Facing the Music

What 1930s pop culture can teach us about our own hard times

By Morris Dickstein

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In *Stand Up and Cheer!*, a bizarre 1934 Hollywood movie remembered today mostly for the sensational performance of the five-year-old Shirley Temple, President Roosevelt appoints a Broadway impresario to his cabinet as Secretary of Amusement. His mission is to distract the public and get them to laugh, which presumably would bring the Great Depression to an end. The movie itself takes on this very task with an uneven set of musical and comedy numbers ranging from a great song-and-dance routine by Temple and hoofer James Dunn ("Baby, Take a Bow") to an interminable sketch featuring the shuffling black comedian Stepin Fetchit and a penguin that talks like Jimmy Durante.

One of the film's major production numbers, "I'm Laughing," reprised toward the end by Aunt Jemima (Tess Gardella), quite literally attempts to will the nation into a better mood. But it is the finale, "We're Out of the Red," that goes for broke. Undoubtedly Fox Studio's answer to Busby Berkeley's arresting choreography and camera work at Warner Bros., this fantasia in song and dance, showing Americans on the march, prematurely celebrates the nation's victory over the Depression. Together with its message, announced on horseback by a Paul Revere–like figure, "We're Out of the Red" is so incoherent that it must be seen to be believed.

Absurd as *Stand Up and Cheer!* is, it highlights the link between the morale-building efforts of the lively arts and those of the Roosevelt administration. Aside from the New Deal itself, nothing in the 1930s served the purpose of lifting the nation's spirits better than the period's art and entertainment. Never before or since have the arts served such a much-needed social function, not even when helping to mobilize the nation in times of war.

As a student of American culture, I've been living with the stresses and solutions of the 1930s for many years, but I couldn't have been more surprised when everyone else grew interested as well. This spring, with my book on the Great Depression soon to come out, I found myself doing half-a-dozen media interviews in which I was invariably asked to compare the effects of the Depression with the likely impact of the current recession, especially on young adults. One way to give substance to that comparison is to consider the role played by the lively arts in hard times.

As the economy crashed in 1929 and continued to deteriorate for the next three and a half years, the cultural sector crashed as well and went through cataclysmic changes. The revenues of movie studios, broadcasters, night clubs, record companies, touring bands, and publishers tanked, along with the bottom

line of other commercial enterprises, and this sent some of them over the edge into insolvency. But the spirit and substance of the arts shifted as drastically as the balance sheet. A few years earlier, expatriate writers and artists had lampooned as small-minded, puritanical, and philistine the everyday Americans who had been their neighbors when they were growing up. But these expatriates headed home when the checks from America stopped coming in, and some took their typewriters and cameras on the road to see how their old neighbors were coping with hard times. At just this moment, advances in technology gave a new reach to art and communication. Talkies provided a welcome boost to the movie business, opening the door to musical comedy and vaudeville-style revues but also to a level of realism that silent film could not have reached. Radio hookups amplified live music, broadcasting from fashionable ballrooms and hotels, along with night clubs like the Cotton Club in Harlem, where Duke Ellington and his band were attracting attention.

In Hollywood, Warner Bros. took the lead in filming tough-minded Depression stories. The studio turned out stark social dramas like Mervyn LeRoy's *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* and explosive gangster films like William Wellman's *The Public Enemy*, which made Jimmy Cagney a star. Berkeley's Depression-tinged *42nd Street* and *Gold Diggers of 1933* depicted the risky theatrical ventures of hard-pressed impresarios, giving us legions of leggy showgirls and their sugar daddies. Like its gangster movies, the Warner Bros. musicals were alternately exhilarating and grim—success stories made at a time when success itself was hard to achieve but thrilling to imagine.

Soon the federal government began its own unprecedented interventions in the arts, commissioning murals for post offices and other public buildings through the Treasury Department, putting artists, writers, musicians, and theater people on relief through the Works Progress Administration, or sending a battalion of superbly gifted photographers to document the rural Depression on behalf of the Farm Security Administration. The government projects were serious and instructive but also uplifting and, significantly, they provided an economic stimulus in the form of jobs for artists. "Artists have to eat too," the head of the WPA, Harry Hopkins, supposedly told Roosevelt in support of the controversial programs. The WPA Writers' Project ultimately produced guides to every state and many localities—they remain a gold standard—showing an America under siege, gazing inward, taking an inventory of itself 150 years after becoming a nation.

