

Celebrity Culture in the United States

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From Barnum to “Bling”

The Changing Face of Celebrity Culture

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Showman P.T. Barnum set the stage for modern celebrity culture by opening the curtain on mass entertainment in the mid-nineteenth century. He dazzled in an era before technology could “broadcast” performance—before the advent of the recording, radio, and motion picture industries; before the heyday of advertising; before the mass distribution of photography in rotogravure sections of the Sunday newspapers. Yet somehow he ignored these constraints and created such popular culture events as the establishment of the American Museum in New York in 1841, the introduction of “General Tom Thumb” shortly thereafter, the orchestration of Swedish songbird Jenny Lind’s celebrated 1851–1852 American tour, the organization of “The Greatest Show on Earth” (a traveling circus/menagerie/museum) in 1871, and the creation ten years later, with James Bailey, of the Barnum & Bailey Circus. His American Museum on Broadway in particular showcased Barnum’s love of humbug in such wildly diverse entertainments as “industrious fleas, automatons, jugglers, ventriloquists, living statuary, tableaux, gypsies, albinos, giants, dwarfs, models of Niagara, American Indians. . . .” “It was my monomania,” he said in his autobiography, “to make the Museum the town wonder and town talk.” And this he did with astonishing ingenuity: “my ‘puffing’ was more persistent, my posters more glaring, my pictures more exaggerated, my flags more patriotic.” It worked brilliantly.¹

The bravado Barnum used to create his wondrous celebrities, illusions, and spectacles injected ballyhoo into the rarified air of America’s earlier devotion to Great Men on a Pedestal. Lacking millennia of history as a nation, Americans of the Revolutionary republic fashioned a mythic national character out of military heroes and eminent statesmen who embodied the ideals of virtue, self-reliance, and achievement.

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¹ Quoted in Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of PT Barnum* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973) 40, 53–54.

² See Warren Susman, “‘Personality’ and the Making of Twentieth Century Culture,” *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon, 1984) 271–85.

By mid-twentieth century, this heroic pedestal was claimed not by politicians and generals but by sports stars and movie legends—by “personality” rather than “character.”² This shift, reflecting the cultural changes wrought by the communications revolution of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and by the rise of immigration and urbanization between the 1890s and 1920s, says a great deal about the nation’s continuing need for self-definition, and about the culture that contributed to the search for it. In his groundbreaking book *The Image*, Daniel Boorstin described this metamorphosis as one from traditional “larger-than-life” heroes known for their achievement to “celebrity-personalities” recognized for their “well-knownness” in a society enamored of “pseudo-events.”³

By the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, the changing face of fame existed squarely at eye level, lacking any pretense of pedestal altogether: postmodern pseudo-celebrity blips flooded the airwaves with “reality television” and Americans eagerly clawed their way to fame as “Apprentices” and “American Idols.” Yet flash and spectacle remain crucial components of “celebrity,” as exemplified today by “bling bling”—the diamond-studded, showy rapper style that has recently won approval by the Oxford English Dictionary.⁴

From Revolutionary Hero to “American Adam”

Heroes of the Revolutionary era were invoked to give the nation a sense of historical legitimacy. If, as Milton wrote, “Fame is the spur that the clear spirit doth raise,”⁵ then it was a spur to industry and virtue. Above all others, George Washington stood as the great embodiment of national virtue, the symbol of the nation’s essential worthiness. Heroes of this era were gentlemen, scholars, and patriots—traditional representatives of such basic social institutions as the state, the military, and the church—and their lives served as examples.

Literary historian R. W. B. Lewis has written that the heroic image contrived between 1820 and 1860 was that of an “American Adam,”⁶ a figure of innocence and promise who was, as Emerson defined him, “the simple genuine self against the whole world.”⁷ In an age optimistic about an indigenous culture-in-the-making, the nation’s novelists, poets, essayists, critics, historians, and preachers all entered into the discourse with gusto, seeking to construct not only a national narrative, but to create that epic’s protagonist. The

³ Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Atheneum, 1971) 57.

