

## 1900s: Music



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Music was an immensely popular form of entertainment in America in the first decade of the century, though not in the same way it is today. Americans did not buy prerecorded records or CDs and play them on stereo equipment. Instead, most American popular music was produced in the home, most likely on a piano, from sheet music purchased from one of many sheet music companies.

Most music was produced by amateurs for small audiences of family and friends, but music was also a developing form in this decade. In fact, this was a decade of vibrant musical production. The sheet music publishing industry was centered in a district of [New York](/places/united-states-and-canada/us-political-geography/new-york) City known as [Tin Pan Alley](/literature-and-arts/performing-arts/music-history/tin-pan-alley), where skilled musicians composed popular music to sell to the masses. Between 1900 and 1909, nearly one hundred of the [Tin Pan Alley](/literature-and-arts/performing-arts/music-history/tin-pan-alley) songs had sold more than one million copies of sheet music. Ragtime music was one of the most popular forms of sheet music, and the king of ragtime was an African American named [Scott Joplin](/people/literature-and-arts/music-popular-and-jazz-biographies/scott-joplin) (c. 1867–1917). [African Americans](/history/united-states-and-canada/us-history/african-americans) as a whole fared better in the field of music than they did elsewhere in American popular culture in the decade. [Bert Williams](/people/literature-and-arts/theater-biographies/bert-williams) (1875–1922), [George Walker](/people/history/british-and-irish-history-biographies/george-walker) (1873–1911), Bob Cole (1868–1911), and the Johnson Brothers (J. Rosamond, 1873–1954; James Weldon, 1871–1938) were among the most successful composers of the decade.

Two of the most important American musical forms trace their roots to this decade. Performers W. C. Handy (1873–1958) and [Ma Rainey](/people/literature-and-arts/music-popular-and-jazz-biographies/ma-rainey) (1886–1939) published and performed the first songs recognized as the blues in this decade. Jazz originated in [New Orleans](/places/united-states-and-canada/us-political-geography/new-orleans), Louisiana, out of music that combined the

rhythms of blues, ragtime, and other musical forms. Both blues and jazz emerged as uniquely American music forms in the 1920s, and some of the earliest and greatest practitioners of these forms were [African Americans \(/history/united-states-and-canada/us-history/african-americans\)](/history/united-states-and-canada/us-history/african-americans).

Thomas Edison (1847–1931) invented the phonograph in 1877, a device that could play music that had been recorded on a metal cylinder. Other phonographs, first called gramophones, played music recorded on a vinyl disc. The first recordings to be sold to a wide audience were recorded in 1902 by opera singer [Enrico Caruso \(/people/literature-and-arts/music-history-composers-and-performers-biographies/enrico-caruso\)](/people/literature-and-arts/music-history-composers-and-performers-biographies/enrico-caruso) (1873–1921). Soon, other opera and concert singers began recording their songs. More popular singers began to record songs, but their recordings did not become a mass phenomena until the 1910s, when recording companies improved their manufacturing and marketing systems.

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