

Life Beyond Entertaining

The Harlem Renaissance was an African American surge of literature, music and arts during the 1920s and 30s. Partially the result of the Great Migration, where African Americans moved from the Jim Crow South to northern cities such as New York and Chicago in search of better opportunities, the movement sought to reconceptualize African Americans from the stereotypes inflicted on them and to celebrate their culture and talent. The Renaissance cultivated authors like Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, artists such as Augusta Fells Savage and Romare Bearden, and brought the New Orleans jazz sound to the north – and introduced all to a white audience.

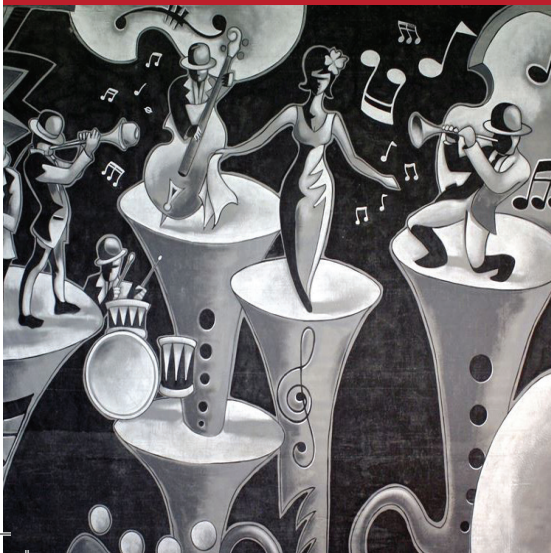
The best of humanity's recorded history is a creative balance between horrors endured and victories achieved, and so it was during the Harlem Renaissance.

– Aberjhani

The prominent nightclub the Cotton Club lured white audiences up to Harlem to enjoy the legendary performances of black entertainers. However, owned by a white gangster, decorated to evoke a southern plantation, and barring African American customers, it presented a manufactured experience to its white upper-class audiences. Although it was stereotyped entertainment, for the first time these audiences were exposed to the genius of black artists such as Duke Ellington, Fats Waller, Lena Horne, Ethel Waters, Cab Calloway and many others – and made them huge stars.

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whites-only hotels and restaurants. When Louis Armstrong returned to his birthplace of New Orleans – despite being the first African American featured on the cover of *Time* magazine and greeted with a hero's welcome – he couldn't walk through the front door of the venue he sold out.

But the artists were also met with acclaim, and they rose above the injustice. Bessie Smith confronted and chased away the KKK members. Rather than suffer the indignity of being denied service, Duke Ellington arranged for private Pullman cars for the entire band. Louis Armstrong transformed Fats Waller's song "Black and Blue" into a scathing commentary of being black in America – using his immense popularity and the rhythms of jazz to describe the African American experience for his large following – black and white.

The music of jazz brought the black experience and black excellence to a white audience and pressed an acknowledgement of their talent and humanity. The Harlem Renaissance's prolific greatness and widespread appeal challenged social attitudes, laying the way to the inevitability of integration and the Civil Rights Movement. While the country in the 1930s was still heavily segregated and jazz musicians like Louis Armstrong and Bix Beiderbecke couldn't perform together publicly, they admired each other's talents and would jam in private. It wasn't a scandal when there was interracial dancing at the Savoy ballroom in Harlem. Fats Waller wrote the first Broadway musical by an African American whose plot and cast were multi-racial – *Early to Bed* – and it was a big hit. And although his compositions were heavily inspired by the African American experience, Duke Ellington refused to be categorized, saying the language of music was that of breaking down barriers and bringing people together. That the exposure of the music would change the perception of race and what it means to be American – and it was a rich, vibrant, and dissonant sound.