Similarly, muralists and other visual artists of the decade focused on local traditions and folklore as sources of strength at a time when many people felt intense economic pressure. Still other artists, influenced by Soviet experiments in the arts, ventured into slashing social criticism (though not on the walls of public buildings, where the designs required local and regional approval). But it was documentary photographers, notably Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans, who best combined pathos with dignity, showing the depths of poverty and despair into which some Americans had sunk, and their fortitude in coping with unimaginable problems. Each of these initiatives indirectly promoted a sense of community, substituting Roosevelt's oft-stated vision of empathy, social

obligation, and interdependency for an older faith in rugged individualism, which made stricken and fearful Americans feel personally responsible for their own plight.

One lesson of the Depression is that, in times of stagnation, rampant fears, and blighted hopes, the arts become a force in bolstering morale and getting people moving again. In fact, sheer movement was what the arts in the ’30s cared most about. This is why choreography became as important as photography, why popular music embraced jazz and the frenetic young jitterbugs who followed it began to swing, why Art Deco design and architecture, which had emerged in the 1920s, took on a dynamic and streamlined look in the 1930s. The arts packed a charge of physical energy that translated into the kind of psychological energy that stimulated Depression audiences and consumers. American culture of the 1930s resists being conveniently divided into serious and popular; rather it falls into degrees of direct or oblique reactions to those dire, unprecedented social conditions.

Besides conveying the joy and superlative grace of movement, dance in films became a metaphor for the need of beleaguered people to link up and hang together. Berkeley’s regimented choreography jibed with new collectivist solutions proposed for Depression conditions; as the more character-based Astaire-Rogers movies advanced through the decade, they gradually promoted dance into a plot device, enabling a bickering couple to achieve not only perfect harmony but a rarefied ease and elegance, something missing from the audience’s encumbered lives. The propulsive energy of swing music, the bubbling wit and syncopated lilt of Broadway and Hollywood songs by the Gershwins, Berlin, Porter, Rodgers and Hart, and Warren and Dubin, and the high-speed verbal duels and physical pratfalls of Hollywood screwball comedy showed how dissonance could be resolved into harmony, how stagnation could give way to action, and how fear could be turned into hope—just as the president so often urged.

The result was a paradox that landed at the heart of my new book: at a time when our society was most unstable and insecure, we somehow, as if by a law of compensation, produced the most buoyant popular culture that Americans had ever seen. Other factors contributed to it. The ragtag, anarchic spirit of vaudeville insinuated its way into early sound films in the work of comedians like W. C. Fields, Mae West, and the Marx Brothers. By 1934, with the tighter enforcement of the Production Code, Hollywood forged closer ties to Broadway, uncorking an infusion of wit and sophistication in popular culture never since matched. The warring couples of late-1930s movie comedies sometimes behaved like rich, spoiled children, in contrast with their Depression audience; yet at other times they acted like elegantly turned out adults, using innuendo and charged looks to project an erotic energy that could no longer be expressed directly, thanks to the heavy hand of the new censorship.

Among novelists and nonfiction writers, there was a split between those who put the Depression front and center, often relying on firsthand reportage, and those who responded to it more obliquely. John Steinbeck did both, evoking the natural paradise of his native California in his early books, then showing how

it was despoiled by exploitation in his social novels about migrant labor. The prose-and-photography books by James Agee and Walker Evans, Paul Taylor and Dorothea Lange, Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, and Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam visualized social problems into vivid human tragedies. Their books were all the more effective for being done with tact and reserve.

