

Harlem Holiday: The Cotton Club, 1925-1940

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Abstract

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This study looks at the Cotton Club, the most famous nightclub in American history, and its position in the histories of the American urban landscape and the white imagination. The Cotton Club is remarkably both very well-known and academically unexplored, and this work both begins that exploration and revises the simple binary that positions the club as either a place of segregated racial misery or unencumbered Jazz Age joy. The floorshows at the club from 1925-1940 both reinscribed a white, heteronormative dominance but these performances also made inroads into subverting that dominance. The shows allowed expression from some of the most highly regarded African American performers of the 1920s and 1930s, as well as specialty acts (dancers, comedians, vocalists) and the chorus line of “copper-colored gals.” My dissertation is arranged in a temporally linear fashion, giving a history of the club that has been wholly ignored by academia, and using touristic theory, I investigate how white audiences viewed an evening at the club, a trip to Harlem in the twenties and thirties, and the spectacle of black bodies on stage.

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Introduction: The Competing Narratives of the Cotton Club

This study looks at the Cotton Club, the most famous nightclub in American history, and its position in the histories of the American urban landscape and the white imagination. The Cotton Club is remarkably both very well-known and academically unexplored, and this work both begins that exploration and revises the simple binary that positions the club as either a place of segregated racial misery or unencumbered Jazz Age joy. The floorshows at the club from 1925-1940 both reinscribed a white, heteronormative dominance but these performances also made inroads into subverting that dominance. The shows allowed expression from some of the most highly regarded African American performers of the 1920s and 1930s, as well as specialty acts (dancers, comedians, vocalists) and the chorus line of “copper-colored gals.” My dissertation is arranged in a temporally linear fashion, giving a history of the club that has been wholly ignored by academia, and using touristic theory, I investigate how white audiences viewed an evening at the club, a trip to Harlem in the twenties and thirties, and the spectacle of black bodies on stage.

Pulitzer Prize-winning historian David Levering Lewis, author of several major works about the Harlem Renaissance, has this to say about the Cotton Club, Harlem’s

“gaudiest and best-known nightspot”: that it “barred African Americans”¹ and was a “white sanctuary” where only “very light Afro-Americans were given the green light by the manager, George “Big Frenchy” Demange”; that “those Langston Hughes poems about happy performers weeping as the sun rose must have come from the Cotton Club,” where the performers worked under miserable conditions and lived in fear of the power of “the gloved fist of Alphonse Capone’s mob to make and break contracts”; and that at other Harlem nightspots, “the music [...] was musician’s music – not always as polished as Ellington’s or as gymnastic as Calloway’s, but sometimes more original.”²

Everything he says here is wrong.

Obviously, a place cannot both have a “whites only” policy and accept African Americans. Either it is “whites only” or it isn’t, and the Cotton Club, while it was in Harlem, wasn’t. When the Cotton Club moved downtown to Times Square in 1936, it did become a whites-only venue, but while in Harlem it happily admitted African Americans “if,” in the words of Cab Calloway, “they could afford it.”³ Calloway’s is not the only first-hand account. The African American intellectual Rudolph Fisher writes of “trying” the Cotton Club, and Lewis should have been aware of Fisher’s account as it appears in a collection of writing that Lewis himself edited.⁴ This is not to say that the Cotton Club

¹ David Levering Lewis, “City of Refuge.” *Ain’t Nothing Like the Real Thing: How the Apollo Theater Shaped American Entertainment*, Richard Carlin and Kinshasha Holman Conwill, eds (Washington DC: Smithsonian Books, 2010) 47.

² David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997) 209-210.

³ Cab Calloway, “Swing That Music! Swing.” Television interview. BBC, 1977. Schomburg Center, NYPL.

⁴ Rudolph Fisher, “The Caucasian Storms Harlem.” *The Harlem Renaissance Reader*, Ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Viking Penguin USA, 1994) 111.

was a bastion of racial progress. There are several accounts of the doormen at the club refusing entry to mixed-race parties, but they weren't refused by George "Big Frenchy" Demange. Owney Madden's number one lieutenant, Demange was a major player in the New York underworld – he didn't work as a nightclub doorman, comparing the complexions of the clientele. The Cotton Club was owned by Owney Madden, a criminal kingpin called "the Duke of New York" – Madden wasn't a member of someone else's mob.

Both Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway, as well as members of their orchestras and dancers in the chorus line, remember their time at the Cotton Club fondly. Ellington spends a chapter of his autobiography doing nothing but enthusing about the club without a single harsh word.⁵ Calloway wrote that "the money was good, the shows were fine, and the audiences and owners respected us and our music."⁶ And it wasn't only the headliners who remember their time at the club well – dancer Carolyn Rich Henderson remembered that "it was a real distinction to belong to the Cotton Club line [...] wherever you went, people pointed you out as the highest type of glamour."⁷ In fact, in 1940 the chorus girls at Harlem's Apollo Theatre went on strike until their pay was raised to the level of the dancers at the Cotton Club.⁸ While these performers were certainly not insensible to racial injustices of the period – Calloway and singer Lena Horne, in

⁵ Duke Ellington, *Music is My Mistress* (New York: De Capo Press, 1973) 80-88.

⁶ Cab Calloway and Bryant Rollins, *Of Minnie the Moocher and Me* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976) 90.

⁷ James Gavin, *Stormy Weather: The Life of Lena Horne* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2010) 42.

⁸ Gavin 43.

particular, seem to have given their position as black entertainers for predominantly white audiences a great deal of thought – and while these injustices certainly did exist, there is nothing to suggest that they were “weeping as the sun rose.” These were professionals carving out a career in show business, and using the best-known cabaret in New York as well as its sizeable radio audience to achieve enviable levels of fame. The entertainment industry has always been financially precarious, and for African American entertainers in the early twentieth century this is doubly true, yet the Cotton Club performers were making a healthy living during the Great Depression, an accomplishment that should not be lightly dismissed. Despite Lewis’ assertion about how they “must” have felt, in their memoirs and recollections these entertainers do not seem to have remembered their time at the Cotton Club as poetic tragedies.

And lastly, who were these musicians who were creating pieces that were “more original” than that of a young Duke Ellington, creating the “jungle sound” and incorporating Mendelssohn motifs into jazz? Who was “more original” than Cab Calloway redefining scat singing, jazz performance, and creating a hep new lyrical style? If Duke Ellington, arguably America’s greatest composer, wasn’t creating “musician’s music,” who was? Lewis doesn’t say. He doesn’t name any of these musicians who were superior to Duke Ellington, he only asserts that there was “more original” music, “musician’s music,” down the street, in another place, somewhere other than the Cotton Club.

Lewis is certainly not alone in perpetuating false narratives about the Cotton Club. Many writers analyzing the literary world of the Harlem Renaissance have also claimed that the Cotton Club barred African Americans. Various writers on Harlem's vibrant queer scene of the 1920s have called the Cotton Club "segregated"⁹ or wrote that it "denied entrance for black patrons."¹⁰ In a collection of essays on Harlem's Apollo Theatre, *Ain't Nothing Like the Real Thing*, the writers of two different chapters call the Cotton Club "whites only"¹¹ - clearly, for those whose project is writing about the Apollo, the neighboring Cotton Club is not "the real thing." And while false accusations of racial exclusion are certainly the most common, some of these other mistakes appear as well. In *Babylon Girls*, her book on African American chorus lines (but not, surprisingly, the Cotton Club Girls), Jayna Brown states "the Cotton Club was segregated" and also that it was "owned by the Mafia [...] Al Capone's gang."¹² Neither Al Capone nor the club's true owner, the British-born Owney Madden, were in the Mafia. And *History Detectives*, a PBS series that attempts the Herculean task of turning archival research into television entertainment, aired a segment about the Cotton Club where they claimed Ella Fitzgerald performed there (she didn't) and Ellington's "Take the 'A' Train" was played there (it wasn't).

⁹ Shane Vogel, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality and Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) 90.

¹⁰ James F. Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010) 86.

¹¹ Richard Carlin and Kinshasha Holman Conwill, eds, *Ain't Nothing Like the Real Thing: How the Apollo Theater Shaped American Entertainment* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Books, 2010) 47, 56.

¹² Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008) 201.

The fact that the Cotton Club was not racially segregated is not a secret history, only uncovered by deep archival research. There are numerous first-person accounts from African American patrons, and many historians have made the important distinction between a “whites only” club and one whose clientele is predominantly white. This is not nit-picking, it is a genuine question - how could so many excellent historians get such basic facts wrong, particularly when those facts relate to a place that is so well-known? When the received narrative of the Cotton Club is so transparently, illogically wrong, why is it being continually retold?

The Cotton Club was not a static venue. In its fifteen year history, it moved from Harlem to Times Square, and once it was downtown it did, in fact, exclude African Americans. Perhaps some scholars confuse the Cotton Club on Broadway, from 1936 to 1940, with the Cotton Club in Harlem, in the 1920s and early 1930s. Perhaps some of these more recent scholars are working solely off of Lewis’ *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, a vital text when it comes to the high art of the Harlem Renaissance, but one clearly rife with misinformation about Harlem’s jazz scene. Some of these writers might be using first-person accounts that could be misleading, mistaken, or exaggerated.

I would suggest, however, that the reason these mistruths receive such wide circulation is because the received narrative is useful. These scholars aren’t interested in the Cotton Club – their projects are the high art of the Harlem Renaissance, or the transgressive queer performance spaces of the period, or the Apollo Theater. And by referencing the familiar and false construction of the Cotton Club as a whites only room

with unoriginal music and unhappy performers, their own subjects are elevated, made more authentic, and “show more goodly and advance more eyes than that which hath no foil to set them off.”¹³ The Cotton Club is an easy straw man, and a familiar one. To most readers, Cab Calloway is a more familiar name than Countee Cullen, and the Cotton Club more familiar than *The Crisis* magazine. The Cotton Club is famous, and it serves as a marker against which other places, ideas, or events can be measured. And if the projects of these scholars are something other than the Cotton Club, and if the Cotton Club is only being used as a quick example of Harlem nightlife at its most unpleasant, what motivation is there to engage in further corrective research?

The Cotton Club occupies a liminal space in the writing of American history. It exists in some popular culture writing and celebrity biographies as a room of undiminished glamour, where a rosy nostalgia places the club at the center of the birth of American jazz during the halcyon days of the Roaring Twenties. This image of the Cotton Club has as much of a presence in the imagination of the public as the Jim Crow den of misery does in the imagination of certain scholars. A 2013 concert from the Seattle Symphony featuring the music of Ellington and Calloway bills itself as “A Night at the Cotton Club” and promises an evening that is “smoky, sultry and swingin’” with “so much energy, the legs on your seat will be tap dancing!”¹⁴ On their promotional website, absolutely no mention is made of race. The club is either seen as a magical place in the

¹³ *Henry IV, Part 1* I:2, 184-185.

¹⁴ “A Night at the Cotton Club.” *Seattle Symphony*. ND. Web. 4 June 2013.

growth of jazz or as the cruel embodiment of America's racist past, and there is little ground in between to complicate these two easy narratives.

In *Skyline: A Reporter's Reminiscence of the 1920s*, newspaperman Gene Fowler mourns the passing of the 1920s, describing the era as a "world of *nevertheless*, a rosy time, the complexion of which has now faded like a clown's face in the rain."¹⁵ For Fowler, every aspect of the Jazz Age that could be seen as unfortunate, unpleasant, or even tragic was mitigated by something positive and joyful. This might be an apt way to view certain elements of African American life and culture during the early twentieth century. For every history that delves into the periods' cruelties, there is a flip side of triumph, and for every writer that sees the period as nothing but "a rosy time" there is a mirror image darkened by social injustice. White America began to discover African American music and the black literary and artistic output of the New Negro Renaissance during the 1920s, but Harlem's cabaret life turned black culture into a spectator sport for more affluent whites. Nevertheless, this entertainment industry provided employment for thousands of Harlemites during the mid-1930s, the height of the Great Depression. And in venues like the Cotton Club, Duke Ellington, one of the greatest composers of the twentieth century, began to receive international attention through the club's radio broadcasts of the 1920s and early 1930s. Despite his growing renown, however, the white-owned club still often positioned him and his fellow performers in the simplistic,

¹⁵ Gene Fowler, *Skyline: A Reporter's Reminiscence of the 1920s* (New York: Viking Press, 1961) 7.

racist terms of the cheerful, naturally rhythmic, childlike blacks, content to do nothing but gratefully entertain their white patrons.

For the writers who either laud or demonize the Cotton Club, I would suggest that Fowler's "nevertheless" is useful. The Cotton Club is as complicated as race in America, and to oversimplify the racial situation at the club, for whatever reason, does no one any favors. To date there is only one book about the Cotton Club, and it does a lovely job of navigating the complexities of the venue. Jim Haskin's 1977 *The Cotton Club* is an excellent work, passionately and expertly written. It is not, unfortunately, a scholarly work, and it makes no pretense of being one. There are only a handful of sources or citations, none of them direct, and the cover's boast of "over 125 photographs" makes it plain that this project was intended for a general readership. This dissertation is, to my knowledge, the first piece of academic writing specifically dedicated to the Cotton Club. I cannot overstate how surprising I continue to find this fact.

I use theories of tourism in my discussion of the Cotton Club. Touristic theory was pioneered by Dean MacCannell in his 1976 book *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, and in the decades since has become a major field of study, often when paired with ideas of globalization and first-to-third world socio-economics. The library of touristic writing is deep and intensely varied. In other areas of theoretical study, it is often quite clear which are the major critics, academics, or philosophers, which writers are in a slightly lower tier, and so on through subsequent levels of influence or output. The world of touristic theory, however, seems to operate differently. In my survey of the literature, it

seems that almost every writer makes use of the theories of Dean MacCannell, and MacCannell stands head and shoulders above every other writer, academic, or cultural critic. There is no second tier – there is MacCannell, then there is everyone else, a jumbled group of globalists, performance critics, race theorists and popular culture writers. Even after thirty years of academic life, the field of tourism is like a crowded sightseeing bus, overstuffed, chaotic, and ultimately democratic.

Ideas of tourism seem obvious in writing about the predominantly white audiences at the Cotton Club, people who literally travelled to the unfamiliar neighborhood of Harlem to watch African Americans perform their blackness in song, music and body. Touristic theory, by focusing on the experience of an audience moving through a space, best allows us to see the room as it was then, clouded by neither Lewis's "weeping as the sun rose" histrionic victimhood nor the Seattle Symphony's "smoky, sultry, and swingin'" gaze-averting veneration. The tourists at the Cotton Club were in the hottest room in the most vibrant neighborhood of America's cultural capital, and they were exploring gymnastic performance and cutting-edge music, and also exploring their imperfect, and frequently unpleasant, understandings of race. The term "safari" was used often, by writers both white and black, then and now, to describe this experience. Using touristic theory also reinforces my own subject-object positionality in regards to this place and these performances - it is harder to forget who and where I am by using these theories to analyze the experiences and understandings of those who travelled to Harlem by taxi instead of by text.

Like any historian, I also serve as a tour guide. Theorist Barbara Weightman delineates a tour guide's function by three categories: outsideness, encapsulation, and directedness. Outsideness, to Weightman, is the condition of awareness created by the tour guide that the tourist is not a part of the community being toured; encapsulation is how, despite that awareness, the tour guide keeps the tour group feeling privileged and comfortable. The last, directedness, refers to the tour guide's control of the tourist's gaze through what is discussed and what areas are visited – a tour guide on Hollywood Boulevard, for example, attempts to keep his charges focused on the stars in the sidewalk and not the homeless in the alleyway. While ideas of outsideness and encapsulation may not apply to my role in this project, Weightman's directedness – the act of highlighting some things and ignoring others – certainly does. The Cotton Club staged at least two different shows a year for fifteen years, and each show had up to a dozen different performers, giving me a cast of hundreds of entertainers, musicians, and acts to choose from. In Weightman's formulation, I have directed this work in certain areas – Cab Calloway gets more attention than Duke Ellington, Earl "Snake Hips" Tucker more than the Nicholas Brothers – and avoided others altogether. Sometimes the figures were avoided because there wasn't enough information on the performers or their acts; sometimes out of the necessity of simple space considerations and worries of redundancy; sometimes because their narratives didn't lend themselves to an investigation of the white touristic experience in Harlem. Hopefully these decisions will be seen in the light of "directedness" rather than scholarly cherry-picking.

The first chapter introduces the key ideas of this work – Harlem, jazz culture, and prohibition, and the way each of these affected the white Americans who would become the touristic audiences of the Cotton Club. The 1920s were a time where affluent whites became increasingly fascinated with what had previously been forbidden – criminal culture, jazz culture, black culture. This Jazz Age creation of what scholar Ann Douglas calls “Mongrel Manhattan,”¹⁶ the unprecedented mixture of racial cultures, informs an understanding of the Cotton Club. Also, this chapter introduces elements of tourist theory that will be used throughout the work.

The second chapter introduces the idea of the tour guide, specifically as that role works in scholar Barbara Weightman’s formulation. Using Weightman’s three central aspects of the tour guide, I discuss three figures from the Cotton Club of the early 1930s that seem to embody these concepts: the white emcee and producer Dan Healy, the black dancer Earl “Snake Hips” Tucker, and the visiting white German broadcaster Helmut H. Helmutt. This dissertation is the first time, to my knowledge, that Helmutt’s 1931 live broadcast from the Cotton Club has been written about or translated into English.

Chapter Three centers on two songwriting teams that worked at the Cotton Club – Dorothy Fields and Jimmy McHugh in the late 1920s, and Harold Arlen and Ted Koehler in 1932. These four white songwriters show how the club presented itself, musically and lyrically, and how the club was understood both by white patrons and white creators. For Fields and McHugh, it was just another job, albeit one that provided them with cocktail

¹⁶ Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995).

party anecdotes about working with gangsters. Fields and McHugh had less to say about working with the black talent. I see the Cotton Club Parades written by Arlen and Koehler as significant, as it was under these writers that the club stopped presenting itself as a generalized representation of African American life. Arlen and Koehler dispatched the loose black signifiers of the plantation or the jungle and replaced them with songs and shows that celebrated the club itself, positioning the Cotton Club as, in the words of the impressed Lady Mountbatten, “the aristocrat of Harlem nightclubs.”¹⁷

The fourth chapter centers on African American bandleader Cab Calloway, and how he mediated an often highly sexual stage persona for white audiences. I argue that a number of elements of traditional black performance, from the African griot to the blackface Zip Coon, combined with the clever distancing of third-person lyrics, created a distance that made his performance palatable, and profitable, to white male audiences. I also investigate Calloway’s national tours during the mid-1930s, and how he brought ideas of Jazz Age Harlem, and the Cotton Club specifically, to concert events outside of New York City.

The lengthy final chapter focuses on the last days of the Cotton Club. After the Harlem Riot of 1936 the club moved to Times Square, and this relocation from the black cultural capital of Harlem to the white entertainment capital of Broadway fundamentally altered what the club was and how it was perceived. The Times Square Cotton Club also featured the venue’s least successful floorshow, starring Lincoln Perry, better known as

¹⁷ Edward Jablonski, *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows and Blues* (Ann Arbor: Northeastern University Press, 1996) 40.

the shuffling black clown, and major Hollywood star, Stepin Fetchit. As the club left Harlem in 1936, the club's shows also abandoned ideas of representing Harlem culture in favor of a general, Broadway-ready celebration of celebrity.

In the epilogue, I look at how the Cotton Club has lived on in two different venues: the current venue that calls itself the Cotton Club in Harlem, and the Black Cotton Club in London. Both have elements of the original, but in choosing to associate themselves with the Jazz Age club they have favored certain aspects, ignored others, and created entertainments that are wildly unlike their namesake. But in what they have chosen, we can see both how the club is remembered by a twenty-first century audience, and how those elements have translated into tourist dollars for the new clubs' owners. So, ultimately, they are very like the original Cotton Club indeed.

Throughout the process of writing this dissertation, I have been continually amazed, intimidated, and disappointed by the fact that no other scholar has written extensively about the Cotton Club. That this space is chiefly used as a Jim Crow totem, for writers to shake their heads at and walk quickly past, is unfortunate. The Cotton Club provides a fertile ground for writers in a number of disciplines. For musicologists, there are the formative years and early successes of Duke Ellington, America's greatest jazz composer. For those working in race, gender, and queer studies, there are the numerous performances, evasions, and constructions of identity, and how these are commodified for a white, male, and heteronormative audience. And for scholars of theatrical performance, the most popular floorshow in New York City is a space that should not be ignored.

Someone should have written this by now. I hope that this work can help begin the conversation.

Chapter 1:

Honest Guides and Piecemeal Morality: Madden, Mills and Duke Ellington

White tourists visiting New York City during the 1920s, if they seemed both affluent and sporting, would on occasion be given business cards by taxi drivers or concierges offering the services of what the *Chicago Defender* called “slumming hostesses.” The card read:

Here in the world’s greatest city it would amuse and also interest you to see the real inside of the new Negro Race of Harlem. You have heard it discussed, but there are very few who really know . . . I am in a position to carry you through Harlem as you would go slumming in Chinatown. My guides are honest and have been instructed to give you the best service. . . . Your season is not complete with thrills until you have visited Harlem.¹⁸

Whether an out-of-towner or a Manhattanite, in the early 1920s white America began to harbor a curiosity about Harlem. Some of this new interest came from the literary achievements of the Harlem, or New Negro, Renaissance, with writers like Alain Locke and Langston Hughes; some of it came from an interest in black music, as blues, jazz, and African American folk music was suddenly more widely available due to technological advances in phonograph recordings and multi-state radio stations looking

¹⁸ Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns, *Jazz: A History of America’s Music* (New York: Knopf, 2000) 145-147.

for programming to fill twenty-four hours of airtime; and some of it came from the Jazz Age interest in what was perceived as low culture, as described by Ann Douglas in her history of the cultural intermingling in what she termed “mongrel Manhattan,” *Terrible Honesty*. Douglas writes, “If this was, as [F. Scott] Fitzgerald said, ‘The Jazz Age, the age was black. Jazz, like the dances it spawned, like its predecessor ragtime and its companion the blues, was the creation of America’s Negro population, and white urban America wanted to go straight to the source and get more of it.’”¹⁹ The act of travelling to the source, Harlem, with the expectations of a new experience, a wild night, fits in both with white Americans’ attitudes about their African American neighbors, and also with the changes in societal consciousness that were happening in the early twentieth century. The assembly line culture of the era had not created just separate industrialized work space; it had compartmentalized both work and play, according to historian Melissa Weinbrenner. “It was more modern to discard the old, holistic code in favor of a modern, piecemeal approach to morality,” she writes. “Just as in one work station an employee painted and in another one screwed in bolts, why not behave one way in one location and another way elsewhere?”²⁰ The white ideas of Harlem constructed by the tourists served to give them permission to alter their behavior – perhaps even, as Weinbrenner suggests, their personal morality – and use the neighborhood of Harlem as a playground for libidinous carousing.

¹⁹ Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1996) 74.

²⁰ Melissa Weinbrenner, “Movies, Model Ts and Morality: The Impact of Technology on Standard of Behavior in the Early Twentieth Century,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 2011, Vol. 44, 647-659.

The upper Manhattan neighborhood of Harlem begins at Central Park to the south and runs north to 155th Street, and is bordered roughly on the west by Amsterdam Avenue and on the east by the East River and the Hudson River. It is a large neighborhood, but the nightclubs, cabarets and dance halls that held the most interest for white tourists in the 1920s and 1930s were in a fairly contained area. The clubs were largely situated between 131st Street and 136th Street, north and south, and Lennox Avenue and 8th Avenue, east and west, an area of about fifteen square blocks. In his 1932 illustration, “A Night-Club Map Of Harlem,” E. Simms Campbell, one of the first nationally-known African American cartoonists and a close friend of Cab Calloway, created a riotous cartoon guide to the area.²¹ The most prominent theaters, ballrooms, restaurants and nightclubs of Harlem are jammed together, creating an entertainment district where elegant couples at the Savoy are next to plates of food at Tillie’s Chicken Shack, and clubgoers at the Yeah, Man Nightclub are on top of the dancing girls at Small’s Paradise, who are themselves crowding the inebriates at Club Hot-Cha. Campbell provides helpful notes throughout, telling the viewer that in one area of Harlem “clubs are opening and closing all the time . . . there are too many to put on this map” and in another that “the only important omission is the location of the various speakeasies, but since there are over 500 of them you won’t have much trouble.” On the corner of Lennox Avenue and 142nd Street, dominating the lower left corner of the map, is a drawing of his friend Cab Calloway singing at the Cotton Club. Of all the nightclubs on the map, the

²¹ E. Simms Campbell, “A Night-Club Map of Harlem.” *Vintage Black Glamour*. 27 February 2012. Web. 1 June 2013. Also available on many other websites and several books.

Cotton Club is the only one with a limousine in front of it. This speaks to the wealth of the Cotton Club's clientele, of course, but also to the place of the Cotton Club for those travelling in the city. Harlem's visitors might walk or take a taxi from one spot to another, barhopping throughout the neighborhood, but to Simms the Cotton Club isn't a stop along the way, it is the destination.

This chapter looks at the impetus and expectations that brought white tourists to Jazz Age Harlem, and at the three men who created the Cotton Club both as a physical venue and as a site that played into ideas of urban American blackness: the club's owner, British-born white bootlegger Owney "The Killer" Madden, who capitalized on Prohibition America's newfound passion for slumming; the man who claimed credit for instituting the club's floorshow, and its resultant literal performances of blackness, the self-aggrandizing white producer Irving Mills; and Duke Ellington, the African American bandleader whose music created new ideas of urban blackness, and who arguably was America's greatest composer.

In his foundational work on touristic theory, *The Tourist*, Dean MacCannell looks at how tourists make sense of the spaces they travel to "in search of experience."²² In his semiotic analysis of various aspects of leisure travel he introduces a concept useful for our purposes, that of touristic sights and touristic markers. His theory proposes that the marker is the signifier, a piece of information about, or representation of, the sight – for

²² Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) 1.

MacCannell, this includes “guidebooks” and “travelogues.”²³ The sight is the location itself, the tourist’s destination, that which is signified by the marker. The Cotton Club was both. It was obviously a sight for those who could afford it, a destination known as the “Aristocrat of Harlem Night Clubs” with a reputation among both music aficionados and well-to-do clubgoers, and with weekly radio broadcasts serving to both advertise and cement its reputation as an important tourist destination. The Cotton Club also served as MacCannell’s marker, however, and what it signified was Harlem, or to be specific the imaginary Harlem that lived in the imagination of the white men and women who visited the club. It allowed tourists to feel that they had seen Harlem despite having visited no more of the neighborhood than one well-appointed, whites-only showroom. The Cotton Club signified an imaginary Harlem, and it did so while both negotiating performances of blackness and reinforcing constructions of white, heteronormative masculinity as a safety net for the male and female tourists.

Before moving inside the Cotton Club we should also address another group of Harlem tourists and another aspect of MacCannell’s work. MacCannell creates a continuum of various types of touristic sites organized by their perceived authenticity. The first stage is the unsatisfying public space, obviously inauthentic, “the kind of social space tourists attempt to overcome,” and it progresses to the sixth, the wholly authentic “kind of social space that motivates touristic consciousness.”²⁴ These categories are fluid as social constructions of authenticity change over time – the Empire State Building, for

²³ MacCannell 41.

²⁴ MacCannell 106.

example, meant something different to visitors in the 1930s than it does to visitors today. Also fluid are MacCannell's tourists, and he writes that "adventuresome tourists move from stage to stage."²⁵ The key word here is "adventuresome." Something that numerous practitioners of tourist theory have challenged MacCannell on is the idea that the tourist always strives for the authentic. If their only goal is authenticity, they ask, how can we explain the continued popularity of cheerfully inauthentic sights such as Disneyland? Some tourists, it seems, prefer to follow a mode of observation rather than a mode of immersion.

This was not the case with the white socialite and artist Carl Van Vechten, who immersed himself deeply in African American culture and encouraged other white Americans to do the same. Those who wanted more adventure from their trips to Harlem could follow self-proclaimed "Negrotarian" Van Vechten's 1926 novel *Nigger Heaven*, which "soon became a guidebook, and [white] visitors carried it in their pockets as they went to Harlem."²⁶ It even had a glossary of "Negro Words and Phrases" in the back to help these visitors communicate with the locals. Well-connected travelers could accompany Van Vechten himself, who "prided himself on steering tourists away from the fake glitter of the white-owned Cotton Club" and taking his guests to drag shows, underground cabarets, and other venues which offered what one scholar gently called

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Chidi Ikonne, quoted by Justin D. Edwards, *Exotic Journeys: Exploring the Erotics of U.S. Travel Literature, 1840-1930* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2001) 18.

“unconventional sexual opportunities.”²⁷ In his seminal 1971 history of the period, *Harlem Renaissance*, Nathan Huggins would angrily call this sort of expedition “a safari” and counter Van Vechten’s self-congratulation, writing that “there was thrill [in Harlem] without danger. For these blacks were civilized – not head-hunters or cannibals – they could not run amok.”²⁸ But for visitors to Harlem who had no need for Van Vechten’s imagined danger, the Cotton Club provided a performance of blackness and sexuality that both referred to, and kept white audiences distant from, the Harlem that lived right outside the club’s doors.

