

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 312

“It Don’t Mean a Thing”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Hot jazz was the music of the Roaring Twenties, but in the Thirties, the public mood was calmer, and so was the music. Loud and raucous was out, smooth and romantic was in.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 312. It Don’t Mean a Thing.

Today, I want to talk about popular music. This is a topic that has come up many times on the podcast, and we’ve seen how new technologies introduced in the twentieth century changed popular music. In the late 19th century, new songs were distributed through the medium of sheet music, then came phonograph records, then came radio.

We also talked about sound quality in phonograph records. The first machines recorded the sound mechanically. When the singers and musicians performed, the sound of their performance vibrated a diaphragm connected to a stylus that “wrote” the sound onto a cylinder, later a disc. This mechanical recording system had a poor frequency response, which is the reason why old recordings from this period have that distinctive tinny sound we still recognize today. Like this:

[music: *Liberty Bell March*]

The development of radio was a setback to the recording industry. When the radio craze hit, everyone wanted one of the newfangled devices, and phonograph sales plunged. That was bad news for the record companies, but it came with a silver lining. The technology of vacuum tube amplification, which made radio possible, could also be used to improve the quality of phonograph recordings. The mechanical recording system gave way to an electronic system, in which the performance was captured by a microphone, then amplified electronically before being “written” to the phonograph record. This allowed for a much flatter frequency response that produced a recording that sounded much closer to a live performance.

By the late 1920s, the quality of phonograph recordings had improved markedly and was now competitive with the radio, and record players also now had vacuum tube amplifiers. No more leaning close to hear a tinny bit of music emerge from a big horn; these machines could play loud enough to fill a whole room with music.

These improvements not only produced better sound quality, they changed the style of musical performance. When making one of those early mechanical records, the musicians had to play and the singers had to sing as loud as possible, to keep that stylus wiggling as it recorded the song. This is one of the reasons that the hot jazz sound of the era was a good fit for records, since those musicians were playing as loud as they possibly could anyway.

The introduction of electronic amplification changed everything. Musicians could now play their instruments more softly, while singers no longer needed to hit every note at full volume. For as long as singers have performed in public, in a cathedral or theatre or auditorium or wherever, the most prized singers have been the ones who could not only hit the right notes, but could blast them out across the room, so that even the people in the back row heard every word. The power of a singer's voice mattered, and singers were judged by how loudly they could sing. Singers—men and women both—tended to be large people, because they needed the muscles and the lung capacity to deliver their sound.

By the late Twenties, this was no longer the case. With electronic amplification, all a singer had to do was get up close to the microphone. Singers could perform in a softer, more personal style. Rather than singing at you, these performers were singing to you, in a less formal and—dare I say it?—more intimate fashion. This new type of singer was dubbed a crooner, a half-affectionate, half-pejorative term.

Crooning is commonly associated with male singers, although arguably the first singer to adopt the style was a woman born Leonore Vonderlieth, who sang under the stage name Vaughn De Leath. She began singing on radio for Lee DeForest in 1920, and in some versions of the story, she was warned that her accustomed style of singing, in a loud soprano register, might break the vacuum tubes in the radio equipment, so she went in the other direction and sang in a soft contralto, and crooning was born. De Leath was a popular radio and recording artist in the Twenties; one of her biggest hits was a 1927 recording of “Are You Lonesome Tonight?” a song better known today for Elvis Presley's version. She was known for a time as the “First Lady of Radio,” but her career faded in the Thirties. She fell on hard times, developed a drinking problem, and died in 1943, at the age of 48.

Singer Gene Austin was another early crooner, best known for his 1925 hit “Yes Sir, That's My Baby,” followed by 1926's “Bye, Bye, Blackbird,” and his most successful record, 1927's “My Blue Heaven,” which became the best-selling record of all time until—

Well, I'll get back to that.

But the singer who really put crooning on the map was a slender saxophonist from Vermont who fronted a band called Rudy Vallee and the Connecticut Yankees. It wasn't long before he gave up the saxophone for singing in his thin tenor voice. This and his boyish good looks made the older generation wrinkle their noses and young women swoon.