Novelists with roots in the 1920s channeled the spirit of the Depression indirectly rather than journalistically. In *Tender Is the Night*, F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote a subtle story of inexorable decline in a decade understandably obsessed with success and failure. Nathanael West, a virtuoso of tacky hopes and shattered dreams, brought the spirit of surrealism and the sensibility of a poet into his anorexic novels, including *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust*. Henry Roth, a disciple of modernists like Joyce and Eliot, made the immigrant world of Manhattan's Lower East Side into the setting of one of the century's great psychological novels, *Call It Sleep*. Another Joycean, William Faulkner, turned a tiny, imagined Mississippi county into a densely peopled world, saturated by local and family history. In Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930), the poor became figures of appetite and passion rather than social victims; and the haunted gentry of his other novels could have been characters out of Greek tragedy. The Depression infiltrated these writers' imaginations without becoming their explicit subject. The same could be said of Margaret Mitchell in her bestseller *Gone With the Wind*, set in another catastrophic era and centering on morally dubious characters determined to rebuild their lives, just as those living through the Depression were obliged to do.

The flowering of writers, filmmakers, photographers, and musicians in the 1930s suggests how current artists might respond to today's economic troubles. We already have novelists of minute and deliberate realism, including Richard Price, who writes about the changing Lower East Side in *Lush Life*, and Richard Russo, whose tales are set in upstate New York and New England towns that history seems to have left behind. Price and Russo have an eye for telling details and the ability to portray contracted, wayward lives, which would hold them in good stead if they turned their attention to the effects of the recession, especially the loss of jobs, the enforced idleness. We also have songwriters capable of stepping out of themselves to record how the sorely beset people around them are faring, as the populist folksinger Woody Guthrie did with his Dust Bowl ballads in the 1930s, a time when few popular performers wrote their own material. One likely candidate is Bruce Springsteen. He has embodied the persona of the working-class hero for more than 35 years and has repeatedly explored his links with '30s icons like Steinbeck, Guthrie, and, most recently, Pete Seeger. From "Born in the U.S.A." to "Dancing in the Dark," Springsteen's songs have run the gamut from defiance to despair like so many great Depression artists, including Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, and even Bing Crosby. Musical comedies too have found ways of exploring darker terrain than their predecessors did.

Today's protracted economic troubles, which may lead to what economists

call a "jobless recovery," also provide great openings for journalists. Some of the realists who chronicled the lives of ordinary Americans in the 1930s would today be more likely to work for cable news or make film documentaries, like many observers who reported from New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. But the documentary aesthetic also contributes to the gritty realism of indie cinema, which puts its emphasis on the problems of ordinary people and places a premium on empathy and authenticity. Indie cinema has recently produced superbly underplayed yet moving small films like Kelly Reichardt's *Old Joy* (2006) and *Wendy and Lucy* (2008) and Courtney Hunt's *Frozen River* (2008). With their characters living so close to the edge, these films could easily be mistaken for Depression movies, the kind the Depression itself only occasionally brought forth.

Instead, the cliché about the arts enshrined in movies from *Stand Up and Cheer!* to Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo* is that hard times demand lighter fare as people look to escape their troubles. For tomorrow's television viewers we can safely predict a glut of upholstered period and costume dramas, such as this year's Jane Austen and Agatha Christie adaptations on *Masterpiece Theatre*, as well as game shows, talent competitions, and reality shows, which are cheap to produce and which satisfy the audience's hunger for sudden changes in fame and fortune. Only this desire can explain the worldwide fascination with the dowdy Susan Boyle on *Britain's Got Talent*, whose instant stardom caught fire on the Internet. Much to the delight of her audience and the media, she was catapulted from anonymity to fame to nervous breakdown in record time.
The current recession has speeded up changes in American life that were long in motion, such as the loss of industrial jobs, and it has derailed other trends, including the growth of the financial services industry. This year's college graduates worry about finding any job at all; young couples wonder whether they can afford to buy a home; people in their 40s and 50s, unemployed for the first time, are concerned about holding on to their homes, which may now be worth less than their mortgage; and those at or near retirement age watch the shrinkage of their pensions or savings and decide to go on working. Meanwhile, as America goes more deeply into debt, its power and economic position in the world shrink, as do the options of individual Americans. This is great material, the developing saga of our daily lives, but it will take a keen imagination and great powers of empat`hy to make sense of it and turn it into art, as Depression writers, artists, and entertainers so triumphantly did.

Morris Dickstein is Distinguished Professor of English and Theatre at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. His new book, Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression, has just been published.