# Harlem Nightclubs

**Summary**

In the 1920s and 1930s, Harlem became a major hub of New York City nightlife and a prolific space for African-American artistic creation. It was in Harlem’s nightclubs (also known as cabarets) that big band jazz became a sensation and where theatrical dance forms like tap dance, and social dances like the Lindy Hop and the Charleston, gained widespread popularity. These artistic developments contributed to an emerging modern black identity among the intellectuals and artists of the Harlem Renaissance. While the artists in these nightclubs tended to be African American, the more elaborate and expensive clubs catered almost exclusively to white patrons; black artists were often faced with the challenge of catering to white expectations while creatively developing their own art. The music and dance that emerged in these nightclubs also became the inspiration of many black modernist authors.

# Beginnings

Despite the efforts of the Reconstruction Era (1865-1877), the southern U.S. became an increasingly inhospitable place for many African Americans causing a great deal to migrate to major Northern cities, especially New York. At the turn of the century, an economic downturn and overbuilding in Harlem caused Harlem landlords to begin soliciting black patrons who often paid significantly more in rent than their white counterparts. The first black families began settling in Harlem in 1905 and by 1920 most of New York City’s African-American population resided in this borough. In Harlem, black cultural practices from different regions in the South blended with each other and with those already found in New York City.

Nightclubs developed across the city (including Harlem) in the early part of the twentieth century. Influenced by concert saloons, jook houses, and the vaudeville stage, the nightclub was a late-night establishment that served food and alcohol and would often offer some type of floorshow (usually a band, and in more elaborate nightclubs, actors, dancers, and singers would perform as well). The word ‘nightclub’ itself developed in the 1910s as a way to eschew legal restrictions on closing times. By calling itself a “club,” which implied private membership (usually obtained with a charge at the door), a nightclub did not have to comply with the same restrictions as commercial establishments.

# Harlem Nightclubs of the 1920s and 1930s

Beginning in the 1920s, Harlem became an urban centre for African American cultures; this period, generally referred to as the Harlem Renaissance, was a prolific time when African-American artists and intellectuals were able to ‘define themselves in “modern” terms’ (Baker 89) through literature, the arts, dance, and music. Harlem nightclubs were especially important for nurturing the development of black music and dance. As Duke Ellington explained in 1930, ‘Jazz is something more than just dance music. We dance it not as a mere diversion or social accomplishment. It expresses our personality, our souls react to the elemental but eternal rhythm’ (quoted in Hill 91). Emerging along with this artistic movement was a new modern black identity.

In these nightclubs, jazz greats like Duke Ellington (1899-1974), Chick Webb (1905-1939), and Louis Armstrong (1901-1971) defined a new jazz sound. Swing music grew in these nightclubs and often featured a large ensemble of instruments (typically brass, woodwinds, and a rhythm section) while utilizing the characteristic swinging rhythms and complex harmonies associated with the jazz sounds of New Orleans. In addition to the music, nightclub floor shows would include elaborate dance numbers with chorus girls, specialty acts like Earl ‘Snakehips’ Tucker (1905-1937), and a growing number of tap dancers. Important tappers like Bill ‘Bojangles’ Robinson (1878-1949), known for bringing tap up on the balls of the feet, and the Nicholas Brothers (Fayard 1914-2006, and Harold 1921-2000), remembered for their acrobatic choreography, performed on these nightclub stages and helped develop the art form. In those nightclubs that featured social dancing, African-American dances like the Charleston (a syncopated partner dance with kicking steps) in the 1920s and the Lindy Hop (a vigorous partner dance that often included aerial movements) in the 1930s became popular forms of entertainment, both on stage and off.

During this period, Harlem also became a point of fascination for many white New Yorkers. Broadway musicals like *Shuffle Along* (1921) and *Lulu Belle* (1926), as well as Carl van Vechten novel *Nigger Heaven* (1926) depicted Harlem as a place where white rules of decorum could be shirked and sexuality could be liberally explored. Harlem symbolically became a place of fantasy and escapism for white New Yorkers who flocked to Harlem’s nightclubs to get a glimpse of what they imagined black culture to be. At the same time, the Harlem Renaissance witnessed a flourishing of black cultural practices, especially in literature, art, music and dance. Harlem nightclubs became a paradoxical space where black artists found a place for significant support and artistic growth, but were also often inhibited by the demands of white patrons.

