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# High Spirits At Low Ebb

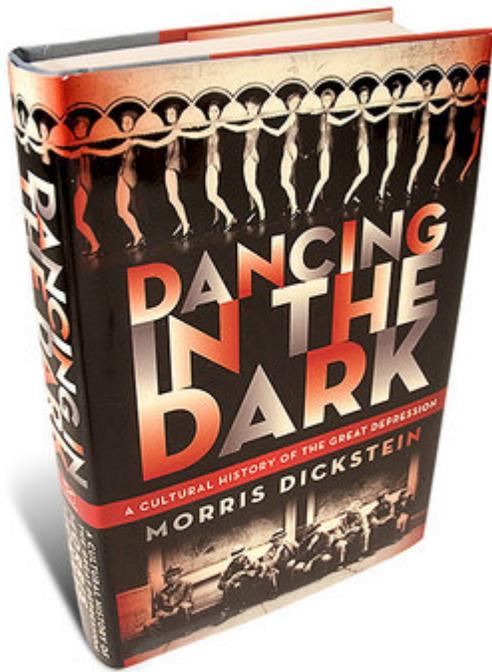
## The meaning of Depression-era movies, songs and novels.

By [ROBERT K. LANDERS](#)

'Think of the sheer lunacy of Hepburn and Grant singing 'I can't give you anything but love' to a leopard on someone else's roof," Morris Dickstein writes in "Dancing in the Dark." He is referring to a scene in "Bringing Up Baby" (1938), one of the screwball screen comedies popular during the Depression.

"The zany freedom of their behavior," Mr. Dickstein continues, "is made possible by money but also by energy, spirit, insouciance, and independence, qualities with which their hard-pressed audience was quick to identify; this was the wild beast missing from their own lives." Many creative spirits in the arts, he says, displayed similar qualities in the 1930s. They reacted to the Depression with "a burst of energy, lightness, and motion," akin in its effect to the morale-boosting of the New Deal.

If that seems like a heavy burden of meaning for a single lightweight comedy to carry, be assured that Mr. Dickstein cites many more examples of Depression-era culture to help carry the load. He offers fluent interpretations of other screwball comedies ("My Man Godfrey"); gangster films ("Scarface"); backstage show-biz movies ("42nd Street"); the plaintive songs that Bing Crosby sang ("Dancing in the Dark"), the sophisticated songs that Cole Porter wrote ("You're the Top"), and much else, including the novels and poetry of the period. More than escape was on offer to Americans then. Throughout "Dancing in the Dark," Mr. Dickstein plausibly draws out the popular culture's hidden links to "the real concerns of the beleaguered audience."



## **Dancing in the Dark**

*By Morris Dickstein*

Norton, 598 pages, \$29.95

The specter of poverty was the major concern, of course. It led Americans to rediscover the poor (recasting them in a heroic light), and it brought "the American Dream" into use as a phrase and into question as a concept. The result in the arts, Mr. Dickstein writes, was "a fascination with success and failure, highlighting the insecurities of the middle class." When economic recovery proved elusive in the early 1930s, "a dream of elegance, a longing for ease and motion, took the place of the dream of success." By mid-decade, he says, a momentous shift had taken place. Individual enterprise, as an ideal, had given way to "a new faith in planning and government" and a new interest in The People. New Deal programs delivered a "message of solidarity," Mr. Dickstein asserts, and so, critically, did "the ideals of the Popular Front."

The Popular Front turns out to be a mainstay of "Dancing in the Dark." Mr. Dickstein is full of admiration for it and what it did for American culture—and he engages in some fancy footwork to put it in the best possible light. He explains on pages 124-25 that the Popular Front arose in 1935 when the world-wide Communist movement relaxed its militantly revolutionary stance and American Communists sought to work with liberals and New Dealers. Only much later—more than 300 pages later—does Mr. Dickstein reveal that this change in position happened "on a signal from Moscow." The Soviet Union wanted "a Popular Front of all 'progressive' forces against the rise of fascism." The unstated reason: Soviet self-interest. Mr. Dickstein never mentions that Moscow had originally *welcomed* the rise of Hitler as a prelude to revolution, and

now, belatedly fearing him, was seeking to win over as allies the very bourgeois governments it had previously sought to overthrow.

As for the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Pact, which effectively ended the Popular Front in the U.S., Mr. Dickstein mentions it only once (on page 500) and then only in passing, in a discussion of troubadour Woody Guthrie: "A perverseness drew him even closer to the Communists after the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939, just when so many others were abandoning ship." Skipping over the two years in which the Communists were allied with the Nazis, Mr. Dickstein treats the second popular front—brought on by the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 and the U.S. wartime alliance with the Soviets—as if it were an uninterrupted continuation of the first. Thus Guthrie, he writes, "stuck with the [American Communist] party after the fall of its general secretary, Earl Browder, in 1945, which signaled the end of the Popular Front."

Mr. Dickstein's enthusiasm for the Popular Front skews his consideration of the serious literature of the 1930s. In 1938, the critic Lionel Trilling pronounced John Dos Passos's "U.S.A." trilogy (1930-36) the most important novel of the decade; though now fallen from critical favor, it may still deserve that accolade. Mr. Dickstein calls the "U.S.A." trilogy "great" but gives it only cursory treatment. Dos Passos, once a favorite of the Communists, became utterly disillusioned with communism after returning from Spain in 1937. Mr. Dickstein gives more space to another "great" Depression-era trilogy, James T. Farrell's "Studs Lonigan" (1935). But he dismisses Farrell's later novels and ignores his rebellion against the Communists in 1936, when the Stalin show trials began.

For Mr. Dickstein the fellow-traveling John Steinbeck, not Dos Passos, is "the representative writer" of the 1930s, because of "his more direct approach to social protest in 'The Grapes of Wrath' " (1939). The critic Edmund Wilson once called Steinbeck's famous book a "propaganda novel." But, according to Mr. Dickstein, it displays "the best . . . of the Popular Front sensibility."

At the behest of a foreign power, Communists in the Popular Front pretended to be liberals ("liberals in a hurry"), and liberals, for the most part, foolishly went along with the pretense. Heavyweights such as Dos Passos and Farrell turned against the party, but some talented artists, like Aaron Copland and Budd Schulberg, remained in its thrall. They did indeed make important contributions to American culture—but they probably would have done so anyway, even had there been no Popular Front. To believe, as Mr. Dickstein seems to, that the Communist Party had a vital, salutary effect on American life in the 1930s really is to be dancing in the dark.

**Mr. Landers is the author of "An Honest Writer: The Life and Times of James T. Farrell."**

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