

THE TWENTIES IN AMERICA



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The 1920s in America

Music, popular

by Yiorgos Vassilandonakis

A pivotal decade for popular music in the United States, the 1920s marked the coming of age of the record industry as recorded music became popular and profitable. Reflecting the cultural changes of the period, new styles of music such as jazz and blues entered the mainstream consciousness, with several variations developing throughout the decade, while musical comedies introduced songs and dances that would become popular both on and off the Broadway stage.

The popular music of the 1920s was largely influenced by the social climate of the United States during the period. American culture in the 1920s was shaped by several unprecedented historical, political, and social events, including the end of World War I, Prohibition and the associated wave of organized crime, and the economic boom and urban migration of the era. A time of great change, progress, and disillusionment, the decade was marked by the rejection of tradition. Recovering from the devastation of World War I, many Americans embarked on an escapist search for lost happiness by presenting themselves as optimistic and carefree.

The popular music of the era appealed to such sentiments, expressing a sense of urgency and change, rejecting the melodic qualities that dominated music prior to the turn of the century, and introducing atonality and new rhythms. It also reflected the tongue-in-cheek overtones of popular culture, especially in the songs written for musical comedies. The era was further marked by the transition from the ragtime music of the previous decades to jazz, the popularity and cultural influence of which caused writer F. Scott Fitzgerald to dub the entire decade the Jazz Age.

Jazz

Although jazz had existed in the previous decade, it did not enter the mainstream until the 1920s. Several factors contributed to the rising popularity of jazz, a style generally characterized by its use of syncopated rhythms and improvisation. World War I was a major factor, as African-American troops had traveled in North America and Europe, in some cases bringing jazz music with them. In addition, numerous African Americans migrated from the rural South to the urban North throughout the period, forming communities in major cities such as Detroit, Chicago, and New York, where the sounds of jazz and the blues spread.

In New York, jazz flourished as part of the African American cultural and artistic movement later known as the Harlem Renaissance. New Yorkers flocked to the Hollywood Club, renamed Club Kentucky later in the decade, to listen to the Washingtonians, the band led by Duke Ellington. Harlem's Cotton Club, a whites-only club featuring black performers, opened its stage to numerous jazz musicians as well as to the blues singers Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey. Many major jazz musicians and singers of the era appeared onstage at the Cotton Club at some point, with Ellington and his band providing regular entertainment starting in 1927. Meanwhile, the Dixieland style of jazz took root in Chicago, brought to the city by musicians from New Orleans such as Louis Armstrong. Widely popular, Dixieland introduced the saxophone as the band's focal instrument, thus differentiating its style from that of standard jazz.

Concurrently with the rise of African American musicians, the orchestra led by Paul Whiteman successfully targeted white, middle-class audiences and became a popular dance band. Whiteman, a classically trained musician, created a modified jazz style that was carefully orchestrated, performed by a larger ensemble, and did not include much improvisation. The band's music blended symphonic textures with simpler harmonies and jazzy rhythms.

In 1924, Whiteman invited composer George Gershwin, among others, to write jazz-inspired pieces for a concert, aiming to combine modern and classical styles and forms. Unlike most jazz performances, this concert was to take place in a concert hall rather than a nightclub. Whiteman's experiment was unprecedented, as jazz had never before been performed in a traditional setting or combined with classical forms. In addition, Gershwin's music was typically "jazzy"—that is, jazz-influenced—but not jazz per se. Nevertheless, Gershwin composed *Rhapsody in Blue*, a popular symphony of sorts and the first example of symphonic jazz. Following its performance on February 12, 1924, the piece received mixed reviews from critics, many of whom were confused by its mixing of genres. Audiences, however, embraced it immediately and enthusiastically, and it was performed numerous times throughout the decade and since.

The experiment was pivotal for Gershwin's oeuvre, as it motivated him to create a second jazz-influenced composition, *An American in Paris* (1928), and subsequent orchestral pieces, including the popular American opera *Porgy and Bess* (1935). Such orchestral work

had a profound impact on American and European music in the 1920s and later decades. Whiteman's and Gershwin's music was not considered "real" jazz, as it differed from traditional jazz in several ways, generally by eliminating improvisation and combining jazz influences with classical styles. Nevertheless, such music served to introduce jazz to audiences during a time when pure jazz remained outside the mainstream.

Brothers George (left) and Ira Gershwin.

