

MEET LANGSTON HUGHES



In 1921 Langston Hughes moved to New York City and enrolled at Columbia University to learn more about poetry-in the nightclubs and streets of Harlem. “To see *Shuffle Along* was the main reason I wanted to go to Columbia,” Hughes said. “When I saw it, I was thrilled and delighted.” The first musical written and performed by African Americans, *Shuffle Along* became a Broadway sensation and launched several careers. Many African Americans were moving north for good-paying jobs and vibrant city life, yet Hughes knew their life was bittersweet. The remnants of slavery and the struggle with segregation held back African Americans from the American dream that was readily available to many whites during the Roaring Twenties.

Hughes’s writing celebrated the dignity of ordinary, working-class African Americans, helping many realize that black was beautiful. “They seemed to me like the gayest and the bravest people possible-these Negroes from the Southern ghettos-facing tremendous odds, working and laughing and trying to get somewhere in the world,” Hughes said. This sentiment fit into the Modernist notion that everyday images, speech, and events belong in the highest forms of literature.

Many Homes Born in Joplin, Missouri, Hughes lived in six different cities by the time he was twelve. It was a childhood of books, music, and poverty. His father moved to Mexico, and his mother moved frequently in search of employment. When his mother sought work, Hughes stayed in Lawrence, Kansas, with his grandmother.

After finishing high school, he visited his father, by then a prosperous lawyer in Mexico. Crossing the Mississippi River on the train gave Hughes the inspiration for his poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” “I put it down on the back of an envelope I had in my pocket, and within the space of ten or fifteen minutes, as the train gathered speed in the dusk, I had written this poem.” His father offered to pay his college tuition if Hughes left the United States. He refused, wanting to try life in New York City. The city captivated him, but he was unhappy at school. He dropped out-later he would finish his degree elsewhere-and worked odd jobs while traveling to Africa and France.

Harlem’s Bard Returning to the United States, Hughes worked as a hotel busboy in Washington, D.C. In 1925 he left three poems by the plate of well-known poet Vachel Lindsay, who was astounded by Hughes’s work. Newspapers reported the next day that Lindsay had discovered an astonishing poet, who happened to be an African American busboy. Hughes soon moved back to Harlem, able to support himself through his writing. His career began in 1926 with the publication of a book of his poetry, *The Weary Blues*. Hughes, considered the poet laureate of Harlem, also wrote novels, nonfiction, plays, and children’s books. Even death could not dampen his sense of humor. Hughes arranged for a jazz trio to play the Duke Ellington tune “*Do Nothing Till You Hear from Me*” at his funeral in New York City.

His legacy as a spokesperson of the Harlem Renaissance lives on in contemporary culture. Critic Kevin Powell writes, “The very people that he documented so well ... were the people who created hip-hop . . . We’re still asking the same questions that Langston Hughes was asking.”

Langston Hughes was born in 1902 and died in 1967.

A dream deferred

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

Like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore--

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over--

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

- Langston Hughes

The Negro Speaks of Rivers

Langston Hughes



I've known rivers:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates¹ when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo² and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile³ and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New Orleans,⁴ and I've seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

¹ The Euphrates (yoo fra' tez) River flows from Turkey through Syria and Iraq. Many ancient civilizations flourished in the area between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers.

² The Congo, also called the Zaire, is a river in central Africa.

³ The Nile, which runs through northeast Africa, is the longest river in the world.

⁴ According to legend, Abraham Lincoln decided that slavery should be abolished after witnessing his first slave auction in New Orleans, Louisiana, along the Mississippi River

The Negro was in Vogue

Langston Hughes

The 1920s were the years of Manhattan's black Renaissance. It began with *Shuffle Along*, *Running Wild*, and the Charleston.⁵ Perhaps some people would say even with *The Emperor Jones*, Charles Gilpin, and the tom-toms at the Provincetown. But certainly it was the musical revue, *Shuffle Along*, that gave a scintillating send-off to that Negro vogue in Manhattan, which reached its peak just before the crash of 1929, the crash that sent Negroes, white folks, and all rolling down the toward the Works Progress Administration.⁶

Shuffle Along was a honey of a show. Swift, bright funny, rollicking, and gay, with a dozen danceable, singable tunes. Besides, look who were in it: The now famous choir director, Hall Johnson and the composer, William Grant Still, were a part of the orchestra. Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle wrote the music and played and acted in the show. Miller and Lyles were the comics. Florence Mills skyrocketed to fame in the second act. Trixie Smith sang "He May Be Your Man but He Comes to See Me Sometimes." And Caterina Jarboro, now a European prima donna⁷ and the internationally celebrated Josephine Baker were merely in the chorus. Everybody was in the audience—including me. People came back to see it innumerable times. It was always packed.

