The Jazz Age and the Harlem Renaissance

One American’s Story

The decade known as the Roaring Twenties was also called the Jazz Age, because the lively, loose beat of jazz captured the carefree spirit of the times. Jazz was developed by African-American musicians in New Orleans. That city was the home of Louis Armstrong, who became one of the world’s great jazz musicians.

As a child, Armstrong often listened to jazz played at funeral processions and dance halls. He was raised by a poor, single mother and started working at age seven. His job was collecting junk in a horse-drawn wagon. While in the wagon, Armstrong often played a small tin horn.

A Voice from the Past

I had a little tin horn, the kind the people celebrate with. I would blow this long tin horn without the top on it. Just hold my fingers close together. Blow it as a call for old rags, bones, bottles or anything that people had to sell. . . . The kids loved the sounds of my tin horn!

Louis Armstrong, quoted in Louis Armstrong by Sandford Brown

Later, Armstrong learned to play the trumpet. With other jazz musicians, he spread this new music to other parts of the country—from Chicago to New York’s Harlem—and then to Europe.

In this section, you will read more about the spread of popular culture, the Harlem Renaissance, and the artists of the Lost Generation.

More Leisure Time for Americans

Laborsaving appliances and shorter working hours gave Americans more leisure time. Higher wages also gave them money to spend on leisure activities. People wanted more fun, and they were willing to spend money to have it. Americans paid 25 cents or more to see a movie—an increase of at least 5 times the price in the previous decade. By the end of the 1920s, there were more than 100 million weekly moviegoers.

In addition to attending movies, some Americans went to museums and public libraries. Others bought books and magazines. Sales rose by
50 percent. Americans also spent time listening to the radio, talking on the telephone, playing games, and driving their cars. In 1929, Americans spent about $4 billion on entertainment—a 100 percent jump in a decade.

But not all Americans were able to take part equally in leisure-time activities or in the consumer culture of the 1920s. Some, like African Americans and Hispanic Americans, had their time and choices limited by factors such as income and race.

Mass Media and Popular Culture

New types of mass media—communications that reach a large audience—began to take hold in the 1920s. Radio and movies provided entertainment and spread the latest ideas about fashions and lifestyles.

The first commercial radio broadcast took place in Pittsburgh at station KDKA in 1920. Other radio stations soon emerged. The number of households with radios jumped from about 60,000 in 1922 to 10 million in 1929. Radio stations broadcast news, sports, music, comedy, and commercials. Not only were Americans better informed than before, but listening to the same radio programs united the nation.

Of all the powerful new influences of the 1920s, none shaped the ideas and dreams of Americans more than motion pictures. The moviemaking industry was centered in Hollywood, California.

Movies gave people an escape into worlds of glamour and excitement they could never enter. Audiences flocked to movie theaters to see their favorite actors and actresses. These included Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Clara Bow, and Rudolph Valentino. Movies also spread American popular culture to Europe. Popular culture included songs, dances, fashions, and even slang expressions like scram (leave in a hurry) and ritzy (elegant).

Moviemakers like Samuel Goldwyn, the Warner brothers, and Louis B. Mayer made fortunes overnight. For most of the 1920s, films were silent. In 1927, The Jazz Singer introduced sound. Another talkie caused a sensation in 1928—Walt Disney’s cartoon Steamboat Willie, featuring Mickey Mouse. Within a few years, all movies were talkies.
A Search for Heroes

Another leisure activity was watching sporting events and listening to them on the radio. Sporting events of all types—baseball, football, hockey, boxing, golf, and tennis—enjoyed rising attendance. Boxing became very popular. Fans who could not attend the fights listened to matches on the radio or saw them on newsreels shown at movie theaters. The Jack Dempsey–Gene Tunney boxing match of 1926 drew 120,000 fans.

In the 1920s, professional baseball gained many new fans because games were broadcast on radio. As a result, fans flocked to major league ballparks. In New York City, fans went to Yankee Stadium, which opened in 1923, to watch the “Bronx Bombers”—the nickname for the New York Yankees. Even college football and basketball attracted huge crowds.

