

# THE JUKE TAKE OVER SWING

BY BARRY ULANOV

YOU may not know offhand what a Juke is, but you've listened or danced to one hundreds of times. In roadside lunch-rooms, city bars, dance dives, everywhere. You may never have heard the gaudy slot-coin phonograph machine, grinding out canned cacophony at a nickel per record, called by name. But in the last two years the Jukes have spun their way clamorously into a multimillion dollar industry. Already about 350,000 Juke-boxes are scattered through the United States, and more are being installed every day. Together they chew up 44 per cent of the American production of popular records, and nothing speeds a performer to national fame so swiftly as the Juke or Electrical Phonograph Record coin machine. The big bands that have come up in the world in the last twenty months owe their triumph primarily to these nickel-oiled behemoths squatting in candy-stores and lodge rooms, in humble diners and swank play-rooms from Augusta to Albuquerque, from Seattle

to Saskatchewan. The Juke is all-American, as star-spangled as the flag, as native as the hot-dog. Manufactured by seven leading firms, the huge and garish purveyors of variegated rhythm dominate the popular music scene. The combined grosses of the industry from manufacturer to wholesaler to small-time renter are expected to go above \$150,000,000 this year.

There's no telling just when or what started the coin machine craze, except the mad success of phonograph records themselves. Ever since Ed Farley and Mike Riley pushed the little valve down and apprised us that *The Music Goes Round and Round* during the bleak Christmas of 1935, the shiny black discs have enjoyed a vogue that grows with every year. In 1926 phonograph records had hit an all-time high. Americans gobbled up 100,000,000 of them and things looked rosy for the industry. Then the maturing of radio tore the market to shreds, until by 1932-33 it looked as if its final collapse were imminent. Sales were down to

10,000,000. The record companies changed hands and their financial structures were reduced to shambles. But the Jukes came to the rescue, capping the first years of Swing. The coin customers boosted sales to 60,000,000 last year and new highs are in sight.

In the Spring of 1936, Benny Goodman strode to success via appearances in Los Angeles, Chicago and New York and innumerable barns, ballrooms and public parks in between. Benny was the first hot musician to wear the legendary mantle conferred by press agents and jitterbugs, King of Swing. With his clarinet-scepter, Benny took a healthy slice at the records for disc sales that Enrico Caruso and countless divas of the pre-Swing era had made. But it was not until the Summer of 1939 that all records were toppled by a phenomenal best-seller, last and most potent export from doomed Czechoslovakia, the *Beer Barrel Polka*. Between Benny and the *Polka*, Hot Jazz arose from its ashes, and the phonograph business took new air into its lungs. Sedate society and Hollywood's salons perked an ear to a new entertainment medium, and the country rocked to the strains of its exuberant new music, sprung from the hinterlands and hollows of America.

Historians of folklore will tell you that New Orleans and Storyville in Louisiana cradled the Jass that later became Jazz and then Swing. They will tell you that it was the music of the bands that marched New Orleans' streets at Mystic Knights of the Sea celebrations and Wakes. And they will tell you fables of the giants who blew their horns and beat their brains to the infectious rhythms of ragtime and the blues, up and down the Mississippi, lending a touch of glamor to the filthy showboat relics they worked. All of which is true, but only half the story. For New Orleans and Storyville, the showboats, and their terminus, Chicago, sheltered only the beginnings of this Jazz that became Swing. What finally gave America the music to which it hops and writhes today is the Juke. The Swing we know is not the simple result of an evolution that began in the bayous and adolcesced in the ginmills of Chicago's South Side and New York's Harlem. It is a monster, part intellectual and part idiot, fattened by the men who run the industry of the Jukes.

## II

When account is finally taken of America's popular music, it will

divide itself into two distinct categories. One is misnamed *Sweet*, and means popular music, made unmusical by a nagging reliance upon a trick stylization such as tenor saxophones purposely harmonized out of tune, or trombones distorted by glissandi (in effect, high-pitched wailings) unnatural to the instrument or the human ear, or new instruments which can swell the musical phrase beyond its ordinary limits, such as the Novachord or electric organ. The other is called *Hot* and that is the music you should heed. But Hot is something of a misnomer, too. It implies blatancy and stimulation and those things are only a small part of Hot Jazz. Hot may be loud and may act as an aphrodisiac, but its distinctions are chiefly musical. It consists, for the most part, of controlled improvisation, calling for enormous technique on the part of its performers, and may be quiet and restrained as well as loud and exciting.

