

The Harlem Renaissance

The quest for equality and freedom for African Americans has been fought on many fronts. But there is no question that in the area of the arts, the contribution of black America has been so profound that it has greatly eased racial tensions and changed the image of black culture profoundly in the eyes of all Americans. Many have criticized the world of such black performers as Richard Prior, Bill Cosby and Eddie Murphy but these artists along with artists in literature, painting, poetry, music and all the arts have brought an acceptance of black culture that has furthered the appreciation of African Americans by all people more than anything else ever could do.

In the history of black culture, the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s was a time when African American culture truly was showcased for the country, indeed the world and people started to realize the rich legacy that was available to all peoples in black culture. The Harlem Renaissance was more than just a greater exposure to black dance, music, comedy or theater even though the chance for all peoples to appreciate the talents of black artists was certainly worthwhile in its own right.

But the Harlem Renaissance also refers to the cultural and social movements of the time in which black pride was beginning to cause big changes in the way African Americans thought about themselves and eventually how all Americans thought of black Americans as well. A lot of factors led to the explosion of black culture during that time frame especially in New York City. The city had been a Mecca for artists of every culture for a long time as it still is today. And during this time frame there was a migration of the African American population to the north and to the urban industrial areas particularly to take advantage of the economic opportunities there.

With the migration of the African American population came the rich black music that had continued to grow and evolve ever since the Civil War. But because of the concentration of cultures in New York and the willingness to experiment, to blend and to discover new cultures that was the norm in that melting pot city, white America too began to discover the jazz, blues, spirituals and gospel music that began to evolve and integrate into many secular musical styles of the time.

The era was in every way a renaissance just as much as the great cultural renaissance in Europe had been many years before it. In every genre, black culture exploded onto the national consciousness. Many outstanding, stand-out names that became household names for literature and the arts came into their own during the Harlem Renaissance including Langston Hughes, Booker T. Washington, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Jelly Roll Morton.

There is no question that the cultural explosion that occurred during that brief time frame created a tidal wave of change that is still being felt today. The blending of blues, gospel and spirituals, when it began to see experimentation by the likes of Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis and Little Richard spawned and

even bigger cultural event known as rock and roll music that changed the world forever. And to this day many of the mannerisms, the approach to style and speech that came to be known as "being cool" was in reality an attempt, especially by youth, to emulate black culture. And by imitation cultures began to merge and blend to where they could never live separately again. And that blending and enjoyment of black culture has done much to help integrate society and make social change and acceptance of each other's cultures by black and white a possibility today.

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