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*Facing the Music: Jazz  
and the Third Reich*

**Ellen Taylor**

*Abstract:*

*I*n this paper, I examine the Swing Kids movement in Nazi Germany as a form of rebellion. This movement was not only deemed a political threat by the Nazi administration, but it was a direct result of the Nazis' classification of jazz as a political issue. The Swing Kids used jazz as their emblem of collective rebellion precisely because it was illegal and, by the Nazis' definition, a political danger. If the Nazis had been able to effectively enforce their ban, the Swing movement may have been less successful, or more likely, impossible. However, the Nazis' failure, both because this task was unrealistic to begin with and also because their system of regulation was imperfect, contributed to an environment in which jazz was able to thrive.

Although Hitler's regime attempted to stamp out any creative expression that it recognized as a threat to The Party's ideals, there was one art form that it could not eliminate: jazz. This style of music was immediately recognized as a threat because it embodies all of the qualities that undermine totalitarian authority: creativity, nonconformity, and innovation. Its syncopated rhythms and tendency towards improvisation represent freedom of expression. Nazi officials recognized the power of art and music, and used both to their advantage in the form of propaganda. They were also cognizant that certain types of art had socio-political connotations that endangered The Party's authority.

Jazz was considered a danger to the core values of German society because it represented a culturally and racially foreign influence. It not only originated in America, but it was rooted in the African American community. Every possible measure was used to purge it from the public sphere. Government officials shut down nightclubs, banned songs on the radio, and banished jazz performers from Germany.<sup>i</sup> However, jazz thrived in Germany throughout the duration of the Nazi regime.

The survival of jazz reveals an imperfection in the Hitler's system of social control. Although the Nazi party attempted to monitor and manipulate almost every aspect of its citizen's lives, it could not defeat jazz.<sup>ii</sup> Some officials simply lacked the musical expertise to recognize jazz. This confusion was exacerbated by the changing and highly disputed criteria for what constituted "hot" music. Additionally, there was too much popular interest in the style to contain. Although some factors that contributed to the jazz craze were almost impossible to control, such as the distribution of secretly imported records, many aspects of the Nazi's campaign against jazz were simply mishandled.

There was no conceivable way that The Party could effectively enforce this ban because it would mean identifying and suppressing all manifestations of jazz music in Germany, whether it be in the form of bootlegged records or covertly imported music sheets. This task was even more impossible because of the widespread popularity of jazz; it was already a staple of German culture before the Third Reich. Additionally, the Nazi administration made major tactical

errors in their campaign to eliminate jazz. Their aggressive attempts to turn the public against jazz backfired. Poor administrative decisions inhibited the full censorship of jazz on the radio, and often, lower officials lacked the musical expertise to identify jazz in the form of music sheets and records.<sup>iii</sup> The Nazis' system of regulation was unfit to handle the daunting task of erasing part of German culture.

Ultimately, the ban backfired by defining jazz as a form of political resistance that was adopted by the Swing Kids (also known as Swing Youth), a teenage counterculture movement in Germany. Although this movement did not have a definite structure or organized political platform, countless adolescents banded together in groups that listened to swing and jazz music as a way of rebelling against the strict social and political order of their society. The very fact that the Nazi Regime considered jazz a threat turned the music into a symbol of defiance. Jazz became an integral element of the Swing Kids' nonviolent protest against the government. The Nazis' policies towards jazz were not only unenforceable, but they actually transformed jazz into a form of political rebellion, which they lacked the ability to effectively regulate.

World War I marked the beginning of the jazz craze in Germany, although the style had been introduced to Europe long before this time period through traveling artists such as the Frisk Jubilee Singers of 1875. The invasion of American troops re-introduced the foreign music to the Germany in 1918, and this time the style gained major recognition.<sup>iv</sup> Although the soldiers departed in 1919, their American jazz music was now a presence in European pop culture, which quickly mushroomed into a nation-wide phenomenon.<sup>v</sup> The creative, social, and sexual liberation of the Weimar Republic cultivated an even more receptive audience for the avant-garde genre.<sup>vi</sup> American jazz musicians quickly gained substantial European fan bases, and soon German musicians began to incorporate elements of jazz music in their own compositions.