After its New Orleans beginnings, Hot Jazz stepped smartly and logically to Chicago and Harlem, where it was bred in the back rooms of prohibition's speakeasies, in the ante-rooms of a flock of bordellos, in arrant imitation of its red-lit past in Memphis, St. Louis and the rest of the South. When

you hear the Blues, sung in tearful remembrance of Beale Street in Memphis and Basin Street in New Orleans, you are listening to a tender and a heart-breaking nostalgia for the houses and the women that set those streets apart and lent them their allure.

Well, we have taken Hot Jazz along until the depression that darkened the thirties. Then it did a disappearing act, along with vaudeville and fat bank accounts and real estate booms. In its place came the music misleadingly called Sweet, the lucrative fare of the Guy Lombardos and their imitators, who mastered the intricacies of playing out of tune and subduing rhythm to the suggestive rumble of a drummer three beats behind the rest of the band. This music that the Lombardos dubbed the *Sweetest This Side of Heaven*, if it was anyone's brain child, should be credited to those wide-awake genii who top the businesses of sheet-publishing of popular tunes and phonograph records and the radio. They determined that America should be lulled to a saccharine sleep in the evening, and their uneven product captured the country. It took the hysteria of *The Music Goes Round* and incessant dunkings in such sizzling inanities as *The Flat Foot Floogie* and *Hold*

*Tight* (Want some sea food, Mama) and *Well All Right* (Here comes Joe from a vaudeville show) to once more spell our popular music H-O-T.

This time it looked like the real thing. Duke Ellington proclaimed, just before the new hot era, that *It Don't Mean a Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing* and soon after, but still before the epoch officially opened, Louis Armstrong counselled a recording band, *Swing You Cats*. Thus, two of the titans of the art were speaking its name before it was born. And then Swing!

Up till the advent of the Juke, it was Benny Goodman's field all the way. The Chicago tailor's son gripped a nation in the fever of a music, self-titled *killer-diller*, which he himself half-despised. Each night and early morning saw new heights of frenetic drumming drive musicians closer to collective madness which the nation's preachers hoped would permanently close its books. As with all such crazes, this phase of the Swing hysteria had to come to an end.

Three years ago, wily bookers and ballroom owners sighted that end and prepared the campaign that was to give gold to the mewling brass glissandi of Kay Kyser and Sammy Kaye and their many imitators. The hell-fired hot music

of Benny Goodman and friends began to lose favor with the public. Came in its stead a rather sickly mongrel, cross between legitimate Hot Jazz and the newer Sweet music. This was the music that slung Glenn Miller across the nation, brought him from the obscurity of a touring band on the Shribman circuit in New England to top the country's purveyors of popular music, plus a cigarette radio commercial and other contracts that will gross young Mr. Miller about \$500,000 this year.

A word about this Shribman circuit. It covers a slice of territory corresponding roughly to the New England states. Yankees therein have cheered and jittered and danced to national acclaim, in rapid succession, two front-line bands, those of Artie Shaw and Glenn Miller. Shaw was also a product of the compromise era, playing Hot in careful alternation with bedraggled Sweet. His future was assured, until a quirk uncovered by a psychoanalyst set Artie thinking too hard, and the talented clarinetist gave up the big dough to be alone in Mexico. Soon after, Miller snared the top position Shaw had vacated. Credit at least part of their huge successes to the man to whom I have dedicated this paragraph, the shrewd Shribman.

## III

But credit even more — the Juke boxes! They carried Artie Shaw's deftly swung version of Cole Porter's *Begin the Beguine* to new highs in record popularity, then turned around and did the same for a series of Glenn Miller records, *Moonlight Serenade* and *Sunrise Serenade*, *The Lamp Is Low*, *In the Mood*, *Tuxedo Junction*, *Stardust*. Glenn merely waxes a tune, without any particularly distinctive arrangement, tricky vocal or distinguished solo, and the record hits an automatic sale of 100,000 copies, just servicing the Jukes!

The Jukes, you see, not only account for nearly half the direct sales of phonograph records, but act as a powerful impetus toward the sale of at least another 25 per cent.

