

# **Popular Music in American History**

**REVISED**

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## Notes for Teachers

*Popular Music in American History* has two purposes: To help students understand American history through their knowledge of song and to help them understand American song through their knowledge of history. It may in fact be impossible to understand one subject and not the other. Popular songs not only reflect moments in social, political, and military history, but at times help to shape those moments.

So this is a book for both music and history classes. Music teachers will find that the book lends validity to the study of the popular music that students regard as their own. History teachers will find that the book helps to enliven a subject that some of their students regard as dull.

The book has two main parts. Music teachers may be tempted to concentrate on the first, which focuses on the nature of popular music. History teachers may be tempted to concentrate on the second, which focuses on the place of popular music in history. But we strongly suggest emphasizing both parts in both subject areas. We also suggest that students will benefit if music and history teachers are able to combine their resources in presenting *Popular Music in American History*.

Musical examples are included throughout the book, and “First Encore: Musical Notes” will help nonmusical readers to understand what they see in the examples. Musical students will also be able to help others interpret the songs used as examples. Our text includes a few passages in terms that music students will find invaluable but that history students may find a bit too technical. Teachers may, of course, simply advise students to skim certain sections.

On page 3 we invite readers to keep musical notebooks for use with the activities suggested in the text. Teachers might wish to make sure that students have such notebooks before beginning to use the book.

Suggestions for listening and other activities are scattered throughout the book in sections with titles such as “Sing Along,” “Listen Along,” “Think Along,” “Notes on Notes,” and “Write a Simple Song.” Thought questions that can be used as the basis for written assignments or class discussion are contained in sections labeled “Applause” at the end of each chapter. By glancing quickly through these materials, teachers can decide easily which activities they want their classes to do. Providing classes with some of the books and records listed in the “Second Encore” and “Third Encore” will help students with these activities.

However you decide to use this book, we’re sure you’ll find it a pleasant and valuable addition to your classroom.

## Program Notes for Students

This is a book. You know that, because you have picked it up, opened the covers, and started to read. But this book is more than just a book. It's a book so filled with music that it sometimes seems like a concert, a concert of pop songs.

You can actually turn the book into a concert if you like. Just do all the activities suggested in the pages that follow. Listen to popular music. Read popular music. And sing popular music along with other singers mentioned in the book—Kenny Rogers, Chuck Berry, and Lillian Russell; soldiers, sailors, workers, immigrants, and slaves. Popular music is fun to hear and fun to sing. So enjoy yourself as you go through the book.

But this book does more than present music. It also introduces you to an idea, the idea that popular culture can tell you something special about the past. Our book unites historical facts with songs and explains how one can tell you a lot about the other. It allows you to sing history, not just read it.

The book has two major parts. The first section talks about the parts of popular songs and the way those parts offer clues to the historical times when the songs were sung. The second part of the book helps you use those clues to explore popular music and American history.

As we go through the book, we'll keep returning to the idea of a concert, especially in the "Applause" sections at the end of each chapter. There we'll invite you to think for a moment about what you've read and heard.

So sit back. Your musical concert of historical American pop is about to begin.

## 17. AIN'T WE GOT FUN?

# The Roaring Twenties

**1919:** *THE PEACE TREATY* concluding World War I is signed on June 28 in the huge Hall of Mirrors in the Palace of Versailles south of Paris.

The Treaty of Versailles brought an official end to World War I. The conditions it placed on Germany rankled deeply. A decade and a half later, Germans used them as an excuse to prepare for another war. Throughout the 1920's the United States government concerned itself with the recovery of war-torn Europe. But ordinary Americans quickly lost interest in Europe. They demanded the immediate return of American soldiers from abroad. When President Wilson sought public approval of his League of Nations idea, Americans wanted nothing to do with it.

Pop music expressed American feelings. One song sang of American soldiers who, having enjoyed weekends in Paris, had attained a new sophistication.

How ya gonna keep 'em down on the farm,  
After they've seen Patee?

