

The Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance began in 1919, but the forces that created it began with the outbreak of war in Europe. While on tour, black soldiers came in contact with others from various imperial systems throughout the world; from the resulting ideals, they built organizations through which Pan Africanism might be a counterbalancing force against the apparently crumbling colonial empires. Already, in New York, Marcus Garvey was drawing huge crowds denouncing the imperialist white man and calling on the black man to return to Africa and build an African empire. Many paid little heed to "Garveyism," but there was an undeniable movement afoot as witnessed in the writing of W. E. B. Du Bois in black magazines like *Crisis* and *The Messenger*. Most importantly, these articles ushered in the era of the "New Negro". Although black political radicalism subsided with the Armistice, the "New Negro" lived on. The Harlem Renaissance was a channeling of energy from political and social criticism into poetry, fiction, music and art.

Black artists, such as Langston Hughes and Aaron Douglas, struggled to define the "New Negro" by examining the past. Most of the artistic work of the Harlem Renaissance resonates such themes and questions. The music and dances of black artists had long been at the forefront of American entertainment. Black music and theater had an openness, an exuberance, and freshness which no other American expression of the time had. The Blues, Ragtime, and its offshoot Jazz, could be heard in Harlem clubs at all hours of the night, with Bessie Smith, Eubie Blake, and Duke Ellington presiding. The 1921 musical revue, "Shuffle Along," written by Blake was the toast of the town and included in the chorus an as yet unknown Josephine Baker, soon to be a star of international fame. Paul Robeson was the favorite star of theater and film. The black man was in vogue.

White people came to Harlem in droves, and to play at the Apollo became the ultimate token of recognition for black performers. Some of the owners of Harlem clubs, delighted at the flood of white patrons, made the grievous error of barring their own race, after the manner of the famous Cotton Club, the Apollo and Lafayette Theatres, and Connie's Inn. But most quickly lost business and folded up, because they failed to realize that a large part of the attraction of Harlem night spots lay in simply watching the black clientele.

And, the Harlem Renaissance was not confined to New York alone, or for that matter, to the U.S. It stretched from coast to coast, and many black performers toured Europe, as well. The cover shown here is actually from a California club of the era which featured Harlem reviews.

The stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression brought an end to the Harlem Renaissance. The black man, at the height of his popularity, became the first to be sacrificed to unemployment and starvation. The Depression made the Harlem Renaissance, with its spirit of play and optimism, seem strange and naive. But the Harlem Renaissance did bring into focus, with sharper intensity than ever before, the consciousness and reality of the African American struggle for self-realization, and it launched the careers of a number of now-classic black stars.

[We'll be looking at New York's Cotton Club in a future article]

