

What was meant by the 'jazz age'?

USA 20

The 1920s is known as the 'jazz age' because the popular music of the time was jazz. The writer F Scott Fitzgerald coined the phrase in 1922 in his book *The Beautiful and Damned*.

Jazz was not new. It originated with black slaves who were encouraged to sing in order to increase production. They used washboards, cans, pickaxes and percussion to produce their own distinctive brand of music. By changing the beat and creating particular rhythms, it was changed into jazz. Originally the music had various names, including 'blues', 'rag' and 'boogie-woogie'. However, these words were taken from black sexual slang terms, and white people disapproved of their use. Therefore, the music was renamed jazz.

Despite its African American origins, in the 1920s jazz became popular with young middle-class whites, especially the flappers. Some condemned jazz as another sign of a fall in moral standards. In 1921, for example, the *Ladies Home Journal* published an article with the title 'Does Jazz put the Sin in Syncopation?' (Syncopation refers to the off-beat rhythms that characterise jazz music.)

Some cities, including New York and Cleveland, prohibited the public performance of jazz in dance halls. However, this only made it more exciting to the young. Jazz became the great attraction of the night clubs and speakeasies and was brought into homes through radio broadcasts.

Duke Ellington, 1899–1974



He was born in Washington, DC, in 1899 and became a composer and pianist. In the 1920s he moved to New York, where he assembled a ten-piece band. He became popular because of recordings such as *Choo Choo* and *Chocolate Kiddies*.

Louis Armstrong, 1901–1971



He was born in New Orleans in 1900 and became famous as a trumpeter there. In 1922 he moved to Chicago, known as the jazz capital of the USA. By 1925 he had his own band and was known nationwide. Some of his famous recordings included *Ain't Misbehavin* and *Tiger Rag*.

Source A: The *Ladies Home Journal*, 1922

Jazz was originally the accompaniment of the voodoo dancer, stimulating the half-crazed barbarian to the vilest deeds. The weird chant had been employed by other barbaric people to stimulate brutality and sensuality. That this has a demoralising effect on the human brain has been demonstrated by many scientists. Jazz is harmful and dangerous and its influences are wholly bad.

To go with the new music came new dances. The Charleston, invented in the Jungles Casino in Charleston, South Carolina, was the favourite dance of the twenties. The One Step, the Black Bottom and the Tango were also popular. The new dances shocked many people, as you can see from this article in *The Catholic Telegraph*:

Task

What can you learn from Source A about attitudes to jazz in the 1920s?

'The music is sensuous, the embracing of partners – the female only half-dressed – is absolutely indecent, and the motions – they are such as may not be described, with any respect for propriety, 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.'

For many, the 1920s was a period in American history when people were having lots of fun, enjoying loud music, wild parties and new forms of entertainment. Millions of people had more money and more leisure time than ever before. It became known as the 'Roaring Twenties'.

Having fun

It was a time of **crazes** – marathon dancing and flagpole sitting became popular. People would see how long they could dance without stopping or how long they could sit on top of a flagpole without falling off. Alvin 'Shipwreck' Kelly set the record when he remained on top of a flagpole for 23 days and seven hours!



Source C ▾ Flappers were mainly middle- and upper-class women from the northern states of America. They earned their own money and rebelled against their restricted lives. For many poorer women, and those in the more traditional southern states, life went on as it had done for many years.



Look at **Source A**. The young women in the photograph are **flappers**. They have just been arrested on a beach in Chicago for being 'indecently dressed'. To put it simply, their swimming costumes are just too revealing for the 1920s – they have shown too much flesh and have shocked an onlooker into calling the police!

Flappers, the fashionable, independent young women of the 1920s, rebelled against the way women had been treated for many years. They hated the fact that men had the best jobs and earned the most money. They rebelled against the sort of clothes that women were traditionally expected to wear (see **Source B**) and detested the role that many men assumed that women should take – the role of wife and mother.

Source B ▾ A woman of 1900.

