

Mass Media and the Jazz Age

READING FOCUS

- How did the mass media help create common cultural experiences?
- Why are the 1920s called the Jazz Age, and how did the jazz spirit affect the arts?
- How did the writers of the Lost Generation respond to the popular culture?
- What subjects did the Harlem Renaissance writers explore?

MAIN IDEA

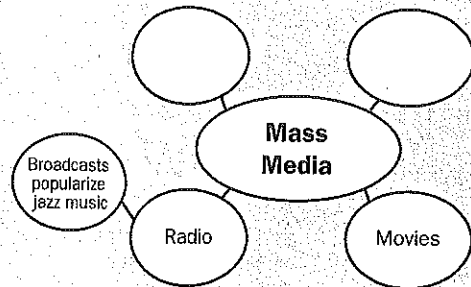
In the 1920s, the mass media provided information and entertainment as never before. The decade was an especially creative period for music, art, and literature.

KEY TERMS

mass media
Jazz Age
Lost Generation
Harlem Renaissance

TAKING NOTES

Copy the web diagram below. As you read, fill in the blank circles with details on how the mass media affected American life.



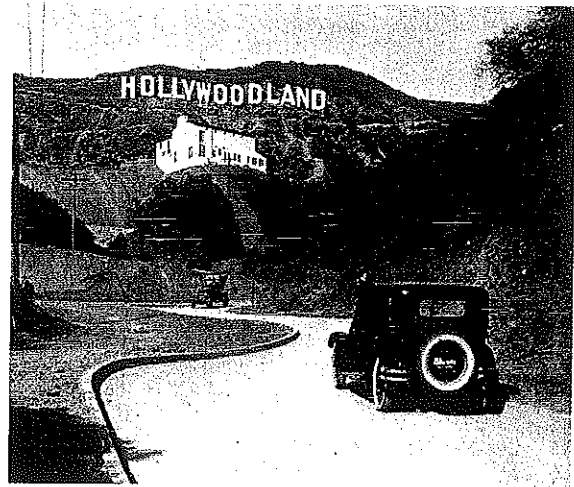
Setting the Scene Before 1900, few people outside Los Angeles had even heard of a dusty little subdivision northwest of the city. Its founder, a religious man, hoped that it would remain a quiet town, where citizens valued proper behavior. In the early 1900s, however, filmmakers began moving there. They were attracted by the large work force in nearby Los Angeles; by the variety of landscapes, from desert to snowy mountains; and by the warm climate and the sun they needed to light their films.

These pioneer filmmakers faced many difficulties. Director Cecil B. DeMille set up his first studio in a rented barn, which he shared with horses and a carriage. DeMille later wrote, “I expected to be working like a horse: what did it matter being housed like one?”

In the early 1920s, DeMille became known for his stylish comedies that dealt with the changing romance customs of the time, and for his epics, which were designed to appeal to mass audiences. The barn he rented grew into a huge movie complex and the small suburb it was located in—Hollywood—soon became the center of the entertainment film industry. The town’s main avenue displayed a strip of expensive shops and bars. Stars drove the streets in luxurious cars, trailed by reporters. In turn, what grew out of Hollywood in the 1920s—its culture of movies, movie stars, and entertainment reporters—helped create the beginnings of a common national culture.

The Mass Media

Hollywood’s new fame reflected a major trend of the 1920s. Before that time, the United States had been largely a collection of regional cultures. Interests, tastes, and attitudes varied widely from one region to another. Most Americans simply did not know much about the rest of the country, talk with people in other regions, or even read the same news as other Americans.



VIEWING HISTORY Hollywood’s Mulholland Drive is shown in this 1924 photo. The now-famous sign in the hills was erected to promote a real-estate development.

Analyzing Visual Information What details in the photograph show Hollywood’s past and future?

Focus on TECHNOLOGY

Adding Sound to Movies The system used to record and play sound in *The Jazz Singer* (below) was known as Vitaphone, which used a 16-inch rotating wax disk to record the movie's singing and speech. The sound was then synchronized with the film and amplified by loudspeakers in the theater. The Vitaphone system offered the best sound quality of its time.

