Introduction

Beginning in the third decade of the twentieth century, talking pictures, radio, and then television appeared on the American scene. Along with recorded music available first on phonograph records and then on such devices as compact discs, these three forms of entertainment, each of which relied on the mechanical transmission of sound into homes or movie theaters, dominated American popular culture between 1928 and the end of the century.

Each year, Americans sampled the available movies, radio programs, and television programs. Their choices reflected the categories that divided them, such as gender, region, race, and ethnicity, but the fact that all chose from the same basic menu meant that popular culture united Americans far more than it separated them. Even regional forms of entertainment, such as the country music broadcast over the Grand Ole Opry program from Nashville, reached wide audiences.

What mattered most in the evolution of this wave of popular culture was the essential historical variable of time. Although particular stars and programs retained their popularity over long stretches of time, Americans watched different movies, listened to different radio programs, and viewed different television programs in different eras. Their choices helped to define and differentiate one time period from another.

Mass Appeal describes the changing world of American popular culture from the first sound movies through the age of television. For three basic innovations – sound movies, radio, and television – I explain how each came to be an accepted part of American life. I also characterize the most popular offerings of each medium, and I detail the career patterns of people who became big movie, TV, or radio stars. Charlie Chaplin's life provides a window on the silent film era. Eddie Cantor and Al Jolson symbolize the early stars of sound movies. Groucho Marx and Fred Astaire represent the movie stars of the 1930s, and Jack Benny stands in for the 1930s'

performers who achieved their success on radio. Katharine Hepburn, a stage and film star, illustrates the cultural trends of the late 1930s and early 1940s. Humphrey Bogart and Bob Hope serve as examples of performers who achieved great success during the Second World War. Walt Disney, Woody Allen, and Lucille Ball, among others, become the representative figures of the postwar world.

None of these stars is in any way obscure, but they may be figures of interest to students today. This book does not look for hidden aspects of the popular culture experience. Instead, it provides a chronology of movies, radio, and television from sound movies to the VCR. It contains my own "readings," as the academics like to say, of key movies, radio, and television programs. It endeavors to project the history of popular culture against the larger themes of American history and to introduce a new generation to the entertainment figures of the era of their parents and grandparents.

I emphasize that this book gathers together evidence that is available to anyone through personal experience and through the abundance of information stored on the Internet. Libraries no longer close at midnight. Information about nearly any film or TV show lies at one's fingertips. Students now take this technology for granted. Ask them to write a report about the movie star Ginger Rogers and they Google the name and come up with a biography and a list of movies.

Academics worry that information obtained in this way lacks the purity of information mined from a book or an archive. Many of these doubts reflect the usual anxiety that accompanies a significant change in technology. I take the Internet as a given and encourage readers of this book to follow up on the subjects that interest them. The book integrates evidence so as to form a simple narrative and series of biographical sketches that the reader can embellish as he or she wishes.

I invite readers to discover or rediscover the movies of the 1930s, the radio programs of the 1940s, and the television programs of the 1950s and to see how the leading figures of popular culture have changed to reflect the changing times.

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Sound Comes In, Vaudeville and Silent Pictures Go Out

On August 15, 1926, the Warner brothers introduced an experimental process to New York audiences that brought synchronized sound to movie theaters. Movies were already a thriving business. Although the early movies did not talk, the audiences made vocal comments on the picture before them and cheered, clapped, and laughed in appropriate places; live or separately recorded music accompanied the film, so silent films were not really shown in quiet settings. The Warner brothers put the sound track directly onto the film and thereby offered something new to an already lively medium. The August 1926 program included a filmed speech from former postmaster general Will Hays, some music recitals, and a silent performance by distinguished actor John Barrymore as Don Juan with a recorded orchestral accompaniment. Audiences marveled at how clearly Hays's words came through and how faithfully the sound process reproduced the musical tones. "The resonance and clarity of the tones seemed to put life into the shadows on the screen," gushed the *New York Times*. It was as though the audience "had a front row seat at the Metropolitan Opera." The upscale audience was reportedly spellbound: "Only those who had to catch trains to go to their summer homes left before the feature came to an end."[1]

