

Zora Neale Hurston

The Anthropologist
(1891-1960)

Now, she is read and loved by students of all colors, everywhere. But there was a time, not much more than twenty years ago, that Zora Neale Hurston's work was largely out of print, her literary legacy alive only to a tiny, devoted band of readers often forced to photocopy her works in order to teach them. The black arts poet and critic Larry Neal saw to it that *Jonah's Gourd Vine* was reprinted in 1971, just as the scholar Darwin Turner had *Mules and Men* reprinted a year before. But those pioneering gestures were rare.

Today Hurston's works are central to the canon of African-American, American, and women's literatures. Recently, at Yale alone, seventeen courses taught *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. An extreme example perhaps, but it gives pause to those who would argue for the timelessness of literary judgment and taste. Which is not to say that her genius went unappreciated by her peers. The prodigious author of four novels—*Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), and *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948)—two books of folklore—*Mules and Men* (1935) and *Tell My Horse* (1938)—an autobiography (*Dust Tracks on a Road*, 1942), and over fifty short stories, essays, and plays, Hurston was one of the more widely acclaimed black authors for the two decades between 1925 and 1945.

Zora Neale Hurston was born on January 7, 1891, in Notasulga, Alabama. (Hurston herself gave varying dates ranging from 1898 to 1903.) Parents Lucy Ann and John Hurston raised her and her seven brothers and sisters in Eatonville, Florida, an African-American community. Her experiences in Eatonville later would serve as the background that shaped the views of her writing. After the death of her mother, John Hurston remarried, and Zora was forced to relocate from relative to relative. Eventually she moved to Baltimore, Maryland, where she attended prep school at Morgan College until 1918. From 1919 until 1924 Hurston studied writ-

ing under Lorenzo Dow Turner and Alain Locke at Howard University. Turner and Locke greatly affected the development of her writing style.

In May 1925, she won second prize at the annual *Opportunity* magazine awards ceremony for her short story "Spunk" that had appeared in Alain Locke's germinal anthology *The New Negro*, which announced the birth of both the New Negro movement and the Harlem Renaissance of black expressive culture. At the age of thirty-four, the wind at her back, Hurston attended Barnard College to study anthropology, earning a B.A. in 1928.

Hurston then enrolled in Columbia's graduate program in anthropology and began to collect black folklore throughout the South between 1927 and 1931; in Jamaica, Haiti, and Bermuda in 1937 and 1938; and in Florida in 1938 and 1939. Hurston seems to have loved listening to and transcribing Negro folktales and myths. As late as 1946, when her own powers of storytelling were on the wane, Hurston was drawn to Honduras to gather more folklore. But despite the publication of two widely heralded collections of folklore, it was as a writer of fiction that Zora Neale Hurston excelled.

With the exception of her last novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee*, Hurston's fiction was well received by mainstream American reviewers. On the other hand, some prominent black male writers thought her work problematic for reasons that would convince few readers now.



1930-1939

No, I do not weep at the world—I am
too busy sharpening my oyster knife.
—Zora Neale Hurston

Alain Locke, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison, for example, were dismissive of what they took to be the ideological posture inherent to her fiction—her “Afro-Americanization” of modernism. In the 1930s, at least, both Wright and Ellison

were more interested in the resources of naturalism as a literary mode than they were in the sort of lyrical symbolism that Hurston developed.

In later years, however, Ellison himself would embrace the modalities of modernism in a way that would reinforce the counter tradition associated with Hurston. In general, Hurston’s black male critics wrote against the majority opinion; Hurston was the most widely acclaimed black woman writer since Phillis Wheatley. When she appeared on the cover of the *Saturday Review of Literature* in 1943 and after winning the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award for *Dust Tracks*, she became the first black author to be honored in this way. Unfortunately, Hurston’s career had reached its zenith with this event. By 1950 she was working as a maid; at her death in 1960 she had fallen into almost total obscurity.

Thirty years later, however, Zora Neale Hurston is the most widely taught black woman writer in the canon of American literature. Why is this so? While a significant portion of her readership is sustained by her image as a questioning, independent woman, her more lasting claim is staked on her command of a narrative voice that imitates the storytelling structures of the black vernacular tradition. Indeed, no writer in the African-American literary tradition has been more successful than she in registering the range and timbres of spoken black voices in writing. The language of her characters dances; her texts seem to come alive as veritable “talking books.”

Hurston also succeeds in shaping a language where so many of her predecessors failed, and in creating a point of view directed at her black readers rather than to an imagined white readership. Almost never do we feel Hurston’s hand on our shoulder as we read her texts. Given the historical prominence that propaganda has, necessarily, been accorded in the black formal arts, this is no mean achievement. Hurston was the first novelist to demonstrate the potential of the African-American vernacular to serve as a complex language of narration, but she was also the first novelist to depict a black woman’s successful quest to find a voice and to overcome male oppression.

Robert Johnson

King of the Delta Blues
(1911–1938)

Some say he frothed at the mouth and howled like a dog, crawling on his hands and knees before dying. Another said he was slipped a “douche tablet” that caused the blood in his veins to dry up. Closer to the facts, most scholars believe that he was poisoned by a jealous husband whose wife he had courted: strychnine-diffused whiskey his final toast and the last note of the despair that marked his music. When his death certificate was located some three decades subsequently, no cause of death was listed and no doctor had signed it. Furthermore, it was annotated with the hearsay, gossip, and rumors that have helped to give substance to the twentieth-century American myth surrounding the life and death of Robert Johnson.

We do know that during the twenty-seven years that marked his stay in this world, Johnson created the most harrowing recordings of Mississippi Delta blues; his unique tunings and intricate guitar playing created a moody, richly textured backdrop to the desperation evidenced by his vocalizing. His lyrics hold more existential agony than a Richard Wright novel: The gothic romance of the rural South—where slavery still existed under other names and a black person’s worth was measured by his or her strength as labor—infused his music like a haint.

Robert Johnson was born in Hazelhurst, Mississippi, in 1911. Of his mother’s twelve children, he was the last—and born out of wedlock. He did not learn the identity of his biological father until he was in his late teens. He received the rudiments of a rural education in Tunica County, Mississippi, but left school to marry his first wife, Virginia Travis, who died at the age of sixteen during childbirth.

The shadow of this grief likely pushed Johnson further into music. As a youth he had begun playing the Jew’s harp and harmonica. In the mid 1920s, he began playing guitar, influenced by Willie Brown, Son House, and Charley Patton.

James Weldon Johnson

The Renaissance Man
(1871–1938)

James Weldon Johnson was a Renaissance man—an “alchemist who turns baser metals into gold,” as Charles Van Doren, historian and literary critic, said about his friend and colleague. Johnson’s career was a combination of high literary achievement, most notably his novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and his collection of poems *God’s Trombones*, with an active political life; he was fundamental to the early successes of the NAACP and he served as U.S. consul in Venezuela and Nicaragua. In the words of one of the chroniclers of his career, Sondra K. Wilson, Johnson was “a songwriter, poet, novelist, diplomat, playwright, journalist, and champion of human rights.” His curiosity was inexhaustible; his courage, incredible; his commitment, unflinching.

One would be hard-pressed to name someone who could rival Johnson’s versatility, perhaps only the towering W. E. B. Du Bois comes close for the sheer multifariousness of his work. Over the course of a life that spanned Reconstruction and its demise, and those initial inroads that would lead to the successes of the civil rights movement, Johnson’s influence is undeniable. As a songwriter, along with his brother J. Rosamond Johnson, he penned a Broadway hit, “Under the Bamboo Tree,” and what would soon be adopted as the Negro national anthem, “Lift Every Voice and Sing.” As a literary figure, he published one of the most influential and accomplished novels written by a black American between the Civil War and the Harlem Renaissance, and he acted as one of the handmaidens of that same cultural movement that sprang up in Harlem in the 1920s.

James Weldon Johnson was born on June 17, 1871, in Jacksonville, Florida. He was raised in a middle-class household; his father was a headwaiter in a luxury hotel and his mother was an elementary school teacher. He received exceptional educational opportunities for the time and place. In 1887 Johnson enrolled at Atlanta

University, where he emerged as a scholar-athlete, and delivered the commencement address in 1894. After a brief stint as principal of his former school in Jacksonville, Johnson formed a legal partnership, becoming, in the process, the first black lawyer admitted to the bar in Duval County, Florida.

By 1904 Johnson had become involved in Republican party politics, writing two songs for Theodore Roosevelt’s presidential campaign and serving as treasurer of the Colored Republican Club. In 1906, at the recommendation of Booker T. Washington, Johnson was named U.S. consul to Venezuela (1906–1909) and Nicaragua (1909–1912). After the election of Democrat Woodrow Wilson it became

clear to Johnson that his political future was limited. He returned to the States in 1912 to publish anonymously *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, written while in Nicaragua, and to take on the editorship, in 1914, of the *New York Age*, the preeminent black newspaper in the country.