Jack Johnson, Race, and Sporting Life Celebrity

Before it was bought by Owney Madden and transformed into the Cotton Club, the Harlem venue was already an alcohol-fueled site for white curiosity with black celebrity and ideas of transgressive sexuality. Jack Johnson’s Club Deluxe was the previous business on 141st and Lennox Avenue and, like the Cotton Club, it proved popular with white tourists until financial mismanagement and mounting legal troubles forced the boxer to sell. The African American heavyweight boxer Jack Johnson was the embodiment of white fears of, and white fascination with, untamed black masculinity. It is difficult to speculate what caused white America more anguish, the obvious glee Johnson took in mocking and annihilating white men in the ring, or his public, illicit

²⁷ Edwards 141.

²⁸ Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971) 90.

affairs with white women. Johnson's highly-publicized behavior incited numerous self-styled guardians of Anglo Saxon manhood, including the American adventure writer Jack London who wrote in a panicked tone that "the White Man must be rescued."²⁹ Johnson's handy defeat of boxing's first "Great White Hope," Jim Jeffries, sparked race riots across America. Louis Armstrong, the jazz legend who would become a bandleader in the last days of the Cotton Club, remembered the aftermath of the Johnson/Jeffries fight. As a young boy in New Orleans, Armstrong ran headfirst into a group of African American youths running frantically down the street. "You better get started, black boy," one yelled to him. "Jack Johnson has knocked out Jim Jeffries. The white boys are sore about it and they're going to take it out on us."³⁰ The aftermath of the Johnson/Jeffries fight would remain Armstrong's barometer for fear, the moment in Armstrong's life that he compared against all future frights. However, Johnson's knockout of a white man was still a moment of tremendous racial pride for African Americans and a clear indication that the twentieth century was bringing a new sort of American race relations. Historian David Krasner eschews the literary, musical, and social milestones of the era, instead calling the Johnson/Jeffries fight of 1910 "the most significant moment" of the Harlem Renaissance.³¹

²⁹ Randy Roberts, *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes* (New York: The Free Press, 1983) 68.

³⁰ Louis Armstrong, *Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans* (New York: De Capo Press, 1986) 36.

³¹ David Krasner, *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance 1910-1927* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) 6.

Johnson's sexuality would gain him as much notoriety as his public ferocity. A series of affairs with white women, some of them prostitutes, became a poorly kept secret in sporting circles, culminating in a trumped-up charge of white slavery when he crossed state lines with a white woman. Johnson's unapologetic behavior was exactly the sort of thing that gave Jack London fits, and confirmed ideas of fearsome black maleness that existed not only in the white public imagination but in academia as well. "Morality among these people is almost a joke," wrote Dr. Thomas W. Murrell, professor at the University of Virginia College of Medicine, in 1910. "A Negro man will not abstain from sexual intercourse if there is the opportunity and no mechanical obstruction. . . . His sexual powers are those of a specialist in a chosen field."³² In these early days of eugenics, white fears of black men were given the patina of scientific fact.

Still, despite it all, some white men wanted very much to have a drink with Jack Johnson. For these men, affiliating themselves with Jack Johnson was a way to reinforce a self-image as a dangerous outlaw. When Johnson opened his first Club Deluxe in Chicago in 1912, African American women's groups were disappointed that the most towering black figure of the day didn't use his money on something more uplifting than a saloon (one civic leader, profoundly misreading the champ's character, suggested that he open a library and art gallery instead). Johnson lived, in the language of the day, a sporting life, and nothing suited a sporting man better than his own bar where he could be the center of attention for a crowd of admirers, white and black. The owner of Club

³² James H. Jones, *Bad Blood: The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment* (New York: The Free Press, 1981) 26.

Deluxe had a history of performance in his own right, and Jack Johnson's celebrity extended from the boxing ring to the vaudeville stage. That Jack Johnson's fame was built on two facts, that he was black and he was dangerous, certainly complicated his celebrity but didn't essentially change it – in some respects, his celebrity trumped his race. As vaudeville historian Trav S.D. points out, Johnson's producer Willie Hammerstein also created successful vaudeville acts in the 1910s and 1920s around such diverse white individuals as Babe Ruth, Helen Keller, and the owner of the Hope Diamond, not because any of them were frustrated entertainers but rather because their celebrity was great enough to fill a theater with curious audience members.³³ Whether the audience was curious about Keller's tremendous handicaps, Lady Hope's tremendous wealth, or Johnson's history of tremendously bad behavior was immaterial. Theater-goers flocked to see these people on stage, to see in the flesh someone they had read about in the newspapers, to acquire the social cache that comes with being able to say that they were in the presence of someone famous, someone who might well come up in conversation. This was a strategy that proved more than successful for Hammerstein, and it was the same strategy employed in Johnson's nightclubs. Johnson wasn't a successful businessman, spending as recklessly on his properties as he did in his personal life, and the challenge of managing both saloons and a boxing career simultaneously proved to be too much for him, but while his clubs were open they always attracted crowds. People wanted to drink with celebrities, even those whose identity was wrapped up in violence,

³³ Trav S.D., *No Applause, Just Throw Money: The Book That Made Vaudeville Famous* (New York: Faber & Faber, Inc. 2005) 129.

racial tension, and criminalized sexuality. Indeed, these dynamics added spice to an evening of slumming, and as the Jazz Age of the 1920s began in earnest and Prohibition became the law of the land, this lesson wasn't lost on the man who in 1923 bought the Club DeLuxe from Johnson: Owney Madden.

Owney Madden and Bootlegger Glamour

Madden was born in 1891 in Leeds and emigrated to America with his family when he was eleven years old, and he would never completely lose his Lancashire accent. He was raised in the dangerous New York neighborhood of Hell's Kitchen, and his childhood of petty crime and violence earned him the nickname "The Killer," which he hated. His charisma and leadership skills also won him the control of a street gang on Manhattan's West Side named the Gophers, who counted among its members George Raft - or so the future Hollywood actor claimed. Madden's biographer frequently describes the gangster as a man of grace and civility, and Madden rose through the rackets to become a fixer for New York mobsters Frank Costello and Meyer Lansky and something of an ambassador to out-of-towners like Chicago's Al Capone. Unless circumstances required him to be otherwise, Owney Madden was level-headed and business-minded, and Prohibition made him very rich.

Madden already owned other New York City nightclubs, but white America's growing fascination with black culture and Harlem made buying the Club DeLuxe and

transforming it into an uptown, upscale nightspot Madden's logical next step. Trading on the nostalgia for the plantation days of the Antebellum South, he named his Harlem venue the Cotton Club. Bandleader Cab Calloway described the performance space of the Cotton Club:

The bandstand was a replica of a southern mansion, with large white columns and a backdrop painted with weeping willows and slave quarters. The band played on the veranda of the mansion, and in front of the veranda, down a few steps, was the dance floor, which was also used for the show . . . the whole set was like sleepy-time-down-South during slavery. Even the name, Cotton Club, was supposed to convey that southern feeling. I suppose the idea was to make the whites who came to the club feel like they were catered to and entertained by black slaves.³⁴

The Cotton Club wasn't the most egregious, and certainly not the only, example of set-designed racism – the more overtly named Plantation Club was just down the street. The romance of the American South was a vibrant force in early twentieth century America. Despite being only one or two generations removed from the Civil War and the Reconstruction, the Confederacy had been reconstructed in the public mind as an American Camelot, emblematic of gentility, elegance, and the heroic struggle of a lost cause. There were over five hundred silent films dealing with the Civil War, and they were all, each and every one, pro-Confederacy, from what film historian Bruce Chadwick

³⁴ Cab Calloway and Bryant Rollins, *Of Minnie the Moocher and Me* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell and Co., 1976) 88.

refers to as the “moonlights-and-magnolias school” that glamorized the South as a place of romantic white cavaliers and grateful, well-treated black slaves.³⁵ While Jazz Age Manhattan and the Antebellum South may sound like antithetical worlds for an evening of fantasy, for the customers at the Cotton Club there were enough similarities between the two, particularly in the power structures of entertainers and the entertained, that allowed the audiences to indulge in fantasies of both jazz and juleps. Both worlds posited a white, male, heteronormative superiority, and more importantly both saw African Americans as more than just natural entertainers, clowns and musicians, but as people who were pleased and delighted to entertain. The white guests in Harlem had no more worries about the feelings, resentments, and anger of the blacks serving them and performing for them than did their Southern counterparts – it was not only safe to treat the blacks as subservient; it was expected, and it was what made the blacks truly happy. The growing artistic movements, and resentments, of Harlem could be forgotten in a smiling Antebellum fantasyland where the modern world of black performance was couched in the absolute safety and comfort of an imagined Southland.

Madden’s connection to New York theater didn’t end with afterparties at the Cotton Club. In the 1920s, he became involved in a long-time romance with playwright, actress, and future Hollywood icon, Mae West. West quipped about Madden that he was “so sweet and so vicious,”³⁶ and West’s characterization of the gangster also neatly

³⁵ Bruce Chadwick, *The Reel Civil War: Mythmaking in American Film* (New York: Random House, 2002) 7.

³⁶ Emily Wortis Leider, *Becoming Mae West* (New York: De Capo Press, 1997) 146.

encapsulates the general sentiment of Prohibition-era America. The violence of the gangsters involved in bootlegging would be acknowledged by a conscientious or civic-minded American in the 1920s, but after that obligatory recognition would come a winking dismissal. While the outlaw has always had a place in the American imagination, Prohibition, which lasted from 1920 to 1933, brought more and more Americans into contact with criminals, with each side rationalizing the arrangement with the argument that the bootleggers were circumventing the law by giving the public what it wanted. By criminalizing the act of drinking liquor, society had consequently made everyone who drank criminals, a new role that Americans accepted with different levels of eagerness. Some people were ashamed and uncomfortable, which of course was part of the intent of Prohibition, but others embraced their new identities as lawbreakers, and further embraced the more mature lawbreakers who enabled the process. ‘Scarface’ Al Capone’s taste for outlandish fashions and primary colors received as much talk in Chicago as his criminality. The *New York World* lionized bootleggers who had made a dangerous December crossing in thick fog with the headline “Rum Kings Assure Wet Christmas.”³⁷ Perhaps the best-remembered fictional creation of the time, Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby, suffered a crisis of conscience that had little to do with his criminality. The bootleggers had become glamorous, and possible former Gopher George Raft wasn’t alone in bragging about – and exaggerating – his gangland connections.

³⁷ Daniel Okrent, *Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition* (New York: Scribner, 2010) 210.

Of course, many Americans found ways to buy alcohol without meeting any criminal more dashing than their hairdresser or corner druggist. Along with the immense number of nightclubs in the neighborhood, Harlem had its share of speakeasies, “hooch joints” operating out of private apartments, and peddlers who had found a way to sell booze without dealing directly with the gangsters – Daniel Okrent tells of two Harlem men who became religiously ordained in order to sell sacramental wine, as well as sacramental brandy and sacramental crème de menthe.³⁸ New York City was awash in liquor during this period and Harlem certainly wasn’t alone in having a variety of alcoholic opportunities, but the touristic interest in black culture, Weinbrenner’s idea of “compartmentalized morality,” and the newly-minted criminality of drinking that allowed revelers to playfully enroll as an underclass combined to make Harlem a destination for some. And ideas of black sexuality, as both an object of spectacle and a source for possible transference, added to the area’s appeal. In his history of the American middle class fascination with the lower class, *Slumming*, Chad Heap recounts the following:

White women even expressed their sexual availability to white men by suggesting that they go slumming in a black cabaret. For instance, when an undercover investigator propositioned a Lower East Side dance hall hostess by asking where she went “when you go out for a good time,” she remarked “I’ve been up to the Cotton Club in Harlem and have danced there all night.” Only later did she acknowledge that the investigator was asking where she usually went to have sex,

³⁸ Okrent 189.

noting that her suggestion of a trip to the Cotton Club was intended as an indirect confirmation of her sexual availability.³⁹

Here, the young woman seems to be suggesting not just her sexual availability, but also that her company would be costly: dancing all night at one of New York's most expensive nightclubs never comes cheaply. This idea that a trip to Harlem is a sexual invitation had appeal to revelers, and a number of cabarets made this invitation as blatant as possible through their floorshows.

Irving Mills and the White Production of Black Music

"I spent a lot of time in Harlem and I went into these little cafes and saw great talent," Irving Mills, the sheet music salesman-turned-impresario (and eventual millionaire agent to Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway), remembers. "I had seen many of the Ziegfeld shows, and it [the Ziegfeld *Follies*] was strictly a revue with great songs, with beautiful costumes, beautiful girls, good dancing and I figured these race . . . these black people, can do it better."⁴⁰ After Madden's purchase of the Club Deluxe, Mills brought the idea of a nightly floorshow to George "Big Frenchy" DeMange and Herman Stark; Madden's lieutenant DeMange was in charge of the day-to-day operations of the club, and Stark had produced variety shows in the past. Madden and his crew agreed to

³⁹ Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) 197.

⁴⁰ Stuart Nicholson, *Reminiscing in Tempo: A Portrait of Duke Ellington* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000) 67. Elipsis in original.

give it a try – they had always intended on a dance band to play at the club, but they had hopes that a proper floorshow would help them draw paying, drinking crowds.

Entertainment in Madden's white clubs, specifically Tex Guinan's dancing girls and the aggressive party atmosphere they created at midtown's Silver Slipper, helped to bring in customers, and his hope was that Mills' idea of a floorshow would do the same. A revue was just a way to further the gangster's primary goal, selling Madden's #1 Beer that was distributed "hourly from the Phenix brewery, and cargoes of King's Ransom and House of Lords scotch smuggled by his ships from Scotland."⁴¹ In other New York clubs and speakeasies, the alcohol could be questionable. One New York official reported that "dollar-a-drink clubs with polished brass rails and elite customers served precisely the same poison as the dime-a-shot dumps of the wharf" – but Madden guaranteed quality, and safety, with his liquor. He knew that wealthy socialites had begun to make excursions into Harlem, and he knew as well that "those already smitten with the romance of rubbing shoulders with gangsters in downtown speakeasies would love the added attraction of good jazz and non-stop dancing" uptown in Harlem.⁴² Irving Mills' idea for a floorshow seemed like a logical attraction for an uptown club that was intending to attract a post-theater clientele.

The man who brought the idea of a theatrical entertainment to the Cotton Club, Irving Mills, inhabits a place in jazz history that mirrors that of the Cotton Club itself.

Both Mills and the Cotton Club have been seen by historians through a binary

⁴¹ Graham Nown, *The English Godfather* (London: Ward Lock & Co., 1987) 61.

⁴² Okrent 210-211.

construction that posits them as either carpetbagging white “vultures” capitalizing on African American talent,⁴³ or a combination of publicist and savior, streamlining the business of big bands to the benefit of African American musicians and bringing jazz music to the attention of mainstream America.⁴⁴ On the one hand, they fit the role of the white interloper to black culture, appropriating African American musical talent and getting wealthy in the process, although sharing very little of that wealth with the artists themselves. On the other hand, they are seen as seminal figures in the evolution of American music, a white man and a white-owned venue bringing the sounds of jazz to a wider audience and sharing African American music with the world, and thereby both insuring the survival of an alternative form of music and helping to construct a new, wholly American sound.

Mills began his career as a ‘songplugger,’ playing piano in department stores in the hopes of luring customers into buying sheet music. Always interested in African American music, in the early 1920s he began producing what were known as ‘race records,’ early African American jazz and blues recordings, and served as something of a back-handed benefactor to bluesmen who needed immediate cash and were unable, or unwilling, to look to the future. “They would get together, each with a lead sheet of what they considered rather ordinary blues under his arm, and head for Mills Music,” Duke Ellington would later remember. “It was very simple, no hassle. Just give him [Mills] the

⁴³ Randall Sandke, *Where the Dark and the Light Folks Meet: Race and the Mythology, Politics, and Business of Jazz* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2010) 20.

⁴⁴ See Thomas J. Hennessey, *From Jazz to Swing: African American Jazz Musicians and Their Music 1890-1935* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994) 123, 155, among others.

lead sheet, sign the outright release, pick up the money and go.”⁴⁵ For each song Mills would pay “fifteen or twenty dollars” and while there were some cagey composers who managed to resell suspiciously similar tunes to Mills, these petty frauds didn’t make a dent in Mills’ rapidly growing fortunes. The ‘outright release’ gave him absolute ownership of African American folk numbers, which he could then sell as sheet music, license the rights to, or record himself. He operated his own jazz combo at the time, Mills’ Blue Rhythm Band, and he unsuccessfully suggested them as the house band for the Cotton Club after Ellington’s orchestra moved on. All of these activities made him considerably wealthy. Irving Mills would sign Ellington as a client in 1926, and eventually own fifty percent of Duke Ellington, Inc. This allowed him to add his name to a number of Ellington’s compositions, including “Mood Indigo,” “Sophisticated Lady,” and “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If it Ain’t Got That Swing),” as well as the signature song of another of his clients, Cab Calloway’s “Minnie the Moocher.” Despite not being a composer or arranger himself, Mills took songwriting credits – and a percentage of the resultant fees – for songs that he participated in recording, “a practice,” as one music historian wrote, “going back to time immemorial in the recording industry.”⁴⁶ The songwriter’s union ASCAP lists Mills as the coauthor of 331 different African American compositions. There is an anecdote about two jazz musicians attending a party at Mills’

⁴⁵ Cary D. Wintz, *Harlem Speaks: A Living History of the Harlem Renaissance* (Naperville: Sourcebooks Mediafusion, 2006) 222.

⁴⁶ Peter Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley* (New York: Little, Brown & Company, 1994) 232.

well-appointed home. “I want you to notice one thing,” one tells the other, “and that’s that huge expanse of red carpeting that covers the ground floor. That’s Duke’s blood.”⁴⁷

The signing of Duke Ellington’s orchestra in 1927 and the creation of an elaborate floorshow transformed the Cotton Club. What had been an upscale Harlem speakeasy, no more or less interesting than a half-dozen others, was now a premiere destination for wealthy white audiences. Ellington wasn’t the first choice – King Oliver, the African American bandleader from New Orleans who first brought trumpeter Louis Armstrong to national attention, had demanded too much money and talked himself out of the job, although partisans of Oliver explain this disastrous career move by claiming that the musician was unwilling to work the nightclub’s rigorous schedule, and rather than refuse the job outright he priced himself out of the market, thereby finding a way to avoid the work while saving face. At the time, Ellington was in Philadelphia, contracted to Clarence Robinson’s show *Dance Mania* at the Standard Theatre. Owney Madden reached out to a colleague in Philadelphia, Boo Boo Hoff, “a lifelong friend and much-feared mastermind of organized crime in the City of Brotherly Love.”⁴⁸ Hoff sent his lieutenant Yankee Schwartz to explain the situation to Robinson and tell the choreographer why he should find it in his heart to let Ellington out of the show. “Be big,” Schwartz told him, “or be dead.” Robinson wisely chose the former, allowing him a long career in choreography that would include the Cotton Club throughout the 1930s, the 1943 film *Stormy Weather*, and for the first African American floorshow in Las

⁴⁷ Browser Joe Carlton, “Who Was Irving Mills?” *The Great Escape* Issue No. 8, May/June 2008: 7.

⁴⁸ Nown 64.

Vegas at the short-lived Moulin Rouge resort in 1955. Ellington and his band headed to Harlem.

This unassimilated new territory is what tourists at the Cotton Club hoped to explore. Duke Ellington's music in the 1920s was called "jungle music," a bass-heavy style of swing that made use of growling horns and Sonny Greer's tom-tom drumming that, like much about the Cotton Club, has been somewhat misunderstood through the following decades. The phrase "jungle music" has given offense, the suggestion being that it was coined by insensitive white writers, and when it appears it is frequently given the shame-faced, distancing modifier "so-called 'jungle music'."⁴⁹ This discomfort is understandable, but mistaken – it wasn't "so-called" jungle music, it was called jungle music, and according to Greer it was called that by Ellington himself after a conversation with George Gershwin.⁵⁰ The use of the word "jungle" wasn't ascribed to the music by racially insensitive white critics or audiences; it was what Duke Ellington named a dozen of his compositions in the late 1920s, including "Jungle Jamboree," "Jungle Blues," and "Jungle Nights in Harlem."⁵¹ To suggest that an outside force at some point gave a racially thoughtless name to Ellington's style is in some ways understandable; however, it robs the composer of his agency. While Ellington shrewdly read the public's tastes in

⁴⁹ See Richard Cranford, *The American Musical Landscape: The Business of Musicianship from Billings to Gershwin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 327 or Shane Vogel, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) 98, among many others.

⁵⁰ Nicholson 79.

⁵¹ Charles Delaunay, *New Hot Discography: The Standard Directory of Recorded Jazz* (New York: Criterion Music Corp., 1948) 84-86.

his creation of an imaginary exoticism, he also chose a label that allowed for both racial acknowledgement and a humorous distancing, one that slyly admitted the white audience's expectations but still claimed an ownership of the sound and the style.

Ellington could be displaying shrewd business sense, giving a white audience a dollop of the imagined African experience they wanted, a shrewd sense of humor in playing on those expectations, or even a somewhat back-handed bit of racial pride, but whatever the case the phrase "jungle" came from Ellington, not from a dismissive outside critic.

Within his early Jazz Age compositions, Ellington played with white expectations. In one of his more popular numbers, 1927's "Black and Tan Fantasy," the composition ends with several bars of European classical music in the form of Mendelssohn's funeral march. This mournful moment, in contrast to the exuberant sound before it, may be a comic acknowledgement of the fate of the inebriated or a requiem for the contents of the inebriate's wallet, or it may be something of more serious import, but whatever the case Ellington, not outside white observers, was in control.

The narrative of Duke Ellington's tenure at the Cotton Club changes depending on the needs of the teller. It can be the story of a young man learning his trade in the Roaring Twenties, the story of a black genius taken advantage of by avaricious whites, or the story of the birth of jazz. There is certainly truth in all of them, but what is often overlooked is that Ellington learned his trade writing and playing music for theatrical performance, for the dancers, singers, and clowns who worked onstage at the Cotton Club. Jazz historian Elijah Wald maintains that truly understanding music from a past

period solely through recordings is like trying to understand the appearance of a peacock just by looking at its skeleton. “We can see the essential bone structure and imagine a squat little bird,” he writes, “but we don’t see the spreading tail and iridescent feathers that are all we would care about if we were confronted with a live peacock. This may seem obvious,” Wald concludes, “but a lot of popular music history is written as if the skeletons were peacocks.”⁵² In the case of the Cotton Club, this analogy is apt. Ellington has long been rightly revered, but the fact that his earliest work at the Cotton Club was as the showband for a theatrical event – one that was designed, choreographed, and treated like a Broadway production – is often forgotten. Ellington’s early music was written as accompaniment to theatrical spectacle. The experience of witnessing these orchestras as performers rather than simply listening to their recordings changes our understanding of their music, and nowhere is that more true than for Ellington, Calloway, and the later orchestras whose primary goal was as an accompaniment to performance at the Cotton Club. Their music wasn’t just for listening, or even for social dancing – it was show music, part of a theatrical spectacle. Unfortunately, even the recordings of these performances are unavailable, as “virtually no musical broadcasts survive from the early period, and only a tiny fraction from the later years.”⁵³

Musicologist Richard Middleton argues that the music of Duke Ellington created a new sort of urban American space, one where an imaginary Africa was relocated “into a

⁵² Elijah Wald, *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock ‘N’ Roll: An Alternative History of American Popular Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) 82.

⁵³ Wald 93.

modern here and now – a narrative, then, which rather than assimilating completely to Darwinian models of social and racial progress worked to ascribe them in a project organized around the laying out of a quite new territory.”⁵⁴ Despite the Cotton Club’s Antebellum décor, Ellington created an aural landscape of black life for listeners to explore, ranging from the imagined jungle of snarls and drums, to the urban sophistication of a tightly blended jazz orchestra, to improvisations on European themes, as African American musical culture was becoming American musical culture.

Non-American writers and intellectuals were not always happy about this development. During World War I, the novelty of the African American 369th Infantry Regiment, known as the Harlem Hellfighters, playing martial music with a syncopated percussion line thrilled Europeans. James Reese Europe, the regimental bandleader and a seminal figure in American jazz, remembered that in France “we played to 50,000 people, at least, and had we wished it we might be playing yet.”⁵⁵ After the war was won and the American soldiers went home, however, African American music was viewed with suspicion by some European guardians of culture. In the 1930s, the British music critic Ernest Newman wrote, “If the peace of the world is to be assured, let America, for Heaven’s sake, send us no more spirituals, but especially no more Jazz!”⁵⁶ Newman’s disdain for both Negro spirituals and black music is telling, but quite gentle when

⁵⁴ Richard Middleton, “Musical Belongings: Western Music and its Low-Other.” *Western Music and its Others: Difference, Representation and Appropriation in Music*, Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh, editors (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) 71.

⁵⁵ Ward, Burns 68.

⁵⁶ Samuel Fuller, *New York in the 1930s* (Paris: Hazan Editeur, 1997) 33.

compared to the vitriol of Russian novelist Maxim Gorky, who in a *Pravda* article entitled “The Music of the Gross” made no effort to hide his feelings for black music and black musicians:

Listening for a few minutes to these wails, one involuntarily imagines an orchestra of sexually-driven madmen conducted by a man-stallion brandishing a huge genital member. The monstrous bass belches out English words; a wild horn wails piercingly, calling to mind the cries of a raving camel; a drum pounds monotonously; a nasty little pipe tears at one’s ears; a saxophone emits its quacking nasal sound. Fleishy hips sway, and thousands of heavy feet tread and shuffle. The music of the degenerate ends finally with a deafening thud [...].⁵⁷

Gorky’s distaste for the “fleshy hips” and “heavy feet” and his curious sexual imaginings were published in 1928, five years before Hitler came to power in Germany and “degenerate music” was banned from the radio and in public performance. In the years that followed, there would be a number of blanket denouncements from older white Americans regarding the music of younger blacks, but the vitriol from some Europeans against jazz in the 1920s served to position the music, and its accompanying lifestyle, as not just the domain of youth, but the property of America. Participation in the musical life of the Jazz Age was a statement of American identity. At a time when phonograph records and radio broadcasts were commonplace, actual attendance at live jazz was a

⁵⁷ Ward, Burns 216.

rejection of these stilted European opinions, prejudices, and mores – Americanness was constructed through African American musical performance. American critics weren't entirely thrilled about this development either – the president of the musician's union in Pittsburgh called for the “death of jazz,” an editorial in *New Republic* from 1920 declared that jazz already was “dead,” and other magazines and white cultural guardians happily agreed with this prognosis.⁵⁸

These attitudes positioned jazz, and urban black culture, as part of an aggressively American youth movement. Like the vast majority of youth movements in popular culture it was largely seen as low culture, and its proponents came to embrace it as such. Listening to jazz music on phonographs and the radio was one thing; but travelling to a nightclub to listen to the music in person was seen as a statement of affiliation with the music and the lifestyle, a youthful American rejection of older European artistic standards. A trip to Harlem wasn't only a libidinous exercise, an opportunity to enjoy a multitude of sins in a compartmentalized moral – or immoral – space. By listening to Ellington's creation of a modern aural territory in the Cotton Club, a complicated white-constructed space in a black neighborhood, the white tourists were rejecting European standards of art and morality and asserting a unique, difficult, raucous Americanness.

⁵⁸ Krasner 241-242.

Chapter 2:

The Cotton Club through Three Tour Guides: Healy, Helmutt, and “Snake Hips” Tucker

Although it is often remembered as an upscale speakeasy that employed famous jazz bands for social dancing and background music, the Cotton Club was first and foremost a place of performance, and it was the quality of these performances that elevated the Cotton Club above its Harlem competitors. The productions at the club, called the *Cotton Club Parades*, were treated like Broadway musicals – there were gala opening nights, newspaper reviews in both the New York dailies and in prominent national African American newspapers, and the new music written specifically for each show became popular through radio airplay, sheet music sales, and cover performances across America. The club employed noted songwriters like Harold Arlen and Dorothy Fields to create original music for each new show, and American standards such as “I’ve Got the World on a String,” “Stormy Weather” and “I Love a Parade” were written specifically for performances at the Cotton Club Parades. These shows may be best remembered for bandleaders like Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway, whose orchestras received their first national exposure in radio broadcasts from the Cotton Club stage, or for occasional breakout stars like Lena Horne. But these celebrities were only part of an extravagant entertainment that featured vocalists, comedy acts, and dance numbers. With elaborate costumes and scenery, innovative jazz, and a roster of variety talent, the revues

were tremendously successful. “Nostalgia has not played anyone false about the Cotton Club shows,” Lena Horne wrote. “They were wonderful.”⁵⁹

The Cotton Club staged two or more full-scale productions a year, and each production had at least a dozen different acts. Describing a handful of routines from the fifteen years of the club’s existence, and then using that small sample as absolutely representative of the club or the culture, would be an unfair reduction of a changing era. During the time of the Cotton Club, 1925 to 1940, fashions in black variety entertainment changed, matured, and were codified. The eccentric Negro dances of Jigsaw Jackson the Human Corkscrew became the polished jitterbug of Whyte’s Lindy Hoppers, Lena Horne went from being a teenage girl in the chorus line to becoming one of the best known African American entertainers in the world, and improvisational New Orleans-influenced jazz became tightly arranged East Coast swing. The one constant throughout was the Cotton Club Parades themselves. These floorshows created an imagined African American experience for their wealthy, mainly white audiences. The audience members functioned as tourists, sightseers exploring a fantasia of black America. This journey seemed more authentic for the tourists because to travel to the imagined Harlem of the Cotton Club was to travel uptown to the actual Harlem of Upper Manhattan, what Cab Calloway slyly called the “land o’ darkness.”⁶⁰ The performances of the African Americans onstage felt like a credible pageant of black life for the white clubgoers,

⁵⁹ Lena Horne and Richard Schickel, *Lena* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1986) 53.

