

# THE APOLLO THEATER

Where Stars are Born and Legends are Made.™

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The Apollo Theater, an historic New York City landmark located at 253 West 125th Street in Harlem, is part of Harlem's story of survival, inspiration, perseverance, and hope.

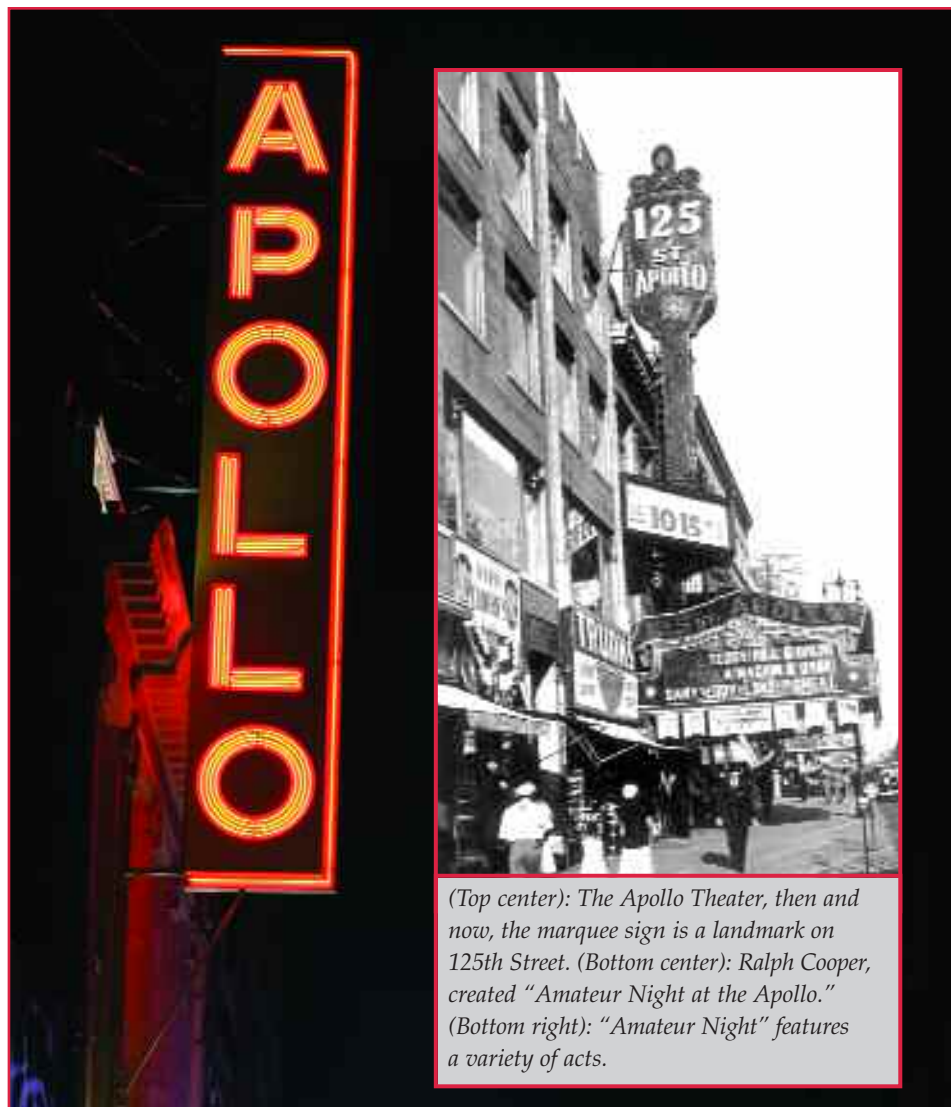
Affectionately called "the Apollo," since 1934 the theater has been the launching pad to fame and fortune for hundreds of performers. This is an awesome achievement in an industry filled with one-hit wonders. The Apollo itself is a miracle, having survived both as a venue and an institution for more than three quarters of a century.

Built in 1914, the Apollo was designed by New York architect **George Keister** and leased to **Jules Hurtig** and **Harry Seamon**, who then created Hurtig and Seamon's New Burlesque Theater. The Apollo was founded at a time when quality entertainment in Harlem was reserved for white patrons. Like many establishments in Harlem and throughout the country during that time, the Apollo was closed to African American patrons.

