

The Jazz Age
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Saxophonist Ahmad Alaadeen contends, “Jazz does not belong to one race or culture, but it is a gift that America has given the world.” The Jazz Age was a period in the 1920s and 1930s in which Jazz music began to grow drastically in popularity in the U.S., despite opposition from many Americans. One of the hubs of this birth of Jazz music was Harlem, a neighborhood in New York City, associated with poverty, crime and violence. Harlem became a capital for the African American race, “a platform from which the new black voice would be heard around the world, and an intellectual center of the New Negro” (Huggins). Harlem intellectuals used their artistic talents to live out their race’s rebirth through poetry, painting and music. These individuals converted their talents and skills into personal and racial success. One influential person from the Jazz Age was Billie Holiday, also known as Lady Day. Her thriving career as one of the best Jazz vocalists of all times could have continued during this era if it weren't for her death due to drug addiction. Another famous musician during this era was Chick Webb, who was one of the most competitive drummers and band leaders of his time. Even though he was diagnosed with congenital tuberculosis, he did not let that stop him from becoming the amazing musician that he was. A third contributor to the Jazz Age was none other than the famous Louis Armstrong. Louis Armstrong was a trumpeter, bandleader, singer, soloist, film star and comedian. He is considered one of the most influential artists in Jazz history and is well known for songs like “Star Dust” and “What a Wonderful World.” Although many people thought it was the devil’s music, Holiday, Webb, and Armstrong played a huge role in the growth of Jazz music

during the Harlem Renaissance era, making it a popular and socially acceptable genre of music, even to this day.

As Jazz music emerged, several music educators tried to convince people that the current classical music was the only “good music.” They believed that if Jazz music developed, then classical music would be forgotten. Along with criticism from music educators, the prejudices towards the African Americans strongly opposed the growth of Jazz music during this era because they viewed this type of music as “barbaric and immoral” (Carter and Calvin). Jazz music broke the rules of the current genre, both musically and socially. “It featured improvisation over traditional structure, performer over composer, and black American experience over conventional white sensibilities.” With the popularity growth of Jazz music, campaigns began to censor “the devil’s music” (Carter and Calvin). Although many people during the Harlem Renaissance believed nothing good came from this new style of music, African Americans’ musical capabilities were able to flourish. African Americans saw Jazz music as an outlet to express their own cultural traditions and their love for music. Southern blacks faced prejudice and poverty and suffered pain and frustration because of this. Their blues songs reflected the loneliness, pain, discrimination and poverty of their world. Their Jazz music became both an expression and reflection of human experience and emotion. Even with the persecutions by many people, this new genre of music was still able to develop, due to the courage and contributions of many talented artists.

One of the most influential artists of the Harlem Renaissance time period was Billie Holiday. She was a young African American girl who started her career in her teens singing in

Jazz clubs. At the age of eighteen, Holiday was discovered by John Hammond and offered her first record deal. She recorded with dozens of Jazz superstars over the years and was one of the first black women to work alongside a white orchestra (“Musicians”). Despite Holiday’s rise to fame, she was faced with many obstacles including prostitution, racism, female inequalities and drug addiction. “Lady Day’s promising career was cut short in the early 1940s by self-destructive behavior, which included alcohol and heroin abuse” (Kallen). Although her career ended much too early, Holiday’s vocal style and emotional songs made a huge impact in the Jazz era and have inspired listeners through the years (Kallen). For example, in the novel *Passing* by Nella Larsen the character Irene is not afraid of her heritage or skin color, and she expresses her culture much like Holiday. Holiday’s music touched the souls of many because she truly lived the blues. When Billie was just twelve years old, she was raped; soon after that she then turned to prostitution for a way to make money. Finally finding a way past all her dark days, she was able to convey the reality of black life in America, and many of her listeners could relate to the sense of alienation and loneliness that she sang about. Holiday’s free-thinking spirit and her contributions to the music industry led her to be an icon of female independence years before women started demanding equality.

Another individual who made a huge impact in the Jazz era was William Henry Webb, better known as Chick Webb, who was an American Jazz and swing music drummer. Chick was born in Baltimore, Maryland, and he suffered from tuberculosis. He worked as a newspaper boy and saved all his money up to buy his first drum set when he was eleven (“Musicians”). Shortly after, he began to play professionally. When Webb turned seventeen, he moved to New York

City and started his own band in Harlem. His band became the house band at the Savoy Ballroom. Webb became one of the best band leaders and drummers of the new swing style (“Musicians”). Webb gained many followers over the years from his catchy beats on his custom-made drum set which had extra-long pedals, a goose neck cymbals holder, and a twenty-eight-inch bass drum. Chick was not able to read music, but he did not let that stop him either, for he memorized each arrangement flawlessly before every performance. Webb used his talents to bridge the racial and cultural barriers of the era and promote a future of great possibility to blacks. Even though he had a disability that would have stopped many others, he found a way to get through it and become one of the best drummers and band leaders of the Harlem Renaissance and of all time.

Perhaps the most famous musician of the Harlem Renaissance was Louis Armstrong. Armstrong came from a very poor family in New Orleans, so to make money for his family, he began to play with bands in small clubs, play at funerals, and parades all around town. His small gig days were soon put to an end, when in 1922, Armstrong was invited to play cornet in a Creole Jazz Band. However, just two short years later, Armstrong moved to New York City, and began to play his music with the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra at the Roseland Ballroom. Armstrong made his first appearance on the Broadway stage in 1929 (“Musicians”). “Armstrong proved as talented at improvising with his voice as with his trumpet. His playing style was the standard that others tried to match” (Haskins). Armstrong is one of the most revered jazz artists of the Harlem Renaissance, and of all times. He was a great artist who was also a great man. People learned to appreciate both African American music and Jazz even more because of him.

Louis played music up until the day he died of a heart attack at seventy years old, on July 6, 1971 (“Musicians”). Armstrong was so talented in many ways and with these talents, he helped the Jazz movement grow dramatically in popularity during this time period.

In conclusion, the Harlem Renaissance was a time period when many believed only in one type of music: classical music. Many people were unsentimental and completely against the new genre that had arose, but the few individuals who were not afraid to perform their talents in public helped mold the positive opinions of this new genre of music. The Harlem Renaissance provided a place and opportunity for talented African American individuals to be capable of having a key impact on the world. Before these times, African Americans were estranged from participating in the popular musical events, but once they had this opportunity to showcase what they were capable of, many people began to adore them and their musical potentialities. Through the expression of several talented artists, Jazz music grew drastically in popularity. Even though this type of tune became popular in the 1920s and 1930s, Jazz music is still a very well-loved genre of music to this day. If it were not for such great performers as Holiday, Webb and Armstrong, African Americans would not have had the courage to express their talents. Jazz music may have never developed without brave artists such as these and would not exist in our world today. These courageous, talented individuals changed the stubborn minds of the Harlem Renaissance age and left their mark on the world forever. They defined the statement that “music is much more than just a pleasant arrangement of sounds. It is the resonance of emotion, a joyful noise, a human endeavor that can soothe the spirit or excite the soul” (Kallen).

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