The Cotton Club, one of the largest and most popular nightclubs in Harlem, opened in 1923 under the direction of gangster Owney Madden at 142nd street and Lennox Ave. The interior of the club was decorated like a Southern plantation and featured jungle images on the walls evoking ‘antebellum nostalgia and modernist primitivism’. (Vogel 81) The Cotton Club had a seating capacity of 700 and like many of the larger nightclubs, it catered almost exclusively to white patrons but employed black entertainers and service staff. The floorshow, much like a vaudeville revue, consisted of several musical numbers, comedic sketches, a featured dance number, and chorus girls. Each show would last two hours and there would be several shows per night. The Cotton Club also managed to gain nation-wide fame as Duke Ellington and his orchestra broadcast live on the radio from the Cotton-Club bandstand from 1927-1931.

Other major clubs could be found along what was called ‘Jungle Alley—’ a stretch of road along 133rd St. between Lennox Ave. and 7th Ave., like Connie’s Inn (known for its revue *Hot Chocolates* that rivalled performances on Broadway). While these larger clubs catered to mainstream white audiences, many of the smaller clubs offered entertainment for integrated audiences. The Nest Club catered to black and white audiences and maintained reasonable prices by offering a small band for entertainment rather than a full floorshow. The Clam House catered to black and white audiences but also to queer culture; their floorshow featured drag performances and was full of sexual innuendo.

By the mid-1930s, the popularity of Harlem nightclubs began to fade. The end of Prohibition in 1933 meant that alcohol was easier to obtain; many of the uptown clubs could no longer compete with downtown clubs. In addition, as jazz gained popularity with the white mainstream, the jazz centre shifted from Harlem to 52nd Street. Finally, the Race Riots of 1935, which began when rumours spread that a young black shoplifter had been beaten by white police officers, made Harlem seem dangerous for white visitors. In 1936, the Cotton Club moved to Broadway, and many other clubs would soon follow.

# Legacy

Harlem nightclubs were the artistic home of many musicians and dancers who would come to define American music and dance in the decades to follow. Swing music became arguably the most popular music in the U.S. during the 1930s and 1940s and its sound grew out of many of the orchestras featured at these nightclubs. In addition, the Lindy Hop, which developed largely at the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem, disseminated through these nightclubs and became a definitive partner dance of the 1940s. Harlem’s Nightclubs were a source of inspiration for many modern black writers during the Harlem Renaissance, especially the writers who called themselves the ‘Niggerati’ (like Wallace Thurman and Zora Neale Hurston), whose writings captured the vibrancy as well as the racial tension of the age.

# References and Further Reading

Baker, Houston A. “Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance” In *American Quarterly*. 39:1 (Spring 1987). 84-97. (This article provides a useful discussion of the relationship between modernism and the Harlem Renaissance).

Erenberg, Lewis A. *Steppin’ Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1981. (This book offers a glimpse into the nightlife of wealthy white New Yorkers. The final chapter includes a description of some of the more popular Harlem Nightclubs).

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Malone, Jacqui. *Steppin’ on the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Dance*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996. (Chapters five and six offer insights into the dancing that took place in Harlem nightclubs during the 1920s and 1930s).

Vogel, Shane. *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. (Vogel’s book examines the racial and sexual politics surrounding nightclub performances).

Watson, Steven. *The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African-American Culture, 1920-1930*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1995. (Watson offers a thorough and detailed account of many of the personalities, events, and establishments important to the Harlem Renaissance).

# Paratextual Material

Burns, Ken (Dir.). “The True Welcome” *Jazz* (Disc four). PBS Video (Distributed by Time Warner Home Video) 2000. (This episode of the *Jazz* series includes video footage and photographs from Harlem Nightlcubs and Interview footage with important dancers and musicians from the period).

Calloway, Cab. “The Cab Calloway Jive Talk Hepster Dictionary.” (1944) <http://www.cabcalloway.cc/jive\_dictionary.htm> (this site provides a list of slang terms and their definitions used during the 1930s and 1940s).

Campbell, E. Simms. “A Night-Club Map of Harlem” (1932) Elizabeth Campbell-Moskowitz. In *The Scene of the Harlem Cabaret* (Shane Vogel) and online: <http://4.bp.blogspot.com/\_QMuDihPPyPA/TGqDXhw9qKI/AAAAAAAANyE/m35BmrVp7DE/s1600/esimmscampbell.jpg> (A cartoon map depicting Harlem nightlife).

Murphy, Dudley (Dir.). “Black and Tan” (1929)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kPFBMPs5nqE>

(A film short starring Duke Ellington and members of his orchestra)