



How did popular entertainment develop during this period?

“The motion picture industry has achieved a standing and size that makes it impossible for people studying the industry to overlook it. It is already the fourth largest industry in the country, yet it is an industry that has only developed in the last ten or twelve years”

Joseph Kennedy, politician & movie investor in 1927

Cinema was a very popular form of entertainment during this period and audiences continued to grow through the 1920s. In 1927 60 million people a week went to the cinema, but by 1929 it was 110 million people a week. It was a very cheap form of entertainment 5 cents for a ticket to a **nickelodeon** and a wide variety of films were on offer, comedies, tragedies, romances and adventures.

In 1910 there were 8,000 cinemas in America, by 1930 there were 303,000. Nickelodeons had wooden benches and were sometimes referred to as ‘flea pits’ but cinemas could also be very extravagant like the 1927 Roxy Theatre in New York with its plush carpets, luxurious seating for 6,000, and grand arches and marble columns. In smaller cinemas a pianist played accompaniment during silent films, but as cinemas became bigger they were replaced by organs.

Moving pictures, or ‘movies’, were invented at the end of the 19th century in Europe. An industry grew up around film-making in a number of countries, and in the USA it was particularly strong in New York. There were a number of reasons why Hollywood in California came to dominate the film industry not just of America but of the world. The First World War had distracted other countries from movie-making while the USA was free to carry on; the cost of the First World War crippled the economies of foreign countries but the USA still had money to spend watching and making movies. California was seen as an ideal location with large empty spaces to film including deserts and mountains and a warm, dry climate most of the year. In the era of silent films the movies produced in **Hollywood** could be easily enjoyed around the world as there was no language barrier.



Source 1: engineers demonstrating the Vitaphone sound system for films in 1926

There were a number of technological developments that maintained people’s interest in movies. There were early experiments with colour, such as the excerpts of Roman splendour in ‘Ben Hur’, a biblical epic from 1925. The first Walt Disney animated cartoon, ‘Steamboat Willie’,

introduced the world to Mickey Mouse in 1928. But the most spectacular innovation was the introduction of synchronised sound in 1927. The Warner Bros' Vitaphone system used a disc with sound recorded on it that played alongside the film. It was first used in the film 'The Jazz Singer', starring Al Jolson who turned to the audience after the silent first half of the film and said, "*You ain't seen nothing yet*". It led to a revolution in film making as companies dropped or altered silent films to add sound tracks. It was the birth of the 'talkies'. Some stars like Mary Pickford underestimated the value of adding sound to movies, claiming that "*adding sound to movies would be like putting lipstick on the Venus de Milo*".

The 'Star' system boosted the popularity of Hollywood films by promoting actors and actresses that audiences would then choose to go and see. It started in 1909 when producer Carl Laemmle promoted actress Flo Lawrence as the star of one of his films – up to that point actors had been anonymous, for example "*the man with the sad eyes*". New magazines like Life, Vogue, and Harper's Bazaar helped film companies like Warner Bros, Paramount and MGM promote their stars who became trend-setters and standard-bearers for America. Their personal lives were followed closely by the press, for example the courtship and marriage of the movie stars Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford.

The Oscar film awards started in 1928 to highlight and promote achievement in the film industry. As a result of all of the publicity famous movie stars began to demand higher wages. In 1917 Chaplin signed the first \$1 million contract to star in eight films, and by 1926 Greta Garbo was earning \$5,000 a week. In 1919 the United Artists was set up by D. W. Griffith, Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks to make their own films without having to rely on the major film companies.

Brief profiles of some of the Hollywood movie stars of the 1920s:

- Rudolph Valentino - Italian immigrant turned Hollywood sex symbol; lover to 1,000s of women; 50,000 attended his funeral (several women committed suicide when he died suddenly in 1926); FAMOUS FILM: "The Sheik"
- Douglas Fairbanks – the swash-buckling action adventure hero of the silent movie age; FAMOUS FILMS : "The Three Musketeers", "Robin Hood", "The Thief of Bagdad", "The Black Pirate", "The Gaucho"
- Charlie Chaplin - British immigrant famous for his physical comedy, one of the most famous people in the world in the 1920s; FAMOUS FILMS: "The Vagabond", "The Kid", "After the Gold Rush"
- Buster Keaton - actor, director, producer, writer, and stunt performer; best known for his physical comedy with a deadpan expression; FAMOUS FILMS: "Sherlock Jr.", "The General", "The Cameraman"
- Harold Lloyd – silent comedian and stunt performer which he performed live and without any safety equipment; FAMOUS FILM: "Safety Last!"
- Gloria Swanson - Female sex symbol famous for wearing extravagant costumes and expensive jewels in films, started her own film production company in 1929; FAMOUS FILM: "Beyond the Rocks"
- Clara Bow - Became a movie star after winning a competition in a magazine; famous for wild parties, large numbers of "close male friends", extravagant spending (red cars with packs of dogs and a monkey included...); FAMOUS FILM: "It"
- Mary Pickford was famous for playing the role of a child, but went on to be involved in film production and the Oscars; FAMOUS FILMS: "The Poor Little Rich Girl", "Pollyanna", "Little Lord Fauntleroy", "Rosita", "My Best Girl"

