

What is Swing?



In music, “swing” can mean many things. Swing is a style of jazz that grew from African American roots and the 1920s big-band traditions in Chicago, Kansas City, and New York City. Swing music dominated American popular music from the early 1930s to the mid-40s, and the artists that led swing bands became international celebrities.

Played by big bands led by such luminaries as Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Benny Goodman, and Artie Shaw, swing has a distinctive rhythmic feel. This feel is achieved by accentuating beats 2 and 4, replacing steady eighth notes with lilting, “swinging” eighth notes, and adding accents and syncopation—all anchored by a walking bass line. This gives the music an undeniable groove or beat, which is hard to explain in words. As Louis Armstrong famously said, “If you don’t feel it, you’ll never know it.” Swing makes people want to get up and dance, and a whole new kind of dance evolved along with the music, including dances like the jitterbug and the Lindy hop.

But swing and other forms of jazz are not the only styles of music that swing; in fact, all music can swing—including orchestral music! When musicians play off each other’s musical ideas in the moment, approach playing together with a

fresh and invigorating spirit, and listen deeply and respond to each other with daring and joy, we say that they swing. We encourage you to investigate the many rich meanings of “swing” so that you and your students can understand, experience, and as Armstrong said, “feel” what it means to swing.

- *What does the word “swing” mean to you? (e.g., swing set, swinging back and forth, etc.)*
- *Does anybody know what the term “swing” means in music?*

Go Deeper

Explore the pioneering artists who developed the swing style in the 1930s and ’40s through multimedia stories, recordings, and images on the  Timeline of African American Music at timeline.carnegiehall.org/genres/swing-bands.