Many Americans took the hint and went to Paris. Writers such as Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald made Paris their creative headquarters. But more to the general national tone was the desire to forget Paris, France, and Europe, and, as the song sang, "Let the Rest of the World Go By."

**1919:** *ON JANUARY 29* the Eighteenth Amendment, prohibiting the sale and transport of alcoholic beverages, is declared ratified. It goes into effect one year later, ushering in the era of Prohibition.

Prohibition of alcoholic beverages was not a success. Because it became a crime to sell alcoholic drinks, criminals took charge of serving America. Drinks produced from impure ingredients caused sickness and even death. Illegal



speakeasies opened for the sale of drinks. Crime syndicates organized the big business of bootlegging booze. Crime flourished everywhere, but no place more in the public's mind than in Chicago.

Alcohol and Prohibition became a theme of popular songs. In 1918, anticipating the growth of the Prohibition movement, a song had claimed, "Every Day Will Be Sunday When the Town Goes Dry." With the Prohibition amendment adopted, a 1919 song asked, "What'll We Do on a Saturday Night When the Town Goes Dry?"

By 1920 the Prohibition amendment was in force. American ingenuity had already found a way around it, for a song of that year sang "The Moon Shines on the Moonshine."

By 1922 Al Capone's city of Chicago was already described as a tipling, "toddling town" in the song "Chicago, Chicago."

## Think Along

What do you understand of the Prohibition era? Why did popular music composers pay such close attention to Prohibition themes?

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**1919: IRRITATED AT THE INFLUX** of black families into white neighborhoods, whites in Chicago riot in July. Both black and white Americans are killed.

When factories boomed with large government contracts during World War I, many poor southerners moved north to work. They often filled the places of workers drafted into the army. Following the war, factories wound down, no longer enjoying government contracts. Returned soldiers found fewer jobs waiting for them. Those that were there were often filled by blacks.

Racial friction was inevitable. The brief depression of 1921 heightened the tension. Then the Ku Klux Klan began to ride. Klan membership spread throughout the country in the 1920's. It reached into northern states where it had never existed before. The Klan struck out at African-Americans, Jewish-Americans, and Catholics. Klan terror included nighttime floggings, tarrings, and even murder of innocent minority members. It was not a pleasant part of American history. It happened as minority cultures began to make an impact on the national culture.

Nowhere did African-American culture make itself felt more than in popular music. Its influence came with the black migration to the industrial cities of the North, especially Chicago, Kansas City, New York, and Detroit.

Black jazz musicians had long played in the bars and clubs of the Storyville district in New Orleans. That district was closed in 1917 during a political morality campaign. The closing combined with the northern migration to wartime factory jobs. Musicians followed the migration routes to entertain the new urbanites. Among them were the legendary Joe "King" Oliver and Louis Armstrong. Over the next decades jazz had an especially potent effect on popular music.

## Listen Along

Record companies recorded many of the early jazz bands on special labels for release in ghetto record shops. Many of them have been reissued as major-label LP's. Listen to 1925 recordings of Louis Armstrong's Hot Five for early, pure sounds of jazz.

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W. C. HANDY'S "St. Louis Blues" had created a popular taste for **blues**, although most were sweetened up for commercial success. Two 1921 songs had *blues* in the title, at least—"The Wang Wang Blues" and "Wabash Blues."

In the 1920's Bessie Smith sang pure blues, not watered-down commercial blues. Her voice was harsh, her words were hard. To everyone's surprise, including that of her recording company, her first record sold over eighty thousand copies.

## Listen Along

Like early Louis Armstrong recordings, the blues of Bessie Smith have been reissued on LP records. Listen to some.

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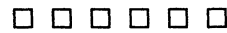
IN 1921 LOUIS ARMSTRONG joined King Oliver at the Lincoln Gardens on Chicago's South Side. One of the pop songs of that year was an old spiritual. Americans have always welcomed religious sentiments in pop. Spirituals sang those feelings with strong rhythms that fit the jazz beat of the Roaring Twenties. This spiritual as a 1921 pop was another example of African-American culture's northward migration.

