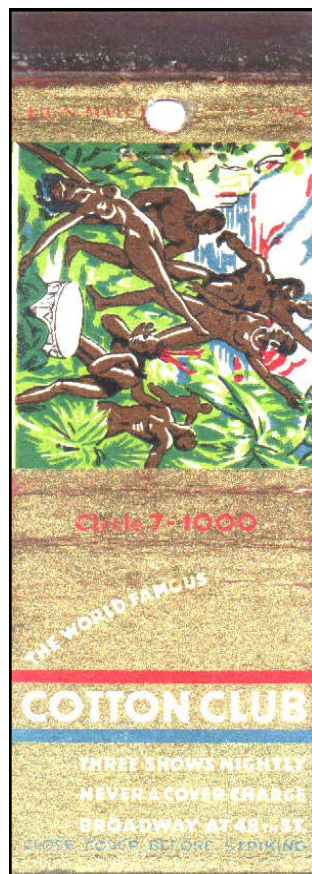
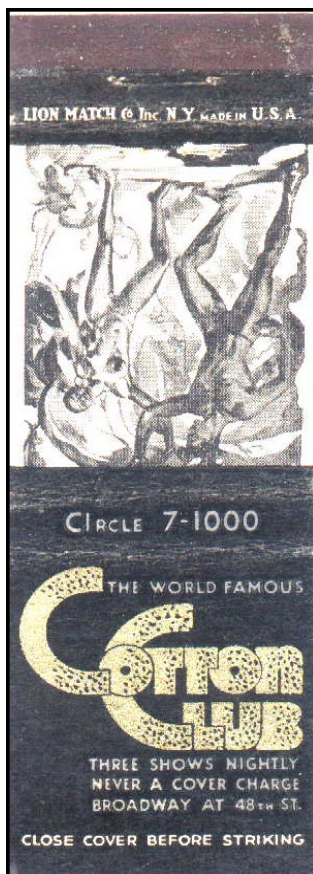


# Harlem Renaissance

*In 1999, I ran an article that touched on the Harlem Renaissance (I think it was on the Cotton Club). It sparked my interest to delve deeper.*

The Harlem Renaissance began in 1919, but the forces that created it began with the outbreak of war in Europe. The United States was called upon to manufacture munitions and other supplies for the war effort. Many immigrant laborers had returned to fight in their native lands and the war halted the flow of new immigrants. The shortage of workers was filled by the reservoir of black laborers in the South and travel subsidies from industries in dire need of manpower made possible a wholesale migration of over a million and a half black people from the rural south to the industrial north. Many, including 50 thousand blacks from the West Indies, settled in Harlem.

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

# Revisited

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.

Two nightclubs stand out in 1930's Harlem: The Cotton Club and Connie's Inn. They featured a pricey attraction for white New Yorkers, intimidated by Harlem's grittier side. The original Cotton Club opened in 1923. It remains the largest, most extravagant club in Harlem's history.

The name "Cotton Club" was conceived by the original owner, mobster Owney Madden, from the light brown color of raw cotton. Madden hoped to cash in on the growing Harlem music scene, featuring "Black" entertainment for an upscale white audience. Madden demanded the girls on his chorus line be "cotton colored," or light-skinned Blacks. Despite the fact that few Harlemites could afford the Cotton Club, it allowed the genius of a generation of Black performers to flourish. The house band, led by the stylish and gifted young composer Duke Ellington, debuted such Swing masterpieces as *It Don't Mean A Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)*, *Mood Indigo* and *Take The 'A' Train* to an enthralled audience.

As entertainment went underground with Prohibition, jazz flourished in the Big Apple. Harlem, especially, was the cauldron in which many new ideas boiled over: Cab Calloway charmed the Cotton Club, Duke Ellington's band moved from the jungle sound to jazz oratorios, Lionel Hampton experimented with new rhythms. To play at the Apollo was the ultimate token of recognition. Until the Cotton Club moved downtown to 48th Street after Prohibition ended, virtually every major Black artist in big band and jazz history had graced its stage. Celebrated jazz singer Lena Horne began her career at the Cotton Club in Harlem when she was only 16 years old. Her first show there headlined Cab Calloway and his band.

The stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression brought an end to the Harlem Renaissance. One reviewer noted, "The black man, at the height of his popularity, became the first to be sacrificed to unemployment and starvation." That's awfully pandering, in my humble opinion, but the white support for the black revival was an 'extra', and the Depression was not a time for extras. Indeed, 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.

