

The Golden Years

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Music, movies, radio, and other forms of entertainment experienced immense popularity during the Great Depression. Instead of denying themselves the luxury of a movie, a dance, or a radio, many people spent their precious pennies on sheer frivolity. At the same time people were struggling to find money for food, they also managed to spend money for fun. Why were the attractions of music and film or radio actors and actresses so important?

People needed to forget their troubles. The Depression increased “the demand for dreams.” The chance to hear original music or to see exotic places filmed in a world where people were not hungry or desperate gave moviegoers that chance to escape their woes. One North Carolina woman admitted in 1938, “If it wasn’t for that movie I don’t know what I’d do. Course, we ain’t really able to spend the 15 cents apiece for foolishness when he’s just makin’ nine dollars and 60 cent a week, but a body cain’t stand it if he don’t have a little pleasure sometimes.”

These were the golden years for Hollywood. Film classics that people still enjoy watching today, either on television or at a movie theater, appeared in a steady stream during the 1930s. Shirley Temple movies began in 1934, and she became Hollywood’s top box-office star by 1935. The first Tarzan movie starring Johnny Weismuller appeared in 1932; *King Kong* debuted in 1933; Marx Brothers’ comedies like *A Night at the Opera* literally had people in tears in 1935, because they were laughing so hard; Walt Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the first full-length animated film, delighted audiences of all ages in 1937; and *The Hound of Baskervilles*, the first Sherlock Holmes movie starring Basil Rathbone, appeared in 1939. Errol Flynn began his swashbuckling career with *Captain Blood* in 1935. *The Wizard of Oz* and *Gone with the Wind* both were released in 1939.

Of course, movie musicals of the 1930s were unsurpassed. *Forty-second Street* premiered in 1933 and started a musical craze in America that featured popular stars, pretty clothes, songs, and hundreds of chorus girls in elaborate—occasionally bizarre—dance routines choreographed by Busby Berkeley and others. Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy were paired in several successful musicals based on operettas. Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers teamed up for the first time in 1933 and danced their way to stardom in frothy, elegant shows like *Carefree*, *Swingtime*, *Top Hat*, and *Shall We Dance?*

Radios had become available to the general public in 1922, but these early “crystal sets” required headphones so that only one person could listen at a time. By the mid-1920s, radios had improved, and the national broadcasting firms of NBC (1926) and CBS (1929) were formed. Music from the movies and from Broadway musicals, broadcast using records or live bands, achieved national popularity on the radio and gave people living in North Carolina something in

common with people living in California or New York. Some songs of the 1930s obviously dealt with the Great Depression in both serious and funny ways: “We’re in the Money,” “Happy Days Are Here Again,” “Ten Cents a Dance,” “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?” and “Pennies from Heaven” all grew out of the early, dark days of the era. Other tunes—like “Star Dust,” “Stormy Weather,” “The Way You Look Tonight,” “Moonlight Serenade,” “The Music Goes ‘Round and Around,” “Whistle While You Work,” “Santa Claus is Comin’ to Town,” “Over the Rainbow,” and “Three Little Fishies” (by Tar Heel bandleader Kay Kyser)—were romantic or happy. These songs proved that people still needed love songs and a good time.

The millions who listened to the radio nightly helped “swing” artists attain stardom, too. The Big Band era had moved into high gear by 1936 and enjoyed a strong following through World War II. The “hot” music featured in these jazz and swing bands was performed by musicians like Benny Goodman (“The King of Swing”), Glenn Miller, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Tommy Dorsey, and Count Basie.

An incredible group of men and women poured out a steady stream of hits during the 1930s and early 1940s, writing beautiful music and lyrics (or words) to America’s popular music. Linda Ronstadt recently has recorded many of these hits on two albums: *What’s New* and *Lush Life*.

Cole Porter both composed the tunes and wrote the words to “Night and Day” (1932), “You’re the Top” (1934), “I’ve Got You Under My Skin” (1936), and “Easy to Love” (1936), among others. The singer Ethel Merman became identified with “You’re the Top.” Porter’s lyrics, witty and set to a snappy rhythm, include the following verses:

You’re the top! You’re the Colosseum,
 You’re the top! You’re the Louvr’ Museum,
 You’re a melody from a symphony by Strauss,
 You’re a Bendel bonnet, a Shakespeare sonnet,
 You’re Mickey Mouse.
 You’re the Nile, you’re the Tow’r of Pisa,
 You’re the smile on the Mona Lisa,
 I’m a worthless check, a total wreck, a flop,
 But if Baby, I’m the bottom,
 You’re the top!

The brothers George and Ira Gershwin created a dynamic musical team. George composed the music, and Ira wrote the lyrics. Some of their hits include “I Got Rhythm” (1930), “I’ve Got a Crush on You” (1930), “Nice Work If You Can Get It” (1937), and “They All Laughed” (1937). Their collaboration was truly magical. “They All Laughed,” a clever, fast-paced love song, featured stanzas like:

They all laughed at Christopher Columbus
 When he said the world was round.
 They all laughed when Edison recorded sound.
 They all laughed at Wilbur and his brother,
 When they said that man could fly.

They told Marconi
Wireless was a phony,
It's the same old cry.

They laughed at me wanting you,
Said I was reaching for the moon,
But oh, you came through,
Now they'll have to change their tune.
They all said we never could be happy,
They laughed at us and how!
But ho, ho, ho!
Who's got the last laugh now?

Jerome Kern wrote music for Broadway productions like *Show Boat* as far back as the 1920s. He was still composing brilliantly in the 1930s and 1940s. With Dorothy Fields providing the lyrics, Kern composed "The Way You Look Tonight" (1936), "Pick Yourself Up" (1936), and "A Fine Romance" (1936). The smoothness of his sound and the sophistication of her lyrics marked their work. One of Kern's most popular songs, "The Last Time I Saw Paris" (1940), with words by Oscar Hammerstein II, reflected America's growing awareness of the war in Europe following the German occupation of Paris, France, in 1940. That event prompted these words:

The last time I saw Paris,
Her trees were dressed for spring,
And lovers walked beneath those trees,
And birds found songs to sing. . . .

The last time I saw Paris,
Her heart was warm and gay.
No matter how they change her,
I'll remember her that way.

The reality of war reached America all too soon, with the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Wartime prosperity and the craving for entertainment by tired soldiers brought out many romantic and patriotic shows and tunes. Songs that reflected the war include "The White Cliffs of Dover" and "This Is the Army, Mr. Jones." Famous war movies like *Casablanca*, *Action in the North Atlantic*, *Mrs. Minniver*, and *The Story of G. I. Joe* were produced. Other songs celebrated family values, love, and the spirit of America. "Chattanooga Choo Choo," "Skylark," "When You Wish Upon a Star," "I'll Be Home for Christmas," "White Christmas," "You'll Never Know," "At Last," "Have Yourself a Merry Christmas," and all the songs from *Oklahoma!* expressed not only humor or sentimentality but also a strong support for the American way of life and democracy. Civilian and soldier morale needed all the help it could get during the war, and music and movies provided a major source of inspiration as well as entertainment.

Perhaps someone in your family or your local public library has recordings from this period. Find some old records or listen to Linda Ronstadt's last two albums. The music tells a lot about America's dreams and goals during the Great Depression and World War II.

**At the time of this article's publication, Terrell Armistead Crow was the editor of Tar Heel Junior Historian, North Carolina Museum of History.*