This Mad Thing Called Swing!

By EDWARD BARRY

A FEW YEARS AGO dance music went completely mad. Saxophones wailed devilishly, trumpets cut like knives through masses of sticky tone, frenzied drums beat a steady, unoccupied meter until the minds of listeners literally weakened with excitement.

Here was old gin in new bottles. Here was the unforeseen jazz of the first two decades of the century back with us under a new name—swing!

Jazz had grown steadily less glamorous, had been all but buried under the vogue of "sweet" dance music. Now it burst forth again to continue its development—to add new tone colorings, new rhythmic wrinkles, new sophisticated twists of melody and harmony. The emphasis was again on improvisation, on that wild imaginative ornamentation or development that might appear spontaneously during a rehearsal and be caught and frozen into permanent form by an arranger.

All over the land swing bands sprang up. They poured into listeners' brains, blasted away at ear drums which had become dulcet with too much experience with the Wayne Kings of the world. The vogue of the new music has become all but universal. Daughter Swing, unlike Mother Jazz, enjoys surprising social standing. Not only in smoky dives and cross-roads dance halls, but at expensive parties and in gold-plated hotels, these saxophones are crying and these brasses shouting.

The most interesting thing about swing always has been the behavior of listeners. The music has stirred shoulders and feet and whole bodies to madness. People have jumped and howled, dashed into the aisles of theaters to sway and to dance. They have yelped great, open-mouthed yells full of a strange, junglelike madness. Swing-crazed youngsters at Manhattan Beach near New York once dug holes in the ocean sand and churned the waters of the Atlantic with their wild capping.

At a Benny Goodman concert in staid Ravinia park evolution went smash into reverse when gibbering young fellows returned to the trees and scrambled madly away. However, scientific caution requires acknowledgment here of the possibility that this last phenomenon may have been due to the simple desire of the customers to get a better view of the proceedings.

How? Why? Why? Why? All this commotion and shouting and running about! Are the effects of swing something beyond human understanding, something which must be tabled as unique and given no more thought?

But at all events the effects of swing should be examined in the light of present-day knowledge of the effects of music, for swing, despite all its eccentricities, is indubitably music. The frequent statements of its enemies that swing is not music are hardly to be taken literally. What these enemies mean is that swing is not good music, and that is a question.

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