

Benny Goodman

Musician (1909 – 1986)

Goodman was born in Chicago, the ninth of twelve children of poor Russian-Jewish immigrants. When Benny was 10, he took music lessons at the Kehelah Jacob Synagogue. Goodman learned quickly and he was soon playing clarinet in various bands.

At 16, Goodman joined the Ben Pollack Orchestra, with which he made his first recordings in 1926. In 1929, he left for New York to become a freelance musician. In 1934 he heard that Billy Rose needed a band for his new theater-restaurant, and he put together a group of jazz musicians. They auditioned and got the job. Then Goodman heard that NBC was looking for three bands to rotate on a weekly broadcast to be called “Let’s Dance.” Thinking the band needed some help, he brought in Gene Krupa on drums, and Fletcher Henderson began writing the arrangements.

The next year the band made a nationwide tour that was a disaster until its last date in August at the Palomar Ballroom in Los Angeles. Thousands of young fans turned out to hear the band and the concert there made national headlines. The band played for seven months at the Congress Hotel in Chicago, where Teddy Wilson joined them to complete the Benny Goodman Trio. Returning to New York, Lionel Hampton made it the Benny Goodman Quartet, and the band was a sensation at the Hotel Pennsylvania’s Manhattan Room.

At age of 28 Benny Goodman had reached what seemed to be the pinnacle of success. The new radio program, “The Camel Caravan,” was scheduled in prime time, and the whole nation listened not only to the band itself but to the intelligent commentary by influential critics like Clifton Fadiman and ROBERT BENCHLEY.

On January 16, 1938, Sol Hurok booked the Benny Goodman band into Carnegie Hall, the first jazz performers to appear there. The concert was a sensation. Critic Bruce Elder called it “the single most important jazz or popular music concert in history.”

A concert with Benny Goodman and Jean-Pierre Rampal on March 16, 1977 at the Century Club was enormously successful but created a contretemps. There were so many reservations for dinner that extra seating was needed, and the question was raised about allowing women to be seated above the second floor. They were. Three weeks later at the April monthly meeting, Goodman played another concert, this time with JOHN HAMMOND, his brother-in-law. He reigned as the King of Swing until his death in 1986 in New York City at age 77.