The Nazi Regime, however, implemented a harsh policy against jazz and attempted to manipulate the public's opinion towards it by portraying it as both an inferior art form and as a threat to traditional German values. These xenophobic overtones are

evident in the Nazis' list of banned musical qualities.<sup>vii</sup> This official publication derogatorily characterizes jazz as a product of "negroes" and Jews, both of whom were unwelcome in the Third Reich. One point of the list reads:

So-called jazz...[must be] devoid of hysterical rhythmic verses characteristic of the music of the barbarian races and conducive to dark instincts alien to the German spirit...as well as all mutes which turn the noble sound of wind and brass instruments into a Jewish-Freemasonic yowl!<sup>viii</sup>

The Nazis called upon stereotypes and widespread racial intolerance to justify their policies towards jazz. They appealed to followers of The Party's ideology by characterizing jazz as both a primitive form of music and also as a threat to the Aryan race. This quotation ennoble the Nazi Party by insinuating that their motivations for banning jazz were purely paternalistic and in the best interest of the German people, who required protection from the "dark instincts" of a foreign culture.<sup>ix</sup> The rhetoric of this prohibition was carefully chosen in order to make censorship appear righteous.

Pseudo-musicology was a slightly less prominent, but still present, element of the Nazis' campaign against jazz. As a self-proclaimed superior race, the Nazis also boasted more advanced knowledge of the arts. One prohibition reads: "plucking of the strings is prohibited, since it is damaging to the instrument and detrimental to the Aryan musicality".<sup>x</sup> This feigned concern for the instruments was intended to strengthen the validity of the Nazis' official stance towards jazz. The supposedly barbaric nature of jazz musicians was evident through the way they mistreated their instruments. Additionally, this statement reinforces the "us versus them" mentality that pervaded Nazi ideology. "Aryan musicality" was overtly distinct from and implicitly more sophisticated than "non-Aryan musicality".<sup>xi</sup> This pseudo-musicological critique was linked to the Nazis' pseudo-scientific theories about race. Citizens who had already accepted the idea of their own Aryan superiority were the target audience of this calculated appeal.

One of the Nazis' greatest opportunities to decrease jazz listenership was through the radio, which was constantly monitored

by Party members. The music genre was officially banned from the German airwaves in 1933, although this prohibition did not take effect until 1935.<sup>xii</sup> That December, the Frankfurt Radio Station and Reich chamber of Music joined together to create a program called “From Cake-Walk to Hot”, which was intended to mock jazz and condition listeners to view it as the product of inferior, foreign races.<sup>xiii</sup> The program was so successful that it was circulated to other radio stations. Ironically, it actually created more fans of jazz by increasing its exposure to the public.

The Nazis continued their campaign against jazz by displaying the exhibit “Degenerate Music”, which was designed to ridicule artists who did not create Party-approved music.<sup>xiv</sup> Nazi supporter Hans Severus Ziegler planned the event in an attempt to gain his superiors’ good graces.<sup>xv</sup> Hitler thought that the exhibit was unnecessary because every sector of musical performance was under the close surveillance of Nazi official.<sup>xvi</sup> However, the leaders of ProMi’s Music Division, Goebbels and Dr. Heinz Drews, were enthusiastic about the project, which they viewed as another way to communicate the Nazis’ musical policies to the public.<sup>xvii</sup>

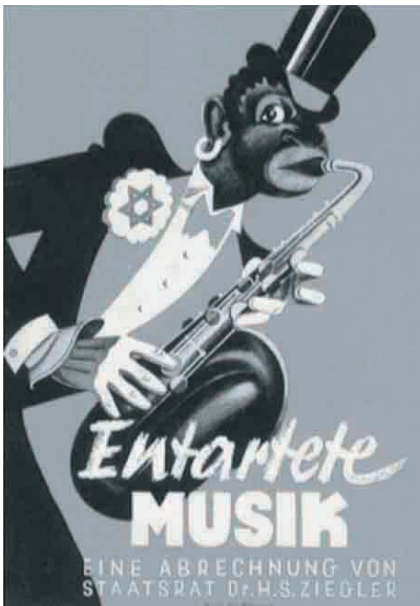


Figure 1.

*Entartete Musik*, Cover to the Exhibition Guide, 1938.

