

Portrait of the USA

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Chapter Eleven

EXPORTING POPULAR CULTURE

Baseball, basketball, movies, jazz, rock and roll, and country music

Mickey Mouse, Babe Ruth, screwball comedy, G.I. Joe, the blues, "The Simpsons," Michael Jackson, the Dallas Cowboys, *Gone With the Wind*, the Dream Team, Indiana Jones, Catch-22 -- these names, genres, and phrases from American sports and entertainment have joined more tangible American products in traveling the globe. For better or worse, many nations now have two cultures: their indigenous one and one consisting of the sports, movies, television programs, and music whose energy and broad-based appeal are identifiably American.

This chapter concentrates on a few of America's original contributions to world entertainment: the sports of baseball and basketball; movies; and three kinds of popular music -- jazz, rock and roll, and country.

BASEBALL

The sport that evokes more nostalgia among Americans than any other is baseball. So many people play the game as children (or play its close relative, softball) that it has become known as "the national pastime." It is also a democratic game. Unlike football and basketball, baseball can be played well by people of average height and weight.

Baseball originated before the American Civil War (1861-1865) as rounders, a humble game played on sandlots. Early champions of the game fine-tuned it to include the kind of skills and mental judgment that made cricket respectable in England. In particular, scoring and record-keeping gave baseball gravity. "Today," notes John Thorn in *The Baseball Encyclopedia*, "baseball without records is inconceivable." More Americans undoubtedly know that Roger Maris's 61 home runs in 1961 broke Babe Ruth's record of 60 in 1927 than that President Ronald Reagan's 525 electoral-college votes in 1984 broke President Franklin Roosevelt's record of 523 in 1936.

In 1871 the first professional baseball league was born. By the beginning of the 20th century, most large cities in the eastern United States had a professional baseball team. The teams were divided into two leagues, the National and American; during the regular season, a team played only against other teams within its league. The most victorious team in each league was said to have won the "pennant;" the two pennant winners met after the end of the regular season in the World Series. The winner of at least four games (out of a possible seven) was the champion for that year. This arrangement still holds today, although the leagues are now subdivided and pennants are decided in post-season playoff series between the winners of each division.

Baseball came of age in the 1920s, when Babe Ruth (1895-1948) led the New York Yankees to several World Series titles and became a national hero on the strength of his home runs (balls

that cannot be played because they have been hit out of the field). Over the decades, every team has had its great players. One of the most noteworthy was the Brooklyn Dodgers' Jackie Robinson (1919-1972), a gifted and courageous athlete who became the first African-American player in the major leagues in 1947. (Prior to Robinson, black players had been restricted to the Negro League.)

Starting in the 1950s, baseball expanded its geographical range. Western cities got teams, either by luring them to move from eastern cities or by forming so-called expansion teams with players made available by established teams. Until the 1970s, because of strict contracts, the owners of baseball teams also virtually owned the players; since then, the rules have changed so that players are free, within certain limits, to sell their services to any team. The results have been bidding wars and stars who are paid millions of dollars a year. Disputes between the players' union and the owners have at times halted baseball for months at a time. If baseball is both a sport and a business, late in the 20th century many disgruntled fans view the business side as the dominant one.

Baseball became popular in Japan after American soldiers introduced it during the occupation following World War II. In the 1990s a Japanese player, Hideo Nomo, became a star pitcher for the Los Angeles Dodgers. Baseball is also widely played in Cuba and other Caribbean nations. In the 1996 Olympics, it was a measure of baseball's appeal outside the United States that the contest for the gold medal came down to Japan and Cuba (Cuba won).

BASKETBALL

Another American game that has traveled well is basketball, now played by more than 250 million people worldwide in an organized fashion, as well as by countless others in "pick-up" games. Basketball originated in 1891 when a future Presbyterian minister named James Naismith (1861-1939) was assigned to teach a physical education class at a Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) training school in Springfield, Massachusetts. The class had been noted for being disorderly, and Naismith was told to invent a new game to keep the young men occupied. Since it was winter and very cold outside, a game that could be played indoors was desirable.

Naismith thought back to his boyhood in Canada, where he and his friends had played "duck on a rock," which involved trying to knock a large rock off a boulder by throwing smaller rocks at it. He also recalled watching rugby players toss a ball into a box in a gymnasium. He had the idea of nailing up raised boxes into which players would attempt to throw a ball. When boxes couldn't be found, he used peach baskets. According to Alexander Wolff, in his book *100 Years of Hoops*, Naismith drew up the rules for the new game in "about an hour." Most of them still apply in some form today.

Basketball caught on because graduates of the YMCA school traveled widely, because Naismith disseminated the rules freely, and because there was a need for a simple game that could be played indoors during winter. Naismith's legacy included the first great college basketball coach, Forrest "Phog" Allen (1885-1974), who played for Naismith at the University of Kansas and went on to win 771 games as a coach at Kansas himself. Among Allen's star players was Wilt Chamberlain, who became one of professional basketball's first superstars -- one night in 1962, he scored a record 100 points in a game.

