“Carnegie Hall Jazz Concert”—Benny Goodman
(January 16, 1938; released 1998)
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Essay by Catherine Tackley (guest post)*

On 16 January 1938, the clarinettist Benny Goodman performed a concert at New York’s Carnegie Hall which featured his Orchestra, Quartet and Trio. Guests from Duke Ellington and Count Basie’s bands took part in a “Twenty Years of Jazz” section and a “Jam Session.” The event had been conceived as publicity for the “Camel Caravan” radio show for which Goodman had provided the resident orchestra since 1936. The concert was recorded privately but not released by Columbia Records as “The Famous 1938 Carnegie Hall Jazz Concert” (an early example of an LP box set) until 1950. Consequently, the album played a fundamental role in sustaining Goodman’s career. Although Goodman would never attempt to replicate the 1938 concert exactly in Carnegie Hall itself, it was re-created in various forms, both in the immediate aftermath of January 16, 1938, and following the release of “The Famous 1938 Carnegie Hall Jazz Concert” in 1950. Most notably, the Carnegie Hall concert forms the finale to the 1956 biopic “The Benny Goodman Story” which features several of the original musicians “as themselves,” although Goodman’s involvement extended only to the soundtrack.

Goodman’s Carnegie Hall concert was previewed in several publications in 1938, many of them anticipating a breakthrough or a culture clash in terms of the presentation of swing, the popular music of the day, in a concert hall primarily associated with classical music. In fact, Carnegie Hall had already been the venue for concerts of popular music by the Clef Club, union-like society for African American musicians, dating from 1912. Goodman’s event can be seen as part of an emerging trend for concert presentations of jazz, which contrasted with its predominant use as dance music at the time. Precedents included Paul Whiteman’s 1924 “Experiment in Modern Music” concert, encompassing the premiere of George Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue,” and a response to this event from W.C. Handy who presented the “evolution of Negro music” at Carnegie Hall itself in 1928. Alongside this, there was a growing trend for listening to swing without dancing, through the inclusion of big bands in movie theatres as well as concert presentations of swing music. Nevertheless, the narrative about the controversy of swing in the concert hall continues to be replicated, obscuring the deeper significance of Goodman’s concert.

Alongside the many “airchecks” recorded by diligent and devoted fans at the time, many of which are now commercially available, the album provides an interesting opportunity to hear
Goodman and his ensembles “live” and also to hear the audience reaction (such as the roar of approval following Krupa’s drum break on the opening number “Don’t Be That Way” contrasting with apparently rapt attention to Goodman’s solo). Goodman’s ensembles played a familiar selection from their usual repertoire at Carnegie Hall, ranging from “sweet” ballads and mainstream popular vocal numbers to the latest up-tempo “killer dillers,” but the concert performances do contain some more obviously spontaneous moments which can be attributed to the freedom from the strict time limits of either a radio show or recorded disc. For example, Goodman’s studio recording of “Sing, Sing, Sing” encompassed two sides of a 78RPM disc, but at Carnegie Hall the solos were extended further and new ones added. Similarly, on the Trio’s performance of “China Boy,” Goodman’s colleagues can be heard encouraging him to take “one more” (chorus)-- and he obliges.

The “Twenty Years of Jazz” section most obviously aligned Goodman’s Carnegie Hall concert with its precedents including Whiteman and Handy. The choice of repertoire for “Twenty Years of Jazz” reflects not only the emergence of the jazz canon on record but Goodman’s own biography. The set started with the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, usually understood as having made the first jazz recording, continuing with the comedic clarinettist Ted Lewis-- both formative influences on Goodman. This is followed by numbers associated with great jazzmen-- Bix Beiderbecke, Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington-- all of which replicate recorded versions to at least some degree, including Ellington’s musicians reprising their own recording of “Blue Reverie.” The section concluded with Goodman’s orchestra playing the virtuosic up-tempo number “Life Goes to a Party” by Harry James, which positioned him and Goodman as the culmination of the historical lineage.

Perhaps one of the least successful aspects musically (as well as being the longest item in the concert)--the “Jam Session”-- was actually the most significant within the history of jazz and more broadly, in terms of racial integration. Goodman had already pioneered integrated groups, firstly in the studio, and then through the incorporation of Teddy Wilson and Lionel Hampton in his small groups, under the influence of John Hammond. It was uncommon to see racial integration in mainstream swing orchestras on the bandstand, with Goodman’s Trio and Quartet often presented as a special “floor show” alongside his all-white orchestra as the main act. However, for the “Jam Session” at Carnegie Hall, a combination of musicians from Goodman, Ellington and Basie’s bands resulted in a big band consisting of four reeds, three brass and a complete rhythm section, with a racial split of four white and seven black musicians. Perhaps the success of this strategy can be judged by the lack of contemporary comment on this, but in terms of evaluating the impact it’s worth noting that Lionel Hampton temporarily took over on drums after Krupa’s departure shortly after the concert, and, in July 1939, Fletcher Henderson became the first black musician permanently employed to play in the main Goodman band.

Although the exceptional nature of the performances at Carnegie Hall has perhaps been overstated by critics over the years, the recording certainly captures Goodman’s swing era ensemble at its peak, including the distinctive contributions from stars such as Gene Krupa and Harry James who were also becoming household names at that time (both left Goodman within a year of the concert). In 1950, by contrast, Goodman’s career was waning somewhat following relatively unsuccessful attempts to fully adapt to bebop, the prevailing trend in jazz at that time. The discovery of the acetate discs on which the concert had been captured within the context of a revival of swing, with its promise of nostalgia and mainstream appeal, and the subsequent release of the concert as an LP box set, rejuvenated his career. Over the years different labels have reinstated entire numbers and even some bars missing from the original release. The recording has been remastered in several different versions; some of
which attempt to “clean up” any extraneous “noise” to achieve something closer to a studio recording, and others which deliberately seek to preserve the atmosphere of the original event.

On January 16, 1938, Carnegie Hall presented a unique, if not completely unprecedented, performance situation that resulted in unique, if not completely unprecedented, performances from Goodman and the other musicians. However, the release of “The Famous 1938 Carnegie Hall Jazz Concert” ensured that the event attained canonical status, attesting to the importance of recordings to our construction and understanding of jazz history.

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