



DOWNBEAT

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ALL RECORDING STOPS TODAY

Headline from Downbeat music magazine, August 1, 1942

On August 1, 1942, the American Federation of Musicians went on strike against major recording companies due to disagreements over royalty payments. The strike forbade union members from recording any sessions for labels including Columbia, RCA Victor, and Decca Records. Musicians were, however, still permitted to perform in concert and on the radio, so long as no recordings were made. Leading up to the strike, record companies scrambled to stockpile recordings by their biggest acts, which included many Big Bands. These companies relied on their stock of unissued recordings, as well as on reissues of records from their back catalogs, in order to stay afloat. By November 1944, over two years after the strike began, all the record companies had finally agreed to new contracts, allowing union musicians to return to the recording studio.

In addition to putting pressure on the major labels to better compensate working musicians, the strike also had other effects on the recording industry that had significant repercussions for Big Bands:

- **The Rise of Vocal-Based Recordings:** Vocalists, who were not represented by the musicians union, were not required to participate in the strike. As a result, singers gained a new prominence on a variety of all-vocal recordings, as well as on reissues of older recordings that were repackaged to give featured vocalists top-billing over their accompanying orchestras.
- **The Popularization of New Musical Genres:** With fewer new records coming from the major labels, specialty labels that employed non-union musicians were able to compete for audiences. Labels such as Savoy and Atlantic specialized in African-American styles including Rhythm and Blues, Boogie Woogie, and Bebop—all genres that found new audiences as a result of the strike. Traditional folk styles including Bluegrass and Country also increased in popularity during this time, with independent labels such as Okeh, King, and even majors like Columbia, recording and distributing these genres in increasing numbers.
- **Smaller Musical Combos:** Genres including R&B and Country generally relied on smaller rhythm combos and fewer horns than the Big Bands, with instruments including drums, piano and the amplified electric guitar that could cover a large amount of musical space and play at a volume that could be easily heard in crowded clubs and dance halls. Additionally, smaller combos were able to tour more inexpensively, and thus with more frequency, than large orchestras.

In groups, discuss the following questions:

- What are some ways that the musicians strike both intentionally and unintentionally affected popular music culture in the U.S.?
- Why did vocalists experience a rise in popularity during the strike?
- What factors led towards the rise in popularity of African-American and traditional Folk-rooted genres? Why do you think small combos that played these genres had a new advantage over the Big Bands?