

Those Thoroughly Modern Twenties

The Ragtime Revolution



The 1920s was the beginning of a whole new era in the United States (and to some extent Canada and England) with sweeping changes in societal norms, new-found affluence, super-fast transportation on land (automobiles) and in air

(aeroplanes and the advent of commercial airlines), and new gadgets right in the home for communication and entertainment (telephones, radio, phonographs) that ushered in the Analog Age. In the laboratories even more amazing futuristic devices were being developed.

Before the First World War (known then as just The World War or the Great War since there hadn't been a second one) there was a stifling sense of Victorian-era moralism in U.S. society where everyone was uptight and proper. Men were supposed to be cold and studious, lord and master over the women and children, and women were expected to be paragons of virtue and modesty, dressed from neck to toe in hobble skirts, flowing tresses and osprey plumes. The showing of any skin beyond the face was immodest and outrageous. Nobody asked their opinion of anything so they'd best keep quiet, and they didn't have the right to vote.

There would be no tolerance of non-conformity from either sex. Home entertainment in the less puritanical households that didn't forbid virtually anything enjoyable consisted of reading, conversing with family members and guests about quaint topics, and maybe playing something on the old piano in the parlor. Otherwise you had to get dressed up and go into town to see a show.

But victory in a hard-fought war and the cultural and political changes that followed it blew that rigid, unyielding conformity to bits. Indeed the puritanical fuddie-duddies of Big Government tried to keep the populace moral and pure and protect the common good with the enactment in 1920 of National Prohibition via constitutional amendment, forbidding the decadent pleasures of beer and wine as well as hard liquor, but it would all soon backfire in the faces of those arrogant moralists. Otherwise law-abiding citizens rebelled against prohibition law in droves, finding ways to get or make demon liquor for their own consumption, creating a virtual nation of outlaws. Newspapers and popular magazines often mocked Prohibition, and black markets, gangster crime, bootlegging, speakeasies, moonshining and some pretty wild private parties all came as a result of an incredibly misguided government policy.

Meanwhile a new generation of young adults born around 1900 and in the years after ushered in the first viable popular youth culture as they moved away from their isolated farm communities and small towns and found new freedom in the big cities and college campuses. They rebelled against everything their uptight parents' generation stood for, became enthusiasts of the new "barbaric" ragtime jazz music and danced to it in ways that were positively scandalous. Guys were more

