

OPPORTUNITY

A JOURNAL OF NEGRO LIFE



◀ Magazines like this one focused on African American culture and history.

WITNESS HISTORY AUDIO

The Excitement of Harlem

In the early 1920s, the New York City neighborhood known as Harlem was the most vibrant African American community in the nation. Teeming with people and teeming with activity, it was also, as one observer noted, “a great magnet for the Negro intellectual.” Among those who were drawn to Harlem was a young Missouri-born poet named Langston Hughes. He later recalled what he felt like as he stepped off the subway:

“I can never put on paper the thrill of the underground ride to Harlem. I went up the steps and out into the bright September sunlight. Harlem! I stood there, dropped my bags, took a deep breath and felt happy again.”

—Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea*

The Harlem Renaissance

Objectives

- Analyze the racial and economic philosophies of Marcus Garvey.
- Trace the development and impact of jazz.
- Discuss the themes explored by writers of the Harlem Renaissance.

Terms and People

Marcus Garvey
jazz
Louis Armstrong
Bessie Smith

Harlem Renaissance
Claude McKay
Langston Hughes
Zora Neale Hurston

NoteTaking

Reading Skill: Identify Main Ideas As you read, identify the main ideas.

- I. New “Black Consciousness”
 - A. New Chances, New Challenges
 1. Migration to North continues
 - 2.
 - B.
- II.

Why It Matters As a result of World War I and the Great Migration, millions of African Americans relocated from the rural South to the urban North. This mass migration continued through the 1920s and contributed to a flowering of music and literature. Jazz and the Harlem Renaissance made a lasting impact, not only on African Americans but on the culture all Americans share. **Section Focus Question:** How did African Americans express a new sense of hope and pride?

A New “Black Consciousness”

Like the immigrants who traveled from Europe and Asia, African Americans who left the South dreamed of a better future. They had heard stories of economic opportunity, social advancement, and greater political rights. The South, they reasoned, was a dead end. Locked into low-paying rural jobs, barred from decent schools, faced with the reality of Jim Crow oppression and the threat of lynching, they pointed their compasses north.

Migrants Face Chances and Challenges Most African American migrants to the north probably found a better life. Wages in a Detroit auto plant or a Pittsburgh steel mill were far better than what a sharecropper earned in the South. In such cities as New York, Chicago, Pittsburgh, and Cleveland, African Americans had a growing political voice. In those towns, there also existed black middle and upper classes. African American ministers, physicians, lawyers, teachers, and journalists practiced their professions and served as role models to the younger generation.

But in coming North, African Americans had certainly not escaped racism and oppression. On average, they were forced to live in the worst housing and labor in the lowest paying jobs. In addition, as the race riots of the summer of 1919 demonstrated, violence was a threat to African Americans north as well as south of the Mason-Dixon line. After World War I, African Americans increased their demand for a real solution to the country's racial problems.

New York City's Harlem became the focal point for the aspirations of hundreds of thousands of African Americans. Some 200,000 blacks settled in Harlem. Migrants from the South mixed with recently arrived immigrants from Caribbean islands, such as Jamaica. This dynamic blend of different cultures and traditions bred new ideas.

Garvey Calls for Racial Pride The most prominent new African American leader to emerge in the 1920s was **Marcus Garvey**. Born in Jamaica, Garvey traveled widely before immigrating to Harlem in 1916. From his travels, Garvey drew one important conclusion: Everywhere blacks were exploited. To combat the problem, he promoted the idea of universal black nationalism and organized a "Back to Africa" movement. Unlike Booker T. Washington or W.E.B. Du Bois, Garvey did not call for blacks and whites to work together to improve America. Instead, Garvey advocated the separation of the races.

Garvey's message found willing converts in American cities. By the mid-1920s, his Universal Negro Improvement Association boasted almost 2.5 million members and sympathizers. His advocacy of black pride and black support of black-run businesses won considerable support.

Garvey's movement fell apart in the second half of the decade. The federal government sent him to prison for mail fraud and then deported him to Jamaica. Without his powerful leadership, the Universal Negro Improvement Association lost its focus and appeal.

Although Garvey's movement died, his ideas did not fade. The nationalist and separatist aspects of the Nation of Islam and the Black Power movement in the 1960s owed much to Garvey. So, too, did later appeals to black pride, self-reliance, and cultural ties to Africa. Harlem's major newspaper, the *Amsterdam News*, later wrote, "In a world where black is despised, he taught [African Americans] to admire and praise black things and black people."

