

Showtime at the Apollo

Legendary African American Venue Stars in Report and Exhibit

“Have you got the feeling?” James Brown, the Godfather of Soul, implored his audience at the Apollo one spring night in 1968. And with his feet twirling and hips shaking, he soon had the crowd twirling and shaking too. It was just one wild night of many at the theater, with its roster of stars such as Sarah Vaughan, Luther Vandross, Dionne Warwick, and the Jackson Five, who all saw their careers kickstarted by the legendary venue.

Few institutions are as storied as the Apollo—celebrating its 75th anniversary this year with *Ain't Nothing Like the Real Thing: How the Apollo Theater Shaped American Entertainment*, an exhibition developed by the staff of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, slated to open in 2015. So it's appropriate that the theater, listed in the National Register of Historic Places, has also earned a nod in the recent *African American National Historic Landmark Assessment Study*, a congressionally mandated NPS report that details a host of sites potentially worthy of NHL status. “The theater certainly has had enough of an impact,” says Cordell Reaves, historic preservation analyst for the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation, which put forth the Apollo in the study.

The exhibit, co-produced with the nonprofit Apollo Theater Foundation, showcases around 100 artifacts, many on display for the first time. “For a lot of the legends the exhibit features, back in the '40s and the '50s, there weren't museums interested in collecting their items,” says curator Tuliza Fleming, who scoured the country looking for objects that once graced the stage.

Built in 1913, the neoclassical hall opened as a burlesque house called Hurtig and Seamon's New (Burlesque) Theater. Harlem at the time was an affluent suburb for wealthy white New Yorkers; black patrons weren't even allowed in the door. In 1904, however, the over-



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NEAR RIGHT: Chaka Khan rocks the house in the 1970s, from the Apollo exhibit “Ain't Nothing Like the Real Thing.” FAR RIGHT: The iconic marquee.

contact points web African American National Historic Landmark Assessment Study www.nps.gov/history/nhl/Themes/Special%20Studies/AA%20NHL%20Assessment%20Study.pdf Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture <http://nmaahc.si.edu/section/programs/view/43>

building of luxury apartments—coupled with an economic downturn—led to a great wave of African American migrants, who re-populated the area around 125th Street in north Manhattan. By the 1930s, the demographics had changed almost completely, and the Harlem Renaissance was in full swing.

The hall, renamed the 125th Street Apollo Theater by new owner Sidney Cohen and manager Morris Sussman, became a playhouse

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for African American variety acts. Most clubs still had a whites-only policy, so the Apollo was one of the few places for locals to go during the Depression, as it “eased life’s burdens by providing its patrons with sidesplitting laughter, good music, acrobatic dancing,

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and theatrical entertainment, all for the price of 15 cents,” writes Fleming in the exhibit’s companion book, *Ain’t Nothing Like the Real Thing*. Bandleader Cab Calloway, regal in his white tux, was a perennial favorite, hair flailing as he punctuated notes with energetic thrusts of his baton.

Under Cohen and Sussman’s management, there were usually four to five shows a day, each preceded by films or newsreels, followed by revues featuring a variety of acts including plays, dancers, and comedians. But it was *Amateur Hour*, every Wednesday evening, that stole the spotlight. Broadcast live over the radio, it was the *American Idol* of its day, giving unknowns the chance to show if they had what it takes. “Apollo’s audience was renowned for its ability to catapult entertainers to stardom, alert them to the inadequacies of their art, or doom them to the realm of obscurity,” Fleming writes.

