Hailing Harlem's Heyday

By Davis M. Maxfield
Smithsonian News Service

Harlem: exciting, exotic, innovative. The memory may have faded in recent decades, but in the spirited, fast-changing 1920s, this community was a mecca for activists and artists — a forum and a stage where old ways were challenged, where new ideas seemed to flow as freely as the era's bathtub gin.

Often forgotten is that the Charleston and the fox trot, new racial attitudes, hot jazz and cool blues, polemic publications, expressive poetry and prose and, above all, a new black pride leaped to national attention from the streets of Harlem in the '20s. For the creative, for the adventuresome, for blacks and whites alike, the blocks beyond Central Park were then a place to be.

That this period became known as the Harlem Renaissance was inevitable, considering the explosion of energy that came out of the darkness of slavery, the segregation laws and lynchings in the South, the poverty and prejudice in the North.

Harlem to the public eye during this renaissance was two worlds — cerebral and serious, fun-loving and frivolous. Late-night clubs and cabarets operated in a time zone unknown to the early-to-bed, early-to-rise. As Variety, the entertainment industry's weekly, reported in 1929:

''Harlem has attained pre-eminence in the past few years as an amusement center. Never has it been so popular. One sees as many limousines from Park and upper Fifth Avenue parked outside its sizzling cafes, 'speaks' and spiritual seances as seen in any other highgrade white locale in the country. When it comes to pulchritude, punch and presentation the Harlem places have Broadway's nightclubs distanced. Celebrities in all walks of life make the Harlem joints every night. You'll likely see a Lady Mountbatten on the ringside of the Cotton Club, a (producer) David Belasco at another and a diplomat in the next.''

In part, the renaissance was spontaneous, a natural excitement coming from artistic genius, the era's brassy sounds, the exuberant singing and dancing starring names such as Cab Calloway, Ethel Waters, Bessie Smith, Bill ''Bojangles'' Robinson, Duke Ellington, Lena Horne. But in part, the renaissance was a calculated movement, propelled by the plans and hopes of a determined number of intellectuals and theorists.

From time to time, the two worlds would overlap (''When did anyone ever sleep?'' one historian asks), yet the strategists' attention was fixed on the future: ''What can be done to help white Americans see black America with some dignity?'' was the question, says Louise Hutchinson, an historian at the Smithsonian's Anacostia Neighborhood Museum in Washington, D.C., site of a current exhibition, ''The Renaissance: Black Arts of the '20s.''

In a sense, it began in 1924 when Charles Spurgeon Johnson, a black sociologist and editor, invited a dozen or so prominent writers to dine at New York's Civic Club to seek ways to bring blacks into America's mainstream. About 110 turned out, including the noted playwright Eugene O'Neill and the acerbic journalist H.L. Mencken. In effect, Hutchinson says, Johnson was the ''midwife'' of the Harlem Renaissance.

As a spin-off of the successful evening, Alain Locke — erudite, handsome, the first black Rhodes scholar — was called upon to guest edit an entire issue of the prestigious literary periodical, Survey Graphic. It would be devoted entirely to writing by blacks. Locke, in his introduction, observed: ''Negro life is not only establishing new contacts and founding new centers, it is finding a new soul.''

Though theirs was never a formal movement, in practical terms these intellectuals saw arts and letters as a bridge between the races, and it was Johnson's stated goal to ''foster a market for Negro writers and for literature by and about Negroes.''

Beyond the writers and the talented entertainers, there was a third, even larger, world in Harlem at the time, populated by people who never saw the inside of a jazz club or sat before a typewriter or easel. Ordinary wage earners, they ventured out to Lenox and Seventh avenues to work or to shop. They belonged, the novelist Fannie Hurst noted, to ''the immense section of unhonored and unsung Harlem which represents decency, family unity and social stability.''

And beyond the streets filled nightly with Packards and Caddys, men in high hats and women in beads and furs — ''Everybody lived like a millionaire,'' exaggerated a journalist of the day — were grim realities. ''Fifth Avenue begins prosperously enough at 125th Street, becomes a slum district about 131st Street, and finally slithers off into a ware-house lined, dingy alleyway,'' another writer of the day reported.