To see *Shuffle Along* was the main reason I wanted to go to Columbia. When I saw it, I was thrilled and delighted. From then on I was in the gallery of the Cort Theatre every time I got a chance. That year, too, I saw Katharine Cornell in *A Bill of Divorcement*, Margaret Wycherley in *The Verge*, Maugham's *The Circle* with Mrs. Leslie Carter, and the Theatre Guild production of Kaiser's *From Morn Till Midnight*. But I remember *Shuffle Along* best of all. It gave just the proper push—a pre-Charleston kick—to that Negro vogue of the 20s, that spread to books, African sculpture, music, and dancing.

Put down the 1920's for the rise of Roland Hayes, who packed Carnegie Hall, the rise of Paul Robeson in New York and London, of Florence Mills over two continents, of Rose McClendon in Broadway parts that never measured up to her, the booming voice of Bessie Smith and the low moan of Clara on thousands of records, and the rise of that grand comedienne of song, Ethel Waters, singing: "Charlie's elected now! He's in right for sure!" Put down the 1920's for Louis Armstrong and Gladys Bentley and Josephine



Aspects of Negro Life: Song of the Towers, 1934. Aaron Douglas

⁵ The Charleston is an energetic dance to jazz music. The Lindy Hop and the black-bottom, mentioned later, are similar dances.

⁶ The Works Progress Administration was a government agency established in 1935 to give employment to out-of-work people.

⁷ A prima donna (pre' ma don 'a) is a principal or featured woman singer.

Baker. White people began to come to Harlem in droves.”⁸ For several years they packed the expensive Cotton Club on Lenox Avenue. But I was never there, because the Cotton Club was a Jim Crow⁹ club for gangsters and monied whites. They were not cordial¹⁰ to Negro patronage¹¹, unless you were a celebrity like Bojangles. So Harlem Negroes did not like the Cotton Club and never appreciated its Jim Crow policy in the very heart of their dark community. Nor did ordinary Negroes like the growing influx?¹² of whites toward Harlem after sundown, flooding the little cabarets and bars where formerly only colored people laughed and sang, and where now the strangers were given the best ringside tables to sit and stare at the Negro customers-like amusing animals in a zoo. The Negroes said: “We can’t go downtown and sit and stare at you in your clubs. You won’t even let us in your clubs.” But they didn’t say it out loud-for Negroes are practically never rude to white people. So thousands of whites came to Harlem night after night, thinking the Negroes loved to have them there, and firmly believing that all Harlemites left their houses at sundown to sing and dance in cabarets, because most of the whites saw nothing but the cabarets, not the houses.

Some of the owners of Harlem clubs, delighted at the flood of white patronage, made the grievous error of barring their own race, after the manner of the famous Cotton Club. But most of these quickly lost business and folded up, because they failed to realize that a large part of the Harlem Attraction for downtown New Yorkers lay in simply watching the colored customers amuse themselves. And the smaller clubs, of course, had no big floor shows or a name band like the Cotton Club, where Duke Ellington usually held forth, so, without black patronage, they were not amusing at all.

Some of the small clubs, however, had people like Gladys Bentley, who was something worth discovering in those days, before she got famous, acquired an accompanist, specially written material, and conscious vulgarity. But for two or three amazing years, Miss Bentley sat, and played a big piano all night long, literally all night, without stopping-singing songs like “The St. James Infirmary,” from ten in the evening until dawn, with scarcely a break between the notes, sliding from one song to another, with a powerful and continuous underbeat of jungle rhythm. Miss Bentley was an amazing exhibition of musical energy-a large, dark, masculine lady, whose feet pounded the floor while her fingers pounded the keyboard-a perfect piece of African sculpture, animated by her own rhythm.

But when the place where she played became too well known, she began to sing with an accompanist, became a star, moved to a larger place, then downtown, and is now in Hall. The old magic of the woman and the piano and the night and the rhythm being one is gone. But everything goes, one way or another. The ‘20s are gone and lots of fine things in Harlem night life have disappeared like snow in the sun—since it became utterly commercial, planned for the downtown tourist trade, and therefore dull

⁸ Drovers are large crowds.

⁹ Jim Crow refers to segregation or discrimination against African Americans

¹⁰ Cordial (kor’ jal) means “warm and friendly.”

¹¹ A business; trade; or custom

¹² An influx is a continual coming in of people or things.



The Lindy-hoppers at the Savoy even began to practice acrobatic routines, and to do absurd for the entertainment of the whites, that probably never would have entered their heads to attempt merely for their own effortless amusement. Some of the lindy-hoppers had cards printed with their names on them and became dance professors teaching the tourists. Then Harlem nights became show nights for the Nordics.”¹³

Some critics say that that is what happened to certain Negro writers, too—that they ceased to write to amuse themselves and began to write to amuse and entertain white people, and in so doing distorted and over-colored their material, and left out a great many things they thought would offend their American brothers of a lighter complexion. Maybe—since Negroes have writer-racketeers, as has any other race. But I have known almost all of them, and most of the good ones have tried to be honest, write honestly, and express their world as they saw it.

