**Harlem Renaissance**

Sophie Meridien, Keith Holt, Daniel Boyle, and Paul Ardoin

It was [*Shuffle Along*](http://vimeo.com/21251492),[[1]](#endnote-1) according to [Langston Hughes](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/langston-hughes),[[2]](#endnote-2) “that gave a scintillating send-off” to the movement so often described as a [Harlem Renaissance](http://www.ushistory.org/us/46e.asp)[[3]](#endnote-3) which would “spread to books, [African sculpture](http://www.artlex.com/ArtLex/a/african_american_4.html),[[4]](#endnote-4) music, and dancing” (*The Big Sea*, 223, 224). This [musical](http://www.nypl.org/blog/2012/02/10/musical-month-shuffle-along),[[5]](#endnote-5) Hughes suggests, provided “just the proper push […] to that Negro vogue of the 20’s” (224) associated with contemporary icons such as jazz trumpeter Louis Armstrong, [*Shuffle Along*](http://www.newworldrecords.org/linernotes/80260.pdf)[[6]](#endnote-6) chorus member [Josephine Baker](http://www.redhotjazz.com/josephinebaker.html),[[7]](#endnote-7) and James P. Johnson, composer of the musical accompaniment for the [wildly popular dance](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZJC21zzkwoE),[[8]](#endnote-8) “[The Charleston](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRveIIe4uAs).”[[9]](#endnote-9)

Literary figures and public intellectuals soon addressed the major issues concerning the music of and around the Harlem Renaissance. The most notable of these, perhaps, was Hughes, whose poetry consistently demonstrated jazz and blues influences. Often, music served as the primary focus for Hughes in poems like “Nude Young Dancer” (“What jungle tree have you slept under, / Midnight dancer of the jazzy hour?”) and “Jazzonia” (“In a Harlem cabaret / Six long-headed jazzers play”), both of which are featured in [Alain Locke’s](http://www.founders.howard.edu/Locke.htm)[[10]](#endnote-10) famous collection, *The New Negro* (227, 226). As an essayist, Hughes directly attributes musical innovation in the Harlem Renaissance to race and class, writing in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” that the “common element”—those African Americans from the lower economic classes—“are not afraid of spirituals” and can truly claim “jazz is their child” (1312); “the Negro artist,” Hughes argues, makes use of “his racial individuality” to create forms like “the Blues” (1312). In opposition, George S. Schuyler posits in “The Negro-Art Hokum,” which appeared in the same magazine (*The Nation*) a week before Hughes’s essay, that Hughes’s belief in “racial individuality” effectively promotes a bigoted understanding of black Americans as fundamentally “peculiar.” While Schuyler does concede that spirituals, the blues, and jazz have indeed come “from dark-skinned sources” (1221), he insists that these forms are much more accurately attributed to class and region. As a final point of contention, Schuyler notes that even “whites have assisted” in jazz’s “development,” which, along with “[the literature, painting](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q0mMabhS5vw),[[11]](#endnote-11) and [sculpture](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=koMXHaPlLEs)[[12]](#endnote-12) of Aframericans,” exhibits clear “[European influence](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ksvoso1NxwQ)”[[13]](#endnote-13) (1221).

Even with its origins and development a matter of debate, music like jazz irrefutably played a major role in the creative literature of the Harlem Renaissance, serving often as a general backdrop and other times as an explicit focus. Gwendolyn Bennett, for example, explores how music is a unique expression of African American identity in “Song,” a poem featured in *The New Negro* that rhythmically and lyrically demonstrates how jazz can “sing the heart of a race” by conveying joy and grief simultaneously (225). By using the image of a “Breaking heart / To the time of laughter,” Bennett illustrates how the combination of joyful melodies and sorrowful contemplation of the past creates an art form with the unique ability to express a cultural identity forged from the clash of rich heritage and a history of racial discrimination (225). In his essay “Jazz at Home,” J.A. Rogers describes the Jazz genre as “a spirit that can express itself in almost anything” (*The New Negro,* 217), thus affirming its multiple roles in the literature of the time. While the [music](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YtzhBT4ICNI)[[14]](#endnote-14) and [dance](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QifiyNm6jG4)[[15]](#endnote-15) of a cake walk might be scenery in a play like Zora Neale Hurston’s *Color Struck*, in the essay “How It Feels to Be Colored Me” Hurston remarks on jazz’s power: “It constricts the thorax and splits the heart with its tempo and narcotic harmonies” (1032); she is thrown into a sort of “primitive fury,” that causes her to “dance wildly inside [her]self … yell within … whoop” (1032). She cannot emerge until the song is over. [Rudolph Fisher](http://dclibrarylabs.org/blkren/bios/fisherr.html)[[16]](#endnote-16) extends the hypnotic power of jazz into the formal elements of a literary work via “The City of Refuge,” where a second-person passage winds the reader down sentence staircases and into a cabaret:

