



With Amusement for All: A History of American Popular Culture since 1830

By 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.

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Editorial Review

Review

"No single author has tackled popular culture with so much breadth and depth and managed to strike a balance between the popular and scholarly approaches. Ashby's absorbing and hugely informative study will appeal to a wide audience. Highly recommended."?Library Journal (starred review)"

"When regarding this book's comprehensiveness, the richness of its detail, and the strength of its interpretation of the specifics of popular culture, I stand in awe. What an achievement! Majestic!"?Benjamin G. Rader, author of *Baseball: A History of America's Game*"

"This intelligent, energetic book has the ability to appeal to historians and scholars without distancing the general reader. The easy linear narrative is punctuated by songs, comic anecdotes, and rich descriptions that bring each era to life."?Charleston Post and Courier"

"Ashby has given us a fine new book. They say in baseball, 'it's hard to tell the players without a scorecard.' With Amusement for All will be the new scorecard for anyone interested in the study of popular culture. The book is both comprehensive and smart, a fine combination of surveying the terrain then saying intelligent things about it. Ashby has rendered an invaluable service."?Elliott Gorn, co-author of *A Brief History of American Sports*"

"American popular culture isn't a distraction from the serious issues of our time. It is inseparable from them. . . . Researches events ranging from Wild West shows to Janet Jackson's wardrobe malfunctions during the 2004 Super Bowl."?Lewiston Tribune"

"Combines being a remarkably quixotic endeavor with being something of a monumental achievement of scholarship and pure perseverance."?Belles Lettres"Belles Lettres

"I know of no other book that provides the same kind of documented, engaging, and lively narrative about American popular culture as *With Amusement for All*."?Michael Allen, author of *Rodeo Cowboys in the North American Imagination*"

"It is not taken for granted that Super Bowls and reality talent shows are discussed around water coolers everywhere the morning after they occur. What should be more common is the use of such entertainment supernovas by historians interested in understanding what makes American culture tick. Thanks to Ashby's fascinating book, this task has become substantially easier."?Pacific Northwest Quarterly"

"The author skilfully quotes appropriate anecdotes and gives us fine, brief descriptions of some of the personalities of the day. . . . Well and fluently written and pleasant to read, and offers a good summary of a whole lot of material about popular culture."?Early Popular Visual Culture"

"Without question, the author...has researched and written a masterpiece. The book is a tour de force in its field and has made popular culture?once thought to be a frivolous area for academic study?a serious field of inquiry."?USA Today"

"LeRoy Ashby draws on the substantial volume of historical scholarship on American popular culture produced since the 1970s to present a survey of impressive breadth on two centuries of American

amusements." *Journal of American History*"

"You'll enjoy this fascinating and massively researched volume on how Americans have amused themselves and how it changed the world." –*WTBF Radio*"

"In *With Amusement for All*, one will find a wide variety of entertainment venues - radio, television, music, sports, movies and the internet; from P.T. Barnum's "bunkum" to Sheldon Cooper's "hokum", it is all here, presented in an informative, entertaining narrative. ? *The Past in Review*" *The Past in Review*

About the Author

LeRoy Ashby is Regents Professor and Claudius O. and Mary Johnson Distinguished Professor of History at Washington State University. He is the author of several books, including *Fighting the Odds: The Life of Senator Frank Church* and *Endangered Children: Dependency, Neglect, and Abuse in American History*.

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