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Purely American: How Art from Harlem and Broadway Shaped American Culture

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Purely American: How Art from Harlem and Broadway Shaped American Culture

The United States of America is a relatively young country, if you consider its foundations established in the late eighteenth century. For this reason, the art forms of visual art, theatre, and literature were already well-developed by the time America had established a unique voice. Although their beginnings were segregated by race, socioeconomic status, popularity, and a couple of streets in New York City (see Figure 1), two musical styles stick out as entirely American art forms: the Broadway musical and jazz. While Harlem Renaissance writers and artists argued for a separate but valued black culture, the unique American art form of the Broadway musical was gaining popularity and clout in the global artistic sphere. These two dissimilar music styles of jazz and storybook musical evolved from loosely black and white backgrounds respectively but remain distinctly *American* art forms which have shaped American culture.

Langston Hughes's poetry stands out among Harlem writers as offering most valuable insight into how popular jazz culture became in the modern age and how African American artists felt about whites' involvement. Hughes moved to Harlem early in the 1920s for a uniquely black atmosphere in which to contribute his gifts to the culture (Graham). To his disappointment, white Americans responded by writing off esteemed black artists as an undereducated and separate lower class and by demeaning them as mere entertainment while invading on the African American jazz scene. "Visitors to the Black Belt" and "I, Too" exemplify how Hughes saw the forced estrangement. In the first, he writes:

You can talk about
Across the railroad tracks—
 To me it's *here*
 On this side of the tracks.
 You can talk about
Up in Harlem—
 To me it's *here*
 In Harlem.

 Who're you, outsider?
 Ask me who am I. (“Visitors...” 1-8, 17-18)

His emphases in this section on the directions, *across*, *here*, *up*, and the pronouns of *you*, *me*, and *I* create an almost perfect seesaw effect between each line. The personal pronouns go back and forth, but never appear in the same line—the whites and blacks never touch—which creates a parallel structure. The “outsider” whites he is talking about here who are trying to create distance while also reaping the benefits of spectacular music from the other “side of the tracks” do not understand Harlem life in its black reality. Hughes and his contemporaries were the most qualified to say what life was really like in the center of the jazz community, so the last line of the poem establishes his and other African American artists' worth to be noticed. He displays this exact theme of equivalent quality in “I, Too” when he says, “I, too, sing America. . . . I, too, am America” (Hughes 1, 18). His song, his voice in literature, is personal (due to the personal pronoun, *I*, instead of *we*), and this poem is a cry for attention. African American authors were not egocentric or selfish in demanding recognition; their talents in poetry belonged to the African American race, but they also belonged in the American literature canon as a whole. Blurring the

boundaries, though, of race and what it means to be American, brings up the issue of what DuBois called *double consciousness*; Berndt Ostendorf states that “whites' integrationist gesture. . . belittles the 'wounds' of black socialization and embezzles the 'bow' of black cultural resources” (19). In other words, America would not be complete without voices from every people group that associates itself as being American. Once whites *embezzle* a form of art so separate from their own, it will cease to inspire for the purposes it was meant to achieve—offering a solace and freedom to the African Americans facing segregation and racism. Defaulting to the status quo, in this case to what the white audience could own, stifles the outlying voices, but those voices are the very sparks most needed to create an incredible, rather than mediocre, distinctive American sound.

While arguing for recognition, Hughes's “Note to Commercial Theatre” elucidates how the white's flighty involvement in black culture was not welcome. He specifically contrasts Harlem with Broadway and Hollywood in the first stanza:

You've taken my blues and gone—
 You sing 'em on Broadway
 And you sing 'em in Hollywood Bowl,
 And you mixed 'em up with symphonies
 And you fixed 'em
 So they don't sound like me. (“Note to Commercial...” 1-6)

As Maryemme Graham points out, “jazz represented America's first original music form,” and its success in light of the fact that it developed during a long, tense era out of *black* neighborhoods through the genius of *black* minds is astounding (“The New Negro Renaissance”). The recognition their music received gave a rightful boost to African American pride in what they had accomplished in creating *as Americans*; but “the black experience. . . proved a fruitful area

for white writers” (Bigsby 238). Hughes's comment on this 'black experience' was that “the white 'black' artists dealing in Negro material have certainly been financially more successful than any of us real Negroes have ever been;” his frustration with the theft of this distinguishing accomplishment, then, seems justified (Bigsby 238). The last lines quoted above demonstrate that the whites believed they were doing something to enhance what they thought was interesting but still needed improvement to conform more to their own lives. However, once they “fixed 'em,” the lines ceased to mean anything; Harlem writers almost never wrote to apply to white culture, but of course, the white population could not be satisfied without claiming the soulful art for themselves.

