The Harlem Renaissance

At the same time the Lost Generation of white writers was questioning materialistic American culture, African American writers who had migrated to the nation’s northern cities began to express their own identity and a rising anger at northern racism. Bustling with nightclubs and cafes and alive with blues and jazz, a section of New York City called Harlem lured black and white intellectuals. The African American literary and artistic movement that resulted became known as the Harlem Renaissance.

Alain Locke was a Professor of Literature at Howard University, a graduate of Harvard, and the first African American Rhodes scholar. Locke urged his fellow blacks to create a new literature. In *The New Negro*, Locke wrote that the younger generation of African Americans is “vibrant with a new psychology….the new spirit is awake in the masses.”

Inspired by Locke, writers like Langston Hughes and Claude McKay spoke out in the strongest voices of the Harlem Renaissance. Hughes, a gifted poet, was one of the first African American writers to use jazz and blues themes and rhythms in his poetry. In a 1926 essay called “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Hughes argued that what was truly worth expressing would be found in the culture of the poorest black people: “If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom tom [drum] cries and the tom tom laughs.”

Claude McKay migrated from his native Jamaica to Harlem. There he wrote poems such as “If We Must Die” and “The White City” that challenged African Americans to fight for their rights. McKay’s autobiographical novel, *Home to Harlem*, published in 1927, expressed his fascination with all the shades of people who could be called black: “Brown girls rouged and painted like dark pansies. Brown flesh draped in soft colorful clothes….The cabaret singer, a shiny coffee-colored girl in a green frock….chocolate, chestnut, coffee, ebony, cream, yellow…."

Of the many gifted black women involved in the movement, a young anthropologist named Zora Neale Hurston eventually became the best known. Hurston’s plays, short stories, and articles began to appear in the 1920s, and featured the African American folklore she had listened to as a child. Her 1937 masterpiece, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, portrayed the first heroic black woman in American literature.

In the 1920s African Americans began to find their own unique voice in a new and exciting literature. The writers of the Harlem Renaissance proclaimed that blacks would no longer accept second-class citizenship in any area of American life.

What is Jazz?

Origins of the word jazz are hazy and there are many theories. One thing we know is that the word came out of bars where early jazz was born in places like New Orleans, with its notorious Storyville red light district. Perhaps African Americans coined the term themselves to describe their music during its early years, when jazz was used as a verb. Musicians back then used to say, “Jazz it up,” when they wanted a band to pick up a song’s pace and swing hard. Some believe that the word jazz had become a new word meaning “to have sex” and that someone, either white or black used the term to describe the new sensual, even sexy music.

Although jazz is performed by musicians of many colors and melds together elements of many kinds of music, it is essentially African American music. Interwoven with jazz’s history is the history of the black experience in America.

Before the 1880s composers would write a melody, which in time would be orchestrated for a small orchestra. Bands would always play the tune the same way-- precisely as it was orchestrated. Eventually, small groups of musicians took it upon themselves to improvise on the melody -- to “Jazz” it up. Early bands were usually very small groups, a “Frontline” of cornet, trombone and
clarinet/Saxophone, and a “backline” (rhythm section) of Brass Bass (tuba), Banjo (an American invention), Drums and Piano.

In the South, these bands would play ‘ensemble style’ -- no solos -- with different instruments of the frontline varying, ‘Jazzing’, the melody --while the musicians all played together (no solos). This ‘Ensemble Playing’, with each instrument ‘jazzing up’ its own part, is what came to be called “Dixieland Jazz”.

When the music moved to St. Louis, Missouri, Detroit, Michigan, and to Chicago, Illinois, --it changed somewhat, but most notably in two ways. Firstly, due to the influence of one musician, Bix Beiderbecke, instrumental soloing became a fixture of Dixieland Jazz. Musicians, such as Louis Armstrong and others, would take Bix’s idea and expand on it by making Solos a fixed feature, along with routining the way bands would play, and some other improvements. Secondly, Dixieland changed into a ‘harder driving’ form. In America’s South, the music seemingly ‘unfurled’ in front of you, a relatively gentle style of playing --associated with the gentler days of the old South. In the North-- in Chicago -- the music reflected life in Chicago -- a hard driving, hustling and bustling city of stockyards, businesses, saloons, gangsters, bootleg ‘hooch’, and JAZZ. Due to Bix Beiderbecke’s influence, soloists were given “space” in each tune, and the music was more forcefully presented to the audience.

Marcus Garvey

Marcus Garvey was born in 1887 and raised in St. Ann’s Bay, Jamaica. There he first began to experience racism. When Marcus was younger he used to be friends with his white neighbors and play with them all the time. However, when they reached their teenage years, they began to shun him.

From 1910-14 Garvey traveled and worked in the Central American region and in London. In 1914 he returned to Jamaica where he organized the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in order to promote Black nationalism and Pan-Africanism [an ideology that encourages the solidarity of Africans worldwide]. Garvey corresponded with Booker T. Washington and later visited Washington’s Tuskegee Institute and visited with a number of black leaders. He soon came to feel, however, that there was a lack of leadership among African Americans. So in 1917 he founded the first UNIA division outside Jamaica. He worked to develop a program to improve the conditions of ethnic Africans “at home and abroad.” In 1918 he began publishing the Negro World newspaper in New York, which was widely distributed. He used Negro World as a platform for his views to encourage growth of the UNIA.

By June 1919, the membership of the organization had grown to over two million, according to its records. In 1919 the UNIA set up its first business, incorporating the Black Star [ship] Line of Delaware with the intention of helping African Americans move back to Africa. It had a successful first year, but had numerous problems the next two years, including mechanical breakdowns on its ships and poor record keeping. While W.E.B. DuBois felt that the Black Star Line was “original and promising,” he also said that “Marcus Garvey is, without doubt, the most dangerous enemy of the Negro race in America and in the world. He is either a lunatic or a traitor.” DuBois feared that Garvey’s activities to encourage people to move back to Africa and to reject integration with whites would undermine his efforts toward black rights in the U.S.

Because Garvey often severely criticized American racism and hypocrisy and advocated black nationalism and black separatism, the U.S. government began to see Garvey as a threat to national security. After looking intently for a way to deport Garvey, he was charged with mail fraud in connection with stock sales of the Black Star Line. Even though the charge really involved a naive mistake, not fraud, Garvey hurt his own cause at the trial by, as his biographer Colin Grant said, being “belligerent where perhaps grace, humility, and even humor were called for.” Of the four Black Star Line officers charged in connection with the enterprise, only Garvey was found guilty.

After doing time at a prison in Atlanta, in 1928 he eventually traveled to Geneva to present the Petition of the Negro Race. This petition outlined the worldwide abuse of Africans to the League of Nations. In 1935 Garvey left Jamaica and lived and worked in London until his death in 1940.

During a trip to Jamaica, Martin Luther King visited Marcus Garvey’s shrine on June 20, 1965 and laid a wreath. In a speech he told the audience that Garvey “was the first man of color to lead and develop a mass movement. He was the first man on a mass scale and level to give millions of Negroes a sense of dignity and destiny. And make the Negro feel he was somebody.”