✓ **Checkpoint** How did Marcus Garvey encourage African American pride?

The Jazz Age

It was F. Scott Fitzgerald who called the 1920s the "Jazz Age." However, it was African Americans who gave the age its jazz. A truly indigenous American musical form, **jazz** is a musical form based on improvisation. Jazz musicians creatively recombine different forms of music, including African American blues and ragtime, and European-based popular music.

A Unique American Music Emerges Jazz emerged in the South and Midwest, particularly New Orleans, where different cultures and traditions came together and influenced each other. Early jazz artists won fame playing in



Marcus Garvey

Dressed in a ceremonial uniform, Marcus Garvey rides in a New York City parade on the opening day of a 1922 convention of a group called Negro Peoples of the World.

Vocabulary Builder

indigenous—(ihn DIHJ uh nuhs)
adj. native to; growing out of a particular region or country

Storyville, a section of New Orleans known for its night life. From the South, it spread north with the Great Migration of African Americans.

Trumpet player **Louis Armstrong** became the unofficial ambassador of jazz. After playing with King Oliver's band in New Orleans and Chicago and with Fletcher Henderson's orchestra in New York, Armstrong began to organize his own groups. His ability to play the trumpet and his subtle sense of improvisation made him a legend and influenced the development of jazz. After Armstrong, all jazz bands featured soloists. Many also began to feature vocal soloists, such as **Bessie Smith**, the "Empress of the Blues."

Jazz Wins Worldwide Popularity Jazz was more than a musical style. It was also a symbol of the Roaring Twenties. It was part of the Prohibition era, played in speakeasies and nightspots in New York, Chicago, St. Louis, and Los Angeles. It was the sound of the Cotton Club, one of Harlem's most famous attractions, where African Americans played African American music to all-white audiences. Phonograph records and radio spread the influence of jazz across the country and beyond. By the end of the decade, the popularity of jazz had spread to Europe as well.

But jazz was still more. It was a demonstration of the depth and richness of African American culture. Gerald Early, a modern scholar of English and African American studies, predicted that, in the future, America will be best remembered for three great contributions—the Constitution, baseball, and jazz. All three enriched lives, opened windows to new possibilities, and lifted the human spirit. Jazz announced that the United States was a land of shared cultures and traditions, a place where people came together and created something greater than their parts.

Jazz quickly bridged the races. Trumpeter Bix Beiderbecke (Bī der behk) became the first white musician to contribute to the styles and popularity of jazz. Jazz sounds influenced such white songwriters and composers as Cole

Stars of the Jazz Age AUDIO

Not only was Louis Armstrong (below left) an influential trumpeter, he also pioneered "scat," a style in which the singer improvises meaningless syllables that mimic the sounds of musical instruments. The recordings and concerts of blues singer Bessie Smith (below right) made her the highest-paid African American entertainer of the 1920s.



Porter, Irving Berlin, and George Gershwin, whose jazz-inspired orchestral work *Rhapsody in Blue* premiered in 1924. The title of a song by African American band leader Duke Ellington best captures how jazz changed popular music: “It Don’t Mean a Thing If It Ain’t Got That Swing.”

✔ **Checkpoint** How did jazz spread from its roots in the South to the North in the 1920s?

The Harlem Renaissance

Jazz and blues were expressions of the African American experience. The pain of the African American experience can be heard in the blues, and the joy of that experience in the soaring notes of jazz. The range of such African American musicians as Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway speaks to the varieties of African American life. But in the 1920s, there were other expressions of African American culture. Novelists, poets, and artists celebrated their culture and explored questions of race in America. This flowering of African American culture became known as the **Harlem Renaissance**. The Harlem Renaissance helped give a new vocabulary and dynamic to race relations in the United States.

African American Literature Flowers In the 1920s, the term the “New Negro” entered the American vocabulary. It suggested a radical break with the past. No longer would African Americans silently endure the old ways of exploitation and discrimination. The new mood was most vividly expressed in Harlem, which attracted African American novelists, essayists, poets, and journalists from all over the country and beyond. In their work, these writers explored the pains and joys of being black in America, leaving a literary legacy that spoke to all Americans of all times.

Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923) set the tone for the Harlem Renaissance. A collection of short stories, poems, and sketches, *Cane* presented African American life and folk culture in all its richness. It was not a blueprint for where African Americans needed to move politically in the future, but a plea to remember and preserve the past.