But it was Johnson’s appointment as field organizer for the nascent National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in December of 1916 that proved to be of the greatest consequence. He oversaw the expansion of the organization, increasing its number of regional branches from 68 in 1917 to 310 in 1920. That same year he became secretary of the NAACP, an office he would hold for the next decade and use as a platform for his political thought. In his later years, he became Adam K. Spence Professor of Creative Literature and Writing at Fisk University.

Johnson is perhaps most widely known today as one of the key figures in the African-American literary tradition. Few books before the Harlem Renaissance had



1910–1919

O black and unknown bards of long ago. How
came your lips to touch the sacred fire?

—James Weldon Johnson

a greater impact on the shape of the tradition than
Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*.
Johnson helped create the first-person black novel,
transferring the classic nineteenth-century slave narra-

tive into the fictional autobiography "as a way of rendering in fiction the range of
sensitivity and consciousness of a black character his ambitions and dreams, his
weakness and fears, his aspirations and anxieties about racial relations in American
society even more fully than the slaves and ex-slaves had done in their popular slave
narratives."

Like Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*, Johnson proposed to take his reader
behind the veil to offer a "view of the inner life of the Negro in America, . . . into
the freemasonry, as it were, of the race." He crafted an unnamed narrator with the
fluidity of racial identity to slip back and forth between the calcified racial divides.
In doing so, he created a character not only representative of a race, but representa-
tive of the very alienation of modernity to which all, white and black, have fallen
prey.

In 1927 Johnson published *God's Trombones: Seven Sermons in Verse*, a collection
of poetry that attempts a mimetic capturing of the black church sermon. Johnson
attempted to give voice to this sacred speech without making recourse to the mis-
spellings and orthographic tricks often employed in representing black vernacular
speech.

In addition to these signal contributions, Johnson edited three significant
anthologies, *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), *The Book of American Negro
Spirituals* (1925), and *The Second Book of American Negro Spirituals* (1926). In the
anthology of black poetry, he makes the claim that it is literary achievement that
marks the stature of a race.

Johnson served as a conduit between the past and a contemporary age of
African-American leadership and letters. Bridging Booker T. Washington with the
civil rights leaders of the fifties and sixties, leading the literary tradition from
Chesnutt to Toomer, Johnson was a true racial and cultural alchemist. He refused to
separate the personal from the political, the existential from the economic, the
spiritual from the social in his broad vision of black freedom.

Jelly Roll Morton

Mr. Jelly Lord

(1885?–1941)

He hated Negroes, Ferdinand Joseph La Menthe was a fair-skinned
New Orleans Creole who claimed, perhaps accurately, that his family originated in
France. He believed he was white, and he passed across the color line whenever he
could. But the pianist who became Jelly Roll Morton was honest enough as a musi-
cian to understand that jazz, the music that marked the twentieth century, was born
of the blending of African and European traditions, the very amalgamation he denied
in himself. Jelly even asserted that he "invented" jazz himself in 1902, when he first
played four beats to the bar instead of ragtime's two. Given what we know of jazz
musician Buddy Bolden, this is probably not true. What is sure, however, is that Jelly
was not only a brilliant pianist, able to play anything in any style, he was jazz's first
composer as well. This was his greatest contribution: the ability to put jazz's impro-
visation together with arrangement and rehearsal—without sacrificing spontaneity.
This complex and conflicted black genius who wrestled with self-hatred yet pro-
duced profound art is a kind of enigma.

Jelly was orphaned early and raised by his grandmother, Eulalie Echo. She once
lent the child to a friend who wound up in jail, and Jelly claimed his first musical
inspiration came from hearing the prisoners sing to stop his crying. Another influ-
ence was his Aunt Lalie, a vodun practitioner who kept glasses of holy water around
his bed. Like many other Creoles, Jelly's family was musical, and he tried several
instruments before deciding on the piano. As an adolescent, he was earning three
dollars a week as a barrel maker when he got a job playing in a high-class sporting
house. He made twenty dollars in tips the first night. Storyville, New Orleans's wild
and wide-open red-light district, ran twenty-four hours a day on alcohol, drugs,
gambling, prostitution, fights, and murder—and was probably the greatest constella-
tion of musical genius ever concentrated in one place. Jelly had found his world.

Weather (1943) and *Star-Sprangled Rhythm* (1942); toured the United States and Canada in the *Tropical Revue* (1943–1944); codirected and danced in *Carib Song* at the Adelphi Theater in New York in 1945; and produced, directed, and starred in *Bal Nègre* at New York's Belasco Theater in 1946. In June 1948, she and her company made their European debut at London's Prince of Wales Theatre with *Caribbean Rhapsody*, which had already received accolades in the United States. Many Europeans were familiar with Josephine Baker but the European stage had never before seen black dance as a high art form. The effect was electrifying.

In 1943, the veteran scholar, choreographer, and performer established the Katherine Dunham School of Arts and Research in New York, which offered classes in dance, theater, and world cultures until 1954. Her classes were accompanied by conga drumming and involved step patterns with isolated movements of the shoulder and hips. She trained all the dancers who appeared in her works in the "Dunham technique," which combined classical ballet with Central European, Caribbean, and African forms. Many of her students went on to achieve fame in their own right, including Marlon Brando, James Dean, Eartha Kitt, and Archie Savage.

In 1959, President William Tubman of Liberia, an Americo-Liberian, appointed Dunham director of the National Dance Company of Liberia and head of the African Performing Arts Center in Monrovia. Dunham represented the United States at the Festival of Black Arts in Senegal, where she became cultural advisor to the Senegalese government, and helped train the National Ballet of Senegal. After a seven-year absence, Dunham continued to dance, choreograph, and direct on Broadway in such productions as *Katharine Dunham and Her Company* and *Bamboche* in 1962. With the 1963 production of *Aida* in 1963, Dunham became the first black person to choreograph for the Metropolitan Opera. She also choreographed and directed Scott Joplin's opera *Treemonisha* in 1972 and founded the Katherine Dunham Museum and Children's School, which are still main attractions in East St. Louis, Illinois. She has received many honorary degrees and awards, including the *Dance* magazine award in 1968, the University of Chicago Alumni Professional Achievement Award, the Albert Schweitzer Music Award, and the distinguished service award of the American Anthropological Society.

Katherine Dunham brought Pan-Africanism to dance, and modern dance to the Pan-African world, without succumbing to primitivist pandering. It is impossible to imagine the world of later black dancers, from Alvin Ailey to Bill T. Jones, without her.

Duke Ellington

The Duke
(1899–1971)

Duke Ellington was the king of swing, at a time when a radio program could prosper on a good collection of swing classics and the rambling of a disk jockey who would introduce the latest swing release. Swing fans listened repeatedly to the newest ten-inch 78 rpm records, living vicariously through the glamorous big bands. Touring bands crisscrossed America, and wherever they went they introduced dance crazes such as the lindy hop, named after Charles Lindbergh's solo flight, and the Suzie-Q or big apple—all black dances. From the ballroom dance floors to casinos, white teenagers crossed racial lines to do the black-inspired dance of the day at places such as the famous Harlem Savoy Ballroom on 140th Street at Lenox Avenue. Here, Ella Fitzgerald sang with Chick Webb's band and there, in the dimmed lights, white kids would watch young black couples spiraling, flipping, and defying gravity on the dance floor. As Duke Ellington would later title one of his tracks, "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing."

Although Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington was surrounded by big bands like that of his black predecessor Fletcher Henderson, his band was not just the typical swing band: It was the preeminent orchestra of his day. For this reason, among others, Ellington is widely considered one of the first black jazz composers, as well as the foremost orchestra conductor of swing. Always uneasy about being too narrowly classified as a swing or jazz artist, Ellington was a master of ingenious creativity with his band; he was incredibly creative, producing more than three hundred songs and composing somewhere between one thousand and two thousand orchestral pieces throughout his lifetime.

Elegant, vivacious, and dapper, Ellington radiated a kind of self-composure, a self-assuredness and joie de vivre. He was the first performer to wear white tails onstage, and the first to wear ballet slippers with a tuxedo. Yet, for all his outwardly

debonair ways, Ellington was an unknowable and inscrutable man. He possessed an element of mystery that undoubtedly played into the "Ellington Effect," as his long-time musical collaborator and friend Billy Strayhorn called it. The Duke had a melodic sensibility that wed, without anxiety or tension, the early forms of blues and ragtime, influenced by the antiphony of slave music, to Euro-American classical forms of music. Similar to Zora Neale Hurston, Katherine Dunham, and other artists of the time, his project was to excavate the past for the true vernacular of southern black folk, and this resulted in the broad recognition of black cultural forms as serious art. He succeeded in this endeavor, regardless of the pretensions and artifice that accompanied the process.