- Louise Brooks - actress and dancer noted as an iconic symbol of the flapper, and for popularizing the bobbed haircut; FAMOUS FILMS: "Pandora's Box", "Diary of a Lost Girl"
- Greta Garbo - glamorous and popular best known for her portrayals of strong-willed heroines; FAMOUS FILMS: "The Torrent", "Flesh and the Devil", "Love", "A Woman of Affairs", "The Kiss"

Unfortunately film stars were not perfect and the industry was rocked by a number of scandals. Charlie Chaplin married two 16 year old girls (one in 1918 and another in 1924), but he also expressed strong left-wing views and was seen as Un-American. Gloria Swanson married a French Count in 1924 to avoid public scandal of being pregnant and unmarried. Clara Bow was named by her therapist's wife as the reason for her filing for divorce.

Not everyone appreciated the influence that the movie industry had over people. They wanted to see films censored, to make sure that they did not undermine the basic values of American society. The list of **copyright** rules was called the Hays Code which said that, "*no film shall be produced which shall lower the moral standards of those that see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience shall never be thrown to the side of crime, wrong-doing, evil or sin*". Complete nudity was forbidden; screen kisses could not last more than 10 feet of film; men and women involved in screen kisses both had to have at least one foot on the floor, adultery was not to be presented as attractive and the clergy were not to be shown as comic characters or villains.

"Music is entering more and more into the daily lives of people. The black musicians of America are playing a great part in this change... They have new ideas and constantly experiment. They are causing new blood to flow into the veins of music. The Jazz players make their instruments do entirely new things, things trained musicians are taught to avoid... Jazz has come to stay because it is an expression of the times... the breathless, energetic, super-active times in which we are living"

From an interview with a jazz player in the 1920s

Jazz was a style of music based on black American folk songs from the old slave-owning states in the South. Slave music was based on rhythms that had been brought over from West Africa. Slave owners had often allowed slaves to sing as they believed it helped them work harder. The word 'jazz' became widely used to describe this music as other terms to describe it tended to be black sexual slang like blues, rag or boogie woogie.

Jazz was heavily syncopated, making the strong beats weak and the weak beats strong, which meant it could be danced too. Playing jazz music required a lot of musical skill but it was also based around **improvisation** as many black American musicians had no formal training and could not read music. Unusual combinations of instruments were used by jazz musicians as they did not have the money to buy anything expensive and had to rely on cheaper instruments like guitars, banjos and harmonicas.

Jazz was not a musical revolution as it evolved over time. An early form of jazz was called ragtime, as popularized by pianist Scott Joplin at the start of the twentieth century. Buddy Bolden is considered the first bandleader to play what would come to be called 'jazz', as by the end of the 19th century, he was the self-Proclaimed "King" of the Coronet, known for improvisational style. In 1915 "Jelly Roll Blues" was the first jazz sheet music, and in 1917, The Original Dixieland Jazz Band, a white American group, made the first jazz recording, 'Livery Stable Blues'. Freddy Keppard, a black American bandleader, had been offered the chance to make the first jazz record, but refused because he was afraid others would copy his style.

While jazz music began to be played by black Americans it quickly became widely copied by white musicians, like the jazz bands of Hoagy Carmichael, Paul Whiteman and Bix Beiderbecke. It was also popularised for older white audiences through the jazz-inspired songs of white songwriters like Irving Berlin and George Gershwin, or white singers like Al Jolson (even though he did "black up" sometimes) as well as Bing Crosby who was part of the Paul Whiteman Band.

