



# **With Amusement for All: A History of American Popular Culture Since 1830**

*LeRoy Ashby*

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Popular culture is a central part of everyday life to many Americans. Personalities such as Elvis Presley, Oprah Winfrey, and Michael Jordan are more recognizable to many people than are most elected officials. *With Amusement for All* is the first comprehensive history of two centuries of mass entertainment in the United States, covering everything from the penny press to Playboy, the NBA to NASCAR, big band to hip hop, and other topics including film, comics, television, sports, dance, and music. Paying careful attention to matters of race, gender, class, technology, economics, and politics, LeRoy Ashby emphasizes the complex ways in which popular culture simultaneously reflects and transforms American culture, revealing that the world of entertainment constantly evolves as it tries to meet the demands of a diverse audience. Trends in popular entertainment often reveal the tensions between competing ideologies, appetites, and values in American society. For example, in the late nineteenth century, Americans embraced "self-made men" such as John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie: the celebrities of the day were circus tycoons P.T. Barnum and James A. Bailey, Wild West star "Buffalo Bill" Cody, professional baseball organizer Albert Spalding, and prizefighter John L. Sullivan. At the same time, however, several female performers challenged traditional notions of weak, frail Victorian women. Adah Isaacs Menken astonished crowds by wearing tights that made her appear nude while performing dangerous stunts on horseback, and the shows of the voluptuous burlesque group British Blondes often centered on provocative images of female sexual power and dominance. Ashby describes how history and politics frequently influence mainstream entertainment. When Native Americans, blacks, and other non-whites appeared in the nineteenth-century circuses and Wild West shows, it was often to perpetuate demeaning racial stereotypes -- crowds jeered Sitting Bull at Cody's shows. By the early twentieth century, however, black minstrel acts reveled in racial tensions, reinforcing stereotypes while at the same time satirizing them and mocking racist attitudes before a predominantly white audience. Decades later, Red Foxx and Richard Pryor's profane comedy routines changed American entertainment. The raw ethnic material of Pryor's short-lived television show led to a series of African-American sitcoms in the 1980s that presented common American experiences -- from family life to college life -- with black casts. Mainstream entertainment has often co-opted and sanitized fringe amusements in an ongoing process of redefining the cultural center and its boundaries. Social control and respectability vied with the bold, erotic, sensational, and surprising, as entrepreneurs sought to manipulate the vagaries of the market, control shifting public appetites, and capitalize on campaigns to protect public morals. Rock 'n Roll was one such fringe culture; in the 1950s, Elvis blurred gender norms with his androgynous style and challenged conventions of public decency with his sexually-charged performances. By the end of the 1960s, Bob Dylan introduced the social consciousness of folk music into the rock scene, and The Beatles embraced hippie counter-culture. Don McLean's 1971 anthem "American Pie" served as an epitaph for rock's political core, which had been replaced by the spectacle of hard rock acts such as Kiss and Alice Cooper. While Rock 'n Roll did not lose its ability to shock, in less than three decades it became part of the established order that it had originally sought to challenge. *With Amusement for All* provides the context to what Americans have done for fun since 1830, showing the reciprocal nature of the relationships between social, political, economic, and cultural forces and the way in which the entertainment world has reflected, refracted, or reinforced the values those forces represent in America.

## **With Amusement for All: A History of American Popular Culture Since 1830 Details**

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## **bigbonton says**

this book is perfect for me, social-economics, rather obscure history, why things "are", plus, it's not an easy read, I had to get my mind in gear by rereading paragraphs. Now my mush mind is back on track. Can't wait for the climatic conclusion, oh wait, it's nonfiction...

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## **Brian says**

I re-read this one for research. It was interesting reading it years later. At the time, I must just not have been very interested, and even when I started re-reading it, it took me a while to crack what he was saying. While I was pointed to theme of how mainstream culture takes something on the fringes of culture and cleaned it up while leaving enough of the edgy stuff in to sell, what really struck me this time was how it's basically a political history. Ashby is concerned with how the mainstream culture of America was governed by white, male, upper-class Protestants, which created interesting tensions with the purported American myth of equal opportunity and democratic self-determination. Ashby is always diagnosing how the people on the margins would defy or sell out to the mainstream or, in the best cases, would navigate a tightrope of not submitting while finding mass appeal and even changing stereotypes.

I can't say for sure, but I think Ashby is a liberal progressive who sees pop culture as helpfully breaking down the various barriers on the edge. I don't think it would spoil the book though, since he never rants about it, and he narrative is right in a lot of ways, even on the feminism bits (I agree that women have had the raw deal in a lot of cultures, even if I'm not happy with the workforce bit). Still, if there's any criticism I would now make of the book, it's that he gives short shrift to religious tensions. Surely Protestantism struggled through it's lack of hegemony in the fifties and sixties and that story is worth telling. Still, one hopes that Ashby is only the beginning of other long, sober, scholarly engagements of pop culture in the future.

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## **Chris says**

I still hear Ashby in the lecture hall every time I open this book. He was one of a kind. In 2008 I had the opportunity to sit in his office and explain how important he was in shaping my interest in history, as well as my trajectory within the field. His other books display good work, but this is the one his students will remember him for.

