



# AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE ARTS

## THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE



# A CULTURAL EXPLOSION

After the Great Migration of African Americans from rural to urban areas, concerted efforts were made to uplift the African American community and provide new socioeconomic opportunities. Harlem emerged as a symbolic capital and cultural hub for Black Americans, fostering artistic experimentation and becoming a popular nightlife destination. Its strategic location in the communications capital of North America facilitated visibility and publication opportunities for the "New Negroes" that were not readily available elsewhere.

The Harlem Renaissance was a transformative period in the arts, showcasing the talents of African American artists, writers, musicians, and thinkers. Harlem emerged as a vibrant cultural center, attracting talent from across the nation and sparking a renaissance across various artistic disciplines. Literature, led by Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, and Countee Cullen, celebrated African American culture, grappled with themes of racial identity and discrimination, and catalyzed social change. Simultaneously, jazz and blues thrived, with iconic musicians like Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, and Cab Calloway shaping American music. Visual arts also flourished, with artists like Aaron Douglas, Jacob Lawrence, and Augusta Savage depicting scenes from Harlem, celebrating themes of pride and empowerment. Their works continue to influence and inspire generations of artists today.

Art and Culture: "Creating a space for the Black Voice"



Bessie Smith was known as the "Empress of the Blues."



Countee Cullen's contributions through his poetry and advocacy for racial equality, profoundly enriched African American cultural expression.

The Harlem Renaissance:  
A Brief History



# THE COTTON CLUB

This renowned Harlem nightspot featured prominent Black entertainers like Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway performing for white audiences. Initially named Club Deluxe and opened by Jack Johnson, the first African American heavyweight boxing champion, in 1920, it was later taken over by Owen ("Owney") Madden, a well-known figure in Manhattan's underworld. Madden transformed the club into Harlem's most popular cabaret, with nightly performances by renowned chorus lines, catering exclusively to white patrons.

Duke Ellington's orchestra, hired as the house band in 1927, contributed hits like "Mood Indigo." Cab Calloway and his orchestra took over in 1931. Despite its initial success, the Cotton Club faced decline after the Harlem riots of 1935 and closed in 1940. Its name has since been adopted by nightclubs worldwide, including a re-creation in Harlem in 1978. The club's story has been immortalized in notable films like Francis Ford Coppola's "The Cotton Club" (1984) and Ken Burns's documentary "Jazz" (2001).



The Cotton Club, at 142nd Street and Lenox Ave in Harlem, was one of the most successful nightlife venues of the period.



Duke Ellington was a frequent performer at the Cotton Club, alongside singer, dancer and bandleader Cab Calloway.



Dancers performing on stage at the Cotton Club.





WANT TO LEARN MORE?



Join Clint Smith, author of "How the Word is Passed," for a crash course on "Arts and Letters of the Harlem Renaissance: Crash Course Black American History #26"

In this episode, explore some of the writers, artists, and musicians who turned Harlem into a world-renowned hub of art and culture, and delve into the factors that brought them all together in the first place.

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