Not everyone agreed that jazz music was a good thing. Anne Shaw Faulkner wrote in her article 'Does Jazz Put the Sin in Syncopation?' in the Ladies Home Journal in 1921, *"Jazz was originally the accompaniment of the voodoo dancer, stimulating the half-crazed barbarian to the vilest of deeds... it has a demoralizing effect on the human brain and has been demonstrated by many scientists... Jazz stimulates to extreme deeds, to a breaking away from all rules and conventions. It is harmful, dangerous and its influence is wholly bad."*

There were a number of reasons why jazz music spread quickly from the southern states to become popular, especially amongst young people, in towns and cities right across the USA:

- Jazz music travelled with black Americans as they moved north through this period; many early jazz musicians got their start working in brothels, for example in New Orleans' infamous Storyville District; when Storyville was closed in 1917, many of these musicians made their way to Chicago on the steamboats that travelled the Mississippi river, spreading Jazz northward; the migration of black Americans to the cities in the north during and after the First World War carried jazz music even further.
- Technology also played its part as in the 1920s jazz could be spread by radio and gramophone records; before this new music was only available as live performances or as sheet music. KDKA in Pittsburgh was the first American radio station and began in 1920. NBC was the first national radio station and started broadcasting in 1926, closely followed by CBS in 1927; there were 60,000 radios in US homes in 1920 and 10 million by 1929, with an estimated audience of 50 million people; as a 1929 newspaper article put it, *"From the feeble wireless telegraph service in 1920, radio had grown swiftly into the billion dollar industry it is today"*; the gramophone industry grew rapidly in 1910s' peaking sales of \$106 million in 1921 until radio ate into its profits as people could listen to new records without having to buy them.



Source 2: Louis Armstrong's gramophone record "Heebie Jeebies" from 1926

Jazz was also popularised by the performances and compositions of a number of musicians. For example:

- Louis Armstrong – born in New Orleans, Armstrong moved north to Chicago in 1922; he was a trumpet player and vocalist, nicknamed "Satchmo"; he made his first record with the Hot Five (later Hot Seven) band in 1925 while performing live with the King Oliver band; his famous songs include "Tiger Rag", "Cornet Chop Suey" and "Potato Head Blues"

- Duke Ellington – born in Washington DC, Ellington moved to Harlem in 1923; he was a jazz composer, conductor, and performer; the Duke Ellington Orchestra was the “house” orchestra for a number of years at the Cotton Club; his shows featured glamorous dancing girls, tap dancers and comedians; his famous songs included “Soda Fountain Rag”, “Choo Choo” and “Creole Love Call”
- Fats Waller – born in New York; he was a jazz pianist, organist, composer and singer; he recorded his first record in 1922; many of his songs from the 1920s are still popular in the present day; his most famous songs included “Squeeze Me”, “Ain’t Misbehavin’” and “Honeysuckle Rose”
- Jelly Roll Morton – born in New Orleans and moved to New York in 1927; he was a pianist and songwriter; he became famous in the 1920s playing with his band Red Hot Peppers; his most famous songs included “Black Bottom Stomp”, “Tank Town Bump” and “Smoke-House Blues”
- Bessie Smith - born in Chattanooga, Tennessee and moved to Philadelphia in the early 1920s; she was a singer who became known as “Empress of the Blues”; in 1923 she signed a recording contract with Columbia Records and toured with her own travelling band; her most famous songs included “Downhearted Blues” and “Backwater Blues”, while “Cold in Hand Blues” and “I Ain’t Gonna Play No Second Fiddle” were collaborations with Louis Armstrong.

“The parties were bigger, the pace was faster, the shows were broader, the buildings were higher, the morals were looser, the liquor was cheaper”

Writer F. Scott Fitzgerald in ‘Tales of the Jazz Age’ (1922)

Special clubs devoted to jazz music were started in the industrial towns of the North, particularly in Chicago and New York. Dancing was usually allowed and many were used as covers for speakeasies. One of the most famous was the Cotton Club, based in Harlem, New York City. Chicago had famous jazz clubs as well, like the Green Mill where Al Capone used to drink. Gangsters wanted only the best entertainment for their customers, so while waiters danced the Charleston at Small’s Paradise in Harlem, Fred Astaire danced at the Trocadero, and Duke Ellington led the house band at the Cotton Club with tap dancer Bojangles Robinson and jazz singer Ethel Waters. Jazz pianist Fats Waller was even kidnapped at gunpoint to play as a surprise guest at Al Capone’s birthday party.

There were a number of jazz-inspired new dances in the 1920s – the Charleston, the Foxtrot, the Lindy Hop, the Black Bottom, the Vampire, the Shimmy, the Turkey Trot, the Chicken Scratch, the Monkey Glide, the Bunny Hug, and so on. Dance crazes where large groups of people who would learn and perform particular dances together and were followed by dance marathons where dancers would try to set records for dancing for as long as they could. In 1923 Alma Cummings danced non-stop for 27 hours, wearing out six partners in the process. This then led to organised competitions where individuals and couples competed for financial rewards.