⁴ See < www.mtv.com/news/articles/11471629/20030430/bg.jhtml?headlines=true >.

⁵ John Milton, “Lycidas,” *The New Oxford Book of English Verse, 1250–1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972) 294.

⁶ R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955) 1–10.

⁷ Lewis vi.

Adamic hero, freed from the past and boasting such intrinsic characteristics as self-reliance, virtue, and achievement, would become the central figure in the quest for national legitimacy. James Fennimore Cooper notably invented Natty Bumppo, the selfless, stoic, and enduring hero who has been described as “timeless and sturdily innocent,” and “the essential American soul.”⁸

The conceptual distance separating Revolutionary heroes from their mid-nineteenth century counterparts was indiscernible. Core values remained, as Emerson demonstrated in extolling the democratic “central man” who was the source of all national vitality.⁹ Elsewhere he depicted history in terms of “representative men”¹⁰—a sensibility that would not have been alien to earlier generations. It was only in the later nineteenth century, with the revolution in communications technology, the rise of a substantial monied class, and the emergence of a mass urban landscape, that the nation’s heroic vision evolved into a new stage.

The Communications Revolution

The look of fame itself changed with what Daniel Boorstin has termed the “Graphic Revolution,” the advent both of mechanical means of image reproduction and of the facility for mass diffusion of information. The emergence of photography and chromolithography in post-Civil War America led to an explosive growth in such mass publications as newspapers and magazines. The first truly mass urban newspapers appeared in the 1880s and were made possible by high-speed presses, the linotype, halftone photo reproduction, and the emergence of news-gathering organizations like the Associated Press—all of which made the daily newspaper the central supplier of national and world news. The circulation of daily papers increased 400% between 1870 and 1900, partly as a result of technology and partly because of rising literacy rates and the growth of leisure time.¹¹

The new magazines like *McClure’s* that appeared in the 1890s also played a role in enlarging the popular imagination, thereby redefining ideals of fame, success, and national heroism. At century’s end America’s most-admired figures were hero-inventors like Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, and Italian émigré Guglielmo Marconi. Financial wizards such as J. P. Morgan, Andrew Carnegie, and John D. Rockefeller (either “captains of industry” or “robber barons,” depending on your perspective) were idolized for fighting their way to Darwinian peaks of capitalist success/excess.

⁸ Lewis 3–4.

⁹ E. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941)

¹⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Representative Men* (London: Dent, 1901).

¹¹ Boorstin 57 and passim.

Immigration, the Melting Pot, and the New Urban Landscape

But then the look of fame shifted again, turning full face in the twentieth century. The new era's heroes were activists who muck-raked the old: figures such as Theodore Roosevelt rode the crest of change and attempted to change the cultural context, busting trusts and monopolies to leaven the social landscape while elevating the United States to a heightened role in the international order. Journalist William Allen White wrote in his autobiography that "that decade which climaxed in 1912 was a time of tremendous change in our national life. . . . The American people were melting down old heroes and recasting the mold in which heroes were made."¹² This sentiment was echoed in Israel Zangwill's hit 1908 play, *The Melting Pot*, which depicted America as "God's Crucible, the great Melting-Pot, where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming."¹³

Between 1890 and the 1920s, twenty-three million new immigrants arrived on America's shores. The "genteel tradition" that had been the core of America's mainstream culture dissolved in this new urban stew, replaced by a vernacular culture that rose from the streets. The sounds and rhythms of this new culture were captured best by the rising entertainment industry: indeed, the most successful performing art of the time was vaudeville—literally, the "voice of the city." Magazines and newspapers trumpeted the phenomenon: one article in the late 1880s proclaimed: "It is remarkable how much attention the stage and things pertaining to it are receiving nowadays from the magazines." Twenty years ago, it was argued, such a thing would have been thought "indecorous," but drama "now makes such a large part of the life of society that it has become a topic of conversation among all classes."¹⁴ No longer "indecorous," entertainment had become decidedly mainstream. Advertising the entertainment at his Opera House, vaudeville impresario Tony Pastor assured his patrons that his "Temple of Amusement" was in fact "The Great Family Resort of the City where heads of families can bring their Ladies and children." Good order was observed at all times, and there were strict rules against "peanut feasts and boisterous applause."¹⁵