All of us know that the gay and sparkling life of the so-called Negro Renaissance of the 20s was not so gay and sparkling beneath the surface as it looked. Carl Van Vechten, in the character of Byron in *Nigger Heaven*, captured some of the bitterness and frustration of literary Harlem that Wallace Thurman later so effectively poured into his *Infants of the Spring*—the only novel by a Negro about that fantastic period when Harlem was in vogue.

It was a period when, at almost every Harlem upper-crust dance or party, one would be introduced to various distinguished white celebrities there as guests. It was a period when almost any Harlem Negro of any social importance at all would be likely to say casually: “As I was remarking the other day to Heywood-,” meaning Heywood Brown. Or: “As I said to George-,” referring to George Gershwin. It was a period when local and visiting royalty were not at all uncommon in Harlem. And when the parties of A’Lelia Walker, the Negro heiress, were filled with guests whose names would turn any Nordic social climber green with envy. It was a period when Harold Jackman, a handsome young Harlem school teacher of modest means, calmly announced one day that he was sailing for the Riviera for a fortnight, to attend Princess Murat’s yachting party. It was a period when Charleston preachers opened up shouting churches as sideshows for white tourists. It was a period when at least one charming colored chorus girl, amber enough to pass for a Latin American, was living in a penthouse, with all her bills paid by a gentleman whose name was banker’s magic on Wall Street. It was a period when every season there was at

¹³ Nordics usually refers to people of Scandinavia; here, the word means white people in general

least one hit play on Broadway acted by a Negro cast. And when books by Negro authors were being published with much greater frequency and much more publicity than ever before or since in history. It was a period when white writers wrote about Negroes more successfully (commercially speaking) than Negroes did about themselves. It was the period (God help us!) when Ethel Barrymore appeared in blackface in *Scarlet Sister Mary!* It was the period when the Negro was in vogue.

I was there. I had a swell time while it lasted. But I thought it wouldn't last long. (I remember the vogue for things Russian, the season the Chauve-Souris first came to town.) For how could a large and enthusiastic number of people be crazy about Negroes forever? But some Harlemites thought millennium¹⁴ had come. They thought the race problem had at last been solved through Art plus Gladys Bentley. They were sure the New Negro would lead a new life from then on in green pastures of tolerance created by Countee Cullen, Ethel Waters, Claude McKay, Duke Ellington, Bojangles, and Alain Locke. I don't know what made any Negroes think that-except that they were mostly intellectuals doing the thinking. The ordinary Negroes hadn't heard of the Negro Renaissance. And if they had, it hadn't raised their wages any. As for all those white folks in the speakeasies?¹⁵ and night clubs of Harlem-well, maybe a colored man could find some place to have a drink that the tourists hadn't yet discovered. Then it was that house-rent parties began to flourish-and not always to raise the rent either. But, as often as not, to have a get-together of one's own, where you could do the black-bottom with no stranger behind you trying to do it, too. Non-theatrical, non-intellectual Harlem was an unwilling victim of its own vogue. It didn't like to be stared at by white folks. But perhaps the downtowners never knew this-for the cabaret owners, the entertainers, and the speakeasy prietors treated them fine-as long as they paid.

The Saturday night rent parties that I attended were often more amusing than any night club, in small apartments where God knows who lived-because the guests seldom did-but where the piano would often be augmented¹⁶ by a guitar, or an odd cornet, or somebody with a' pair of drums walking in off street. And where awful bootleg¹⁷ whiskey and good fried fish or steaming chitterling were sold at very low prices. And the dancing and singing and impromptu¹⁸ entertaining went on until came in at the windows.

These parties, often termed whist¹⁹ parties or dances, were usually announced by brightly colored cards stuck in the grille of apartment elevators. Some of the cards were highly entertaining in themselves. Almost every Saturday night when I was in Harlem I went to a house-rent party. I wrote lots of poems about house-rent parties, and ate there at many a fried fish and pig's foot-with liquid refreshments on the side. I met ladies' maids and truck drivers, laundry workers and shoe shine boys, seamstresses and porters. I can still hear their laughter in my ears, hear the soft slow music, and feel the floor shaking as the dancers danced. Φ

¹⁴ A period of great ~ happiness: peace, or prosperity

¹⁵ During Prohibition, speakeasies were secret clubs where alcoholic drinks were sold illegally

¹⁶ Augmented means "accompanied"

¹⁷ Bootleg means "made, transported, or sold illegally:"

¹⁸ offhand; with-out preparation - improvised

¹⁹ Whist is a card game similar to bridge