⁶⁰ Cab Calloway and Bryant Rollins, *Of Minnie the Moocher and Me* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976) 257.

thanks to the presence of African Americans in the neighborhood surrounding the place of performance. This imaginary African American experience was created for the white tourists primarily through the floorshows – the comedy bits, the risqué songs, and the hot jazz of the orchestra.

By looking at three different performers who served as tour guides for the club's white audiences – emcee Dan Healy, dancer Earl "Snake Hips" Tucker, and German broadcaster Helmutt H. Helmutt – we can see different aspects of the Cotton Club Parades and different ways that ideas of Harlem and white privilege were constructed for the club's audiences. White emcee Dan Healy provided room for a discussion of the most obvious element of the Club, race. Dancer Earl "Snake Hips" Tucker showed the complicated sexualities at play; and a delightfully named German broadcaster, Helmutt H. Helmutt, who was both a tourist and a literal tour guide for his German listeners, showed how the black performers at the club could find spaces of resistance and self-expression.

In modern touristic theory, the tour guide occupies a liminal space. The tour guide is part of the world of the tourists, but also part of the world being toured. She is expected to keep her charges secure and comfortable, always allowing them to be in the privileged position of the spectator, but she is also expected to be an insider to the world being explored, with an insider's knowledge of places, customs, and secrets (or poorly kept secrets, at least, because the tourists also know them). The tour guide's role is to direct the gaze of her charges, explain what is being seen, and ultimately to protect them from

the foreign environment; or, as explained by tourist theorist Barbara Weightman, to create states of “encapsulation, directedness, and outsideness.”⁶¹ Graham Dann in *The Language of Tourism* defines Weightman’s terms: encapsulation “provides relative comfort and safety” for the tourists, creating a space where, despite the unfamiliar people, places, and atmosphere being experienced, they can still feel secure and somewhat in control. Directedness is the focusing of the tourists’ gaze, showing them, or at least highlighting, only selected aspects of the locale. Together “encapsulation and directedness render the mass tourist an outsider, a person who looks rather than becomes part of the experience,” and this final element, outsideness, is the reinforcing from the tour guide that the visited site is foreign and that, for better or worse, the tourists are not and can never be truly part of the world that is under observation.⁶² Weightman’s formulation proves useful in discussing the touristic experience at the Cotton Club.

All three of these elements – encapsulation, directedness, and outsideness – work together, allowing the tour guide to have control and the tourists the comfort of being controlled, informed, and safe. In a theatrical environment, these are the goals of the master of ceremonies, and for the Cotton Club the white emcee’s chief function was to occupy the liminal space between the black performers and the white tourists, the entertainers and the entertained. This show host introduced the acts and bantered with the talent, living in a world that was literally on the stage and with the performers, while at

⁶¹ Barbara Weightman, “Third World Tour Landscapes,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 14.2 (1987) 230-236.

⁶² Graham M.S. Dann, *The Language of Tourism: A Sociolinguistic Perspective* (Wallingford: CAB International, 1996) 95.

the same time through word and race showing the tourist audience that he was one of them. By providing a white master of ceremonies in the earliest years of the club, the tourist audience was allowed to feel that even if the evening was to be dominated by African Americans both on the floor and throughout the club, ultimately there was the reassurance that a white man was still in control. It was important that he be onstage as well. The audience was well aware that the club was owned and operated by two white men, Owney Madden and Herman Stark. However, the presence of a white face, onstage, introducing the acts and controlling the action, gave a performed reinforcement of white control in a non-white space. Although other performers at various times stepped into the role of the audience's guide to Harlem, most notably Cab Calloway, for almost the entirety of the club's early history the emcee was the white song-and-dance man Dan Healy.

Healy was a dancer and character actor who had appeared in small roles in Broadway musicals such as Irving Berlin's *Yip Yip Yaphank* and Rodgers and Hart's *Betsy*, but his earliest notoriety came on the vaudeville stage. At the dawn of prohibition, Healy impersonated "Mister Dry," a well-known character from one of Rollin Kirby's anti-prohibition political cartoons. "Perhaps the most famous and enduring image from Prohibition era America," cartoon historian Joyce Walker writes, Mister Dry was a "black-coated, acerbic kill-joy who represented the worst of the Prohibitionists."⁶³

Healy's embodiment of this comic villain was a great success for the dancer both onstage

⁶³ Joyce A. Walker, "Dry Humor: The American Cartoonists' View of Prohibition," Political Cartoon Society. Web. 4 March 2013.

and in the public mind, who associated Healy with Gotham anti-Prohibitionists and Jazz Age topicality. Dan Healy gave himself the image of the New Yorker aware of the news of his city, filtered through nose-thumbing at the Prohibitionists. Healy's one film appearance, in Florenz Ziegfeld's 1929 *Glorifying the American Girl*, has him playing a lascivious dancer named Miller who starts a talented young ingénue on the road to stardom – stardom, in this picture, meaning a spot on the chorus line of the *Ziegfeld Follies*.

The film was a good showcase for Healy, in the role of a musical comedy villain. He sings adequately; he dances in a straightforward tap style, with a vertical body and crisp movements, adding a few flourishes of the specialty dancer such as springing into perfectly rigid cartwheels or reeling about comically on wobbly legs. Mordaunt Hall's 1930 review in the *New York Times* was lukewarm to the film and only slightly less so to Healy, with Hall writing backhandedly that "Healy at least succeeds in making Miller thoroughly obnoxious."⁶⁴ The film gives us an idea of what Healy must have looked like onstage at the Cotton Club. Hunched forward, with his shoulders rounded and a tendency to hug one arm close to his body, to a modern viewer Healy is physically reminiscent of another famous New York master of ceremonies, Ed Sullivan. Even Healy's speaking voice sounds like Sullivan's, nasal and swallowed, although with Sullivan's often-imitated mouth-forward drawl replaced by a heavy, insinuating overtone, making him sound very much like a stereotypical New York sharpie of the early twentieth century.

⁶⁴ Mordaunt Hall, "Glorifying the American Girl," *New York Times*: 11 January 1930: np.

The voice of Dan Healy figures prominently on the recording “A Night at the Cotton Club,” and it is here that we can learn how the white emcee communicated with both the black talent and the white audiences looking to Healy for a tour of Harlem. A *Nite at the Cotton Club* was recorded April 12, 1929, a live performance from Ellington’s orchestra and an attempt by the show’s producers to recreate the nightclub in a recording studio for the record-buying public. Healy introduces the numbers and provides patter, and there is the sound of applause between numbers. There is even an African American specialty act in the person of Harmonica Charlie, the harmonica being considered a peculiarly African American novelty – at the time, it was not even recognized as a musical instrument by the musicians union.⁶⁵ It is hard to imagine that any listeners would have been fooled into accepting this as a live performance from the club. With the exception of the musical numbers, the production sounded hollow, tinny, and fake. The applause was obviously that of a dozen musicians tapping their music stands and instruments rather than a few hundred audience members banging their tables and clapping their hands. Also, the vocalizations from the supposed “crowd” are clearly the whoops and hoots of Ellington’s orchestra, African American jazz musicians rather than white socialites, or white socialites trying to sound like African American jazz musicians.

Healy’s patter is often uncomfortable for the modern listener. After one number, Healy called out, “Dukey and the boys love applause, don’t’cha Dukey?” and, indeed, throughout the recording, and presumably onstage at the club, he referred to Ellington as

⁶⁵ Elijah Wald, *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock and Roll: An Alternative History of American Popular Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 162.

“Dukey” rather than “Duke.”⁶⁶ While Healy clearly intended to convey friendly familiarity and a spirit of informality, this diminutive nickname “Dukey” instead served to reinforce an uncomfortable racial attitude, a lack of respect for the Cotton Club’s top talent. Edward Kennedy Ellington was given the nickname of “Duke” by a childhood friend, and it stayed with him throughout his life due to both the aptness of the moniker and Ellington’s enjoyment of it. An aristocratic nickname suited the calm, debonair man quite well. But in the 1920s, “Duke” wasn’t just a foppish bit of faux nobility; it carried implications of masculinity and danger. Playwright Robert Sherwood used “Duke” for his John Dillinger stand-in, Duke Mantee, in *The Petrified Forest*, and the nickname appears to be an easy signifier of dangerous criminality in numerous crime stories from the 1920s, including the mobster Duke Genoa in Frederick Nebel’s pulp classic *The Crimes of Richmond City*. Real-life gangsters also acquired the nickname – Cotton Club owner Owney Madden was himself referred to as “The Duke of the West Side.” “Duke” was a nickname for dangerous men. But Healy’s morphing of “Duke” into “Dukey” turned the dangerous into the ridiculous, the masculine into the childish. This juvenile modification infantilized and desexualized Ellington and reinforced the paternalistic control of Healy, the white master of ceremonies, over his African American performers.

The performance of affectionate familiarity only went one way. There were no back-and-forth exchanges between Healy and Ellington, no responses from the orchestra save agreement with the emcee. Healy talked, the orchestra laughed, and Ellington never

⁶⁶ Duke Ellington, *A Nite at the Cotton Club* (RCA: 12 April 1929).

once referred to Healy as “Danny.” In fact, on this recording Ellington didn’t speak at all, not even in asides to his orchestra, and the only vocalizations from the African American performers come from feigned enthusiasm at the introduction of Harmonica Charlie. In his earliest live performances Duke Ellington was uncomfortable introducing songs and addressing his audiences. Ellington had a famously steep learning curve when it came to onstage patter, relying on his charismatic drummer Sonny Greer to banter with the singers and make spontaneous comments to the audiences. But by 1929 and the release of *A Nite at the Cotton Club*, Ellington was nationally known and widely respected, and to keep him quiet throughout in favor of Healy, a local celebrity at best, is surprising. But this RCA record was meant to mimic an evening at the club, and it is significant that the white Healy did all the talking and the far more famous African American kept quiet. The tour guide was introducing the sights to his audience of tourists, providing Weightman’s ‘encapsulation’ by keeping them safely in a world of white superiority.

The world of the club was also a male, heteronormative one. The “tall, tan and terrific” chorus line of Cotton Club Girls had been a feature of the floorshow from the club’s beginning. A collection of uniformly tall and light-skinned African American women, they were advertised in various shows as “copper colored gals,” “hot chocolates,” or the incredibly loaded “wild blackberries – sweet and unrefined.” The women’s sex appeal was a major draw for the club, as the *Variety* review of the first Cotton Club Parade makes breathlessly clear:

[...] The undressed thing goes double. The almost Caucasian-hued high yaller gals look swell and uncork the meanest kind of cooching ever exhibited to a conglomerate mixed audience. One coocher, boyishly bobbed hoyden, said to be especially imported from Chicago for her Annapolis proclivities who does the Harlem River Quiver like no self-respecting body of water. The teasin'est torso tossing yet, and how!⁶⁷

The reviewer then spent a few paragraphs on Healy, Ellington, and the specialty acts, before returning to the women:

The big attraction, of course, are the gals, 10 of 'em, the majority of whom in white company could pass for Caucasians. Possessed of the native jazz heritage, their hotsy-totsy performance if working sans wraps could never be parred by a white gal. The brownskins shiverree is worth the \$2 couvert alone.⁶⁸

Between the casual sexism, the racist assumption that the most attractive black women were those who looked whitest and the heteronormative assumption that the readership would be nothing but straight men thrilled by “coochers” dancing the “shiverree,” and the grueling *Variety* house style, there is a great deal to digest in the Cotton Club's first review. One thing is clear, though: the chorus line of Cotton Club Gals was positioned by this reviewer as the biggest draw of the evening.

The women of the chorus line were well-treated by the Cotton Club management. Unlike chorines at the downtown shows, notably Tex Guinan's club at the Silver Slipper

⁶⁷ Abel Green, “Cotton Club” *Variety* 7 December 1927: 54, 56.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 56.

where ‘dates’ were arranged between dancers and certain customers, socializing with the well-heeled male customers was not only discouraged; it was forbidden. The reasons why the black dancers were treated better than their downtown white counterparts can be attributed to a number of reasons. Racial mixing always seemed to bring the police down on the club – while African Americans were usually welcome, as the earlier *Variety* review plainly states, mixed race parties often weren’t admitted and it seems likely that Madden would want to avoid arranging “dates” for the young women in his employ for the practical reason of keeping the heat off his lucrative operation. Also, throughout his time at the club, Madden’s personal involvement with Mae West consumed all of his romantic energy – unlike some other club owners, Madden didn’t chase the girls in his employ himself, and this behavior created a culture of respect for the women that would undoubtedly have affected all Madden’s employees, as well as any customer who was hoping that a suggestive stage show would lead to an offstage arrangement. “Getting near a Cotton Club girl wasn’t easy,” an interview with dancer Cleo Hayes revealed. “Male admirers sent gifts upstairs, but couldn’t enter the dressing room” and “most of the chorines denied strenuously [...] that the gangsters had ever had their way with them.”⁶⁹

There were men dancing in the revues throughout the club’s history as well, in specialty acts, partner dances, and even a short-lived foray with “the Cotton Club Boys,” a tap dancing combo. Most of the specialty acts were comic – for instance, the Tramp Band, or Jigsaw Jackson, the Human Corkscrew – or children, like the Nicholas Brothers.

⁶⁹ James Gavin, *Stormy Weather: The Life of Lena Horne* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 2010) 43.

But for those dancers whose sexuality was on display, performances at the Cotton Club had to negotiate this white heteronormative space very carefully.

Earl “Snake Hips” Tucker, who first appeared at the Cotton Club in 1929, would begin his dance by trembling. Blowing on his hands as if he were cold, the gesture would turn with an extension of his arm and a flick of his wrist into the movement of a shooter in a craps game, and he would wave, clap his hands, and move from the Tremble to the Shake. While Duke Ellington’s orchestra played “East St. Louis Toodle-Oo” or “Snake Hip Dance,” Tucker moved his body outrageously, his hips and pelvis gyrating and circling, his body at times vibrating from head to foot and at other times forming perfect S-shapes, his torso broken dramatically into multiple units and his hips out of joint. In skin-tight satin pants, silk shirt, and kerchief knotted around his neck, Tucker maintained a fixed, angry intensity, what one critic called the expression of “a murderously naughty boy.”⁷⁰ He ended his routine by turning his back to the audience and returning to the Tremble, allowing them to see from all angles the speed at which he could make his body shiver. It was a spectacular display of athleticism, skill and sexuality and at the Cotton Club Tucker’s dance was both a provocation and a sensation.

Dance historian Marshall Stearns remembers being a “callow and puritanical undergraduate” when he saw Tucker at the Cotton Club in the late twenties. He was “unable to believe what he saw” and spent “most of his energy trying not to look shocked.” His date from Vassar had a much more positive reaction, and even though her

⁷⁰ Marshall & Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* (New York: De Capo Press, 1994) 237.

applause struck Stearns as a “public endorsement of depravity,” her reaction wasn’t surprising. Dancer Al Minns stated baldly that “women were fascinated” by Tucker,⁷¹ and because these fascinated women in the Cotton Club audience were almost all white, this was a potentially disastrous situation. It was necessary to create a space where the white women in the audience could be comfortably engrossed in the display while making certain that their white male companions didn’t feel threatened by an overt display of black masculine sexuality. To this end, Tucker and his dance were carefully coded as homosexual, creating both a landscape for an imaginary Jazz Age Harlem and a means for his viewers to stay unthreatened from it. Through his amazing physical performance, Tucker’s body can be mapped as a site of racial and sexual tensions that would have been read by the predominantly white spectators at the Cotton Club in a number of different ways. Tucker’s double-purposed feminization served both as a marker for the Cotton Club’s recreation of a Harlem that was understood, and indeed expected, to be sexually progressive, and also as a means to distance the audience’s fears of black masculinity. Tucker also served as a tour guide, wordlessly using his body to map out the imaginary Harlem that his audience had travelled uptown to experience. His dancing introduced an overtly sexual fantasy of Harlem to his audiences, while at the same time maintaining their heteronormative privilege and his own comfortable-yet-dangerous identity. He literally embodied the Harlem that was understood by the club’s downtown clientele.

⁷¹ Ibid.

In the 1920s, the Shake, under many names, was a particularly African American dance. Also called the *todalo*, or toddle, the hip-shaking dance can be traced back to the early 1800s and throughout black American culture. The semantic derivation of “toodle-oo,” as in Ellington’s number “East St. Louis Toodle-oo” that Tucker danced to – a deep history that Ellington was originally unaware of but pleasantly surprised by – is believed by one scholar to be a white mishearing and bastardization of *todalo*.⁷² Dance styles where the hips and buttocks swung and shook were omnipresent in the black community, and Jazz Age urban modernity soon brought them to white viewers and dancers as well. These shakes and shimmies caused great consternation for self-appointed guardians of white culture such as Vernon and Irene Castle. The Castles’ 1914 guide to proper dancing, *Modern Dance*, warned against this sort of thing, and their rules for “Correct Dancing” absolutely forbade it. “Do not wriggle the shoulders,” was their first rule, followed by “Do not shake the hips. Do not twist the body.”⁷³ These rules were not just for social dancing. The Castles were concerned about possible imitation by audience members viewing any performance where the dancers behaved like “wild Apaches” when “there was no one to tell those young people that they are mistaken in their choice of steps.”⁷⁴ Tucker’s dance broke all three of the Castles’ rules for dancing within white societal norms, creating an African American spectacle which was exactly what visitors

⁷² Chadwick Hansen, “Jenny’s Toe Revisited: White Responses to Afro-American Shaking Dances” *American Music* 5.1 (Spring 1987): 1-19.

⁷³ Vernon and Irene Castle, *Modern Dancing* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1914) np.

⁷⁴ Castle, 26-27.

to Harlem hoped for, a rejection of convention and imagined moment of slumming, albeit one in a room where champagne cost thirty Depression-era dollars a bottle.

Tucker's style operated both in the Jazz Age modernity of the 1920s and the minstrel show past. The "eccentric Negro dance" was a component of the minstrel show as well as a catch-all phrase that encompassed a variety of styles from the rigidity of the Cakewalk, to the raucous Shake, to Earl "Snake Hips" Tucker's back-breaking performance. It would have reminded the 1920s audience of these performances of blackness that were humorous, grotesque, and above all very physical, "combining rubberlegs with rotating hips . . . strange, physically dynamic, hysterically out of control."⁷⁵ Tucker wasn't the only eccentric dancer who appeared at the Cotton Club – other revues featured Henry "Rubberlegs" Williams and "Jigsaw" Jackson, the Human Corkscrew. Clearly, to Dan Healy and the Cotton Club producers, a gyrating, physical dance was as much a part of their fantasization of black America as were hot jazz, saucy songs, and fond nostalgia for the Antebellum South, from which the club took both its name and its interior design cues. The startling physicality of the dance allowed the white audience to exoticize the black dancer as something removed from civilization and closer to a primal savagery, placing them in the presence of an unrestrained physicality that gave them permission, in the words of Harlem Renaissance poet James Weldon Johnson,

⁷⁵ Thomas DeFrantz, "Simmering Passivity: The Male Black Body in Concert Dance." *Moving Words: Re-Writing Dance*, Ed. Gay Harris (London: Routledge, 1996) 108.

to “throw off the crusts and layers of inhibitions laid on by sophisticated civilization”⁷⁶ if only through the vicarious pleasures of scopic association. “The only issue on which all 1920s white commentators agreed,” wrote one scholar, “was that jazz dancing manifested primitive experience,”⁷⁷ a primitivity that posited African Americans as simpler, more physical, and therefore more carnal.

This carnality was not purely heterosexual. Tucker’s dance also served to signify a sexually progressive, queer Harlem, an aspect of the African American neighborhood that was not particularly secret at the time for either the knowledgeable, adventurous socialites or the more general public. When showing friends around Harlem, the white Harlem Renaissance patron and self-proclaimed “Negrotarian” Carl Van Vechten eschewed the Cotton Club in favor of Harlem’s gay and lesbian bars. He did this not for the shock value, but because this sort of public display of nontraditional sexuality was understood as part of the Harlem experience and, for some, was to be expected from an evening slumming uptown. Even mainstream publications wrote of Harlem’s gay nightlife, with *Vanity Fair* reviewing the gay and lesbian nightclub the Clam House as “a popular house for revelers, but not for the innocent young.”⁷⁸ Other Harlem hotspots, the Ubangi Club and Connie’s Inn, were well-known for their “pansy shows” with African

⁷⁶ James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2000) 328.

⁷⁷ Nicholas M. Evans, “Racial Cross-Dressing in the Jazz Age: Cultural Therapy and Its Discontent in Cabaret Nightlife.” *Hop on Pop: The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture* Eds. Henry Jenkins, Tara MacPherson, and Jane Shattuc (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002) 389.

⁷⁸ Charles G. Shaw, *Nightlife: Vanity Fair’s Intimate Guide to New York After Dark* (New York: John Day Company, 1931) 31.

American drag performers; and recent scholarly work on the gay and lesbian nightlife of 1920s Harlem has revisited a number of clubs, both overt and underground, that featured astonishingly risqué acts on stage and catered to gay and lesbian clientele. “Nobody was in the closet,” recalled writer and actor Richard Bruce Nugent, “there wasn’t any closet.”⁷⁹ Visitors to Harlem expected a glimpse of transgressive sexuality, and for those at the Cotton Club Tucker’s Snake Hip Dance served this purpose.

In fact, Tucker’s dance was perhaps the only moment in the revue that could rightly be called queer. Between the female singers performing torch songs or blue numbers laced with barely hidden sexual innuendo and the prominence of the Cotton Club Gals, the scantily clad chorus line of “sepia beauties,” the show was constructed as a heteronormative spectacle. The sexuality of Tucker’s dance was part and parcel of the Cotton Club’s packaging of an imagined libidinous Harlem experience for the white audiences to view. But by understanding the performance as a queer one, the white men in the audience could stay reasonably comfortable with Snake Hips’ dance because, in Stearns’ words, the dance was a feminized “public depravity” rather than dangerous sexual threat. Stearns writes that “the Shake began as a woman’s dance, in the European tradition,”⁸⁰ a tradition where the straight and linear reads as masculine and the rounded and lissome as feminine. The curves Tucker made in his body interrupted the verticality of his frame, and with the side-to-side movements of his hips Tucker created an image of

⁷⁹ Richard Bruce Nugent, *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections From the Work of Richard Bruce Nugent* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002) 21.

⁸⁰ Stearns 235.

the straight line broken, the dancer opting for sensuality over rigidity, the man who rejects masculinity. He was marked by his clothes as well. Unlike the formal wear that most of his contemporaries wore to dance at the Cotton Club, Tucker was dressed in a shiny silk shirt, tight pants, and wore a kerchief knotted around his neck, an effeminate ensemble for the men in the audience, but one that also allowed his body to be seen clearly. In his clothes and his movements Tucker was feminized, and this allowed the audience a measure of safety in his transgressive performances. He was performing a blackness that wasn't threatening to white masculinity and also performing a queerness that served as a marker for the sexually experimental world of Harlem, allowing the audience both heteronormative comfort and a touristic association.

Tucker's body mapped out an imaginary Jazz Age Harlem as surely as the revue at the Cotton Club did, one that was read by white patrons as exotic, sexual, primitive, and, in the case of the dancer but not the venue, queer. How much of Tucker himself could be read from the dance is uncertain. Duke Ellington described Earl Tucker as coming from "one of those primitive lost colonies where they practice pagan rituals and their dancing styles evolved from religious seizures,"⁸¹ but Ellington was mistaken. Tucker, in fact, attended the middle-class Frederick Douglas High School in the suburbs of Baltimore, coincidentally the same school where Cab Calloway was a star athlete. But Duke Ellington's imagined biography of the dancer wasn't a Cotton Club publicity stunt or a confused pre-Civil Rights era diminishment – Ellington made that comment in 1966.

⁸¹ Yuval Taylor and Jake Austen, *Darkest America: Black Minstrelsy From Slavery to Hip Hop* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 2012) 271.

If a proud and knowledgeable man like Ellington, a proper “race man,” believed that Tucker was a sub-civilized pagan from the way he danced, white audiences in search of their reductive idea of black experience could hardly be expected to have a more sophisticated view when confronted by a black body that so neatly mapped out everything they had expected in their exploration of Harlem.

There is only one extant recording of a performance at the Cotton Club. That fact alone is remarkable, because the club hosted weekly radio broadcasts for several years, broadcasts that served many purposes. The radio broadcasts promoted the club, solidifying it as a place of cultural importance. The fact that they were on the radio worked as circular proof for the listener that the Cotton Club must be important because, after all, only important performers would be heard on the radio. However, none of the weekly radio broadcasts from the Cotton Club have been preserved. Like so many jazz and swing broadcasts of the period, they were recorded over, discarded, or simply lost, because radio executives felt that repeat airings of live music held no interest for listeners, whereas radio comedy could be successfully and profitably rerun. Apparently to the radio executives of the time, the music of Duke Ellington was a passing fad, but the comedy stylings of Lum & Abner would last forever. The only extant recording of a live performance from inside the Cotton Club was discovered in 2001. It comes from a German broadcaster with the unlikely name of Helmut H. Helmutt, and for his pains the entertainers at the Cotton Club flicked lit matches at him and made fun of his hat.

In March and April of 1931, Helmutt and his small crew journeyed to New York City to make an audio travelogue for his listeners in Berlin. He recorded in a variety of New York landmarks such as Times Square, the Empire State Building, the subway, and Macy's, giving his listeners a sense of place as he described the sights over the ambient noise of his surroundings. Although some people in Germany saw this as an exercise in colonization – one newspaper, the *Südwestdeutsche Zeitung*, covered the story with the boastful headline “Hello Europe, Hello America, We Put Our Microphone on the Statue of Liberty.”⁸² The project was intended to glorify both scientific progress in radio broadcasting and the pleasures of unabashed tourism. Relayed through a series of short wave transmitters from Helmutt on location, to the NBC studios, and across the Atlantic to Germany, this broadcast was one of the most complicated and ambitious radio projects Germany had launched. And all of this effort was in the service of the pleasant, slender young Helmutt, wandering around New York City and talking about the sights for the folks back home.

The transmissions were recorded onto twelve-inch wax plates and later copied onto metal test pressings, to be catalogued with a German series of documentary broadcasts, *The World on Records*. It was one of these metal test pressings, labeled “Impressions of the Cotton Club,” that was discovered in the RCA archives in 2001. This recording is the only one of Helmutt's broadcasts, and the only live broadcast from the Cotton Club, that is currently extant. As such, it provides a useful glimpse into the show,

⁸² Horst J.P. Bergmeier and Rainier P. Lotz, *Live From the Cotton Club* (Hambergen: Bear Family Records, 2003) 8.

filtered through the eyes of a literal tourist who was busily playing the role of tour guide for his German countrymen who were listening to Cab Calloway's orchestra in the year before Hitler became Chancellor.

Sitting at a table next to the stage with his microphone and transmitter, Helmutt described the action throughout the show. His earliest description of the venue was that *alles schwarz*, "[...] everything is black, black, and black. The waiters are black, many guests are black, black, the orchestra is black, you can hear it."⁸³ On the heels of that description, Helmutt, despite playing the role of tour guide for his German listeners, almost became a prototypical tourist. He was not impressed by "the black orchestra, of ten men," saying "this isn't anything special. One could sometimes see ten-men Negro orchestras in Europe." In the tradition of tourists everywhere, he bemoaned the presence of other tourists. As theorist Alex Gillespie points out, "the sight of another tourist may, like a mirror, make visible to tourists their own object-state as a tourist. A tourist alone may direct his or her gaze towards the toured population, remaining invisible to self, but when other tourists are present, then the tourist may be reminded of his/her own outsider status."⁸⁴

A phrase that Helmutt used in his frequent complaints about the nature of the Cotton Club is *Europaesiert*, which translates to "Europeanized." Helmutt sadly stated that the club was "only a weak reflection of Harlem past, in everything it became, it

⁸³ *Live From the Cotton Club* (Hambergen: Bear Family Records, 2003). Translation by Mary Katherine Stickel. All subsequent quotations from Helmutt are from this recording.

⁸⁴ Alex Gillespie, *Becoming Other: From Social Interaction to Self-Reflection* (Charlotte: Information Age Publishing, Inc., 2006) 63.

became a little Europeanized, its peak is over . . . Too bad that we did not have trans-Atlantic radio five years ago.” It seems Helmutt was referring to the disappointing presence of other whites in the audience, asserting his hope that the club would have had more of a black clientele. This would have created, for Helmutt, a more authentic experience, as well as privileging him as one of the few Caucasians in the room. By condemning the club as “Europeanized” he was in essence condemning himself, a visitor who was literally from Europe, and indicting himself for helping to create the very inauthenticity that he complained about. This is how the tourist always understands him or herself, with a constant awareness that his presence contributes to the diminishment of the pure experience as he or she imagined it. And this is also how the tour guide still constructs a space, using Barbara Weightman’s “outsideness,” and reinforcing the fact that the tourist can never truly be part of the society being toured.