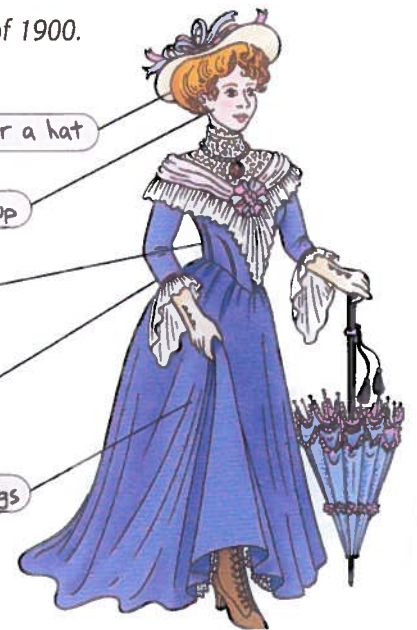
long hair, tied up under a hat

pale skin, little make-up

tight corset that pulled in the waist

long sleeves, covering the arms

long dress, covering legs



Source D ▾ The president of Florida University, 1923. Many older people saw flappers as an example of the evils of modern life. These people felt that family life, religion and traditional values were threatened by their new freedom.

"The low-cut dresses, the stockings and short skirts are born of the devil and are carrying the present and future generations of this country to destruction."

What new forms of entertainment were there?

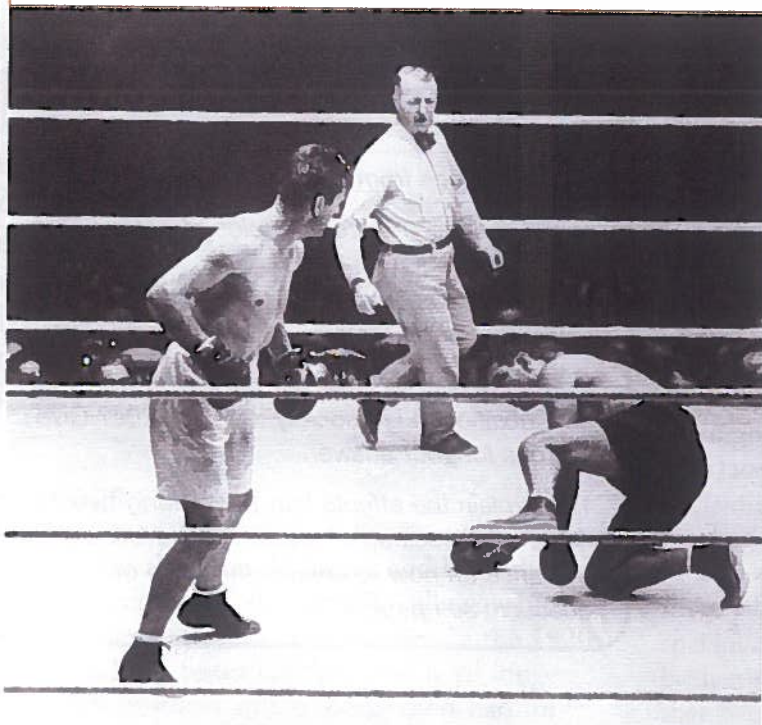
In the USA in the 1920s, there was a growth in the popularity of many forms of entertainment, including sport, radio and the cinema. Labour-saving devices for the home, like washing machines, gave people more free time. Mass production meant people worked less. Americans began to look for ways to fill their spare time, especially as many were now better paid. They wanted to forget about the war and set out to enjoy themselves. A whole pleasure industry grew up, giving Americans new entertainments to spend their money on. The boom of the 1920s brought new forms of music and dance as well as increased popularity for spectator sports.

NEWSPAPERS AND MAGAZINES

More and more people bought newspapers and magazines. In 1919 the first tabloid newspaper, the *Daily News*, was published. This breakthrough encouraged other publications, which concentrated on crime, cartoon strips and fashion. People wanted to read about heroes and heroines of sport and cinema. Advertisers were keen to use magazines and newspapers to sell their goods. In 1922, ten magazines each claimed a circulation of over 2.5 million.



Source A: The heavyweight boxing champion Gene Tunney sends Jack Dempsey to the canvas in the eighth round of their 1927 title bout in Chicago



SPORT

In the early 1920s sport became a very important part of the lives of many Americans. The radio made following major sports events even more popular. Indeed, the 1920s was officially named the 'Golden Age of Sport'. Baseball, football, horse racing and tennis captured the imagination of many people. Baseball was the most popular game; Babe Ruth, the most popular sportsman of the time, had a major influence on the younger generation because he was not shy about drinking and smoking in public.



