

BBC Bitesize GCSE History – The USA in the 20th century

Episode 7 – Popular culture in the USA, 1920-1960

Announcer: BBC Sounds, music, radio, podcasts.

Katie: I'm Katie Charlwood, a history podcaster.

Datshiane: And I'm Datshiane Navanayagam, a history graduate and BBC presenter.

Katie: Welcome to Bitesize GCSE history.

Datshiane: In this series, we're going through key developments and themes in American twentieth-century history. And you're gonna love this seventh episode, because it's on popular culture. So, Katie, tell us why culture's important enough for us to devote a whole episode to it.

Katie: Well, I'd say it's a reflection of society itself. It captures trends, ideas, protests and aspirations.

Datshiane: Agreed, it captures the zeitgeist, or the mood, or spirit of the age, and links to other big themes in this series, like the economy and migration.

Katie: The USA's booming economy in the 1920s meant some people had the money to go to the cinema or to buy a gramophone player to play the latest jazz music on.

Datshiane: The great migration for African Americans took them away from the southern states as they headed north and west.

Katie: It was the catalyst for exciting new cultural hubs in places like Harlem, New York.

Datshiane: Jazz was a mashup of brass band marches, ragtime, blues and gospel. It blended improvisation, fast tempos and lively rhythms. It was so popular, the twenties are sometimes called the Jazz Age.

Katie: When they're not roaring.

Datshiane: In big vibrant cities, like Chicago and New York, black and white people dancing in clubs and dance halls to jazz bands made black musicians like Duke Ellington and Bessie Smith famous.

Katie: Some black musicians, like Fats Waller, managed to make big profits from the sale of recordings and live performances.

Datshiane: But, sandwiched between the gloom of world war and the economic shock of the Wall Street crash, the decade saw some people embracing optimism, partying, enjoying new kinds of music and, for many, throwing caution to the winds.

Katie: Hedonistic?

Datshiane: Got it in one. It was a life devoted to pleasure, and having fun.

Katie: It was a period of great change with new modern dances: out with the waltz, and in with my favourite dance, the Charleston.

Datshiane: But remember not everyone approved; some older people thought the dances were lewd and encouraged immoral behaviour including drunkenness.

Katie: Well, some of the older generations also said that about cinema.

Datshiane: And there was a growing industry in Hollywood, in California, which produced popular movies from comedies to romance for mass audiences.

Katie: And cinema had a major impact on society. Film stars were the influencers of the decade.

Datshiane: You can understand the power picture houses had, because every town had one.

Katie: Weekly cinema audiences in the USA exploded from thirty-five million, in 1919, to one hundred million, in 1930.

Datshiane: That's incredible. The new stars of the silent screen, Rudolph Valentino and Clara Bow, were the crush of the age, promoted through mass medias and radio shows, to magazines and photoshoots.

Katie: Remember in Episode 2, we found the twenties was a time of invention and innovation with new gadgets and technologies? A really good example was 'The Jazz Singer' movie, released in 1927; the first feature length film with sound.

Datshiane: The talkies had arrived.

Katie: The thriving cinema industry provided thousands of jobs as well as entertainment for millions.

Datshiane: But again, not everyone approved.

Katie: Worries for some people that daring content in movies would encourage loose morals, prompted Hollywood to ban nudity in 1934.

Datshiane: As well as stars of the screen, there were stars of the pitch and fairway. Fans of sport like baseball and golf could follow play at one of the new stadiums, on the radio, and in the paper.

Katie: And crossword puzzles and board games took off, as people moved from one craze to the next.

Datshiane: And now we're moving on to the 1930s. But guess what, jazz wasn't a fad, and it was still popular in the 1930s with singers like Billie Holiday.

Katie: She recorded a protest song called, 'Strange Fruit', in 1939. The song used a grim metaphor to evoke the lynch mobs who pursued black Americans and ethnic minorities.

Datshiane: That song is a primary source to demonstrate how culture and politics interacted and connected to each other.

Katie: Culture also reveals society's trends and bold new ideas.

Datshiane: Like the growing appeal of science fiction and comic books, which came on the scene in the early 1930s; we can use an original action comic book as a source of evidence for this.

Katie: Yes, comic strips and comics were bright, cheap and easy to read.

Datshiane: With superheroes like The Phantom and Superman,

Katie: they offered escapism like the pictures, or cinema.

Datshiane: As did upbeat stage musicals like '42nd Street' and feature-length cartoon fairy stories from Walt Disney.

