

A night at the Apollo Theatre in New York City
with some comments on the Chitlin Circuit

A Podcast script
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The black urban theatre circuit, popularly known as the Chitlin Circuit, stretched across the United States.

I'll name some of these theatres. There was the Apollo Theatre in New York City's Harlem where I spent a memorable evening, the Regal Theatre in Chicago, The Howard Theatre in Washington. D.C., The Uptown Theatre in Philadelphia, The Royal Theatre in Baltimore and the Fox Theatre in Detroit.

These venues were very special. When blues moved out of the country and into the city it became a different kind of music. African American entertainers, comedians and musicians played this circuit to great effect. Audience participation was a given. These were people that appreciated their musicians and told them so in more ways than one. The Chitlin circuit was the starting place for acts like Cab Calloway, Pearl Bailey, Ike and Tina Turner, Patti LaBelle, Louis Jordan, Fats Waller, Etta James, Nat King Cole - and more - Gatemouth Brown, W.C. Handy, Louis Armstrong, Aretha Franklin, James Brown, The Jackson Five. The list goes on and on and on.

Movie houses, back in the day, had elaborate prosceniums, gold trim and fancy double curtains. These were palaces of entertainment.

There was a special item at the Apollo Theatre in New York City's Harlem. This was a round platform which was part of centre stage. This platform could be lowered and performers dressed in their stage attire could step on to this platform down beneath the stage, invisible to the audience, and slowly rise up through the stage - the head, then the shoulders, then the rest of them would come into audience view. In this day of rock shows and special effects this is not such a big deal but it was a very big deal back then. To see a headline performer coming up through the stage that way was an amazing thing.

These were the acts that I caught when I went to the Apollo. Red Foxx, Pigmeat Markham (famous for his courtroom parody "Here come de Judge"), and Tito Puente. Now, you might not think that Tito Puente belonged in such a venue but he was from the 'hood', from Spanish Harlem. He was known and respected for his wonderful drumming and his band.

Ruth Brown came tripping out on to the stage in a gold lamé gown so tight around her legs and feet that looked like a mermaid she could could barley tippy-toe, waddle up the the microphone but once she was up there and started singing "Mama he treats your daughter mean....." everybody knew the song. Everybody was with her.

Then Pigmeat Markham came on and did his "Here come de Judge" routine. There were screams and roars of laughter because these people had been through the court system, so seeing it parodied on stage, with black folks playing judges and cops and so forth, was just a real hoot.

Tito Puente was a native of Spanish Harlem in New York, so he was from the 'hood', as it were. The audience liked his music as well because, golly, it had the rhythm, it had the beat. So, they were with it. They were really, really with it.

Now, if you didn't perform up to standard and there was a very high standard, you could be in a mess of trouble, particularly on open stage night. There was a guy with a long waist high hook who would come out from the wings. I may be remembering this from another performance. It might have been a clown-like figure with a noise maker. Performers that were not up to audience specifications would try to duck the hook or noisemaker and eventually it would haul or drive them still gamely singing off the stage into the wings. You don't really find that sort of thing in a polite folk club nowadays.

Very much a part of the show at the Apollo, or in any of these venues, was the audience. You get a very special kind of audience reaction when you've got common culture. The entertainers played to this commonality and told jokes about sorghum and blue gums and what have you and got the audience going right along with them.

Urbanized country folks were part of the audience. Here was a place where the audience was on fire to hear their own people performing and these were often class acts that later on became very, very famous.

The audience knew these performers were good and knew they were theirs, their own people on stage. The audience was on top of everything that happened on stage - every reference, every musical note, they knew the language that was being spoken. It was theirs and they dug it!

In a white world, before the civil rights movement took hold, you could step into a theatre and hear your kind of talk, your people talking about things that concerned you. Making fun of it. Making music out of it. The rhythm carried it and it was just total immersion in a vibrant culture. People up here in Canada are really nice but, sometimes, they're too polite. Sometimes, the absolute best thing to do is to get down and dirty with that performer. Yell when you like it and say when you don't and maybe even get out the hook. Both audience and performer will be better for it.

