



“Black and Tan Fantasy” and Harlem Renaissance Reality

By Michael Sofie

Although considered by some scholars as primarily a literary movement, the Harlem Renaissance of the nineteen-twenties also encompassed African-American music, art, dance, and theater. Langston Hughes’ poetry captures the lives, poverty, prejudice, lack of opportunity, and most of all, the sounds of the Negroes in Harlem. Günter Lenz explains that for Hughes:

the folk tradition, especially the blues...had found a new incarnation in jazz, in a music of the ‘common people,’ the ‘lowdown folks,’ that expressed the rhythm of life of the black community in the urban North, the ‘tom-tom of revolt against the weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work work work, and pain swallowed in a smile’ (2003).

Conditions were right for this explosion of culture, as Hasse notes, “[b]etween 1910 and 1920, New York City had surpassed Washington D.C. as the American city with the largest black population” (61-2).

In the 1920’s the black population of Harlem grew 226 percent to 165,000, and all crowded into 150 blocks, and “[i]t...became the center of black intellectual, political, and cultural life and a magnet for aspiring young black men and women” (Hasse 62-3). Of the thousands from the South that had migrated to the city looking for work during the First World

War, many had money to spend at the clubs, dance halls, and juke joints to escape from the cares of the work-a-day world. “In the black community, music reached more people than did literature,” as Hasse insists in *Beyond Category*, “[m]usic was more accessible because you did not have to be educated or even literate to listen to it” (64).

Hughes connection with Harlem was more spiritual than physical, he had enrolled at Columbia University in New York in 1921 at the urging of his father, but withdrew in 1922 at the age of twenty to see the world. By his return to Harlem late in 1924 he had visited ports in the Mediterranean, Africa, and Europe as a crewmember on freighters. Hughes contacted some other young, black artists there and published his first poem, “The Weary Blues,” which would lead to a book contract. He moved to Washington D.C to live with his mother and became “harshly critical of Washington’s ‘Negro society.’ ‘Never before, anywhere,’ [Hughes] wrote, ‘had I seen persons of influence – men with some money, women with some beauty, teachers with some education – quite so audibly sure of their own importance and their high places in the community’” (Hasse 32). He had never encountered such strong class distinctions among blacks in his overseas travels, time in Mexico with his father, or in the cities of New York, Cleveland, Chicago, and Lawrence, Kansas. As Hughes relates in The Big Sea, “[a]t the height of the Negro Renaissance, I was a student at Lincoln University, [a black school in Pennsylvania], spending my week-ends and holidays in New York” (212). Until his graduation in 1929 he continued to frequent Harlem, connect with the literati, with African-American issues foremost on his mind.

The rhythms of blues and jazz which spiced his poetry reverberated in his psyche, as Hughes admits:

The blues poems I would often make up in my head and sing on the way to work. One evening, I was crossing Rock Creek Bridge, singing the blues I was trying to get right before I put it down on paper. A man passing on the opposite side of the

bridge stopped, looked at me, then...cut across the roadway...[and] [h]e said
“Son, what’s the matter? Are you ill?” “No, “I said. “Just singing.” “I thought
you were groaning,” he commented...So after that I never sang my verses aloud
on the street any more. (172)

“Lenox Avenue: Midnight” evokes that major Harlem thoroughfare which was populated with
speakeasies, clubs, and dancehalls when Hughes writes, “The rhythm of life / Is a jazz rhythm,”
and illustrates that by the sounds, “The rumble of the street cars, / To the swish of the rain.”
(lines 1-2, 9-10) As Meyer explains, “[h]e also reveled in the jazz music of Harlem and
discovered in its open forms and improvisations an energy and freedom that significantly
influenced the style of his poetry” (913). The lyrics of the song contained in “The Weary
Blues” are not typical blues style, as Hughes observes, “[t]he *Blues*...have a strict rhythm
pattern: one long line repeated and a third line to rhyme with the first two. Sometimes the
second line...is slightly changed and sometimes it is omitted” (138). Published in 1926,
“Po’ Boy Blues’ never departs from the rigid form. It begins:”