Duke Ellington grew up in the middle-class African-American community of Washington, D.C., which, during the 1930s and '40s was especially preoccupied with bourgeois pretensions and color distinctions. The young Ellington gave up the formal composition studies he had been afforded as a child, to make a Dante-like journey into the "black" music culture of the dimly lit poolrooms and the after-hours clubs. Here he listened to the major figures of the stride piano style, particularly James P. Johnson and Willie "the Lion" Smith. In 1923, Ellington moved to Harlem to work with Elmer Snowden, and in 1924 he formed the Washingtonians, his first real band. They auditioned at Harlem's Cotton Club and were hired. Already the Duke's work was being discussed by those who understood his compositions as full of "compositional ingenuity, harmonic adventurousness, sophistication, and professionalism."

The Cotton Club was lush. In fact, it was a segregated drinking spot, run by gangster Owen Madden and "Big Frenchy" De Mange, who kept all but the most affluent blacks off the premises. Lena Horne was a Cotton Club chorus girl at one time. She tried to leave once, but the bosses had her father beaten up. Protected by the mob, they strong-armed him from signing another contract at a Philadelphia theater. The name Cotton Club, moreover, like its rival, the Plantation Club, evoked images of the mythical "good old days." Partially to be consistent with its primitive theme, Ellington initiated his so-called "jungle music," the signature music of the Cotton Club. It also was named after the growling, plunger-muted solos of "Bubber" Miley, who defined the orchestra's so-called jungle style. At the same time, Ellington composed more serious pieces, including the early masterpieces "East St. Louis Toodle-oo" (1926), "Black and Tan Fantasy" (1927), and "Black Beauty" (1928). And he came to detest the confining categories of swing and jazz.

The 1930s signaled Ellington's emergence as a composer of extended orchestral works. After the death of his mother in 1935, he wrote and recorded a tribute, *Reminiscing in Tempo*, that stood apart from the jazz sounds of his peers. Yet in the same period he continued to demonstrate great range and versatility through his shorter pieces, four of which have remained timely for generations: "Mood Indigo" (1930), "It Don't Mean a Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing" (1932), "Sophisticated Lady" (1933), and "In a Sentimental Mood" (1935).

In this era the image of the bandleader was highly significant. The leader was responsible for public relations and band management as well as being the conductor and arranger. The sidemen he chose were invaluable to his image. Ellington managed his band as if he were painting a haphazard but beautiful picture. Notoriously chaotic in rehearsals, the band played as one person during performance and recording. He wrote directly for each of his sidemen, and as it is often said, he played a whole band rather than just the piano. And although his sidemen changed frequently, there were the few that became legendary: "Bubber" Miley, the exponent of the growl trumpet; Sidney Bechet, the brilliant New Orleans soprano saxophonist and clarinetist; Joe "Tricky Sam" Nanton, a trombonist; Johnny Hodges, the alto saxophonist; and Otto Hardwick, a reed player.



Billy Strayhorn, of course, Ellington's close collaborator as a pianist, composer, and lyricist who wrote "Take the A-Train," joined him in 1939 and stayed with him until his own death in 1967. "What little fame I have achieved is the result of my special orchestrations, and especially of the cooperation of the boys in the band, I cannot speak too highly of their loyalty and initiative," Duke wrote.

The band's popularity was ensured by weekly radio broadcasts from the Cotton Club, but it was cemented by their several Hollywood cameo appearances. Throughout the 1940s, they were fixtures in films such as *Black and Tan Fantasy*, the Ziegfeld revue *Show Girl*, *Check and Double Check*, *Belle of the Nineties*, and *Murder at the Vanities*, plus the Marx Brothers' film *A Day at the Races*, in which Ivie Anderson, the singer of the band, appeared. The Duke also composed sound tracks for films later revered as classics. *Cabin in the Sky* was one such venture, in which Lena Horne also was featured. His 1943 composition *Black, Brown and Beige: The History of the Negro*, which followed African Americans from Africa to Dixie, was predicated on his interpretation of the "natural feelings of a people." It embodies his gift to orchestral jazz: the discovery that bands can have an unmistakable sound and can play as a unified unit, a distinctive sound. His first complete film score, performed by the orchestra, was for *Anatomy of a Murder*. In 1960 he recorded music for *Paris Blues*.

By the 1940s the Duke was widely considered one of America's finest composers. Each new Ellington work was showcased at Carnegie Hall. But in the fifties, bebop began to eclipse the big bands, which now seemed outdated and clumsy, with too many musicians and instruments. Bebop was a new sound, that enabled small, inexpensive, and intimate groups to move in a new musical direction. Ellington made the cover of *Time* magazine in 1956, however, because of an exciting comeback performance at the Newport Jazz Festival. The "oldies" were rediscovered suddenly. Ellington collaborated with Billy Strayhorn on *Royal Ancestry*, a musical portrait of Ella Fitzgerald. He also recorded with the Count Basie Orchestra and the Louis Armstrong All Stars in the 1960s. He collaborated with the younger generation, making two recordings with the tenor saxophonists Coleman Hawkins and John Coltrane. He made a trio album with drummer Max Roach and double bass player Charlie Mingus in 1962.

The elder, more established Ellington was criticized in the 1960s by young black activists for not being sufficiently involved in the civil rights struggle. He replied, "I

Lovers have come and gone, but only my mistress stays. She is beautiful and gentle. She waits on me hand and foot. She is a swinger. She has grace. To hear her speak, you can't believe your ears. She is ten thousand years old. She is as modern as tomorrow, a brand new woman every day, and as endless as time mathematics. Living with her is a labyrinth of ramifications. I look forward to her every gesture. Music is my mistress, and she plays second fiddle to no one.

—Duke Ellington

wrote 'Black Beauty' in 1927. . . . We have been talking for a long time about what it is to be black in this country." Certainly *Deep South Suite* (1947) was based on black political aspirations and ambitions.

His creative energies found full expression in *Harlem*, an extended work that premiered at a fundraiser for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1951. In a letter addressed to Harry S. Truman, Ellington predicted that the concert would benefit "your civil rights program—to stamp out segregation, discrimination, [and] bigotry."

By 1963, he had written *My People*, an extended choral and orchestral work celebrating the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, which challenged the demeaning stereotypes of African Americans in Hollywood films and throughout American popular culture. He also wrote *Jump for Joy*, which had a buoyant sense of political irony that is suggested in such numbers as "Uncle Tom's Cabin Is a Drive-In Now."

Ellington was a deeply religious man, and at the end of his life he wrote *Three Sacred Concerts* that were performed in Grace Cathedral in San Francisco and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City in the 1960s. His last concert, performed at Westminster Abbey in 1974, was for solo voices, choir, and Ellington's piano alone. In 1966, President Lyndon Johnson awarded him the Gold Medal of Honor, and he performed at President Richard Nixon's birthday in 1969, when he was awarded the Medal of Freedom. Between these awards and tours to South America and Europe, his dearest friend and collaborator Billy Strayhorn died. In 1974 Ellington died of cancer.

Duke Ellington was famous for creating what Francis Newton called the sound that was "New Orleans colors, the liquid Creole clarinet . . . the blue sound of muted brass . . . and a well mixed reed sound." He also established jazz as composed art form, mastering the art of composing those most fundamentally improvised mediums, to our eternal joy and delight.

bol in black popular culture for black cultural nationalism. For a moment, even though Garvey and the UNIA had no developed plan or politics, his proposed United States of Africa seemed at least imaginable.

The dream would not last, however. Garvey was indicted on charges of mail fraud stemming from his dealings on behalf of the Black Star Line. Before his trial, a "Garvey Must Go" campaign was led by rivals both inside and outside the UNIA. He was convicted and incarcerated in Atlanta in 1925. While Garvey was imprisoned, his second wife Amy Jacques Garvey managed to maintain the organization through tireless devotion. His sentence was commuted two years later, but authorities deported him upon release. But even after his release, the UNIA could not regain its former strength. Garvey would never again enjoy the status of an international black statesman. After he left the United States, he tried to rebuild the organization. He held UNIA conventions in Canada, and would later try his hand, unsuccessfully, at party politics in Jamaica. He migrated to England in the late thirties, where, as one of his final acts of international diplomacy, he criticized Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie during Mussolini's invasion of that country. In the process, Garvey alienated many blacks in America, the Caribbean, and in Europe and Africa, who were passionately rallying around Selassie's cause.

In 1940, he had a stroke that left him partially paralyzed. He died a few months later from another stroke, reportedly caused by the shock of reading his own obituary, written by a malicious reporter. Garvey did not leave behind established institutions—libraries, research centers, journals—that continue to play a viable part in black politics. What he did leave was his vision of a republic based on a common skin color, a powerful legacy of black cultural nationalism.

