In December of 1937, publicist Wynn Nathanson came up with an idea. Benny Goodman should play Carnegie Hall. The resulting January 16, 1938 concert was a huge success, and a turning point for jazz and popular music. Putting the most popular bandleader in the world into the bastion of highbrow culture was a bold move. The concert helped jazz evolve from being strictly dance music to music worthy of a discerning listening audience. It was the start of jazz being recognized as an art form on a par with classical music.

At first, Goodman was hesitant. An avid admirer and participant in classical music, he was skeptical that the audience that attended Carnegie Hall concerts would understand and respond favorably to his music. After some convincing, he warmed to the idea and took it seriously. Impresario Sol Hurok was brought in to lend his imprimatur as the presenter of the concert. Benny gave up several bookings in order to hold rehearsals in the hall, so the musicians could familiarize themselves with the venue’s legendary acoustics. A perfectionist and tough taskmaster, Benny rehearsed the band until they were flawless. The night of the performance, Benny dressed in formal tails and the band in tuxedos. Band vocalist, Martha Tilton, splurged and bought herself an expensive dress from Lord and Taylor for the occasion.

The concert sold out quickly and extra chairs were added on stage to accommodate the overflow crowd. Notoriously absent-minded, Benny had to buy scalped tickets for his family at the last minute. Producer Albert Mark, husband of former Goodman band singer Helen Ward, asked if he could record the concert. After some cajoling, Benny gave his approval. A single microphone was positioned over the band and was relayed by phone lines to two nearby recording studios. Two acetate discs were made, one for Albert Marx, which is in the Library of Congress, and one for Benny. Benny’s copy lay in his closet as a neglected masterpiece for 12 years until one of his daughters discovered it. Realizing its value, Benny didn’t even attempt to play the acetate before turning it over to his record company, Columbia Records.
Released in 1950, the album “Benny Goodman--The Famous 1938 Carnegie Hall Jazz Concert” became one of the first million-selling long-playing records. Many years later, in early 1998, the better-quality original aluminum masters were discovered. The subsequent 1998 CD release included material not found on the original 1950 album.

The idea that jazz was a worthy listening experience for a concert audience was new. “The King of Swing” played music for dancing, though some of his fans had begun crowding the stage to check out their favorite musicians. Handsome and charismatic drummer Gene Krupa, and tall and lean trumpeter Harry James, both had their own devoted fans. Soon after the Carnegie Hall concert both Krupa and James would leave to form their own big bands.

The Benny Goodman Trio and Quartet with Krupa, pianist Teddy Wilson and vibraphonist Lionel Hampton, were among the first integrated groups of black and white musicians to perform in concert. Benny also invited members of Duke Ellington’s and Count Basie’s bands to perform in a “History of Jazz” segment, and take part in a “Jam Session” during the concert. This was nine years before Jackie Robinson broke the color line in major league baseball in 1947.

Swing was the popular music of the time and Benny Goodman and His Orchestra were number one. Benny was 28 at the time. Harry James and Martha Tilton were only 21. Lionel Hampton was 24 and Teddy Wilson was 25. Gene Krupa was the oldest at 29. They were young and ambitious, the superstars of their day. They were big before Sinatra, Elvis and The Beatles.

There were plenty of surprises for those in attendance who were unfamiliar with jazz and swing music. The sinewy glissandos and blue notes of the woodwinds, the shakes, growls and muted sounds of the brass, and the mighty, flashy drumming of Gene Krupa, were sounds never before heard in Carnegie Hall. The vibraphone, an unusual instrument at the time, showcased Lionel Hampton’s astonishing virtuosity. The in-the-moment improvisations of the soloists generated energy and spontaneity not normally heard on the concert stage. The audience was blown away by the unbridled energy and power of the Goodman Band.

I bought the original LP over 50 years ago and was quite familiar with that material. In doing research for this essay, I listened extensively to the CD release of the concert with the additional material. I tried to put myself in the audience that night, some 83 years after the concert took place. The excitement still emanated from my speakers. I was there. It was a wild night.

Let me take you through the concert as I experienced it from beginning to end.

