



16 May 2012 | voaspecialenglish.com

## American History: Creativity Reached New Heights During Great Depression

Welcome to THE MAKING OF A NATION – American history in VOA Special English. I'm Steve Ember.

(MUSIC)

Hard economic times and social conflict have always offered a rich source of material for artists and writers. A painter's colors can show the drying of dreams or the flight of the human spirit. A musician can express the tensions and uncertainty of a people in struggle. The pressures of hard times can be the force to lift a writer's imagination to new heights.

So it was during the nineteen thirties in the United States. The severe economic crisis -- the Great Depression -- created an atmosphere for artistic imagination and creative expression. The common feeling of struggle also led millions of Americans to look together to films, radio, and other new art forms for relief from their day-to-day cares. This week in our series, we tell about American arts and popular culture during the nineteen thirties.

(MUSIC: "Let's Dance"/Benny Goodman Orchestra)

The most popular sound of the nineteen thirties was a new kind of music called "Swing." And the "King of Swing" was a clarinet player named Benny Goodman. Benny Goodman and other musicians made swing music extremely popular during the nineteen thirties.

Swing was a new form of jazz. Many of its first players were black musicians in small, unknown groups. It was only when more well-known white musicians started playing swing in the middle nineteen thirties that the new music became wildly popular.

One reason for the popularity of swing music was the growing power of radio during the nineteen thirties.

Radio had already proven in earlier years that it could be an important force in both politics and popular culture. Millions of Americans bought radios during the nineteen twenties. But radio grew up in the nineteen thirties.

(MUSIC: "Reminiscing"/Singing Sam)

SINGING SAM: "Howdy, Folks. Yes, it is your old friend Singing Sam, so let's just settle back and reminisce a bit, what you say, huh?"

(MUSIC: "On the Radio"/Frank De Vol)

Producers became more skillful in creating programs. And actors and actresses began to understand the special needs and power of this new electronic art form.

Swing was not the only kind of music that radio helped make popular.

(MUSIC)

The nineteen thirties also saw increasing popularity for traditional, classical music by Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, and other great composers.

In nineteen thirty, the Columbia Broadcasting System, CBS, began a series of concerts by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra on Sunday afternoons. The next year, on Christmas Day, the National Broadcasting Company, NBC, began weekly opera programs from the stage of the Metropolitan Opera in New York.

(MUSIC: NBC Symphony Orchestra)

In nineteen thirty-seven, NBC asked Arturo Toscanini of Italy to lead an orchestra on American radio. Toscanini was the greatest orchestra leader of his day. Millions of Americans listened on Christmas night as Toscanini and the NBC Orchestra began playing the first of ten special radio concerts.

It was a great moment for both music and radio. For the first time, millions of average Americans were able to hear classical music by great composers as it was being played.

Music was an important reason why millions of Americans gathered to listen to the radio during the nineteen thirties.

(MUSIC: "William Tell Overture")

But even more popular were the many series of weekly programs, whether comedy, suspense, or drama.

FRED FOY (ANNOUNCER): "'The Lone Ranger Rides Again.' Easy, steady, big fella."

Families would gather around the radio, and thrill to the adventures of "The Lone Ranger," or laugh at the funny experiences of such comics as Fred Allen, Jack Benny, Edgar Bergen and his wooden ventriloquist's dummy Charlie McCarthy, WC Fields, and George Burns and Gracie Allen.

ANNOUNCER: "Yes, it's 'Maxwell House Coffee Time,' starring George Burns and Gracie Allen."

Radio helped people forget the difficult conditions of the Great Depression. And it helped to bring Americans together and share experiences.

(MUSIC: "Don't Be That Way"/Benny Goodman Orchestra)

Swing music. Classical music. Great comedy programs. The nineteen thirties truly were a golden period for radio and mass communications. But it was also during this period that Hollywood and the American film industry became much more skilled and influential.

(SOUND: Film projector)

In previous years, films were silent. But the "talkies" arrived in the nineteen thirties.

(MUSIC: Selznick Studios theme)

Directors could produce films in which actors could talk. Americans reacted by attending film theaters by the millions.

(MUSIC: "Gone with the Wind" title theme)

It was a great time for Hollywood.

The films had exciting new actors. Spencer Tracy. Bette Davis. Katharine Hepburn. The young Shirley Temple. The most famous film of the period was "Gone with the Wind" with Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh in the starring roles of Rhett Butler and Scarlett O'Hara.