Now, I want to emphasize here that Rudy Vallee is not the same person as silent film star Rudolph Valentino, whom I talked about in episode 242, although it's very easy to confuse them. They have similar names, and were both popular with young women and disdained by older men. But Valentino was a silent film star, not a singer. He died in 1926 at the age of 31 from complications of a perforated ulcer. This was just about the time Rudy Vallee's career was getting started, though no doubt the similarity in names helped gain public attention.

Rudy Vallee would begin releasing records in 1928. In 1929, he began to host a radio program that would run until 1955. It was originally called *The Fleischmann's Yeast Hour* and a few other names before becoming *The Rudy Vallee Show*. He famously opened the show with a cheerful, "Heigh-ho, everybody!"

It's notable that Vallee was a friend and admirer of Louis Armstrong, and beginning in 1937, when Vallee went on vacation from his radio show, he insisted that Armstrong substitute as guest host, thus making Louis Armstrong the first African American to host an American radio program.

Because Vallee's style of performance was dependent on amplification, live performances posed a challenge. He sang into an amplified microphone on stage when the equipment was available. When it wasn't, he sang into a megaphone, and is often remembered that way.

Vallee became a major celebrity. He was hugely popular with young women, and his live performances quickly sold out. But there were also plenty of people who looked down on Rudy Vallee. He was an unlikely sex symbol. His boyish looks and slender build and inability to sing without electronic assistance struck many men of the time as distinctly unmasculine. The fact that women swooned anyway only annoyed the men further, hence the tagline, "Men hate him! Women love him!"

His singing career peaked in the early thirties, although his radio show ran for much longer. He developed a second career acting in film and later television. In his earliest film appearances, in the Thirties during the peak of his popularity, he played himself, or a version of himself, but his acting skills developed sufficiently to keep him in demand for other kinds of roles. Later in his acting career, he made a number of television appearances, most memorably as a villain in three episodes of *Batman* in 1967. He passed away in 1986, at the age of 84.

There were other crooners, but by the mid-1930s, there was one name and one voice that dominated popular music. It belonged to one Harry Crosby, Jr., born May 3, 1903 in Tacoma, Washington. Crosby grew up in Spokane and after attending a performance by Al Jolson was

inspired to become a singer himself. He initially sang in a couple of vocal groups, and along the way picked up the nickname “Bing” before going solo in 1931. He landed a recording contract and a radio show that same year. Three of the top twelve songs of 1931 were recorded by Bing Crosby.

Well, that was it. Bing Crosby would own the 1930s and 1940s. You could call him a crooner, although Crosby himself rejected that label. He was certainly jazz-influenced. His performances had swing, and his style was relaxed, elegant, and seemingly effortless. He was known to wander off the melody, occasionally breaking into a whistle or singing scat before circling back to where he was supposed to be.

He was so popular, so successful, that the next generation of male singers got their start by closely imitating his style, notably Perry Como, Dean Martin, and Frank Sinatra. He recorded 396 singles that charted, including 41 that reached number one. He had at least one single on the charts every year from 1931 to 1957. Estimates of how many records he sold in total vary, but they begin at 300 million and go up from there.

It would be too much to list all of Bing Crosby’s hit songs, but there’s one that’s impossible not to name, and that’s his 1942 recording of “White Christmas,” composed by Irving Berlin for the musical film *Holiday Inn*. “White Christmas” sold over 50 million copies, usurping the title of best-selling record of all time from Gene Austin’s 1927 recording of “My Blue Heaven”—see, I told you I’d come back to it.

Bing Crosby’s recording of “White Christmas” remains the all-time best-selling record to this day. It won the 1942 Academy Award for Best Original Song, and inspired another musical film, 1954’s *White Christmas*. The song “White Christmas” is also notable for demonstrating there was a market for Christmas-themed songs, and Christmas-themed secular songs at that, songs that evoked a general nostalgic sense of hearth and home, as opposed to explicitly Christian religious music. Irving Berlin was Jewish, after all.