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## **Scott Wilson says**

Easily the most fun 648 pages I've read in a long time! I tell you what, if you want to read a history book that illuminates how people how we act, and react; and how we often rewrite history to suit our current needs, then this book gives you incredible bang for your reading buck.

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## **Son Tung says**

I chose to read this book because I was just wondering about all the pop culture around me: American, K/J-Pop and others. I have never seen any of my friends having this thought, they just blend in, just enjoy whatever fits their desires (or I really have small circle of friends). And I wonder what kind of entertainment older people enjoy, how much time they spend with it, and how all of that differs from millennials, 9x, 8x. And what kind of influence pop culture has on society and cultural perception.

For some questions, the author gives me more than I want or don't know I want, and for other questions I think I have to continue the quest of reading more.

This book is serious, it treats pop culture with facts and historical contexts (e.g. the emergence of certain kind of entertainment). Sometimes facts bored me out.

A common theme throughout the book: Pop culture is a product of change and also an agent of change, it both reflects and changes society, unite and divide, it can follow well worn path or invent new ones. At certain critical junctures like The Great Depression, WW2, 9/11, pop culture is constrained but at the same time it liberates. It is full of paradoxes and contradictions, reassuring or unsettling. It can act on basic human instincts or noble causes.

From personal experience, the last year was a year of intensive reading, maybe I have read more zealously than ever before. I noted how my preferences for certain kind of entertainment had changed and it is amazing. Certainly after spending time reading history, the horror of war, diseases, poverty... I was no longer interested in some forms of cheap entertainment I once indulged in. It is now I seek in pop culture what is still ambiguous or complex for human mind to comprehend.

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## **Lance Eaton says**

Ashby's mammoth text (700 pages long; 33+ hours of listening on audiobook) was a fascinating and excellent discussing of popular culture that was great in terms of timing as I listening to it just as I was revising my online Popular Culture in the US course (You can see the course preview [here](#) or the course playlist [here](#)). Ashby covers a whole lot of content, arenas of popular culture, and events within popular culture. But equally important, he ties it together well as he drifts in each chapter from sports to reading to radio to television to other arenas. In reading it, you get a much fuller sense of mesh of intersections within popular culture while also a framework for understanding how it connects to the culture at large and history. Now, I just need to find a way to integrate the book within my own course.

If you enjoyed this review, feel free to check out my other reviews and writings at **By Any Other Nerd** /

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## **Todd says**

An interesting look at the history of entertainment in the United States. Starting with the development of

circuses and burlesque style shows and eventually transforming into sports, radio, and TV. Along the way the impact of politics and religion are seen and felt on what constitutes moral and good family entertainment.

The most interesting part for me is the fact that nothing seems to change in regards to every generation of political and religious leaders warning about the dangers of (insert choice of entertainment) and the corruption it'll have on youth and families and the moral decay it'll bring. It is kind of funny to see Jazz music being treated in its day the same way Hip Hop music is being treated today.

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### **Peter Mcloughlin says**

Interesting and nuanced picture of the history of American pop culture with a three-dimensional depiction of its positive and negative aspects from about 1830 to about 2005. Talks about the multifaceted aspects of the culture industry keeping people in line, acting as an opiate in a cruel industrial world and often subverting the established order at the margins. Pop culture like all culture wears many hats. Sometimes clamping down and sometimes liberating or merely relieving the monotony of the lifecycle. Pop culture pulls in many directions at once as it is wont to do when it is alive.

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### **Melissa says**

A fantastic overview of popular culture in the last two centuries. He seems to lose focus in the most recent decades, but that's understandable, given that there hasn't been much time for the unimportant things to fade from memory.

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### **Allison says**

An interesting overview of American popular culture extending to sports, performing arts, and general diversions. I enjoyed Ashby's theory on how the political landscape informs pop culture, and how it makes us who we are as a people. It was a little long, a few parts dragged, but all things considered, an engaging read.

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### **Mike Maginot says**

About the only thing I didn't like about this history of pop culture was that the narrator of the audiobook frequently mispronounced words. For example, every time he said "lived", he pronounced it with a long "i". Otherwise, this volume covers a wealth of material, managing to be both informative and entertaining.

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### **Erin Hendrian says**

Though interesting, for some reason this book depressed me to no end. I guess the book was great, but pop culture just came out looking seedier and sadder until I loathed the sight of its optimistic mustard cover.

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### **Karl says**

A superb overview of American popular culture and how society both impacted and was impacted by that culture. At times I felt like I was back in Dr. Ashby's class on the subject. On a side note: I had an undergraduate professor who was a TA under Ashby. He talked about how Ashby had him reading through numerous comics, looking for certain themes. After reading this book I believe some of that research may have been included in it.

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### **Matthew Hurley says**

A magnificent survey of pop culture from the roots up. Critical reading for those who are to analyze the next generation of mass entertainment; it's a story unfinished, that begs further application.

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### **Jason says**

An exhaustive academic history of the ways in which the circus, minstrel shows, vaudeville, professional sports, film, radio, television and film have been characterized by conflicts between social classes, races and genders as well between moralists and boundary pushers, progressives and reactionaries, labor and management and groups with varying interests and values from early American history to the present. The book is full of valuable information and certainly encourages further reading on many subjects, but it's a bit too lengthy and complete to work particularly well as pleasure reading.

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