

Music to get you through your next depression

As we plunge ever deeper into the cost of living crisis and inflation rises to 10%, how do our music tastes compare with those who lived through the worst economic crisis in modern history? The great depression. But does the music of then, hold any relevance to our situation in 2023?

1929. There isn't a penny in your pocket or a job for miles and things can feel pretty rough. You'll become a criminal and drown your sorrows in the bootleg shine of a speakeasy. Dancing amongst the clouds of cigarette smoke to the sorrows of the bluesman sitting in the corner plucking at his six-string. Then on the radio, you'll get to hear the big bands swing, and a fella belting out a tune. You just know he has a slick back head of hair and a suit sharp enough to cut steel. It's a hell of a show. It might be just enough to forget where you are for a minute. In that sense, despite the great depression, 1929 seems a hell of a lot better than 2023.

After the disaster of Brexit, years of Tory austerity, a European war and an ever-worsening cost of living crisis the Tories released a budget that sent inflation soaring, flushed £800 billion down the toilet and left doctors at food banks, nurses on strike and footballers feeding your kids. But when you turn on the radio you are blessed with the latest TikTok dance song or Cardi B master class in innuendo. A selection with questionable relevance to the financially embattled.

The great depression started with the 1929 stock market crash, leading to the worst economic downturn in history. Today unemployment in the UK is 3.8% and never exceeds 5% and if it did, we would be talking of an economic apocalypse. In America, for every 1 % unemployment goes up 40000 people die. During the Depression, unemployment reached heights of almost 25% and for those lucky enough to find work, wages fell by 42.5% between 1929 and 1933. This meant a lot of people across the country had to make significant changes and live a much cheaper life. (Sound familiar?) Yet music still had a huge impact.

John Kenrick is a music historian, an expert in musical theatre and creator of [Musicals101.com](https://musicals101.com), and the author of the textbook *Musical Theatre: A History*.

"More people were looking for something to get them through the day. Remember, this was the era, the thirties and forties, of the swing bands, so you wanted songs that could be danced to." he says.

"Then also jukeboxes were showing up during the Depression, and you wanted people plunking their nickels in, listening to your number, and dancing.

"During the great depression, a song was one thing you could still afford."

In the 1930s the entertainment industry was one of the few profitable businesses and produced high-earning stars, like Bing Crosby, giving rise to a new type of performer called the crooner.

Many of the popular songs reeked of classic American optimism and were very upbeat in hopes of getting people to forget the troubles of the depression for a short moment. Like Harold Arlen's "Forget your troubles. Come on, get happy, now," or 'We're gonna chase all your cares away.' But others had a more cynical tone.

"The singer, Eddie Cantor had a song that went, '*Potatoes are cheaper, tomatoes too. Now is the time to fall in love.*' It's still optimistic, but you know that you know, that it's at least got a wink in it of, oh, well if potatoes are cheap, you can afford to get married. Yeah, right." Says, John.

"And then there were the songs that really went for the jugular and dealt with the dark side of it."

Brother, can you spare a dime? Written for a Broadway show by Yip Harburg a man who would not long afterwards write the songs for The Wizard of Oz, is possibly the most definitive song of the Depression and truly embodied the nation's disenchantment and the harsh realities of the financial landscape.

"You know, once I built a railroad, made it run. Once I built a skyscraper. Now brother, can you spare a dime?"

The song highlighted how Americans who had spent years working hard for their country and helped create the technical innovation and economic indulgence of the Roaring 20s when national wealth had doubled, all suddenly lost their jobs and felt abandoned by their government.

"What we're experiencing here in America in 2023 is you can't get people to take those crap jobs that pay crap. Well back then, imagine what it would be like to have 30% unemployment." Says, John.

But although the big swing bands dominated fiscally thanks to radio, along the rural south there was the blues and folk to pass the time. Although the blues stemmed and mainly dealt with racial oppression faced by the rural black community which had been existing long before 1929, it was still popular during the Depression.

While some conflate the blues with slavery and oppression, music historian and author Elijah Wald reminds us, the blues was seen by most black people as 'sexy' and music to dance to and not just sorrowful melodies. Elijah believes blues music was very popular with young blacks for its escapism.

However, the delta blues of the 1930s could have a dark edge. It was characterised by its raw instrumentation and intense soulful vocals that conveyed feelings of pain, and an air of mysticism. The likes of, Robert Johnson, the man so desperate for success they say he sold his soul to the devil, 'the haunting murderer' Leadbelly or the soulful former preacher Son House captured these emotions through their sorrowful tunes, which became the sound of the Great Depression. As a result blues and folk music found a new audience and meaning, resonating with the thousands of people left destitute by the economic crash.

Elijah said: "There are people who when they are sad, want to hear sad music and they are people who, when they are sad, want to listen to happy music...I mean, the same person who goes out because they're feeling depressed and wants to go out dancing and have a good time, if they are still alone by one in the morning, may want to hear sad music"

But what does any of this mean for us in 2023? As we barely pay our bills and our financial situation ever worsens, can we look back at the music of yonder hoping for the same musical escape? It would appear that many of us already are.

“One thing that certainly is striking ... is the extent to which young people are attracted to older music,” Elijah says. “I mean, clearly when people aren't happy with their time and place, they're more likely to be interested in art that takes them to a different time and place, whether it be real or imaginary.”

Maybe there is a reason behind those mindless TikTok songs and the senseless debauchery. Maybe people are just trying to get through the day, and although it may not look like it now, who knows, a hundred years from now in the next depression maybe they'll look back at Cardi B to get them through it, because as John says:

“In good times or bad, it's the arts that make life viable. It's the arts that help bring joy at crucial times.”

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Interviews:

- *John Kenrick – found through his personal website (musicals101.com) and contacted via email- interview conducted via zoom on 12/04/2023 at 16:40*
- *Elijah Wald – found through his personal website (ElijahWald.com) and contacted via email- interview conducted via zoom on 02/04/2023 at 18:10*