STEAL AWAY

Steal a - way, steal a - way, Steal a - way to Je - sus.

Steal a - way, steal a - way home, I ain't got long to stay here.

Steal away, steal away,  
 Steal away to Jesus.  
 Steal away, steal away home,  
 I ain't got long to stay here.



1927: CHARLES LINDBERGH FLIES ACROSS THE ATLANTIC, the first person to make the flight alone.

Problems like racial tension and urban crime seemed to pass most Americans by. For most, the 1920's meant prosperity and advancing living standards.

Pop music reflected those good times. There were new dances with their own songs, "Charleston" and "I Wish I Could Shimmy Like My Sister Kate." There were novelty songs such as "Yes, We Have No Bananas," the biggest song of 1923, and "When the Red, Red Robin Comes Bob, Bob, Bobbin' Along." But most of all there were love songs: "Who's Sorry Now?" "I'll See You in My Dreams," "I'll Be with You in Apple Blossom Time," "Alice Blue Gown," and "Ain't We Got Fun?"

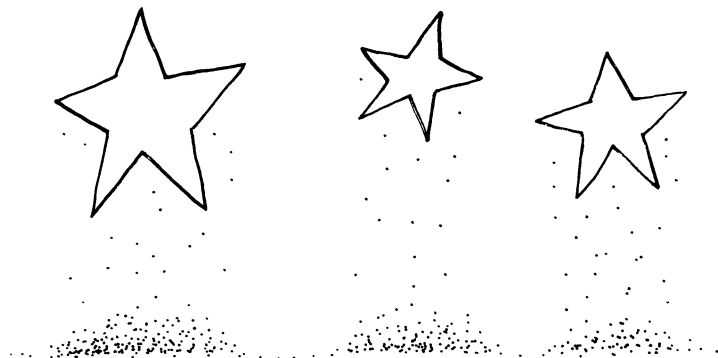
The year of Lindbergh's flight seemed to be the peak of the party. His solo adventure thrilled Americans. Babe Ruth thrilled Americans too in 1927 when he hit a record-setting sixty home runs. Gene Tunney provided more excitement as he beat Jack Dempsey in the famous fight of the "long count." These were the kinds of heroes who played for the up-tempo good times of the 1920's.

The year 1927 also saw the first sound movie, *The Jazz Singer*, starring Al Jolson, who sang for the soundtrack. That year Gene Austin recorded one of the first million-selling records, "My Blue Heaven." The year also saw and heard *Showboat* for the first time. By integrating songs with plot, Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II turned traditional operetta into modern musical. In the show, dock laborer Joe sang about his hard life, "Body all achin' an' wracked with pain," while the Mississippi continued running silently. A classic song was born—"Ol' Man River."



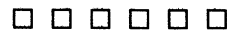
Two years later the party was all over. The year 1929 brought an end to the good times. But before it finished, there were still more upbeat songs such as "Ain't Misbehavin'," "Singin' in the Rain," and "Happy Days Are Here Again."

The decade's last year also had a song that, along with "St. Louis Blues," has proven to be America's most popular all-time hit. It was composed by Hoagy Carmichael, with lyrics added later. The song was . . .



## Notes on Notes

Back in the first half of your concert, you noted what you thought this all-time top pop might be. It was a song of 1929. What song do you think it was? It was “Stardust.”



### Applause

Americans have long been fond of memories of the 1920's. The period's songs receive enthusiastic applause, and while they do, think about the following.

1. Many of the personalities of the 1920's have become myths in American memory. But you might just ask, Who were these people? So, who were . . . Ernest Hemingway, Al Capone, Joe Oliver, Bessie Smith, Babe Ruth, Jack Dempsey, Charles Lindbergh, Al Jolson, and Hoagy Carmichael? Do you know the names of any other superstars of the 1920's?
2. Why have the Roaring Twenties remained such a popular period of American history?