Langston Hughes

The Poet
(1902–1967)

With a career that extended from the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s to the Black Arts movement of the 1960s, Langston Hughes was the most prolific black writer of his era. Between 1926, when he published his first pioneering poems, *The Weary Blues*, until 1967, the year of his death, when he published *The Panther and the Lash*, Hughes wrote sixteen books of poems, five works of non-fiction, and nine children's books; he also edited nine anthologies of poetry, folklore, short fiction, and humor. He translated Jacques Roumain, Nicholas Guillen, Gabriela Mistral, and Federico García Lorca, and wrote at least thirty plays. It is not surprising that Hughes was known as "Shakespeare in Harlem" and "The Poet Laureate of the Negro Race."

Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri, in 1902. His father, James Nathaniel, was a black businessman, a victim of his own internalized racism; and his mother was Carrie Langston Mercer, a descendent of black abolitionists. Hughes attended Columbia University in New York from 1921 to 1922, and received his B.A. from Lincoln University in Pennsylvania in 1929. His unorthodox career included stints as a laundry boy, assistant cook, and busboy; he also worked as a seaman on voyages to Europe and Africa. Fluent in French and Spanish, he lived for periods in Mexico, France, Italy, Spain, and the Soviet Union. But it was in New York, as one of the earliest participants in the Harlem Renaissance, that Hughes's genius was discovered and developed. The Renaissance was a spectacular flowering of African-American culture during the 1920s, an era of exciting creativity in literature, art, music, and dance. Originally called the New Negro movement, the renaissance was an era of black pride, positive self-consciousness, and cultural affirmation. It was a golden movement.

Langston Hughes's writing is deceptively simple, and his life also is often enigmatic, even disingenuous. Hughes's biographer, Arnold Rampersad, writes that Hughes's own autobiography, *The Big Sea*, "is a study in formal sleight of hand, in which deeper meaning is deliberately concealed." In fact, Hughes was a mask-wearing man who worked to protect his vulnerability by constructing a facade of personal compliance, asexuality, and political moderation.

Hughes endured a series of betrayals: from his racist father; from "godmother," the wealthy white patron who smothered his freedom; from Zora Neale Hurston, whom he believed stole his work; from the political left, which used him; from publishers and a public that pushed him from artistry toward commercialism; from an America that patronized and ignored him. After forays into these worlds, Hughes built a wall of geniality. But he knew where the real basis of his creativity lay.

He returned constantly to the life-affirming folk tradition of the black masses: "After all the deceptions and disappointments, there was always the undertow of black music with its rhythms that never betray you, its strength like the beat of the human heart." Hughes's genius lay in expressing black consciousness, interpreting to the people the beauty within themselves, and in raising the racial folk form to literary art. He used the incredibly creative poetry of black language, blues, and jazz to construct an Afro-American aesthetic that rarely has been surpassed. He learned the hard way that his strength was in loyalty to black culture and identification with "my people." "I don't study the black man," Hughes said. "I 'feel' him." Rampersad writes that Hughes discovered "in his chronic loneliness, true satisfaction came only from the love and regard of the black race, which he earned by placing his finest gift, his skill with language, in its service."

Hughes's work was reviewed in mainstream journals by mainstream writers, where few fully appreciated his experiments with the blues, jazz, and black talk. His experiments in these forms was expressed most directly by his popular newspaper columnist alter ego, Jesse B. Semple (a.k.a. "Simple"), whose musings Hughes published in the *Chicago Defender*. Simple's discussion of issues such as the complexities of bebop were remarkably rich; when we juxtapose them with Hughes's comments about the ways jazz informed his poetry, we understand that we must read Hughes both as a product of and a reaction to the African-American vernacular.

Others would soon pick up on his techniques. As Leopold Sedar Senghor has

remarked, Hughes's style was "analogical, melodious, and rhythmical," rife with "assonance and alliteration." Senghor notes, "You will find this rhythm in French poetry; you will find it in Claudel; you will find [it] in St. John Perse. . . . And it is this that Langston Hughes has left us with, this model of the perfect work of art." In these and other respects, Hughes's best work was probably his vernacular poetry, cast "in the idiom of the black folk" and found, especially, in *The Weary Blues*, *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, and *Ask Your Mama*.



Step outside yourself, then look back, and you will see how human, yet how beautiful and black you are, how very black, even when you're integrated.

—Langston Hughes

Hughes spent his life creating; he was perhaps the first black author to earn a living, however modest, from writing. He went on many reading tours to black colleges and other organizations, selling and signing books. He was briefly on the teaching staff at Atlanta University and the Laboratory School of the University

of Chicago. In the 1950s he appeared before Senator Joseph McCarthy in the government's witch-hunt for communists. He was reconciled enough to lecture in 1965 in Europe for the U.S. Information Agency. He went to Dakar to the First World Festival of Negro Art. Hughes died in New York of congestive heart failure on May 22, 1967.

Before his peers Sterling Brown and Zora Neale Hurston, Hughes demonstrated how to use black language and music as a poetic diction—at a moment when other black writers thought the task fruitless at best, detrimental at worst. Indeed, so much of the best of the African-American literary tradition—Brown, Hurston, Ellison, Morrison—grows out of his elevating the vernacular into literature. Hughes, in other words, undertook the project of constructing an entire literary tradition from the common language. This was the very language, ironically, that the growing and mobile black middle class shunned as the embarrassing legacy of slavery. We may fail to recognize the boldness of Hughes's innovation because of his triumph: Adopted, accepted, and naturalized by his successors, black vernacular is now everywhere in American speech and literature. Even without his other contributions, this achievement alone ensures his permanent place in American letters.

The
African-
American
Century

Ernest Everett Just

The Biologist
(1883–1941)

Ernest Everett Just was a brilliant biologist who sought freedom from racism in the objective truth of science. A professor of biology at Howard University for more than thirty years, Just was the first great modern African-American scientist. He was awarded the NAACP Spingarn Medal in 1915 for his work on the embryology of marine invertebrates, and again in 1939. He published *The Biology of the Cell Surface* (1939), a groundbreaking text based on research at the Marine Biology Center at Woods Hole, Massachusetts, in the 1920s and in Europe in the 1930s. Just's research concentrated on the process of fertilization, as well as on parthenogenesis, the development of unfertilized eggs. He discovered the fundamental role played by protoplasm (the substance that lies outside of the nucleus of the cell) in cell development, including its influence on heredity.

E. E. Just was born on August 14, 1883, in the old decaying southern city of Charleston, South Carolina. As a child, he moved to James Island, a Gullah community just off the coast, when his father, a dock builder, died. His mother, a schoolteacher, supervised his education. As a widow, Mary Cooper Just was forced to find work where she could and took a job in the Jamestown phosphate mines. Undeterred by the obstacles she faced with her four children, she sent Just to the Colored Normal, Industrial, Agricultural and Mechanical College in South Carolina, which prepared him, however inadequately, for college. She later sent him to Kimball Union Academy in Meriden, New Hampshire, which offered Just a more thorough education. The family arranged for Just to sail to New York—he paid for his way by working on the ship—and once he got to New York, he worked to pay his expenses. Just graduated from Kimball in 1903, the same year his mother died. That fall he enrolled at Dartmouth College, where he was the only black

Any black who strives to achieve in this country should think in terms of not only himself, but also how he can reach down and grab another black child and pull him to the top of the mountain where he is.

—Jesse Owens

to shake hands with him. Owens pointed out that neither did President Roosevelt. The Olympic Committee suspended his amateur status because he had elected to come back and work for pay rather than stay and compete in European meets. But the pay rarely materialized, and when it did it came from humiliating performances, including racing against a horse. Owens had left OSU

without graduating, and the only steady work he could get was menial. Occasional speaking engagements kept him in the public eye, though, and by the 1940s he was able to support himself on the lecture circuit.

As the civil rights movement emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, Owens increasingly found himself out of step with many in the black community. Asked to mediate between U.S. officials and the sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos, who gave the black power salute on the medals podium at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics, Owens angered the young athletes and began to attract criticism as an Uncle Tom. A Republican, he wrote in 1970 that "[i]f the Negro doesn't succeed in today's America, it is because he has chosen to fail."

In 1972 Owens moved from Chicago to Phoenix, Arizona, partly for his health and partly for the renowned golf courses, where he became a familiar figure when not on a speaking tour. In Phoenix Owens became a philanthropist, giving his money and his name to the Jesse Owens Memorial Medical Center and Jesse Owens Memorial Track Club. He served on the boards of the Boy Scouts of America, the National Council of Christians and Jews, and other organizations. Perhaps most gratifying to Owens, OSU awarded him an honorary degree in 1972. When he died in 1980, Arizona governor Bruce Babbitt arranged for his body to lie in state in the capitol building before being returned to Chicago for burial. Despite his often contentious relations with mainstream black leaders, Owens is remembered for his amazing grace under pressure in 1936, when he showed the world that Hitler was wrong. In the process, Jesse Owens also revealed the depth of how America was wrong about his fellow black human beings.