So obviously these boxes wield the Big Stick in popular music, the Biggest Big Stick ever. The Jukes point the way to the future of Jazz in America. The success of Miller, and Shaw and Tommy Dorsey before him, in effecting the great compromise which tore the guts from Hot music and gave some shadow of a skeleton to Sweet, indicates where we may find the styles to come in popular music. These styles will be highly

orchestrated, will run more and more to sentimental songs in the mediocre manner of recent European importations, such as *The Woodpecker Song* and *When the Swallows Come Back to Capistrano*. There will be Hot interludes. We need not weep for Benny Goodman or any of his white confreres, though it seems certain that the already precarious lot of the Negro bandsman will grow worse. You can't kill the tumultuous creative spirit of this people, most stridently expressed in Hot Jazz, but it is being relegated to a lesser place in the commerce of music, so that even the great men of that music, Duke Ellington, Coleman Hawkins, and a few others, must scuffle for a living.

Owners and renters of the Juke boxes look forward expectantly each week to the pulp pages of *The Billboard* and other trade gazettes to see what's what in their business, to note what new records are "going strong," "coming up" or are "possibilities." Between pages devoted to pin-ball and slot machines and the doings of pitchmen and carnivals nestles the buying guide that contributes most significantly to the popular musical taste of America. *Billboard* prognostications can hardly help being right, because the Juke owners buy what

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it recommends. And when records are dinned into the ears of young and old as consistently as the Jukes perform that function, it is impossible to forget the tunes or lose the simple melodies. Recall that vicious circle, the next time you find yourself going batty with love or hate of a popular song such as *The Three Little Fishies* or *Boo Hoo*.

New powerful factors are entering the field of the Jukes (which, though it might seem fitting, are not named after the moronic family dear to eugenicists). There is Phonovision or Talkovision — a slick combination of the standard Juke box and miniature movies. In preparation for the onslaught the Phonovision Corporation of America has hired a large staff, appointed a former producer of movie shorts to supervise its three-minute productions, and begun the manufacture of Jukes that can be seen as

well as heard. There are also the beginnings of a system of Juke machines wired to a central studio and supplying a nickel's worth of Hot or Sweet or things between by Telephone control; this system will give the writhing customers a choice from thousands of recordings instead of a measly dozen or two.

The changes are all in the direction of making the Juke more potent in fixing the popular music tastes of America and stimulating its appetite for recordings. Certain it is that greater mechanization is in store for our music: gears and sprockets will displace musicians and originality will make way for the standardized output necessary to feed the market created by the proliferating Jukes. For good or ill, the Jukes have taken over Swing and will twist it to their own profit.

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### INSPIRATION

Like fat, tame carp at Chantilly  
Our thoughts aswimming go,  
To gather in with greedy mouths  
What laughing gods may throw.

— ERNESTINE E. MERCER

► *An American of mixed Mayflower and Jewish descent learns a lot about race hatreds.*

## A HALF-JEW SPEAKS

ANONYMOUS

MY brother, a tall, broad-shouldered fellow with a lean Yankee-cut face, combines a taste for the great out-of-doors with a taste for Plato and neatly dovetails these predilections by teaching the classics in a small New England university town. He has three tow-headed kids with pale blue eyes and the kind of skin it makes you smart to look at throughout the sunburn season. The name might be Olsen — but it isn't. People who see them first and catch the name afterwards are usually pretty baffled. Sometimes they take this curious situation in their stride. Sometimes it bowls them over — as when my brother followed the distant footsteps of his grandfather into a swank small Eastern college. Having been charged with a message for the college president, he seized the first opportunity to deliver it, at the freshman reception with faculty members balancing tea-cups all around.

"My grandfather said it might interest you, sir, that your father and he were intimate friends."

The president beamed graciously: "Indeed it does. And what is your name, young man?"

"Blumenberg," said my brother, and still describes with chuckles the way the president's face froze at those jarring syllables.

Our family are used to that kind of thing. We think it's funny. Which is why my brother was in no hurry to explain that the grandfather in question was not Isaac Blumenberg, the 1848 German-Jewish émigré who settled in Ohio, but our maternal grandfather, a Presbyterian minister with an impeccable early-American pedigree. My brother himself is married to a thorough-going daughter of the Old South and when his son grows up, tall and Nordic-looking, as he can't help being, but still one-quarter Jewish and named Blumenberg, this business is going to get funnier. When the Jewish blood in the male Blumenberg line gets so fractional that the services of an expert accountant will be required to nail it down, it's going to be positively hilarious.