In the 1920s, cultural critic Gilbert Seldes rhapsodized about the "lively arts"—including jazz, musicals, radio, and motion pictures—that were creating an "American" culture to match the country's new immigrant, urban personality. Broadway flourished, and one of its leading lights, George Gershwin, composed staccato-paced, syncopated rhythms that helped define the Jazz Age. It was a highly

¹² William Allen White, *The Autobiography of William Allen White* (New York: Macmillan, 1946) 428.

¹³ Israel Zangwill, *The Melting Pot: A Drama in Four Parts* (New York: Macmillan, 1908) 33.

¹⁴ See "Theatre Scrapbooks, 1877–1903," vol. 3: article "Concerning the Stage," c. 1890, University of Virginia Manuscript Room.

¹⁵ Amy Henderson and Dwight Bowers, *Red, Hot & Blue: A Smithsonian Salute to American Musicals* (Washington: Smithsonian Press, 1996) 10.

visual culture as well. In 1915, poet Vachel Lindsay wrote of the “increasingly hieroglyphic civilization” that characterized the rise of American modernism.¹⁶ Times Square and Broadway’s “Great White Way” were blanketed by extravagant displays of signs and blinking lights that bespoke what one chronicler called “a staggering machine of desire.”¹⁷ And who would emerge as the dominant symbol of modernism? Media-generated “celebrities” whose popularity was achieved via the mass media of radio, recordings, and motion pictures.

The Emergence of “Celebrity”

“Celebrity” became a measure of success in a culture preoccupied with personality. In biographical articles that appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Colliers* from 1901 to 1914, 74% of the subjects came from traditional fields such as politics, business, and the professions. But from 1922 until 1941, over half came from the world of entertainment: sports figures like Babe Ruth and Joe Louis, movie stars like Gloria Swanson and Charlie Chaplin.¹⁸ The machinery providing mass information in the broadcasting, recording, and film industries created a ravenous market for celebrity culture: media-generated fame became a raging—and lasting—popular vogue.

Celebrities were able to broach all cultural levels. Between 1906 and 1920, Metropolitan Opera stars Enrico Caruso and Geraldine Farrar were the company’s most successful box office draws. But their popularity transcended Golden Horseshoe audiences, as newspapers and periodicals fanned their fame and enormously lucrative sales placed their recordings in millions of households. Farrar even went to Hollywood in 1915 to star in such Cecil B. DeMille “spectaculars” as a silent version of *Carmen*, and *Joan the Woman*.

Motion pictures helped make celebrity culture a national pastime. Though early “flickers” and back-alley lantern shows were considered slightly sleazy, by the teens movies had achieved a middle-class respectability. Whereas early film actors remained anonymous, the public began to lobby for its box office favorites, and by 1915 there were such authentic “stars” as Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks.

In the twenties and increasingly with the advent of “talkies,” movie celebrities came to represent the visual quintessence of glamour. Stars such as Marlene Dietrich, Joan Crawford, and Greta Garbo glowed with glamour—draped in diamonds and wrapped in silk, feathers, and fur, they were silvered beings worshipped by

¹⁶ Vachel Lindsay, quoted in Susman xxvi.

¹⁷ Quoted in William Leach, “Brokers and the New Corporate Industrial Order,” *Inventing Times Square: Commerce and Culture at the Crossroads of the World*, ed. William R. Taylor (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1991) 99.

¹⁸ Leo Lowenthal, *Literature, Popular Culture, and Society* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1961) 110–14.

what Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard* would call “all those little people out there in the dark.” By the late 1920s, each of the major studios had its own portrait gallery where studio photographers created a style of portraiture that crystallized stardom. Armed with banks of lights, large format cameras, retouching pencils, but above all an aesthetic of glamour, they coaxed celluloid icons from mere flesh and blood.

