

Name _____ Date _____

Harlem Renaissance

“We Born Again”

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. After slavery ended, millions of African-Americans moved from the rural south to large cities in the north. They were seeking better economic opportunities and an escape from racial terrorism and segregation. This movement was called the Great Migration. As demand for industrial labor increased, many African-Americans took factory jobs in cities like Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia and New York. With these jobs came a new black middle class.

Notes

During the Great Migration, many African-Americans settled in Harlem, a neighborhood in New York City. At the time, most landlords refused to rent to black people. But when an economic downturn in the 1890s led to high vacancy rates in the area, property owners started selling and renting to African-Americans. By 1930, the population of Harlem was more than 70% black.

2. New political ideas that focused on the African-American experience greatly impacted the Harlem Renaissance. W.E.B. Du Bois was a sociologist who developed the theory of double consciousness. Du Bois described this as the split that many African-Americans felt between their black identity and their American identity. Even though most African-Americans had been born and raised in the US, the discrimination they faced made many feel like outcasts. Double consciousness was later explored by many black artists and writers. Du Bois was an early supporter of the Harlem Renaissance. However, he was also concerned that negative depictions of African-American life through art or literature could feed the racist views of whites.

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Another influential figure was an activist named Marcus Garvey. He wanted African-Americans to take pride in their heritage and encouraged them to return to their ancestral homelands in Africa. Garvey’s ideas were very controversial. Most African-Americans considered the US their home and did not want to move to an unfamiliar place. But the black pride that Garvey promoted remained an important part of the Harlem Renaissance.

3. When the Harlem Renaissance began, just after World War I, the economy was very strong. People were more liberal and spent more time and money on the arts and entertainment. Though racism was still widespread, art, music and literature created by African-Americans became popular among black and white communities alike. For the very first time in the US, black artists and intellectuals were able to flourish. Many made a living from their work and were acknowledged for their contributions.

Some say the Harlem Renaissance officially began with the 1921 musical *Shuffle Along*. The acclaimed show was written, produced and performed entirely by African-Americans. Many of the actors were veterans of the Vaudeville scene. *Shuffle Along* brought jazz to Broadway and kickstarted the careers of many of its stars. It also introduced white New Yorkers to black music and culture. The show was so popular that it was said to have caused traffic jams every night outside the theater.

4. Literature was at the forefront of the Harlem Renaissance. Writers centered their work around black lives and experiences. Many works included commentary on race and racism. Langston Hughes, one of the most famous authors of the Harlem Renaissance, is best known for his poetry about working class African-American life. Music also informed Hughes' work. He wrote many poems influenced by the distinct styles of jazz and blues. Novelist Zora Neale Hurston found inspiration in African-American folklore and often used black vernacular in her dialogue. Others, like Claude McKay, stuck to more traditional literary styles like sonnets. McKay wrote extensively about life in Jamaica, which he contrasted with the pain and difficulty of being black in the United States.

There was not one single style or political ideal behind the Harlem Renaissance. The movement encompassed African-American expression of all kinds. As a result, many black authors rejected the pressures to appeal to white audiences.

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5. Lots of musicians got their start during the Harlem Renaissance. Many people also refer to this era as the Jazz Age. Jazz and blues, invented by African-Americans in the south, became hugely popular during the Harlem Renaissance. These genres were new and exciting. Musicians like Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong drew huge audiences at popular clubs every night of the week. Singers like Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday brought unique sounds to the music scene. Smith's strong, deep voice impressed both live audiences and radio listeners. She became known as the Empress of Blues. Holiday was a legendary improviser, and what she lacked in formal training, she made up for in her distinct, rough vocals and emotional performances.

Despite their popularity, black musicians were still treated poorly throughout the country. Many performed in clubs or theaters for exclusively white audiences. Entertainers who toured in the south were forced to stay in segregated hotels and eat at segregated restaurants. They did not receive any of the privileges that white celebrities enjoyed.