

Rent Parties

By Frank Byrd

The history of the Harlem house-rent dates back as far as the World War. To understand what gave such an impetus and community wide significance to this institution, it is necessary to get a picture of living conditions as they were in Harlem at that time.

During the early nineteen twenties it is estimated that more than 200,000 black people migrated to Harlem: West Indians, Africans and American black people from the cotton fields and cane brakes of the Deep South. They were all segregated in a small section of Manhattan about fifty blocks long and seven or eight blocks wide; an area teeming with life and activity. Housing experts have estimated that, sometimes, as many as five to seven thousand people have been known to live in a single block.

Needless to say, living conditions under such circumstances were anything but wholesome and pleasant. It was a typical slum and tenement area little different from many others in New York except for the fact that in Harlem rents were higher; always have been, in fact, since the great war-time migratory influx of colored labor. Despite these exorbitant rents, apartments and furnished rooms, however dingy; were in great demand. Harlem property owners, for the most part Jews, began to live in comparative ease on the fantastic profits yielded by their antiquated dwellings. Before Black people inhabited them, they could be let for virtually a song. Afterwards, however, they brought handsome incomes. The tenants, by hook or crook, managed to barely scrape together the rents. In turn they stuck their roomers for enough profit to yield themselves a meager living.

A four or five room apartment was (and still is) often crowded to capacity with roomers. In many instances, two entire families occupy space intended for only one. When bedtime comes, there is the feverish activity of moving furniture about, making down cots or preparing floor-space as sleeping quarters. The same practice of overcrowding is followed by owners or leesees of private houses. Large rooms are converted into two or three small ones by the simple process of strategically placing beaverboard partitions. These same cubby holes are rented at the price of full sized rooms. In many houses, dining and living rooms are transformed into bed rooms soon after, if not before, midnight. Even "shift-sleeping" is not unknown in many places. During the night, a day-worker uses the room and soon after dawn a night-worker moves in. Seldom does the bed have an opportunity to get cold.

In lower Harlem, sometimes referred to as the Latin Quarter and populated mostly by Cubans, Puerto Ricans and West Indians, accommodations are worse. The Spanish seem to require even less privacy than their American cousins. A three or four room apartment often houses ten or twelve people. Parents invariably have the two or three youngest children bedded down in the same room with themselves. The dining room, kitchen and hallway are utilized as sleeping quarters by relatives or friends.

Blacks constitute the bulk of the Harlem population, however, and have (as was aforementioned) since the War. At that time, there was a great demand for cheap industrial labor. Strong backed; physically capable Black people from the South were the answer to this demand. They came North in droves, beginning what turned out to be the greatest migration of Black people in the history of the United States. The good news about jobs spread like wildfire throughout the Southlands. There was money, good money, to be made in the North, especially New York. New York; the wonder, the magic city. The name alone implied glamour and adventure. It was a picture to definitely catch the fancy of restless, over-worked sharecroppers

and farmhands. And so, it was on to New York, the mecca of the New Negro, the modern Promised Land.

Not only Southern, but thousands of West Indian Black people heeded the call. That was the beginning of housing conditions that have been a headache to a succession of political administrations and a thorn in the side of community and civic organizations that have struggled valiantly, but vainly, to improve them.

With the sudden influx of so many Black people, who apparently instinctively headed for Harlem, property that had been a white elephant on the hands of many landlords immediately took an upward swing. The majority of landlords were delighted but those white property owners who made their homes in Harlem were panic-stricken.

At first, there were only rumblings of protest against this unwanted dark invasion but as the tide of color continued to rise, threatening to completely envelop the Caucasian brethren, they quickly abandoned their fight and fled to more remote parts; Brooklyn, Bronx, Queens and Westchester. As soon as one or two Negro families moved into a block, the whites began moving out. Then the rents were raised. In spite of this, Black people continued to pour in until there was a solid mass of color in every direction.

Harlemites soon discovered that meeting these doubled, and sometimes tripled, rents was not so easy. They began to think of some way to meet their ever increasing deficits. Someone evidently got the idea of having a few friends in as paying party guests a few days before the landlord's scheduled monthly visit. It was a happy; timely thought. The guests had a good time and entered wholeheartedly into the spirit of the party. Besides, it cost each individual very little, probably much less than he would have spent in some public amusement place. Besides, it was a cheap way to help a friend in need. It was such a good, easy way out of one's difficulties that others decided to make use of it. Thus was the Harlem rent-party born.

Like the Charleston and Black Bottom, it became an overnight rage. Here at last, was a partial solution to the problem of excessive rents and dreadfully subnormal incomes. Family after family and hundreds of apartment tenants opened wide their doors, went the originators of the idea one better, in fact, by having a party every Saturday night instead of once a month prior to the landlord's call. The accepted admission price became twenty five cents. It was also expected that the guests would partake freely of the fried chicken, pork chops, pigs feet and potato salad (not to mention homemade "cawn") that was for sale in the kitchen or at a makeshift bar in the hallway.

Saturday night became the gala night in Harlem. Some parties even ran well into Sunday morning, calling a halt only after seven or eight o'clock. Parties were eventually held on other nights also. Thursday particularly became a favorite in view of the fact that "sleep in" domestic workers had a day off and were free to kick up their heels without restraint. Not that any other week-day offered Saturday any serious competition. It always retained its popularity because of its all round convenience as a party day. To begin with, the majority of working class black people, maids, porters, elevator operators and the like, were paid on Saturday and, more important than that, were not required to report to work on Sunday. Saturday, therefore, became the logical night to "pitch" and "carry on", which these pleasure-hungry children did with abandon.

