



ROYAL
COLLEGE
OF MUSIC
London



RCM Sparks
Explore Big Band Music



DISCOVER

The Big Band became popular in New York and big cities across the United States of America during the 1930s. Right from the start Big Bands were linked to dancing, just like other forms of Jazz music. Modern technology such as films and radio, quickly increased the popularity of the music and swing dancing through the country. During World War II, American Big Band musicians joined military bands and accompanied American soldiers to Europe. This brought the sound of the Big Band and swing music to the United Kingdom, and played an important role in keeping up the British people's spirits during the war.

What is a Big Band?

A Big Band is the name for a large jazz orchestra. The exact line-up evolved over time but eventually settled into five saxophones, four trumpets, four trombones, piano, guitar, bass and drums. Singers would also sing occasional songs, but the instrumental musicians were just as well-known in this period!



Each big band is led by a bandleader, who brings together the musicians and leads them through rehearsals and performances. The name of the bandleader is often included in the name of the band. The most famous bandleader was Chick Webb, who led the house band at the Savoy. Eventually the legendary jazz singer Ella Fitzgerald took over as band leader, one of the first female musicians in jazz to lead a group like this. There were often 'battles of the bands' between Chick's band and guest bands like Duke Ellington's Orchestra. Chick's band could rarely be beaten!



EXPLORE

Rhythm

The music was organised around the rhythm section, saxophone section, trumpet and trombone sections who would deliver the groove and interlocking riffs to create energetic, swinging music that was impossible for dancers to resist. The swing rhythm comes from the distinctive 'ten-to-ten' rhythmic pattern played by the drums, and backed up by the guitar and bass, which played a 'walking' bass line pattern. The brass and saxes played syncopated riffs (catchy and repetitive musical phrases) that add excitement by bouncing off the walking bass. As well as the instruments playing in groups there was plenty of space for individual soloists to play improvised solos and express themselves too.



LISTEN

Can you spot the 'ten-to-ten' rhythm and 'walking bass line' pattern at the heart of this piece?
www.youtube.com/watch?v=SfTJEwFUYdU.

Walking Bass Line:

Swing

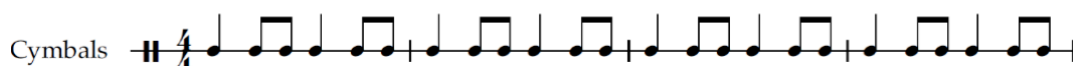
Played on Double Bass with fingers:



Ten-to-Ten Rhythm

Swing

Hi-hat or Ride Cymbal:



Give it a go! Find a table or a household item to act as your drum kit and tap out the ten-to-ten rhythm. Once you've mastered this, use your voice or a tuned instrument to add the walking bass line.



EXPLORE

Jazz Language

In this resource and in our song *Put It In The Pocket* there are some words that are part of the language of jazz, such as:

Cats – the very best dancers and jazz musicians

Pocket – a description for the place where the music feels right – with a good swinging groove

Groove – the rhythmic energy in the music that makes you want to dance

Horn – a name for all the brass instruments and saxophones

“Sock it!” – play LOUD with energy!





SING

Watch the accompanying YouTube video guide and learn this song inspired by the New York jazz scene of the 1930's - www.youtube.com/watch?v=_n5fyYhYOwc

PUT IT IN THE POCKET

VERSE

I met a great dancer in N.Y.C
I wanted some advice and she said this to me
Don't play too crazy but don't play too cool
All the cats will love it if you follow this rule

CHORUS

Put it in the pocket
You gotta put it in the pocket
Don' cha rock it
Just stay in the groove

Put it in the pocket
You gotta put it in the pocket
Then if you sock it
The dancers on the floor will move!

VERSE

The band kept on playin, till half past four
My chops were kind of tired, but they begged us for more
Then I remembered her words of advice
Pickin up my horn again no need to think twice

CHORUS

I put it in the pocket
You gotta put it in the pocket
Don' cha stop it
Keep dancin tonight

I put it in the pocket
Got on and put it in the pocket
Don't ever knock it we're really feelin good tonight



WATCH

Dance plays an important role in the history of jazz music, as big bands performed to large audiences in venues called Dance Halls. The most famous and largest dance hall in New York was the Savoy Ballroom, in the Harlem district of the city. It could hold 4000 people and had two stages, so two big bands could alternate to provide music for the dancers and listeners all night – it didn't really get busy until midnight! In many ways it was very modern – smoking wasn't allowed, and it was the only ballroom in New York where black and white people could dance together during a time where lots of public spaces were segregated. It was so popular that the dance floor had to be replaced every three years!

All the finest “Lindy Hop” dancers would come and dance to the bands at the Savoy. The very best all hung out together in “Cat’s Corner” in a particular spot on the dance floor. The style of dancing was energetic and competitive, designed to work with the energetic rhythms of the big bands that -played there. Many of the best dancers would go on to be professional dancers in Broadway musicals.

Check out of the different styles of dance associated with jazz music.

East Coast Swing - <https://youtu.be/EaK5OWztCz8?si=Q4CLLhIrcpuU760V>

Jive - www.youtube.com/watch?v=8elEFicc3jE

Lindy Hop - www.youtube.com/watch?v=YFpU5ypLrKQ



DANCE

Now that you've learnt about the different dances that accompany big band music, listen back to 'Put It In The Pocket' and create your own dance moves inspired by the videos you've just watched.