Helmutt was as respectful an audience member as he could be under the circumstances, confining the bulk of his narration to the louder moments of the show and staying quiet during the softer ones. Unfortunately for the jazzophile, this created the frustrating experience of Helmutt talking incessantly over hot music and the wail of Cab Calloway in a rare live performance from the period, drowning out the orchestra with his rapid German, followed by the unfulfilling experience of listening to the sound of tap dancing. He must have cleared this with the club’s management beforehand as the Cotton Club was surprisingly strict with distracting audience members, as Duke Ellington explains:

The Cotton Club was a classy spot. Impeccable behavior was demanded in the room while the show was on. If someone was talking loud while Leitha Hill, for example, was singing, the waiter would come and touch him on the shoulder. If that didn't do it, the captain would come over and admonish him politely. Then the headwaiter would remind him that he had been cautioned. After that, if the loud talker still continued, someone would come and throw him out.⁸⁵

This assertive behavior from African American waiters towards white audience members was, unsurprisingly, unpopular with some of the guests. In his 1929 *Variety* review, writer Abel Green speculated on the “psychological reaction of the service corps to the ofay invaders . . . The staff seems to take the attitude that for once it can assert itself on native territory [...]” and he described the behavior of the black waiters as “churly.”⁸⁶

This confrontation with an audience of white tourists, or “ofay invaders,” wasn't confined to the waitstaff. Ellington and his orchestra may have stayed quiet, but with Dan Healy backstage the singers and the specialty acts apparently had no compunction about interacting with the audience in a manner that was playful, “churly,” or both. Leitha Hill, the blues singer who specialized in risqué numbers like “Deep Sea Diving Papa” and “Toothache Blues,” made an impression on Helmutt. “Oh!” Helmutt exclaimed, “that was a girl, a young, black, Negro beauty who, who, who threw a match directly at the microphone for us, and who is grinning happily at us now.” In keeping with her preferred

⁸⁵ Duke Ellington, *Music is My Mistress* (New York: De Capo Press, 1973) 80.

⁸⁶ *Variety*.

song stylings, Hill's move could be seen as both impish flirtation and a challenging prank, a piece of direct communication between performer and audience. Ultimately it was a bit disrespectful, and it is hard to imagine that there were many places in America where blacks could flick matches at whites with total impunity. But despite the white Healy's control of the stage, what Weightman would call "encapsulation," there was still the element of outsideness to the performance, a reminder for the audience that they were not a part of the show, or a part of Harlem. For Helmutt Helmutt it was another reminder of the tourist's status as an outsider that he dutifully, and delightedly, reported for his overseas audience.

Helmutt was less delighted by the next communication from a performer. "Now, a stepdance number is up, a typical production of Harlem artistry," he begins, "Eddie Cantor, one of the most famous tapdancers in Harlem." Whether or not the black dancer Eddie Rector heard that Helmutt confused his name with that of the famous Jewish comedian, Eddie Cantor, is uncertain, but given Helmutt's position near the stage it certainly seems likely. "Of all the soft-shoe dancers, Eddie Rector was unquestionably the greatest soloist," Marshall Stearns writes, but he was also a troubled man. Dancer Buddy Bradley remembered that a few years before Rector's Cotton Club engagement, "Eddie was drinking heavily, and we'd have to hold him up and dress him before he went on stage, but the moment he began to dance he was as straight as anybody," and only a

few years after it he would be institutionalized.⁸⁷ Certainly he knew about the unusual broadcast, though, because during his soft-shoe to Ellington's "Mystery Song" he paused and spoke directly to Helmut Helmut, "*Ach du lieber strohhut!*"

If Helmut was surprised that an African American dancer in Harlem spoke German, he didn't mention it, perhaps because he was feeling a bit hurt. Rector's comment translates to "Oh, you sweet straw hat," and while it could have been simply a display of linguistic fluency, Helmut's resultant silence and the then-current trend of New York fashion suggests that the dancer was poking fun at the visitor. The straw hat had enjoyed brief popularity in the 1920s, largely thanks to Maurice Chevalier's tour of the East Coast – where he was backed, incidentally, by Duke Ellington's orchestra. However by 1931, the year of this broadcast, the straw hat had fallen out of fashion, and it was certainly more informal than the trilbys and top hats favored at the upscale Cotton Club. Rector's aside sounds like a dig at Helmut, who as both a foreign tourist and a professional broadcaster on a career-making project might well have been sensitive to his reception from those he was visiting. With more than Leitha Hill's flicked matches, Rector's insult reinforced Helmut's status as an outsider, unaware of metropolitan American fashions, the proper attire for an elegant evening out, or the changes in New York style. And unlike Hill's gesture, which might have been seen by the rest of the audience as spontaneous showmanship, acknowledging the presence of the foreign broadcaster and bringing American performers and audience, black and white, together,

⁸⁷ Stearns 289-290.

Rector's German-language comment was personal. While some of the audience might have been surprised and impressed by Rector, the black dancer, speaking a foreign language, few if any of them would have known what was said in German. Helmutt understood, and rather than laugh the incident off or express his surprise, he made no mention of it at all, despite the fact that his German listeners could clearly hear their language being spoken in a voice that didn't belong to their tour guide.

Barbara Weightman's formulation of a tour guide's three qualities can be seen by these three men. Dan Healy provided the tour guide's encapsulation by reassuring the audiences of a controlling white presence; Earl "Snake Hips" Tucker directed the audience towards the scopic sexuality that was most comfortable for them; and Helmutt H. Helmutt, the only literal tour guide of the three, showed Weightman's outsideness. Helmutt did this not entirely through his own actions, but by the events taking place around him, events that reinforced his status as the Other in the visited environment. This reassertion for the typical white tourist that he did not belong in Harlem is a double-edged sword, as white privilege is reinforced at the same time that ignorance of customs and styles can put the visitor in the position of feeling like he is a figure of fun. Helmutt's experience also points to the fact that there was space at the Cotton Club for subversive behavior, antics and asides from black performers at the expense of the white audience. This goes against the received narrative of the Cotton Club's entertainers being little more than obedient tools to either entertain wealthy whites. This subversion, this creation of outsideness, allowed for black self-expression while at the same time constructed the

imagined Harlem that the audiences had travelled to see, one where the black population was direct, challenging, and dangerous, but dangerous only in the way of cutting remarks and flicked matches.

Chapter 3: No Weary Blues: Fields and McHugh, Arlen and Koehler, and the Songs of the Cotton Club

The Cotton Club is best remembered for its music. The jungle growl of Ellington's orchestra, the scatting of Cab Calloway, the hot jazz of Louis Armstrong – the Cotton Club casts such a long shadow on African American music of the 1920s and 1930s that black performers who never appeared there are routinely mistakenly credited with appearances at the club, as if it is difficult to believe that any famous African American of the period could have possibly performed anywhere else.⁸⁸ But despite the club's musical dominance in both the African American cultural landscape of the period and current cultural memory, the music of the Cotton Club was racially complicated. The orchestral numbers were created by an Ellington or a Calloway, the individual bandleaders and their own composers and arrangers. This music, used for both social dancing from the audience and chorus numbers during the show, came almost exclusively from African American talent. However, the songs that were written for the featured singers were, with few exceptions, written by white songwriters. In the songs, the purported authentic Harlem experience was musically mediated and lyrically verbalized by these talented outsiders. Two of the best-known songwriting teams in American popular music history worked at the club: Dorothy Fields and Jimmy McHugh, who wrote several shows beginning in 1928, and Harold Arlen and Ted Koehler, who began in

⁸⁸ "Correction: Cotton Club interstitial," *PBS History Detectives* website, 6 Aug 2010.

1932. All four of these white writers have been inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame, and a small sampling of their work reveals many familiar songs. Fields and McHugh wrote standards such as “On the Sunny Side of the Street,” “I Can’t Give You Anything But Love,” and “I’m in the Mood for Love;” Arlen and Koehler wrote “Get Happy,” “Let’s Fall in Love” and “Stormy Weather,” and Arlen’s success would continue to Hollywood, where he wrote the songs for *The Wizard of Oz* and won the Academy Award for “Over the Rainbow.” These two white songwriting teams approached the task of writing for the Harlem nightclub very differently, however, and this chapter explores what they brought to the Cotton Club, what they took from it, and how they engaged with their task of using music to create a fantasized Harlem. Fields and McHugh built careers for themselves; Arlen and Koehler rebuilt the Cotton Club as a place that not only signified an imagined black experience or the neighborhood of Harlem, but became in itself a signifier and the signified. During their tenure, the Cotton Club wasn’t just part of Harlem – it was, itself, Harlem.

The Cotton Club Parades, like most of the high-end cabaret and nightclub revues of the early twentieth century, hired songwriters to compose original songs for the performances. The commercial cachet of being a venue where popular music first ‘broke’ was a valuable asset for marketing the clubs, making them seen as places where the newest music could be consumed and the newest vogues in popular songs were experienced. Also, this was still a period where sales of sheet music outpaced sales of recordings, and “recorded versions of these songs were at first just seen as a way to

promote the sheet music, and were usually released only as the sheet music sales began falling.”⁸⁹ The Cotton Club, like its rivals both uptown and downtown, sold sheet music at the coat check stand in the lobby, allowing patrons who had just discovered this new music to both acquire a tangible souvenir of their clubgoing experience and have a means to later play these new songs for their friends, giving the visitor the cultural currency of being on the cutting edge as well as further advertising the Harlem venue.

A place cannot retain the glamour of counterculture danger if it is universally embraced. In Dorothy Fields and Jimmy McHugh, we can see two whites who clearly have no interest in Harlem, even as they are writing songs for the neighborhood’s most celebrated performance space. In the music Fields and McHugh chose to write and chose not to write, and in the stories they tell of their time working for the club, we can also see another white America, one that was dismissive (if not wary) of black culture. In their self-confessed feelings of superiority to blacks and black music, we have the necessary counterpoint for those whites who chose to see themselves as daring and modern by embracing Harlem society. Part of the allure of the Cotton Club for touristic audiences was the small act of rebellion implicit in their interest and affection for black life, no matter how performatively that world was constructed. Therefore, it was necessary for those audiences that there was a mainstream opinion to rebel against. Even while working for the Cotton Club, Fields and McHugh embody that mainstream white superiority. They serve as foils to Arlen and Koehler, whose interest in African American life and culture

⁸⁹ Louis Rastelli, “History of the Record Industry Part 2: Independent Labels, Radio, and the Battle of the Speeds,” *Fish Piss Magazine* 3.1 (2004): n. pag.

and excitement in writing for the club led them to create a beloved, albeit imaginary, version of Harlem, a fantasia that both reflected and created the neighborhood's image in popular thought. Also, Fields and McHugh can serve to show us a white America that was interested in Prohibition-era gangsters as a way to perform their own ideas of moral and physical courage, and had no interest in black culture and jazz at all.

Jimmy McHugh, like Irving Mills, was an ambitious song plugger working in Manhattan. McHugh was a tireless self-promoter, and his skills at networking and generating publicity for himself were every bit as great as his musical talent. He found ways to get his name in the newspaper that ranged from public charity work to opportunistically rushing to the sites of fires and making certain to be interviewed as a witness, always making sure that his latest song was mentioned any time he was interviewed. The Irish Catholic McHugh became a member of St. Malachy's, known as "the Actor's Church," and organized a four a.m. Sunday mass for performers who were just getting off work in nightclubs and cabarets – the congregation included celebrities like Marilyn Miller and Fred Allen, and gave McHugh access to show business connections that would prove useful in his career⁹⁰. But as creative as McHugh was in self-promotion, musically he was less interested in originality than he was in sales. He collaborated with Mills' brother Jack on the song "Everything is Hotsy Totsy Now," which they recorded in 1925 under the name of The Hotsy Totsy Boys. It was a moderate sheet music and radio success, and was subsequently covered by several dance

⁹⁰ Alyn Shipton, *I Feel a Song Coming On: The Life of Jimmy McHugh* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009) 33-36.

bands. The phrase “hotsy tots,” which essentially means “terrific,” came from Billy DeBeck’s popular *Barney Google* comic strip, and was one of several pieces of Jazz Age slang that the comic created, along with “horsefeathers,” “heebie-jeebies,” and “sweet mama,” that found traction across racial lines in the 1920s. McHugh wasn’t alone in capitalizing on the cultural currency of the comic strip – two years earlier in 1923, a young Billy Rose had a smash hit with his musical take on the character, “Barney Google With His Goo Goo Googly Eyes” (also called “the Barney Google Foxtrot”). Popular music based not just on the comics section generally, but on Barney Google specifically, was already a proven commodity, and McHugh followed the trend with his own composition. He had done the same thing before, after the success of the novelty song “Yes, We Have No Bananas” inspired him to write the near-identical “Hey, You Want Any Codfish? We Only Got Mack’rel Today,” a song that McHugh’s biographer calls both “unmemorable” and “unashamed.”⁹¹ That lack of shame was McHugh’s greatest asset when it came to aggressive self-publicity, and he promoted this obvious imitation as “A Deep Sea Ditty That’ll Knock ‘Em Dotty – Every Line a Long Loud Laugh, Every Chorus a Continuous Chuckle.”⁹² In these Tin Pan Alley days, McHugh was always looking for trends and had no qualms about capitalizing on the music of the moment, whether from the funny pages or the farmer’s market.

McHugh’s attitude towards songwriting can be seen clearly in the first piece of advice he gave to Dorothy Fields, the lyricist with whom he would write his greatest hits.

⁹¹ Alyn Shipton 36.

⁹² Ibid.

“You were trying to write *up* to the people,” he recalled in a 1929 joint interview with *Metronome*, “and I told you to write *down*, give them something they understood, something that should not tax their intelligence.”⁹³

One of the few women of her era to find success in popular songwriting, Dorothy Fields’ earliest work was writing lyrics that capitalized on the collegiate music trend of the early 1920s, songs with names like “Varsity Drag” and “Collegiana.” Her lyrics were clever – “Collegiana” features the rhyme “. . . every pedagogue/all go to bed agog,” exactly the sort of thing McHugh found too challenging for the general public. She was the daughter of famous vaudevillian Lew Fields, a fact which prompted one Tin Pan Alley publisher unimpressed with her ‘rah rah’ music, to ask, “If she’s so damn talented, why doesn’t her father ever do anything for her?”⁹⁴ Helping his daughter in the low profession of show business was the last thing that Lew Fields wanted to do, and he both actively discouraged her and “sent word to his contacts in the industry that he would be much obliged if they did not encourage his daughter.”⁹⁵ His goal was to provide his family with a comfortable, conventional life outside of show business, and Dorothy seemed to make her father’s dream come true when she reached what the vaudevillian must have considered the pinnacle of respectability: marriage to a nice Jewish doctor. The marriage didn’t last, however, and Field’s ambitions as a songwriter led her to Mills

⁹³ Mitchell Parish, “Meet Dorothy Fields and Jimmy McHugh,” *Metronome* March 1929, from Shipton 81. Italics in original.

⁹⁴ Deborah Grace Winer, *On the Sunny Side of the Street: The Life and Lyrics of Dorothy Fields* (New York: Shirmer Books, 1997) 24.

⁹⁵ Shipton 80.

Publishing and her professional partnership with the ambitious Jimmy McHugh.

McHugh's relationship with Irving Mills led to an offer to write original songs for the Cotton Club revues, an offer that did not sit well with Lew Fields and was less than whole-heartedly embraced by his daughter. Her father expressed his displeasure at the idea of her working at the Cotton Club, and "in the story that she loved to repeat throughout her life, she went on to say that she'd write lyrics for the Westminster Kennel Club if she was given the chance."⁹⁶

Dorothy Fields' comment deserves to be explored, both thoroughly and delicately. Taken in the best possible light, it still positions the Cotton Club as a low-rung venue in Fields' eyes, a lesser, undistinguished place unworthy of her talents. However, she would write songs for it as she would for any club that offered her a job, no matter how minor. That the Cotton Club, even as early as 1928, was a popular spot widely recognized as being on the vanguard of African American jazz clearly didn't matter to Fields – she still saw it as beneath her. Further extrapolating her comment leads to her uncomfortable comparison of the performers in Harlem to animals, to the dogs of the Westminster Kennel Club. This is tenuous ground. Nonetheless, her biographer's assertion that "she loved to repeat" this bon mot "throughout her life" might suggest that Fields not only found the 'Cotton Club / Kennel Club' wordplay apt, but also found the comparison between performing blacks and performing dogs apt as well. Whatever the case, a job at the Cotton Club held no allure for her.

⁹⁶ Winer 27.

Dorothy Fields and Jimmy McHugh viewed their work for the Cotton Club as one of a series of songwriting jobs, one in which they had no particular interest. After landing a job at the Cotton Club, they began writing for other revues around town, including the midnight ‘roof show’ at the Ziegfeld *Follies*, and they seem to have reserved their best work for productions outside of Harlem. For the white nightclub revue *Delmar’s Revels* they wrote the enduring “I Can’t Give You Anything but Love.” For the Cotton Club, though, they contributed forgettable numbers such as “Freeze an’ Melt,” “Harlemania” and “Hottentot Tot.” The latter, especially, shows their disinterest in Harlem. The lyrics were borrowed, almost in their entirety, from a 1915 children’s tongue-twister, telling the story of an African child at school, and asking the question “If a Hottentot taught a Hottentot tot to talk ere the tot could totter / Ought the Hottentot tot be taught to say ‘aught’ .. by her Hottentot tutor?”⁹⁷ It is racially inoffensive, even perhaps sweet, but it uses a generalized Africanness that is completely unmoored from the signifiers of Harlem or the Cotton Club. It isn’t sexy, jazzy, or mysterious – in fact, it isn’t in any way adult, while the Cotton Club Parades were very adult shows. It doesn’t seem to be a song that took much thought from the writers.

Fields and McHugh seemed to put more effort in their other projects of the period, and none received more of their attention than their Broadway debut, *Lew Leslie’s Blackbirds of 1928*. This was the job that Jimmy McHugh had been waiting for. Despite his shameless self-promotion and his stated belief that a good song should talk down to

⁹⁷ *Such Nonsense! An Anthology*, ed. Carolyn Wells (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1918) 232.

an audience, McHugh fancied himself another Irving Berlin or George Gershwin, and he believed that it was only other people's snobbery, politics and prejudice that was keeping him from Broadway. "Broadway was a haughty young wench with no apparent inclination to bestow her favors on me, a brash young Irishman," he would write in an unpublished memoir. "She played her favorites. No crass outsiders were being considered to elbow them aside."⁹⁸ It was his association with the Cotton Club that brought McHugh to the attention of producer Lew Leslie. The impresario and nightclub owner believed that the success of the Cotton Club signaled the possibility of a lucrative African American revue in midtown, and once that show began drawing audiences it could be transferred to Broadway – it had been three years since the hit *Shuffle Along*, and Leslie knew that another show, *Still Shufflin'*, with music written by Fats Waller, was currently in out-of-town tryouts and poised to get to Broadway before him. Between the emergence of jazz and the success of the Cotton Club, Broadway of 1928 was ready for another African American musical, and Leslie was determined to get there first.

Contracting Fields and McHugh didn't bother the management at the Cotton Club – as has been noted, the two were free to write music elsewhere while they were employed in Harlem – but Lew Leslie's next actions were an ill-considered insult to Owney Madden. He began hiring away other performers from the Cotton Club, starting with the chorus girls and ending with Adelaide Hall. Hall, a recent addition to the Harlem show, was the vocalist on Duke Ellington's haunting "Creole Love Call" both at the show

⁹⁸ Shipton 69.

and on a popular recording, and she was well on her way to becoming the next Florence Mills or Josephine Baker. When Leslie attempted to poach Hall, the Cotton Club management threatened to “sprinkle a little kerosene in the lobby” of his nightclub, and Leslie quickly headed uptown to supplicate Owney Madden.⁹⁹ A backroom deal was reached that allowed Hall and the dancing girls to perform for Leslie’s eight o’clock revue before returning uptown for their late night engagement at the Cotton Club. The details of what Madden received in return are unknown – presumably, in the language of the period, he got a piece of the action at the box office – but it was a mutually beneficial arrangement similar to the sort enjoyed between white theaters and white nightclubs during the period. A performer would do his or her number both in a Broadway musical and, later that night, at a cabaret, creating a situation where each venue was tacitly advertising the other and doubling the exposure for both the singer and the song. For songwriters like Fields and McHugh, this was a perfect arrangement.

Lew Leslie’s Blackbirds of 1928 was one of the biggest hits of the decade, running on Broadway for 519 performances. Critics raved about the stars, notably Hall and Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, and about Fields and McHugh’s songs, which included the hits “I Must Have That Man,” “Diga Diga Doo” and, resurrected from *Delmar’s Follies*, “I Can’t Give You Anything But Love.” While the songwriters were repurposing children’s tongue-twisters for their show in Harlem, they were giving their best work to the show on Broadway. However, despite a positive review, Walter Winchell perceptively noticed

⁹⁹ Shipton 86.

that Jimmy McHugh “has never made an extensive study of the black race, or of the old spirituals.”¹⁰⁰ Even in the most successful black musical of its time, the critics couldn’t help but notice that the songwriter involved knew little about black people. Fields and McHugh weren’t interested in African American culture and, despite the period, they weren’t even particularly interested in jazz. They wrote foxtrots, collegiate anthems, popular songs, and whatever it took to further a driving ambition. With the success of *Blackbirds*, they resigned from the Cotton Club.

However, the pair’s time in Harlem served them both as careerists and as raconteurs. Dorothy Fields and Jimmy McHugh each told similar stories from their time at working at the Cotton Club, and these self-serving anecdotes, seemingly designed for interviews or dinner parties, are informative in how the two seek to position themselves in terms of their time in Harlem. They have both been widely circulated in writings about Fields and McHugh, the Cotton Club, and Prohibition-era gangsters, and they each deserve to be examined. McHugh’s story is that after an evening at the club, he was overcharged on his bill:

I told the waiter, ‘Take this to the bosses and tell them what they can do with it.’

The waiter departed. A few moments later, he was back. ‘The bosses want to see you,’ he said . . . As I walked in, I was greeted by expressionless faces . . . Owney Madden . . . Big Bill Duffy . . . Ben Marden and Jack Arken . . . Mike Best, known to the nefarious society of the underworld as ‘the Baron of Yorkville’ . . . They

¹⁰⁰ Walter Winchell, “Jimmy McHugh’s New Darktown Production,” *New York Evening Graphic* May 1928.

were the lawless hierarchy of the most lurid decade of professional triggermen.

All were killers.

According to his story, the outraged McHugh began insulting the group, calling the white clubowner and his minions “a bunch of cheap bums” and the gangsters were “shocked into silence.” The criminals conferred and decided that in light of McHugh’s bravado, he should have a raise. McHugh’s toughness had impressed them all. “Marden and I became close friends,” he concluded. “I think he would have killed for me.”¹⁰¹

Dorothy Fields’ story of mobsters cowed before showfolk involves the lyricist taking her family to opening night, and being surprised when singer Aida Ward “belted out three of the most shocking, ribald, dirtiest songs anyone had ever heard in the 1920s . . . My father [Lew Fields] said, ‘You didn’t learn those words at home.’ I said, ‘I didn’t write those words.’” Fields’ biographer continues: “Lew Fields, in a rage, went to find the owners, and supposedly threatened to take him (sic) outside if he didn’t correct the situation . . . The club promptly made an announcement that the song that Miss Ward had just sung had not been written by Fields and McHugh.”¹⁰² Another of Dorothy Fields’ biographers, the musicologist Charlotte Greenspan, calls Fields’ story “puzzling” and unsuccessfully attempts to reconcile the story’s logical difficulties and situate it in the timeline of Cotton Club performances. Greenspan examines the story and attempts to answer over a half-dozen questions about it: As Aida Ward was not in Field’s first show,

¹⁰¹ Shipton 72.

¹⁰² Winer 28.

who exactly was singing? As one of the shows' principal creators, Fields surely had attended at least one rehearsal – how could she have been surprised by the song? Why would a risqué song in a midnight cabaret show be startling to a New York theatre professional? Greenspan, unfortunately, finds no solutions for any of the story's logical or logistical problems.¹⁰³

There is, however, a simple explanation for the story's many contradictions and logical fallacies, which is that the story is simply not true. Dorothy Fields was lying, and Jimmy McHugh was with his story of easily-impressed murderers, as well. It is simply impossible to believe that McHugh's complaint about the bar bill wouldn't be handled by the headwaiter or by the floor manager – that instead, it should be taken directly to the owner, Owney "The Killer" Madden, while he was in a secluded conference with a group of dangerous criminals, strains credibility past the breaking point. Similarly unlikely is Dorothy Fields' story of her outraged father forcing "Big Frenchy" DeMange to somehow stop the show in order to have the emcee formally apologize. And how, exactly, could DeMange call a halt to the show, over the sound of Ellington's eleven-piece orchestra playing hot jazz? These are stories that live at the intersection of show business and gangster tales, two areas where unembellished history is hard to find and colorful exaggerations and outright falsehoods are everywhere. These anecdotes are informative in how they position the Fields and McHugh. The songwriters certainly try to come across well in the telling, as standing up to known gangsters shows the pair to be

¹⁰³ Charlotte Greenspan, *Pick Yourself Up: Dorothy Fields and the American Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) 58.

brave, and the delighted regard with which the gangsters receive them shows them to be charismatic. The storytellers are saying, “these are violent men, but not towards me,” thereby gifting themselves with a charm that transcends the lawless and possibly psychopathic nature of their targets. These stories create a Runyonesque world, where through personal moxie Broadway professionals win the respect and cheerful admiration of men called ‘Big Frenchy’ and ‘Killer.’

For McHugh, telling these stories is simply another act of self-promotion; by contrast, Fields uses her tale as a way to reassert both her racial and gendered identity. Through this story, she constructs a feminized version of herself, both shocked by a transgressive other and helpless in the face of it. In McHugh’s tale, he stands up to the gangsters, asserting his masculinity as an aggressive man even against overwhelming odds. In Fields’s story, it is her father who becomes the protector, and she becomes the stunned, powerless girl, one who is worthy of being protected. While both stories are about plucky showfolk facing down gangsters, Fields’s story is instigated by a black woman, singing an inappropriately dirty song. Even though she was at a cabaret, in Harlem, at a show she herself co-wrote, Dorothy Fields was still so delicately naïve (and the black singer so shameless and low) that the show demanded interruption, and Fields deserved protection. This protection takes the form of her white father making demands of a white gangster who tells the white emcee to issue an apology. The African American woman whose lack of sensitivity instigated the whole affair is never even spoken too.

Neither of these stories of their adventures in Harlem are about their dealings with African Americans. They are interested in creating a relationship with the white criminal ownership, not with the black legendary talent. Rather than tell stories about their time with Duke Ellington, one of America's greatest composers, or Bill Robinson, one of America's greatest dancers, they tell stories about gangsters, which seems to be the final proof that Fields and McHugh had no interest in the Harlem of the 1920s even after the celebrity of the black artists had far outpaced the notoriety of mobsters like Owney Madden. They were far more interested in creating stories about themselves. The songwriting team that followed them, Harold Arlen and Ted Koehler, provide a stark contrast. They were less interested in positioning themselves as the dynamic friends of white gangsters than they were in becoming friends with the black artists, men and women they immediately recognized as great talents. While Fields and McHugh repurposed children's tongue-twisters into nightclub songs, Arlen and Koehler attempted to create songs that participated in the construction of black life, modern Harlem, and the Cotton Club itself.

Several changes were made in 1932 to the club's floorshows. There was a new producer, Dan Healy, a New York celebrity who had occasionally worked as an emcee at the show. Healy changed the way the show billed itself. Previously, the shows had titles that reflected either the jazz that the audience had come to hear (*Rhythmania*) or the women that the audience had come to see (*Wild Blackberries: Sweet and Unrefined*). The new title, *The Cotton Club Parade: 20th Edition* (a number apparently chosen more for its

imaginary anniversarial weight than its mathematical correctness) made the Cotton Club, the venue itself, the star of the show. There was an acknowledgement that the audience had come for the music, celebrity, and sexuality, but that these things at this club were a given. The Cotton Club had become synonymous with Ellington's jungle sound and the scopophilic pleasures of imagined black sexuality – a particular title for a particular show was no longer necessary, and for the rest of the club's history the Parades would be numbered and not named. The show's composers were also changed, as the team of Jimmy McHugh and Dorothy Fields was heading to Hollywood. McHugh and Fields enjoyed the steady money and exposure of writing for the Cotton Club, but they never believed that the job brought them much status – Fields in particular, who asked that her name be taken off the sheet music that was sold at the Cotton Club coat check. Replacing them was the team of Harold Arlen and Ted Koehler.

Roger Edens remembers attending rehearsals with his friend Harold Arlen. "I shall never forget the sight and sound of Harold with the cast," he said. "Singing with them, dancing with them, laughing and kidding with them . . . I was always amazed that they completely accepted Harold and his super-minstrel show antics." Eden's amazement doesn't seem to be a case of a progressive man being embarrassed by his white friend who acts black in the presence of African Americans – he would later write that he preferred black people in the 1930s, because they were "not so sensitive back then."¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ Harold Jablonski, *Harold Arlen: Happy With the Blues* (New York: De Capo Press, 1986) 68.

