

The Jazz Age

Gale Student Resources in Context, 2011

The [Jazz Age](#), also known as the Roaring Twenties, was an era of American history that began after World War I and ended with the onset of the Great Depression in 1929. However, the era's social and cultural legacy lives on and still influences American life today. Many aspects of American life that had beginnings in the [1920s](#) are immediately recognizable as part of modern-day society.

[Popular Culture](#) and Teenagers

The era sprang into being with the introduction of commercial radio and the birth of jazz music, a creation of [African Americans](#) that quickly became popular among middle-class white Americans. Although white performers took over the music and facilitated its spread among society at large, the music was an early vehicle for the integration of some aspects of [African American culture](#) into white society. In the past, people who wanted to hear music had to go to a live performance, which limited access. With the advent of the radio, a wide swath of the population could experience vastly different styles of music without leaving home. The radio also leapt over regional differences, creating a more standardized culture of similar tastes and references as well as more standard accents and speech patterns. Radio created celebrities by bringing national events into people's homes; when Charles Lindbergh became the first person to fly across the Atlantic Ocean without stopping, millions of Americans followed his feat on the radio, transforming him instantly into a hero. Along with the radio, the advent of the movie and the opening of theaters across the country increased this spread of culture, as 90 million Americans went to the movies every week by 1929.

Young people in the 1920s, entranced by jazz, were the first generation of teenagers to rebel against their parents and their parents' traditional culture. Along with the new music came new fads and fashions, such as long, slinky flapper dresses for [women](#) and wide, pleated, deeply cuffed pants for men, as well as a host of slang terms that were mystifying to the older generation. The popular culture idolized young people and their taste for the new and startling, a slant that is familiar to Americans today. Similarly to today, African American trends in the Jazz Age were adopted first by white young people and eventually by society at large. For example, dances such as the Charleston, the fox-trot, and the jitterbug, originally invented by African Americans, became wildly popular among white youth in the 1920s. At the same time, however, mass culture, such as the radio show *Amos 'n Andy*, featuring African American characters, spread racist stereotypes across the country. African Americans were not the only groups who were the subject of vicious stereotypes; other radio shows and movies mocked Italians, Jews, and other ethnic groups with impunity.

Consumer Culture

The 1920s transformed American life with the introduction of many inventions and lifestyle choices that are a familiar part of U.S. culture today. The era saw the rise of ready-made clothing in standard sizes, the automobile, commercial radio, electric appliances, and the telephone, as well as the spread of music through home phonograph records. Cigarette smoking and cosmetic use became widespread,

synthetic fabrics were common, and advertising became far more visual and psychologically based than in the past. Americans also began shopping at chain stores and eating more canned and frozen food and less food made from scratch. In short, the consumer culture that is still deeply embedded in American society had its beginnings in the Jazz Age.

An enduring symbol of the transformation of the American economy and culture was the automobile. Henry Ford had introduced the assembly line to automobile production, allowing cars to be produced ever more quickly and cheaply. Ford cut automobile prices six times in the early 1920s, down to \$290 by 1925. This made cars affordable for middle-class families. Ford also instituted a minimum wage for his workers, shortened their workday to eight hours, and reduced the work week from six days to five days.

In contrast to Ford's emphasis on efficiency in manufacturing, Alfred Sloan, president of General Motors, introduced new concepts in advertising and marketing. According to the University of Houston's Digital History Project, Sloan is famous for saying, "The primary object of a corporation was to make money, not just to make cars," and he applied himself wholeheartedly to this goal. Unlike Ford, who saw [automobiles](#) as functional, useful products, Sloan advertised his cars as symbols of luxury and wealth; General Motors introduced yearly model changes so people would feel compelled to buy new cars more often to keep up with the latest automotive fashion. Sloan also diversified his cars, presenting some as higher status, luxury automobiles that were thus more desirable, and he opened the first consumer credit agency to allow people to buy them. All of these innovations are firmly entrenched in [American culture](#) today.

Women in the Jazz Age

The women's suffrage movement gained steam in the 1920s as women entered the work force after World War I and gained the vote in 1920. Many men had died in the war, leaving opportunities open to women. The image of the flapper, with its associated notions of [equality](#) and sexual freedom, allowed some women to live more liberated lives. Women musicians in particular, such as African American singer Bessie Smith and pianist Lil Hardin Armstrong, were widely popular. Paradoxically, however, the image of the free-spirited flapper began to lessen social support for traditional suffragettes and [feminists](#), who now seemed frumpy and old-fashioned in comparison.

In addition, the early momentum in favor of women's freedom ran into a snag when an Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution was proposed that outlawed [discrimination](#) based on gender. Some women supported it, while others feared that it would involve legislation that would set minimum wages and maximum hours for female workers, and that this legislation would either curtail their ability to make money, or prevent companies from hiring women in the first place. Most women who worked had jobs in domestic service, in offices, and as clerks—all low-paying professions. Women consistently made far less money, and worked in lower-status jobs, than men did.

The Great Migration

During the 1920s, vast numbers of African Americans moved from the South to the North, mainly to cities, to escape from [poverty](#) and the hopeless life of tenant farming or sharecropping. They were

forced by local laws and customs to settle in all-black neighborhoods, where they swelled the labor force in cities such as Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland, as well as New York City. In the 1920s, Harlem in New York City became the unofficial capital of black American culture, a hotbed of intellectuals, artists, and musicians. The influence of Harlem's vibrant culture gradually spread, through radio and movies, to the culture at large, even while African Americans remained segregated and restricted in opportunity.

Legacy

The profound social changes brought about during the Jazz Age led to divisions between rural, more traditional people and those who belonged to the more worldly urban culture. They also fostered divisions between younger and older generations. Young people thought older people were hopelessly out of date; older people were convinced that the young people were victims of decayed morals, and they believed the [United States](#) was headed in the wrong direction. This divide between the metaphorical, more socially conservative "heartland" of the country and the progressive cities, and between older and younger individuals, is still present in the United States today, even though several generations have passed since the Jazz Age ended.

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