Swing as an Attitude Towards Life

Arising in the mid-1930s and originating in the United States, the newest style of jazz, swing became popular across the world, even in Nazi Germany. ---Despite discrimination against jazz music and jazz culture in the Third Reich, swing found an enthusiastic and dance-hungry audience. For a group of mostly young fans, however, swing music and dancing represented more than a passing fad. For them it became an overall attitude towards life. These enthusiastic swing fans created their own discrete youth culture. ----German swing fans were decisively affected not only by the stigmatization of jazz by the Nazi regime, but also by preparations for war and/or experiences of war. This meant that in Germany the Swingjugend became a political matter.

Swingjugend

The first German 'Swing Cliques' originated in 1935-36 in Hamburg, Berlin, and Frankfurt am Main. Incidentally, though the term Swingjugend (Swing Youth) also derives from Nazi parlance and is similarly discriminatory in intent, it became the standard term. By contrast, the term 'Swing Kids' appeared for the first time in the film of the same name (USA 1993). In the first years of the war, the Swingjugend movement saw a comparably large influx of members and developed into a protest movement that the Nazi regime had to take seriously. The Swingjugend rejected the Nazi state, above all because of its ideology and uniformity, its militarism, the 'Führer principle' and the leveling Volksgemeinschaft (people's community). They experienced a massive restriction of their personal freedom. They rebelled against all this with jazz and swing, which stood for a love of life, self-determination, non-conformism, freedom, independence, liberalism, and internationalism.

In addition to the polite external appearance of the Swingjugend, which accompanied a cool and laid-back demeanor based on Anglo-American clothing and lifestyle, the Nazis were offended by their liberal attitude towards life. Because the Swingjugend hardly bothered about curfews, bans on dancing, or the ban on listening on so-called 'enemy radio stations' once the war began, they got into further conflicts with the Nazi state. Added to this, the Swingjugend began to express their opposition more and more explicitly. This ranged from their mockery of the Nazi movement through provocative actions and violent confrontations, to their refusal of compulsory membership of the Hitlerjugend (HJ, or Hitler Youth) and of the Bund Deutscher Mädel (BDM, or League of German Girls) or of military service in the army. However, commitment to jazz led to their discrimination, isolation, and, finally, criminalization, only when it occurred in connection with non-musical reasons for oppression (alleged moral waywardness, rejection of service in the HJ or BDM, being of the Jewish faith, etc.). Such acts resulted in swing enthusiasts having to suffer all kinds of punishments. But the fight against the Swingjugend was hampered by the fact that the Nazi state had no nationwide agreed-upon means of dealing with them. Also, in the Swingjugend the Nazis were not confronting a unified organization, but loosely organized, informal peer-groups of friends.

Hamburg's Swing Fans in Nazi Camps

Because Hamburg was considered the center of the Swingjugend, the Gestapo, police, and other governmental organizations proceeded with special cruelty against the swing movement there. Many 'swing boys' and 'swing girls' had to endure interrogations, torture, and detention by the Gestapo. This led many a swing fan to commit suicide. Even the national leader of the SS, Heinrich Himmler himself, demanded in a letter from 26 January 1942 that their 'ringleaders’ be locked away in concentration camps for two to three years. Between 40 and 70 of Hamburg’s Swing Boys and Swing Girls were deported to various Nazi camps. Youths under the age of 18 were, generally speaking, consigned to the so-called Jugendshutzlager (Youth detention camps – a type of concentration camp for young people). The boys were sent to the male camp Moringen, while the girls were sent to the female camp Uckermark, which was situated near Ravensbrück. After March 1942, adults and Jewish swing members, on the other hand, were deported to Theresienstadt or to concentration camps such as Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald, or Auschwitz.
The Swing Girls were housed separately at the Uckermark youth detention camp in 1942 and were subjected to constant acts of intimidation by the SS. Since the Swing Boys had been categorized as politically oppositional prisoners at Moringen youth detention camp, they were all held together in the same block. This meant that they could mutually support each other. Together, they secretly sang popular swing titles like ‘Jeepers, Creepers,’ ‘Caravan,’ ‘Some Of These Days,’ ‘The Flat Foot Floogie,’ ‘Sweet Sue, Just You,’ or ‘Goody Goody.’ Like their fellow prisoners, they had to work days as forced labourers at a munitions factory. But since the factory did not fall under the oversight of the SS, they could collectively indulge in their passion for jazz in the pauses. Günter Discher remembers how they would imitate the performance of a big band: The salt mine where we worked had really nice acoustics. One of us played on the cartridges – these were like wooden boxes, and he would play drums with some sticks. We improvised all sorts of things. Sometimes it sounded horrible. But it was a survival strategy.

Far more dangerous was the unauthorized eavesdropping on radio programmes in the SS cantina. By means of such actions, the Swing Boys not only used jazz to retain their group identity in Moringen, but were also able to bring out their oppositional stance and to distinguish themselves from the rest of the prisoners. Their fellow prisoners, according to Discher, ‘didn’t know what to do with swing music. We swings were arrogant and had little contact with the others.’ In contrast, the Hamburg Swing Girls in the concentration camp Ravensbrück expressly sang for their fellow prisoners. They were housed together with other female political prisoners in the same block. To this group belonged the sisters Jutta and Inga Madlung, who performed different swing tunes after work or after lights out. In an interview, Jutta Madlung recalled: They liked it and were happy about the variety it brought whenever we sang 'In the Mood' or 'Bei mir bist du schoen' or 'A Tisket, a Tasket' or whatever. But precautions had to be taken so that the performance of hated jazz melodies was not accidentally discovered by an overseer: Sometimes at night, after lights out, we were quite precocious and would cover the windows with our bed sheets and then we would sing.

Herbert Schemmel, interned at the concentration camp Neuengamme, tells of an audacious part of swing history. After his confiscated private record collection was handed over to his parents, this jazz fan had the records sent to him in the camp. The SS had made to concessions to the prisoners after the middle of 1942 in order to get them to work, so prisoners were allowed to form camp bands or to receive food packets. Schemmel took the risk of having the records sent, because as Lagerschreiber (camp scribe), he had a high position within the so-called Häftlingsselbstverwaltung (prisoner self-government), appointed by the camp’s commanders. Thereupon I had my portable record player, along with about one hundred records sent to me – English and American swing records. They got here, but I never received them. Schitli [Wilhelm Schitli, head of the detention camp] called for me and said that there was already something in my files about connections to English industrial circles. The records, therefore, had to be confiscated and would be stored along with my effects.

This was then done. But the SS man checked out these "allegedly dangerous" records, and the record player and used them at a party at his own home. In the confusion of the last months of the war, Herbert Schemmel was finally able, in January 1945, to smuggle his property out of the effects room and to play the jazz records again.

That Herbert Schemmel did finally recover his records tells us much about the persecution of the members of the swing movement. In the final analysis, the Nazi regime was not able to exercise complete control over the Swingjugend and many swing fans remained true to their music, even in the camps of the Third Reich. Precisely in this extreme situation, music provided a strong footing and constituted a form of intellectual resistance, strengthened all the more by the memory of the many years of persecution for their ties to jazz. Yet despite such bold activities, it must not be forgotten that many of the Swing Boys and Swing Girls died because of the inhumane conditions of their imprisonment.

By Guido Fackler