Walking out on stage dressed in his formal tails, Benny receives a warm, enthusiastic welcome from the audience. He had commissioned Edgar Sampson, the composer of “Stompin’ at the Savoy,” to make a new arrangement of Sampson’s song “Don’t Be That Way,” first recorded by Chick Webb in 1934. After rehearsing it on the Carnegie stage, Benny chose this song as the all-important opening number. It catches fire after Gene Krupa’s first drum break. Appropriately, Benny takes the first solo of the evening. After a long decrescendo, another explosive Krupa drum break leads to an exciting last chorus. The crowd goes wild. The evening is off to a good start. Gene Krupa’s drumming contributed mightily to the success of this concert. Though often criticized as bombastic and guilty of incessant four to the bar bass drum pounding (which
covered up the acoustic bass most of the time), it was Krupa’s charismatic, exciting playing that really got the crowd going throughout the concert.

Next came “Sometimes I’m Happy,” the night’s first arrangement by Fletcher Henderson. A low-key dance number from the Goodman repertoire, this piece was left off the original LP.

“One O’clock Jump,” a mainstay of the Count Basie band, is up next. Jess Stacy starts it off with some Basie-like blues piano. After a string of solos, trumpeter Harry James, well-versed in the blues growing up in Texas, connects with the audience and receives an ovation. The classic riffs kick in and keep repeating. Again, Krupa’s fills lift it up with Goodman’s high notes soaring over the top of everything. Crowd goes wild.

The “History of Jazz” segment comes next. The first four selections, The Original Dixieland Band’s “Sensation Rag,” Bix Beiderbecke’s “I’m Coming Virginia,” Ted Lewis’s “When My Baby Smiles at Me” and Louis Armstrong’s “Shine,” are recreations of early jazz recordings. But for the Ellington number, “Blue Reverie,” Ellingtonians Johnny Hodges on soprano sax, Harry Carney on baritone sax and Cootie Williams on trumpet, are brought in. Hodges starts off playing some great evoking his predecessor, the great soprano sax master Sidney Bechet. Years later, John Coltrane’s recording of “My Favorite Things” made the hard to control soprano sax popular in jazz again. Harry Carney solos on baritone sax, followed by a wah-wah muted trumpet solo by Cootie Williams. Goodman and James were top flight soloists, but the rest of the Goodman band were not up to the level of the Ellington and Basie musicians. Goodman wanted the best, regardless of color, so the crowd got a stellar lineup of great soloists.

The orchestra comes back for “Life Goes to A Party,” the first uptempo song of the evening. Not only does James play another cool trumpet solo, he also wrote the swinging arrangement. His solo is followed by a chorus featuring fills by Krupa leading to the dynamic ending.

Next is the jam session on Fats Waller’s “Honeysuckle Rose.” In his program notes, writer Irving Kolodin cautions the audience that jam sessions can be risky and unpredictable. Though not every musician delivers a memorable performance, there are some real high points. We get to hear the great Lester Young in his prime starting off the solo section followed by Count Basie, who was inspired to take three choruses. Basie trumpeter Buck Clayton follows, succeeded by Hodges on alto sax. This is followed by Basie’s “The All-American Rhythm Section” consisting of Basie on piano, Walter Page on bass, and Freddie Green on guitar, with Krupa filling in for Jo Jones on drums. They are followed by Harry Carney on baritone sax and Goodman on clarinet. The great Freddie Green, Count Basie’s rhythm guitar player for over 50 years, was the glue that held the rhythm section together and made it swing. However, he almost never took a solo. The CD reissue includes Green’s two chorus solo on this tune, a real rarity. As occurs in a typical jam session, it sometimes takes a while for the gang of musicians to hit upon something they can agree on and be inspired by. As James comes in, the group finally plays some riffs that catch on. Again, Goodman’s high register clarinet signals the ending. It ends well to good applause, clocking in at around 16 minutes, quite a workout for the musicians and the audience.
Bringing it back down after the jam session, the trio with Benny, Teddy Wilson and Krupa play Johnny Green’s “Body and Soul.” Without a bass, Wilson, with his full-sounding piano style and great left hand, is free to explore whatever harmonic inventions he desires.

Adding Lionel Hampton on vibes, things start hopping again with the quartet’s performance of “Avalon.” Unlike the short solos played in the orchestra arrangements, the small groups gave the musicians plenty of space to stretch out. There’s a great descending ensemble riff that leads to the ending. More applause.

“The Man I Love” is a straight-ahead ballad rendition of the Gershwin standard.

Picking up the tempo, “I Got Rhythm” is the first killer-diller (an extremely fast and exciting piece) of the evening. This is fitting as it closes the first half. Of note: the extra four bar tag in the original composition, usually left out when soloing, is included here. A virtuoso performance by all, ending with Hampton really turning it on. His solo seems to end with a sudden stop. But it starts up again, surprising and delighting the audience. This device is used a few times during the concert. Finally, the quartet builds to a great climax and stirring applause.