Spectators flocked to see sporting events. In 1924, 67,000 watched the football match between Illinois and Michigan in the Memorial Stadium. In 1927, some 145,000 saw the boxing match between Jack Dempsey and Gene Tunney.

THE CINEMA

The most popular form of entertainment in the 1920s was the movies. A visit to the cinema became an integral part of American life.



By 1926 there were over 17,000 movie houses, including many in small villages. Until 1927 there was no soundtrack on films. A pianist played tunes while the film ran. He would play fast music for chase scenes and romantic music for love scenes. The film stars of the silent era included Charlie Chaplin and Greta Garbo. In 1926 it was reported that Greta Garbo earned \$5000 a week.

Rudolf Valentino was the first male star to be sold on sex appeal. The studio publicity reported how women fainted when they saw him. When he died in 1926, over 100,000 fans lined the streets during his funeral.

The release of the first 'talkie' in 1927 made the cinema even more popular. By 1930 more than 100 million cinema tickets were sold every week. Movie-makers found that sex sold tickets. Newspapers wrote about risqué love scenes and the sex lives of the stars.

The cinemas themselves improved their facilities in order to attract more people. The early nickelodeon with its wooden seats was replaced by 'picture palaces' with luxurious seats. The hollow-sounding piano was replaced by organs or even a full orchestra. By the end of the 1920s, there were several famous film studios, notably Warner Brothers, William Fox and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM).

Source C: Mary Evelyn Hulst remembers the 1920s

It was really an experience. You would be treated like a king or queen. You were ushered into an enormous lobby of marble or gilt with huge stairways leading up to the balconies. All the carpets were at least an inch or two thick. Everything was done in there to make you feel comfortable, to make you feel very important.

THE RADIO

The radio had a huge influence on many Americans. The first radio station, Station KDKA, began in 1920, and by 1930, 40 per cent of US homes had a radio set. Radio enabled



people to listen to sporting events, music – notably jazz – and advertisements. News, sport and entertainment were easily relayed into millions of homes. Indeed radio became the main source of family entertainment. It created sporting heroes such as Jack Dempsey and Babe Ruth, and made events accessible to many who could not afford to attend.

Source B: A woman listening to a radio, 1923



Hollywood

Hollywood became the centre of movie making in the USA in the 1920s.

The first film shot in the Hollywood area was called *In Old California* (1910). The following year the first studio was opened by the Centaur Company. This company was based in New Jersey but wanted to make Western films in California. By 1915 the majority of American films were being made in the Los Angeles area. Four major film companies – Paramount, Warner Bros, RKO and Columbia – had studios in Hollywood. Five years later, a million people were employed in the Hollywood film industry.

Movie stars themselves moved to the Los Angeles area and began building themselves luxury homes. Gloria Swanson, for example, had a 22-room mansion in Beverly Hills. Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton both lived in the area.

Hollywood and the film industry in general did provoke criticism from those who believed that the movies were threatening the morals of American society. Many Americans blamed Hollywood for the blatant use of sex symbols, such as Clara Bow and Rudolf Valentino. They were also shocked by the morality of some Hollywood films. Hollywood responded by setting up the Hays Code.

Source A: Extracts from the Hays Code

- No screen nudity
- Screen kisses must not last
- Adultery must not be presented as attractive
- Producers must avoid low, disgusting, unpleasant, though not necessarily evil, subjects
- Members of the clergy cannot be comic characters or villains
- Murder, arson and smuggling must be shown as evil.

The Jazz Singer

People liked films because they provided an escape from everyday life. The film companies were aware of this, so they built grand and glamorous cinemas that were known as 'picture palaces'. This made going to the cinema a fantastic experience.

In 1927 Warner Brothers released *The Jazz Singer*, starring Al Jolson. It was the first 'talkie' film. Before this all films had been silent. The talkies spelt the end for many film stars who looked good, but had unattractive voices.