The advertisement poster of “Degenerate Music” represents the aim of the exhibit- to portray jazz as primitive, foreign, and dangerous (see Figure 1). The background of the image is a menacing red, the color traditionally associated with communism. The foreground features a monster-like creature sporting the Star of David and playing a saxophone, the most popular of all jazz instruments.<sup>xviii</sup> This character represents the double threat of jazz as an African American creation, which the Jews supposedly adopted for the purpose of undermining the Nazi government.<sup>xix</sup> The musician’s gaudy earring represents his barbaric nature. Although he is wearing a formal suit, it looks mismatched with his loud accessories. This image is the visual embodiment of the Nazi’s campaign against jazz. It features every negative quality that they attributed to the style and its creators.

Despite its calculated design, the exhibit failed to achieve its desired effect. Visitors were offended by the Nazis’ mockery of Igor Stravinsky, a famous composer, as well as other musicians who were “officially tolerated” in some parts of Germany.<sup>xx</sup> The administrative hypocrisy of this act, as well as the Nazis’ ridicule of a widely respected musician, caused so much unrest that the German Foreign Affairs Office was forced to publicly apologize for including Stravinsky in the exhibit.<sup>xxi</sup> Nonetheless, this humiliating misstep did not discourage the Nazis from continuing their assault on jazz music through other means.<sup>xxii</sup>

In 1942, Goebbels decided to take radio censorship a step further by establishing the “Programming Board for the Music and Entertainment Sector”, which was dedicated specifically to monitoring jazz music on the German radio.<sup>xxiii</sup> This board consisted of ten Nazi-appointed officials who each supervised different divisions of radio broadcasting. They did not take orders from the RRG (The German Broadcasting Company) but directly from the head of the Programming Board, Hans Hinkel.<sup>xxiv</sup> Goebbels had entrusted the fate of German broadcasting to a hand-selected group of specialists, who were all preeminent authorities in their respective areas of radio entertainment.<sup>xxv</sup> Each would closely monitor the radio for any trace of jazz, and ensure that only Nazi-approved music made it to the air.



However, it was soon clear that this job was easier said than done. Hans Hinkel frequently received messages from fellow Nazis who criticized his inability to keep jazz off the air. Party member Norbert Salb complained “there is still so much jazz on the radio that for years now the programs have been grating on the ears of the truly musical, German feeling-listeners”.<sup>xxvi</sup> Even Hinkel and his team of specialists had proven unfit to jazz from the airwaves.

Goebbels recognized that traditional censorship was failing and decided that a more creative approach was necessary in order to effectively suppress the jazz culture of Germany. Instead of simply banning jazz, he would divert its audience by creating an even more popular genre that would be marketed as authentic German music and endorsed by the Nazi Party. In September 1941 he set his plan into motion by establishing the “German Dance and Entertainment Orchestra”.<sup>xxvii</sup> This orchestra was to substitute heavy use of strings and accordions for the saxophones and percussive instruments that characterized jazz, and avoid choruses and solo performances.<sup>xxviii</sup> Its songs would mimic the traditional German music of pre-WWI.

The orchestra had its radio debut on April 1, 1942.<sup>xxix</sup> Hans Hinkel gave the opening speech in which he attempted to excite listeners by announcing that the band was an early birthday treat for Hitler.<sup>xxx</sup> The orchestra played live every four weeks and their recordings were featured every Wednesday. This not only gave the band more exposure, but it also acted as a reminder to other artists of what kind of music the Nazis favored. With any luck, individual musicians would begin to imitate the orchestra’s sound and help to establish the new genre.<sup>xxxi</sup>

Unfortunately, the Nazi Party soon recognized the band itself as a possible political threat. The trouble began when one of the trumpeters drunkenly suggested to a restaurant entertainer that he should play the Jewish tunes favored by the German troops. When the manager came over to silence him, the trumpeter motioned at the man’s Nazi pin and yelled, “You can’t be proud of that thing! Adolf Hitler is finished anyway!”<sup>xxxii</sup> Although the musician was a member of a Nazi-organized propaganda band, he was aggressively opposed to the Party’s ideals. In response to this embarrassing episode, the manager of the orchestra remarked:

“I stand by my assertion that thirty musicians together in one place constitute a political danger spot...So it is hardly to be wondered at if, in the whole orchestra, there is literally only a single Party member”<sup>xxxiii</sup>

This remark may not have been far from the truth. The seemingly isolated instance may have hinted at the political views of the other band members. Perhaps they had remained silent out of fear that they, like their fellow band-member, would be sent to a concentration camp for expressing their true views.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The Nazis could barely control their own musical creation, let alone wield it as a weapon against jazz music.

