Cotton Club

The Harlem cabaret is perhaps the most fabled intersection of the jazz age and the Harlem Renaissance, and no cabaret was more fabled than the Cotton Club—the "aristocrat of Harlem—at the northeast corner of Lenox Avenue and 142 Street. Between its opening in September 1923 and its relocation downtown in February 1936, the Cotton Club would boost the early careers of Edith Wilson, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Aida Ward, Adelaide Hall, Earl "Snakehips" Tucker, Mantan Moreland, Ethel Waters, Lena Horne, the Nicholas Brothers, and the bands of Duke Ellington (in 1927-1931 and 1933), Cab Calloway (in 1930-1933), and Jimmie Lunceford (in 1934-1936). As famous for its exclusionary racial policies as for its fast-stepping revues, the Cotton Club embodied many of the contradictions of the popular Harlem Renaissance; its cultural meaning was shaped by the combined forces of Prohibition economics, postwar trends in musical theater, black performance traditions and innovations, white patronage, and the mass media.

The Douglas Casino—a large, underused dance hall space resting atop a movie house—had been built at 644 Lenox Avenue in 1918. It was sold in 1920 to the former heavyweight champion Jack Johnson, refurbished as an intimate supper club seating 400, and renamed the Club Deluxe. In 1923, the struggling club was resold to Manhattan's most powerful underworld figure, Owen "Owney" Madden, who was then in prison, having been convicted of manslaughter. Madden had made his fortune on sales of "Madden's No. 1" beer during the national experiment with enforced sobriety; he also owned a number of other nightclubs in Manhattan, including the Stork Club and the Silver Slipper. Initially, most of the personnel of the Cotton Club—including cooks, waiters, busboys, the management, and entertainers—were imported from Chicago. George "Big Frenchy" DeMange managed the club while Walter Brooks, who had brought Shuffle Along to Broadway in 1921, served as front. Lew Leslie produced the first floor shows; and Andy Preer's Missourians, renamed the Cotton Club Syncopators, provided music. Madden himself rarely visited the newly baptized Cotton Club, and although federal authorities padlocked the club's doors for three months in 1925 for forty-four violations of the Volstead Act, he faced little trouble from the police before his voluntary return to Sing Sing and semiretirement in July 1932.

Madden spared little expense in creating an exclusive, titillating uptown destination for a well-heeled downtown crowd. The club was renovated to fit 700, with seating surrounding the dance and show floor that extended from the horseshoe-shaped stage. Joseph Urban, Florenz Ziegfeld's celebrated set and costume designer, redeigned the interior in what Singer describes as "a brazen riot of African jungle motifs, Southern stereotypology, and lurid eroticism" (1992, 100). The gangsters themselves were an attraction; DeMange was expected to be present and visible. Admission to the club cost $2.50 and, except for Madden's beer, drinks were expensive. Strict decorum and studied elegance were expected of both staff and customers. Shows (generally three per night) were scheduled to allow performers at other locations to drop in after work; Sunday night became "Celebrity Night," with everyone from Jimmy Durante to New York's mayor Jimmy Walker asked to take a bow and perhaps do a number. New floor shows opened twice each year and were budgeted to rival Ziegfeld's Follies (indeed, some—such as Lew Leslie's long-running Blackbirds of 1928—would eventually find their way to Broadway). Following the closing in 1925, Harry Block replaced Brooks as front, Herman Stark began a fifteen-year run as stage manager, Dan Healey replaced Leslie as floor-show producer, and Jimmy McHugh composed the music (McHugh was joined in 1927 by the lyricist Dorothy Fields). Healey established the formula: a top-billed singer or comedian; specialty acts in eccentric dances and "adult" songs; a chorus line attired in elaborate, or elaborately brief, costumes; and behind it all top-notch jazz—particularly once Duke Ellington's Washingtonians became the house band in December 1927 (some commentators remember it as an offer the band couldn't refuse). At the Cotton Club, where he had to write not only dance tunes, but also overtures, transitions, accompaniments, and "jungle" effects, Ellington developed much of his distinctive orchestral composition style.

A key innovation in creating the Cotton Club's exclusive atmosphere was Madden's seemingly paradoxical introduction of a strict color line into the heart of Harlem. In establishing a whites-only policy regarding customers, Madden was following the practice at Connie's Inn, a rival Harlem club favored by moneyed whites. At the Cotton...
Club, the concept was extended to the division of labor, creating a strict divide between the whites who ran the club and produced, wrote, and choreographed its shows, and the blacks who cooked, waited and bussed tables, and entertained. Women in the chorus line faced their own color bar; they were essentially conceived as part of the club's decor, and they were expected to be "tall, tan, and terrific": at least 5 feet 6 inches, no darker than a light olive tone, and under twenty-one. Then in 1927 the Columbia Broadcasting System, one of the emerging radio networks, began to broadcast from the Cotton Club. By 1930, half-hour programs might be broadcast over several stations and networks five or six nights a week, giving bandleaders a chance to build a national- and mixed- audience and greatly increasing their opportunities to tour and record. In deference to Ellington's new clout and his expressed regret that friends and family of the performers were unable to see them play, the club relaxed its whites-only policy for customers, at least for light-skinned celebrities willing to sit near the kitchen.

Though the Cotton Club experienced a number of changes in the early 1930s, the Depression had trouble catching up with it. For the revue of spring 1930, Brown Sugar —Sweet but Unrefined, Cab Calloway's orchestra replaced Ellington's, and the composer Harold Arlen and the lyricist Ted Koehler replaced McHugh and Fields, who were then (like Ellington) leaving for Hollywood. However, the repeal of Prohibition and the increasingly visible poverty of Harlem eventually created insurmountable problems for many mob-run uptown clubs. The Cotton Club pulled up stakes after the close of its show for spring 1936 and reopened in September at 200 West 48 Street and Broadway, the former site of the Palais Royale and the future site of the Latin Quarter. After four years of high midtown rents, the rising cost of mounting elaborate floor shows, changing tastes in jazz, and renewed federal attention to income tax evasion among New York's nightclubs, the Cotton Club closed its doors permanently on 10 June 1940.

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See also: Blackbirds; Fields, Dorothy; Harlem: 3- Entertainment; Johnson, John Arthur "Jack"; Leslie, Lew; Madden, Owen Vincent; Nightclubs; Nightlife; Organized Crime; specific entertainers

Further Reading


Sample Entries

The Cotton Club was a New York City nightclub located in Harlem on 142nd Street and Lenox Avenue from 1923 to 1935, then briefly in the midtown Theater District from 1936 to 1940. The club operated most notably during the United States' era of Prohibition. The club was a whites-only establishment, but featured many of the most popular black entertainers of the era, including musicians Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington, Jimmie Lunceford, Chick Webb, Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Fats Waller, Willie group of companies Cotton club. Childhood. Cosmetic. Health. Household. Hygiene. Phone: +7 (495) 730-07-77 www.cottonclub.ru. Address: 143985, Moscow region, Balashikha, Sobolikha village, 1st Lipovyi per., 4. About company. About us. History of the company. Mission and values. Awards.