Supporting yourself against close walls, you crouchingly descend a narrow,

twisted staircase until, with a final turn, you find yourself in a glaring, long, low basement. In a moment your eyes become accustomed to the haze of tobacco smoke … you trace the slow-jazz accompaniment you heard as you came down the stairs to a pianist, a cornetist, and a drummer on a little platform at the far end of the room. There is a cleared space from the foot of the stairs, where you are standing, to the platform where this orchestra is mounted, and in it a tall brown girl is swaying from side to side and rhythmically proclaiming that she has the world in a jug and the stopper in her hand. (70-71)

Fisher, who sang “with Paul Robeson during their college days” (Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 241), knew and incorporated the power of music into literature.

Like jazz, the spiritual is closely related to both music and literature; here, though, it is the literature which inspires the music. [Arising from slave songs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1JtD_YpyXYU),[[17]](#endnote-17) poems, and religion, spirituals served as an alternative medium through which to lament oppression. In “The Negro Spirituals,” published in his own *The New Negro,* Alain Locke argues that spirituals are needed because poetry alone is not sufficiently effective in portraying moods (203); the musicality and [vocalization of spirituals](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mIfPf3_ng_I)[[18]](#endnote-18) are vital, in Locke's opinion, to relaying the hardships of oppression. He asserts of spirituals that “their finest meaning resides in their musical elements” (206), while in “Negro Art and America,” Albert C. Barnes depicts spirituals as “pure soul” and “wild chants” performed without the restraint or hesitation that might be found in other forms of literature such as poetry (23, 21).

To blend both literature and music, though, is perhaps (according to Houston Baker) the most modernist contribution of early 20th-century African American literature. In Baker’s *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, W.E.B. DuBois earns special praise for [incorporating printed bars of music](http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/duboissouls/ill18.html)[[19]](#endnote-19) into *The Souls of Black Folk*, allowing his text to “sing” (Baker, 67) and, in the process, to join the numerous “blues geographies” that comprise the sounds of a boundary-less assemblage Baker calls “renaissancism” (106).

Works Cited

Baker, Houston A. *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989.

Barnes, Albert C. “Negro Art and America.” Locke 19-25.

Bennett, Gwendolyn. “Song.” Locke 225.

Fisher, Rudolph. “The City of Refuge.” Locke 57-74.

Gates, Henry Louis Jr., ed. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. New York:

W.W. Norton & Company, 2003.

Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1993.

---. “Jazzonia.” Locke 226.

---. “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” Gates 1311-14.

---. “Nude Young Dancer.” Locke 227.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Color Struck*. *FIRE!!: A Quarterly Devoted to the Younger Negro Artists*

1.1 (November, 1926): 7-14.

---. “How it Feels to Be Colored Me.” Gates 1030-32.

Locke, Alain. “The Negro Spirituals.” Locke 199-210.

---, ed. *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. New York: Touchstone, 1997.

Rogers, J.A. “Jazz at Home.” Locke 216-24.

Schuyler, George S. “The Negro-Art Hokum.” Gates 1221-23.

1. http://vimeo.com/21251492 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/langston-hughes [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.ushistory.org/us/46e.asp Copyright *2008-2012 ushistory.org, owned by the Independence Hall Association in Philadelphia* [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. http://www.artlex.com/ArtLex/a/african\_american\_4.html [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. http://www.nypl.org/blog/2012/02/10/musical-month-shuffle-along Copyright The New York Public Library, 2012 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. http://www.newworldrecords.org/linernotes/80260.pdf [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. http://www.redhotjazz.com/josephinebaker.html [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZJC21zzkwoE [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRveIIe4uAs [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. http://www.founders.howard.edu/Locke.htm [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q0mMabhS5vw [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=koMXHaPlLEs [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ksvoso1NxwQ [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YtzhBT4ICNI [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QifiyNm6jG4 [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. http://dclibrarylabs.org/blkren/bios/fisherr.html [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1JtD\_YpyXYU [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mIfPf3\_ng\_I [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/duboissouls/ill18.html Copyright 2004 by the University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, all rights reserved [↑](#endnote-ref-19)