Paul Robeson

Citizen of the World

(1898–1976)

One of the most gifted men to rise to prominence in the twentieth century was Paul Robeson. He was a world-renowned thespian, a highly talented singer, a scholar, a linguist, and a courageous political activist. He stands as one of the first black artists to use his eminence in the worldwide struggle against bigotry and injustice. By the 1940s, he was so widely recognized as a prominent activist that the United States government mounted a sinister attack on his career and reputation. His career did not survive, but his reputation has only increased in luster.

Robeson was born the son of a slave, William Drew Robeson, a remarkable man who escaped from bondage in North Carolina at the age of fifteen. He graduated from college and became a Presbyterian minister in Princeton, New Jersey. The youngest of five children, each of whom was expected to be a high achiever, Paul Robeson was sent to school in a neighboring town in Somerville, New Jersey, because of a segregated school system in Princeton that did not offer secondary education for black children. In 1915, he won a scholarship to Rutgers, where he excelled both academically and in sports. He was twice named an All-American in football and was a member of his college team in baseball, basketball, and track. Not only known for being a champion debater, he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa during his junior year and chosen to be his class valedictorian. In 1919, Robeson attended Columbia Law School. In 1921, he married Eslanda Goode. Their only child, Paul Robeson, Jr., was born in 1927. During his time in law school, Robeson was drawn to the stage.

After playing a lead in the short-lived Broadway play *Taboo*, which traveled to London in 1922, he became a replacement cast member in *Shuffle Along*, the history-making musical created by Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle. In 1923, Robeson decided not to pursue law after all, selecting the stage indeed. His big break came when

he was invited to join the Provincetown Players, the influential Greenwich Village theater company that included playwright Eugene O'Neill among its three associate directors. In 1924, Robeson appeared in the revival of O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* and premiered in the playwright's *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, a play embroiled in controversy because of a scene involving an interracial kiss. Robeson's acting career gathered pace with his 1930 London performance of *Othello*. Not since Ira Aldridge in the 1860s had a black man played this role. Robeson excelled in a 1932 Broadway revival of Hammerstein and Kern's musical *Showboat*, which featured his dramatic rendition of "Ol' Man River"; it was followed by a long-running and critically acclaimed production of *Othello* on Broadway in 1943.

Robeson is perhaps best known for the instrumental role he played in bringing African-American spirituals into classical music repertory. A scene in *Emperor Jones* called for whistling, which Robeson could not do, and so instead he sang a spiritual. He was praised for his vocal talent even more than for his acting ability. In 1925, he and his longtime pianist and arranger, Lawrence Brown, who also played with the African-American tenor Roland Hayes, staged a recital at the Greenwich Village Theatre. This was the first time in which a black soloist sang an entire program of spirituals before the white public. For the rest of his life, although he would sing a wide range of material—including popular tunes, work songs, political ballads, and folk music from all over the world—Robeson was admired as an interpreter of spirituals.

Robeson also developed a career in films, making his debut in 1924 in *Body and Soul* by the black filmmaker Oscar Micheaux. His most fruitful screen years were between 1933 and 1942, when he was featured prominently in *The Emperor Jones* (1933), *Show Boat* (1936), *Tales of Manhattan* (1942), and several British films. He became disillusioned with his work in films, however, coming to believe that with few exceptions, such as *Song of Freedom* (1936) and *The Proud Valley* (1940), his characters were little more than racial stereotypes, comics, or "primitives." His subservient role in the film *Sanders of the River* (1936), which extolled British imperialism, plagued him as his interest in the African heritage grew. In 1926 he wrote, "There can be no greater tragedy than to forget one's origins and finish despised and hated by the people among whom one grew up. To have that happen would be the sort of thing to make me rise from my grave." Robeson eventually became the first black person in film history to win the right to exercise final approval of his films. He also refused to perform in front of segregated audiences.

Robeson's decision to settle in London in the early 1930s opened up new cultural and political arenas. Socializing with a cosmopolitan community of blacks from England, Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, he would declare with some humor that it was in London that he discovered Africa. Studying at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, Robeson learned two African languages and plunged into the heated world of anticolonial and antifascist

thought. He also wrote a series of essays that became a blueprint for the Negritude movement that emerged in Paris in 1934. He contributed to the study of music by analyzing the similarities in Chinese and African music based on the pentatonic scale. He met future African leaders Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya and Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria, and he was influenced deeply by such political activists as C. L. R. James, the radical Caribbean theorist; William Patterson, the black American trade unionist; and American anarchist Emma Goldman. He developed a profound awareness of his relationship as a black American to residents of the Third World. He participated with some regularity at labor and peace marches in England. He protested British colonialism in Jamaica, spoke at a London rally for Jawaharlal Nehru, the father of Indian independence, performed at benefit concerts for the Spanish Republic, and in 1938 traveled to Spain to sing for Republican troops. He

first visited the Soviet Union in 1934 to meet the Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein. Although Robeson was never a member of the Communist party, and was often misguided about the Soviet Union's own racist and anti-Semitic agenda toward its own colonized peoples, he had close ties to many of the party's leaders and would continue to defend the Soviet Union until his death.

After more than a decade of living in London Robeson returned home in 1939. As soon as he arrived, he gave his support to the labor union movement and sang on radio the now famous egalitarian song "Ballad for Americans," the first lines of which are "Man in white skin can never be free, while his black brother is in slavery." Robeson served on the board of many black cultural, political, and civil rights organizations, including the Council on African Affairs, an American-based organization that distributed information on African struggles for freedom, where he shared the chairmanship with W. E. B. Du Bois. During World War II he fully supported the war effort but did not refrain from protesting against the poll tax, the segregation of American armed forces, and overt racism. He worked for a federal antilynching law and consistently protested the inequality and disparity of class lines in America. "It means so little when a man like me wins some success," Robeson once said. "Where is the benefit when a small class of Negroes makes money and can live well? It may all be encouraging, but it has no deeper significance. I feel this way because I have cousins who can neither read nor write. I have had a chance. They have not. That is the difference." After the war, Robeson, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Bartley Crum, a liberal white lawyer, called for a national conference to secure a federal antilynching law. Robeson also protested the antilabor Taft-Hartley Act and campaigned for Henry Wallace's liberal Progressive party in the 1948 election.

As the Cold War intensified, Robeson found himself severely attacked and isolated in the United States. As early as 1941 the FBI placed him under surveillance, the beginning of years of harassment and denigration, not only because of his alleged communism, but also for his militancy on civil rights. A statement Robeson made at a peace conference in 1949 enraged them: "It is unthinkable that American Negroes would go to war on behalf of those who have oppressed us for generations against a country [the Soviet Union] which in one generation has raised our people to the full dignity of mankind." Deep in the throes of anti-communist hysteria, the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) announced in 1949 its intention to hold investigative hearings on Robeson and on the loyalty of African Americans. White liberals and black liberals alike, fearful of the taint of communism, ostracized him. In 1949, Robeson was supposed to perform at Peekskill, New York, but the concert was disrupted by mobs, which viciously attacked concertgoers. A rescheduled event, guarded by members of several left-wing CIO unions, passed without incident, only because over two thousand people formed a human shield

Every artist, every scientist, must decide now where he stands. He has no alternative. There is no standing above the conflict on Olympian heights. There are no impartial observers. Through the destruction, in certain countries, of the greatest of man's literary heritage, through the propagation of false ideas of racial and national superiority, the artist, the scientist, the writer is challenged. The struggle invades the formerly cloistered halls of our universities and other seats of learning. The battlefield is everywhere. There is no sheltered rear.

—Paul Robeson

around Robeson. On leaving, the audience was attacked by enraged rock-throwing locals. Eleanor Roosevelt issued a statement of outrage. State and local police were reported to have joined the mobs, and a grand jury investigation said that the violence had been provoked by Robeson's previous "unpatriotic" remarks.

Few can withstand such tremendous efforts to secure their silence. This campaign culminated in the withdrawal of Robeson's passport in 1950, preventing him from traveling or performing abroad. Blacklisted by Broadway and Hollywood, by concert halls and record companies, radio and television, his theatrical career was ruined. In 1956, Robeson spoke out against continuing racial injustice and refused to condemn the Soviet Union or answer questions about his membership in the Communist party. Robeson suffered for his beliefs at great personal cost. In 1961, he suffered a nervous breakdown, attempted suicide, and for the rest of his life he experienced severe depression. Despite obtaining his passport again, starring in another production of *Othello*, and publishing *Here I Stand*, an outspoken autobiography written with Lloyd Brown, he seemed to vanish from public life. Young student leaders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) proclaimed at a sixty-seventh birthday celebration for Robeson that "we of SNCC are Paul Robeson's spiritual children. We too have rejected gradualism and moderation." Other civil rights leaders ignored him. Indeed, Paul Robeson's last public appearance was at a benefit dinner for SNCC in 1966.