In 1933, New York City's Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, launched a campaign against burlesque. The declining popularity of burlesque led to the birth of the "variety show," a show with many different acts including music and comedy skits. The Apollo began to present variety shows, with great success. The Apollo was also purchased by the Schiffman family during this period and began its rise within Harlem's African American residential and commercial district. The Apollo became one of the first theaters to offer live entertainment for African American audiences featuring Black entertainers.

## Amateur Night

In 1934, Master of Ceremonies **Ralph Cooper** suggested the idea of an



(Top center): The Apollo Theater, then and now, the marquee sign is a landmark on 125th Street. (Bottom center): Ralph Cooper, created "Amateur Night at the Apollo." (Bottom right): "Amateur Night" features a variety of acts.

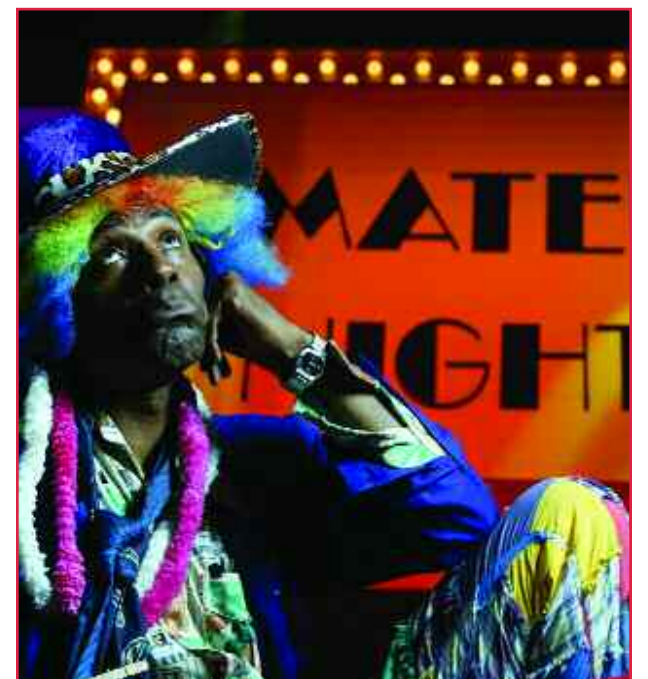
"Amateur Night" at the Apollo, which Cooper had already been presenting both in theaters and on the radio. "Amateur Night at the Apollo" has remained a hit for more than 70 years. To this day, contestants on Amateur Night rub the stump of the "Tree of Hope," which was once a chestnut tree in front of the Lafayette Theater where unemployed performers in the 1920s would gather in hopes of work. **Ella Fitzgerald** was one of the first Amateur Night winners.

The Apollo has launched the careers of musical icons such as **James Brown**, **Stevie Wonder**, **Michael Jackson**, and **Lauryn Hill**, and continues to be a popular venue for emerging and established African-American performers. As Ted Fox put it in his book *Showtime at the Apollo* (Mill Road Enterprises, 2003): "For more than

four decades from its inception as a black theatre in 1934, the Apollo probably exerted a greater influence upon popular culture than any other entertainment venue in the world. For blacks it was the most important