THE WARNER BROTHERS AND THE MOVIE INDUSTRY

The four Warner brothers were typical of the men who made the movie business. They were Jewish, the sons of a Polish cobbler who immigrated to Baltimore, Maryland. The peripatetic family eventually settled in Youngstown, Ohio, where the father worked first as a cobbler and then as a grocer, with the sons doing what they could to help. The second son,

Albert, went on the road for the Swift Company selling soap. In Pittsburgh in 1904 he saw his first movie at a "nickelodeon," an early storefront movie theater so-called because of its cheap admission price. The family decided to go into the movie business, obtaining a motion picture projector and a print of a short film called *The Great Train Robbery*. They showed it in halls near their home base as part of a complete program that included a piano solo by Rose Warner (a Warner sister) and songs from Jack Warner. Then they opened their own nickelodeon in Newcastle, Pennsylvania. Starting without enough money to buy necessities for their small storefront operation, they had to borrow chairs from an undertaker down the street.[2]

The Warner brothers went from film exhibition, to film distribution, to film production in 1917. In 1925, still relatively minor players in the business, they became interested in experiments with sound being made by Western Electric and ATT. Although previous efforts at linking picture and sound had not been successful, the Warners thought that the new system held enough promise to eventually replace the need for an orchestra in movie theaters. The Warner brothers invested in recorded sound.[3]

With or without sound, the movies had become big business by the time of World War I. Their development reflected a typical industrial pattern in which the barriers to entry were low at first, and many different companies and individual entrepreneurs joined the movie business. Over time, as in other businesses, some movie operators, such as the Warner brothers, became more successful than others, and their success allowed them to invest in larger theaters or to expand to other areas of the business. Someone who showed movies in theaters might also decide to produce or distribute them, or a production company might buy a chain of theaters to have a guaranteed audience for its offerings. As these things happened, the size of the typical firm grew larger, making it more difficult for upstart newcomers to compete and absorbing or eliminating less successful competitors. The industry eventually consolidated into five major integrated companies – MGM, Paramount, Warner Brothers, RKO, and Fox. Two large companies, Columbia and Universal, made movies but did not distribute them. Together, these companies dominated the industry.[4]

VAUDEVILLE AND THE MOVIES

Sound movies replaced live variety shows, which were known as vaudeville. This late-nineteenth-century show business phenomenon, which peaked in the early twentieth century, provided good clean family fun (although some acts used double entendres and suggestive actions to skirt the edge of

decency – to the discomfort of those who ran the business but to the delight of many audiences). Vaudeville shows, at least in theory, offered something for everyone, including women and children. The trick was to provide wholesome entertainment that did not alienate audiences in search of thrills or laughs. Staples of vaudeville variety shows included acrobats or "dumb" acts with animals that often led the program as people were still finding their seats, comedians who might appeal to adolescent males, tenors whose masculinity attracted the ladies, and even sports figures revered by the men.[5]

The creation of vaudeville depended on two important factors: the availability of an audience with the time and financial means to attend the show and the development of an effective transportation network that allowed performers and scenery to move cheaply and quickly from one town to another. Chains, or wheels, of vaudeville theaters developed along the stops of the streetcar and railroad lines that then linked American cities.[6]

Movies began as junior partners in the relationship with vaudeville. Vaudeville theaters showed short movies to quiet the patrons as they took their seats, or to signal the beginning of an intermission. Movies were also exhibited in urban entertainment settings or arcades, where patrons paid to see movies that were shown through a peephole, one amusement among many games and novelties in the arcade.