And speaking of film, Bing Crosby became a film star almost as quickly as he became a recording and radio star. He appeared in 31 musical films in the 1930s. 1942’s *Holiday Inn* was the number eight American film of that year by box office receipts. In 1944, Crosby starred in *Going My Way*, the highest grossing film of that year and nominated for ten Academy Awards. It won seven including Best Song, Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Actor for Bing Crosby. In 1946, Crosby starred in three of the top five films of that year, including *Road to Utopia*, *Blue Skies*, and the year’s highest-grossing film, *The Bells of St. Mary’s*.

And you can’t talk about Bing Crosby’s film career without mentioning 1940’s *Road to Singapore*, in which Crosby co-starred for the first time with British-born American comedian Bob Hope. Hope and Crosby began performing together in 1932, and it seems they got on rather well. They would appear together numerous times on stage, radio, and later television, as well as becoming business partners, but most famously in *Road to Singapore* and six sequel productions,

Road to Zanzibar, Road to Morocco, Road to Utopia, Road to Rio, Road to Bali, and The Road to Hong Kong, costarring with Dorothy Lamour in all but the last of these films.

Typically, the plots of these *Road* films, such as they were, involved Crosby and Hope as con men working some kind of shady deal; they would meet Dorothy Lamour's character, and their relationship would become strained as both men fell for her and competed for her affection. Crosby would sing, Hope would make wisecracks, often at his own expense, and Crosby would usually get the girl, though not always. There was a certain Bugs Bunny-Daffy Duck vibe in the Crosby-Hope relationship. Hope would sometimes address the theater audience directly, perhaps to suggest he deserved an Academy Award for his performance in that very film. (He never got one.) On one memorable occasion in *Road to Bali*, as Crosby was gearing up to do a number, Hope advised the audience, "He's gonna sing, folks. Now's the time to go out and get the popcorn."

[music: "My Blue Heaven"]

Edward Kennedy Ellington was born on April 29, 1899, to an African-American family in Washington, DC. Both his parents played the piano and they made sure their son did, too. His mother taught him good manners and dapper dress. Young Edward had such an aristocratic air that his friends began calling him "Duke" Ellington. The nickname stuck.

While still a teenager, Duke Ellington took an interest in ragtime and imitated the piano-playing styles of some of the most popular musicians of the time. He was just 15 years old and working a summer job at a soda fountain when he composed his first piece of music, "Soda Fountain Rag."

He became a professional musician before he was twenty and formed his first band, called The Duke's Serenaders. A few years later, he moved to Harlem in New York City. There was a lively jazz scene in New York of the early Twenties, but it took some doing to break in. In 1924, Ellington took over as bandleader at the Kentucky Club in New York.

Ellington played the piano and led the band from the keyboard. Together he and his musicians developed a distinctive sound: bluesy, with trumpets in upper register, and with unconventional arrangements. Their repertoire ranged from jazzy and modern to smooth and romantic. The band was popular and its recordings sold well, and in 1927, Ellington and his band got their big break when they were hired as the house band for the Cotton Club in Harlem.

I've talked about the Cotton Club before, in episode 232. The entertainers and servers were all Black, while the clientele were all white, representing the wealthy elite of New York society. The liquor flowed freely, despite Prohibition, and Ellington's band played dance music as well as accompanying the club's singers, dancers, and vaudeville bits and performing live from the club every week to a national audience over NBC Red.

Ellington and his band left the Cotton Club in 1931 to go on tour. They were hugely successful in North America and in Europe, and although the Great Depression hit the record industry hard, Duke Ellington's records still sold well. Notable are 1930's "Mood Indigo" and 1933's "Sophisticated Lady," both pieces composed by Ellington, as was his influential 1932 recording, "It Don't Mean a Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing."

According to Ellington, the title was the motto of his trumpeter, Bubber Miley, who had died of tuberculosis earlier that year at the age of 29. The piece was meant as a tribute, but it also not only became a jazz standard but provided the name for the new style of jazz music that was emerging in the 1930s: swing.