Soon, other African American writers joined Toomer at the forefront of the Harlem Renaissance. Jamaican immigrant **Claude McKay** was the most militant of these writers. In his novels and poems, McKay showed ordinary African Americans struggling for dignity and advancement in the face of discrimination and economic hardships. A poem that McKay wrote after Chicago was stricken by violent race riots captured his sense of anger and militancy:

Primary Source

“If we must die—let it not be like hogs,
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Marking their mark at our accursed lot . . .
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we will face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying but fighting back!”

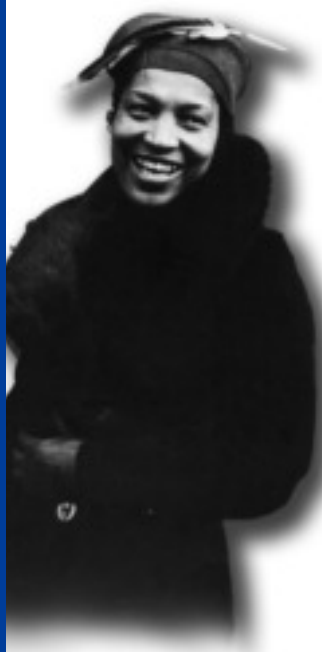
—Claude McKay, “If We Must Die”

HISTORY MAKERS

Duke Ellington (1899–1974)

Duke Ellington became one of the most important early figures in jazz and probably its greatest composer. He gained fame in the 1920s, when his band played in Harlem nightclubs. Hiring many skilled musicians, he arranged his music to showcase their talents. Ellington wrote or arranged about two thousand pieces of music that range from popular songs to ballets and movie music. Before his death, he had been awarded the highest honors from the governments of both the United States and France.





▲ Zora Neale Hurston

McKay represented the political and ideological left wing of the Harlem Renaissance. More in the center was **Langston Hughes**, probably the most powerful African American literary voice of his time. For Hughes, the force of the movement was not politics but a celebration of African American culture and life. (See the American Literature feature on the next page.) In more than 50 works of fiction, poetry, journalism, and criticism, he captured the remarkable diversity of everyday African American life. In the last line of his autobiography *The Big Sea*, Hughes wrote, "Literature is a big sea full of many fish. I let down my nets and pulled. I'm still pulling."

Another powerful voice was **Zora Neale Hurston**. Hurston traveled the rural back roads of her native Florida, collecting folk tales in books such as *Mules and Men*. But Hurston also looked to the future. Her 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* expressed the new longing for independence felt by many women, black and white.

The Harlem Renaissance Has Lasting Impact The Harlem Renaissance gave a voice to African American culture, just as jazz and blues gave it a tune. It altered the way many white Americans viewed African American culture, and even the way African Americans viewed themselves. James Weldon Johnson, poet and secretary of the NAACP, noted:

Primary Source

"A great deal has been accomplished in this decade of 'renaissance.' . . . Today, one may see undesirable stories, but one may also read stories about Negro singers, Negro actors, Negro authors, Negro poets. The connotations of the very word *Negro* have changed. A generation ago many Negroes were half or wholly ashamed of the term. Today, they have every reason to be proud of it."

—James Weldon Johnson, article in *Harper's* magazine, 1928

The Harlem Renaissance ended with the national financial collapse that also ended the nation's decade of prosperity. But the sense of group identity and African American solidarity that it created would become part of the bedrock on which the later civil rights movement would be constructed.

✓ **Checkpoint** What themes did Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston explore?

SECTION

5 Assessment

Progress Monitoring Online

For: Self-test with vocabulary practice
Web Code: nea-0708

Comprehension

- 1. Terms and People** For each of the following, write a sentence explaining the importance of that person or item to the development of African American culture.
 - Marcus Garvey
 - jazz
 - Louis Armstrong
 - Bessie Smith
 - Harlem Renaissance
 - Claude McKay
 - Langston Hughes
 - Zora Neale Hurston

2. NoteTaking Identify Main Ideas

Use your section outline to answer the Section Focus Question: How did African Americans express a new sense of hope and pride?

Writing About History

- 3. Compare and Contrast** Write a thesis statement and introductory paragraph for an essay in which you compare the influence of jazz to the influence of the Harlem Renaissance. Consider both the similarities and differences in the two cultural developments.

Critical Thinking

- 4. Identify Points of View** Why do you think Marcus Garvey rejected the goals of earlier African American leaders such as Washington and Du Bois?
- 5. Analyze Information** How did jazz blend cultural influences and cross-cultural divides?
- 6. Identify Main Ideas** Restate the main idea of Claude McKay's poem "If We Must Die" in your own words.