The first generation of movie entrepreneurs started with the arcades and moved on to bigger things. Adolph Zukor owned a big arcade on New York's Union Square and ultimately became one of the founders of Paramount Pictures. A Jewish immigrant from Hungary who arrived in this country as a teenager, Zukor had already established himself as a successful furrier before going into the arcade business.[7]

A turning point in the movie industry came around April 1904. A businessman in the Pittsburgh area built an amusement arcade, which then burned down. Rather than going back to the arcade business, the man decided to reopen his business as a movie theater, using a machine, similar to the one already used in vaudeville theaters, that allowed moving images to be projected in front of an audience rather than being shown through a peephole to one patron at a time. On June 19, 1905, this ninety-six-seat nickelodeon opened with a showing of *The Great Train Robbery* and a piano to provide background music.[8]

The early operators cashed in on the nickelodeon craze that swept the nation around 1906. By the end of 1907, a journalist in the popular magazine *The Saturday Evening Post* reported that "Three years ago there was not a single nickelodeon devoted to moving picture shows in America. Today there are between four and five thousand. Two million

people attend every day, a third of whom are children." The author noted the small size of the nickelodeons – typically less than 200 seats – and the continuous nature of the performances for the short films – eighteen performances a day, seven days a week.[9]

Marcus Loew also got into the penny arcade business and eventually owned a chain of vaudeville theaters and a film exhibition business. In time, he controlled the largest chain of theaters in New York City, and that suggested the need to go into the motion picture production business. In 1920, he acquired Metro Studios for that purpose, and his efforts ultimately led to the creation of Metro Goldwyn Mayer, the largest and most prestigious film company in Hollywood.[10]

With Loew running his chain of theaters, he received assistance on the production end of the business from Louis B. Mayer, another Jewish immigrant. Mayer had started out in his father's junk business in Canada, then entered the theater business in the raw industrial town of Haverhill, Massachusetts, in 1907, and finally became a Hollywood film producer and head of production for MGM.[11]

THE JEWISH QUESTION

That so many of these early entrepreneurs were Jewish immigrants did not happen by conscious design. One might think of the movie business as simply that, a business. Jews intent on, as the expression went, "making a living" and geared toward the retail trades saw the movies as a business like any other, such as salvaging junk (Mayer), selling gloves (Samuel Goldwyn), selling soap (Albert Warner), or selling furs (Zukor). Few of these businessmen thought it possible to, say, start a bank or a steel mill. Those enterprises were beyond their means and outside their network of connections. Movies – or in the earlier phases, amusement parlors, penny arcades, vaudeville halls, and nickelodeons – lacked the respectability of selling financial securities or practicing as a lawyer. Running a movie theater did not guarantee entry to the local Rotary (started in 1905), much less to the local country club. Instead, movies were cheap marginal businesses that changed hands many times and carried an unsavory connection with the tawdry world of show business.[12]

Because it did not seem to matter, Americans trusted what became the single most important component of their entertainment industry to a group of Jews who did not necessarily share mainstream Christian values. In the early stages of development, it was simply not self-evident that the movies would grow into such a large business. If people had known, more

businessmen with deeper pockets and hence more respectability might well have entered the business. Of course, producers who were Jewish did not set out to make Jewish movies, any more than Jewish owners of department stores discouraged their customers from Christmas shopping. In both cases, the Jewish businessmen performed a retail function and set out to give the public what it wanted. The same customers who went to Macy's or Bloomingdale's or Filene's or any of the other department stores owned by Jews to do their Christmas shopping patronized theaters owned by Jewish companies and watched biblical epochs like the very Christian *Ben Hur* without giving it a second thought. The executives did not encourage a Jewish identity among the actors who appeared in their films. Theodosia Goodman, said to be a Jewish girl from Cincinnati, became a famous silent movie star, so seductive to the male audience that she suggested a vampire or vamp. She appeared not as Goodman but under the more exotic and ethnically ambiguous name Theda Bara.[13]