Another method of making sound movies involved recording sound directly onto film. Although the early use of this method produced poor sound quality and distortion, by the 1930s it became the preferred technology for making "talkies."



The 1920s changed all that. Films, nationwide news gathering, and the new industry of radio broadcasting produced the beginnings of a national culture. As you have read, early in the decade few American women dressed in the flapper style or smoked and drank in public. Such customs became common cultural experiences because of the growth of the mass media. The **mass media** are print, film, and broadcast methods of communicating information to large numbers of people.

Movies From their beginnings in the 1890s, motion pictures had been a wildly popular mass medium, and through the 1920s, audiences grew. Between 1910 and 1930, the number of theaters rose from about 5,000 to about 22,500. By 1929, when the total population was less than 125 million, the nation's theaters sold roughly 80 million tickets each week. Moviemaking had become the fourth largest business in the country.

This growth occurred throughout the silent film era. In 1927, the success of the first sound film, *The Jazz Singer*, changed the course of the movie industry. Starring vaudeville performer Al Jolson, the movie included speech, singing, music, and sound effects. Audiences loved it. As more theaters played "talkies," the industry's boom continued.

Some actors never made the shift from silent films to sound films. Foreign actors, for example, often faced the choice of learning English or giving up their movie careers. Other actors moved more smoothly to talkies. Greta Garbo, a glamorous star of the silent screen, retained her popularity in speaking roles despite a heavy Swedish accent. Silent screen actress Lillian Gish won renown for playing the part of the delicate heroine. She readily transferred her expressive gestures and heart-rending glances to speaking roles. Charlie Chaplin extended the silent era. Dressed in his famous tattered suit, derby hat, and cane, Chaplin had delighted American audiences since 1914 with his silent comedy. In the era of sound, Chaplin added music to his films and success-

fully continued his soundless portrayal of the "little tramp."

Newspapers and Magazines Americans followed the off-screen lives of their favorite stars in two other mass media—newspapers and magazines. During the 1920s, newspapers increased both in size and in circulation, or readership. In 1900, a hefty edition of the *New York Times* totaled only 14 pages. By the mid-1920s, however, newspapers even in mid-sized American cities often totaled more than 50 pages a day, and Sunday editions were enormous. In fact, the use of newsprint roughly doubled in the United States between 1914 and 1927.

Even as newspapers grew and gained more readers, the number of independently owned newspapers fell. Many disappeared as a result of mergers. A newspaper chain, owned by a single individual or company, often bought up two of a city's established papers and merged them. Thus they created one newspaper with potentially twice the circulation. The larger the circulation, the more money that advertisers would pay to market their products in the paper and the greater the profits for the publisher. Between 1923 and 1927, the number of chains doubled, and the total number of newspapers they owned rose by 50 percent.

Profits, not quality, drove most of these newspaper chains. To attract readers, especially in the cities, many chains published tabloids. A tabloid is a compact newspaper that relies on large headlines, few words, and many pictures to tell a

story. Tabloids of the 1920s replaced serious news with entertainment that focused on fashion, sports, and sensational stories about crimes and scandals. This content sold papers, as publisher William Randolph Hearst knew well. Hearst once said that he wanted his New York tabloid the *Daily Mirror* to be “90 percent entertainment, 10 percent information—and the information without boring you.”

During the 1920s, sales of magazines rose, too. By 1929, Americans were buying more than 200 million copies of such popular magazines as the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Reader’s Digest*, *Ladies’ Home Journal*, and *Time*. These magazines provided a variety of information in a form that most people could easily digest. Advertisers, eager to reach so many potential customers, often ran full-page ads promoting their products.

With the rise of newspapers and magazines as mass media, Americans began to share the same information, read about the same events, and encounter the same ideas and fashions. Thus newspapers and magazines helped create a common popular culture.

