

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

# The Cotton Club

By Jessica McBirney  
2017

*The Cotton Club was a whites-only night club that showcased several prominent African American entertainers during the 1920s and 1930s. In this informational text, McBirney explains the club's influence in Harlem and its representation of African American entertainers. As you read, take notes on the positive and negative parts of The Cotton Club.*

- [1] In the 1920s and 1930s jazz clubs were extremely popular social gathering spots, especially in big cities like New York City. One of New York's most famous jazz clubs was the Cotton Club.

## A Bootlegger's Dream

Originally located in Harlem, a majority-African-American neighborhood in New York City, the Cotton Club opened in 1920. It was started by Jack Johnson, the first African American boxing champion, but three years later Owney "The Killer" Madison bought the club. Madison was a famous white gangster and bootlegger.<sup>1</sup> His primary goal was to use the Cotton Club to illegally sell alcohol.



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In the 1920s the U.S. government passed a law outlawing the manufacture and sale of alcohol across the country. The era came to be known as Prohibition. Because alcohol was illegal, gangsters like Owney Madison could make a lot of money by selling it to people willing to take the risk. The Cotton Club was briefly shut down for selling alcohol, but it restarted without much trouble.

## An Unusual Racial Situation

The Cotton Club was "whites-only" — only white people were allowed to come inside and enjoy the atmosphere and entertainment. On one hand, this rule was not too surprising, because during the 1920s most of the U.S. was racially segregated.<sup>2</sup> White Americans did not want to see African Americans in their social gathering places.

1. someone who illegally made and sold alcohol in the 1920s  
2. many public and private places had rules banning African Americans from entering

- [5] But on the other hand, the rule was quite surprising. First, Harlem was about 70% African American, yet none of those African Americans could go to the famous club right in their own neighborhood. Second, most of the performers at the Cotton Club were African American. The managers coordinated this intentionally.<sup>3</sup> Madison wanted to give “authentic black entertainment to a wealthy, whites-only audience.”

Unfortunately, his view of African American culture was simplistic and racist. Most of the Cotton Club shows included a “jungle” theme, based on a common idea of the time that non-Western cultures were wild and savage. Dancers wore exotic clothes, and were made to move like animals. Other shows recreated the southern plantations of the early 1800s, where African Americans had been enslaved.

The dancing, music, and entertainment were extremely popular, but they reinforced negative stereotypes<sup>4</sup> of modern African Americans.

## A Jazz Institution

Despite the racist undertones, the Cotton Club featured many of the most famous African American musicians and performers of the time. Duke Ellington, a successful jazz musician, started his career as the leader of a jazz orchestra at the club. He encouraged the management to begin letting some African American customers attend the performances. Other famous performers at the Cotton Club were Cab Calloway, Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, and Ella Fitzgerald.

## The Legacy of the Cotton Club

Race riots hit Harlem in 1936, causing the Cotton Club to close down. It re-opened in a different part of the city later that year, starting out with a well-publicized, Broadway-level show. The club stayed in its new location until 1940, when it closed down permanently.

- [10] Today the Cotton Club is remembered as a cultural hotbed that groomed some of the greatest jazz musicians in the world, while also perpetuating harmful racial relationships. Poet Langston Hughes criticized the club for reducing its African American performers to zoo animals and forcing the closure of other local African American bars in the Harlem community.

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3. **Intentional (adjective):** done with purpose  
4. a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image of a person

## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following identifies the central idea of the text? [RI.2]
  - A. The Cotton Club allowed African American talent to gain popularity, while also encouraging racial stereotypes and segregation.
  - B. The Cotton Club caused more harm than good, as the attention that African American performers received was all negative.
  - C. The Cotton Club played a key role in breaking down the divide between African American and white performers.
  - D. The Cotton Club exposed whites to important African American history and culture during a time when it was not discussed.
  
2. PART B: Which section of the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
  - A. "The Cotton Club was 'whites-only' — only white people were allowed to come inside and enjoy the atmosphere and entertainment." (Paragraph 4)
  - B. "Second, most of the performers at the Cotton Club were African American. The managers coordinated this intentionally." (Paragraph 5)
  - C. "Other shows recreated the southern plantations of the early 1800s, where African Americans had been enslaved." (Paragraph 6)
  - D. "Despite the racist undertones, the Cotton Club featured many of the most famous African American musicians and performers of the time." (Paragraph 8)
  
3. PART A: What does the word "hotbed" mean as it is used in paragraph 10? [RI.4]
  - A. a place of decline
  - B. a place of growth
  - C. a place of shame
  - D. a place of diversity
  
4. PART B: Which detail from paragraph 10 best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
  - A. "groomed some of the greatest jazz musicians in the world"
  - B. "perpetuating harmful racial relationships."
  - C. "reducing its African American performers to zoo animals"
  - D. "forcing the closure of other local African American bars in the Harlem community."

5. How do paragraphs 4-5 contribute to the key concept of the article? [RI.5]

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