Ethel Waters famously called Harold Arlen the “Negro-est white man”¹⁰⁵ she ever knew and this statement, along with the idea of “super-minstrelsy,” both require some exploration. The son of a cantor, Harold Arlen worked as a musician, singer, and composer with a moderately successful jazz band, the Buffalodians. His one onstage theatrical appearance had been in the ill-fated musical *Great Day!* Originally titled *Louisville Lou, A Musical Play of the Southland*, the show was Vincent Youman’s attempt to replicate the success of Jerome Kern’s *Showboat*, and to that end it was full of uncontextualized signifiers of a theatricalized South that Youman inserted and removed as the show was being created. There were plot elements of plantations, levees, craps games, what the script refers to as “singing pickaninnies,” and even a showboat; and there was blackface. All of these were removed, replaced, and in some cases reinserted during out-of-town-tryouts (previews also brought a new song for Arlen’s character, the piano-player Cokey Joe, called “Doo Dah Dey”). Despite the revisions, Philadelphia reviewers called the show “slipshod,” “tedious,” and “cumbersome,” and it was still in tryouts in October of 1929 when Wall Street collapsed.

Arlen left the stage, continued writing music, and was introduced to the veteran lyricist Ted Koehler. Their very first composition, “Get Happy,” was a song that Koehler thought of as a Negro spiritual and a tremendous success. As a spiritual it is certainly inauthentic, but in comparison to the other great white man’s Negro spiritual “Old Man River,” it at least gets its signifiers right. While “Old Man River” is about earthly misery

¹⁰⁵ Scott Allen Nollen, *Louis Armstrong: The Life, Music and Screen Career* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2004) 72.

and never-ending sorrow, “Get Happy” is about redemption: the judgment day, washing away cares in the river (presumably the Jordan), hallelujah. A popular success, it was quickly sold to a Broadway review where it was staged by Busby Berkeley in a manner that removed all traces of “blackness” from it. Sung by white bathing beauties at the beach, who washed their cares away in the Atlantic Ocean and got happy by tossing an enormous beach ball back and forth, Berkeley’s interpretation of “Get Happy” was theatrical but confused, and Arlen remembered that “the staging made no sense.”¹⁰⁶ “Get Happy” was a smash that served to make Arlen and Koehler a popular song-writing team, and after a string of hits they found their way to the Cotton Club.

This discussion of Arlen’s early career is not intended to lend undue weight to Waters’ comment of Arlen as the “negro-est white man” or to give the white composer a preternatural understanding of black life. The intent isn’t to show an understanding of blackness, but rather to show an understanding of white, theatricalized understandings of blackness, constructed by white producers for white audiences. Whether or not Arlen understood “authenticity” is irrelevant – through his professional experiences he certainly understood inauthenticity as it was constructed for, and expected by, white America. He was in a perfect position to create his own music that could both acknowledge the white audience’s expectations and, eventually, gently mock them, and he had the perfect singer to occupy that liminal space in the person of the bandleader whose nicknames included

¹⁰⁶ Jablonski 46.

The Tarzan of Harlem, The Man Your Mother Warned You About, and Mr. Hi-De-Ho — Cab Calloway.

From the very first line of his first hit – and the song that he would perform for the next fifty years – “Minnie the Moocher,” Cab Calloway positioned himself as a tour guide for white listeners. With “Now folks here’s the story . . .,” he immediately became an insider, a figure with knowledge of a particular world that is unfamiliar to the receiver, but despite this privileged, hep position, he shows himself to be more than happy to share his stories and invite his audience into that world. This is the role that Calloway would play throughout his career. He would write guidebooks complete with glossaries and handy quizzes on the material (*Professor Calloway’s Hepcat Dictionary*), host a radio show based on explaining the latest black jazz argot (*Swingformation, Please*), and generally play the role of benevolent educator for the outsider, the non-Harlemite, the non-musician, the non-black. It was all ridiculous, and very much intentionally so, and it allowed Calloway to both signify on the absurd perceived differences of the hep and the square, and to make himself even more hep when the squares didn’t get the joke, as they inevitably didn’t. An easy binary has emerged from jazz critics between Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway, with Ellington the serious, quiet genius and Calloway the outlandish, exuberant clown, but it should be pointed out that the one time Calloway and Ellington

met in a “Battle of the Bands” at the Savoy, Cab Calloway’s band won while Sonny Greer, Duke Ellington’s drummer, remembered that “they kicked our ass that night.”¹⁰⁷

The chief attraction of Duke Ellington’s orchestra was the music – the arrangements, improvisations, for some the jungle growl and for others like RD Darrell the knowledge that Ellington was in the process of constructing what he would call “a tone parallel to the American Negro.”¹⁰⁸ The chief attraction of Cab Calloway’s orchestra was Cab Calloway. Calloway provided a very specific black man representing a specific, if fantasized, black neighborhood, who would rarely stop singing, scatting, or cajoling the band (occasionally to the frustration of his musicians, most famously Dizzy Gillespie). To some writers, this idea of an articulate, urban black man went against their notions of primitive black authenticity.

When the African American blues guitarist Leadbelly played in New York and let the mask slip, showing less a buck-wild savage and more a professional musician, with interest in hillbilly yodels and Tin Pan Alley, one outraged columnist for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* wrote, “Already the pure nigger in him shows signs of being corrupted. A certain striving for effect is noticed in his performances, a trick, evidently, that he picked up at Cab Calloway’s.”¹⁰⁹ Calloway is identified by this columnist as an African American who is not only inauthentic but poisonous, capable of erasing the authenticity from “real” black men like Leadbelly. The expectation was that Leadbelly would fulfill a

¹⁰⁷ A.H. Lawrence, *Duke Ellington and His World* (New York: Routledge, 2001) 133.

¹⁰⁸ R.D. Darrell, “Black Beauty,” *The Duke Ellington Reader*, ed. Mark Tucker. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 57.

¹⁰⁹ Marybeth Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues* (Philadelphia: Basic Books, 2008) 119.

white audience's primitivist longing. The blues singer's well-known story of being discovered by white researchers while he was doing time in a Louisiana prison was as much of a draw as his music, and the audience was paying for a rural blackness that would allow them to both spiritually strip off the weights of sophistication, education, and civilization, and at the same time enjoy the feeling of superiority over the simple, uneducated, and uncivilized other. Their understanding of the "authentic" African American was one who played the three-chord blues, while the "inauthentic" Cab Calloway played highly arranged jazz - and his recordings were made by record producers, not folklorists. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* critic wanted music about suffering, not covers of cowboy songs, and when he didn't get it he found the experience insufficiently "black." His understanding of true "blackness" involved the swamps of the South and not the urbanity of Harlem. The Cotton Club audiences wanted both, but by 1932 their desire was less for the rural South and more for an imagined Harlem.

"Harlem Holiday," the opening number to 1932's 20th *Cotton Club Parade*, is a minstrel show plantation song transplanted to an urban environment. "When the whole world's down / And the times look blue / You'll be high up on Lenox Avenue"¹¹⁰ presents a world of cheerful blacks singing a song of unrestrained joy and inviting the white audience to join them. Keeping in mind that this song was originally performed for affluent whites visiting a black neighborhood, and performed during the Great Depression, there is something more unsettling about this number than simple racial

¹¹⁰ Cab Calloway and His Orchestra, "Harlem Holiday" (New York: Perfect Records, 9 June 1932).

stereotyping. This song could be an unpleasant ventriloqual act, with the white writers using black performers to reassure white audiences that despite severe economic deprivation and social injustice, those simple, musical black folks in Harlem are still happy in their ignorance. Jim Haskins points out that at this time some educators in Harlem didn't feel the need to teach children how electricity worked because, in the words of one teacher, their impoverished families "couldn't get the licenses anyway."¹¹¹ "Harlem Holiday" is both an absurd urban take on plantation fantasy, and a parodic look at the happy poor that those songs celebrated. "There's no work, only play / Sleep when you choose, you get paid anyway / Ain't that news! / Every song will be gay / No weary blues / Every day will be a Harlem Holiday."¹¹² The phrase "weary blues" isn't a simple pejorative characterization, of course. "The weary blues" was a song, a style, and the title of Langston Hughes' first successful poem, although Calloway points out in his autobiography that the figures of the Negro Renaissance and the figures of jazz operated in different spheres:

We'd be in an after-hours place sometime and somebody would say to me, 'Say, there's Langston Hughes' or 'There's Countee Cullen' and the names would ring a bell with me; I'd associate them with a particular poem I'd read, but the two

¹¹¹ Jim Haskins, *The Cotton Club* (New York: Hippocrene Books, Inc., 1994) 50.

¹¹² Calloway, "Harlem Holiday."

worlds, literature and entertainment, rarely crossed. They were working hard on their thing and we were working hard on ours.¹¹³

“No weary blues,” though, is a lyric that distances the African American performers inside the Cotton Club from those outside it by placing the black performers alongside the white revelers in explicitly rejecting, or performing the rejection of, an authentic form in favor of one constructed for white spectators. This authenticity, as blues scholars Elijah Wald and Marybeth Hamilton point out, is also questioned, but for a white audience in 1932 it would have been accepted without reservation. White audiences would have been pleased and comforted to know that their evening would feature black songs of complacency rather than black songs of complaint.

If “Harlem Holiday” only gently made the turn from “darky song” to parody, the opening number to the *21st Cotton Club Parade* later in 1932 fulfilled the possibilities that Arlen and Koehler hinted at and rehearsed earlier. “Minnie the Moocher’s Wedding Day” begins with the line “Here’s some news that will get you / It’s made to order for you” and indeed it was, as Arlen and Koehler constructed a song for the Cotton Club audience that took numerous signifiers of Harlem to a frenzied extreme. While the original “Minnie the Moocher” uses the idea of a pipe dream to explain the excesses of “a diamond car with platinum wheels,” the story of Minnie’s wedding to Smokey Joe has no such framing device. The listener is left with the understanding that events in

¹¹³ Cab Calloway and Bryant Rollins, *Of Minnie the Moocher and Me* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976) 105-106

“Wedding Day,” such as a “hundred thousand hoppers /went over to China picking poppies” to put “them all in one bouquet” are no opium-fueled hallucination. Drugs were part of the “unconventional excesses” that whites associated with Harlem, but here the wail of the reefer man is replaced by cargo-loads of opium. Arlen’s music moved from the gentle swing of “Harlem Holiday” to something more hot (driving rhythms, growling horns) and more complicated. There is a secondary repeated chorus — “Yeah, man, I heard somebody say / It’s Minnie the Moocher’s wedding day” — where Koehler’s lyrics once again position Cab Calloway as a Harlem insider — and room for Calloway’s call-and-response “hi-de-hi” which was absent from “Harlem Holiday,” and by this point a potent signifier of Harlem nightlife in itself. Ted Koehler’s lyrics for the song took not only imagined black fantasy but white privilege to an absurd extreme, as “the King and queen of every nation / were glad to get an invitation.” The European whites that are anxious to get to the Harlem event include the Prince of Wales and the King of Sweden, who is “giving the bride away,” as a fantasy is constructed for Cotton Club audiences that not only imagines a spectacular Harlem event but also casts the white audiences themselves as powerful and privileged, albeit in the most ludicrous way possible.

In *The Tourist*, Dean MacCannell writes that the tourist finds himself on a continuum of authenticity, often trying to move up on the continuum and backstage on his vacation to find himself in a more ‘authentic’ place.¹¹⁴ The Cotton Club audiences, of course, had already achieved that authenticity — they were literally in Harlem, albeit an

¹¹⁴ Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999) 101-105.

exclusive and protected part of Harlem. Through the mimetic representations of Harlem constructed by these songs, however, they felt that despite the layers of theatricality, they had gotten closer to the place. They had been invited to these parties themselves, moving from audience member to holiday-maker (in “Harlem Holiday”), to wedding guest and finally to a peer of royalty. Progressively moving up notches in MacCannell’s continuum of authenticity, the audience had been brought to a place that was wholly ridiculous, a parodic idea where white privilege wasn’t simply comfort but was peerage, and where black parties didn’t involve gay songs and a day off from work, but involved cargo shipments of opium, “million dollar” wedding cakes, and appearances from Swedish nobility. Through these shows of 1932 and the work of Dan Healy, Arlen, Koehler and Calloway, the Cotton Club became what many white tourists wanted – Mae West’s “museum of occult sex,” a knowingly constructed exhibit of Harlem with curators who were very much aware of the meanings of their displays.

Chapter 4: The Tarzan of Harlem

“This dapper, handsome dervish – clad in a dazzling white silk evening suit and broad-brimmed fedora – careens across the floor,” writes record producer Al Quaglieri of the onstage appearance of bandleader Cab Calloway. “[Calloway’s] toothy, worldwise grin . . . that thin moustache . . . that tangle of shiny black hair dangling carelessly over his forehead. Since time began, whenever parents warned their daughters about dangerous men, this was the very guy they meant.”¹¹⁵ Leading his band, handling all the vocals, and exuberantly dancing in front of the bandstand with his hair fried, greased, and flying, Calloway became a major celebrity in the 1930s. He appeared on tour, on film, and at Harlem’s most glamorous nightclub, the Cotton Club, prompting *Fortune Magazine* to declare in a 1933 issue that “in many places, including New York, Calloway’s gate [money made from ticket sales] exceeds Ellington’s.”¹¹⁶ Calloway’s management company promoted merchandise including Cab Calloway neckties and, in reference to the latter’s theme song, Minnie the Moocher Milkshakes. “Minnie the Moocher” and Calloway’s call-and-response style gave him a number of his nicknames, including ‘The Hi-De-Ho Man,’ ‘Mr. Hi-De-Ho,’ ‘His Royal Highness of Hi-De-Ho.’ But others came from his jaded, dangerous, and profoundly masculine persona, for

¹¹⁵ Al Quaglieri, *Are You Hep to the Jive?* CD liner notes (New York: Sony Legacy Rhythm and Soul Series, 1994) 5.

¹¹⁶ Wilder Hobson, “Introducing Duke Ellington.” *The Duke Ellington Reader*, Ed. Mark Tucker (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 96.

example ‘The Tarzan of Harlem’ or the nickname Quaglieri points to: ‘The Man Your Mother Warned You About.’ Twenty years before the gentle crooner Nat King Cole was warned against making eye contact with white women in his audiences, Calloway was exhorting them to follow his lead in his call-and-response choruses. And while Cole’s white handlers were worried about a black man singing sentimental love songs, Calloway gleefully sang about undisguised black virility. The man from Harlem would sing “The Man From Harlem,” the story of a slick lothario who can get any woman in the room. “The women watched him with amazement / Each one said she’d have the man from Harlem,” a lyric Cab Calloway followed on his 1932 recording of the song with the boastful aside, “can you blame ‘em?” This chapter explores Calloway’s strategies to navigate between personal pride, black masculinity, and white anxieties, and how his performances constructed new ideas of black urban masculinity for white audiences; this chapter also looks at Calloway on tour, when he was away from the safety of Harlem and, through his performance, reconstructing the Cotton Club for white audiences outside of New York City.

With this combination of sex appeal and subversive attitude, it is easy to see why later generations would latch on to the idea of Calloway’s sexually outlandish, larger-than-life persona. During the swing revival movement of the 1990s Calloway’s look, sound, and slang were fetishized, with a number of bands covering his material and some paying tribute to him with original songs, such as Big Bad Voodoo Daddy’s “Mr. Pinstripe Suit,” a celebration of an extravagantly dressed, hard-swinging “Mister Hi-De-

Hi-De-Ho” who is described as “smooth,” “bad” and “with a kitten on each hand.”¹¹⁷ Since hip hop scholarship has reached academia, at least one critic has given Calloway an important place in the pre-evolution of the form. In his forthcoming book on subversion and humor in popular music, the critic Iain Ellis calls Calloway a “prophet of rap aesthetics” whose “celebrations of decadence, slang, bling and an overall manifestation of cool” makes him “hip hop’s preeminent godfather.”¹¹⁸ Cab Calloway’s sly lyrical content and exuberant dancing constructed a powerful performance of black male sexuality, and combined with his cheerfully conspicuous consumption he embodied a Harlem fantasy for white audiences living through the Great Depression. Milt “Fump” Hinton, the bass player for Cab Calloway’s Cotton Club Orchestra, remembers going on tour with the band in the 1930s. “We would play a dance for white people, and they’d put a ring five feet back from the bandstand, so the people could stand but not get too close. There would be police in front of the stand, but the police didn’t like us, either. We were very sharp, were dressed very neat, we were playing very good, and we all had money.”¹¹⁹ The attitude of white jealousy for black success that Hinton describes isn’t surprising. What is surprising is that Cab Calloway, a wealthy man, a handsome man (“damned handsome,” in his own words), and the best-dressed man in the room, managed

¹¹⁷ Big Bad Voodoo Daddy (Scotty Moore, lyrics), “Mr. Pinstripe Suit.” *Americana Deluxe*, Interscope 1998.

¹¹⁸ Iain Ellis, “Cab Calloway: Original Rapper.” *PopMatters* (18 November 2005) <http://www.popmatters.com/m.usic/columns/ellis/051118.shtml>.

¹¹⁹ *The World of Swing: An Oral History of Big Band Jazz*. Ed. Stanley Dance (New York: De Capo Press, 2001) 327.

to be so popular with a white fan base who were often pre-disposed to find outwardly virile black men threatening or insulting.

Cabell “Cab” Calloway was born on Christmas Day, 1907, to a middle class family in Baltimore. A self-described “young hustler,” Calloway followed in his sister Blanche’s footsteps and began pursuing a life in music. Always athletic, he played basketball while at Crane College, often playing forward for the team in the evening and playing drums for a dance band at night, followed by semi-professional basketball with the Baltimore Athenians. He also tried out for, and was offered a position by, the Harlem Globetrotters, who at this early point in their history were a barnstorming professional team based in Chicago – the “Harlem” in the team name referring not to location, but operating as an easy signifier for “all-black.” Cab’s sister convinced him to turn down the Globetrotters and stay in college, but his time in academia was short-lived. He dropped out of college in order to concentrate on music and stage performance, eventually taking a role in the road company of the all-black musical *Plantation Days*, a popular show that starred his sister Blanche. When the tour ended, Cab rejoined his old band, the Alabamians, and brought them to New York City. Rooming with the popular arranger Fletcher Henderson and immersing himself in the Jazz Age Harlem scene, Calloway quickly realized that his band wasn’t able to compete with the hot jazz bands of New York. “You couldn’t come into Harlem playing no jive square music,” Calloway remembered. “You had to be playing up-to-date real-live jazz or swing, shooting from the hip. And our band wasn’t playing like that. We were fine in Chicago and the Midwest,

but New York was something else.”¹²⁰ Calloway foolishly entered the Alabamians in a battle of the bands at Harlem’s Savoy Ballroom in 1929, where the Alabamians were thoroughly embarrassed by another outfit, the Missourians. Calloway himself was popular with the crowd, though, and when the disappointed Alabamians went home to Chicago, Calloway was asked to stay in New York and become the new leader of the Missourians. He immediately began working to make the group a success.

“The Missourians had quite a band,” Calloway remembered. “They couldn’t compare to Chick Webb or King Oliver, to Duke Ellington or Jimmie Lunceford, but they were a hell of a lot better than the Alabamians.”¹²¹ Calloway’s time with Fletcher Henderson gave him an ear for talent, and he hired a number of strong players to bolster the band (including a young, pre-bop Dizzy Gillespie, a hire Calloway would later have cause to regret when Gillespie pulled a knife on him during a backstage altercation). Calloway’s time on stage helped him learn how to work an audience and hone his innate charisma into a communicative performance, best exemplified by his familiar call-and-response. While the Missourians were a co-operative band who made their decisions, and split their earnings, democratically, they became more and more reliant on Calloway’s hustle and business acumen. His time dealing with finances and practicalities earned him a solid reputation as a businessman, and his skills at promoting the band brought them a new agent, Irving Mills, the Cotton Club insider who also represented Duke Ellington. In

¹²⁰ Cab Calloway and Bryant Rollins, *Of Minnie the Moocher & Me* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1976) 66. All information on Calloway’s life and unnoted quotations in this chapter comes from Calloway and Rollins’ work.

¹²¹ Calloway and Rollins, 73.

1932, when Ellington and his orchestra went to Hollywood to perform in Amos and Andy's first, and only, motion picture, *Check and Double Check*, Calloway and his Missourians had become popular enough to be hired as Ellington's replacement at the Cotton Club.

Hiring Calloway to replace Ellington was an inspired choice. Rather than find another bandleader like Duke Ellington, a situation where the new hire would surely look bad in comparison, they found a performer who was Ellington's polar opposite. Duke Ellington was Apollonian cool, Calloway was Dionysian revelry; Ellington stayed seated at the piano, Calloway danced raucously around the stage; Ellington rarely addressed the audience, depending on his drummer Sonny Greer to handle the banter; Calloway sang, scatted, and was constantly speaking in hepcat slang and hi-de-hos. Calloway was a performer, and a consummate example of Wald's analogy of skeletons and peacocks – despite his acrobatic vocals and an excellent band, Calloway's recorded music is only seeing the skeleton, while the spectacle of his performance is seeing the full peacock. Such aggressive showmanship is often looked down on by jazz critics. Calloway's biographer Alyn Shipton writes that he was initially disinterested in his subject, as his “opinions had been formed by the kinds of critics who did not take Cab Calloway seriously as a jazz musician, dismissing his singing as ‘commercial.’”¹²²

¹²² Alyn Shipton, *Hi-De-Ho: The Life of Cab Calloway* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) viii.

While at the Cotton Club, Calloway made two short films for Paramount Pictures: *Cab Calloway's Hi-De-Ho* in 1934¹²³ and *Cab Calloway's Jitterbug Party* in 1935.¹²⁴ These films show how the audiences of the period, white and black, understood Cab Calloway's image and performance, with the former positioning him as a sex symbol and the latter, quite clearly, as a tour guide. Both feature performances at the Cotton Club (actually, a studio recreation) and both feature a handful of hot jazz numbers highlighted by Calloway's exuberant singing and dancing. *Hi-De-Ho* trades heavily on Calloway's sex appeal. He sings the vamp number "The Lady With the Fan" and shares a long kiss with a beautiful African American customer seated at a private table – as he joins her and leans in, she raises her feathered fan, obscuring their faces, and after a long moment she lowers the fan to show them still kissing. After romancing his first partner, Calloway heads off for another assignation, this time with the wife of an out-of-town railroad porter. The cuckolded porter comes home early, and while his unfaithful wife tries to stall him in the living room, Calloway, apparently unable to refrain from song even when hiding in another man's bed, gives the game away by bursting into a "hi-de-ho." The Cab Calloway of this film isn't just a sexually dangerous wolf, he is an absolute dynamo, gleefully working his way through two women and three songs in a seven-minute long film.

¹²³ *Cab Calloway's Hi-De-Ho*. Dir. Fred Waller, Perf. Cab Calloway and His Orchestra. Paramount Pictures, 1934. Film.

¹²⁴ *Cab Calloway's Jitterbug Party*. Dir. Fred Waller. Perf. Cab Calloway and His Orchestra. Paramount Pictures, 1935. Film.

However, Cab Calloway in *Jitterbug Party* is a non-threatening tour guide, with silly voices and broad smiles, welcoming the audience to join him in Harlem. The film again begins at the ersatz Cotton Club, and after singing a few numbers Calloway joins a party of African Americans at their table to invite them to a “jitterbug party.” They head off together, through the streets of Harlem, some of which was filmed on location. They pass the Log Cabin Club, a nightclub that, incongruously, looked like its namesake in the middle of a New York City street, and the Lafayette Theatre, the elegant and brightly lit playhouse known as “the House Beautiful”; and they pass other signifiers of Harlem life that appear to have been recreated on a film set – a group of men shooting craps in an alleyway, a pair of young boys and a puppy sitting on a stoop, an African American policeman. Finally the group arrives at the party, where Calloway’s band rips into an uptempo version of “Call of the Jitterbug.” The number ends with Calloway, the band, and the partygoers dancing together in a loose kickline, and on the final line of the song Calloway looks directly into the camera and rapidly walks towards it, his face filling the frame. The moviegoing audience has been included in the party. He addresses the viewers with a croaked “Oh, you jitterbugs!” and the short film quickly cuts to black. Unlike the sly homewrecker of *Hi-De-Ho*, Calloway in *Jitterbug Party* is generous and genial. He has invited the audience to join him in his world, and has taken them from the Cotton Club to a penthouse party, pointing out some highlights of Harlem along the way. Finally, he has directly addressed the viewers and allowed them a hep new nickname. These two films nicely summarize Calloway’s constructed persona, both at the Cotton

Club and later throughout his career. He was both the grinning “Man From Harlem” and the leering “Man Your Mother Warned You About,” and at the Cotton Club, the latter persona required some skillful mediation.

The performance of blackness at the Cotton Club was designed to reaffirm for the white spectator black subservience, their white privilege, and reinscribe the superiority of white heteronormative masculinity, and nowhere is this made clearer than in the club’s 1925 advertising poster. The image is of a black doorman welcoming a well-heeled white couple into the Cotton Club. The whites are drawn realistically, both attractive in evening wear with the man in tails and a top hat and the woman in fur. The doorman has the exaggerated features of minstrelsy, his enormous ruby-red lips smiling wide as he bows to the couple, ushering them inside. The image is quite clear – the elegant whites are in control and the grotesque clownish black man is their servant. In the world of illustration, he is not even a man, but rather he is drawn as a cartoon, a caricature of a human being. Other illustrations on matchbooks and menus would follow suit, with gendered images joining racial ones. Images of black men continued to be grotesquely exaggerated, always with protruding, grinning lips, while the black women were drawn in a more realistic style, always slim, lovely, and barely clothed. The women of the Cotton Club’s chorus line, the “tall, tan and terrific” “copper-colored gals,” were obviously sexualized. Indeed, their overt sexuality was one of the Cotton Club’s major attractions – but their sexuality was humanized in these illustrations while the black man was neutered by his dehumanization, making him a monstrous joke who appeared not to exist in the same

world as his female counterparts. By keeping the drawings of the women realistic and sexualized and those of the men clownish and asexual, these omnipresent illustrations continually reinscribed white male power while representing the black man as less than human.

The removal of the threat of black masculinity carried over to the specialty acts. The Cotton Club prided itself on the “Cotton Club Parades,” the bi-annual variety shows that were the featured attraction of the venue throughout its history, from its 1925 opening until it closed in 1940. The opening night of each new Cotton Club Parade was treated like an opening night for a major Broadway show, with celebrities in attendance, journalists and critics writing reviews, and live radio broadcasts from the red carpet. The parades themselves, while showcasing the best in black talent, were careful to code the acts as non-threatening. Most often these acts had already coded themselves in a way that removed them from perceived white masculine competition. The tap-dancing Nicholas Brothers were children – Fayard was a teenager, and Harold was only eleven years old. The remarkable one-legged tap dancer Clayton “Peg Leg” Bates was, as his nickname suggests, crippled. Bill Robinson was almost sixty when he first appeared at the club, and was well-known to his audiences for his wholly imaginary docile “Uncle Tom” persona. Despite the physical mastery evinced by these black performers, the fact that they were very young, relatively old, or physically disabled allowed the white men in the audience to remain unthreatened.

Other masculine acts took the more direct route to calming white heteronormative fears by using costume and movement to code themselves as homosexual, just as in the performances of Earl “Snake Hips” Tucker that began in 1928. In recent years there has been a spate of writing that queers the Harlem Renaissance and recovers the history of gay and lesbian writers, fictional characters, and the physical sites – cabarets, drag shows, and other venues – of transgressive sexuality for both whites and blacks. Even in the deeply heteronormative environment of the Cotton Club there were allusions to black male homosexuality, serving both as a marker for a Harlem that was understood to be sexually progressive and as a means to distance the white male fears of black masculinity.

In a space where even a handsome man rapidly thrusting his pelvis could be read as reasonably non-threatening, Cab Calloway had a good head start in keeping white audiences comfortable when he took over as bandleader in 1932. He would need it, because his performance and persona were diametrically opposite of former bandleader Duke Ellington’s, and drastically changed the Cotton Club’s representations of black masculinity. Duke Ellington’s worrisome virility was kept in check by both his gentle on-stage demeanor and his physical position, seated behind a piano, while Calloway was loud, exuberant, and seemingly inexhaustible in his incessant dancing and strutting. Calloway’s dancing fit with the new direction of the Cotton Club Parades, a movement away from a performance of a generalized blackness, one that encompassed ideas of the jungle as well as ideas of the plantation, towards the specificity of 1930s Harlem. The

floorshows became a celebration of the increasingly famous Cotton Club itself, and allowed the vocalizing Calloway to serve as a tour guide to an imaginary Harlem for his white listeners. Calloway's knowledge of the characters, slang and geography gave him a position of authority and made him an insider to what the white audiences would consider an exotic world. The role of the tour guide, however, is by its nature subservient, that of a hireling who shares his understanding of local customs and figures with his employer for a price. This kept Calloway in a space that was doubled, but ultimately safe.

With his 1931 hit song "Minnie the Moocher," a song that many associated with the club, Calloway had already begun to lyrically create an imaginary Harlem, and in the sequels to "Minnie" written for the Cotton Club Parades the cast and the world seemed to grow into a fantasized Harlem populated with big-hearted frails, wailing reefer men, and smooth, hep lotharios. The African music scholar William Banfield has suggested that Calloway unknowingly became something of a *griot*, assuming the traditional West African role of the storyteller who keeps the history of the village and its people alive through song, although in Calloway's case the people are fictitious and the village is Harlem.¹²⁵ for white listeners he was simply a tour guide. Calloway's lyrics positioned him not as a romantic adversary but rather as a friendly guide to Harlem, a role that allowed him knowledgeable authority, but also implicitly suggested subservience to his paying white audiences. In his songs Calloway described New York City locales and provided introductions to various Harlemites, always distancing himself through a

¹²⁵ William Banfield, personal conversation. 20 April 2011.

narrative song structure wherein he told the stories of various dangerous men but, through his third-person lyrics, did not become them. “Smokey Joe” and “the Reefer Man” are characters identified by their nicknames as well as personas assumed by Calloway in performance, and the sexually successful “Man From Harlem” can be read as both Cab Calloway and the fictional third-person figure in the song. Singing about “The Tarzan of Harlem” in 1939, he could discuss “romancing all the chickadees” and warn the women listening that “if someone’s banging at your door / it’s just his way to ask for more;” and he could even scat into a variation of Johnny Weissmuller’s Tarzan yell, as long as Calloway concludes the chorus with “*he’s* the Tarzan of Harlem.” This thin third-person phrasing was enough to allow both Calloway’s cheerful expression of black masculinity and the audience’s distanced observation of it, placing them in a position of tourists listening to a story rather than white men confronting smiling black virility, keeping everyone at the performance in a safe space.