Radio As a mass medium, radio barely existed until the 1920s. Before that time, relatively few Americans had radio sets, and those they had were all homemade. They used their radios to communicate with each other one-on-one. In 1920, Frank Conrad, an engineer with the Westinghouse Electric Company, set up a radio transmitter in his garage in Pittsburgh. As an experiment, he began sending recorded music and baseball scores over the radio. The response was so great that Westinghouse began broadcasting programs on a regular basis. Soon the nation had its first commercial radio station, Pittsburgh’s KDKA.

At first, the only advertising on KDKA was the occasional mention of its sponsor, Westinghouse. Yet even that was enough to increase the sales of Westinghouse products, mainly home appliances. In the coming years, radio would become a profitable medium for advertisers.

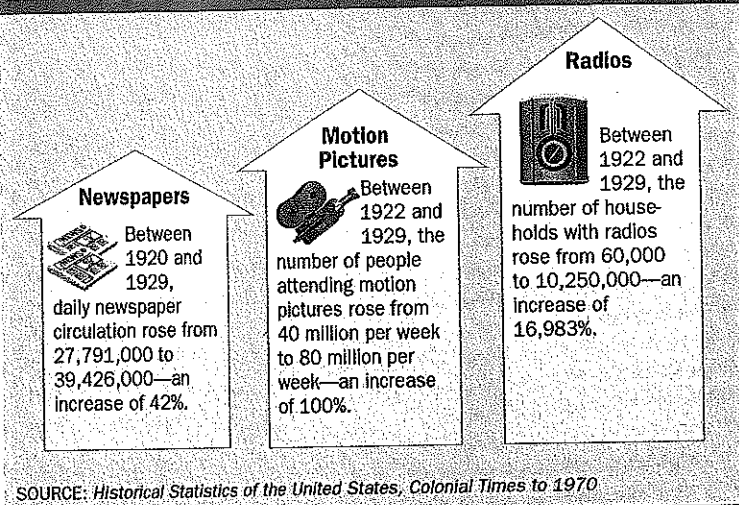
Radio enjoyed tremendous growth. By 1922, more than 500 stations were on the air, and Americans eagerly bought radios to listen to them. To reach more people, networks such as the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) linked many individual stations together. Each station in the network played the same programming. Soon much of the country was listening to the same jokes, commercials, music, sports events, religious services, and news. Other companies imitated NBC, building networks of their own.

The Jazz Age

Both the growing radio audience and the great African American migration to the cities helped make a music called jazz widely popular in the 1920s. This music features improvisation, a process by which musicians make up music as they are playing it rather than relying completely on printed scores. It also has a type of off-beat rhythm called syncopation.

Jazz Arrives Jazz grew out of the African American music of the South, especially ragtime and blues. By the early 1900s, bands in New Orleans were

Growth of the Mass Media in the 1920s



INTERPRETING DIAGRAMS

The decade of the 1920s saw an explosion in forms of mass communication. **Making Comparisons** Why do you think radio grew the most during this decade?

READING CHECK

What social changes were brought about by the mass media?

BIOGRAPHIES



Duke Ellington
(1899–1974)

Edward Kennedy Ellington was born in Washington, D.C. At 17, “Duke,” as Ellington was called, played in Washington’s clubs at night and painted signs during the day. In 1923, Ellington and several other musicians moved to New York City and formed a band. This band, under various names and in one form or another, continued to play with Ellington until his death at age 75.

Although Ellington was an excellent pianist, his greatest talents were as a band leader, an arranger, and a composer. He wrote at least a thousand pieces in his long career, including music for concerts, Broadway shows, films, and operas. Among his most memorable tunes are “Mood Indigo,” “Solitude,” “In a Sentimental Mood,” “Blue Harlem,” and “Bojangles.”

Louis Armstrong, nicknamed “Satchmo,” was born and grew up in New Orleans, where he learned to sing and play the trumpet. In 1922, Armstrong was invited to play the trumpet in Chicago, and in 1923, he made his first recordings with King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band.

Armstrong’s showmanship and virtuosity soon became evident, especially when he performed his improvised extended solos. Because of Armstrong, long solos became key elements of jazz ensemble performances.