Along this same vein, jazz was not merely being listened to by whites, but also being stolen and taken to Broadway. A phrase came about to describe the racket of cheap pianos being pounded all around Broadway and Harlem: Tin Pan Alley (“Tin Pan Alley”). An article by the Tribeca Film Institute explains that this “music was urban music, and its initial popularity relied on sounds and themes that were perceived by white audiences as connected to African American life in the United States” (“Broadway and...”). The reason this music became so widely known, though, was that European immigrants, especially Jews, took the sounds they heard to Broadway and popularized it. Tin Pan Alley, with its more ragtime feel, “along with the early jazz of New Orleans, Chicago, and New York, . . . came to define 'American' on the musical front” (“Broadway and...”). Strictly speaking, whites did not stick closely to only Western influence in their production, but recognized a special quality in sounds from non-Caucasian areas; therefore, what made American music distinct relied entirely upon African American influence.

As jazz music gained popularity within and beyond the vague boundaries of Harlem and other African American communities, jazz concerts became a trendy pastime for whites. A popular venue called the Cotton Club was opened by a white gangster named Madden “with the

idea of creating a 'stylish plantation environment' for its entirely white clientele” (Winter). In the first half of the twentieth century, though, blacks had to fight for desegregation in theaters where *black artists* were performing. Even into the 1950s, at Norman Granz's show *Jazz at the Philharmonic*, “blacks were, at best, seated in the balcony” (Hentoff). Granz took action against this by hiring his own ticket sellers and removing *White Only* and *Black Only* signs from restrooms, but he still received backlash from white members of the audience (Hentoff). The white concert-goers were perfectly content listening to and appreciating African Americans on stage, but they still could not imagine sitting next to one.

Such treatment discouraged black involvement in the innovative music style that was supposed to be their own and rightfully infuriated them to make steps toward desegregation. Whites felt such entitlement to this form of entertainment that a police officer was quoted as saying to Duke Ellington: “If you'd been a white man, Duke, you'd have been a great musician” (qtd. in Hentoff). This ridiculous comment not only shows immense racism, but exemplifies the mindset of whites that blacks were inherently inferior. What this officer did not realize or think of before he spoke is that Ellington could never have become the talent he was in the genre of jazz had he not grown up with the black culture that developed the style; America needed, and still needs, authentic African American contribution. The United States is unique from other countries in that many cultures are represented within her borders. The blending of imported practices, beliefs, and styles is essential to the formation of a uniquely American culture, in place of independent European, African, Asian, Eastern, and Latino cultures all in one place—Americans do not have to be white to be great.

On the other side of the music sector in New York City, artists and musicians on Broadway were developing a second uniquely American form of art: the genre of the storybook musical. As seen on the map below, the two sections rested relatively close to one another in the

sprawling metropolis of New York City, but they were home to distinctly different people groups and cultures. As I will discuss below, Broadway and the surrounding area was a place fore ostentatiousness, beauty, and lively community, whereas the African Americans in Harlem were