Maintaining this safe space was of paramount importance when Calloway was on his national tours, and he did this largely through the performative recreation of the Cotton Club. When on the road in the 1930s and 1940s, the band billed itself as Cab Calloway and his Cotton Club Orchestra, and they always brought along African American dancers and specialty acts to perform during their shows. The promotional materials that Calloway’s agent Irving Mills sent to the local venues and media outlets reinforced the orchestra’s position as the house band at Harlem’s most glamorous night

club, announcing “hot sounds from Harlem!” and “direct from the Cotton Club!”¹²⁶ The Cotton Club was prominently featured because of its close association with Calloway’s success, because the club served as the venue for his weekly radio broadcasts, but these associations also served the double function of recreating a space of luxury for the Depression-era audiences. Cab Calloway, live on tour, created a fantasized Harlem glamour for Americans of the 1930s who might never get near New York City, and this imagined Cotton Club also recreated a space of absolute white privilege.

Michael Quinn’s theories of the semiotics of celebrity provide a framework for these resonances of the Cotton Club that Calloway brought with him on tour. Quinn argues that there is a “pervasive influence” within a celebrity’s performance that the audience cannot escape, a prior understanding of the performer that alters the audience’s experience of the performance.¹²⁷ For a 1930s’ performance of Cab Calloway, that understanding would have involved the Cotton Club and all the ideas of glamour and protected racial adventure that were embedded in the venue. They would also have involved the audience’s understanding of Cab Calloway’s personal life. Both on and off stage, Cab Calloway embodied ‘the sportin’ life’ of drinking, womanizing, and brawling. The majority of his audience probably wouldn’t have known about his womanizing, but they might have heard about one or another of his scuffles. He fired black be-bop pioneer Dizzy Gillespie over what became known as “the spitball incident” because the bored

¹²⁶ Irving Mills, “Mills Artists, Inc., Irving Mills, President, Presents Cab Calloway and his Cotton Club Orchestra” (New York: Laurel Ptg. Co., 1938).

¹²⁷ Michael Quinn, “Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting,” *New Theatre Quarterly* 22 (1990) 154-161.

trumpet player had taken to throwing spitballs from the bandstand. When one landed in the spotlight near Calloway, the bandleader fired Gillespie after the show, prompting Gillespie to pull a knife. Rather than back down from the weapon, however, Calloway attacked, was stabbed in the buttock, and the ensuing brawl became common knowledge in the jazz community. Calloway received press attention for his trouble with the law in Kansas City when, after being denied admittance to a 'whites only' Lionel Hampton concert, Calloway fought with a policeman and was sent before a judge. And according to pianist Claude Hopkins, his brawl with Calloway "made all the papers."¹²⁸ Calloway's only songs about physical violence were both comic and common, for example, "You Rascal You," a standard that was performed by such a large number of vocalists that it had no special connection with Cab Calloway. His songs about sexuality were distanced by the third-person lyrics, and his songs about brawling and physical violence were relegated to his takes on jazz standards. That left only one element of the sportin' life, and one that he was happy to take first-person ownership of and allow white audiences to directly connect to him: alcohol.

In Calloway's autobiography, he tells a number of stories about hard drinking, consuming everything from smart cocktails to bathtub moonshine. Sometimes the alcohol is tangential to an event or story, sometimes it is central, but from the 1920s onward it is always present. Duke Ellington described the place of alcohol in jazz culture by writing that "in those days the amount of liquor one drank determined your status and of course

¹²⁸ *The World of Swing* 42.

there were many who had the reputation ... liquor drinking among the musicians was done from the Gladiator perspective just the same as playing his instrument.”¹²⁹ This sort of competitive drinking was the only masculine activity that Calloway pointed to directly in first-person song in numbers like “Good Sauce From the Gravy Bowl,” “The Hi-De-Ho Miracle Man” or “Jitter Bug.” The latter was a phrase which, in Calloway’s lexicon, referred to a drinker rather than a dancer and alcohol was called “jitter sauce,” making heavy drinkers “jitterbugs.” In “Jitter Bug,” the lyrics consist of a roll call of the band and a doggerel boast about how much each can drink – for example, “that old man there with eyes a twinkle / We named him after Rip Van Winkle / He would sleep for forty years / If he could get his fill of beers.”¹³⁰ Calloway may have had limited control over the amount of information the audience had on his everyday sportin’ life, but he could control what was acknowledged onstage. He directed the audience’s gaze, and he pointed it away from racially dangerous ideas of womanizing and brawling and towards the far more acceptable, even comic, idea of post-Prohibition competitive drinking.

An audience’s knowledge of Cab Calloway’s allegiance to the sportin’ life might not be limited to what they read in the newspapers, however. When on long tours, Calloway reserved a special train car to transport his green Lincoln. “Everywhere Cab went he took that beautiful car with him,” bassist Milt “Fump” Hinton remembers, “and when we got into a town the rest of us would get taxis but Cab would roll that old Linc

¹²⁹ Duke Ellington, quoted in Stuart Nicholson, *Reminiscing in Tempo: A Portrait of Duke Ellington* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1999) 59. Ellipses in original.

¹³⁰ Cab Calloway, “Jitter Bug,” Victor Records, 18 December 1933

down off the train, with his coonskin coat on and a fine Homburg or derby, and roll into town looking for the action.” Calloway was a very public spectacle, as were the rest of his orchestra. Hinton continues, “The guys dressed to kill – all the time. The first thing I did was to take \$600 and buy a whole closetful of suits. I had to. It was embarrassing travelling with those guys unless you were suited down.”¹³¹ Calloway’s sartorial style in his personal life was echoed and exaggerated both on stage and in song. His number “Blue Serge Suit” mocks the out-of-fashion square who would “look as sharp in a sack / as in a blue serge suit with a belt in the back.” In 1933, jazz critic Wilder Hobson wrote the following about Cab Calloway: “Dressed in such fascinating haberdashery (sic) as a snow-white dress suit with extra long tails, Calloway weaves gracefully before his orchestra and in a high, spasmodic voice emits hot arias like *Minnie the Moocher* . . .”¹³² His “snow-white suit” although presumably not made by a haberdasher, was eye-catching and expensive, but also loud and exaggerated – a bit too much. The tails were not just long, they were “extra-long,” and not the sort of thing that a New York socialite would wear. Calloway could be the most expensively dressed man in the room, but still cleverly negate the potential jealousies of his white male audience members by wearing something that was too extravagant, too flamboyant – and thus, feminizing – and too black.

The white audiences at the Cotton Club, it should be remembered, were inundated with images of minstrelsy. Black caricatures were on the cover of each menu, each

¹³¹ Calloway and Rollins 146.

¹³² Hobson.

program, and each box of matches, and a black man in over-the-top finery could not help but bring certain reminders of minstrelsy. Zip Coon is described by one scholar as “the servant dressed in the master’s clothes [...] irresistible to women, or so he believes,”¹³³ and Calloway’s outrageous clothing positioned him not just as someone whose sexual magnetism was the product of wishful thinking, but whose status was far lower than those whose wardrobe he unsuccessfully aped. Despite the fact that Calloway was both very wealthy and very sexually attractive, this echo of the minstrel show allowed white audiences the possibility that he was simply an unsuccessful striver. The Zip Coons, Long-Tail Blues, and entire panoply of minstrel show characters that took elegant white fashion to an extreme and ended up looking foolish could be read in Calloway’s extra-long tails, transforming him from a virile, sexual threat into a comfortable, lovable clown. Calloway almost always wore dazzlingly white suits, and theorist Richard Dyer points out that in fashion, white masculinity is signified by clothes that are dark and somber.¹³⁴ A black-and-white photograph from a New Year’s Eve party at the Cotton Club shows the white revelers in black tuxedos, while Calloway wears neither his snow-white dress suit nor evening wear of any kind, but rather a sober, dully-colored double-breasted suit.¹³⁵ For a man as sartorially conscious as Calloway this must have been a deliberate choice. Perhaps he had a desire to downplay his appearance and not overshadow the

¹³³ Barbara Lewis, “Daddy Blue: The Evolution of the Dark Dandy.” *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy*. Eds. Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, Brooks McNamara (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1996) 259, 268.

¹³⁴ Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997) 132.

¹³⁵ Jim Haskins, *The Cotton Club* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1994) 70.

customers on their biggest night of the year, to position himself as less important and less wealthy than the white audience. On such an important and anticipated night for well-heeled club goers as New Year's Eve, it seems that Calloway had chosen to make himself far less visible and allow the audience to keep their gaze where they wanted it, on themselves, and to perform a subservient blackness.

The importance of clothing also makes its way into *Cab Calloway's Hepster's Dictionary*, his 1938 guide to his peculiar brand of jive talk. Republished in 1944 as *Cab Calloway's Swingformation Bureau*, the work contains a dozen different terms for clothing, ranging from the now common "threads" to the long-forgotten "dry-goods." There are slang terms for specific articles and accessories, such as "cogs" for sunglasses and "orchestration" for overcoat.¹³⁶ Calloway's over-the-top hepcat slang was as much a part of his performance as his snow white suits and his madcap dancing. Al Quaglieri wrote that he would open his shows with a well-timed comic build, asking the band:

"Are you all reet?" (they reply, "Yes, we're all reet!"); asking the audience, "Are you all root?" ("Yes, we're all root!"); and then rapidly instructing his band, "Then mash me a fin, gate, so I can cop me a fry! Let's hit it and git it like we always do! One and two . . ." and they would swing into his first number.¹³⁷

¹³⁶ Reprinted in Calloway and Rollins, 253-258.

¹³⁷ Quaglieri, 6. Translated, Calloway is surprisingly asking "Are you all right? Then give me five dollars, friend, so I can get my hair straightened!"

Calloway would write guidebooks complete with glossaries and handy quizzes on the vocabulary and perform songs like “Jiveformation, Please,” or “Are You Hep to the Jive?” that were based on explaining the latest black jazz argot. He played the role of benevolent educator for the outsider, the non-Harlemite, the non-musician, the non-black. Calloway used language to signify in the most traditional sense with, as scholar Henry Louis Gates defined the term, “an opposition to the transparency of speech” with “the relationship between intent and meaning, between the speech act and its comprehension” skewed to construct a multi-leveled language that was understood in different ways by different listeners.¹³⁸ Calloway’s jive was intentionally ridiculous, and it allowed him to both signify on the absurd perceived differences of the hep black and the square white. Ultimately, this made him even more hep when the squares didn’t get that it was all a joke, as they inevitably didn’t. Echoing the malapropisms that were a mainstay of humor about African Americans, Calloway’s subversive jive talk may have been read by white listeners as a mannerism as ridiculous as his clothing, a language that was impenetrable, therefore absurd, and therefore comic. By using language to both play the clown and make himself cheerfully foreign, Calloway continued to obfuscate his own masculinity by making himself ridiculous, as well as to signify Harlem through convoluted jive talk, for both the Cotton Club’s guests and those vicariously experiencing the Cotton Club through film or on tour.

¹³⁸ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 53.

These elements of third-person distancing and comic resonances served in some cases not as a racial safety net in Calloway's performances, but as a cause for critical approbation. Some jazz writers of the period only saw in Calloway a novelty act, a showman. *Metronome* critic George T. Simon wrote dismissively of what he called Calloway's "antics . . . the screaming novelties and unhip 'hip' phrases" and, playing the contrarian, concluded that his "singing of ballads always impressed me more than his vocal clowning."¹³⁹ When the blues guitarist and recently-released convict Leadbelly made his famous appearance in New York, playing cowboy songs and standards from Tin Pan Alley and showing himself to be less the buck-wild savage that white audiences had expected and more a professional musician, one outraged columnist for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* wrote, "Already the pure nigger in him shows signs of being corrupted. A certain striving for effect is noticed in his performances, a trick, evidently, that he picked up at Cab Calloway's."¹⁴⁰ To this critic, Calloway is an African American who is not only inauthentic but poisonous. Calloway is so far from the critic's notion of "pure" blackness that he is capable of erasing the authenticity of "real" black men like Leadbelly, a blues-singing murderer.

But the greatest insult to Calloway's masculinity, both real and performed, didn't come from the critics. On June 19th, 1936, while playing in Longview, Texas, the word came out over the wire that the previously undefeated Brown Bomber, Joe Louis, had lost to the German Max Schmeling, a result that would cause anguish throughout black

¹³⁹ George T. Simon, *The Big Bands* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1981) 110-112.

¹⁴⁰ Marybeth Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues* (New York: Basic Books, 2008) 119.

America. A columnist for the *Boston Chronicle* wrote that “not even the worst days of the Depression could achieve such blanket sadness . . . Harlem is sad, very sad tonight.”¹⁴¹ Far from Harlem, playing for an all white crowd in Texas, Cab Calloway had to give the bad news to his musicians. “But the worst thing,” Calloway wrote, “was to have to announce it to the audience.”¹⁴² While his men moaned in disappointment and disbelief, the white audience began cheering and clapping. Cab Calloway and His Cotton Club Orchestra had to become the featured entertainment for a celebration of the destruction of Joe Louis, performing for a jubilant white crowd that was enjoying what they saw as the firm proof of their own masculine superiority. “We were not what you would call docile Negroes,” Calloway said of himself and his band, “we were tough guys who had played the whorehouses and gambling houses, and it took something out of us to accept that kind of crap.”¹⁴³ Over a decade later Calloway would get some of his own back when he recorded “Ol’ Joe Louis” and sang about how, in the rematch, “Schmeling came out black and blue,” but on this summer night in Texas all Cab Calloway could do was whirl like a dervish, make the audience answer to him, and perform a masculinity that the jubilant whites only half understood.

¹⁴¹ David Margolick, *Beyond Glory: Joe Louis vs. Max Schmeling, and a World on the Brink* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005) 170-171.

¹⁴² Calloway and Rollins, 140.

¹⁴³ Calloway and Rollins, 126.

Chapter Five:

The Boast of Broadway: The Relocation, Recreation and Last Years of the Cotton Club

In a 1938 script treatment, the writer Dashiell Hammett set a scene in a Harlem nightclub. The club had a “noisy native” band playing for a mixed-race clientele that included “a sprinkling of New York underworld characters,” and Hammett described the Harlem club as “not too Broadwayish.”¹⁴⁴ This descriptor is significant, positioning “Broadwayish” as antithetical to racial mixing, hot jazz, and glamorous criminality – the key elements that made the Cotton Club famous. Hammett, and his readers, understood Broadway nightclubs and Harlem nightclubs to be very different. When the Cotton Club relocated to Broadway in the fall of 1936, it not only abandoned Harlem in favor of Times Square; it abandoned Harlem culture as well. The Jazz Age infatuation of wealthy whites for black culture had waned and the Harlem Riot of 1935 made the neighborhood feel less hospitable to white tourists, making the move downtown financially sensible. But as the Cotton Club transitioned from “the aristocrat of Harlem” to “the boast of Broadway,” it began to take on more of the expected characteristics of a white nightclub. The choreography began to emulate Ziegfeld’s *Follies* rather than uptown rent parties, the orchestrations became sweeter, the featured acts became Hollywood stars and the special guests of the club included some who would never have set foot in Harlem. Rather than showcasing new black talent like Duke Ellington or Lena Horne, the Cotton

¹⁴⁴ Dashiell Hammett, *Return of the Thin Man* (New York: The Mysterious Press, 2012) 196.

Club began to feature established celebrities like Louis Armstrong or Lincoln “Stepin Fetchit” Perry. The Cotton Club tried to pass as just another Times Square nightclub, and this chapter examines the whitening compromises made not just by performers, but also by management, in the last few years of the club’s history.

Nazi Max on the Cotton Club Stage

On December 12, 1936, only a few months after it had closed in Harlem and reopened at Times Square, the Cotton Club held a celebration honoring Bill “Bojangles” Robinson’s fiftieth anniversary in show business. At the event, praised by Ed Sullivan as a night where “Broadway laid aside all its cheapness and meanness,”¹⁴⁵ tributes to Robinson were given by a variety of celebrities. There were African American celebrities at the event – Calloway led the band, members of the current floorshow performed, and Rosa Washington Riles appeared to give a testimonial to Robinson in the person of her better-known character, Quaker Oats spokeswoman Aunt Jemima.¹⁴⁶ The majority of those honoring Robinson, though, were white. A telegram was sent by Robinson’s frequent Hollywood dance partner, Shirley Temple, congratulating her “Uncle Bill.” Ethel Merman sang at the celebration, making her in all likelihood the only white woman to ever perform on the Cotton Club stage, and speeches were given by Fred Astaire, Ray

¹⁴⁵ Jim Haskins, *The Cotton Club* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1994) 119.

¹⁴⁶ Neither Haskins nor the press specifies which “Aunt Jemima” performed. There were a number of “Aunt Jemimas” on tour throughout America at the time who sang, told cheerful stories about the Antebellum South and, of course, giving pancake-making demonstrations; and there was also a blackface Aunt Jemima who would have a radio program five years later. The dates of her employment and the date of the celebration make Rosa Washington Riles the most logical candidate.

Bolger, and Noel Coward, a collection of musical theater stars whose presence served to inform the audience that the Cotton Club now belonged more to Broadway than to Harlem. The most curious speaker, though, and the one whose presence on the Cotton Club stage was the most problematic, was the current heavyweight champion, the most hated man in Harlem, Max Schmeling.

“Nazi Max,” as he was known to some columnists, had only recently returned to New York City. Six months earlier on June 19, 1936, Schmeling had beaten Joe Louis at Yankee Stadium, winning by a knock out in the twelfth round. After beating Louis, Germany’s newspaper *Der Angriff* reported that “the victorious German boxer raised his arm for the Hitler salute” and “80,000 went head over heels in enthusiasm.”¹⁴⁷ While Hitler’s Germany, and many white Americans, celebrated Aryan superiority in the ring, Louis’s defeat was a devastating blow to the black community. Violence broke out in some black neighborhoods - historian David Margolick writes that in New York, “much of the mayhem was directed against whites who, whether out of bad luck or foolish voyeurism, found themselves in Harlem.”¹⁴⁸ However, the prevailing mood of black America was simple misery. “Not even the worst days of the Depression could achieve such blanket sadness,” wrote one columnist, concluding that “Harlem is sad, very sad tonight.”¹⁴⁹ Louis, the ‘Brown Bomber,’ was both a symbol of pride to African Americans and a financial windfall for Harlem’s businesses. The energy generated from

¹⁴⁷David Margolick, *Beyond Glory: Max Schmeling vs. Joe Louis and a World on the Brink*, (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2005) 174.

¹⁴⁸ Margolick 170.

¹⁴⁹ *Boston Chronicle*, 27 June 1936, reported in Margolick 171-172.

New York City prizefights involving Louis spilled over to the bar receipts and box office takings of all of Harlem's bars and cabarets, creating "sky-rocketing grosses" for the Cotton Club.¹⁵⁰ Louis's loss, which was followed by his brief absence from the sporting scene, was dispiriting both morally and financially, and had an impact on the Harlem cabarets' bottom line. After his victory over Louis, Schmeling became a very public figure, returning to Berlin via the *Hindenburg* on June 26th to be feted in the fatherland. In Germany, Schmeling was a national hero; one newspaper wrote about one of his personal appearances that "Frankfurt couldn't have been more excited had Goethe come down from Mount Olympus."¹⁵¹ He was praised by and photographed with Joseph Goebbels and Adolf Hitler, and oversaw the German release of his fight film, *Max Schmeling's Sieg – ein deutscher Sieg* (*Max Schmeling's Victory: A German Victory*). With tremendous national pomp he was a guest of honor at the 1936 Berlin Olympics before returning, once again by zeppelin, to America where he, and not Joe Louis, was engaged to speak at the Bill Robinson Anniversary tribute at the Cotton Club. Schmeling went from sharing a stage with Adolph Hitler to sharing a stage with Bill "Bojangles" Robinson in less than six months.

Like nearly all African Americans, Bill Robinson was a Joe Louis supporter – in fact, Louis would be one of the pallbearers at Robinson's funeral – and Robinson was at the Louis-Schmeling fight. Wearing a plaid-on-plaid suit, Robinson was one of the very few African Americans prominent and wealthy enough to have a ringside seat at Louis'

¹⁵⁰ *Chicago Defender*, 13 July 1935, reported in Margolick 82.

¹⁵¹ *Paris Soir*, 28 June 1936, reported in Margolick 180.

painful defeat. Less than a year later, Robinson was forced to grin and clown with the man who beat Louis and devastated black America, and he had to do this at the Cotton Club, at his own party. The presence onstage of “Nazi Max” Schmeling indicated an uncomfortable new truth about the relocated Cotton Club. The appearance of white celebrities like Fred Astaire, Ethel Merman, and Noel Coward indicated the Cotton Club’s newfound place as part of the Broadway community. However, the invitation to Max Schmeling showed a profound disregard both for the talent at the club and the man-of-the-hour, Bill Robinson, and also for the Cotton Club’s previous image as the face of Harlem for white America. No matter how much the Harlem club catered to the egos and racial assumptions of its white patrons, it is hard to imagine that Schmeling would ever have been welcomed uptown. The black performers wouldn’t have stood for it, and the white tourists, who congratulated themselves for being in simpatico with the black talent, would have joined in their resentment. Bringing Schmeling onstage signaled to the audiences and the performers that things had changed, and the Cotton Club Parades were going to reflect broad, white notions of celebrity and popularity rather than anything that was even nominally based in black Harlem life. Harlem was now something of an afterthought for the Cotton Club and its patrons. As the floorshows became more and more homogenous with the entertainment found at any number of white midtown spots, the touristic experience of an imagined Harlem was replaced by the more generalized experience of following trends that often had little to do with black culture, and spotting

celebrities like Germany's Max Schmeling or Hollywood's Stepin Fetchit.¹⁵² Fetchit's 1939 appearance at the Cotton Club was easily the least successful of the venue's floorshows, ultimately hastening the end of the club, and serving as the most pointed example of how the perception and reality of the place had changed. What was once called "the aristocrat of Harlem nightclubs" now seemed reduced in rank to a common Broadway cabaret, vulnerable to the critics, the civic government, and the growing disinterest of its once-adventurous audience.

In the years before the move to Times Square, there were a number of changes in both American society and the Cotton Club itself that marked the venue. The Roaring Twenties were over, and gangster Owney Madden no longer ran the club. Public pressure had caused the cozy relationship between the underworld and the corrupt Tammany Hall city government to begin to fray, and both New York governor Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New York district attorney's office were eager to be seen as figures of law and order. Madden was one of several New York bosses to find that their political influence had withered away. With gang-friendly reporter Walter Winchell keeping a low profile as well, the press also invigorated their attacks on organized crime, with the *New York Daily News* referring to Madden as "the Al Capone of New York."¹⁵³ Paroles were revoked and arrest warrants were issued. After going into hiding for a few months and making

¹⁵² Stepin Fetchit was born Lincoln Theodore Monroe Andrew Perry. Since this writing is concerned with Lincoln Perry's outsized persona, both onstage and in the gossip columns, I will follow the lead of his biographer Mel Watkins and refer to him by his stage name.

¹⁵³ Graham Noun, *The English Godfather* (London: Ward Lock Limited, 1987) 127. This idea of Owney Madden as New York's Al Capone has stuck, with some modern scholars erroneously claiming that the Cotton Club was owned by "Al Capone's gang" (Brown, *Babylon Girls* 201).

plans for the continuation of his empire, on July 7th, 1932, Owney Madden abandoned the Cotton Club to become the only man ever to give himself up at Sing Sing Penitentiary. According to Madden's biographer Graham Nown, he drove to the prison, walked to the gates, and:

rapped on the steel doors and saw the cover on a small eye grille open.

"What do you want?" asked the uniformed head and shoulders, suspiciously.

"The name's Owney Madden. I believe the warden has a cell waiting for me."

The guard smiled skeptically, believing it was some kind of joke.

"Beat it, pal," he told the well-dressed prankster. "Get the hell out of here."¹⁵⁴

Madden finally convinced the authorities that he was who he claimed and that he meant what he said. He turned himself in, managing to serve a lesser sentence - and keep a great deal more of his ill-gotten fortune - than if he had been apprehended, and served a year in Sing Sing. When he got out of prison in 1933, Madden passed ownership of the club to Herman Stark and left New York for good, moving to Hot Springs, Arkansas where he lived until his death in 1965.

Madden's lieutenant George "Big Frenchy" DeMange could still be found at the Cotton Club from time to time. Most of his evenings, though, were spent on 54th Street at his own nightclub, the Argonaut, a room formerly owned by Texas Guinan and described by Charles Shaw as "spacious, [with] dim lights, and a well-waxed dance floor, featuring

¹⁵⁴ Nown 137.

an undraped revue.”¹⁵⁵ Without the presence of Madden, and with only the occasional appearance by DeMange, the frisson of mixing with dangerous men in a dangerous place was missing for the audiences. With the repeal of prohibition in 1933, the touristic audience was robbed of one more illicit thrill, that of gentle law-breaking. The columnist H.L. Mencken spoke to writer Sheilah Graham about the “soothing effect” that the repeal of the Volstead Act had for fashionable rebels who drank as “gestures against prohibition.” “The only change there will be,” he said, “is that those who have no desire to get drunk will not be forced into it. That necessity has lain very heavily upon them during all the years of prohibition.”¹⁵⁶ With alcohol once again legal, drinking was no longer equated with daring, and audiences who reveled in imagining themselves boldly flaunting the law in the company of uptown criminals were robbed of these sources of self-definition. The Cotton Club was still a place for dinner, drinking, and entertainment, but it was no longer a place for tourists to feel the excitement of sinfully mingling with the underworld.

The Harlem Riot of 1935

If the relocation of the Cotton Club was prompted by one single event, that event was the Harlem Riot of 1935, called by historian Jeffrey C. Stewart “the first modern race

¹⁵⁵Charles G. Shaw, *Night Life* (New York: The John Day Company, 1931) 27.

¹⁵⁶“Mencken Sees Tranquility Arise in U.S, From Ashes of Prohibition,” *Sunday Times*, Sheilah Graham, 12 Nov 1933.

riot.”¹⁵⁷ One of the great voices of the New Negro Renaissance, Alain Locke, suggested several other descriptors for the event, including “a depression spasm, a Ghetto mutiny, a radical plot and dress rehearsal of proletarian revolution.”¹⁵⁸ Whatever the event was to be labeled, it shared with most American race riots the pattern of a simple event that, through various misunderstandings and willful provocations, escalated into a tragedy that deeply impacted an already-ailing neighborhood. On March 19, 1935, a false rumor circulated that the police had murdered a sixteen year-old Harlem resident. Following a narrative that would become all-too-familiar in twentieth century America, the resentments of a societally disenfranchised group, coupled with the provocations of outsiders and an overzealous, deadly reaction from the police, erupted into senseless violence, tremendous property damage, and death. The riot lasted through the night, long enough for downtown newspapers to report on the race riot for white New Yorkers who never went north of Columbus Circle. White New Yorkers quickly discovered that their African American neighbors uptown were very, very angry. “The riot symbolized that the optimism and hopefulness that had fuelled the Harlem Renaissance,” scholar Jeffrey Stewart wrote, “was dead.”¹⁵⁹

In the aftermath of the riot, Alain Locke described the state of Harlem in his essay “Harlem Weather-Vane,” published in a special edition of *Survey Graphic* magazine. For

¹⁵⁷ PBS Online Forum, “Harlem Renaissance” 20 Feb 1998.

¹⁵⁸ Alain Locke, “Harlem Dark Weather-vane.” *Survey Graphic*, special issue, August 1936.

¹⁵⁹ Jeffrey Stewart Interview, “Harlem Renaissance,” Online Newshour Forum. PBS. 20 Feb1998.

white America, wrote Locke, the imaginary Harlem of hot jazz and cheerful blacks was gone forever:

Like a revealing flash of lightning it [the riot] etched on the public mind another Harlem than the bright surface Harlem of the night clubs, cabaret tours and arty magazines, a Harlem that the social worker knew all along but had not been able to dramatize—a Harlem, too, that the radical press and street-corner orator had been pointing out but in all too incredible exaggerations and none too convincing shouts.¹⁶⁰

By pointing at the night clubs as perpetrators of, at the very least, a camouflage of Harlem's racial unrest, Locke gave voice to a resentment of venues like the Cotton Club in the African American community. Despite charitable outreach and the employment opportunities that mitigated James Weldon Johnson's complicated feelings for the white-patronized clubs, Locke clearly expresses something that the Cotton Club had denied for years – that white cabarets were not entirely welcome in Harlem.

