

# “Carnegie Hall Jazz Concert”—Benny Goodman (1938)

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Essay by Cary O'Dell



*Benny Goodman*

The uniquely American art form known as “jazz” has had many important milestones. One of its most notable is a sold-out concert—originally conceived, believe it or not, as a publicity stunt—that was held at Carnegie Hall on January 16, 1938. That concert featured the talents of Benny Goodman, America’s King of Swing, and a group of other legendary musicians (including Bobby Hackett, Babe Russin, Vernon Brown, Jess Stacy, Gene Krupa, Johnny Hodges, Harry Goodman, Buck Clayton, Harry Carney, Martha Tilton, and Harry James). And unlike most of the hyperbole that clouds much cultural and musical history, it is not a stretch to say that Goodman and his band’s collective performance that January night changed the course of music, certainly the course of jazz within the world idiom. It granted to the emerging genre a legitimacy previously unknown. It elevated it. The Goodman concert boldly stated, to critics and audiences alike, that jazz was here to stay, and that it demanded to be taken seriously.

Benny Goodman (1909-1987) was already the acknowledged master of swing by the time of the Carnegie Hall concert came around. Even for a successful jazzman, one didn’t get to Carnegie Hall without work and reputation. Goodman was born in Chicago and picked up his first clarinet at age 10. A natural—perhaps even a prodigy—Goodman was playing his first professional gigs by the time he was 11. By age 14, the young musician had quit school and the following year, after the death of his father, Goodman became the sole support of his family. By 16, he had left Chicago and joined Ben Pollock’s band. Goodman struck out on his own at age 25 in 1934. He eventually signed a multi-month appearance agreement with Billy Rose’s Music Hall. There, Goodman and his backup men began to play a type of music that had its roots in Southern jazz forms like Dixieland and ragtime. Its upbeat, danceable rhythms were judged harshly by some but embraced by others. In a precursor to rock and roll, the new music was especially popular with the so-called “younger generation.” After Goodman and his band began to play on NBC Radio’s weekly “Let’s Dance” program and play shows across the country, America’s latest major musical movement was literally in full swing. In 1937, “Time” magazine anointed Goodman the “King” of it.

Ironically, as mentioned, the whole idea of Goodman and company playing Carnegie Hall was originally something of a publicity stunt dreamed up by publicist Wynn Nathanson. He approached music impresario Sol Hurok (who also often promoted/produced Marian Anderson) about the possibility of putting Goodman’s crew in New York’s most prestigious venue. The idea was incredulous. At the time, jazz and swing may have been popular but it was not considered

high art and certainly not worthy of playing a hall that had previously hosted the greatest voices of opera and the finest prima ballerinas of dance. Even Goodman was doubtful and uneasy with the suggestion. But Nathanson and Hurok knew they had a solid idea: “appropriate” or not, this concert would cause all sorts of attention.

Once the deal was done, Hurok and Nathanson fanned public and press flames and Goodman and his musicians got to work on their performance for that night. Cancelling some recording sessions, Goodman moved his orchestra into the Hall weeks early so they could rehearse and become accustomed to the acoustics. As the evening approached, Goodman settled on his set list; it would be a mix of old and new. Audience favorites like “Swingtime in the Rockies,” “Sing, Sing, Sing” and “Blue Skies” would be on the bill as well as a brand new Fletcher Henderson arrangement of “Blue Room” and an ambitious montage titled “Twenty Years of Jazz.” Goodman also planned to include a good, old-fashioned “jam session” on the number “Honeysuckle Rose.” Also taking in part in the gig: Buck Clayton, Freddy Green, Lester Young and Johnny Hodges.

Despite Goodman’s early misgivings, as the day of the show grew nearer, public interest rose. Even at a ticket price of \$2.78 (almost \$100 in current dollar) the concert—over 2,000 seats--was soon a sell out. There was even an active scalping market for tickets if you were interested and could afford it. The day prior to the concert, the press was already weighing in. Even before it occurred, the “New York Times Magazine” recognized the historical significance of the concert saying, “The occasion is a landmark in the growth and recognition of a special kind of music that was reborn after the halcyon days of symphonic jazz some ten years ago...the event will be decisive in the history of swing.”

As things got closer to curtain time, nerves did not abate. Goodman supposedly paced and Harry James, while backstage, stated that he felt like “a whore in church.”

The band opened with “Don’t Be That Way.” Along with that and the numbers mentioned above, other songs performed that night included “Stompin’ at the Savoy,” “Sometimes I’m Happy,” “One O’Clock Jump,” “China Boy,” “Dizzy Spells,” “Sensation Rag,” “I’m Coming, Virginia,” and “Bei Mir Bist du Schoen.” It was a swingin’ evening. Before they were through with their performance, “the boys” had members of the audience dancing in the aisles. “Girl singer” Martha Tilton got five curtain calls for her rendition of “Loch Lomond.”

Even if the next-day newspaper reviews of the concert were mixed, the die had been cast. Jazz had arrived. It had been given legitimacy and was here to stay.

For such a monumental moment in music history, a recording of this performance almost didn’t happen at all. One recording only took place because Albert Marx, now married to former Goodman singer, Helen Ward, produced them as a gift for his wife, with a second set intended as a gift for Goodman. Marx set up three microphones that night—one by the conductor, one each on each side of the band. Goodman’s copies eventually got relegated to a closet in his apartment for 12 years before they were rediscovered by his sister-in-law who brought them to his attention. Goodman passed the masters onto his recording label, Columbia, who, in 1950, issued the first selections (including the famous jam session) ever to be heard by anyone outside the Hall that night. The records, one of the first to be pressed on 33 1/3 long-playing discs, sold over a million copies. In 1985, these recordings were remastered and released on CD. In 1998, after the discovery of earlier aluminum studio masters struck from Marx’s original copies, the full concert was finally released to the music-buying public.

Interestingly, though it took a full 60 years for all the music from this performance to make it out of the Hall and into the ears of the wider world, the Benny Goodman/Carnegie concert was legendary long before. It may not have been the very first time that jazz was elevated to the level

of fine art or was performed in a formal concert setting, but it was the first time that it played New York's Carnegie Hall. And, because of that, the Goodman concert is to jazz what the Bristol Sessions of 1927 were to country music, a "big bang," a defining moment that brought together the best of the best and informed the populace about a new type of American music. Goodman stated some years later, "I think the band I had at the Carnegie Hall Concert, about that time, was the best band I ever had. It really was a close-knit organization and they had just a wonderful ensemble and great soloists, and I think I got more satisfaction out of that band than any other."

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