

What was the impact of Anglo-American popular culture on America and Europe, 1918-1945?

During the 1920s the United States enjoyed a period of unprecedented prosperity, which facilitated the widespread growth of the entertainment industry and the birth of a new, youth-based, popular culture. However these new dances, media crazes and sports were not confined to the US. Popular culture spread across the Atlantic and had a large effect on the daily lives of people in Europe. Other factors, such as the growth of the automobile industry and the general rise in wages also contributed to the spread of Anglo American pop culture in the inter-war years.

One of the most noticeable changes to occur in the e 1920's was the sudden proliferation of radios. People wanted to hear the latest songs from stars like Marlene Dietrich and Bing Crosby. For example, by 1939, 75% of British households had a TV and in 1926 the BBC got a monopoly on radio broadcasting. This new form of mass entertainment prompted a media revolution. Newspapers were forced to become more scandalous and visually orientated to compete with the radio. The advent of the radio also had the effect of linking far flung places together, and facilitating the fast movement of information. This was especially apparent during WW2, when people tuned in to hear the outcome of decisive battles such as El Alamein and Stalingrad. As a result of this transfer of information, people also become more politically aware.

The music industry quickly realised the potential of radio and moved to capitalise on its popularity. The latest songs from America were now broadcast in Europe, opening up an entirely new and lucrative market. Songs such as 'Swanee', 'My Blue Heaven' and 'T for Texas' became hits on both sides of the ocean. The growth of jazz illustrates perfectly the power and potency of radio. This genre grew from humble beginnings in the slums of New Orleans to become an integral part of popular culture. Another phenomenon of twentieth century was the 'music star'. For the first time singers became as important as the songs and people like Al Jolson and Louis Armstrong became household names.

Cinema was the other dominant medium of the inter war period which helped propagate Anglo-American pop culture. With increased wages and more leisure time, people began to attend cinemas more regularly, sometimes as much as two or three times a week. In Europe 'super-cinemas', holding up to 3000 people, were constructed in the major cities while in Britain small cinemas known as 'flea pits' were popular with the ordinary proletariat. However the film-making industry in Europe did not receive any major boost and most cinemas relied heavily on Hollywood for the newest releases. A numbers of revolutions in cinematography such as the first 'talkies' (films with sound) and films in colour (such as 'The Wizard of Oz' and 'Gone with the Wind') added to the popularity of cinema.

Like the music industry, the film industry also developed around big-name stars of the silver screen. Prominent among them were Charlie Chaplin, Al Jolson and Clarke Gable. These stars were idolised and became the role models of young people. The led trends in fashion and were highly influential. Female stars such as 'America's Sweetheart' Mary Pickford and Greta Garbo introduced new hairstyles and ways of dressing, while men looked up to stars such as Rudolf Valentino and idolised their glamorous lives. In this way, cinema was a form of

escapism for the lower classes. When war came to Europe in the 1940s, stars such as Bob Hope visited troops to raise morale.

Another major effect of the growth of Anglo American pop culture was the rise of interest in sport. The 20s and 30s were the decades of mass spectator sport. In Britain soccer became a part of the national identity and match attendance soared. For example, in 1929 200000 people attended the cup final in Wembley. The celebrity culture bloomed in the world of competitive sport as well, and people like Jesse Owens and Babe Ruth became just as famous as the movie stars. However, unlike in the music and film industries, sports did not travel seamlessly across the water. For example, sports such as baseball, basketball and American football never really established themselves in Europe.

Anglo-American pop culture also had the effect of highlighting the differences between the youth of the day and the elder generations. Young people became increasingly Americanised as slang terms such as 'sez you' entered the vernacular. There was also a growing division between urban and rural communities. People in the big cities quickly became engrossed in the latest news and fashions, while their counterparts in the lagged behind and were more insulated from foreign influences. By far the biggest division was between the 'bright young things' and their parent's generation. These young women were influenced by the flappers in America and by female film stars such as Claudette Colbert and Clara Bow, who portrayed successful career women in the movies and thereby accelerated female empowerment. They dressed radically, smoked, went out without chaperones and danced to new crazes such as the 'black bottom' and the 'Charlestown'.

Governments also recognised the raw power of these new mediums of popular culture. Fascist dictators such as Hitler and Mussolini exploited them for their own benefit. For example, Hitler commissioned acclaimed film director Leni Riefenstahl to produce propaganda masterpieces like 'Olympia', 'Jud Seuss' and 'The triumph of the will'. But governments in America and Britain also used these instruments to spread the allied message. For example, Franklin Delano Roosevelt addressed the American people directly in his famous 'Fireside chats' on the state of the national, while Winston Churchill gave stirring speeches over the radio to maintain national unity and morale during the Second World War.

From 1918 to 1945, Anglo-American popular culture had a major impact on the societies of both America and Europe. It produced the first celebrities, introduced people to different cultures and radical ideas, and provided light entertainment for the masses. It changed forever how people absorbed information and spent their leisure time.