This wasn't just the opinion of the intellectual black middle-class; hostility towards the white-owned nightclubs was given the official, civic weight of the city. In the committees held to diagnose the causes of the Harlem Riot, night spots like the Cotton Club came under similar censure. The 1935 report from Mayor LaGuardia's committee in the aftermath of the riot made the following recommendation:

¹⁶⁰ Alain Locke, "Harlem Dark Weather-vane." *Survey Graphic*, special issue, August 1936.

That the police in Harlem close up the dives and pleasure dens that cater to the vices and disreputable pleasures of white patrons. It is especially urged that any cabaret, dance hall or any other form of institution for entertainment in Harlem that refuses to admit Negroes and thereby advertises itself as such a place be closed by the police.¹⁶¹

Strictly, the Cotton Club didn't "refuse to admit Negroes"; its policies of racial inclusion and exclusion were far more fluid, and the steep prices of the venue tended to do more work than the doorman to discourage most residents of Harlem from attending the club. But for the Cotton Club, and all other Harlem nightclubs, to be called out as a source of racial tension by both the black intellectual establishment and the white civic government was a message that club owners and patrons couldn't ignore. The idea that there might be more to Harlem's blacks than an innate desire to entertain had certainly been broached before, notably by blacks like Paul Lawrence Dunbar and whites like Carl Van Vechten, but the physical evidence of the riot and the official warning of the city finally brought the message home. With the riot, the illusion that Harlem was a playground for adventurous, wealthy whites to go slumming was destroyed. Touristic white audiences on safari to Calloway's cheerful "land o'darkness" were faced with inescapable truths about economic depression, racial tension, and outright resentment towards visitors who would gaily spend hundreds of dollars on champagne and faux Chinese food. The Cotton Club

¹⁶¹ *The Complete Report of Mayor LaGuardia's Commission on the Harlem Riot of 1935*, (New York: Arno Press, 1969) 133.

closed its Harlem doors less than a year later in 1936, and reopened in an area more comfortable and familiar to white tourists, Times Square.

The Boast of Broadway

The club had promoted itself since 1931 with the line, “After the theatre come to the Cotton Club,” but now that the club was located at the corner of Broadway and 48th Street the journey for the audiences had become much easier. In his 1930s guidebook to New York, *Night Life*, American bon vivant Charles Shaw gives an overview of nightclubs in the Broadway district. “I consider Broadway is fully as diverting as Montmartre,” he wrote. “There are lights by the thousand everywhere you look, but certainly not much else [. . .] lights that entreat, that implore, that command you to buy soda . . . tooth paste . . . nuts.”¹⁶² Broadway here is seen as a place of commodities and commodified pleasures, and Shaw’s placement of the nightclubs next to neon advertisements for disposable goods creates a street where the capitalist ideas of product trump all, and individual nightclub entertainments are as interchangeable – and easy to discard – as a bottle of soda. While the modern artist Shaw’s enthusiasm for Broadway was tremendous (his fascinating guide book contains a great deal of writing about the area reminiscent of free verse, as well as “A Slice of New York Nightlife: A Drama in One Act” celebrating the bustle of the Great White Way), he saw the nightlife there as a series of clubs to bar hop throughout the night rather than as a single destination around

¹⁶² Shaw 10, 23.

which to plan an evening. To Shaw, clubs in neighborhoods like Harlem or Greenwich Village were worth a special trip, whereas clubs on Broadway were essentially interchangeable places to visit after the theater and carouse in until dawn. The Cotton Club, with its reputation for elegance and roster of talent, could never quite join the ranks of interchangeable post-Prohibition bars, but the club could begin to take on some of the characteristics of its white neighbors, both to fit in with the Broadway scene and to make the perception of African Americans a little more friendly to midtown audiences.

The new location was at Broadway and 48th Street, where Broadway and Seventh Avenue cross, a corner building in the heart of the Broadway theater district. This location had been home to other white-owned clubs that had attempted to import Harlem nightlife downtown to white audiences. The Immerman brothers, owners of the popular Connie's Inn, ran the black-and-tan Harlem Club here for a few unsuccessful months in 1933, and in 1934 the Ubangi Club brought some of Harlem's more sexually daring entertainments to Broadway in the form of the 250-pound cross-dressing Gladys Bentley, but the Broadway audiences were not yet ready for Harlem's "pansy shows."¹⁶³ The lessons of Connie's Inn and the Ubangi Club weren't lost on the creators of the Cotton Club Parades. Attempting to bring a more authentic Harlem experience to Broadway in the form of racially mixed rooms or openly homosexual cabarets had failed, even in the years when Harlem was in vogue and these sorts of clubs were attracting a healthy number of curious whites uptown. It seemed that white audiences were comfortable with

¹⁶³ Haskins 113.

sexually and racially progressive shows, shows that celebrated a certain, open idea of blackness, when they were located north of 110th Street in Harlem, but not when they were in Times Square. The Cotton Club's goal, of course, wasn't the fostering of an open-minded racial expansiveness; it was to make money, and if proven Harlem commodities had failed to make money on Broadway, the Cotton Club's producers were going to do their best to avoid what they saw as their rival's mistakes. The next four years of Cotton Club Parades avoided the more transgressive elements of Harlem life, real or perceived, in favor of a more mainstream approach, walking the line between nostalgic reflections and mirroring the proven commodities of the white clubs downtown. In the choices they made for their final years, it seems quite clear that the new Cotton Club was determined not to become too black.

The new venue was much larger than the old Harlem club, but it kept the same look. "It was heavily carpeted and terraced, and while a jungle décor similar to that of the uptown club was installed, the old cupid-strewn ceilings and 'theater boxes' were retained."¹⁶⁴ Likewise, the supper menu had been retained in its entirety, although most of the prices had been raised. Steak sandwiches had gone up by a dollar, and lobster cocktails by fifty cents, but faux-Chinese moo goo gai pan held steady at two dollars and twenty-five cents a plate and the cost of a side dish of olives had gone down to forty cents from fifty.¹⁶⁵ Similar décor and identical dining choices kept the club familiar for its regulars. Surprisingly, though, the cover charge for a night at the Cotton Club had gone

¹⁶⁴ Haskins 114.

¹⁶⁵ Haskins 116-118.

down, despite its new, significantly more expensive location. Previously, the cover charge had been as high as three dollars; in Times Square, it was between one-fifty and two-fifty, and then only for the early dinner show. Haskins theorizes that “now that the club had moved away from a neighborhood inhabited by Negro undesirables, it was no longer necessary to maintain a high cover charge to keep them out,” concluding that “relatively few blacks crossed the ‘Mason-Dixon Line’ of 110th Street.”¹⁶⁶

The décor and the food may have been the same, but the experience of an evening at the Cotton Club was not. A visit to the Cotton Club no longer began with a physical trip north to the neighborhood of Harlem. For white audiences, there was no longer the frisson of intermingled races, and the white insider pleasure of being knowledgeable about uptown black life and all that implies; sexuality, slumming, and a privileged perspective on jazz and entertainment. It was now a trip to Times Square to see, in the flesh, performers who were well-known through radio, film, and constant advertising. The Cotton Club was no longer a Harlem discovery; in 1936 it began to advertise itself as “the Boast of Broadway,” although in reality it was one of many Broadway hotspots. On Lennox Avenue in Harlem it was an institution that demanded to be included in an evening’s entertainment, but on Broadway in Times Square it was just another entertainment option. The decision to go there typically rested with the tourist’s personal preference for Bill Robinson over Fred Astaire or Cab Calloway over Guy Lombardo.

¹⁶⁶ Haskins 118.

The reopening was heavily advertised, with all of the promotions playing on its two stars, Cab Calloway and Bill Robinson. The earliest newspaper ads showed a cartoon stork in elegant top hat and monocle, carrying two swaddled babies in its beak. Over the babies faces were imposed photographs of the faces of Calloway and Robinson, the former saying “Hi-de-Ho!” and the latter, “Yeah, Man!” “Yeah man” was seen as a peculiarly black expression at the time - in Calloway’s *Hepcats Dictionary*, he even feels the need to define the phrase as “an exclamation of assent.”¹⁶⁷ The hep language of the ads certainly had the desired effect with the critics – the *New York Post* praised the stars in their review of the opening: “two more pulse-quickenning darktown strutters have never come hi-de-hoing and yeah-maning down from Harlem than the stars selected for this show.”¹⁶⁸ This ad campaign was a drastic change from the way the club had sold itself while it was in Harlem. Previously, the ads featured realistic drawings of scantily-clad showgirls or of elegant white couples embarking on their Harlem adventure at the club. Once in Times Square, however, the ads featured the headlining attractions in the form of photographs of their heads super-imposed over cartoon bodies – a dancing Bill Robinson, Cab Calloway as a schoolteacher instructing the Nicholas Brothers, Robinson and Calloway as stork-delivered newborns. The showgirls were absent from the new images and in the text they were mentioned, if at all, in small print under the stars’ names, as was

¹⁶⁷ Cab Calloway and Bryant Rollins, *Of Minnie the Moocher & Me* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1976) 261.

¹⁶⁸ Ken Vail, *Swing Era Scrapbook: The Teenage Diaries & Radio Logs of Bob Inman 1936-1938* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2005) 63.

the white audience. The Cotton Club's advertising gave a clear message that this was now a place to see celebrities rather than a place to be seen.

This privileging of celebrity created an appeal to a different sort of touristic audience, different from those who had explored Harlem in the 1920s. There are theatergoers who take pleasure in discovering small venues, unknown talents, and the next big thing; for them, like the tourists MacCannell writes about, the value of the event or evening comes from the feeling of a discovery and exploration of what is perceived as an authentic place or event. There are also those, however, who would prefer seeing something familiar, whether it is a blockbuster show or a famous performer, for the communal appeal and conversational cachet that carries a deeper acquaintance with the well-known. Unlike McCannell's tourists who pride themselves on their insider connection with authenticity, phenomenologist Edward Relph writes of the tourist with an "inauthentic attitude" whose interest lies in associating himself with the popular, whose "individual judgment [...] is nearly always subsumed to expert or socially accepted opinion."¹⁶⁹ These are the "visitors checking off starred attractions in their guidebooks" who cheerfully equate fame with merit - how else, they reason, would this fame have been acquired? - and who have a desire to see the most famous, which in their minds must therefore be the best.¹⁷⁰ Becoming more familiar with the well-known allows them this feeling of self-worth as well as the comfort of knowing that when these subjects

¹⁶⁹ Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion Ltd., 1983) 83.

¹⁷⁰ Graham M.S. Dann, *The Language of Tourism: A Sociolinguistic Perspective* (Wallingford: Cab International, 1993) 20.

are introduced in conversation, if they are not introducing them themselves, they will have a privileged position because of their time spent at the Eiffel Tower, or Disneyland, or seeing Duke Ellington live. Relph's theories, like McCannell's, adapt easily from the world of the globe-trotting tourist to the theater-going audience, as the touristic audience seeks out events that contain entertainment's "starred attractions": the celebrity. That celebrity may be Duke Ellington or Stepin Fetchit, but as long as the performer has a degree of fame, then that celebrity will be worth seeing, and boasting about having been seen. The audience member's personal feelings for the celebrity may vary greatly. On seeing Stepin Fetchit, for example, they may agree with Robert Benchley that Fetchit "was the best actor that the talking movies have produced"¹⁷¹ or they may find him tiresome or offensive, but the value for Relph's audience member doesn't come from the quality of the performance, it comes from the fame of the performer. The tourists at the relocated Cotton Club were less interested in seeing blacks than they were in seeing stars.

The Cotton Club was more than obliging to these customers, and in their 1936 reopening with Calloway and Robinson they were taking pains to remind the audience of the star power they were offering on stage. Although he sang "Minnie the Moocher" in all of his touring shows, Calloway hadn't performed his signature song at the Cotton Club in five years. To the Harlem audiences that song was ancient, and they were more interested in Minnie's further adventures in numbers like "Kicking the Gong Around" and "Minnie the Moocher's Wedding Day," but the producers at the downtown Cotton

¹⁷¹ Robert Benchley, "Hearts in Dixie: The First Real Talking Picture," *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*, April 1929 122-123.

Club insisted the old song be put in the show, a reminder for the audiences of Calloway's breakthrough hit. Robinson was nearly sixty years old when he returned to the Cotton Club. He was still a tremendous talent and still in fine form – in 1939 he would celebrate his 61st birthday by dancing down Broadway for thirty blocks – but he was hardly a fresh face to the club-goers. He would have his career rejuvenated by 1939's *The Hot Mikado* on Broadway and 1943's *Stormy Weather* in Hollywood, but at this point it seems that the Cotton Club wanted him because of his familiarity to audiences and pure longevity in the business, as can be seen by the fiftieth anniversary tribute that the club would hold three months after the reopening. Audiences, it was hoped, remembered Bill Robinson.

The Cotton Club of the late thirties made a concerted effort to sell a nostalgia for the Cotton Club of the mid twenties. When Duke Ellington returned as bandleader for the Cotton Club Parade of 1937, the innovative musician was asked to do something he had never done before – play a medley of his earlier hits. At this point in his career, Ellington didn't have one signature song like Calloway's "Minnie the Moocher" – his eventual theme, "Take the 'A' Train," wouldn't be written until 1941, four years after Duke Ellington had made his final appearance at the Cotton Club and long after white tourists were interested in finding the quickest way to Harlem. Ellington had always been a forward-thinking musician, and he had expanded his jazz vocabulary from year-to-year. After leaving Harlem in the early thirties, Ellington's successful tour of Europe had given him both the confidence and the finances to work on jazz operas and oratorios and returning to the Cotton Club and revisiting his decade-old "jungle music" went against

his nature. But for the producers of the show, playing the music of the twenties served both to remind audiences of Ellington's early fame and it fit in perfectly with the more middle-class, middle-aged tourists that they were now courting. Where once the goal had been selling race, now the goal was selling nostalgia. Dave Tough, a jazz drummer who worked in New York City during this period, remembers that his typical audiences were businessmen who "like to think it's still prohibition and they're wild young cats up from Princeton for a hot time. All they need is a volume of F. Scott Fitzgerald sticking out of their pockets."¹⁷²

The Cotton Club reopened downtown on September 23, 1936. The two heavily-promoted stars Robinson and Calloway were praised by the critics, but the rest of the show received tepid reviews. The same critic from the *New York Post* who parroted the "hi-de-ho" and "yeah, man" of the ad copy wrote that the rest of the show was "a bit too long" and that "in spots, this downtown incarnation grows a bit tedious and dull, which is something a colored show is just not supposed to do."¹⁷³ In their promotional material, the Club's producers chose unsurprisingly to ignore the bulk of this review for their advertising pull quote, using the reviewer's description of Calloway and Robinson instead: "Pulse-quickenning! *New York Post*."¹⁷⁴ Despite a lukewarm critical response, the show was a tremendous financial success, with an average weekly gross of \$30,000.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² David W. Stowe, *Swing Changes: Big Band Jazz in New Deal America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994) 231-232.

¹⁷³ "New Cotton Club Opens" from Vail, *Swing Era Scrapbook* 63.

¹⁷⁴ *A Cotton Club Miscellany*, scrapbook, Schomburg Center – Research and Reference. NYPL.

¹⁷⁵ Haskins 116.

The elegance of the club had transferred intact from Harlem, with the usual laundry list of famous names in attendance undisturbed, and the tactic of selling African American entertainment that had fame and familiarity was, at first, a success.

Stepin Fetchit and Broadway Style

In the last years of the club, the marketing and production strategies of promoting celebrities continued. For the remaining Cotton Club Parades, the club featured Robinson, Calloway, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington's return, and arguably the most famous, and certainly the most financially successful, African American comedian Lincoln Perry, known by his stage name Stepin Fetchit. These acts were all promoted above the imagined Harlem of African American revelry and the imagined licentiousness of half-naked light-skinned chorus girls. The *Cotton Club Parade* of 1939 starring Stepin Fetchit wasn't the final floorshow at the Cotton Club, but in many ways it was the club's nadir.

Stepin Fetchit did not weather the decades well. Despite an early, intense popularity that made him one of the most successful, and wealthy, African American entertainers of his time, Fetchit quickly became an easy signifier for the ugly imagery of the lazy black. The on-screen persona of Stepin Fetchit, mumbling in his speech and shuffling in his movements, made his name a shorthand for incompetent, slow-witted African Americans. He was cartoonish and often turned into a cartoon. Like Cab Calloway, he was caricatured in a number of animated short films, but Calloway's

cartoon self was exuberant and dangerous – “Minnie the Moocher,” for example, showed Calloway in the form of a comically frightening ghost, delivering the song as a cautionary tale to a terrified Betty Boop. Fetchit was always slow and thick-headed, a comfortable caricature for white audiences. Henry T. Sampson called it “the most popular caricature used by animators [...] His drawling, shuffling, lazy, dim-witted screen persona was known and loved by movie audiences all over the world.”¹⁷⁶ The backlash against “the Laziest Man Alive” began early, with NAACP chairman Walter White scolding Hollywood in 1942 that “restriction of Negroes to roles with rolling eyes, chattering teeth, always scared of ghosts or to portrayals of none-too-bright servants perpetuates a stereotype which is doing the Negro infinite harm.”¹⁷⁷ But the revival, and reviling, of Fetchit was strongest in the 1960s. In the CBS television special *Of Black America*, he was reintroduced to the public with the following words that all but assign him all the blame for the mass media’s negative portrayal of African Americans: “The tradition of the lazy, stupid, crap-shooter, chicken-stealing idiot was popularized by an actor named Lincoln Theodore Monroe Andrew Perry.”¹⁷⁸

However, as journalist Charles A. Johnson wrote, “[N]o black actor that I know of has had worse press from people who have never seen his movies.”¹⁷⁹ Fetchit always played the conniving servant whose outrageous laziness was his only defense against the

¹⁷⁶ Henry T. Sampson, *That’s Enough, Folks: Black Images in Animated Cartoons, 1900-1960* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 1988) 161.

¹⁷⁷ Jill Watts, *Hattie McDaniel: Black Ambition, White Hollywood* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005) 217.

¹⁷⁸ Watkins, *Stepin Fetchit* 268.

¹⁷⁹ Charles A. Johnson, “Hollywood Signs: A Young Perspective on Two Old Black Movies,” *Los Angeles Times* 13 March 1988.

unjust system in which he found himself. His sloth and his dimness fit into the tradition of “puttin’ on old massa,” the idea of a canny African American feigning such tremendous incompetence that his white superiors would have no choice but to do the work themselves, a trickster figure. This act of signifyin’ was much clearer in his stage act, where Fetchit as a solo performer controlled the audience, than in a filmic world where the audience was led by directors and editors. In his seminal book on African American humor, *On the Real Side*, Mel Watkins describes how Stepin Fetchit would open his nightclub act:

On stage, he would come shuffling out, scratching his head, looking for all the world as if he were utterly confused and lost. Mouth agape, eyes half-closed, shoulders slumped, he would embark on his practically incoherent monologue – usually in a whining monotone that had little meaning beyond the visual image of confusion it conveyed. Then, suddenly, he would begin a controlled dance routine that amazed his audience; as he danced, his facial expressions changed subtly, the half-closed lids lifting, the eyes widening momentarily to reveal the spark of enthusiasm and arrogance that his simpleton mask concealed. Without this contrast, Fetchit frequently moved beyond that thin line that separates the humorous from the pathetic. On the screen, the contrast was often absent.¹⁸⁰

The Stepin Fetchit who lived on film has endured as an unpleasant symbol of American racist attitudes, the ultimate lazy darky come to shuffling life. On stage, as Watkins

¹⁸⁰ Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side*, (New York: Touchstone, 1994) 248-249.

points out, Stepin Fetchit was a self-aware professional, acknowledging the character that the audience had come to see but insisting that they recognize the entertainer under the collection of verbal and gestural tics. He would spend the evening performing skits and comedic monologues, and dancing the “Step ‘n’ Fetchit,” a dance he had created in the 1920s and from which he took his stage name. He moved in and out of the character in a way that let everyone in the audience know that he was not a clownish curiosity or an embarrassment to the New Negro but rather a performer who was in on the joke of Stepin Fetchit. As Watkins points out, this was a contrast that was clear on stage but easily lost in film, and one that the comedian would struggle to explain throughout his life. “You made an image in your mind that I was lazy, good-for-nothing, from a character that you seen me doin’,” Fetchit said in a 1971 interview, “when I was doin’ a high-class job of entertainment.”¹⁸¹ His act received enthusiastic houses and glowing notices, with one Chicago critic writing “the patrons of the house tumbled without reserve for the film comedian. [...] He put on his Stepin Fetchit shuffle which the audience forced him to repeat until he lazily claimed that ‘I’s finished.’”¹⁸²

Stepin Fetchit would not be so well-received at the Cotton Club, either by the New York critics or by Fetchit’s new employers. He was the first major Hollywood star that the club had contracted as a headliner, and while some of their other performers had made films, they were mostly made after the performers had achieved their stardom at the

¹⁸¹ Joseph McBride, “Stepin Fetchit Talks Back,” *Film Quarterly* (Summer 1971) as cited in Watkins *On the Real Side* 201.

¹⁸² “Stepin Fetchit’s Lazy Drawl Bug Hit in Chicago,” *Pittsburgh Courier* 10 May 1930, as cited in Watkins *Stepin Fetchit* 120.

Cotton Club. Bill Robinson, thanks to his on-screen appearances with Shirley Temple, was the only headliner who had a film career that came close to Fetchit's, and this was something on which the club's publicity made sure to capitalize. For Robinson's return to the club in December of 1937, they ran an ad with a photograph of Robinson, grinning as he danced down a penciled-in road, with a photograph of Shirley Temple imposed next to the road. "Goodbye Uncle Bill," the caption reads, "lots of luck at the Cotton Club!"¹⁸³

Robinson may have been known as the Mayor of Harlem, but the club promoters disassociated him from the neighborhood and reminded audiences that the dancer had worked most recently in film, and by seeing him they were seeing a Hollywood star. They had no such trouble promoting Stepin Fetchit, a bona fide movie star. The trouble came in working with him.

Fetchit was in the complicated position of wealth and fame coupled with living in an America that treated him as a second-class citizen, a combination that presented him with opportunities and indignities in equal measure. This was a familiar story for every African American entertainer, from Bert Williams in the 1910s to Sammy Davis, Jr. in the 1950s, who basked in adulation onstage but had to leave the theater through the back door. Fellow Cotton Club performers Ethel Waters and Bill Robinson were in similar positions, and both masked their anger at the situation, as well as their violent and vindictive personal lives, with time-honored strategies for dealing with their white employers. Waters was a deeply troubled woman, given to poisonous slandering of her

¹⁸³ Vail 292.

co-stars and violent tirades, yet to the white press she played up a subservient Christian faith and made comments like “it’s a joy being colored, because we have a peculiar sort of happy outlook on life.” “She always had a bandana on her head, like ‘Yessuh, boss,’” according to dancer Avelle Harris. “I didn’t go for that *at all*.”¹⁸⁴ Lena Horne remembered that Bill Robinson “carried a revolver, was poisonous to other blacks, and truly believed in the wit and wisdom of little Shirley Temple,” and, most damning of all, that he was “a male Ethel Waters,” but management never knew because she believed Robinson was “one of the biggest Uncle Toms in show business.”¹⁸⁵ Stepin Fetchit, however, was no Uncle Tom. Bandleader Andy Kirk remembered how Fetchit would often get into scrapes with white fans. “White people would run to Step and hug him and say ‘Come on, have a drink with me’ and treat him like Stepin Fetchit. Step would push them away and say ‘I don’t know you [...] I only drink with my friends. The white people would try to treat him like Stepin Fetchit off the stage and he wouldn’t take it.’”¹⁸⁶ He was a demanding performer who had clear ideas about what he needed onstage and was due offstage, and he was intransigent if his demands weren’t met. “Fetchit was harder to handle than any artist” he had ever worked with, one theater manager claimed.¹⁸⁷ The comedian never played the subservient fool to charm his white employers, and he was dismissive of those who did, never changing himself to better fit

¹⁸⁴ James Gavin, *Stormy Weather: The Life of Lena Horne* (New York: Atria Books, 2009) 120.

¹⁸⁵ Gail Lumet Buckley, *The Hornes: An American Family* (New York: Knopf, 1986) 174.

¹⁸⁶ Champ Clark, *Shuffling to Ignominy: The Tragedy of Stepin Fetchit* (Lincoln, Nebraska: iUniverse Books, 2005) 65.

¹⁸⁷ Watkins, *Stepin Fetchit* 133.

into a mainstream, white society. “Now get this,” the elderly Fetchit insisted in 1971, “when all the Negroes was goin’ around straightening their hair and bleaching theirself trying to be white and thought improvement was white, in them days I was provin’ to the world that black was beautiful. Me.”¹⁸⁸ On the set, he insisted on script changes, refused to do bits that he didn’t think were funny, and sometimes refused to show up for work at all if he was having trouble with a director or co-star. When not performing, he was frequently in trouble for drunk or reckless driving, violent altercations, and newsprint-grabbing outbursts. In just the five months leading up to his Cotton Club appearance, he found himself in trouble with the law twice: once in Chicago for assaulting a delivery boy who made a comment after Fetchit’s poured Tabasco on a steak dinner; and once in Fargo, North Dakota for instigating what reporters called a “one-man riot” because he claimed another man owed him a hundred dollars and an overcoat.¹⁸⁹ Despite his immense popularity, Fetchit’s demanding on-set behavior and off-screen antics caused one writer to refer to him as “the world’s champion job loser.”¹⁹⁰ There was a growing number of African American comedians who were more than capable of doing variations on his ‘shuffling darky’ act, and the studios soon found it much easier to deal with a Willie Best, Clarence Muse, or ‘Snowflake’ Toomes than the prickly and insistent Fetchit. He was fired from both Twentieth-Century Fox and Columbia. He would eventually be fired from the Cotton Club as well.

¹⁸⁸ Watkins, *Stepin Fetchit* pre-titular quote.

¹⁸⁹ Watkins, *Stepin Fetchit* 223.

¹⁹⁰ Watkins, *On the Real Side* 251.

The *Cotton Club Parade* of 1939 was officially untitled and unnumbered – just called *Cotton Club Parade* in the advertisements – but it was referred to by the performers and the press as *A Cotton Club Vaudeville*, a name that resonates with a small-scale nostalgia at odds with the earlier floorshows. The show was scheduled to open in early fall, but the opening date was delayed several times due largely to contractual battles between Fetchit and Cotton Club producer Herman Stark. Fetchit's rock star behavior paled in comparison to his rock star contract, filled with outrageous riders, unreasonable demands for both his onstage act and his backstage comfort and, of course, an enormous salary. Before attending the first rehearsal, Stark was presented with a lengthy letter from Fetchit. He had already insisted that they "build him a special dressing room containing a bath and a kitchen," but in this lengthy letter he turned to his onstage needs.¹⁹¹ "This is to advise you," it began, "that it will necessitate you to furnish me with a Chinese girl singer and a very light straight man" and his act further required "a white French phone with a fifty-foot cord," "a prop pinto horse," and "two new song arrangements each week. [...] During my engagement I can be the only one allowed to talk other than the straight man [...]" and Fetchit's demands continue, before his stern closing, "nota bene – and nota bene that nota bene!"¹⁹² The letter's recipient Herman Stark is often misidentified as a 'gangster' by those writing about the Cotton Club, and while Stark was certainly connected to the underworld he was by no means a killer of the Owney Madden stripe. The club's publicity packages, which never mentioned Madden at

¹⁹¹ Watkins, *Stepin Fetchit* 225.

¹⁹² Haskins 154.

all, referred to Stark as a “white impresario of sepian entertainment [...] the Ziegfeld of the colored race.”¹⁹³ The publicity was certainly extreme, but not incorrect - he was a professional producer, remembered by Lena Horne as “a typical cigar-chewing theater manager.”¹⁹⁴ That Stark was more show business than underworld was undoubtedly fortunate for Stepin Fetchit, as the producer’s reaction to the absurd contract was negotiation rather than violence. Stark refused most of the provisions, and in retaliation Fetchit failed to appear for a number of rehearsals and, more aggravating for the company, Fetchit missed the warm-up performances at the Golden Gate Hotel. Eventually compromises were made: Fetchit lost his remodeled dressing room and his Chinese girl singer, but he managed to keep his pinto pony for a Will Rogers themed sketch, and his excessive salary remained intact.

Stepin Fetchit was also in the unlikely position of holding out for something that would have been unthinkable a few years earlier – Fetchit wanted the show to include a chorus line, and Herman Stark wanted to do the show without the Cotton Club Girls. Since the club’s move to Times Square the role of the chorus girls had been drastically reduced, both in the advertisements and onstage. Choreographer Leonard Reed came to the club in 1937 with ideas to mirror the movements of the dancing girls from other Broadway shows. “I stole from everybody,” Reed said in an interview, “I watched Busby Berkeley like I watch a hawk, like a hawk watches a chicken. From *Hellzapoppin*, [...] I stole I don’t know how much material.” But most tellingly, Reed changed the structure of

¹⁹³ *A Cotton Club Miscellany*, Schomburg Collection, NYPL.