You can track the emergence of swing to a number of factors. One important one is the new electronics I was talking about a few minutes ago. Just as singers could perform in a more intimate, even sensual, way, thanks to electronic amplification, the hot jazz style of a smaller number of musicians playing loud gave way to larger bands that, yes, sometimes played loud, but also could be smooth and intimate, like the crooners.

Dancing and dance music were very much in fashion in the Thirties. You can attribute this in part to the torrent of musicals Hollywood was putting out, and in particular to Fred Astaire, who gave dancing an air of cool elegance. And there's an economic consideration, too. This is the Great Depression. During the Depression, families found radio an economical way to entertain themselves at home. Well, you know, you can dance at home. All you have to do is roll up the carpet and you can turn your own living room into a dance floor. And in the 1930s, a lot of people were doing exactly that.

Of course, your in-home dance hall is going to need a dance band to provide the music; that's where the radio comes in, and that's where the big bands come in. At first blush, you might wonder why bands are getting bigger. Twenties jazz bands were four guys in a speakeasy; isn't a big band performing in a ballroom a lot more expensive? Isn't that out of step with economizing during an economic depression? Yes, it is, but here's the beauty of it: the radio networks were willing to pay a dance hall or hotel ballroom for the right to broadcast the music and thus share the cost of hiring the musicians. Wealthy New Yorkers could come in person to the Grand Ballroom at the Waldorf-Astoria and dance the night away with a big band, while the folks at home could share the experience, dancing in their own living rooms to the very same music at the very same time.

Duke Ellington's composition gave swing music its name, but he didn't originate it. It was another African-American bandleader named Fletcher Henderson who deserves most of the credit for that. Henderson and his band became regulars at the Roseland Ballroom at 51st and Broadway in New York City in 1924, and over the next decade, his arrangements blazed the trail to swing. Henderson's arrangements were written for sections, rather than individual performers, with the melody tossed back and forth between these different sections over simple, punchy riffs

that allowed a soloist to improvise while staying grounded to the beat. And that's the essence of swing.

Henderson was skilled at hiring talent and arranging music. At managing the band, less so. They released numerous recordings, and at its peak, his band was considered one of the best in the business, but Henderson was never able to capitalize on its success, and things began to fall apart when the Great Depression hit.

At that same time, a jazz clarinetist was attracting attention in New York. He was a twenty-something Jewish American from Chicago—the son of immigrants from the Russian Empire—named Benjamin Goodman, but better known to music lovers as Benny Goodman. Goodman played for radio and made records alongside other future band leaders such as Tommy Dorsey and Glenn Miller. In 1934, impresario Billy Rose invited Goodman to play at his newly opened Billy Rose Music Hall. Goodman formed a band, the Benny Goodman Orchestra to perform at the venue. They made a record of “Moonglow,” which became a hit. Goodman and his orchestra were then invited to be part of the NBC radio program *Let's Dance*. When Fletcher Henderson's band broke up, Goodman hired Henderson to write arrangements for his band. The radio show led to a national tour in 1935, and this is the moment when swing really took off.

Benny Goodman would earn the title “The King of Swing,” for his role in popularizing the new sound, but a number of other band leaders would pick up on swing and become just as celebrated, including Tommy Dorsey, his brother Jimmy Dorsey, Glenn Miller, Harry James, Woody Herman, and Artie Shaw, to name a few.

The rise of swing was remarkable, and equally remarkable was that it was not the musicians or the singers who were becoming national names. It was the bandleaders. Music lovers of the time likely could name more singers, musicians, and bandleaders off the tops of their heads than at any time before, which we can credit to phonograph records and radio making more music available to more people than had ever been possible before.