The first professional basketball league was formed in 1898; players earned \$2.50 for home games, \$1.25 for games on the road. Not quite 100 years later, Juwan Howard, a star player for the Washington Bullets (now called the Washington Wizards), had competing offers of more than \$100 million over seven seasons from the Bullets and the Miami Heat.

Many teams in the National Basketball Association now have foreign players, who return home to represent their native countries during the Olympic Games. The so-called Dream Team, made up of the top American professional basketball players, has represented the United States in recent Olympic Games. In 1996 the Dream Team trailed some opponents until fairly late in the games -- an indication of basketball's growing international status.

THE MOVIES

The American film critic Pauline Kael gave a 1968 collection of her reviews the title *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*. By way of explanation, she said that the words, which came from an Italian movie poster, were "perhaps the briefest statement imaginable of the basic appeal of movies." Certainly, they sum up the raw energy of many American films.

If moving pictures were not an American invention, they have nonetheless been the preeminent American contribution to world entertainment. In the early 1900s, when the medium was new, many immigrants, particularly Jews, found employment in the U.S. film industry. Kept out of other occupations by racial prejudice, they were able to make their mark in a brand-new business: the exhibition of short films in storefront theaters called nickelodeons, after their admission price of a nickel (five cents). Within a few years, ambitious men like Samuel Goldwyn, Carl Laemmle, Adolph Zukor, Louis B. Mayer, and the Warner Brothers -- Harry, Albert, Samuel, and Jack -- had switched to the production side of the business. Soon they were the heads of a new kind of enterprise: the movie studio.

The major studios were located in the Hollywood section of Los Angeles, California. Before World War I, movies were made in several U.S. cities, but filmmakers gravitated to southern California as the industry developed. They were attracted by the mild climate, which made it possible to film movies outdoors year-round, and by the varied scenery that was available.

Other moviemakers arrived from Europe after World War I: directors like Ernst Lubitsch, Alfred Hitchcock, Fritz Lang, and Jean Renoir; actors like Rudolph Valentino, Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, Ronald Colman, and Charles Boyer. They joined a homegrown supply of actors -- lured west from the New York City stage after the introduction of sound films -- to form one of the 20th century's most remarkable growth industries. At motion pictures' height of popularity in the mid-1940s, the studios were cranking out a total of about 400 movies a year, seen by an audience of 90 million Americans per week.

During the so-called Golden Age of Hollywood, the 1930s and 1940s, movies issued from the Hollywood studios rather like the cars rolling off Henry Ford's assembly lines. No two movies were exactly the same, but most followed a formula: Western, slapstick comedy, *film noir*, musical, animated cartoon, biopic (biographical picture), etc. Yet each movie was a little different, and, unlike the craftsmen who made cars, many of the people who made movies were artists. *To Have and Have Not* (1944) is famous not only for the first pairing of actors Humphrey Bogart (1899-1957) and Lauren Bacall (1924-) but also for being written by two future winners of the Nobel Prize for literature: Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961), author of the novel on which the script was based, and William Faulkner (1897-1962), who worked on the screen adaptation.

Moviemaking was still a business, however, and motion picture companies made money by operating under the so-called studio system. The major studios kept thousands of people on salary -- actors, producers, directors, writers, stuntmen, craftspersons, and technicians. And they owned hundreds of theaters in cities and towns across the nation -- theaters that showed their films and that were always in need of fresh material.

What is remarkable is how much quality entertainment emerged from such a regimented process. One reason this was possible is that, with so many movies being made, not every one had to be a big hit. A studio could gamble on a medium-budget feature with a good script and relatively unknown actors: *Citizen Kane* (1941), directed by Orson Welles (1915-1985) and widely regarded as the greatest of all American movies, fits that description. In other cases, strong-willed directors like Howard Hawks (1896-1977) and Frank Capra (1897-1991) battled the studios in order to achieve their artistic visions. The apogee of the studio system may have been the year 1939, which saw the release of such classics as *The Wizard of Oz*, *Gone With the Wind*, *Stagecoach*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (directed by Capra), *Only Angels Have Wings* (Hawks), *Ninotchka* (Lubitsch), and *Midnight*.

The studio system succumbed to two forces in the late 1940s: (1) a federal antitrust action that separated the production of films from their exhibition; and (2) the advent of television. The number of movies being made dropped sharply, even as the average budget soared, because Hollywood wanted to offer audiences the kind of spectacle they couldn't see on television.

This blockbuster syndrome has continued to affect Hollywood. Added to the skyrocketing

salaries paid actors, studio heads, and deal-making agents, it means that movies released today tend to be either huge successes or huge failures, depending on how well their enormous costs match up with the public taste.

