen to the following three masters of stride and jazz piano. Try to distinguish the chords from the melody, and describe how the musicians use either bass notes or chords to support their improvisations.

- Fats Waller, “Handful of Keys”  
 **CD1: Track 33**
- Art Tatum, “Get Happy”  
 **CD1: Track 34**

### Listening Three

Jazz band arrangers employed various techniques to develop a driving sense of swing and to highlight improvised solos. For instance, arrangers used syncopation (offbeat rhythms), riffs (short melodic phrases played repeatedly over a series of chords), and call and response (phrases by a soloist or section that are answered by another section). Listen to the following excerpts and compare how the different bands and arrangers varied the instrumentation (musical instruments used in the arrangements), rhythms, and the interaction between sections (such as brass or reeds) and soloists. Note techniques such as the use of riffs and call and response.

- Fletcher Henderson and his Orchestra, “Keep a Song in Your Soul”  
 **CD1: Track 28**
- Benny Goodman and his Orchestra, “King Porter Stomp”  
 **CD1: Track 38**
- Paul Whiteman and his Orchestra, “Lonely Melody”  
 **CD1: Track 29**
- Count Basie and his Orchestra, “Jumpin’ at the Woodside”  
 **CD1: Track 36**
- Duke Ellington and his Famous Orchestra, “The Mooche” or “Take the ‘A’ Train”  
 **CD1: Tracks 30 and 32**

## ACTIVITY THREE: INDEPENDENT RESEARCH

1. Using primary sources (such as newspapers), find out how Prohibition affected your town or city. Are there editorials or other commentary on the pros or cons of Prohibition? Are there records of speakeasies or related criminal activity? Are there advertisements for jazz concerts or clubs? Was Prohibition considered successful in your area?

2. Research musical styles that were influenced by the jazz and swing artists described in the lesson. Possible topics include (1) the differences between the music of the Jazz Age (1920s) and that of the Swing Era (roughly 1935 to 1950), including soloists, singers, size of bands, and arranging styles; (2) regional differences in the jazz music of Chicago, New York, and Kansas City; (3) the growth of the radio broadcast industry in your region, and its jazz programming in the 1930s and 1940s.

3. Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington was one of the greatest American composers. He wrote thousands of pieces, including songs, instrumentals, suites, and movie scores. In addition, he was a brilliant pianist, orchestrator, and bandleader. Learn more about the life and works of Duke Ellington. Using the library, Internet, and multimedia resources, develop a profile of his life and seminal works. Examine his childhood and first musical experiences in Washington, D.C., his performances in Harlem’s Cotton Club, his band and compositions during the Swing Era, and his later extended works.

Possible resources include: [www.smithsonianjazz.org](http://www.smithsonianjazz.org) (search for Ellington); Ellington’s autobiography, *Music Is My Mistress* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976); and Jazz at Lincoln Center Radio broadcasts about Duke Ellington (there are several to choose from at [www.jazzatlincolncenter.org/jazzcast/archive.asp](http://www.jazzatlincolncenter.org/jazzcast/archive.asp)).