EARLY MOVIE THEATERS

As the careers of Nicholas Loew and Adolph Zukor demonstrated, nickelodeons soon gave way to movies shown in more elaborate settings. By 1908, the nickelodeon craze had largely run its course.[14] William Fox, another of the early movie entrepreneurs who would put his name on one of Hollywood's signature companies, opened the Dewey Theater in the Union Square district of New York in 1908. In these and other ventures, he took the movies to the next step, offering a lot more entertainment for just a little more money. The Dewey Theater cost between ten and thirty-five cents, still within many people's range. The 1,000-seat theater presented a show that lasted for two full hours, with five reels of film and five vaudeville acts.[15]

As the storefront theaters began to disappear, more elaborate theaters of the Dewey variety appeared. That happened not just in places like New York but also in smaller centers. In 1914, for example, Pittsburgh entrepreneurs made plans for a 900-seat theater, with a fancy façade and ticket booth and a lobby decorated with tile imported from France. Here was something that anticipated the elaborate movie palaces of the 1920s. There was to be an electric sign in the front that was three stories high and an elegant fountain in the lobby. Even more impressive than the large bathrooms was the fact that the theater would be cooled in summer, using large blocks of ice, and in this way would beat the doldrums that affected the theater business in the hot weather months.[16] Indeed, the movie palaces were

early leaders in air conditioning technology, so that the Chicago chain of Balaban and Katz theaters, which came into prominence between 1917 and 1923, ran newspaper advertisements with icicles drawn next to the names of its theaters. Balaban and Katz, like the other big-time operators, promised a grand experience at the movies in settings that included massive chandeliers, elaborate drapery, unobstructed sight lines, and comfortable seats, all presided over by ushers in red uniforms with white gloves and yellow epaulets. Half of the show consisted of a live musical revue.[17]

Even more elaborate movie houses followed. In 1927, Grauman's Chinese Theatre – the theater where the stars would eventually leave their hand and footprints in front – opened in the heart of Hollywood. An impressive monument to the downtown affluence of the twenties, it cost $1 million to build and seated 2,200. In that same year, the Roxy, with its 6,250 seats, started operations in New York.[18]

By 1914, the movies had become the senior partners in the relationship with vaudeville, and by almost any measure the leading form of entertainment in America. By 1920, some 35 million Americans went to the movies each week.[19] In Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*, set in that year, the daughter of the respectable middle-class family at the center of the novel is "movie mad," and the family constantly needs to use the car to go downtown to the movies.

Within a few more years, nearly all of the theaters in America, some 97 percent, showed films. In 1926, only six theaters remained in the East that were devoted exclusively to live variety shows in the vaudeville manner, and only six such theaters existed in all the rest of the country. That number dwindled to four in 1928, which meant that the only places to see big-time vaudeville, the traditional stage show without a movie, were New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles.[20]

Vaudeville, once at the pinnacle of American entertainment, had become a sideshow, a form of entertainment that took place between the showings of movies. By this time, movies satisfied the craving for entertainment because they put the songs and dances of vaudeville performers on film. Live performers had their limits; they could only do so many shows a day. Movies could be rewound and shown continuously day and night. Furthermore, the setting for the movies could be just as genteel and opulent as any vaudeville theater.

EARLY MOVIE STARS AND CHARLIE CHAPLIN

Vaudeville was nonetheless important to the development of the movies because it served as a recruiting ground for the performers who would

become stars in the new medium. The inventors of the motion picture, such as Thomas Edison and his associates, assumed that one movie was much like another.[21] One could sell movies by the foot, rather than by the title or the star. Movies tended to be short, perhaps fifteen minutes in length, and largely forgettable as anything other than a momentary spectacle. Over time, however, circumstances changed. Adolph Zukor had the insight that movies could be more than casual short programs and that they might compete with the legitimate theater and offer a full evening's entertainment. He aspired to offer "famous players in famous plays," a departure from the film-as-short-novelty concept in which the producers did not even reveal the names of the actors. In 1912, Zukor bought the rights to a film about Queen Elizabeth starring Sarah Bernhardt that had been produced in Europe.[22] By 1915, long-running, multi-reeled movies, such as *Birth of a Nation*, had begun to appear with some regularity.[23]