The studios still exist, often in partnership with other media companies, but many of the most interesting American movies are now independent productions. The films of Woody Allen (1935-), for example, fall into this category. Critics rate them highly and most of them make a profit, but since good actors are willing to work with Allen for relatively little money, the films are inexpensive to make. Thus, if one happens to fail at the box office, the loss is not crushing. In contrast, a movie featuring Tom Cruise or Arnold Schwarzenegger typically begins with a cost of \$10 million or more just for the star's salary. With multiples of a sum like that at stake, Hollywood studio executives tend to play it safe.

POPULAR MUSIC

The first major composer of popular music with a uniquely American style was Stephen Foster (1826-1864). He established a pattern that has shaped American music ever since -- combining elements of the European musical tradition with African-American rhythms and themes. Of Irish ancestry, Foster grew up in the South, where he heard slave music and saw minstrel shows, which featured white performers in black make-up performing African-American songs and dances. Such material inspired some of Foster's best songs, which many Americans still know by heart: "Oh! Susanna," "Camptown Races," "Ring the Banjo," "Old Folks at Home" (better known by its opening line: "Way down upon the Swanee River").

Before the movies and radio, most Americans had to entertain themselves or wait for the arrival in town of lecturers, circuses, or the traveling stage revues known as vaudeville. Dozens of prominent American entertainers got their starts in vaudeville -- W.C. Fields, Jack Benny, George Burns and Gracie Allen, Buster Keaton, Sophie Tucker, Fanny Brice, Al Jolson, and the Three Stooges, to name just a few -- and the medium demanded a steady supply of new songs. Late in the 19th century, music publishing became a big business in the United States, with many firms clustered in New York City, on a street that became known as Tin Pan Alley.

Vaudeville and the European genre of operetta spawned the Broadway musical, which integrates songs and dancing into a continuous story with spoken dialogue. The first successful example of the new genre -- and still one of the best -- was Jerome Kern's *Showboat*, which premiered in 1927. Interestingly, *Showboat* pays tribute to the black influence on mainstream American music with a story centered on miscegenation and, as its most poignant song, the slave lament "Ol' Man River."

Songwriter Irving Berlin (1888-1989) made a smooth transition from Tin Pan Alley to Broadway. An immigrant of Russian-Jewish extraction, he wrote some of the most popular American songs: "God Bless America," "Easter Parade," "White Christmas," "There's No Business Like Show Business," and "Cheek to Cheek." Cole Porter (1891-1964) took the Broadway show song to new heights of sophistication with his witty lyrics and rousing melodies, combined in such songs as "Anything Goes," "My Heart Belongs to Daddy," "You're the Top," "I Get a Kick Out of You," and "It's De-Lovely."

Black composers such as Scott Joplin (1868-1917) and Eubie Blake (1883-1983) drew on their own heritage to compose songs, ragtime pieces for piano, and, in Joplin's case, an opera. Joplin was all but forgotten after his death, but his music made a comeback starting in the 1970s. Blake wrote the music for *Shuffle Along*, the first Broadway musical by and about blacks, and continued to perform well into his 90s. Blues songs, which had evolved from slaves' work songs, became the rage in New York City and elsewhere during the 1920s and 1930s; two of the blues' finest practitioners were Ma Rainey (1886-1939) and Bessie Smith (c.1898-1937).

JAZZ

W.C. Handy's "St. Louis Blues" is one of the most frequently recorded songs written in the 20th century. Of all those recordings, one stands out: Bessie Smith's 1925 version, with Louis Armstrong (1900-1971) accompanying her on the cornet -- a collaboration of three great figures (composer, singer, instrumentalist) in a new kind of music called jazz. Though the meaning of

"jazz" is obscure, originally the term almost certainly had to do with sex. The music, which originated in New Orleans early in the 20th century, brought together elements from ragtime, slave songs, and brass bands. One of the distinguishing elements of jazz was its fluidity: in live performances, the musicians would almost never play a song the same way twice but would improvise variations on its notes and words.

Blessed with composers and performers of genius -- Jelly Roll Morton (1885-1941) and Duke Ellington (1899-1974), Louis Armstrong and Benny Goodman (1909-1986) and Bix Beiderbecke (1903-1931), Billie Holiday (1915-1959), and Ella Fitzgerald (1918-1996) -- jazz was the reigning popular American music from the 1920s through the 1940s. In the 1930s and 1940s the most popular form of jazz was "big-band swing," so called after large ensembles conducted by the likes of Glenn Miller (1909-1944) and William "Count" Basie (1904-1984). In the late 1940s a new, more cerebral form of mostly instrumental jazz, called be-bop, began to attract audiences. Its practitioners included trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie (1917-1993) and saxophonist Charlie Parker (1920-1955). Trumpeter Miles Davis (1926-1991) experimented with a wide range of musical influences, including classical music, which he incorporated into such compositions as "Sketches from Spain."

