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**“I Got the Feelin’”: The Apollo Theater**



# A Historical Synopsis

Many years later, we’re still enjoying jazz icons like Ella Fitzgerald and Duke Ellington. So, what has made jazz such a special genre that can endure the test of time? For me, jazz music is all about the feeling it gives the listener. If I close my eyes tight enough, I feel like I have transcended time for a split second. So naturally, I wanted to learn more, something that might further bring the music to life; visiting The Apollo Theater in Harlem seemed like the perfect place to begin this task.

Although now The Apollo Theater is an icon for African-American culture, it did not begin like this. The neoclassical Apollo Theater was designed by George Keister and owned by Sidney Cohen. In 1914, the theater opened its doors for the first time as “Hurtig & Seamon’s New Burlesque Theater”. Benjamin Hurtig and Harry Seamon certified a thirty-year lease for the theater, where the only allowed white people to attend and perform. In 1933, Fiorello La Guardia, who would go on to be the mayor of New York City, fought to ban burlesque and successfully closed Hurtig & Seamon’s Theater. Cohen and his partner Morris Sussman reopened the theater as the 125th Street Apollo Theatre. Cohen and Sussman, who served as the theater manager, modified the burlesque format to focus on shows that would draw in the growing African- American population in and around Harlem. (Apollo History) The opening show at the Apollo was Jazz a la Carte, featuring Benny Carter's big-band. This cemented the Apollo Theater’s role in Harlem as a centrally African-American venue (Altman). The theater changed hands in 1935 when Frank Schiffman and Leo Brecher took over. Their families maintained the theater until the late 1970s. The theater opened and then closed again in 1978 under new unsuccessful management. Percy Sutton, a well-to-do lawyer,

politician, media and technology executive, and a group of private investors bought the theater in 1981. The theater was adapted into a television and recording studio, where James Brown , “the Godfather of Soul”, famously recorded his album “Live at the Apollo!” A couple of years later The Apollo Theater was dubbed a state and city landmark. In 1991, a non-profit organization called the Apollo Theater Foundation, Inc., was created. Today, the Apollo Theater serves as a pillar of the community and a symbol for American music. The Apollo Theater helped popularize jazz, swing, bebop, R&B, gospel, blues, and soul. Icons in their respective genres, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Billie Holiday, Sammy Davis Jr., James Brown, Bill Cosby, Gladys Knight, Luther Vandross, D’Angelo, and Lauryn Hill (among many others) all began their careers at The Apollo Theater (Apollo History).

# Amateur Night at The Apollo

Amateur Night at The Apollo was as glamorous as it sounds. Walking out of the subway station on 125th Street and seeing the red lights spell out A-P-O-L-L-O, well ignoring the fact that the two “L”s were out, I felt I had transcended time. I immediately thought of all the great performers who had graced the stage with their talent. I found my seat and was welcomed by a very energetic man. He sang to the audience and got everyone excited about the show to come. He asked us to grab hold of the person sitting next to us. I must admit, I was a little nervous, it seemed a bit more hands-on than I had expected. He continued to sing a sweet R&B song and invited people up to the stage. A middle-aged African-American woman named Debbie came up with pompoms, a bald white man in a full blue tracksuit, and an elderly woman in a scarf,

who reminded me too much of the Berkeley women at my dad’s coffee shop. The singing man, Joe Gray, would ask them where there from and they responded by dancing and signing their hometowns. As the audience, would sing back “Wisconsin’s in the house! Are you ready?” or “Seattle’s in the house! Are you ready?” By this point, my inhibitions had faded and I was very ready to see what more was coming. Joe then asked us all to raise up our hands clutching our neighbor’s hands. As the band was playing, he preached, “Feel this moment! This the Apollo Moment! This feeling of togetherness regardless of color or gender or religion! I want you take this moment, this Apollo Love, back to your communities and remember this feeling of wholeness!” The sounds of saxophone and trumpet paired with smiling faces and sheer happiness made the moment feel surreal. This was feeling, the feeling of jazz, that I had hoped to find.

A man named Capone walked on, he was the host. He gave each part of the theater a line for his song. He would cheer “who’s in the house? who’s in the house?”, I swayed back and forth and sang back “it’s all in the middle”. I looked around, some looked skeptical, others couldn't be having more fun even if a clown entered the mix. Then, Capone welcomed on a few child performers. A fourteen year old girl, who sang beautifully and a break dancing group of twelve year olds named “Street Justice”. The dancing children beat the girl and made it to the next round. Capone reappeared on stage and introduced the first act. Before the first performer began, she rubbed “The Tree of Hope” - the tree that had stood in front of the Lafayette Theater - for good luck. The acts ranged from draw-dropping in the best to the worst way. The all-time worst was the Michael Jackson/Prince impersonator who was promptly booed off the stage by “The Executioner”, a tall man in a blue suit who danced him off the stage. The best was

an Adele sounding girl with a powerful voice that filled the entire theater. The crowd roared with excitement when she belted out the high notes.

# A Universal Feeling of Possibility

As i thought more about the feeling that jazz and the Apollo Theater emanate, I wondered if others had enjoyed this same feeling. While reading the essay entitled “The Apollo: A Place of Possibility” by Lonnie G. Bunch III, an impressive educator and historian, I realized that the unbeatable feeling of the music is universal. However, it must be recognized that this theater served as a safe haven where African-Americans “got to be who [they] are and maybe who [they] want to be” (Bunch 14). Although, maybe today the music has a universal aspect to its sound, the pain and suffering from which these beautiful genres were born should not be diminished in any way. For Bunch, “The Apollo was a place of possibility because it often revealed glimpses of a better day” (Bunch 14). While Bunch means this is in a racial context, the Apollo continues to embody that feeling of optimism and possibility in its atmosphere. The message Joe Gray gave during Amateur Night was said for a reason. He wanted the audience to remember that the Apollo Theater is a place, “Where stars are born and legends are made,” to this day regardless of color.

In another essay, “Growing Up with the Apollo” by Smokey Robinson, this idea of possibility and undiscovered talent at the Apollo is shown again. Robinson explains how he walked into the Apollo and met Ray Charles who asked him to the play the piano with him (Robinson 19). For Smokey Robinson and many other artists like him, Amateur Night at the Apollo Theater represents their big break, their chance to shine. The

building located at 253 125th Street is not just made of concrete but instead, of the hopes and dreams of generations of striving talented (and maybe not so talented) artists.

For a historian, The Apollo is a place of possibility for African-Americans to express themselves during a grossly oppressive time in history. For an artist, the same place represents a different kind of possibility; the chance to be discovered and be a success. So what does The Apollo mean for the rest of us, humble listeners?

For me, The Apollo is still a place of possibility. Through the music one can travel back in time and hear the songs of all those who have made The Apollo Theater what it is today. Like James Brown sang so passionately at the Apollo many years ago, “I got the feelin’” of universal possibility.

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