In the Depression, the American public responded exuberantly to this larger-than-life celebrity. Fan magazines like *Photoplay* documented star activities (or at least the studio’s version) with gushing stories about stars “at home”—what they ate, what their beauty secrets were, what pets they pampered, what cars they drove, what they wore. Fabric stores sold patterns of favorite star dresses for at-home seamstresses to copy, as in the phenomenally successful dress Adrian designed for Joan Crawford in the 1932 movie *Letty Lynton*: in addition to countless Butterick patterns of this puffed-sleeve, cinched waist dress, over 500,000 copies of the dress were sold at Macy’s alone!¹⁹ And how many women peroxidized their hair à la Harlow, or later adopted Veronica Lake’s “peekaboo” look?

The Advent of the Broadcast Industry

The advent of the broadcast industry in the 1920s marked another quantum leap in the cultivation of celebrity culture. While the film industry expanded in response to popular demand and the recording industry enjoyed a 600% sales increase between 1933 and 1938, radio became an everyday medium for mass culture. A household presence, an average radio in 1934 cost about \$35, and 60% of all American households had at least one set.²⁰ And unlike records, radio was live: entertainment and information were available at the touch of the dial. Radio stars like Rudy Vallee, Jack Benny, Molly Goldberg, and Burns and Allen became virtual members of the family.

While entertainers dominated the airwaves, broadcasting created political celebrities as well. Franklin D. Roosevelt’s election in 1932 coincided with radio’s own coming of age, and he proved himself a master of this ubiquitous medium. Of FDR’s “fireside chats,” a New York newspaper reporter noted that, “while painting a verbal picture expansive enough for a museum mural, Roosevelt reduced it to the proportions of a miniature hanging cozily on the wall of a living room.”²¹

Others thought that radio would “purify politics.” In 1928 Mississippi Senator Pat Harrison waxed that “the venomous darts (of the demagogue) cannot pass through the air”—an optimism soon dis-

¹⁹ Howard Gutner, *Gowns by Adrian: The MGM Years 1928–1941* (New York: Abrams, 2001) 120.

²⁰ Cited in Amy Henderson, *On the Air: Pioneers of American Broadcasting* (Washington: Smithsonian Press, 1988) 22.

²¹ Henderson, *On the Air*, 186.

pelled by the likes of Father Charles E. Coughlin, who won an enormous following in the 1930s by using radio to spread an increasingly proto-fascist brand of politics.²²

In its early decades, television vastly expanded broadcasting's impact: the Army-McCarthy hearings, political conventions, and the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon debates established television's center stage significance. Radio and television—even before the advent of cable and 24/7 coverage—had become the essential means for communicating political messages.

Contemporary Celebrity Culture

Those two factors—cable and 24/7 coverage—have transformed contemporary celebrity culture. Whereas earlier celebrity was broadly encompassing, encouraging general agreement at least in mainstream culture, contemporary celebrity is carefully niched, appealing not to wide swaths of society but to minute slivers. The consequences of this narrow-casting range from a fundamentally decentralized and trivialized culture of special interests to a society that is polarized on such national issues as red/blue politics and gay rights.

Another consequence of contemporary celebrity harkens back to the ballyhoo of Barnum and his gleeful use of illusion and spectacle to make humbug out of “reality.” Boorstin found contemporary media-generated celebrity dependent on “pseudo-events,” and French sociologist Jean Baudrillard has argued that a culture dominated by “simulacra” is not capable of discriminating between reality and the illusion or simulation of reality. The popularity of reality television where participants—regardless of talent—are convinced of their own celebrity clearly continues the tradition of humbug. Instead of Major Bowes' gong, Simon tells them they are pitiful, or the Donald declaims, “You're fired!” Do they believe in their fame fallibility? Of course not.

Contemporary celebrity is eons from an age when heroes were placed on pedestals: today, rather than reverential and upward-looking, the perspective is eye-to-eye—an immense psychological sea change. The disposable culture spawned by today's 24/7 media seems relentless, devouring anything in its path while leaving its audience permanently unsated. But the show will always go on: *bling bling!*

²² Henderson, *On the Air*, 188.