



THE ROARING TWENTIES

"SOMETIMES, though, there is a ghostly rumble among the drums, an asthmatic whisper in the trombones that swings me back into the early twenties when we drank wood alcohol and every day in every way grew better and better, and there was a first abortive shortening of the skirts, and girls all looked alike in sweater dresses, and people you didn't want to know said, 'Yes, we have no bananas,' and it seemed only a question of a few years before the older people would step aside and let the world be run by those who saw things as they were—and it all seems rosy and romantic to us who were young then, because we will never feel quite so intensely about our surroundings any more." That was Scott Fitzgerald, writing in 1931 when the decade of flaming youth had sputtered out like a match before the Wall Street hurricane. "Now once more," Fitzgerald wrote, "the belt is tight and we summon the proper expression of horror as we look back at our wasted youth."

Lately, however, the expression of horror has become rather less severe. Those about to enter the sere and yellow, are discovering, much to their surprise, that instead of having to apologise for growing up in the Roaring Twenties it has become something of a cachet—quaint, but in a way picturesque. Indeed, the cloche hat almost begins to look like a halo.

Beverly Nichols, talking about the Twenties from the BBC said, "The ideals of the Twenties—what we thought about Sex with a capital S, and War with a capital W—all these are coming under an almost embarrassing scrutiny. To have been one of the Bright Young People—as I suppose I must confess to have been—is today a positive responsibility. One feels as though one ought to have a Message tucked away somewhere in the attic."

Bearing no message, certainly, but in other respects sounding right out of the twenties themselves comes the ZB Sunday Showcase programme for August 12 (and 22A August 19). It is an original New York cast recording of the London and New York hit show, *The Boy Friend*, with book, music and lyrics by the young English playwright and composer Sandy Wilson. Stars of the show are Julie Andrews, a 20-year-old soprano, who is currently the toast of Broadway as Eliza in *My Fair Lady*, the musical version of Shaw's *Pygmalion*, and John Hewer. The orchestra is that of Paul McGrane and

his Bearcats, and their orchestrations (by Ted Royal and Charles L. Cooke) are incredibly clever parody of all those worn 78s most families who ever cranked a gramophone still cherish. *The Boy Friend* music will be introduced by a graduate *cum laude* of the twenties, A. R. D. Fairburn, of Auckland, who will tell, among other things, of how he was carried off the field after the Charleston with a pulled leg-muscle and what happened when he took his current girlfriend for a spin on his motor-cycle.

Those expressions "girl friend" and "boy friend," now so familiar, date from the twenties, and when you come to look at them, they tell you more than you might think about the period. It was the age when young people came into their own, hence "girl" and "boy," and even "baby," as a term of endearment. Their elders had, they felt, been responsible for the war and for all the troubles of the times. Youth must have its chance, and, if you were no longer young, then you simply went at it as if you were. Women of sixty poured themselves through tubular dresses which only the young and boyish-figured could get away with, and even for them it was a triumph of charm over Chanel. Hair was eroded from the "bob" to the shingle and Eton crop, and under the ubiquitous cloche hat it disappeared altogether. Men's dress abandoned the formalities of the frock coat and morning dress, and the comfortable, though standardised lounge suit reflected the easier, freer life of the new age. Remember, though, those Oxford bags, flannel trousers with a billowing width of leg which came in, abruptly, at the whim of Oxford undergraduates in 1925. For week-end and holiday wear the tweed jacket and flannel trousers outfit came into fashion and is still with us. Sports clothes for women were progressively raising eyebrows, with the tennis champions at Wimbledon first discarding stockings, then shortening skirts, going into pleated skirts, then shorts. What happened to bathing suits? They shrank, whether or no they ever got wet.

Ah, the banjos on the beach, the fast cars, the night clubs, the back-to-childhood parties! What a wonderful fling life was—for a small section of society. Underneath it all, however, one suspects that the bank clerks went on banking, the housewife went on cleaning, pretty much as they had always done.

Though we can laugh at the twenties now for their superficial oddities, in many ways they have influenced us a great deal. They danced on the remains



H. L. MENCKEN
"A ribald and endless show"

of a shattered society, at first in confidence, then in defiance of a world that, half-unconsciously, they must have felt was growing up no better than it ought to be. At least, as Fitzgerald, who spoke for the twenties better than anyone else, noticed "we will never feel quite so intensely about our surroundings any more." It was a time of hysteria and extremes of conduct, with America in particular having a high old time under Prohibition.

Herbert Hoover called Prohibition "an experiment noble in purpose." Perhaps it was, but in practice it had some odd



SANDY WILSON

consequences. Of it Heywood Brown, the notable *New Yorker* writer and playwright, wrote: "In praise of Prohibition, it furthered the amenities as well as the hazards of drinking." E. B. White, another *New Yorker* humorist, suggested that the Government take over the speak-easies: "In that manner the citizenry would be assured liquor of a uniformly high quality, and the enormous cost of dry enforcement could be met by the profits from the sale of drinks."

Bath-tub gin and its unnameable variants went hand in hand with a vast increase in organised crime. Gangsters and bootleggers made their fortunes. Sherwood Anderson commented on the effect of bootleg liquor on American taste. The drinking of liquor of dubious origin, he maintained, would help the general degeneration of American taste in all other matters.

But America was America and Prohibition and its problems were happily confined to the States. In another way, American influence penetrated the world's consciousness, and that was through the cinema. Flickering shadows on the screen made the whole world kin as never before. Clara Bow spread the gospel of "It," and an Italian called Rudolph Alfonzo Raffaele Pierre Filibert Guglielmi di Valentina d'Antonguolla became the hero of millions of women as Rudolph Valentino. His funeral in 1927 was a carnival of the kind of press-agentry for which the twenties became famous. The lying in state attracted a crowd which stretched down eleven blocks, due largely to the undertaker's press agent having distributed photographs in advance to all the newspapers. A posed photograph of the funeral cortege was on the streets in one paper before the procession had even started.

Though we may laugh or gasp at such manifestations of life in the twenties, it must be remembered that they also criticised themselves enormously. Consider Eliot's *The Waste Land* and H. L. Mencken's scathing portrait of the democratic man which impressed itself on the twenties' conscience perhaps more deeply than any other notion of the period, with the possible exception of Fitzgerald's "flapper." "If democracy has any genuine merit," said Mencken, "it is the merit and virtue of being continuously amusing, of offering the plain people a ribald and endless show."



JULIE ANDREWS

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