Biography Charlie Chaplin, 1889–1977

Charlie Chaplin was born in England in 1889 and moved to the USA in 1913. He began to work in silent movies and rose to become one of the great comic movie stars of the 1920s. Among his most famous films were *The Vagabond*, *The Kid*, *The Gold Rush* and *The Pawnshop*.

Source B: Charlie Chaplin and Jackie Coogan in *The Kid*, 1921



Chaplin did lose popularity in the 1920s when an actress, Joan Barry, claimed he was the father of her child. Chaplin took Barry to court over this. Although he won the case, some Americans turned against him, believing he was setting a bad moral example, and refused to go to see his films.

SOURCE B



Babe Ruth in action.

Sport

With plenty of money and leisure time people attended sporting events in great numbers.

- **Baseball** was popular with working class people in the cities. There were many great players. One of the most famous was 'Babe' Ruth of the New York Yankees. In 1927 season he recorded 60 home runs, a record that lasted until 1961. By 1930 Babe Ruth was earning \$80,000 a year, a huge amount for that time.
- **Boxing** was also popular. The most famous boxer was Jack Dempsey, who was world heavyweight champion from 1919 to 1926. Dempsey was well known for his powerful punching and was a great favourite with the fans.
- **Golf** had one of the greatest sporting heroes of the time. Bobby Jones was the best golfer in the world, but was also a good sport. He once lost his ball in some trees. While looking for it he accidentally trod on it. No one saw this happen, but Jones told his opponent and accepted a penalty of one shot.

The Roaring Twenties

Learning objectives

In this chapter you will learn about:

- the key elements of 'the Roaring Twenties'.

The 1920s are often called 'the Roaring Twenties'. They were seen as a time of change – everything was faster and louder; people were richer and more glamorous. Not everyone shared the wealth of the boom years, but those who did not were, to an extent, the forgotten people of the 1920s. To most people at the time, and since, the image of the 1920s is of youth, wealth and confidence. Even the gangster culture of Prohibition seemed thrilling.

Key elements of the Roaring Twenties

- **Wealth**, fuelled by the manufacturing boom. People who made more money spent more money, which helped the economy to keep expanding.
- **Novelty** became fashionable. New kinds of music (such as jazz) swept America and new dances came with them. New consumer goods, such as radios, fridges and record players, were produced cheaply enough for many Americans to be able to buy them.
- **Mobility** increased as more and more people could afford cars. People could work further from home. New jobs, such as travelling salesmen, relied on the car. More people had the spare time to 'motor' for pleasure, and that created a whole web of jobs such as garages, petrol stations, motels and diners along the rapidly expanding road system.
- **Leisure**, because people had more free time and more money to spend during their free time. So the leisure industry expanded. For example, many more people watched, listened to the radio (and even played) sport.
- **Changing morals and values** caused confusion for many people. Many otherwise law-abiding people broke the law for the first time during Prohibition. Some people felt it was immoral for young women to break away from the conventional role of women – yet many of them knew young women who dressed and behaved unconventionally without being immoral.

Cities were the focus of the Roaring Twenties. The pace of small-town and rural life was far slower, and change came more slowly too, although people used new inventions such as mail-order catalogues to get a taste of the Roaring Twenties, no matter where they lived.

New technology – automobiles, airplanes and motion pictures – were transforming American life. Business was getting bigger. New products – toasters, vacuum cleaners and refrigerators – arrived in local shops. New cars rolled off the assembly line and then sped down city streets. Even the new music of the 1920s, jazz, was fast.

Source A: From *America in the 1920s*, written by Edmund Lindop in 2010.

Top tip

Remember that key factors in a situation are usually linked to each other. So, in the Roaring Twenties, the fact that there was more wealth **led to** people being able to buy new consumer goods, such as fridges and washing machines. This **led to more** leisure time, which meant people could go to sporting events or the movies or even go motoring.

Activities

- 1 Write a sentence giving at least one example of how the increased wealth of many Americans affected each of the elements of the Roaring Twenties listed below:
novelty motoring
mobility leisure.
- 2 Novelty was an *effect* of wealth because people had more money, so they could pay for these new things. Novelty was also a *cause* of increased wealth because people had more money because they were paid to make and sell fridges, play jazz music etc. Explain at least four more pairs of effects becoming causes like this.