Harlem, once a German-American community, began to attract Afro-Americans after New York real-estate speculators lost their shirts in a wave of over-building that coincided with the depression of 1905-1906. For the first time, developers began renting to blacks from other areas of New York, and later to waves of Southerners recruited to fill jobs during World War I.

Sunday night was *the* night at the Cotton Club, when stars performing all over New York would show up and be entertained by the club orchestra.

The general upheaval and disillusionment that followed wartime idealism hit hard in this new home for blacks. Although 1,300 black soldiers, members of the decorated U.S. 369th Infantry Regiment — the ''Hell Fighters'' — had marched triumphantly up Fifth Avenue and then through Harlem to celebrate the Allied victory, peace for the race rang hollow. After all, a nation that had fought to make ''the world safe for democracy'' was itself a place of segregation, inequality and recent racial violence.

Determined to declare war on these conditions was W.E.B. DuBois, editor of The Crisis, published by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Either ''loved or hated,'' says the Smithsonian's Hutchinson, but always exercising great influence in the Harlem community, DuBois issued a stirring message right after the war: ''We are cowards and jackasses if now . . . we do not marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn to fight . . . against the forces of hell in our own land. We return/We return from fighting/We return fighting.''

A younger crowd of ''New Negro'' progressives considered the protest views of DuBois — not to mention the ''accommodationist'' positions of Booker T. Washington — as dated voices of an ''Old Negro'' establishment. This was ''a most irreverent bunch,'' claiming to be ''more sophisticated in modern ideas than their elders,'' the journalist Jervis Anderson maintains in his 1981 study, *This Was Harlem*.

There were also vocal racial nationalists closely linked to the New Negro writers. Together, Anderson says, they represented ''not an appeal to compassion and social redress but a bold assertion of self.'' As blues-steeped Langston Hughes, Harlem's acknowledged poet laureate, wrote in 1926, ''We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame.''

Whites and blacks alike supported many of these new literary lights. Hughes himself was favored for years by a Park Avenue patron. But Carl Van Vechten, one of the most influential white go-betweens for black writers and the publishers downtown, was the first to write profitably about the sweep of exotic Harlem life.

Van Vechten had long relished the Harlem scene, frequenting such hot spots as the Cotton Club. His own parties seemed to many the epitome of '20s glamour. Here blacks and whites — musicians, artists, the stars of theater — rubbed shoulders, sipped drinks, conversed, sang and danced. Yet his controversially titled novel, *Nigger Heaven*, focusing as it did on the ''rich and poor, fast and slow, intellectual and ignorant,'' was despised by many blacks, among them DuBois, who called the work ''a blow in the face, an affront to the hospitality of black folk and to the intelligence of white.''

Claude McKay, the earliest voice of the Harlem Renaissance, dropped another best-selling bombshell on the scene with his *Home to Harlem*. Where Van Vechten had offended by intruding the under-class into a novel about high Harlem, one historian observes, McKay ''sinned far more grievously by totalling ignoring the upper classes.'' McKay argued acidly that his was ''a real proletarian novel.''

In his account of Harlem life, Anderson suggests that works like McKay's have lasting value because they ''helped set black literature — along with American writing as a whole — upon a course that has since become broader, more democratic in sensibility.''

By the depths of the Depression, both the serious side and the razzle-dazzle of the Harlem Renaissance were muted. As Langston Hughes lamented, ''We were no longer in vogue . . . Sophisticated New Yorkers turned to Noel Coward. Colored actors began to go hungry, publishers politely rejected new uses for their money . . . The generous 1920s were over.'' And yet blacks had found a strong new voice, and they would use it again.

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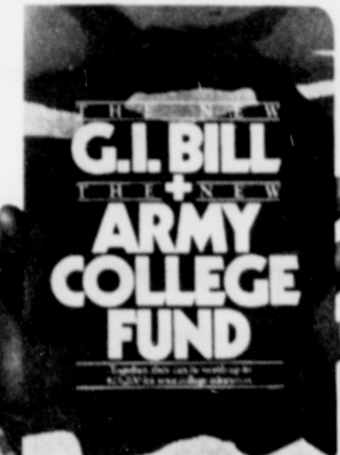

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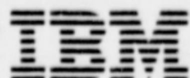

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