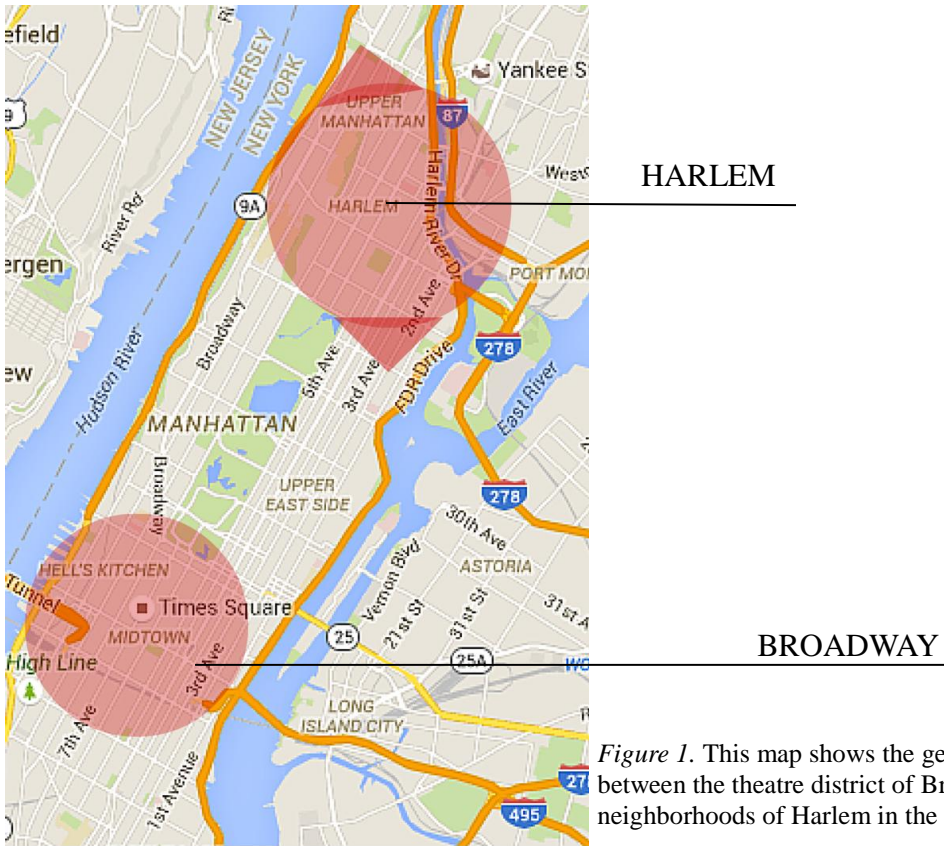


Figure 1. This map shows the geographical relationship between the theatre district of Broadway and the neighborhoods of Harlem in the early 20th century.

facing the struggle to include themselves under “the definition of U.S. national culture” (Hutchinson 11). Theater had involved music in various forms for centuries, whether in operatic form or merely an instrumental background to create mood, but Broadway in the early twentieth century saw the particular blend of play and large-scale musical numbers present-day people recognize as the musical. The playwright Florenz Ziegfeld created the first of these in his huge production of *Show Boat*¹—he drew themes from George M. Cohen, a former writer and choreographer, making magnificent patriotism a recognizable factor of Broadway productions (Mroczka). Oscar Hammerstein worked with Ziegfeld in composing the music for *Show Boat*,

1 *Show Boat* “is the story of the Hawks family and their showboat troop of actors aboard the Cotton Blossom floating theater” (“Show Boat”).

but afterwards collaborated with Jerome Kern, Richard Rodgers, and others on productions like *Oklahoma!*² and *Big River*³. Hammerstein and his compatriots organized “the scene-song scenario: plot action capped by a song to delineate character; blackout; lights up on new set; further plot action; another song; and so on” (Mordden 107). This format is seen in popular musicals and films like *Wicked* or *Singin' in the Rain*, and even Disney movies like *The Lion King* and *Frozen*; what now seems obvious and simple in creating a fluid plot with music was received with massive success and acceptance by the American public.

Nearly a century later, America is a bit older, segregation is happily less of a problem, and what it means to be American is solidly developed. Where these American ideals came from, though, can be traced back to the two musical forms we have been discussing: the musical and jazz. The former style has produced in American culture what Bob Perkins calls “celebratory American spirit” (“Newsies' and More...”). He differentiates this kind of performance from an opera, which did not originate in America and maintains a different aesthetic and objective (Perkins). The distinction lies within the chorus numbers, “singing and dancing to multiple part harmonies in some kind of triumphant tone of conviction or celebration” (Perkins). Not only is the excitement and fervor for life and opportunity a component of Americanism and Capitalism, but merely the party mentality also resembles American enthusiasm. Especially in the first storybook musicals like *Show Boat* and *Oklahoma!*, there are scenes with picnics and barn dances, flirting young couples and passionate squalls—the chorus is the *community*, and “the spell [they cast] on an American audience is as much a part of [their] popularity as the songs”