Paul Robeson was one of the most broadly talented African Americans in the twentieth century. He was a polymath, a scholar, an actor, and a singer. He was the first black male film star, and he was the first African-American intellectual or performer whose career would be destroyed because of his political beliefs. More than any other single performer, however, he made the spirituals—the music that slaves created and that his friend W. E. B. Du Bois called "The Sorrow Songs"—a central part of the canon of American music.

Hold on together, for the day is coming;
hold together if we are to be successful
as we have been in the past. We need
each other, Negroes of America.
—Junius C. Austin

The
African-
American
Century

handsome and elegantly dressed man on Garvey's right.

In 1926, Austin moved to Pilgrim Baptist Church in Chicago. For the next forty-two years, he pursued his social gospel with vigor and verve. When he arrived at the church, its debt stood at one hundred fifty thousand dollars. Within ten years—during the Depression—he liqui-

dated the debt, set up new missions in Africa, built a huge community center, and constructed a gymnasium and housing project. For Austin, the church could not afford to ignore the interlocking evils of racism and economic irregularity. "Slavery! Slavery!" he thundered. "Economic slavery, peonage, and race injustice in general must go," Austin regarded American laissez-faire capitalism as a "relic of 1776" and derided the hypocrisy of a capitalist social order that "clings to the moribund platitude that all men have equal opportunity to acquire and achieve."

People often traveled two hours to fill the twenty-five hundred seats in his church—two and three services every Sunday. His sermons had the intellectual depth of David Walker, the bodily grace of the Nicholas Brothers, and the political passion of the prophet Amos. His music ministry was guided by the gospel legend Thomas Dorsey. His social ministry included support from local Chicago branches of the NAACP, the Urban League, and the Sleeping Car Porters. He also formed one of the first organizations of black aviators in America at his church. He played a crucial role in electing Oscar DePriest to the U.S. Congress—the first black congressman since Reconstruction. Austin's Cooperative Business League, established soon after his arrival in Chicago, was a gallant attempt to galvanize and politicize black class-consciousness.

Austin was a towering figure in the largest institutional presence in the black community—the black church. As Randall K. Burkett rightly notes, his life and work exemplified an "independent, Pan-Africanist and black religious nationalist spirit." He was a visionary and courageous leader—at the grassroots and national levels—and was one of the first black ministers to demonstrate both the economic and political potential of the church.

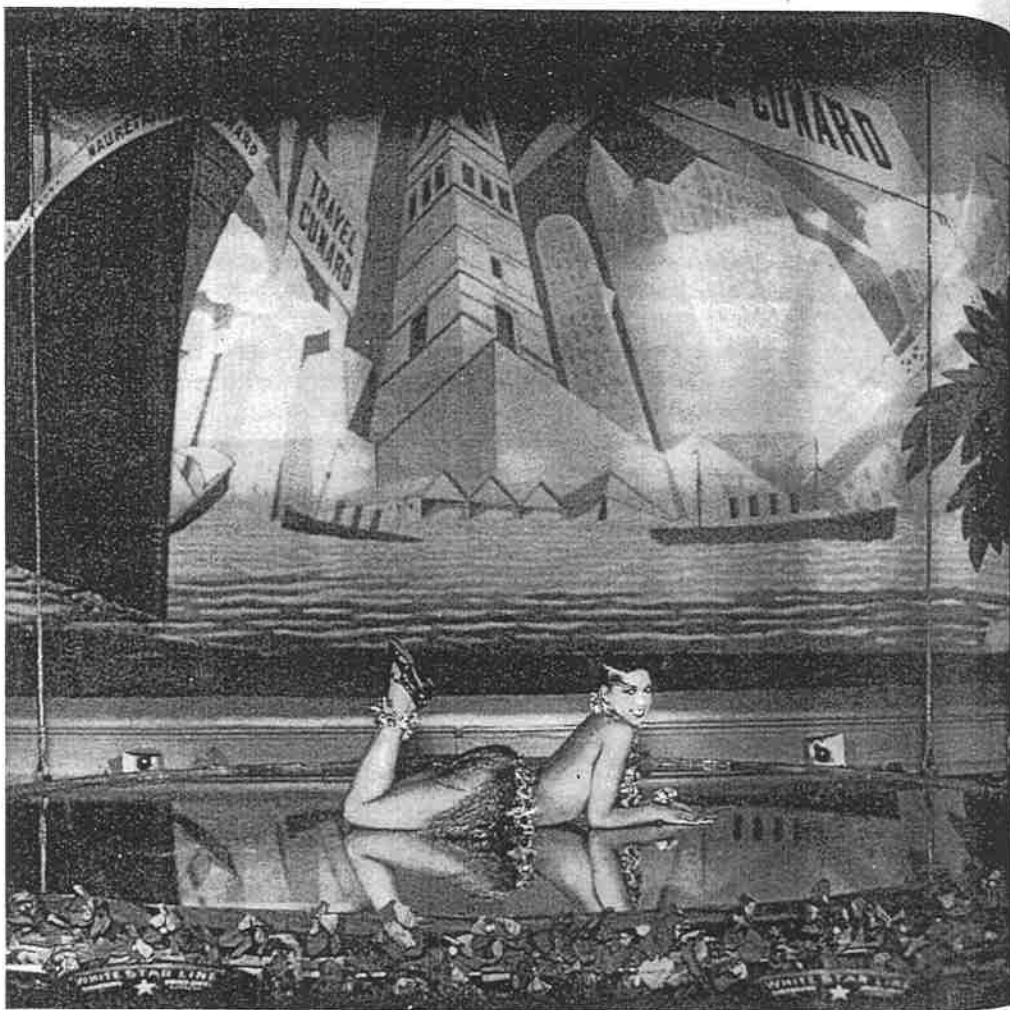
Josephine Baker

The Cleopatra of Jazz
(1906–1975)

How she danced! When Josephine Baker and *La Revue Nègre* stunned the opening-night audience at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées on October 2, 1925, the dazzling young African-American dancer and comic was a long way from home. Born in the slums of East St. Louis in 1906, Baker entered show business at fourteen, when she abandoned her job as a domestic to enter the black vaudeville circuit. With extraordinary energy and a boundless desire to please the audience, she enlivened every show with her crazy antics and frantic dancing. She played the part of the goofy novice on the end of the chorus line, who constantly forgets her steps and messes up the routine. With these early successes, Baker, like many other chorus girls, dreamed of dancing on Broadway.

She first appeared in a traveling road show edition of *Shuffle Along*, featuring Eubie Blake's music and Noble Sissle's lyrics, which became one of the most successful musical comedies in American theater. Two years later, in 1924, Sissle and Blake gave Baker star billing as "the highest paid chorus girl in the world" in their next show, *The Chocolate Dandies*. Although Baker appeared in blackface in the comic role of Topsy Anna, she discarded her comic persona in the musical's "Wedding Finale." As a "deserted female" Baker appeared in a glamorous white satin gown slit alluringly up the left leg. It was this image—the very image of an elegant, composed, polished performer—that Baker would use to conquer the French.

Baker's ticket to Paris came from Caroline Dudley Reagan, a white society woman who wanted to show Parisians "real" Negro music and dance. Reagan assembled what would become known as *La Revue Nègre*, which included composer Spencer Williams and clarinetist Sidney Bechet. Josephine Baker joined the troupe as lead dancer, singer, and comic. When the troupe reached Paris, opening night was ten days away. During that brief time the revue became more "African."



placing less emphasis on tap dancing and spirituals and more on Josephine Baker and her suggestive dancing.

On opening night at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in 1925 the house was packed. When audience excitement and anticipation climaxed, Josephine Baker entered the stage in blackface lips and plaid dungarees, with knees bent, feet spread apart, buttocks thrust out, stomach sucked in, cheeks puffed out, eyes crossed. She appeared to be part animal—some people saw a kangaroo, others a giraffe—part human. Her movements were just as astonishing: shaking, shimmying, writhing like a snake, contorting her torso, all this while emitting strange, high-pitched noises. Then, almost before the audience could comprehend what this apparition might possibly be, she burst off-stage on all fours, stiff-legged, derrière extended into the air, hands spanking the boards as she scuttled into the wings.