Source 3: a Dance Marathon in 1923

These new dances and crazes were particularly attractive to young people and so a lot of older, more religious, more small-town and rural people were horrified by it. Reverend Culpepper, a Methodist preacher, said in 1925, *"Dancing is a divorce feeder. It is heathen, animalistic and damnable. It degrades manhood and womanhood. Now is the time to say plainly that it is the most pernicious of modern customs"*. In 1922, The Catholic Telegraph newspaper went further, explaining, *"The music is sensuous, the female is only half dressed and the motions may not be described in a family newspaper. Suffice it to say that there are certain houses appropriate for such dances but these houses have been closed by law."*

RECOMMENDED VIEWING – Key Question 6

Good introductions to the beginnings of cinema as popular entertainment in the USA can be seen in Paul Merton's Birth of Hollywood episode 1 <https://youtu.be/UtCJj4ajbNc> or the first episode of the America series Hollywood <https://youtu.be/yS37kyfnGy4>. There is also the excellent but brief video about silent cinema from the Crash Course series at <https://youtu.be/ROOV9tucra0> a video about the impact of the talkies in silent cinema can be found at <https://youtu.be/ZIAt2lcg5ZM>.

There is a short video about the stars of silent cinema <https://youtu.be/Uf9qeQ4Rvzk> but for a look in more detail at specific films stars there is Paul Merton's excellent programme on Charlie Chaplin <http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x5t8tvk> the first quarter of a documentary about Clara Bow (with links to the other parts of the documentary) <https://youtu.be/UYNy8hMaDUo> and Hollywood episodes on stars Gloria Swanson and Rudolph Valentino <https://youtu.be/fVqgx20CPVs> and on Douglas Fairbanks <https://youtu.be/8NtoV8WIhI4>.

Highly recommended is episode 2 of Ken Burns' series about Jazz focussing on the rising popularity of Jazz music in the 1920s https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cat9zzP5_Is as well as a BBC documentary on Louis Armstrong <https://youtu.be/WPspHmFoEYs> and the American equivalent at <https://youtu.be/9o-hZBuy5DQ> and even a video on white fears about Jazz music <https://youtu.be/UHBdQVMPaHU>.

There is a short video presentation about speakeasy culture at <https://youtu.be/B-ybTyhiaVY> and one of many 1920s dancing videos can be found at <https://youtu.be/yNAOHtmy4j0> as well as a pair of videos about Duke Ellington and the Cotton Club <https://youtu.be/szHWzomqBMI> and <https://youtu.be/rLNZdovc3PI>.

GENERAL 1920s AMERICA SUPPORTING VIDEO MATERIAL:

Crash Course History - Roaring 20s <https://youtu.be/VfOR1XCMf7A>

BBC 20th Century Boom and Bust https://youtu.be/4Xrz69_W4ew

BBC American Voices: clips on Timelines TV <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLvsS9mRi0sXb78FqO8DACjXgoF-sih5K->

BBC American Voices: full episodes

1. Immigration https://youtu.be/txB7_9E1E8Q
2. Boom and Bust <https://youtu.be/iwy5HNuHNes>
3. Hard Times <https://youtu.be/OenNGPd6n-l>
4. New Deal <https://youtu.be/Re-XsLwylCo>
5. Black America https://youtu.be/_4wiOs5T9go

The Century: America's Time –

1. The Beginning: Seeds of Change <https://youtu.be/dssfipirT2U>
2. 1914-1919: Shell Shock https://youtu.be/1GBWDQ5cF_U
3. 1920-1929: Boom To Bust <https://youtu.be/RN7ftyZigYs>

GLOSSARY:

Nickelodeon	Cheap cinemas that cost 5 cents (a nickel) for a ticket.
Hollywood	The area of California that became the home of the US movie industry.
Censorship	Controlling the content of films.
Jazz	An improvised style of upbeat dance music.
Improvisation	Making up a tune rather than reading from sheet music.

REFERENCES:

FRONT COVER : a Jazz orchestra 1921 (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jazz_Age#/media/File:CarterAndKingJazzingOrchestra.jpg)

Source 1 : engineers demonstrating the Vitaphone sound system for films in 1926 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:VitaphoneDemo.jpg>

Source 2 : Louis Armstrong's gramophone record "Heebie Jeebies" (1926) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis_Armstrong#/media/File:Heebie_Jeebies.jpg

Source 3 : a dance marathon in 1923 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dance_marathon#/media/File:Dance_marathon,_1923.jpg