Many big band recordings of this era became beloved classics. Just to name a few, you have “Blue Skies” and “Sing, Sing, Sing,” recorded by Benny Goodman's band. You have Glenn Miller's recordings of “Pennsylvania 6-5000,” “Chattanooga Choo Choo” and “In the Mood.” Songwriter Cole Porter wrote a number titled “Begin the Beguine” for the 1935 stage musical *Jubilee*. The show was not a success and the song remained obscure until Artie Shaw recorded a swing version two years later that became famous.

Big bands playing swing music dominated American popular culture for the next decade, but the rest of the world was less enthusiastic. Swing was reasonably popular in France, but when it aired on the BBC, it drew letters of complaint. Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany banned swing music altogether, decrying it as a Jewish plot to corrupt their youth.

It was through swing that jazz became fully part of American popular culture. But it's notable that it was white bandleaders who brought swing into the mainstream. The swing craze did not do much for the fortunes of African-American musicians, except for the ones hired by Benny Goodman. By the way, Goodman and some of his white band members sometimes performed along with members of Fletcher Henderson's band, making these perhaps the first occasion in American history when white and Black musicians shared a stage, and Goodman's band eventually became the first racially integrated music group, with Black musicians paid the same rates as their white colleagues.

African-American band leaders like Cab Calloway and Count Basie and of course Duke Ellington made a living for themselves and their bands. Their audiences were mostly African American, along with a certain subset of white music lovers who thought the mainstream bands were offering a dumbed-down version of the real thing. Even Artie Shaw, one of the biggest names in big bands, admitted, "These men weren't musicians... They purveyed music... They're not creators; they're simply purveyors. Now, let's take Duke Ellington. It's a rare talent that can maintain that organization, but not allow that to dampen his creative qualities."

Count Basie's music was perhaps more blues than swing. Duke Ellington refused to label his band's music as "swing" or even as "jazz." To him, it was the music of Duke Ellington, period. Privately though, Ellington is quoted as saying, "Jazz is music; swing is business."

Duke Ellington entered into a long and fruitful creative partnership with composer Billy Strayhorn beginning in 1939. Strayhorn was born in Dayton, Ohio and grew up in Pittsburgh. His first interest was classical music, but at the time, that was a field closed to African Americans. In 1938, Duke Ellington and his orchestra played in Pittsburgh and Strayhorn wrangled a meeting with him. Strayhorn demonstrated to Ellington how he would have arranged one of Ellington's pieces and Ellington was interested enough to invite Strayhorn to come to New York to work with him.

Strayhorn would collaborate with Ellington for the next 25 years, until Strayhorn's death in 1967. The diminutive and reserved Strayhorn would shy away from the limelight, perhaps in part because he was gay and openly involved in long-term relationships with other men. This worked to his disadvantage, as Ellington got most of the credit for their collaborations, although Ellington himself freely acknowledged his debt to Strayhorn, calling him "my right arm" and declaring "Strayhorn does a lot of the work, but I get to take the bows." In 1959, Ellington and Strayhorn would collaborate on the score to the film *Anatomy of a Murder*, produced and directed by Otto Preminger, the first American film to be scored by African-American musicians.

But the most famous collaboration between Strayhorn and Ellington was their very first. When Strayhorn traveled from Pittsburgh to New York to take up his new job with Ellington, Ellington had written out directions for him on how to get from Penn Station up to Harlem. Strayhorn took

the first line of those instructions, “Take the ‘A’ Train” and composed a song around it. “Take the ‘A’ Train” would become Duke Ellington’s signature song, and not just *a* jazz standard but *the* jazz standard, probably the best known and most often performed piece of jazz.

I can’t play it for you because it’s under copyright, but the song was included in the 1943 musical film *Reveille with Beverly*, and I will post the clip of that song from YouTube on the podcast website and I encourage you to take a few minutes to watch it. The film version shows Duke Ellington and his orchestra performing the song on a train train, though of course the “A” train referred to in the title is a subway line.