When Josephine Baker reappeared for the spectacular finale, set in a Harlem nightclub, the stage belonged to her and her partner, Joe Alex, and their *Danse sauvage*. Their entrance was astonishing, Janet Flanner wrote in *The New Yorker* several years later:

She made her entry entirely nude except for a pink flamingo feather between her limbs; she was being carried upside down and doing the split on the shoulder of a black giant. Midstage, he paused, and with his long fingers holding her basket-wise around the waist, swung her in a slow cartwheel to the stage floor, where she stood like his magnificent discarded burden, in an instant of complete silence. She was an unforgettable female ebony statue.

While the French dance critic André Levinson was seduced along with everyone else by the “black Venus,” he also commented on the inseparability of the music and Baker’s dance movements:

There seemed to emanate from her violently shuddering body, her bold dislocations, her springing movements, a gushing stream of rhythm. It was she who led the spellbound drummer and the fascinated saxophonist in the harsh rhythm of the “blues.” It was as though the jazz, catching on the wing the vibrations of this body, was interpreting word by word its fantastic monologue. The music is born from the dance, and what a dance!

When the curtain fell, some applauded wildly, others booed in derision, just as had the first audience to hear Igor Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du Printemps* performed in

The day I no longer go on
stage will be the day I die.

—Josephine Baker

the same theater in 1913. But defenders and detractors alike shared one
reaction: shock. No one had ever witnessed such unbridled sexuality
on a stage.

Exactly what Baker's allure meant to French culture was the subject of fervent debate both in cafés and in the press. For some, Josephine Baker and *La Revue Nègre* represented a transfusion of new blood and energy for a France stultified by tradition and sorely in need of renewal. For others, who held that the future of civilization itself lay in protecting an untainted French culture from jungle invaders, *La Revue Nègre* foretold the disintegration of centuries of classical cultural attainment, achievements of the mind over the body. Predictably, all this talk boosted box office receipts at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées and guaranteed that the revue would be a success—the irresistible *succès de scandale* that it quickly turned out to be.

Josephine Baker's personal success was as formidable as her exotic stage presence. With her well-oiled skull-hugging coif and her Paul Poiret dresses, she was a model of Parisian chic. Often escorted by artist Paul Colin, who sketched her in his studio as frequently as possible, Baker was invited to all the best parties in the city. Soon, she received an offer from the Folies-Bergère to be the star of their new show, *La Folie du Jour* (Madness of the Day). Within a year, there would be Josephine Baker dolls, costumes, perfumes, and even a hairdressing called "Bakerfix."

When *la Joséphine* opened at the Folies-Bergère in April 1926, she appeared in a venerable French institution. First of the French music halls, the Folies was founded in 1869. Its premier reputation rested on its first-rate, popular artists (such as Yvette Guilbert, Maurice Chevalier, and Mistinguett), its elaborate sets and costumes, and since 1894, its stage nudity—which presented women bare from the waist up standing, like statues, in tableaux. The contrast between their alabaster immobility and Baker's wild dynamism on opening night was as dramatic as Picasso's use of African masks in *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* had been exactly twenty years earlier.

Once again, Baker's entrance was arresting. Baker appeared onstage as the young savage Fatou, in an African jungle with a French explorer asleep at the base of the palm tree and quasinaked black men singing and drumming softly nearby. There she stood, laughing, in the witty, scandalous costume that would make people snicker and nudge each other for years after: a girdle of drooping bananas just waiting to be aroused. And arouse them *la Joséphine* did, while exuding bemused

innuendo. Baker seemed to be a goddess of vitality, Eros itself in blackface. "This girl," wrote critic André Rouverge for the *Mercure de France*, "has the genius to let the body make fun of itself."

Over the next span of years, *la Joséphine* captured the imagination of Paris as few others had done. But an American tour with the Ziegfeld Follies in 1936 did not generate the enthusiastic reception that Baker enjoyed among the French, and when she returned to Paris she took as her second husband a French sugar broker named Jean Lion. Though she soon divorced Lion, she became a French citizen in 1937. During the Second World War Baker was active in the service of the Red Cross and the French Resistance: doing undercover work, entertaining troops in Morocco, and even driving an ambulance. She married orchestra leader Jo Bouillon after the end of the war, when she also received the Croix de Guerre and the Legion of Honor.

During the late forties and fifties Baker made several tours of the United States. Her refusal to play to segregated audiences or stay in segregated hotels, and her vocal support for the civil rights movement, won her renewed admiration in America. Through the early sixties she crossed the Atlantic to give benefit concerts for American civil rights groups and, ultimately, to participate in the 1963 March on Washington. At home in France, Baker's other great passion was her "Rainbow Tribe"—the ten sons and two daughters of different races and nationalities she adopted as an "experiment in brotherhood." However, financial difficulties and poor health made it difficult for her to support the tribe and her lifestyle at her beloved château in the Southwest of France, Les Milandes. Though she benefited from the largesse of friends such as Princess Grace of Monaco and married American artist Robert Brady in 1973, Baker spent years struggling with private poverty that belied her glamorous public persona. Four days after the April 8, 1975, Paris opening of *Josephine*, a show based on her life, she died of a fatal cerebral hemorrhage—fifty years after she arrived in Paris and took it by storm. She was one of the few performers ever to be given a state funeral in France.

Baker embodied both the energy of *le jazz hot* and the elegance of the black Venus. The tension between these two impulses created the spellbinding effect that Josephine Baker exercised in her youth and in her mature years. The ultimate African-American expatriate, she found in France what she was denied in the U.S.: the freedom to be at once erotic and comic, suggestive and playful, intense and insouciant, primitive and civilized.

Louis Armstrong

"Satchmo"

(1901–1971)

He didn't know precisely when he had been born, so he picked July 4, 1900, thereby proclaiming himself a true American for a new century. The recent discovery of a birth record changes his birth date to August 1, 1901, but his true American status remains: More than any other single person, Armstrong made jazz America's music—and America's greatest aesthetic gift to the world. Armstrong's way with a cornet or trumpet was unique. Here was purity and clarity of sound, perfection of tone, exquisite timing, mastery of improvisation, an unsurpassed depth of feeling, unlimited range, wholeness of body, and seemingly unlimited power. Satchmo's creative genius makes him not only the greatest American musician of the century, but perhaps the most innovative and influential twentieth-century musician in the world. Listen to only a few bars of any of his recordings. You will understand the awe with which Duke Ellington remarked that musicians had "never heard anything else like it," or the reason Quincy Jones has said, "Everything comes from Louis."

Armstrong was born, of course, in New Orleans, the cradle of African-American music, where African, European, and Caribbean cultures mingled and changed. He was not a light-skinned, overconfident, musically educated, middle-class Creole. Armstrong brought to the table the black half of the jazz equation, and he summoned his gifts from the most impoverished depths of the black community. He was born in a neighborhood so rough that, in the midst of other poor, crime- and disease-ridden neighborhoods, it was called "The Battlefield." His unmarried mother was a fifteen-year-old washerwoman and part-time prostitute. Armstrong lived with her on the corner of Liberty and Perdido Streets, where the lowest-class black hookers plied their trade. On occasion, young Louis was forced to eat food out of garbage cans. After an arrest for delinquency, a judge sent him to the Colored

Waif's Home. The home boasted a brass band that, critic James Lincoln Collier suggests, "undoubtedly had a certain vitality and rhythmic courage." When the band director handed the twelve-year-old Armstrong a cornet, it had something else.

After his release, Armstrong began to play in the streets when he wasn't at his job delivering coal to the "cribs" of the fifty-cent prostitutes. He was too young to be admitted to Pete Lala's Cabaret, which showcased the hottest jazz bands. But the street women liked him, and if they were between customers they would let him stop and listen to the music inside the cabaret. Armstrong was an extraordinary musician from the very beginning. Edward "Kid" Ory let him sit in, when he was only sixteen, for his cornet player, the fabled Joseph "King" Oliver. Like many New Orleans jazzmen, Armstrong could not read music—though it is unclear whether he believed, with many, that it would spoil his playing. But Armstrong was forced to learn how to read musical scores when he got a job with the more sophisticated Fate Marable's Kentucky Jazz Band, which played on the *Dixie Belle*, a Mississippi River paddleboat. So many of Marable's sidemen became famous that his band was called "the floating conservatoire." While playing on the *Dixie Belle*, whose passengers were all white, Armstrong also learned the critical lesson of how to tailor jazz to white audiences.