When I was home de
Sunshine seemed like gold.
When I was home de
Sunshine seemed line gold.
Since I come up North de
Whole damn world’s turned cold. (lines 1-6)

James Emanuel acknowledges that Hughes “undertook a difficult task when he sought to
communicate the poetry of the blues through written words alone -...when Bessie...Smith, and
Ethel Waters, were popularizing the blues...with musical, vocal , and gestic art combine[d]”
(137). Negroes who migrated to the big cities found that “the blues and blues-oriented jazz” in

the North “was harder, crueler, and perhaps even more stoical and hopeless than the earlier forms” (Jones 105).

White Americans took notice of the music of the Negroes in 1921 when *Shuffle Along*, an all-black show, appeared on Broadway, and as Southern reports, “created a vogue for Negro shows that lasted through the depression years” (439). “To see *Shuffle Along* was the main reason I wanted to go to Columbia,” as Hughes claims, [i]t gave just the proper push...to that Negro vogue of the 20’s, that spread to books, African sculpture, music, and dancing” (175). Starr and Waterman conclude, “the cultural energy and creativity of black New York was also expressed through popular cultural forms, both in live performance and over the mass media. It could be argued that Harlem was a portal through which black styles and sensibilities entered American mass culture from the 1920’s through the 1940’s” (125).

“[Duke] Ellington was ‘virtually [Hughes] musical counterpart in black America’ and desperately longed to collaborate on a musical,” as Tolson speculates, “whether Hughes or Ellington produced the more lasting and universal art” (2). The twenty-four year-old Ellington arrived in New York in 1923 from Washington D.C. bent on “leading a band with a distinctive sound of its own that set it off from all others” (Hasse 61). The competition would be fierce since Harlem became the Mecca for black musicians after the exodus to the North from the shuttered, red-light, Storyville district of New Orleans. Many migrated to Chicago first, but most eventually came to New York; and came they did, Fletcher Henderson, Jelly Roll Morton, Cab Calloway, and many more brought their instruments to populate the burgeoning Harlem music scene (Scupin and DeCorse 695a). The Savoy Ballroom, the Cotton Club, speakeasies, and cabarets were actively recruiting musicians who played with “‘hot’ and bluesy intonations” (Jones 111). According to R. D. Darrell’s “Black Beauty,” Ellington’s composition titles revealed his affinity to “the life of his people in deep South or darkest Harlem: *Black Beauty*,

Awful sad, Saturday Night Function, Parlor Social Stomp, Rent Party Blues, ...Jungle Night in Harlem, [and] Swampy River” (60).

Hughes and Ellington connected on the seminal Ellington Piece from 1927 of *Black and Tan Fantasy*, a variation on the blues that would be the inspiration later in the 1930’s “to compose a musical evolution of the Negro race” (Hasse 96, 260). *Black, Brown, and Beige: A Tone Parallel to the History of the Negro in America*, as Hasse notes, the suite was first performed At Carnegie Hall in 1943 (261). When Hughes visited Africa he had a revelation:

I am not black. There are lots of different kinds of blood in our family. But here in the United States, the word “Negro” is used to mean anyone who has *any* Negro blood at all in his veins. In Africa, the word is more pure. It means *all* Negro, therefore *black*. I am brown. My father was darker brown. My mother an olive-yellow...on my father’s side both male great-grandparents were white... [o]n my mother’s side, I had a paternal great-grandfather...who was white...[o]n my maternal grandmother’s side, there was French and Indian blood. (36-7)

Ellington was from Washington D.C. so he understood the stratification of Negro society that flourished there and “[h]e must have grown impatient with discrimination based on skin color, income, and occupation” (Hasse 32). Both Hughes and Ellington would find New York more relaxed with Negroes from the South, long time residents of the North, and newly arrived blacks from the West Indies. It was the conditions and circumstances of this diverse group of African-Americans people that Hughes and the Duke championed, and at the same time endeavored to reconcile with white America. In Hughes poem “Cross,” the character had a white father and black mother who died in different economic conditions, and he muses, “I wonder where I’m gonna die, / Being neither white or black?” (lines 11-12).