Ralph Cooper

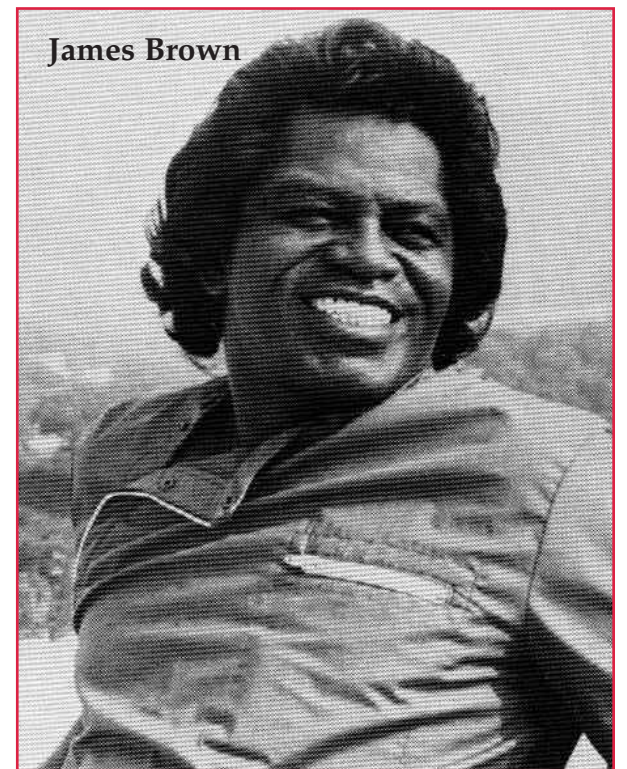




of those who frequented the Apollo. Radio broadcasts of Apollo shows were the first exposure that many whites had to black music. By the 1950s talent scouts became regulars in the audience as independent record labels created a new boom in the music industry.

## The Apollo and Harlem

The Apollo Theater has been a strong force in Harlem, a legendary community in its own right. Initially, Harlem was home to a large number of foreign immigrants including Russians, Jews, Germans, Italians and Irish. By 1910, African Americans began to migrate into areas between 135th and 145th Streets. From the time of



James Brown

the Harlem Renaissance, a period from about 1919 to the mid 1930s which was rich in literary arts, political thought, and African American grandeur—to the dawn of the century. The Apollo Theater remains one of Harlem’s most important landmarks. **AT**

cultural institution—not just the greatest black theatre, but a special place to come of age emotionally, professionally, socially, and politically.”

For many performers, the Apollo provided nurturing for their careers as well as an atmosphere that many described as “feeling like home.” For **James Brown**, it was shoes and clothing on loan, for he had none to perform in when he arrived. For young Ruth Jones, it was a name change to **Dinah Washington**. For **Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton**, it was custom-made gowns in exchange for her “mannish Texas clothing.” For **Billie Holiday**, it was a shove on stage from comedian **Pigmeat Markham** that got her beyond her first-time stage fright.

The Apollo’s own tailor shop made costumes. The Apollo management—especially Ralph Cooper—had keen instincts, knew what their audience wanted and knew how to fine-tune raw talent to perfection. The performers all went on to achieve great success, and the sense of home and community kept them coming back even after they had gone on to stardom.

Early in its history, the Apollo was the popular social scene for Harlemites, who toiled hard by day, coping with the many social injustices of the time. A trip

to the Apollo meant dressing up in their best for an evening of electrifying performances that were guaranteed to lift the spirit. Lines often wrapped around the block as patrons waited patiently to gain entrance to the “temple of entertainment.” Many adults reminisce with starry eyed fondness of sneaking in to the Apollo—sometimes even playing hooky from school—just to get a peek at a hot singer or two. The Apollo was the showplace of the African American community, a symbol of pride in black accomplishment and excellence.

Because the audiences at the Apollo—the people of Harlem—expected the best and settled for nothing less, their tastes and reactions had a worldwide impact on decades of American music and culture. Their reaction to an up and coming talent could either send a defeated soul packing for the long ride home or it could launch a performer on a thrilling ride to success.

While the Apollo’s performers were mostly African American, white performers also graced its stage from time to time. They were often spotted in the audience as they studied, with admiration and respect, the variety of acts in order to polish their own. **Milton Berle**, **Elvis Presley**, and **Tom Jones** are just a few



Mary J. Blige

(Top left) This photo collage is found in the lobby of the Apollo Theater. How many of these historic artists can you identify? (Top right) James Brown, a superstar whose career was launched on the Apollo’s stage. (Bottom right): Mary J. Blige



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**THE APOLLO THEATER STUDY GUIDE**  
 PUBLISHER  
 Rosalyn J. McPherson  
 The ROZ Group  
 WRITING & RESEARCH  
 Gloria Blakely, June Bryant, Diane Patrick

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 ART DIRECTION: Professor Michael Nix, Baruch College, CUNY  
 GRAPHIC DESIGN: Brian M. Sierra and Andy Zhang  
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THE APOLLO THEATER FOUNDATION, INC.  
 The Apollo Theater | 253 West 125th Street  
 New York, NY 10027 | (212) 531-5300

www.apollotheater.org