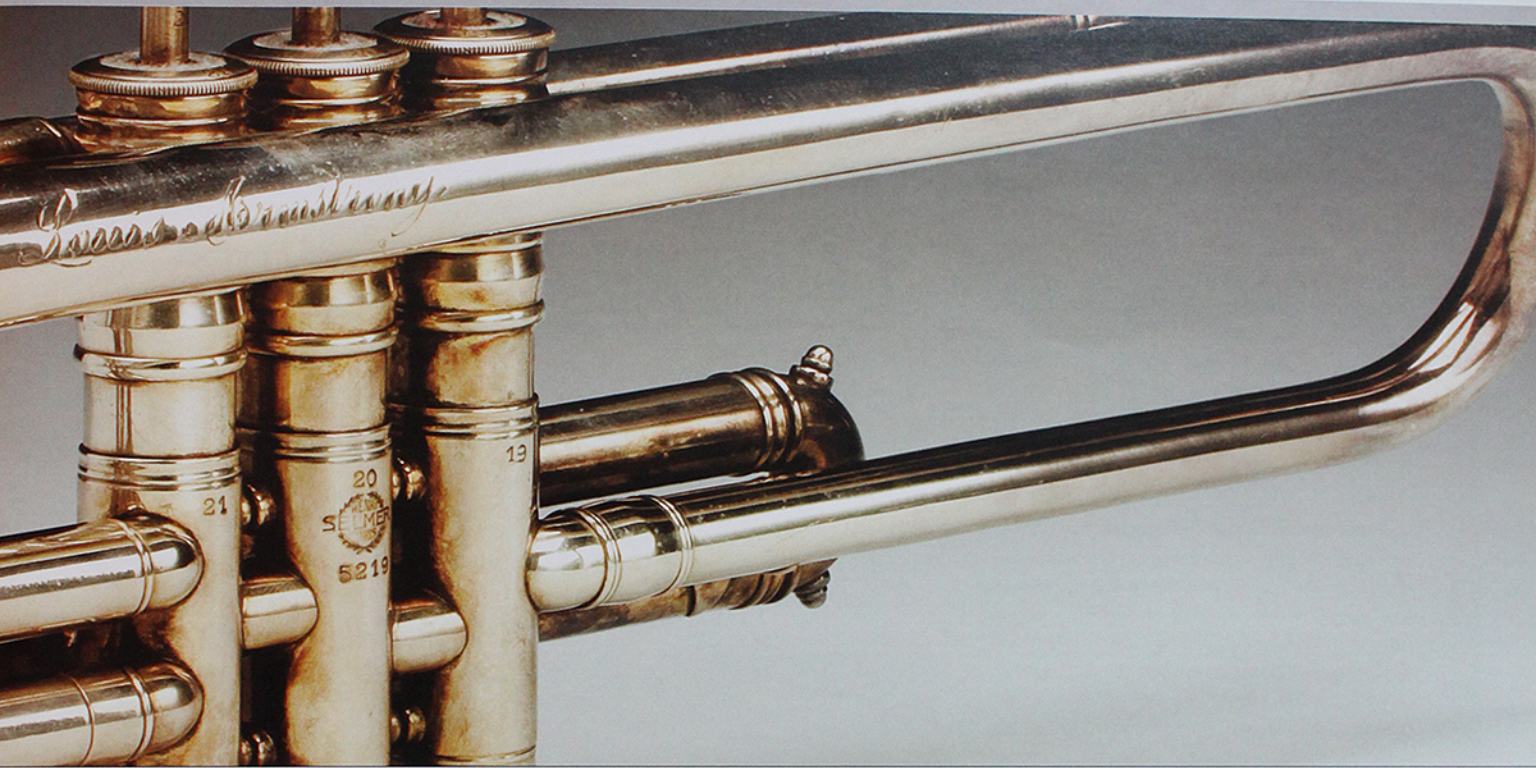
Frank Schiffman and Leo Brecher bought the building in 1935 and shortened its name to the Apollo, keeping much the same format, including *Amateur Hour*. Schiffman, a pugnacious businessman and meticulous notetaker with a sharp eye for talent, was the brains behind the theater’s success over the next 40 years. Of actress and

singer Pearl Bailey, he wrote after her show on October 22, 1965, “The absolute mistress of comedy-song. Had audience in her hands from start to finish. Excellent!!!” Of Buddy Holly’s show with the Crickets on August 16, 1957, he noted “Four White boys. Very bad.” And of

the acts that failed to attract a large enough crowd to cover their fees, he marked “substantial loss.” Not everyone appreciated his money-driven tactics, but no one denied that his entertainment savvy drove the Apollo’s reputation as a star-making vehicle.

A teenaged Ella Fitzgerald planned on dancing one *Amateur Night*. “There I was, nervous as can be, only 15 years old with the skinniest legs you’ve ever seen—and I froze; got cold feet,” she later recalled. “The man in charge said that I had better do something up there, so I said I wanted to sing instead.” Her impromptu rendition of “The Object of My Affection” captivated the audience and the rest is history.

The Apollo set or showcased all the latest trends in music. Duke Ellington and the swing bands. Jazz and bebop with Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonious Monk. Girl groups such as the Shirelles. Well into the 1970s, the Apollo pulsed with the sounds of rock, soul, R&B, funk, and gospel. But times were changing. African American performers found themselves welcome at previously off-limits venues such as Radio City Music Hall, where the money was better. The city was in the throes of a recession, and Harlem’s crime rate was on the rise. In January 1976, the Apollo was shuttered and, despite sporadic



BOTTOM LEFT CHUCK STEWART, KWAME BRATHWAITE/COURTESY OF THE APOLLO THEATER FOUNDATION AND SMITHSONIAN BOOKS, BOTTOM RIGHT LLOYD YEARWOOD/COURTESY OF SMITHSONIAN BOOKS

shows, remained so until Inner City Broadcasting company gave it a grand reopening in 1985.

Despite the comeback, the hall's heyday is now a memory. Still, it remains an icon. When James Brown died in 2006, the Apollo held a memorial service as thousands came to pay their final respects. The Apollo was again a scene of mourning when Michael Jackson died. And when presidential candidate Barack Obama appealed for votes from the city, he spoke from the Apollo stage.

restoration so that the legacy lives on, a legacy that Fleming stresses encompasses all of American entertainment. Indeed, stars of all stripes, from John Lennon and Barbra Striesand to Willie Nelson and Jennifer Lopez have been drawn to perform here. Fleming says they were welcome from the inception. "Latinos, Asians, African Americans—right from the very beginning, all were on its stage."

This fall, after its Smithsonian showing, the exhibit will visit Detroit and New York City under the aegis of the Smithsonian Institu-



Today managed by the Apollo Theater Foundation, the hall still hosts Amateur Night every Wednesday evening, as well as concerts, community programs, and lectures. The top tourist site in Harlem—which has undergone a revitalization of its own in recent years—it attracts 1.3 million visitors each year. It is also undergoing a \$96 million

tion Traveling Exhibition Service. Future articles in *Common Ground* will focus on other sites from the assessment study.

TOP: Louis Armstrong and his trumpet jazzed audiences for decades. **ABOVE LEFT:** The Supremes' first performance at the Apollo, in 1962, with the *Motortown Revues*. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Sarah Vaughan on stage in 1964.