Armstrong also improvised with his voice, replacing words with nonsense syllables in a style known as “scat” singing. His first scat recording, “Heebie Jeebies,” encouraged many jazz vocalists to sing scat. His Hot Five and Hot Seven ensemble recordings are among his most notable early recordings.



Louis Armstrong
(1901–1971)

are played widely to this day.

When flappers danced to jazz on the radio or to a live jazz band, most likely they did the Charleston. This dance took over the dance halls and ballrooms in the 1920s and became a national fad. The Charleston embodied the Jazz Age. It was wild and reckless, full of kicks and twists and pivots. Unlike traditional ballroom dancing, the Charleston could be danced with a partner, in a group, or all alone.

The Jazz Spirit The jazz spirit ran through all the arts of the 1920s. People spoke of “jazz poetry” and “jazz painting.” However, jazz most strongly influenced other forms of music. Composers in the Jazz Age, such as George Gershwin, mixed jazz elements into more familiar-sounding music. Gershwin, the son of

playing the new mix of styles. Although jazz recordings were available in the 1910s, many radio listeners began hearing the new sound for the first time in the 1920s. Soon jazz became a nationwide craze. Younger people in particular loved to dance to the new music. By 1929, a survey of stations showed that two thirds of all radio air time was devoted to jazz.

Some Americans were horrified by jazz. Its syncopated rhythms and improvisations were too suggestive of the free manners and morals of the age. Eventually, however, Americans from many walks of life embraced the music. The great symphony conductor Leopold Stokowski declared that jazz was “an expression of the times, of the breathless, energetic, superactive times in which we are living.” The 1920s came to be called the **Jazz Age**.

Jazz Clubs and Dance Halls One of the most popular places to listen to jazz was Harlem, a district on the northern end of the island of Manhattan. By one count, Harlem had some 500 jazz clubs. A dozen of them, including the Cotton Club, Connie’s Inn, and the Saratoga Club, catered to the rich and famous. At clubs such as these, musicians, most of whom were black, performed for audiences that were primarily white.

Nearly all the great jazz musicians played in the Harlem clubs at one time or another. Jelly Roll Morton, a jazz pianist from New Orleans, arranged his band’s music in a way that encouraged group improvisation. This gave his band a smooth, modern sound. Benny Goodman, known as the “King of Swing,” began playing jazz professionally as a teenager in the early 1920s. His “big band” helped make jazz popular with white audiences. Goodman’s 1936 quartet, which included African American musicians Lionel Hampton and Teddy Wilson, was the first popular racially mixed jazz group. Two musicians, in particular, made important contributions to jazz beginning in the 1920s: Louis Armstrong, who wowed audiences with his brilliantly improvised trumpet solos, and Duke Ellington, an arranger, composer, and bandleader, whose works



Sounds of an Era

Listen to a 1927 recording of “East St. Louis Toodle-oo” by Duke Ellington.

Russian immigrants, won overnight success in 1924 with his *Rhapsody in Blue*. First played by bandleader Paul Whiteman's orchestra, this piece throbbed with jazz rhythms. Not quite jazz and not quite symphony, it was, instead, a magical blend of the two. The basic form of this rhapsody came to Gershwin in a sudden rush of insight while riding a train. He said that he heard the music in the rhythmic noise of the train:

“ I heard it as a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America—of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated national pep, of our blues, our metropolitan madness.”

—George Gershwin, 1924

Painting Like jazz musicians, American painters of the 1920s did not shy away from taking the pulse of American life. Painters such as Edward Hopper and Rockwell Kent showed the nation's rougher side, from cities to coal mines, from the streets to the barrooms.

By contrast, a young artist named Georgia O'Keeffe painted natural objects such as flowers, animal bones, and landscapes. However simple her images, they always suggest something greater than themselves. A range of hills, for example, seems almost to shudder with life. O'Keeffe continued to paint until her death in 1986 at the age of nearly 100.