2 Rodger's and Hammerstein's first musical, *Oklahoma!*, is “based on the 1931 play 'Green Grow the Lilacs,' by Lynn Riggs,” and centers around “Laurey. . . a headstrong farm girl and the woman with whom both cowboy Curly and farm hand Jud have fallen in love. When she plays hard-to-get with earnest Curly and instead accepts dangerous Jud’s invitation to the upcoming box social, tensions rise between the men and capture the interest of the whole town” (“Oklahoma!”).

3 *Big River* is a musical adaptation of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The stage production follows the same plot as Huck runs away down the river and gets involved in all sorts of adventures with a runaway slave, Jim, and Huck's best friend, Tom Sawyer (“Big River”).

(Mordden 106). An example of the type of spectacular numbers found in early musicals is the number Cap'n Andy's Ballyhoo from *Show Boat*. The song, with stage directions and musical cues, begins:

(The band is heard in the distance)

BOY

Here comes the Show Boat parade!

(The CROWD gathers, shouting and waving their hats. Some coloured children run on, leaping, dancing, throwing their hats in the air. CAPTAIN ANDY enters from stage R., with a girl on each arm, behind him the brass band and balance of the troupe and followers. He finishes stage C.)

GIRLS

(presenting candy, etc., to ANDY)

Captain Andy, Captain Andy,

Here's your lemon cake and homemade candy.

Quince preserve and apple brandy;

Mama sends her best regards to you. ("Cap'n Andy's...")

Not only are the members of the chorus having a parade with raucous band music, but the crowd, too is enjoying itself, yelling and jumping, involving themselves in the revelry. Furthermore, the town commemorates an officer, therefore privileging patriotism, while also bringing him into a familiar zone. The girls send their mothers' regards, signaling their fondness and acquaintance with Captain Andy, and even extend homemade treats. Such a scene was often demonstrated in real-life, small-town America, and even continues today to some extent. This event would be

recognized by nearly every member of an American audience, calling up reminiscences of childhood or a *simpler time* in our country and filling him or her with feelings of delight.

As popular as these groundbreaking shows were, there is a bit of controversy between critics' ideas on whether or not whites' portrayal of black characters was lacking and misrepresentative or innovative and meaningful. Mordden argues that attempts to incorporate realistic scenarios surrounding African American life were not the main focus, as “*Show Boat* was about Americans, not race conflict” (110). He asserts that only in the 1970s with productions like *Raisin*⁴, a musical adaptation of the first colored play on Broadway by Lorraine Hansberry, was black culture displayed accurately in a storybook musical that was written by an African American (Mordden 327). Specifically during the Roaring 20s, Broadway producers chose to reflect society's free-and-easy, frivolous attitude; serious subjects were avoided entirely or made into a joke to keep the audience light-hearted, but John Jones presents a different argument for off-Broadway shows (68). He states that, although the majority of blacks could not afford to attend shows, “the African American musicals of the 1920s produced some positive changes in employment and income, and, for black audience members, more equal treatment with whites” (Jones 68). Jones does concede, however, in stating that popular African American shows like *Shuffle Along*⁵ were written and produced by whites and were not given stage space except for off-Broadway theaters (69). Afro-American presence could not be ignored, especially due to jazz's mainstream popularity, but Broadway underhandedly kept blacks out of the limelight.

4 *Raisin* is the musical adaptation of *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry, and focuses on Walter Younger and his mother [as they] struggle over how best to use his late father's insurance money. Walter hopes to use it to open a liquor store and mother Lena is eager to move her family out of Chicago's black ghetto” (“Raisin...”).

5 The plot of the all-black casted show, *Shuffle Along*, “[surrounds] a run for mayor by two men, with the loser taking on the role as police chief. As the comedy musical unfolds, a do-gooder named Harry Walton steps and and removes both men from the scene, claiming the love interest in the process” (Taylor).

