

From Hep Cats to Full Birds: Slang of the 1940s

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What is slang? Slang is *awesome* and slang is *ridiculous*. Slang is the *bee's knees*, the *cat's pajamas*, and the *cat's meow*. Slang is *far out*, *groovy*, and even *dynamite*. Slang is *bad* and *sweet*, *hot* and *cool*, and *hip* and *crazy*. Slang is also *fresh*, *fly*, and *phat*.

Those are seventeen different slang ways of saying that slang is *good*, but what is slang? According to the dictionary, slang is an informal vocabulary whose meanings may quickly change. A slang expression may suddenly become widely accepted and just as quickly outdated. In the 1920s, for example, *twenty-three skidoo* was a trendy way of saying "to leave quickly." Today the phrase is rarely used and even more rarely understood.

Sometimes slang provides a name for a newly developed object. For example, *walkie-talkie* is the popular name for the small two-way radios that members of the American military used during World War II. It is much simpler to call the gadget a *walkie-talkie* than a "portable, two-way communication device."

Slang is often created as an in-group language. It separates the group from outsiders and creates a sense of community. Teenagers have developed their own slang for decades. Young people use these words and phrases as a way to set themselves apart from older generations, who are considered old-fashioned and out of style.

People draw most slang terms from popular culture, such as music, books, and film. Slang from the 1940s is no exception. At the beginning of the decade, many popular slang terms came from the jazz and swing music community. The language that the musicians used, and the lyrics of their music, influenced the way teenagers spoke. This is similar to the way that rap music can reflect the youth culture of today. Words like *cool*, *groovy*, and *hep* can be traced back to musicians of the 1940s.

When America entered World War II in 1941, military expressions began to creep into everyday vocabulary. Servicemen and -women created slang expressions, such as a *full bird* to represent a full colonel, or military acronyms such as *WAC* or *WAVE*. These terms appeared in letters home or in newspaper articles and radio reports about the war. Civilians quickly came to recognize and use military slang in daily speech.

Below are a few slang expressions from the 1940s, drawn from popular music and a 1943 army slang dictionary. See how many you can recognize. Are any of these terms still used today? Have their meanings stayed the same, or have they changed? If you want to

be a hep cat or kitten, the next time you flap your lips, use some of these slang terms, and you will be cooking with gas.

Above my pay grade—Don't ask me

Armored heifer—canned milk

Bandit—enemy fighter

Bathtub—motorcycle sidecar

Cook with gas—to do something right

Dead hooper—poor dancer

Flap your lips—talk

Flip your wig—to lose control of yourself

Gammin'—showing off

GI—Government Issue, an American service member

Gone—knowledgeable

Hairy—old, outdated

Hen fruit—eggs

Hep cat/kitten or cool cat/kitten—hip person

Hi sugar, are you rationed?—Are you going steady?

Hi-de-ho—hello

Hit the silk—to bail out, use a parachute

I'm going fishin'—I'm looking for a date

Killer-diller—good stuff

Licorice stick—clarinet

Motorized freckles—insects

Mud—coffee

North Dakota rice—hot cereal

One striper—private first class

Popsicle—motorcycle

Snap your cap—get angry

Stompers—shoes

Threads—clothing

What's buzzin', cousin?—How's it going?

Whistle Dixie—to be wrong or mistaken

Yuck—a foolish person

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