To make matters worse, the orchestra’s music did not achieve the fame that Goebbels had envisioned; it was downright unpopular.<sup>xxxv</sup> Jazz enthusiasts were unhappy with this artificial substitute for their favorite music. German music lovers were eager for something new and edgy, but this surrogate jazz resembled traditional polka from 30 years before.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Jazz embodied all of the musical qualities that listeners loved- it was fresh, unpredictable, and catchy. Poorly disguised polka music could not replace, let alone challenge, jazz as the preeminent music style of the time.

Rebellious Germans were forced to satisfy their craving for jazz through illegal means. Foreign imported jazz, brought over on airplanes and ships as luggage, was virtually untraceable and easily distributed.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Bootleggers cleverly disguised the names of songs so that the Nazis could not identify jazz records. Some party officials simply lacked the aptitude to read music, and unwittingly allowed forbidden music sheets to circulate.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Jewish musicians such as Arthur Arshavsky evaded the Nazi radar by adopting less conspicuous names (he went by Artie Shaw).<sup>xxxix</sup> Often, jazz fans met in private to listen to the forbidden music. These illicit gatherings were particularly characteristic of young jazz-enthusiasts, who were referred to as the Swing Youth.

Rather than obey the Nazis’ regulations about jazz music, the Swing Youth responded by adopting jazz and swing music as a symbol of their political dissidence. The very name “Swing Youth” blatantly mocked the Hitler Youth. Rather than dress in the demure fashion

endorsed by the Nazis, the Swing Kids Americanized themselves by sporting long hair and Zoot suit-like clothes.<sup>xi</sup> These cliques often used American slang and adopted names such as “the Harlem Club, the Cotton Club, Texas Jack, the Al Capone Gang, the Navajos Down” to reflect their enthusiasm for American culture.<sup>xli</sup> Some of the Swing Kid groups organized events that celebrated jazz, such as dance contests.<sup>xlii</sup>

The Nazis viewed the Swing Youth as criminals and viciously persecuted them. In 1940, the police stormed a swing festival in Hamburg and arrested 500 youths in attendance.<sup>xliii</sup> The SS chief ordered that the “ringleaders” of the swing groups be identified and sent to work at concentration camps for two to three years minimum.<sup>xliv</sup> “There,” he ordered, “the youngsters must first be beaten, drilled in the strictest fashion and be made to work”.<sup>xlv</sup> The Swing Kids were considered enemies of the Party and were punished harshly for their transgressions. Himmler hoped that arresting the leaders of these groups would serve as a warning to the other Swing Youth so that they might replace their rebellious activities with more acceptable German behavior. However, the Swing Kid movement lived on as new groups cropped up and continued to use jazz as their means of rebellion.<sup>xlvi</sup>

Ironically, the Swing Kid movement was a result of the Nazis’ aggressive policies towards jazz. The Nazis had inadvertently set the stage for a political rebellion through music by placing legal taboos on it. Jazz was no longer simply a style of music, but a symbol of nonconformity with the Nazi ideals. Those who listened to it showed an acceptance of black and Jewish artists, an appreciation of American innovation and creativity, and a disregard for The Party’s laws. By expelling jazz from mainstream Germany, the Nazis had pushed the music into counterculture territory. They had inadvertently given dissenters another weapon of rebellion.

Although the movement was nebulous and unstructured, it represented a group of people, if only a minority, who collectively disrupted the Nazis’ system of social regulation. Even though the Nazis caught and punished a certain percentage of the rebels, the movement thrived and, in the words of the preeminent scholar of this field, Michael Kater, “jazz as a symbol of freedom remained

resilient".<sup>xlvii</sup> The Swing Movement flourished in spite of, and in response to, Hitler's totalitarian regime. The Nazis' attempt to eliminate jazz music was both a tactical miscalculation and an overestimation of their regulatory powers. They not only allowed jazz to become the cornerstone of a major counterculture movement, but they unknowingly transformed it into a pervasive form of rebellion that they could not fully control.

