

All That Jazz - Looking for Fun in the 20s

By Toni Lee Robinson

The Great War was finally over. American soldiers came home. The country was very tired of war. People were convinced of one thing. The U.S. should never go to war again! They wanted to put the bad times behind them. They wanted life to be light and happy.

There was a new kind of music finding its way into night clubs and dance halls. Its sparkling rhythm fit right in with the mood of the times. It was called jazz. Born in the melting pot of New Orleans, it was a truly American sound.

Jazz began in the black culture. It was birthed from an older type of music — the blues. Like blues, jazz is intense and soulful. Jazz can wail and pound. It can swing and skip. In the 20s, the sizzling new music spread like wildfire.



The sounds of jazz can be played in various ways. String instruments like piano and guitar are jazz basics. Brasses like the trumpet give jazz a smooth sound. The sax and other woodwinds add a breezy note. Drums put rhythm and sparkle in the music. Rhythm is the heart of jazz. The lush, often quirky rhythms make it perfect for dancing.

People of the 20s were crazy for dancing. They invented their own dances. The staid old waltzes of earlier days were just too stuffy for young people of the 20s. They kicked up their heels in a frantic caper called the Charleston. To do this dance, you had to hop, kick, touch your knees, swing your arms, and wriggle like a snake all at the same time.

Many were so wild about dancing that they held dance marathons. People came to join in or to watch these tests of stamina. The couple who kept moving the longest won the contest. Couples danced...and danced...and danced and...you get the idea. Some were after the cash prizes. Some were looking for publicity. Others thought it would be fun. Most just got very tired.

It seemed the sillier the activity, the better some people liked it. These trends, or fads, didn't usually last long. One of the fads of the 20s was flagpole sitting. A man named "Shipwreck" Kelly held the record. He sat for 49 days atop a flagpole! Other fads included games like Mah Jongg. This Chinese game was played with painted tiles. The nation also went crazy over crossword puzzles.

One form of fun in the 20s was radio. Radio had come into being before the turn of the century. Later advances made it practical for home use. In the 1920s, radio brought the world into the kitchens of America.

Now people could hear up-to-date news from all over the nation. Many people had no electricity. They didn't let that stop them from using radios. Early batteries supplied power. Radios were big and bulky. They were often set in large, carved wood boxes.

The whole country loved radio. People listened to anything that came across the air waves. Early offerings were limited. The first shows were news and speeches. Sports quickly became a favorite. Listeners tuned in to boxing matches and baseball games.

Going to the movies was a great way to have fun in the 20s. Movies then were black and white. Until 1926, they were also silent. Theaters hired someone to play a piano as the film rolled. Text appeared every so often so you could read what the actors were saying.

Some silent film actors became the first movie stars. Charlie Chaplin was the favorite funny man. In several movies he played a loveable little tramp. Clara Bow was the beautiful leading lady in several films. Then "talkies" came along. Patrons could hear the words as they were spoken. People were thrilled! They flocked to the theaters.

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Date _____

A whole new set of stars burst from the screen. Al Jolson starred in *The Jazz Singer*. This first major "talkie" was about Jolson's life. John Barrymore starred in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

Americans went to the movies no matter who the stars were. They also danced and enjoyed jazz music. They followed silly fads. In the 20s, people were serious about having fun. A 1921 song said it all:

"Ev'ry morning, ev'ry evening, ain't we got fun?
Not much money, oh, but honey, ain't we got fun?"

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Questions

1. What made people so determined to look for fun in the 1920s?

2. Explain the origins of jazz music. What type of music did it come from?

3. Why do you think people of the 20s liked jazz music and the Charleston so much?

_____ 4. A fad is:

- A. the newest hair style
- B. a new law
- C. a social trend or craze
- D. a fair-weather friend, close for a while but quickly drops away

_____ 5. People competed in dance marathons because the winners went on to become stars.

- A. true
- B. false

_____ 6. Radio quickly became a favorite form of entertainment because:

- A. Small transistor radios were so portable they could be carried anywhere.
- B. It was less expensive than television.
- C. Right from the beginning, there were endless types of programming.
- D. It was the first contact many people had with the world outside their town besides letters and newspapers.

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7. What was a "talkie," and why were people so excited about them?

8. Imagine you live on a farm in the American Midwest in 1922. Up till now, your only connection with the world outside your town has been newspapers. What would it be like to hear a Yankees game broadcast from New York City for the first time?