(Getty Images)



Technological Developments

Developments in technology and marketing affected the ways music was experienced by and distributed to its audiences. During the 1920s, the number of public and commercial radio stations grew rapidly. Radio shows devoted to music became popular, with some even broadcasting from nightclubs and other music venues. Performances at the Cotton Club by Duke Ellington and his band, among other performers, were broadcast to a nationwide listening audience. This model of distribution allowed a wide audience to become familiar with the musicians and listen to a live performance without having to leave their homes.

Sound recording, which had begun in the second half of the previous century, had evolved into a booming industry by the early 1920s, with approximately 100 million records sold each year. A substantial number of these records were "race records," recordings by and for African Americans. These records featured blues and jazz, as well as ragtime, gospel, and other genres of music. While race records existed as a result of the widespread segregation in U.S. society, they called attention to African American artists and styles of music, bringing such music into the mainstream. At times, they also influenced songwriters to compose music that mainstream audiences found more appealing.

By the 1920s, music was available through the radio and records as well as in films, which were typically silent except for musical accompaniment. Previously, music had mostly been disseminated in the form of sheet music, which required the consumer to be able to read music, play an instrument, and often read lyrics in order to perform it. With the new availability of recorded music, consumers could listen to and enjoy music without needing musical training. This created a passive audience more accustomed to listening to music than playing it. With the new technologies available, songs were published en masse and widely distributed, increasing the popularity of the songs as well as the dances that frequently went with them.

This new way of experiencing and consuming music brought about another significant shift, placing focus upon the performer of the song rather than the composer. In the past, music was recreated at home from sheet music, employing instruments and amateur musicians available in the household, so each performance would vary in quality and sound. With the advent of records and radio broadcasts, the consumer could purchase and listen to an expert rendition of any given song. During the 1920s, consumers became attached to the versions of songs recorded by particular performers, rather than the intentions of their composers. Consumers began to care more about the voices and looks of favorite performers than the work or reputation of composers.

Musical Comedy

Another major source of popular songs in the 1920s was musicals. Musicals of the era greatly differed from their romantically influenced predecessors, focusing instead on lively, comical plots about everyday people. Two such musicals, *Funny Face* (1927) and *Lady, Be Good* (1924), featured songs by George Gershwin and his lyricist brother, Ira. Live musical comedies were consistently popular throughout the 1920s despite the prevalence of technological advancements such as records and the radio.

Since the market for musicals continued to be strong, songwriters such as the Gershwins and Irving Berlin wrote songs intended for the Broadway stage. The popularity of the songs they produced was only underscored by the dances choreographed to their music. The 1920s showcased the dancing of siblings Adele and Fred Astaire in memorable performances to songs such as "Fascinating Rhythm" in *Lady, Be Good*. In addition, several popular dances of the period originated in stage productions, most notably the Charleston, which was popularized by the song of the same name featured in the 1923 show *Runnin' Wild*.

Impact

The 1920s produced numerous influential figures who would continue to shape the field of popular music in later decades, including Duke Ellington and George and Ira Gershwin. Styles of music popularized during the period, such as jazz and the blues, grew in popularity over time and branched out into various subgenres, leading to the eventual development of rock and roll. The advancements in mass distribution of live and recorded music made during the 1920s would further shape the field, allowing for the establishment of a record industry that would dominate American popular music for much of the century.

Further Reading

- 1 Cox, Jim. *Music Radio: The Great Performers and Programs of the 1920s through Early 1960s*. Reprint. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2005. Discusses the popular-music-based radio programs of the 1920s and later decades.
- 2 Gioia, Ted. *The History of Jazz*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. Recounts the development of jazz, with several chapters describing the events of the 1920s.
- 3 Harrison, Daphne Duval. *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s*. Reprint. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000. Describes the influence of the blues, as sung by African American women, on the music and society of the 1920s.
- 4 Oja, Carol J. *Making Music Modern: New York in the 1920s*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. Explores the significance of modernist composers in shaping the decade's music.
- 5 Oliver, Paul. *Songsters and Saints: Vocal Traditions on Race Records*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984. Details the various genres of music, other than the blues, that appeared on race records in the 1920s.
- 6 Shaw, Arnold. *The Jazz Age: Popular Music in the 1920s*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989. Chronicles the musical developments of the 1920s, including sections on specific songs and performers.
- 7 Tick, Judith, and Paul Beaudoin, eds. *Music in the USA: A Documentary Companion*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. Examines the history of music in the United States and features several sections on the 1920s.

Citation Types

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