Intermission

When asked how long an intermission he wanted, Goodman replied, “I don’t know. How long does Toscanini take?”

Irving Berlin’s “Blue Skies,” one of Fletcher Henderson’s arrangements, starts off the second half of the program. Another great swinging performance.

Before the enormous popularity of Frank Sinatra with the Tommy Dorsey band, most big bands were mainly instrumental ensembles. The vocalists would jump up and sing one chorus then sit back down. The arrangements featured instrumental ensemble sections interspersed with solos by the featured sidemen. As vocalists became more vital to the financial success and longevity of the bands, they began to dominate the scene. Martha Tilton comes on to sing Claude Thornhill’s arrangement of the Maxine Sullivan hit “Loch Lomand.” She receives five curtain calls! Benny has to assure the audience that she’ll be back later for another number.

I wonder if the choice of “Loch Lomand” as the first number for vocalist Martha Tilton had anything to do with the fact that Andrew Carnegie immigrated to the United States from Scotland at the age of 13, to make his fortune in America.

Rogers and Hart’s “Blue Room” is another swinging arrangement commissioned by Benny for the concert. This arrangement is also by Fletcher Henderson.

“Swingtime In the Rockies” is another uptempo killer-diller arrangement by Jimmy Mundy. Explosive drumming by Krupa and a powerful solo by trumpeter Ziggy Elman lead to a dynamic ending.
“Bei Mir Bist Du Schoen” was a huge hit for The Andrews Sisters. This version brings Martha Tilton back to sing the song. In the middle, the band breaks into a happy Jewish freilach. This lively dance interpolation features Ziggy Elman blasting away on trumpet. The combination of Goodman, Tilton and Elman would later result in the huge hit “And the Angels Sing.” I imagine it must have been satisfying for Benny, who learned to play clarinet in a synagogue in Chicago, to feature this Jewish sound in Carnegie Hall, the temple of culture in New York. Always careful to pick the right tempo for a song, Benny’s choices were masterful throughout the concert.

The trio comes back for a spirited “China Boy.” Goodman is encouraged to “Take one more!” and “One more, Ben!” and he does. Krupa plays a solo on brushes.

Edgar Sampson’s “Stompin’ At the Savoy” follows in a quartet version. There are some effective stop time sections and good use of dynamics, but it seems rather long. Krupa’s incessant four to the bar bass drum does drag things down a bit.

The final quartet number is “Dizzy Spells” and it’s another killer-diller. It starts with Krupa at a very fast clip. This one really shows off the group’s virtuosity. Great dynamics and stops add excitement. Hampton’s furious virtuosity is impressive at the end. Big applause.

What can follow such excitement? “Sing, Sing, Sing,” that’s what. The Louis Prima number, arranged by Jimmy Mundy, became one of the iconic performances of the swing era. Whenever I watch a current film or TV show that wants to evoke the swing era, they trot out this number. Krupa’s tom-tom introduction instantly transports the listener back to another time. All the sections are separated by those tom-tom passages. The brass section, tight and biting, really shines on this number. The solos by Babe Russin on tenor sax, James on trumpet and Goodman on clarinet, are all based on just one minor chord. The climax seems to come after Goodman’s solo ends on a seemingly impossible high note. But, right after his solo, Benny points to pianist Jess Stacy to take it. Caught unawares (he’d never been asked to solo on the song before), Jess nevertheless unleashes the most iconic solo of the evening. It’s an impressionistic reverie that has since become a classic. He starts out noodling around before settling on a minor blues progression. Gaining steam, he proceeds to play a lovely, confident solo ending in the piano’s upper register. Krupa lets there be a slight pause before starting a crescendo on the toms that launch into the exciting last chorus, punctuated by Krupa’s snare drum wailing away. This was the highlight of the evening.

The concert could have ended right there. It was the end of the printed program. Two encores were played: “If Dreams Come True” and “Big John’s Special.” Neither are memorable.

Though James and Krupa would leave soon after to form their own bands, these great musicians joined forces for this concert. The Goodman Band’s youth, musicianship, and vitality made them not just the most popular, but one of the best bands of the day. This concert helped establish jazz as a concert art form.

In presenting an integrated All-Star lineup of musicians at Carnegie Hall, Benny Goodman helped move race relations forward as far back as 1938.
An aura of excitement still surrounds this concert. Something extraordinary occurred that evening. We are fortunate to have the recordings so we can listen and relive one of the most important concerts of the 20th Century.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect the views of the Library of Congress.