

# The African-American Culture Expression during the Harlem Renaissance

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**Abstract:** The Harlem Renaissance is a period of remarkable creativity in literature, music, dance, painting, and sculpture by African-Americans. Though bore the additional burden of racial prejudice, the African-Americans also wanted to establish and develop their authentic American voice. This paper explores how the blacks break the old American cultural conventions and express their own cultures during the Harlem Renaissance.

## 1. Introduction

To describe the largest racial minority in America, the term “nigger” is pejorative and “Black” is less pejorative. By the time of the Harlem Renaissance, “Negro” was the more preferred term. Often within the “colored” community, the lighter shades were preferred because they were closer to white, but beginning in the Harlem Renaissance and on through the time of the Civil Rights movement, when the rallying cry was “Black is beautiful,” darker skin color became a sign of not being adulterated by white blood, and “Black” returned to vogue. Then as American black folk rediscovered their African origins, African-American came into being, and today it is the politically correct term.

Throughout American history, the political and cultural scene has always been an area in which marginalized voices compete with mainstream voices for the opportunity to express themselves, to convey their message, to influence public opinion, to achieve the status of recognition.

## 2. The African-American Culture Expression

At any given moment, the literary scene (as well as the scene of the other arts including music, dance, painting, sculpture, essays, etc.) is just such an area. American writers, too, wanted to establish and develop an authentic American voice, and they had to struggle against the early-established literature that had adopted European, especially British, convention styles, and purposes.

How hard was it for even white Protestant American writers to break through that barrier? Let one fact represent the difficulty: Theodore Dreiser was the first American writer of note for whom English was not the native tongue of both his parents. And, if it was hard for whites to break the grip of old conventions and usages, how much more so for black writers who bore the additional burden of racial prejudice!

During the Harlem Renaissance, black writers and other artists and speakers searched for their own voice constantly. The following two instances might illustrate this significant phase when blacks found their voice. Each instance concerns a key figure.

First, James Weldon Johnson, later known for his “God’s Trombones.” visiting a black church in Kansas City, Johnson was suddenly struck by the sermon. In the preacher’s voice, in the materials he used and the way he presented them, Johnson suddenly knew that he was in touch with the black folk tradition, and that tradition would be the source of the voice black folks were seeking.

He had heard what Americans know as the style of black worship. Not only the songsters but the preacher too, setting up a call and eliciting a response from the audience. The preacher is not just speaking at people, but engaging them in a conversation with emotional resonance, a resonance that elicits response from the congregation. That experience became the basis for Johnson’s “God’s

Trombones.” and in that instance he knew he had insight into a voice that would express Negro history, character, longing, and aspiration.

The other incident is W.C.Handy. W.C.Handy is known as the “father of the blues,” meaning not that he was the first to play the blues but that he fostered their development into a popular American art form. In 1903, playing in Cleveland, Mississippi, Handy got his first chance to hear blues music. A band from the Mississippi Delta, playing a bass, a mandolin, and a guitar, played during the intermission than Handy’s band did for the whole evening. And in that instant, Handy recognized that the blues were an authentic expression of black culture, and that singing the blues, singing in a blues idiom, could offer a voice to Negroes that would express where they had been, how they lived, and what their dreams were.

What was the cultural power that these two folk expressions tapped into? What was there in African American culture that had allowed African Americans to survive their early ordeals on American soil and promised better things to come?

The answers have not long been available, and in the past it was often assumed that African Americans in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were just beginning to pick up on cultural traits of the mainstream of American life, that they were merely assimilating. Today, thanks to the studies of such scholars as Houston Baker, Sterling Stuckey, Samuel Floyd, Henry Grates, and LeRoi Jones, Americans have a more developed idea of the forces integral to African American life and survival, forces that had to also face the challenge of the northern migration and the new life in urban settings along the rivers and in the major metropolises such as New York.

Among different literary and art forms, music is one way that expressed the common culture of African-Americans. In music, they expressed their plight, their endurance and resolve, and their intention to eventually overcome their oppression. Their early songs later encountered the traditions of hymns and psalms as they were sung in the Christian traditions to which slaves were exposed when observing their masters, and together emerged as the distinctive art form called the Negro Spiritual. Often the songs and spirituals were coded messages, coded so that the slave owners would not understand their true meaning. That is , the music itself was a part of the mask Dunbar said his people wore.

The spirituals, as an art form, were already in evidence when the Jim Crow laws began to make Negroes think of leaving the south where they had resided for generations. Among the spirituals one can hear the two tugs pulling at their hearts, the one tug toward freedom, toward leaving, and the other tug toward staying, toward remaining within the nurture of their community. For example, in a song as simple as “swing low, sweet chariot,” whites listening might hear a song coming out of a fairly simple Christian faith that suggested that when a person dies the angels will come for the departed soul and take it to heaven. But the Negro singing the spiritual knew full well that the religiously symbolic Jordan River was really the politically symbolic Ohio River and that the “sweet chariot” was the Underground Railroad, and the song was about escape to the north. Yet in a song such as “There is a Balm in Gilead,” the Negro was reminded that his strength came from the nurturing arms of his community, all of which would be lost if he ventured north to freedom.

Now it is an oversimplification, but in general the spiritual gave rise to two art forms as the migration took place. The transplanted Negro, alone in a strange city or having to form a new community, perhaps at the bar or juke joint, sang the blues; but sometimes whole church communities moved together, kept the community together, and there they sang what is called Gospel Music. We might readily think of one as secular and the other sacred music, and sometimes this is the case, but any number of black artists could sing in either medium, and the ancient culture they had maintained did not recognize such clear distinctions between church and cabaret as did white America.

In blues, jazz, gospel, and so on, the Negro preserved the very nature of the core West African cultural system that he had carried to this country, and it was by means of these musical forms that he carried that same cultural system north in the migration. The voice of the soul of the Negro people, according to George Gershwin, was “jazz developed out of ragtime, jazz that is the plantation song improved and transferred into finer, bigger harmonies” (Claudia Roth Pierpont, 74).

And parallel to the musical forms was the art of oration, of the man of words, who used the same response form that blues uses; hence the preaching, even in a black Christian church, carried with it the cultural values carried from West Africa.

Thus, what W.C. Handy heard in the blues playing at a dance hall in the Mississippi Delta and what James Weldon Johnson heard in the preaching at a black church in Kansas City were in this sense one and the same, or rather two distinct expressions of the thing.

### **3. Conclusion**

From way off Kansas City and deep down Mississippi, the blacks bring their music, their culture together to New York City and the Harlem Renaissance. In Harlem, the African-American folk tradition lay at the heart of their culture, and that had allowed them to survive the horrors of the middle passage and the evils of slavery, and that promised to provide them a voice for the future. This all translate into the new life of Harlem and New York City. It helped shape what became the Harlem Renaissance.

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