

The **BENNY** who never changed his tune



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Any day now the movie about Benny Goodman will go before the cameras. In this, the latest of the film biographies, the King of Swing will receive the royal treatment.

But what will happen after *The Benny Goodman Story* has made the round of neighborhood theatres? To find an answer, we cite a precedent: *The Glenn Miller Story*. A spectacularly successful movie, it helped turn a man into a legend. Glenn Miller died in 1944, while on tour in the Army Air Force. His plane disappeared. The present generation of teen-agers never saw or heard Miller in person, but the music he played—a melodious, easygoing swing, free but not too sophisticated—intrigued them quite as much as it intrigued those who had had the opportunity of hearing him in person. Glenn Miller's music, preserved on records, had not lost its popularity even before the motion picture came along. After the picture, Glenn Miller became a craze. His music is now more alive than when he himself was living.

Where Does Benny Stand Today?

There are differences in Goodman's case. Today, at the age of forty-five, he is still young, still (fortunately) very much with us. You can see him, you can hear him. He has a fine reputation, but he is no legend. As a matter

of fact, the Benny Goodman of today, playing in about the same style he did twenty years ago, is not at the peak of his popularity.

Benny Goodman is a great musician. He looks like a scholar, and he is a scholar. As the man with the clarinet no one can surpass him. And as a bandleader during the late thirties and early forties he was incomparably exciting.

When the King Swung High

Today Benny is still the finest technical master of his instrument, but what he plays is often lost in second-rate surroundings or surroundings that do not complement his style. During the swing-band era, Goodman rode almost unchallenged to the top of popularity polls. In those days, when he appeared at the Paramount Theatre in New York, youngsters jumped and actually danced in the aisles. And in 1938, when he gave a concert on The Mall in Central Park, 25,000 screaming worshipers, then called "alligators," turned out.

His band was then a beautifully welded unit. Its personnel did change, but as soon as one important member was lost, Goodman picked up another musician of equal virtuosity. He chose each musician with two purposes: The man had to have individual (Continued on page 122)

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brilliance and a style that blended perfectly into that of the Goodman ensemble.

His orchestra became a unique developing ground for jazz musicians who later went into business for themselves: Harry James, Ziggy Elman, Gene Krupa, Teddy Wilson, and Lionel Hampton, among others. The music this band played really swung. Like Glenn Miller's, it was free, sweet, exciting, melodious, and without atonality. And, unlike so much modern jazz, it was not over-arranged to a point where only professional musicians could appreciate it fully. Probably no more exciting swing-band music exists than that contained in the Benny Goodman Carnegie Hall recording, an album, incidentally, that has sold over a hundred thousand copies to date.

From the early forties on, the Goodman band went through a series of bewildering changes. Goodman himself was torn between his jazz and his classical repertoire. (He is also a superb classical clarinetist, and his playing of the Mozart Clarinet Quintet is a joy to the purest-minded Mozartian.) He surrounded him-

self with musicians of a more modern bent, and continued to play in his own style. This has produced a good deal of interesting music, but it does not seem to jell. The gulf between Goodman and his associates is wide.

In the early days Goodman made another important contribution to jazz. He brought to new development the small jazz combo, the trios and quartets, which included, besides Goodman, Teddy Wilson, Gene Krupa, and Lionel Hampton. To this chamber music of jazz Goodman brought a tautness and an integration not previously experienced. Subsequently he attempted to expand the groups into sextets, but the results were not as happy.

THE people who love Goodman, therefore, turn to the original Goodman and accept no substitutes. The throwback is significant. Since Goodman's swing days jazz has undergone much change—through bop and postbop and on to “progressive” and “abstract.” “Bop” is a form of jazz that arose circa 1945; its harmonies were deliberately atonal, its effects

exaggerated. “Progressive” jazz, while it springs from bop, is less wild, less mannered, less screechy. It is still, however, quite cerebral and involved. This modern jazz has its admirers, but it has not captured as large an audience as the warmer, more open-hearted style of the “classical” period of Goodman and Miller. The most progressive college youngsters do love “progressive” jazz; some may even curl their lip at the old-fashioned Benny. But the numerous American middle class—including most college students—still prefer the jazz music of the thirties.

And now the movie! If it turns out to be reasonably good, and if Goodman plays in it often enough and long enough, the picture will undoubtedly be a huge success, perhaps as big a success as *The Glenn Miller Story*. I predict, however, that the most popular numbers will be those that present Goodman in his earlier style. If the man who never changed his tune is accompanied by a band in tune with that tune, the music will be convincing and irresistible.

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