In order to fully understand the Swing movement as a form of political rebellion, it is important to recognize that it was not only deemed a political threat by the Nazi administration, but it was actually a direct result of the Nazis' classification of jazz as a political issue. The Swing Kids used jazz as their emblem of collective rebellion precisely because it was illegal and, by the Nazis' definition, a political danger. If the Nazis had been able to effectively enforce their ban, the Swing movement would have been less successful, or more likely, impossible. However, the Nazis' failure, both because this task was unrealistic to begin with and also because their system of regulation was imperfect, contributed to an environment in which jazz was able to thrive.

## *End Notes*

<sup>i</sup> Kater, Michael H. "Forbidden Fruit? Jazz in the Third Reich." *The American Historical Review* 94, no. 1 (February 1989): 11-43.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>iv</sup> Budds, Michael J. *Jazz and The Germans* (Pendragon Press, 2002), 9.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>vii</sup> As told by Josef Skvorecky, a jazz fan who lived in the Nazi-occupied Czech Republic (Budds 14).

<sup>viii</sup> Budds, *Jazz and The Germans*, 15.

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>x</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xii</sup> Lotz, Rainer E., and Bergmeier, Horst J.P. *Hitler's Airwaves: The Inside Story of Nazi Radio Broadcasting* (Great Britain: Bittles Ltd, 1997), 136

<sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xv</sup> Specifically, Ziegler was trying to redeem himself for alleged "homosexual offences", which was punishable by law (Bergmeier and Lotz 139).

<sup>xvi</sup> Bergmeier and Lotz, *Hitler's Airwaves: The Inside Story of Nazi Radio Broadcasting*, 139.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xviii</sup> The man in the foreground is actually a representation of Johnny, the African American villain portrayed in *Jonny Spielt Auf*, by Ernest Krenek. In this opera, Johnny commits the ultimate societal taboo by seducing and taking advantage of white women. He lures the innocent females in with his barbaric music, and then leaves them in heartbreak and anguish. Johnny and other similar characters were often featured in Nazi propaganda. Budds, *Jazz and The Germans*, 19-21.

<sup>xix</sup> Hurley, Andrew Wright, *The Return of Jazz*, (New York: Bergahn Books, 2009), 19.

<sup>xx</sup> Bergmeier and Lotz, *Hitler's Airwaves: The Inside Story of Nazi Radio Broadcasting*, 140.

<sup>xxi</sup> Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise*, (Union Square, West New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), 321.

<sup>xxii</sup> Bergmeier and Lotz, *Hitler's Airwaves: The Inside Story of Nazi Radio Broadcasting*, 140.

<sup>xxiii</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>xxiv</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xxv</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xxvi</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>xxvii</sup> *Ibid.*, 145

<sup>xxviii</sup> Kater, "Forbidden Fruit? Jazz in the Third Reich", 22.

<sup>xxix</sup> Bergmeier and Lotz, *Hitler's Airwaves: The Inside Story of Nazi Radio Broadcasting*, 144.

<sup>xxx</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xxxi</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>xxxii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xxxiii</sup> *Ibid.*

xxxiv Ibid.

xxxv Kater, "Forbidden Fruit? Jazz in the Third Reich", 22-24.

xxxvi Ibid.

xxxvii Ibid., 21.

xxxviii Ibid.

xxxix Ibid.

xl "Swing Kids: Facts, Discussion Forum, and Encyclopedia Article," n.d. [http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Swing\\_Kids](http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Swing_Kids).

xli McKay, George. "'This filthy product of modernity...'" Index on Censorship 27, no. 6 (1998): 171.

xlii Dances such as the jitterbug and tango were outlawed. "Jazz and Social Justice (Part 1): Giving Voice to the Voiceless Preamble: from Hamburg to New Orleans Introduction: Why Jazz and," n.d. [http://74.125.155.132/scholar?q=cache:2ZBqi-cH6ZgJ:scholar.google.com/+goebbels+jazz&hl=en&as\\_sdt=2000](http://74.125.155.132/scholar?q=cache:2ZBqi-cH6ZgJ:scholar.google.com/+goebbels+jazz&hl=en&as_sdt=2000). "Swing Kids: Facts, Discussion Forum, and Encyclopedia Article".

xliii "Swing Kids: Facts, Discussion Forum, and Encyclopedia Article".

xliv Horn, Daniel. "JSTOR: Journal of Social History, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Autumn, 1973), pp. 42," n.d. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3786496>.

xlvi Ibid.

xlvi Kater, "Forbidden Fruit? Jazz in the Third Reich", 39.

xlvi Ibid.