RHETT BUTLER: "No, I don't think I will kiss you, although you need kissing badly. That's what's wrong with you. You should be kissed, and often, and by someone who knows how."

SCARLETT O'HARA: "Oh, and I suppose you think you're the proper person."

RHETT BUTLER: "I might be. If the right moment ever came."

Directors in the nineteen thirties also produced such great films as "It Happened One Night," "Mutiny on the Bounty," and "The Life of Emile Zola."

(MUSIC)

The success of radio and films, as well as the depression itself, caused problems for many Americans newspapers during the nineteen thirties. The trouble was not so much that readers stopped buying newspapers. It was that companies talked about their products through advertisements on radio instead of buying advertising space in newspapers.

GRACIE ALLEN: "Another cup of Maxwell House coffee, George?"

GEORGE BURNS: "Sure, pour me a cup, Gracie."

GRACIE ALLEN: "You know, Maxwell House is always good to the last drop."

GEORGE BURNS: "And that drop's good, too."

ANNOUNCER: "For America's Thursday night comedy enjoyment, it's George and Gracie. And for America's every day coffee drinking enjoyment, it's Maxwell House. Today, more Americans buy and enjoy Maxwell House than any other brand of coffee at any price."

(MUSIC)

Nearly half of the nation's independently-published newspapers either stopped publishing or joined larger companies during the nineteen thirties. By World War Two, only one hundred-twenty cities had competing newspapers.

Weekly and monthly publications faced the same problem as daily newspapers -- increased competition from radio and films. Many magazines failed. The two big successes of the period were Life Magazine and the Reader's Digest.

"Life" had stories for everyone about film actors, news events, or just daily life in the home or on the farm. Its photographs were the greatest anywhere. Reader's Digest published shorter forms of stories from other magazines and sources.

(MUSIC)

Most popular books of the period were like the films coming from Hollywood. Writers cared more about helping people forget their troubles than about facing serious social issues. They made more money that way, too.

But a number of writers in the nineteen thirties did produce books that were both profitable and of high quality. One was Sinclair Lewis. His book, "It Can't Happen Here," warned of the coming dangers of fascism. John Steinbeck's great book, "The Grapes of Wrath," helped millions understand and feel in their hearts the troubles faced by poor farmers.

(MUSIC)

Erskine Caldwell wrote about the cruelty of life among poor people in the southeastern United States, and James T. Farrell and Studs Terkel wrote about life in Chicago.

The same social concern and desire to present life as it really existed also were clear in the work of many American artists during the nineteen thirties.

Thomas Benton painted workers and others with strong tough bodies. Edward Hopper showed the sad streets of American cities. Reginald Marsh painted picture after picture of poor parts of New York City.

The federal government created a program that gave jobs to artists. They painted their pictures on the walls of airports, post offices, and schools. The program brought their ideas and creativity to millions of people.

Indeed, we are proud to have, in the lobby of our VOA building, several such murals by artist Ben Shahn, capturing many facets of the American experience in the nineteen thirties.

At the same time, photography became more important as cameras improved in quality and became smaller and more portable. Some photographers like Margaret Bourke-White and Walker Evans used their cameras to document the difficult conditions of the Depression.

The German émigré Alfred Eisenstaedt's photographs of new events and celebrities appeared regularly on the covers of Life.

Alfred Stieglitz was another famous photographer in the nineteen thirties. He not only helped to establish photography as an art form, but was influential through his galleries in introducing avant garde artists from Europe to the public.

The nineteen thirties were a particularly productive time for landscape photographer Ansel Adams, who also turned to photographing factories and industrial themes.

All this activity in the arts and popular culture played an important part in the lives of Americans during the nineteen thirties. It not only provided relief from their troubles, but expanded their minds and pushed their imaginations.

The tensions and troubles of the Great Depression provided a rich atmosphere for artists and others to produce works that were serious or just plain fun. And those works, in turn, helped make life a little better as Americans waited, worked, and hoped for times to improve.

Our program was adapted from a script written by David Jarmul. You can find our series online

with transcripts, MP3s, podcasts and pictures at [voaspecialenglish.com](http://voaspecialenglish.com). You can also follow us on Facebook and Twitter at VOA Learning English.

I'm Steve Ember, inviting you to join us again next week for THE MAKING OF A NATION -- American history in VOA Special English.

---

Contributing: David Jarmul