Sports figures captured the imagination of the American public. They became heroes because they restored Americans’ belief in the power of the individual to improve his or her life. Babe Ruth of the Yankees was baseball’s top home-run hitter. Someone once asked Ruth why his $80,000 salary was higher than the president’s. Ruth supposedly replied, “Well, I had a better year.”

Baseball players weren’t the only sports heroes. Golfers idolized Bobby Jones. People cheered Helen Wills and Bill Tilden on the tennis courts. In 1926, New York City threw a huge homecoming parade for Gertrude Ederle, the first woman to swim the English Channel. Americans also made national heroes of two daring young fliers—Charles A. Lindbergh and Amelia Earhart.

Why do you think Lindbergh and Earhart became American heroes?
The Harlem Renaissance

Wartime military service and work in war industries had given African Americans a new sense of freedom. They migrated to many cities across the country, but it was New York City that turned into the unofficial capital of black America. In the 1920s, Harlem, a neighborhood on New York’s West Side, was the world’s largest black urban community.

The migrants from the South brought with them new ideas and a new kind of music called jazz. Soon Harlem produced a burst of African-American cultural activity known as the Harlem Renaissance, which began in the 1920s and lasted into the 1930s. It was called a renaissance because it symbolized a rebirth of hope for African Americans.

Harlem became home to writers, musicians, singers, painters, sculptors, and scholars. There they were able to exchange ideas and develop their creativity. Among Harlem’s residents were poets Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, and Countee Cullen and novelists Claude McKay and Zora Neale Hurston. Hughes was perhaps Harlem’s most famous writer. He wrote about the difficult conditions under which African Americans lived.

Jazz became widely popular in the 1920s. It was a form of music that combined African rhythms, blues, and ragtime to produce a unique sound. Jazz spread from its birthplace in New Orleans to other parts of the country and made its way into the nightclubs of Harlem. These nightclubs featured popular jazz musicians such as Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, and singers such as the jazz and blues great, Bessie Smith. Harlem’s most famous nightclub was the Cotton Club. It made stars of many African-American performers, but only white customers were allowed in the club.

The Lost Generation

For some artists and writers, the decade after the war was not a time of celebration but a time of deep despair. They had seen the ideas of the Progressives end in a senseless war. They were filled with resentment and they saw little hope for the future. They were called the Lost Generation.
For many of them, only one place offered freedom and
tolerance. That was Paris. The French capital became a
gathering place for American expatriates, people who
choose to live in a country other than their own. Among the
American expatriates living in Paris was the young novelist
Ernest Hemingway. As an ambulance driver in Europe dur-
during World War I, he had seen the war’s worst. His early nov-
els, *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*, reflected the
mood of despair that followed the war.

Novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald and Sinclair Lewis were two
other members of the Lost Generation. Fitzgerald and his
wife, Zelda, lived the whirlwind life of the Jazz Age—fast
cars, nightclubs, wild parties, and trips to Paris. His master-
piece, *The Great Gatsby*, is a tragic story of wealthy New Yorkers whose
lives spin out of control. The novel is a portrait of the dark side of the
Roaring Twenties.

Lewis wrote *Babbitt*, a novel that satirized, or made fun of, the
American middle class and its concern for material possessions.

*A VOICE FROM THE PAST*

It’s the fellow with four to ten thousand a year . . . and an automobile and a
nice little family in a bungalow . . . that makes the wheels of progress go
round! . . . That’s the type of fellow that’s ruling America today; in fact, it’s
the ideal type to which the entire world must tend, if there’s to be a decent,
well-balanced . . . future for this little old planet!

Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt*

The social values and materialistic lifestyles criticized by Lewis soon
came to an end. As you will read in the next chapter, the soaring econ-
omy that brought prosperity in the 1920s came to a crashing halt. It was
followed by a worldwide economic depression in the 1930s.