¹⁹⁴ Buckley 120.

the African American chorus line to that of the least ethnic show in New York, the Ziegfeld Follies. Reed explained:

We had sixteen chorus girls and eight showgirls. The showgirls were all 5'10'', 5'11''. None of the chorus girls were above 5'5''. I wanted the ponies. I wanted the two, that separation; I wanted the tall girls and the short girls. When we did a good picture number, the girls walking, I wanted those girls to be seen. [...] The showgirls did no dancing. They walked and turned and spun, just picture: walk here and pose, and walk somewhere else. But they didn't do any dancing.”¹⁹⁵

The distinction between ‘ponies,’ who dance, and ‘showgirls,’ who simply walk elegantly, was taken from Ziegfeld. It was a style that was fundamentally different from that of Clarence Robinson and the earlier Harlem choreographers and another odd instance of the Broadway club disassociating itself from its African American past. For a white, touristic audience travelling uptown, hot horizontal dancing from attractive women was absolutely expected. The conception of libidinous blacks, low to the ground, hips shaking and upper bodies shimmying, was as much a part of the white tourist's conception of ‘Harlem entertainment’ as jazz. Reed changed the show to highlight a stiff, vertical elegance rather than a gyrating, horizontal sexuality, a change that was both old-fashioned and far too European. From 1937 on, the Cotton Club Girls now performed exactly like blonde chorines, in partner dances and picture dances. Reed also felt that the more suggestive, horizontal dance styles that were understood to be typically African

¹⁹⁵ Oral History Project: Leonard Reed. Dance Collection, NYPL.

American could be left to the specialty acts like the exotic shimmy dancers Princess Vanessa or Kaloah. Reed hired fewer female dancers, and for producer Herman Stark the logical end of this was to have no dancers in the show at all. Stark's announcement that this would be a Cotton Club Parade without the Cotton Club Girls was met with resistance, and Fetchit was understandably adamant that chorus girls were part of his first appearance at the Cotton Club. "Working in a floor show without girls is like working in a kitchen minus utensils," Fetchit said. "It just cannot be done."¹⁹⁶ Stark eventually relented, compromising with his star by hiring sixteen dancers, creating an abbreviated chorus line that was much smaller than the '50 copper colored gals' the club's patrons had come to expect.

The bandleader for Fetchit's 1939 show was Andy Kirk, who *Metronome* critic George Simon called "a gentle man, a kind man, a happy man" who led an uneven orchestra that "could be wonderful one minute, mediocre the next, wonderful again, only fair for a while and then suddenly wonderful once more."¹⁹⁷ Neither as charismatic and innovative as Ellington nor as popular and flashy as Calloway, Kirk was one of many bandleaders of the Swing Era who played 'sweet' jazz designed more for social dancing and background music than for athletic jitterbugging and Hot Club appreciation. Indeed, the African American Kirk prided himself that his music didn't sound black at all, writing "we were often thought of as a white band because of our smooth style and our emphasis

¹⁹⁶ Watkins *Stepin Fetchit* 225.

¹⁹⁷ George T. Simon, *The Big Bands 4th Edition* (New York: Schirmer, 1981) 301.

on ballads and waltzes.”¹⁹⁸ This was an attitude new to the Cotton Club, which had hardly been known for music that was racially neutral with an emphasis on waltzes. Even though Ellington had compromised on “Swingtime in Honolulu” in his 1937 return, he still performed the jungle music and hot jazz that were so associated with the club and with the audience’s ideas of a rowdy Harlem. But with Ellington, the audience had an association to the uptown club of ten years ago, whereas Kirk’s Kansas City band brought with them no nostalgic memories for heavy beats and growling brass. Performing at the Cotton Club was a major step in the career of Kirk and his orchestra, the Clouds of Joy (as they called themselves when playing before white audiences – before black audiences, they altered the band’s name to Andy Kirk and his Dark Clouds of Joy), a touring outfit that had never played a long residency in New York City. Kirk’s non-threatening music was perfectly suited to a floorshow built around Stepin Fetchit, a star who jealously guarded the limelight.

Kirk’s orchestra wasn’t the only attempt of the downtown club to move away from hot jazz. The previous year, during Duke Ellington’s final appearance at the club, Will Vodery was brought in as the musical arranger. Vodery was one of the most successful and talented African American composers of the time, and he was well-respected by his colleagues – Ellington called him a “boss musician” and said that he had “learned valuable lessons in orchestration” from him.¹⁹⁹ But Vodery was in his fifties; his

¹⁹⁸ Andy Kirk and Amy Lee, *Twenty Years on Wheels* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989) 66.

¹⁹⁹ Stuart Nicholson, *Reminiscing in Tempo: A Portrait of Duke Ellington* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1999) 97.

style of jazz was informed by his time leading a band during World War I and he had spent the years following the war writing showtunes for Florenz Ziegfeld. Will Vodery had been referred to as an “old Broadway hand” as early as 1921; by 1938 the composer was completely out-of-step with contemporary jazz, swing, or the music of modern Harlem.²⁰⁰ Hired to arrange the 1938 Cotton Club Parade, Vodery ignored contemporary swing in favor of the Ziegfeld style that he was familiar with, and he was absolutely unwilling to make changes - as bassist Milt Hinton said of Vodery, “he was so damn sure of himself, he scored in ink.”²⁰¹

Ellington recalls that for the Cotton Club Parade in 1938, he was the one forced to make changes. “‘I Let a Song Go Out of My Heart,’ written in a little Memphis hotel, was originally in the show,” Ellington wrote, but the producers “decided it should come out and be replaced by something to do with Hawaii. So [musician Henry] Nemo and I wrote “Swingtime in Honolulu.””²⁰² This was a telling choice from the producers. Rather than use the imaginary locales that were familiar from the club - the Southland, the jungle, the streets of Harlem - they opted for a tropical fantasy, one that Ellington’s orchestra, without a steel guitar or a group of baritone singers, was singularly ill-suited for. This wasn’t done to fit in with some theme of the show: the show didn’t contain hula dancers, fire-eaters, or any imagined island entertainment, and the Cotton Club wasn’t expanding their ideas of ethnicity to include Polynesians. Rather, the choice was made

²⁰⁰ Catherine Parsons Smith, *William Grant Still* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008) 26.

²⁰¹ Gene Lees, *You Can’t Steal a Gift: Dizzy, Clark, Milt and Nat*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001)191.

²⁰² Duke Ellington, *Music is My Mistress* (New York: De Capo Press, 1976) 88.

for the simple reason that Hawaiian music was very, very popular at the time. The primitivist fantasies of white America had migrated from the jungles to the tropics, buoyed by several popular albums - Bing Crosby's recordings of "Sweet Leilani" and "In a Little Hula Heaven" with the orchestra of Dick McIntire and his Harmony Hawaiians had proven to be big money-makers just a few months earlier. The Cotton Club had abandoned any pretense that their show was an excursion into Harlem to discover what was current in African American music; they were now, somewhat desperately, following trends, hiring celebrities, and hoping to capitalize on the current tastes of the public.

Stepin Fetchit's show finally opened at midnight, the first of November 1939, and the reviews were not kind. The show's failure wasn't entirely Fetchit's fault, as reviewers found the show lifeless, overly long and, worst of all, simply dull - one critic called the show the very opposite of a picker-upper; it was, he wrote, "a slower-upper."²⁰³ Only some of the specialty acts, the singing Dandridge Sisters in particular, were singled out for praise.²⁰⁴ Of more interest to the columnists, however, was the backstage feud between Stark and Stepin Fetchit that had "spiraled into a full-blown, highly-publicized quarrel."²⁰⁵ It began when the newspapers got a hold of Stepin Fetchit's letter of exorbitant demands to Stark, an item that was widely reprinted in entertainment columns under titles like *Variety's* "Fetchit Doesn't Like Slumming" or the *New York Amsterdam*

²⁰³ Haskins, 156.

²⁰⁴ Earl Mills, *Dorothy Dandridge: An Intimate Biography* (Los Angeles: Holloway House, 1999) 51.

²⁰⁵ Watkins, *Stepin Fetchit* 225.

News’ “Stepin Fetchit Upsets the Gay White Way.”²⁰⁶ Negative press was nothing new for the comedian; he had once quipped, “I do not object to a little adverse publicity. Somehow people sort of expect me to do odd things and I don’t like to disappoint them.”²⁰⁷ Stories about these “odd things” began circulating in the New York newspapers, and they eventually moved away from the comedian’s movie star demands to his animosity with Stark. Eventually a rumor broke that the ill-will between the two men had turned into a violent brawl that had spilled over to the rest of the Cotton Club’s cast and crew. One night, Fetchit allegedly began hurling bricks at the staff, something he vehemently denied. “Sure I had a fight with Herman Stark, manager of the place, but the story that I tossed bricks at half the Cotton Club crew is entirely false.” Fetchit concluded, “Figure it out for yourself. Where would a guy find a brick at the Cotton Club?”²⁰⁸ Despite his logical counter-argument, Stepin Fetchit was fired less than four weeks into the run. “You don’t know how glad I am to get out of there,” he told reporters, but his relief was only temporary as he quickly resumed his difficult ways. In the following seven months he quit one touring musical, was fired from another, and had one of his sons charge him with child abandonment.²⁰⁹

The *Cotton Club Parade* of 1939 may have been just another maelstrom in Fetchit’s tempestuous life, but for the club it marked a major change, a new type of

²⁰⁶ Watkins, *Stepin Fetchit* 313.

²⁰⁷ Watkins, *Stepin Fetchit* 202.

²⁰⁸ “‘They Exaggerated My Trouble’ Says Fetchit,” *Chicago Defender* 25 November 1939, as cited in Watkins, *Stepin Fetchit* 227.

²⁰⁹ Watkins, *Stepin Fetchit* 227-230.

public scrutiny that it had not known before. The problem wasn't the backstage drama - there were certainly feuds and rivalries at the club before, as might be expected in any situation where the healthy egos of celebrities jockeyed for position in the limelight. Bill Robinson disliked sharing the bill with anyone, and he especially disliked the young, popular Cab Calloway; Calloway reciprocated his feelings, saying of Robinson "it was the 'I am the star' routine. Nobody gets a bigger hand than me. It's me all the way."²¹⁰ More famously, Ethel Waters, a blues diva who lived through unimaginable hardships, greatly disliked the beautiful overnight sensation Lena Horne, and through word and deed made the young singer's life miserable, feelings Horne had a hard time getting past. Years later when Horne was filming *Stormy Weather*, director Vincente Minnelli had a difficult time getting the singer in the proper emotional state for the title song. Her friend and co-star Cab Calloway whispered two words in her ear, she immediately burst into angry tears, and Minnelli got the take he wanted. Calloway's words were "Ethel Waters."²¹¹ But these personal grievances only saw the light of day in memoirs and biographies written decades after the Cotton Club had closed. The New York City gossip columnists never wrote of them largely, it seems, because the Harlem club was insulated from the sort of reportage that clubs downtown had to endure. Walter Winchell, Louis Sobol, and their entertainment column colleagues would simply not have had the opportunity to socialize with African Americans in any but the most cursory way, and

²¹⁰ Jim Haskins and N. R. Mitgang, *Mr. Bojangles: The Biography of Bill Robinson* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1988) 237-238.

²¹¹ Gavin 133.

despite the club's renown the only negative press it received was the occasional bad review. The Harlem club was insulated from the Broadway writers, but once the club moved to Times Square and hired a major movie star like Stepin Fetchit, standard show biz stories of grievances and jealousies became fair game. Now that the club identified itself as a part of Broadway rather than a part of Harlem, it had to take an unhappy aspect of Broadway entertainment that it had previously avoided; inches in the gossip columns and an audience that frequently seemed to be more interested in backstage chaos than onstage performance.

Fetchit's absence allowed Louis Armstrong to take over as the sole headliner, but the presence of the jazz great didn't soften the critics' opinions of the show. Surprisingly, Armstrong himself, a consummate entertainer who was certainly recognized even then as a musical giant, bore the brunt of a great deal of the criticism. One columnist, his racism on full display, dismissed Armstrong for his "ape-man antics," while another was more straightforward, feeling that the show was "a little too Negro."²¹² Louis Armstrong was certainly darker-skinned than most of the club's performers, and the racism inherent in these comments is certainly clear, but there is an aspect in these words that bears examining. It is impossible to imagine such a comment from when the club was in Harlem – even if a white writer had felt uncomfortable by blacks, he certainly would have known what to expect as he headed uptown, and criticizing a club in Harlem for being "too Negro" would be self-evidently ridiculous even to the most racially ignorant.

²¹² Haskins, 151.

Now that the club was in Times Square, however, things were different. The white tourists expected a black show, certainly, or why would they have chosen the Cotton Club over one of its many competitors? But they didn't want the show to be "too Negro" – they wanted the chorus girls unthreatening, the performers famous and comfortable, and the music familiar and sweet. Whereas the white tourists before 1936 wanted immersion in their ideas of Harlem, what Dean MacCannell would call a quest for an imagined authenticity, the tourists now wanted something different, and it was something that the Cotton Club could never truly provide, no matter how European the dances, sweet the music, and familiar the celebrities. With Harlem out of vogue and Prohibition long over, these tourists wanted Broadway glamour without uptown danger, show business celebrities without gangsters. The new audiences wanted the Cotton Club without Harlem.

The Cotton Club closed on June 10, 1940. While the chorus girls moved like Ziegfeld's chorines, walking, spinning, and posing, Andy Kirk and his Clouds of Joy, a band who specialized in waltzes and whose listeners swore were white, played the final number at the Cotton Club, the ballad "Until the Real Thing Comes Along."

Epilogue: Gospel Brunches and Burlesque Shows: Twenty-First Century Ghosts of the Cotton Club

When the Cotton Club finally closed on June 10, 1940, one columnist blamed the club's demise on "lack of the famous old filthy nasty lucre."²¹³ Changing public tastes in jazz and nightclub entertainment, the loss of big name bandleaders like Duke Ellington or Cab Calloway, and a disastrous run with the unreliable Stepin Fetchit as headliner all caused the club to follow the unfortunate popular culture arc of fresh novelty, to familiar property, to simply passé. In the last half of the twentieth century the name "Cotton Club" made very few appearances in other venues or in popular culture. Most of the other clubs that had named themselves after the Harlem nightspot, like the one in Los Angeles owned by Frank Sebastian, or the one in Chicago owned by Al Capone's brother Ralph, had closed before the end of the 1930s; both Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway, who had on various tours and recordings called their bands "the Cotton Club orchestra," no longer used that modifier; and by the middle of the century the name seemed stuck in the 1920s. It was used as either a specific signifier of a historical era, on album titles such as *Duke Ellington: The Cotton Club Years*, for example, or as a more general signifier for African American entertainment. For example, Delta Record's quickie release *Kings of the Cotton Club* featured Scatman Crothers, who never appeared at the club, singing the western yodeling classic "Ghost Riders in the Sky", while on other tracks a slumping Cab

²¹³ Jim Haskins, *The Cotton Club* (New York: Hippocrene Books, Inc., 1994) 157.

Calloway sang showtunes backed by a novelty orchestra that relied heavily on banjos and kazoos. The most ambitious incursion into modern popular culture came with 1984's motion picture, *The Cotton Club*. The film was directed by Francis Ford Coppola fresh off his success with *The Godfather*, starred Richard Gere (coming off his star-making turns in *American Gigolo* and *An Officer and a Gentleman*), and producer Robert Evans enthused over the project, calling it “*The Godfather* with music ... how can I lose?”²¹⁴ In his book *Fiasco*, James Robert Parish devotes an entire chapter to *The Cotton Club*, tracing the production's reckless spending, drug-fuelled personality clashes, and continual rewrites. There were over forty script reworkings, many demanded by Gere, who wanted his character to be more likable, have more screen time, and play the cornet, the instrument Gere had played in his high school band. The production might be most famous for the tawdry story of the murder of one of the film's cocaine dealers/financial backers by another of the film's cocaine dealers/financial backers. The victim, Roy Radin, made the mistake of choosing as his bodyguard the actor Demond Wilson, better known as Lamont from TV's *Sanford and Son*: Wilson lost the man he was supposed to protect on the Los Angeles freeways, and Radin disappeared, his bullet-riddled body discovered several months later. This Hollywood true crime story dominated any press the film received, both during production and at its release.

The film itself is more of a disjointed bore than a guilty-pleasure fiasco. The few bright moments - the dance numbers, or the performances of Bob Hoskins and Fred

²¹⁴ James Robert Parish, *Fiasco: A History of Hollywood's Iconic Flops* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2006) 10.

Gwynne as Owney Madden and Big Frenchy DeMange – are crushed by the weight of two-and-a-half unfocused hours of meandering subplots, B-movie gangster clichés, and racial politics that range from simplistic to questionable. With a cost of 47 million dollars, over three times the original budget, the film grossed less than 26 domestically, a financial catastrophe that ended Evan’s dream of producing a Broadway musical based on the Cotton Club and made the property a profoundly unpopular choice for further representation in the popular culture after 1984.

Despite the rejection of the film, in the past few decades the Cotton Club has reemerged in the names of several different venues. Some use the name without any reference to jazz, black entertainment, or Harlem of the 1920s. Whataburger Field in Corpus Christi, Texas, for example, the home of the minor league baseball Corpus Christi Hooks, calls the lounge for their season ticket holders the Cotton Club, not because of any Harlem connection but rather because the ballpark is on the site of an old cotton warehouse. But for most, the Cotton Club is used as a specific signifier in the creation of what Marvin Carlson would call “a recycled experience,” one where ideas of the Cotton Club, as it is understood by a modern audience, are ghosted into a contemporary place of performance.²¹⁵ In the same way that white tourists at the Cotton Club of the 1920s hoped for an authentic African American experience, tourists at the club’s modern day incarnations have come for an authentic Cotton Club experience. Both groups of club goers are bound for a certain amount of disappointment as this authenticity is highly

²¹⁵ Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003) 4.

mediated and usually not the chief goal of the venue, in any case; but for all these groups of tourists the inauthenticity of the experience both masks and highlights essential truths. For the Harlem club-goers of the past, this dynamic could be found in the music, written to accompany stage shows that were often racially inauthentic and problematic, but which came from a new generation of black musicians who had found ways to marry race and modernity in the jazz of Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, or Cab Calloway. For the modern audiences this authenticity is well-hidden, but the Cotton Club homages of both London and modern-day Harlem reveal aspects of the Jazz Age nightclub that are surprisingly honest and authentic. These ghosted ideas of what the Cotton Club was, and how these ideas communicate with the modern interpretations of the nightspot, is the focus of this chapter, particularly in two clubs: the Cotton Club in present-day Harlem, and the Black Cotton Club that opened in London in 2007. The owners and publicists of both of these venues have taken great pains to claim an authentic relationship and position themselves as the true heirs to the original Cotton Club, but it is in their inauthenticities that each spot reveals an aspect of the original Harlem venue.

The current Cotton Club in Harlem opened in 1978. It is located east of Lennox Avenue near the popular Dinosaur Barbecue and under the Hudson Parkway, a good twenty blocks south from the club's original location. Technically, the club isn't in Harlem at all, but rather in the neighborhood of Morningside Heights, what comedian George Carlin referred to as "White Harlem." Unlike most Manhattan businesses, the small two-story building stands alone on a street corner. The club's website doesn't make

any mention of the fact that it isn't the original Cotton Club – quite the opposite, as it boasts that it “was home for legendary greats” and makes the curious claim that “ever since the glory days of world famous musician Duke Ellington and his orchestra, some of the most profound artists, including Slappy White [...] and even legendary Tom Jones have tuned up with our band.”²¹⁶ The website of the new Cotton Club clearly positions the venue as a place of celebrity. For tourists who are hoping to recapture the glamour of the club, this idea that the place is still vital, connected to the world of celebrities - albeit ones whose best days may be behind them - emphasizes the allure of fame that was part of the original Cotton Club's stock and trade. This fame, and the club's historical legacy, is reemphasized inside the club, as the small, dark club is decorated in an art deco style, with numerous photographs of Ellington, Calloway, and other celebrities associated with the original club on the walls. The club features swing dancing on Mondays and weekend entertainment, Thursday through Saturday, of floorshows patterned loosely in the style of the original Cotton Club – variety shows featuring African American vocalists, tap dancers, and a 12-piece band, “the Cotton Club All-Stars.” On Sundays, the club also hosts a gospel brunch.

The idea of a gospel brunch has proven to be a reliable tourist attraction. The combination of music, food served in the form of an all-you-can-eat Southern style buffet, and spirituality seems to work well for audiences who enjoy gospel music, chicken-fried steak, or those tourists who want to extend the pleasures of their vacation

²¹⁶ “Dinner & Jazz.” *Cotton Club of New York*, n.d. Web. 10 March 2013.

without missing Sunday service. In his article “Million-Dollar Juke Joint,” scholar Daniel Lieberfeld explores the commodification of the blues, and the idea of the gospel brunch, at the House of Blues. Lieberfeld explores the interplay between “artful rootsiness” and a sleek business model, and how this appeals to white clubgoers in the “capital of liberal intellectualism,” Harvard Square. “America’s dominant culture uses aspects of peripheralized cultures to manage its dilemmas of race and class relations,” Lieberfeld writes, “and to make money in the process.”²¹⁷ Lieberman’s argument is effective in regards to the national House of Blues chain, but the gospel brunch at the Cotton Club has some significant differences. The idea that the event is a commodification of spirituality, or a voyeuristic cheapening of an important black cultural experience, are put to the lie by the audiences it attracts. Audiences, indeed, might be the wrong word – better to call them parishioners. Unlike the evening shows, which are chiefly made up of tourists and, according to the club’s owner John Beatty, “85% white” (Shilling), the bulk of the attendance for the gospel brunches is made up from African American church groups arriving by chartered bus after a Sunday service at one of the outer boroughs.²¹⁸ When I attended, the audience consisted of myself, a pair of Eastern European tourists who approached the room with reverence - one of them gestured towards the stage and murmured “Duke Ellington” to the other - and about eighty middle-aged or elderly African American parishioners from a local church. Having only been to one other gospel

²¹⁷ Daniel Lieberfeld, “Million-Dollar Juke Joint: Commodifying Blues Culture.” *African American Review* 29:2, Summer 1995, 219-221.

²¹⁸ Erik Shilling, “Clubbed to Death.” *The Village Voice*, 20 November 2007. Web. 11 March 2013.

brunch when I lived in Las Vegas, my previous experiences were in line with Lieberfeld's: a predominantly, if not entirely, white audience, with just enough drunken, performative "testifyin'" to point up some of the more problematic aspects of white-to-black cultural tourism.

The gospel brunch at the new Cotton Club is quite different. Offering group rates for area churches affords the opportunity for annual special occasion outings, like the one that attended on my visit, as well as maintaining ties within the community. This is important to the owner, John Beatty (despite the website's implicit claims of historicity, the club was opened by Beatty in 1978), who has fought off several attempts from Columbia University and others to buy his unique property and intends to keep the Cotton Club a black-owned, family business. Ideas of community extend beyond Beatty's family and local churches - he lets the "Silver Belles," an ensemble of elderly dancers who had performed in the chorus line of the original Cotton Club and in other Harlem venues rehearse in his space for free.²¹⁹ Although the club is disingenuous, if not deceitful, about its historic origins, its celebration of black artistry coupled with its involvement in community performance provides the tourists with something similar to what they would expect from the Cotton Club, a venue where African American music is celebrated, where social dancing to the jazz and blues bands is encouraged, and where the club's Harlem roots can be experienced, albeit in a transplanted form.

²¹⁹ *Been Rich All My Life*. Dir. Heather MacDonald. Toots Crackin Productions, 2006. Film.

The Cotton Club as a black-owned business with community ties is cultural reappropriation enough, but in the performances of spiritual music on the Cotton Club stage there is something transformative. The music at the original club was hot jazz, with risqué novelty songs and the occasional foray into blues. Despite its attempt to market itself as an authentic black experience for white Jazz Age club-goers, and that this marketing, from the name of the club through the set decorations, took the form of a reimagined Antebellum setting with the orchestras set up on the stairs of the theatrical plantation house, there were apparently never any gospel songs or Negro spirituals performed on the Cotton Club stage. This was a place for consumption, not reflection, and the appeals of drinking and unrestrained sexuality didn't mix with songs of praise. By holding a Sunday service, albeit one as commodified as a thirty-dollar gospel brunch, on the stage of the Cotton Club, albeit one twenty blocks away from the original, there is a spiritual reappropriation at work. The space, if not exactly sanctified, at least has completed the change of spiritual ownership, from white gangster Owney Madden to black Harlemite John Beatty, as well as a change of purpose, from the sale of alcohol, sexuality, and imagined experience to something perhaps a bit more hopeful.

Using black culture and theatrical sexuality to fill a club and sell booze is not entirely an artifact of the past, however. Calling itself "the femme fatale of London," the Lady Luck Club in the Fleet Street district is a popular cocktail lounge with a generic

retro theme, advertising “Music from the 20s to the 60s!”²²⁰ The club hosts live bands, burlesque shows, and a wide variety of specialty nights, from the rockabilly Club Thunderbird to, on the third Saturday of every month, the Black Cotton Club. The Black Cotton Club has become the club’s runaway success, having received coverage from local tourist guides as well as on BBC Three and Euromaxx, offering a line of several compilation CDs for sale at the door and online, and receiving crowds reminiscent of the heyday of Studio 54. A 2009 BBC piece on the club shows a crowded room and, working the door, club owner Nino de Grottola scanning the long line of potential club-goers and choosing who will gain admittance on the basis of their vintage look. He himself is wearing a mesh sleeveless t-shirt, a necktie knotted like an ascot over a gold chain, and a snap-brim hat. What exactly he is looking for in potential attendees is hard to say, although it could best be described by the catchall term “retro” – a term that would describe the music played at the club as well. De Grottola is serious about the African American music he loves, saying in a *Time Out* interview that the club was “my very last shot at it. I thought: if this doesn’t work, people don’t deserve the records.”²²¹ His musical tastes, like his wardrobe, can be described as catholic, as he explained to a television interviewer. “The Black Cotton Club is emphasized more on jazz, bebop, rhythm and blues, race music, which kind of goes up to the early Fifties.”²²²

²²⁰ “About Lady Luck.” *Lady Luck Club*, n.d. 11 March 2011. Web.

²²¹ Simone Baird, “Lady Luck at Too2Much.” *Time Out London*, 25 August 2006. Web. 11 March 2011.

²²² “Black Cotton Club,” *BBC Three News*, 2 May 2009. Web. 11 March 2011.

This ahistorical generality of music, where songs of the 1920s are side-by-side with those of the 1950s, runs up against some oddly specific aspects of his club. De Grottola's use of the term "race music" shows his familiarity with the form, and the fact that he uses it in a BBC interview to promote his business shows that it is both a commonplace term for him, and one that will resonate with a select clientele. Promotional posters and CD packages from the club use the word "jass," the earliest ragtime spelling, rather than the accepted "jazz;" and the DJs at the Black Cotton Club spin the American music on 78s – something that is not strictly necessary, as the music isn't a collection of unearthed rarities but rather neo-swing standbys like "Minnie the Moocher" and "Sing Sing Sing," hits from the likes of Calloway, Dizzy Gillespie, and Bob Crosby and his Bobcats, making the use of the 78s, like the spelling of jazz, more of an affectation than a historical recreation. And here again is where the club's ahistoricity is confusing – Bob Crosby, brother of Bing, was obviously white, and his Dixieland band isn't just in the club's rotation but is featured prominently on their compilation CDs, billed as "rare dance music from the 78s era,"²²³ along with Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, Jack Teagarden - as many white performers as black, and none of their frequently re-released songs particularly "rare." And although there is certainly no shortage of sexual imagery of attractive black women from the original Cotton Club, the cover of their CDs features a drawing of a scantily-clad white woman suggestively playing the clarinet.

²²³ "What's On," *Lady Luck Club*, n.d. Web. 13 March 2013.

Why, then, all the talk of “race music” – indeed, why the name, Black Cotton Club? The London club isn’t the only Cotton Club to add the modifier “Black.” There is also a Black Cotton Club in the suburbs of Chicago, an upscale nightclub designed for mature patrons. According to their advertising, it is “the hottest club in Elgin for the Grown N Sexy!” and they offer spoken word poetry nights, amateur talent contests, slow jams and rhythm and blues and “ladies drink free on Friday.”²²⁴ For the Chicagoans, it seems the name is more an acknowledgement of their patrons than an homage to Harlem, something the artwork in the club bears out. There are historic photos of Chicago, but apparently none of New York or its famous musicians, and there are more frosted mirrors and neon liquor signs than either. Also, photographs of the venue shows a staff and clientele that is predominantly, if not entirely, black. For the Americans, it seems, the name works to connect it to ideas of black performance, but the Chicago club also asserts a prideful ownership with the modifier.

Promotional pictures and videos from the London nightspot show a crowd that is entirely white, and despite Nino de Grottola’s musical proselytizing their understanding of the club’s name has less to do with African American music than it does with the recycled experience of bygone sophistication. This is a point the BBC3 broadcast makes clear. “Who’s never dreamt of looking like a movie star from one of the black and white classics of the Forties?” asks the announcer, before stating that “anyone who wants to get

²²⁴ “The Black Cotton Club,” *Reverb Nation*, n.d. Web 11 March 2011.

in to the Black Cotton Club in London has to make sure that their outfit is perfect.”²²⁵ With the emphasis on vintage clothing and the difficulty of making it through the door, the Black Cotton Club reduces the importance of the music and places its emphasis squarely on the customer. The customers are the stars of the evening, showing off their vintage wear, admiring the fashions of those about them “and hopefully,” as owner De Grottola says, “go home with a bit of a headache in the morning.”²²⁶ The Black Cotton Club in London is a place for white folks to dress up, see and be seen, and spend a good deal of their discretionary income on alcohol, an experience that is every bit as authentic to the spirit of bootlegger Owney Madden’s original Cotton Club.

²²⁵ “Black Cotton Club,” *BBC Three News*.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

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