Katie: But some culture drew attention to very real down-to-earth problems in America. John Steinbeck, Tillie Olsen and Erskine Caldwell wrote about the Great Depression, poverty and racism. If we scoot forwards to the 50s, we see a youth culture on the rise. The term teenager became more common, and young people had more free time and money than previous generations.

Datshiane: And a new type of music was taking off, continuing the trend in the previous generation, where white youths partied to the music of black jazz artists, this was the turn of African American stars like Chuck Berry and Little Richard to wow the fans.

Katie: This was rock 'n' roll.

Datshiane: The term was the brainwave of disc jockey, Alan Freed, who wanted to develop this new trend, so he began playing rhythm and blues records, which was traditionally the music of black audiences, but he labelled this music 'rock 'n' roll' to bridge the gap between white and black audiences.

Katie: Offering music with a similar bluesy beat, Elvis Presley released his first hit song 'Heartbreak Hotel', in 1956.

Datshiane: And he became the most popular music artist in American history.

Katie: But not everyone approved. Television helped catapult Presley to fame.

Datshiane: Yup, and more people had them, as the price of your average television set dropped. In fact, by 1960, around eighty-seven per cent of homes had a telly and they were the main mode of home entertainment.

Katie: TV shows like 'I Love Lucy' defined American ideals of family life.

Datshiane: And this helped break down regional differences, as most Americans watched the same TV programmes, contributing to a new national popular culture.

Katie: Yay! Everyone approved! 'I Love Lucy' was huge at the time. The cultural historian, Lynn Spigel, wrote of the series that: "In its earliest manifestations, the family comedy provided television viewers with more than just an idealistic picture of themselves at home. [...] The domestic sitcom appealed to viewers' experiences in post-war America and, above all, their fascination with the new television medium."

Datshiane: Nice quote, Katie. By the late 1950s, television shows, even though they were still shown in black and white, were hugely popular. But Hollywood felt threatened and so film makers came up with new experiences to draw in audiences, like widescreen formats and gimmicks like wearing special specs to view in 3D.

Katie: Film stars still had enormous pull with audiences thronging to glamorous leads like Marilyn Monroe and rebellious leading men, like James Dean.

Datshiane: Okay, but again, did everyone approve?

Katie: Again, not everyone did, but Monroe and Dean were huge pop culture icons.

Katie: So, let's consider in what ways American culture changed during this period as a potential exam question. Remember to think about the causes of the changes and the consequences.

Datshiane: Katie, can you give me two similarities and two differences between popular culture in the 1920s and 30s?

Katie: Yes, jazz remained popular through both decades, as did going to the pictures. But in the 1930s, new forms of entertainment gained popularity, like Walt Disney cartoons and musicals like '42nd Street'.

Datshiane: Okay. So now name two ways new technology drove popular culture.

Katie: So new technology in the twenties provide a new way to listen to music on a mass-produced object. Gramophones and the radio, then TV, took that music to millions and popularised it.

Datshiane: And like you said, cinema, or picture houses, had a huge influence on the public, as millions went to the cinema several times a week, and they faithfully followed the fashion trends and habits of their favourite stars.

Katie: Okay, so describe three ways in which politics and popular culture were interconnected in the USA in the 1930s.

Datshiane: Okay. So, firstly, there were protest songs from jazz singers like Billie Holiday. Her song 'Strange Fruit' recalled the lynchings by white supremacists.

Secondly, white and black people thronged to see performers like Billie and Bessie Smith. That opened up black culture to wider society and gained support in the white community for ending Jim Crow laws.

Thirdly, authors like Erskine Caldwell and John Steinbeck wrote books about the Great Depression.

Katie: Okay, so time for a blistering recap.

Datshiane: Popular culture is the ideas, customs and behaviour of a society at a certain point in history; including music, books and mass media.

Katie: The 1920s was a time of great social and cultural change, and for new forms of entertainment.

Datshiane: Jazz was so popular, it gave its name to the decade – the jazz age.

Katie: In the 1930s, over one hundred million people went to the cinema and comic books took off.

Datshiane: Authors in the Great Depression wrote fiction with political themes to call out social problems.

Katie: Then, in the 1950s, teen culture established itself, and the vast majority of homes had TVs, where wholesome family shows created a unifying experience for American viewers.

Datshiane: It's a change of atmosphere though in our next episode, as we look at the lives of women in America.

Katie: From flapper culture to feminism. See you then.

Datshiane: Bye!