Zukor and others like him developed the first movie stars in America. From being anonymous figures in front of the camera, the actors evolved into recognizable entities whose careers could be followed by the audience from one picture to another. People developed a rooting interest in movie stars, such as the exotic Theda Bara, the sexy Clara Bow, or the innocent Mary Pickford, that expressed itself in business at the box office and that nurtured sideline ventures such as fan magazines.[24]

Charlie Chaplin became the most famous performer from the silent era who was able to sustain his fame into the era of talking pictures, unlike Bara, Bow, and Pickford. His image remained so well known even in the early 1980s that IBM used it to introduce the personal computer to America. Like many of his contemporaries, Chaplin appeared to come from nowhere – a pure creation of the movies – to become one of the most famous men in the world.[25]

In fact, Chaplin came from vaudeville, an early example of how performers made the transition from one medium to the other. Those who eventually became the biggest movie stars of the silent era were, by and large, not the biggest vaudeville or legitimate stage stars, like Sarah Bernhardt, who had no reason to linger in a still untested field. Instead, they were performers who thought they could better themselves in motion pictures. Chaplin made his first movie at the relatively advanced age of twenty-five, showing that it took him some time to find his permanent means of livelihood.

His childhood was something out of a Dickens novel, and his movies would retain a Victorian sense of sentimentality. Born in London, he started out in relatively comfortable circumstances with successful show business parents. Then his childhood began to crumble beneath him. Chaplin's father

deserted the family and died of alcoholism. His mother suffered from long bouts of mental illness, a far more stigmatizing disease then than now. Without functional parents, Chaplin spent time in an orphanage. He entered the world of the theater and went on extended American tours with an English group of young acrobatic comics, before stopping in Los Angeles in 1914, where he went to work for producer Max Sennett of Keystone comedies fame. Showing the inventiveness and physical grace that allowed him to stand out in slapstick comedy, Chaplin became as close to an overnight success as the real world allows.[26]

He quickly rose from bit player at Keystone to a famous movie star, with authority over his own pictures and even his own movie studio. A year after his Sennett debut, he signed with Essanay for $1,250 a week. A year later, he was with Mutual at $10,000 a week (with a $150,000 signing bonus). "Fulfilling the Mutual contract," he later wrote, "was the happiest period of my career. I was light and unencumbered, twenty-seven years old, with fabulous prospects and a friendly glamorous world before me."[27] If anything, the world turned friendlier after that. In 1917, he signed a million dollar contract with First National and began building his own studio. Then he signed with United Artists and gained complete control over his films.[28]

In the four years between his 1914 debut and his initial First National production, he made sixty-one of his eighty-two films. He retained his character from picture to picture – the famous tramp with the hat and cane who, dressed in baggy pants and an ill-fitting suit coat with a tie and vest that mocked the costume of a gentleman, maintained his dignity and humanity in the face of the world's outrages. He described himself as a geologist, "who was entering a rich, unexplored field." Meanwhile, "Money was pouring into my coffers. The ten thousand dollars I received every week accumulated into hundreds of thousands. Now I was worth four hundred thousand, now five hundred thousand. I could never take it for granted." He lived in a world of success, different from the rest of the world, which permitted him instant entry almost anywhere. "When I met people, their faces would light up with interest," he recalled.[29]

For Chaplin, time punished success despite the longevity of his career. Some of his problems stemmed from the tensions of the creative process. He appealed to the movie-going public, but also to the intellectuals and opinion shapers of the world. It became difficult for him to maintain both his popularity and his critical esteem. The fact that he created his own material, at first by means of almost pure improvisation, added to the pressures he faced. Many people depended on him and his highly