Literature Several modern writers began fruitful careers during the 1920s. Novelist Sinclair Lewis attacked American society with savage irony. His targets included the prosperous conformist (*Babbitt*, 1922), the medical business (*Arrowsmith*, 1925), and dishonest ministers (*Elmer Gantry*, 1927). In *Main Street* Lewis, showing no mercy, depicts small-town Americans as a

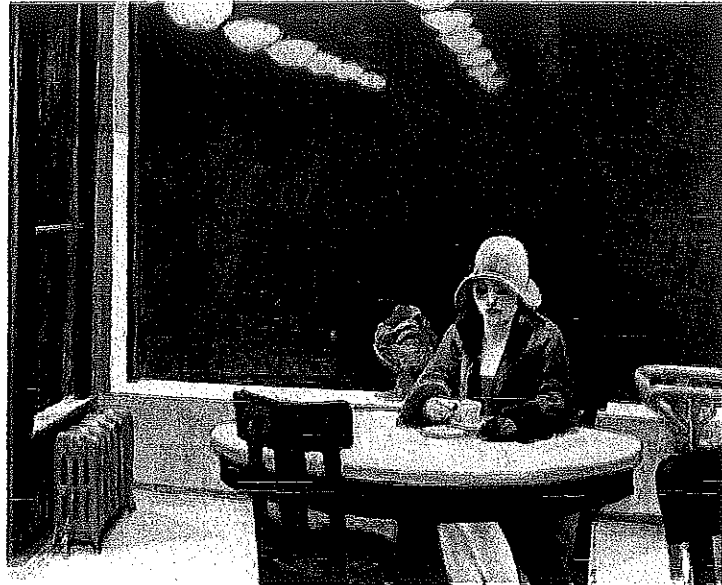
“ savorless people, gulping tasteless food, and sitting afterward, coatless and thoughtless, in rocking-chairs prickly with inane decorations, listening to mechanical music, saying mechanical things about the excellence of Ford automobiles, and viewing themselves as the greatest race in the world.”

—Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street* (1920)

Lewis refused a Pulitzer Prize in 1926, but in 1930 he became the first American to receive the Nobel prize for literature.

Another writer destined for the Nobel prize was playwright Eugene O'Neill. In a career stretching from the 1920s into the 1950s, he wove dark, poetic tragedies out of the material of everyday American life. Until his time, most American theaters had shown only European plays or light comedies. The power of O'Neill's work proved to the public that the American stage could achieve a greatness rivaling that of Europe.

The Lost Generation American society in the 1920s troubled one group of important writers. This group rejected the quest for material possessions that



VIEWING HISTORY Edward Hopper painted this scene, titled *Automat*, in 1927. The *Automat* was a popular restaurant chain in which one could purchase a snack or meal from a vending machine and then eat at a table. **Drawing Inferences** What does the painting suggest about Hopper's view of the culture of the times?

Artists of the Jazz Age (left to right): Writer F. Scott Fitzgerald and his wife, Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald, a writer and painter; poet Edna St. Vincent Millay; and writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston.



seemed to occupy so many Americans. Its members also scorned American popular culture as artless and uninspired. Postwar society so repelled them that they left the United States for Europe. These expatriates, or people who live outside their homeland, found Europe more intellectually stimulating.

The most prominent of these writers settled in Paris. They included Sherwood Anderson, Archibald MacLeish, Hart Crane, E. E. Cummings, John Dos Passos, Ernest Hemingway, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Another notable American writer, Gertrude Stein, had been living in Paris for some time and had come into contact with many of the expatriates. Stein remarked to Hemingway that he and the other expatriate writers were all a **Lost Generation**, a group of people disconnected from their country and its values. Hemingway introduced Stein's term to the reading public when he used it in his 1926 novel *The Sun Also Rises*.

F. Scott Fitzgerald was both part of the Lost Generation and part of the Jazz Age. Some people believe Fitzgerald helped create the flapper culture with his novel *This Side of Paradise*, published in 1920. His 1925 masterpiece *The Great Gatsby* focused on the wealthy, sophisticated Americans of the Jazz Age whom he found to be self-centered and shallow.