Two unlikely men, an African-American political activist and a German anthropologist, ventured ideas that made the Renaissance possible. The struggle against inequality and for recognition of Negro rights started earlier than the 1920's with the formation of several groups. W.E.B. Du Bois founded the leading one, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909. As Jackson affirms, "[a]lthough the Negro Renaissance was fundamentally a cultural movement, it can in no way be isolated from black protest of the period: protest movements formed an important psychological backdrop and many artists in fact wrote for radical magazines" (2). In 1906 Du Bois invited the ground-breaking anthropologist, Franz Boas, to give the commencement address to Atlanta University. His meticulous research challenged existing theories about racial characteristics and particularly those that held Negroes as an inferior race, and in fact supported the idea that all humans were the same except for minor variation of characteristics (Scupin and DeCorse 306). "Boas's closing advice is that Negroes should not look to Whites for approval or encouragement," and therefore, "[d]o not look for the impossible, but do not let your path deviate from quiet and steadfast insistence on full opportunities for your powers" (Wiki). Hughes poem "I Dream a World" mirrors this new philosophy:

A world I dream where black or white,
Whatever race you be,
Will share the bounties of the earth
And every man is free. (lines 9-12)

Mark Herbling in The Harlem Renaissance: the One and the Many summarizes that "[q]uestions of race, racial identity, and racial prejudice were the core concerns that linked Du Bois and Boas. Each man had personally experienced prejudice. Each grew to understand that the prejudices he confronted were deeply rooted in the social and intellectual soil of Western culture" (19).

The conflict for the novelists and writers of the Harlem Renaissance was as middle-class Negroes they had little in common with the new “urban proletariat” workers who had migrated from the agricultural South. Although they could write about things they observed, Harlem writers did not share the same mentality of those they reported (Jones 132-3). In a 1960 interview as he answered “a question about his literary aims, Hughes replied, ‘I explain and illuminate the Negro condition in America. This applies to 90 percent of my work’” (68). The temptation for some black writers was to produce exaggerated material for white patronage. “In a famous peroration, Hughes answered that he and his fellow artists intended to express their ‘individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad...If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn’t matter either’” (Lewis xxii). The question remains whether the Harlem Renaissance improved the situation for Negroes in light of the continued prejudice and exploitation of African-Americans through the 1960’s Civil Rights movement. Perhaps the one lasting significant feature was a heightened awareness by white America of the talents and contributions of these resilient people.

As Langston Hughes perfected his craft for over forty-five years, other Harlem Renaissance writers faded into obscurity. His artistry took the many forms of poetry, prose, stories, gospel-song plays, and as an editor or translator, a spokesperson, and a performer with musical accompaniment. He stayed current with world issues and trends and continued to be accepted and relevant to African-Americans through the turbulent 1960’s Civil Rights movement. Singer Eartha Kitt commented that “I knew Langston Hughes well, and he was always interested in interchanging cultures,” and that “he was always studying things for their positives” (White 2). Hughes’ love of music resounded in his work as he kept current with musical trends, and commented on swing, be-bop, and progressive jazz. In his later years he would combine his literary art in collaborations with singer Nina Simone, composers Kurt Weill,

Jan Meyerowitz, William Grant Stills, and Davis Amran, and jazz musicians Charles Mingus, Leonard Feather, and Phineas Newborn. The world is fortunate to have many recordings of Langston Hughes' mellifluous recitations which capture the rhythm, humor, and tone of his work. Hughes remained faithful to his people, art, and philosophy, and most of all to himself.

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