Well, it’s time to wrap this up, but before I close, I want to talk about one woman singer who was a major influence of the time: an African American born Eleanora Fagan in Philadelphia, who began singing as a teenager under the stage name Billie Holiday. Her innovative jazz vocal style changed popular music. She sang for Count Basie and later for Artie Shaw, putting her in the unique position of a Black singer fronting for an all-white band. She eventually left in frustration in 1938, complaining of how on tour she was never allowed to eat in the same restaurants or ride the same elevators as her white bandmates.

Holiday was already making waves as a recording artist when in 1939, she recorded “Strange Fruit,” a song composed by a Jewish-American high school teacher in New York City. “Strange Fruit,” as interpreted by Billie Holiday, was a slow and eerie song of protest against lynchings. The first verse goes like this: “Southern trees bearing a strange fruit/Blood on the leaves and blood at the root/Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze/Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.”

Wow.

“Strange Fruit” hit a nerve with white America and re-opened old wounds in Black America. It was known to bring listeners to tears and has been called the beginning of the civil rights movement. It certainly put Billie Holiday on the map.

The popularity of singers like Bing Crosby and Billie Holiday foreshadowed the end of the big band era, as celebrity would swing back from the bands to the singers, singers like Frank Sinatra, Nat King Cole, Dean Martin, Ella Fitzgerald, Judy Garland, Peggy Lee, and the Andrews Sisters, just to name a few. But for about a decade, swing would be the American sound, the sound Americans danced to at home, and later, the sound that accompanied Americans as they marched off to war.

But that is a story for another episode. We’ll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I’d especially like to thank Carol and Alessandro for their kind donations, and thank you to Gal for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Carol and Alessandro and Gal help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and

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And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we return to the tense situation in Europe. The Munich Agreement was supposed to have averted a war, but immediately after going back on his word and occupying Czechoslovakia, Adolf Hitler is ready to pull out the same old playbook, this time against Poland. What Guarantee Is There? Next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I'm going to recommend a new book that was very helpful to me in organizing my thoughts for today's episode. It's titled *Let's Do It*, by Bob Stanley and covers the history of popular music from Tin Pan Alley to the dawn of rock and roll, in a manner not too different from how I do this podcast. If the popular music episodes of *The History of the Twentieth Century* particularly appeal to you, you should check it out. That's *Let's Do It*, by Bob Stanley.

In looking through *Let's Do It*, I realized there's a type of music I overlooked in the podcast, so let me say a word about it now. It's barbershop style. I'm sure you already know what it sounds like: typically sung by a quartet of men *a capella*, with a tenor taking the lead, a second tenor and a baritone singing just above and below the melody in close harmony, and a bass singer hitting the roots of the chords. There are women quartets as well.

Barbershop quartets first appeared in America around the turn of the twentieth century, and I should have said something about them in the Belle Époque days of the podcast, but now is fine, because the 1930s saw a revival of the barbershop quartet form.

The origins of barbershop are obscure, although Bob Stanley correctly points out in *Let's Do It* that barbershops have traditionally been an important social space in the African-American community, so the name itself strongly implies that barbershop style originated with African Americans. If so, white Americans quickly adopted it. Certain turn-of-the-century songs became barbershop standards, including "Shine On, Harvest Moon," "Down by the Old Mill Stream," and "Sweet Adeline."

Barbershop went out of style after the Great War, but in the 1930s, there was a deliberate effort to revive it, at the center of which was the 1938 creation of an organization originally known as the Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barber Shop Quartet Singing in America,

a deliberately ungainly name with the equally ungainly abbreviation SPEBSQSA. This was a sly bit of New Deal-era satire on the alphabet soup government agencies of the time. Nowadays, it's more commonly known as the Barbershop Harmony Society and claims 20,000 members and an additional 60,000 affiliated singers worldwide.

The society promotes educational programs and contests to preserve and encourage the style. Barbershop quartets even in our time often adopt the clothing styles of the early twentieth century as a nod to the music's origins, such as straw hats and striped vests.

Barbershop is usually thought of as a men's form, but in 1945, a parallel organization for women singers, called the Sweet Adelines, was founded. Today it claims a membership of 24,000 women worldwide.

[music: Closing Theme]