After Hemingway made the term *Lost Generation* famous, it was taken up by the flappers. They liked to imagine themselves as rebels against the culture of their time, living a fast and dangerous life. The words of a popular poet of the day, Edna St. Vincent Millay, captured the flapper's attitude toward life:

“My candle burns at both ends;
It will not last the night;
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—
It gives a lovely light!”

—Edna St. Vincent Millay, “First Fig,” 1920

The Harlem Renaissance

For African Americans, New York City's Harlem was becoming the cultural center of the United States. The number of African Americans living in Harlem grew from 50,000 in 1914 to about 200,000 in 1930. Not just a national center for jazz, Harlem also became the home of an African American literary awakening of the 1920s known as the **Harlem Renaissance**.

James Weldon Johnson emerged as a leading writer of the Harlem group. Johnson lived in two worlds, the political and the literary. As executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of

Focus on CULTURE

Twenties Slang Every generation coins its own terms and phrases. The youth culture of the 1920s was no different. In addition to “flappers” and “speakeasies,” the decade spoke its share of slang, some of which is still in use today.

baloney Nonsense; untrue

bee's knees The best; cutest

copacetic Excellent, used as an exclamation

gold digger A woman in search of a wealthy man

goofy Silly, clumsy, stupid

hard-boiled Unfeeling or tough

jazz baby Another word for flapper

peppy Energetic

ritzy High class

swell Terrific

Colored People (NAACP), he led the group during an active period in its history. At the same time, he pursued a writing career that inspired younger members of the Harlem group. His most famous work, *God's Trombones* (1927), is a collection of sermons in rhythmic verse modeled after the style of traditional black preaching.

Other writers followed Johnson's lead. Alain Locke's 1925 book *The New Negro* celebrated the blossoming of African American culture. Locke noted that both African and American heritages could be enriching, not conflicting. Zora Neale Hurston came to New York in 1925, became an anthropologist, and gained fame as a writer with her poignant novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Dorothy West, another accomplished writer, tackled the dual themes of being black and being a woman.

The leading poets of the Harlem Renaissance were Claude McKay and Countee Cullen. McKay produced a large body of work, including *Harlem Shadows* (1922), and was a voice of protest against the sufferings of African Americans in white society. The gifted Cullen is best known for his 1925 collection of poems called *Color*. He also brought to light the talents of fellow writers in *Caroling Dusk: An Anthology of Verse by Negro Poets* (1927).

The Harlem writer perhaps most studied today is Langston Hughes, a poet, short story writer, journalist, and playwright whose career stretched into the 1960s. Hughes spoke with a clear, strong voice about the joys and difficulties of being human, being American, and being black:



Harlem Renaissance poet and writer Langston Hughes

<p>“I, too, sing America. I am the darker brother. They send me to eat in the kitchen When company comes, But I laugh, And eat well, And grow strong. . . .</p>	<p>Tomorrow, I'll be at the table When company comes. Nobody'll dare Say to me, 'Eat in the kitchen,' Then.</p>	<p>Besides, They'll see how beautiful I am And be ashamed— I, too, am America.”</p> <p>—Langston Hughes, “I, Too,” 1926</p>
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Section

2

Assessment

READING COMPREHENSION

1. What social changes were brought about by the **mass media**?
2. Who were some of the major figures of the **Jazz Age**?
3. Why is the term **Lost Generation** used to describe some writers of the 1920s?
4. How might the jazz spirit have influenced the poetry that came out of the **Harlem Renaissance**?

CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

5. **Making Comparisons** What do the novels of Sinclair Lewis and F. Scott Fitzgerald say about Americans in the 1920s?
6. **Writing an Opinion** What influence do film and radio have on current popular culture? Give examples.



Take It to the NET

Activity: Drawing a Cartoon

Learn more about popular entertainment in the 1920s, and then draw a cartoon about the music, movies, sports, or arts of the Jazz Age. Use the links provided in the *America: Pathways to the Present* area of the following Web site for help in completing this activity.

www.phschool.com