Such misrepresentation did not matter, though, because, throughout the twentieth century, the Broadway-going audience was made up mostly of middle-class whites, as oftentimes blacks were too poor to attend (Jones 68). This reality stands in stark contrast to the monopolized jazz industry like the Cotton Club, but further emphasizes the double standards of whites capitulating to being entertained by blacks, but not allowing their fellow African Americans a seat in the audience. This proves that whites accepted blacks' contribution to the American art scene, but still refused to give them the same rights as Americans.

Despite this double standard, jazz established its place as an American product, but as the contrast to such cheerful Americanism. Even before the twentieth century, African American music in the form of the spiritual “captured the widespread attention of the nation” as Americans tried to find their own voice (“The American Art Song...”). Just as the spiritual developed out of the blacks' struggle through years of slavery, jazz evolved out of spiritual influences and the ache of segregation and racism. No less a voice than the American storybook musical, jazz encompasses the heart and soul of America through the lens of abused minorities. The spirit of jazz even bolstered the Civil Rights movement of the mid-twentieth century. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stated that jazz was “America's triumphant music,” and on introducing the jazz musician Wynton Marsalis said that his presence was to “illustrate that American democracy and America's music share the same tenets and embody the same potential for change, hope and renewal” (qtd. in Hentoff). Furthermore, in current society, “the social conditions facing American popular music, especially rap, are analogous to those faced by jazz music;” the music of Harlem is still impactful to those yearning for equality today (Phillipp). When one compares Hughes's poems to Ziegfeld's lyrics, one can detect dissimilar tones—the former abused and frustrated, the latter lighthearted and festive. Readers can assume Hughes and his contemporaries

longed for an age in which they could enjoy frivolous picnics or parades, but their realities did not allow for such freedom.

After the golden age of the musicals had passed, the 1960s and 70s took a darker turn. America had seen national failures, disgraces, and tragedies with the assassinations of prominent leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and John F. Kennedy; the wasteful calamity of Vietnam; and the hardships experienced through the Civil Rights, Women's Rights, and Gay Rights Movements on American soil (*Blood*). The quaint, happy endings of musicals like *Oklahoma!* no longer proved realistic or helpful in an age with so much pain. The dividing racial conflicts between whites and blacks were being forced into the American public's view, and the theatre was responding by creating content that gave attention to the issues. Melanie Blood uses dancer and choreographer Bob Fosse as an example of this period in that his own life was challenged by his diagnosis of AIDS; his career focused on “the seamy, ugly, or negatively sexual sides of life.” Art reflects culture, and in Fosse's case with musicals such as *Chicago*⁶ and the film *All That Jazz*⁷, American musicals reflected the true darkness of racial prejudice and other central issues.

After this era passed, however, Americans returned to a more hopeful, positive perspective, and again, the tone of musicals followed. Blood asserts that “in the last half of the 1990's, a new trend seems to be emerging on Broadway; this trend is toward more optimistic, lighter content in musicals along with lavish spectacle. Perhaps due to our cultural emphasis on 'family values,'” or New York City improvement projects, “some of the most successful recent productions have been. . . revivals of the older, optimistic golden age musicals.” While the beginnings of Broadway were lighthearted due to their segregated ignorance of Harlem's darker

6 “Set in the legendary city during the roaring *jazz hot 20s*, *Chicago* tells the story of two rival vaudevillian murderesses locked up in Cook County Jail.” Driven to violence by their rage in finding their husbands have cheated on them, they turn their “incarceration into a murder-of-the-week media frenzy, thus preparing the world for a splashy showbiz comeback.”

7 The summary on IMDB describes *All That Jazz*: “Director/choreographer Bob Fosse tells his own life story as he details the sordid life of Joe Gideon, a womanizing, drug-using dancer” (“All That...”).

reality, the New York City stage no longer ignores or downplays the dismal side of America.

With this happier trend, I see a hopeful America. We no longer have to sugarcoat the truth that our country is *not* perfect, but can express and deal with our concerns through art and song. Now that we have accepted a more multi-cultural Broadway, incorporating jazz and African American producers and performers as an example, we both reflect and mold a more multi-cultural society. As America's art forms, musicals and jazz communicate for *every* voice, and, through art, we are singing for a better America.

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