The Saturday night party, like any other universally popular diversion, soon fell into the hands of the racketeers. Many small-time pimps and madams, who, up to that time, had operated under-cover buffet flats, came out into the open and staged nightly so-called Rent Parties. This, of course, was merely a "blind" for more illegitimate activities that catered primarily to the

desire of travelling salesmen, pullman porters, inter-state truck drivers other transients, for some place to stop and amuse themselves. Additional business could always be promoted from that large army of single or unattached males and females who prowled the streets at night in search of adventure in preference to remaining in their small, dingy rooms in some ill-ventilated flat. There were hundreds of young men and women, fresh from the hinterlands, unknown in New York and eager for the opportunity of meeting people. And so, they would stroll the Avenue until they saw some flat with a red, pink or blue light in the window, the plunk of a tin-panny piano and sounds of half-tipsy merry making fleeting out into the night air; then they would venture in, be greeted volubly by the hostess, introduced around and eventually steered to the kitchen where refreshments were for sale. Afterwards, there was probably a night full with continuous drinking, wild, grotesque dancing and crude love-making. But it was, at least, a temporary escape from humdrum loneliness and boredom.

The party givers were fully aware of the conditions under which the majority of these boys and girls lived and decided to commercialize on it as much as possible. They began advertising their get-togethers on little business cards that were naïve attempts at poetic jingles. The following is a typical sample:

*There'll be brown skin mammas
High yallers too
And if you ain't got nothin to do
Come on up to ROY and SADIE'S
228 West 126 St. Sat. Night, May 12th.
There'll be plenty of pig feet
An lots of gin
Jus ring the bell
An come on in.*

They were careful, however, to give these cards to only the “right” people. Prohibition was still in effect and the police were more diligent about raiding questionable apartments than they were about known “gin mills” that flourished on almost every corner.

Despite this fact, the number of personal Saturday night responses, in answer to the undercover advertising, was amazing. The party hostess, eager and glowing with freshly straightened hair, would roll back the living room carpets, dim the lights, seat the musicians, (usually drummer, piano and saxophone player) and, with the appearance of the first cash customer, give the signal that would officially get the “rug-cutting” under way. Soon afterwards she would disappear into the kitchen in order to give a final, last minute inspection to the refreshment counter: a table piled high with pig-feet, fried chicken, fish and potato salad.

The musicians, fortified with a drink or two of King Kong (home made corn whiskey) begin “beating out the rhythm” on their battered instruments while the dancers keep time with gleeful whoops, fantastic body-gyrations and convulsions that appear to be a cross between the itch and a primitive mating-dance.

After some John buys a couple of rounds of drinks, things begin to hum in earnest. The musicians instinctively improvise as they go along, finding it difficult, perhaps, to express the full intensity of their emotions through a mere arrangement, no matter how well written.

But the thing that makes the house-rent party (even now) so colorful and fascinating is the unequalled picture created by the dancers themselves. When the band gets hot, the dancers get hotter. They stir, throw or bounce themselves about with complete abandon; their wild, grotesque movements silhouetted in the semi-darkness like flashes from some ancient tribal ceremony.

They apparently work themselves up into frenzy but never lose time with the music despite their frantic acrobatics. Theirs' is a coordination absolutely unexcelled. It is simple, primitive, inspired. As far as dancing is concerned, there are no conventions. You do what you like, express what you feel, take the lid off if you happen to be in the mood. In short, anything goes.

About one o'clock in the morning; hilarity reaches its peak. "The Boys", most of whom are hard-working hard-drinking truck drivers, long-shoremen, moving men, porters or laborers, settle down to the serious business of enjoying themselves. They spin, tug, and fling their buxom, amiable partners in all directions. When the music finally stops, they are soaked and steaming with perspiration. "The Girls", the majority of whom are cooks, laundresses, maids or hair-dressers, set their hats at a jaunty angle and kick up their heels with glee. Their tantalizing grins and the uniformly wicked gleam in their eyes dare the full blooded young bucks to do their darndest. They may have been utter strangers during the early part of the evening but before the night is over, they are all happily sweating and laughing together in the beat of spirits.

Everything they do is free and easy; typical of that group of hard-working Black people who have little or no inhibitions and the fertility of imagination so necessary to the invention and unrestrained expression of new dance-steps and rhythms.

The dancers organize little impromptu contests among themselves and this competition is often responsible for the birth of many new and original dance-steps. The house-rent party takes credit for the innovation of the Lindy-Hop that was subsequently improved upon at the Savoy Ballroom. For years, it has been a great favorite with the regular rug-cutting crowd. Nothing has been able to supplant it, not ever the Boogie-Woogie that has recently enjoyed a great wave of popularity in Uptown New York.

Such unexpected delights as these made the house-rent party, during its infancy, a success with more than one social set. Once in awhile a stray ofay or a small party of pseudo artistic young Black people, the upper-crust, the creme-de-la-creme of Black Manhattan society, would wander into one of these parties and gasp or titter (with cultured restraint, of course) at the primitive, untutored Black people who apparently had so much fun wriggling their bodies about to the accompaniment of such mad, riotously abandoned music. Seldom, however, did these outsiders seem to catch the real spirit of the party and as far as the rug-cutters were concerned, they simply did not belong.

With the advent of Repeal, the rent-party went out, became definitely a thing of the past. It was too dangerous to try to sell whiskey after it became legal. With its passing went one of the most colorful eras that Harlem has ever known.

