

## HOW SONG, DANCE AND MOVIES BAILED US OUT OF THE DEPRESSION

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Many were surprised that the final stimulus legislation signed by President Obama preserved a \$50-million increase in arts funding that had been the subject of a heated battle in Congress. Though it amounted to only a tiny fraction of the measure's total cost, it had become the target of conservatives, many of whom consider the arts frivolous, elitist and, frankly, left-wing. They showed their disdain in February when they pushed for—and passed—a Senate amendment ruling out stimulus funds for museums, arts centers and theaters.

That shortsighted decision was reversed at the last moment, after supporters made a good case that the arts are often the linchpin of downtown neighborhoods, creating jobs and providing many other economic benefits: stimulating business, promoting urban renewal and attracting tourists.

But was that really the point? Is that really why we need the arts? These days, it seems that every discussion of the economic situation includes the obligatory comparison to the prolonged crisis of the 1930s, yet what the Depression and the New Deal actually showed is that the value of the arts goes well beyond job creation and economic stimulus.

- 4 Studies of the 1930s have shown how the economic meltdown was accompanied by psychological depression: loss of morale, a sense of despair, grave fears for the future. Going to the movies or listening to the radio could not solve these problems, but they could ease them in the same way that President Franklin D. Roosevelt's intimate fireside chats boosted morale and restored confidence.

The most durable cliché about the arts in the 1930s is that despite the surge of social consciousness among writers, photographers and painters (some of it

supported by federal dollars), the arts offered Depression audiences little more than fluffy escapism, which was just what they needed.

But that's not the whole story. It's certainly a paradox that dire economic times produced such a fizzy, buoyant popular culture. From the warring couples of screwball comedy and the magical dancing of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers to the sophisticated music and lyrics of Cole Porter, Rodgers and Hart, and the Gershwins, the '30s generated mass entertainment legendary for its wit, elegance and style. This culture had its roots in the devil-may-care world of the 1920s, but it took on new meaning as the Depression deepened.

The engine of the arts in the '30s was not escapism, as we sometimes imagine, but speed, energy and movement at a time of economic stagnation and social malaise. When Warner Bros.—which avoided bankruptcy with its lively and topical gangster films, backstage musicals and Depression melodramas—promised a “New Deal in Entertainment,” it was offering the cultural equivalent of the New Deal, a psychological stimulus package that might energize a shaken public.

- 8 With his roots in the ethnic slums, the gangster was a dynamic figure who somehow mastered his own fate even as he trampled on other people's lives. Busby Berkeley's showgirls were at the center of glittering fables of success and failure, wondrous changes in fortunes that resonated for '30s audiences. Against all odds, the performers came together into a working community; so did the stricken victims in topical melodramas right up through “The Grapes of Wrath,” who discovered that they were helpless on their own but had a chance if they banded together and helped one another.

If we look at the arts as a life-giving form of social therapy, many other fads and fashions of the 1930s fall into place. The thrust of the culture, like the aims of the New Deal, was to get the country moving again. At cross-purposes in conversation, Astaire and Rogers seem perfectly ill-matched. Endlessly bickering with each other, they can agree on nothing. But once they dance, a swirling poetry of movement takes over.

The public also loved comedies about the very rich. Everyone could feel superior to their silliness, the weightlessness of their lives, yet live vicariously through their energy, irresponsibility and freedom, the snap of their delicious dialogue. Meanwhile, musical standards created a seductive dreamland, somewhere “over the rainbow,” a better world where cloudy skies and rainy days somehow promised “pennies from heaven.”

The propulsive swing music of the big bands, produced by performers and band leaders such as Duke Ellington, Artie Shaw and Benny Goodman, brought jazz to a mass audience for the first time—jazz to dance to, not simply to listen to. It filled the airwaves, ballrooms, nightclubs, even concert halls.

- 12 The visual equivalent of swing music was Art Deco. Gifted designers such as Raymond Loewy, Donald Deskey, Walter Dorwin Teague and Norman Bel Geddes stimulated consumption by putting a fluid sense of movement into everything from locomotives to table radios, projecting the consumer into a streamlined future otherwise hard to imagine. This culminated in the design of the 1939 New York World's Fair, with its flowing crowds and futuristic visions of “The World of Tomorrow.”

Today's economic and cultural climate is still a long way from the Depression, which was already in its fourth year when FDR kicked off the New Deal. A quarter of the workforce was unemployed. The stock market had crashed, and the banking system had failed. Yet there are eerie resemblances, especially in the crisis of confidence that froze credit markets and blasted consumer spending almost overnight in mid-September of last year.

There is little sign so far of how the arts will respond to the damage done to our confidence and morale this time around. But moviegoing has already increased by almost 16% this year. We know from the 1930s that the stimulating effect of art and entertainment comes not only in the jobs produced but in the emotional links with the public that absorbs this work and takes it to heart.

The arts can be a lifeline as well as a pleasant diversion, a source of optimism and energy as well as peerless insight, especially when so many people are stymied or perplexed by the unexpected changes in their world. As our troubles worsen, as stress morphs into anxiety and depression, we may desperately need the mixture of the real and the fantastic, the sober and the silly, that only the arts can bring us.