ROCK AND ROLL AND COUNTRY

By the early 1950s, however, jazz had lost some of its appeal to a mass audience. A new form of pop music, rock and roll, evolved from a black style known as rhythm and blues: songs with strong beats and often risqué lyrics. Though written by and for blacks, rhythm and blues also appealed to white teenagers, for whom listening to it over black-oriented radio stations late at night became a secret pleasure. To make the new music more acceptable to a mainstream audience, white performers and arrangers began to "cover" rhythm and blues songs -- singing them with the beat toned down and the lyrics cleaned up. A typical example is "Ain't That a Shame," a 1955 hit in a rock version by its black composer, Antoine "Fats" Domino, but an even bigger hit as a ballad-like cover by a white performer, Pat Boone.

Shrewd record producers of the time realized that a magnetic white man who could sing with the energy of a black man would have enormous appeal. Just such a figure appeared in the person of Elvis Presley (1935-1977), who had grown up poor in the South. Besides an emotional singing voice, Presley had sultry good looks and a way of shaking his hips that struck adults as obscene but teenagers as natural to rock and roll. At first, Presley, too, covered black singers: One of his first big hits was "Hound Dog," which had been sung by blues artist Big Mama Thornton. Soon, however, Presley was singing original material, supplied by a new breed of rock-and-roll songwriters.

A few years after its debut, rock and roll was well on its way to becoming the American form of pop music, especially among the young. It spread quickly to Great Britain, where the Beatles and the Rolling Stones got their starts in the early 1960s. In the meantime, however, a challenge to rock had appeared in the form of folk music, based largely on ballads brought over from Scotland, England, and Ireland and preserved in such enclaves as the mountains of North Carolina and West Virginia. Often accompanying themselves on acoustic guitar or banjo, such performers as the Weavers, Joan Baez, Judy Collins, and Peter, Paul, and Mary offered a low-tech alternative to rock and roll.

Bob Dylan (1941-) extended the reach of folk music by writing striking new songs that addressed contemporary social problems, especially the denial of civil rights to black Americans. The division between the two camps -- rock enthusiasts and folk purists -- came to a head when Dylan was booed for "going electric" (accompanying himself on electric guitar) at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival. Far from being deterred, Dylan led virtually the entire folk movement into a blend of rock and folk.

This merger was a watershed event, setting a pattern that holds true to this day. Rock remains the prevalent pop music of America -- and much of the rest of the world -- largely because it can assimilate almost any other kind of music, along with new varieties of outlandish showmanship, into its strong rhythmical framework. Whenever rock shows signs of creative exhaustion, it seems to get a transfusion, often from African Americans, as happened in the 1980s with the rise of rap: rhyming, often rude lyrics set to minimalist tunes.

Like folk, country music descends from the songs brought to the United States from England, Scotland, and Ireland. The original form of country music, called "old-time" and played by string bands (typically made up of fiddle, banjo, guitar, and base fiddle), can still be heard at festivals held each year in Virginia, North Carolina, and other southern states.

Modern country music -- original songs about contemporary concerns -- developed in the 1920s, roughly coinciding with a mass migration of rural people to big cities in search of work. Country music tends to have a melancholy sound, and many classic songs are about loss or separation -- lost homes, parents left behind, lost loves. Like many other forms of American pop music, country lends itself easily to a rock-and-roll beat, and country rock has been yet another successful American merger. Overall, country is second only to rock in popularity, and country singer Garth Brooks (1962-) has sold more albums than any other single artist in American musical history -- including Elvis Presley and Michael Jackson.

CRITIQUE

Some countries resent the American cultural juggernaut. The French periodically campaign to rid their language of invading English terms, and the Canadians have placed limits on American publications in Canada. Many Americans, too, complain about the media's tendency to pitch programs toward the lowest common denominator.

And yet the common denominator need not be a low one, and the American knack for making entertainment that appeals to virtually all of humanity is no small gift. In his book *The Hollywood Eye*, writer and producer Jon Boorstin defends the movies' orientation to mass-market tastes in terms that can be applied to other branches of American pop culture: "In their simple-minded, greedy, democratic way Hollywood filmmakers know deep in their gut that they can have it both ways -- they can make a film they are terrifically proud of that masses of people will want to see, too. That means tuning out their more rarefied sensibilities and using that part of themselves they share with their parents and their siblings, with Wall Street lawyers and small-town Rotarians and waiters and engineering students, with cops and pacifists and the guys at the car wash and perhaps even second graders and junkies and bigots;...the common human currency of joy and sorrow and anger and excitement and loss and pain and love."

[Chapter 12: The Media and Their Messages>>>>](#)