July 8, 1922, was a momentous day that changed the course of history. With the closing of New Orleans's red-light district by the U.S. Navy, King Oliver and his Creole Jazz Band followed the momentum of the great migration and moved north to Al Capone's Lincoln Gardens Café in Chicago's black South Side. On that day, at Oliver's request, Armstrong arrived in Chicago to play second cornet in Oliver's band. "We never had to look at each other when we played," Armstrong said of Oliver. "[We were] both thinking the same thing." Still, the talented young horn player was a country bumpkin, who sported a box suit and an unfashionable hairdo. But he had left behind his hometown wife, and Oliver now introduced him to the world. Lil Hardin, Oliver's pianist, had a music degree from Fisk, and immediately saw Armstrong's potential. She bought him new clothes, changed his hair, taught him how to act, talked him into leaving Oliver, and married him. The rest, as they say, is jazz history.

Armstrong became known as the best player of the new "hot" music when he broke with Oliver and moved to New York to join the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra. In 1925, however, he returned to Chicago to lead a series of spectacular



recordings. His sessions with the pickup bands that came to be known as the Hot Five and the Hot Seven changed jazz history. In recordings such as "Muggles," "Cornet Chop Suey," "Potato Head Blues," and "Muskkrat Rumble," Armstrong revolutionized the role of the soloist, making it the focal point of any jazz performance or recording. According to legend, in a February 1926 recording session Armstrong dropped the lyric sheet to "Heebie Jeebies" and was forced to improvise his lines without words. Naturally, he imitated the sounds of a horn, and scat singing was born. Although many consider the story to be more myth than fact, Armstrong is credited with inventing the technique that remains central to all jazz vocalists today.

By the end of the 1920s, recordings such as "(What Did I Do To Be So) Black and Blue" and "I Can't Give You Anything But Love" gained Armstrong more popular recognition than had the influential Hot Five and Hot Seven

recordings. After singing "Ain't Misbehavin'" from the orchestra pit of the Broadway show *Hot Chocolates*, he was catapulted onto the stage and into the public eye. Although he continued to perform in serious jazz concerts with fellow musicians like Sidney Bechet, his work as a vocalist and entertainer became more commercial in the 1930s and 1940s. He appeared in over fifty films, including *Rhapsody in Black and Blue* and *Pennies from Heaven*, and became the first African American to have a major sponsored radio show. Louis Armstrong was a star.

Much later, in the 1960s, he recorded such popular tunes as "Hello, Dolly" (which pushed the Beatles off the charts), "Mack the Knife," "Blueberry Hill," and "What a Wonderful World." The public loved Armstrong, but some music critics believed he sacrificed his art for popular acclaim. Those in between said there never could be enough applause to compensate for a deprived childhood. Not unrelated was the criticism that he grinned and fawned and played the fool for white people. Amid all the controversy, Armstrong's music survives and prevails. He still occupies the spotlight, a handkerchief in his right hand, blowing those clear round notes nobody had ever heard before, or has since. Always at ease in the idiom of popular song, Armstrong has had a profound impact on vocalists from Bing Crosby to Billie Holiday to Ella Fitzgerald to Frank Sinatra.

After struggling with ill health, Armstrong died of heart failure on July 6, 1971. His fourth wife, Lucille Wilson, to whom he was married for nearly thirty years, continued to live in the modest home she and her husband bought in the Corona neighborhood of Queens, New York. Since her death the house has been maintained as a historic archive by Queens College of the City of New York.

Armstrong knew he came from a tradition. "Before my time," he once said, "the name was levee camp music, then in New Orleans we called it ragtime. The fantastic music you hear on radio today, used to hear it way back in the old sanctified churches." Despite his modesty, he was not unaware that he was contributing to that tradition. "We all do 'do, re, mi,'" he said, "but you have to find the other notes yourself." After Armstrong, the art of finding it yourself—improvisation—has remained at the heart of jazz and all American music.

Man, if you gotta ask, you'll never know.

—Louis Armstrong, when asked to define jazz

A. Philip Randolph

Union Man
(1889–1979)

Asa Philip Randolph has been called the prophet of the civil rights movement. As a union leader, magazine editor, and grassroots activist, he campaigned for decades for economic equality. A master strategist when it came to collective bargaining and the power of nonviolent protest, his influence extended from the Pullman porters in the 1930s to the 1963 March on Washington.

Born in 1889, Randolph grew up in Florida, the son of a preacher. After graduating as class valedictorian in 1907 from Cookman Institute, a segregated high school, he worked a string of menial jobs. In 1911 he moved to New York. Good jobs were hard to find there as well, and he worked as an elevator operator while continuing his education at City College and pursuing his first career dream: acting. In the end, his rich, deep voice would grace not theater stages but union halls and political rallies.

Randolph's political education began in Harlem, which was bursting with new migrants from the Caribbean and the rural South. He joined the Socialist party, and in 1914 met Chandler Owen, a student at Columbia University whose politics mirrored his own. At first, the two spread their message by means of street-corner oratory. In 1917 they founded the *Messenger*, a radical magazine whose editorials took unpopular stands on a variety of topics, such as urging African Americans to oppose America's entry into World War I.

Economic justice was at the heart of Randolph's philosophy, and the year 1925 saw the start of his struggle for it. His opposition was the Pullman Company, which ran the dining and sleeping cars on railroads across the nation. Pullman prided itself on its elegant black porters, some of them college men and leaders in their communities, who performed acts of menial servitude for white customers. For years Pullman had ignored the porters' efforts to improve their working conditions, rec-

tify a racist pay scale, and obtain the opportunity for career advancement. An official Pullman "union," founded by the company, effectively squelched real change.

Attracted by Randolph's political views, his reputation as a fighter, his formidable skills as a speaker, and his independence from Pullman (and therefore his freedom from direct economic reprisals), a group of porters asked him to represent them in their efforts. The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) was launched in August 1925 and faced immediate opposition not only from Pullman brass, who spied on meetings and threatened and fired workers, but from many established African-American leaders. Black anti-BSCP sentiments stemmed from various sources: the bitter history of racist white unions, which had convinced some that management was a better friend than labor; the position of Pullman, in the dismal context of the times, as the largest and best employer of black men; and Randolph's own political background, which sparked fears of communist co-optation of black politics and activism.

Randolph waged a ten-year campaign to win official recognition of the BSCP, which in 1937 negotiated its first contract with Pullman. His growing influence as a labor leader carried him into his next arena, fighting for increased opportunities for black workers nationwide. After a stint as president of the National Negro Congress, Randolph took on the White House. Together with Walter White of the NAACP and T. Arnold Hill of the National Urban League, he pressured President Franklin D. Roosevelt to integrate both the growing defense industry, which was gearing up in advance of U.S. entry into World War II, and the nation's military. When Roosevelt waffled, Randolph threatened a march on Washington in the summer of 1941, a mass demonstration in support of equal opportunity. The threat worked in part; Roosevelt did not desegregate the armed forces, but he did sign Executive Order 8802, which integrated jobs within the war industry and established a Fair Employment Practices Committee.

Randolph continued pressuring government to integrate the military. In 1947 he established the Committee Against Jim Crow in Military Service and Training, which asked blacks to refuse to register for the draft or to refuse to report if draft-

Salvation for a race, nation, or class must come from within. Freedom is never granted; it is won. Justice is never given; it is exacted. Freedom and justice must be struggled for by the oppressed of all lands and races, and the struggle must be continuous.

—A. Philip Randolph

1940–1949

ed. The committee's campaign of nonviolent civil disobedience, along with Randolph's persistent pressure, finally met with success when President Harry S. Truman signed Executive Order 9981 in July 1948, which desegregated the armed forces. Randolph continued his union work, agitating against racism within the American Federation of Labor, the BSCP's parent union. When the AFL merged with the Council of Industrial Organizations to form the AFL-CIO in 1955, Randolph became the federation's vice president, a post he held until 1968.

Serving as a bridge between black leaders of different and sometimes contentious camps, in 1963 Randolph revived his March on Washington movement. He asked Bayard Rustin to assist him in organizing a massive demonstration of African Americans seeking equality and freedom in both the political and economic arenas. Coming after a decade of battling for civil rights, the 1963 March on Washington focused on political issues—mainly segregation and voting—but Randolph saw to it that its official name included the phrase “jobs and freedom.” The two were inextricably tied together, in his view. On August 28, 1963, Randolph saw his vision realized: the largest demonstration of the civil rights movement featured Martin Luther King, Jr., delivering his “I Have a Dream” speech to a peaceful crowd of 250,000 and ended with a visit to the White House. Within the next two years President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

His advancing years slowed but did not stop Randolph, who founded the A. Philip Randolph Institute, a training and employment organization based in Harlem. He was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1964. He died in 1979. Many who came of age after the civil rights movement have forgotten his influence and his legacy—but we honor the memory of this “messenger” of economic and racial justice. Randolph saw that civil and economic rights were



inseparable. He left us a powerful message: “Salvation for a race, nation, or class must come from within. Freedom is never granted; it is won. Justice is never given; it is exacted. Freedom and justice must be struggled for by the oppressed of all lands and races, and the struggle must be continuous.”