

A black and white photograph of a man in profile, seated at a piano. He is illuminated from the side, creating a strong silhouette effect. His hands are on the keys, and the piano's lid is open. The background is dark, with a light source creating a soft glow behind him.

Oct. 24, 2009, through Feb. 8, 2010

*The Huntington Library, West Hall*

# CENTRAL AVENUE

*and Beyond*

The Harlem Renaissance in Los Angeles



**D**uring the 1920s and '30s, the Harlem Renaissance saw a flourishing of African American literature, art, music, and social commentary. The New York City neighborhood attracted scores of gifted black composers, artists, and writers, including many who had fled the racism of the South. Parallel movements occurred in cities across the nation. In Los Angeles, a vibrant scene of jazz clubs, literary societies, and concert venues sprang up around Central Avenue, a main artery that ran through the heart of South Los Angeles, where an atmosphere of cultural energy nurtured the talents of gifted African Americans.

To celebrate Los Angeles' contributions to this dynamic era, The Huntington joins forces with the Mayme A. Clayton Library, located in Culver City. The Clayton Library, not yet open to the public, houses the extensive collection of African American materials gathered by the late Mayme A. Clayton, who worked for more than 40 years as an academic librarian. Drawn from the collections of both libraries, and including Clayton Library items that have never before been publicly displayed, this exhibition chronicles just a few of the many remarkable accomplishments of black Angelenos from about 1920 to 1950.

Sara S. "Sue" Hodson  
Curator of Literary Manuscripts  
The Huntington Library

Avery Clayton  
Founder and CEO  
The Mayme A. Clayton Library

Marie Dickerson Coker, Sebastian's Cotton Club,  
Culver City, 1934. Mayme A. Clayton Library.

**Cover:** Claudius Wilson, the company composer and accompanist for the  
First Negro Classical Ballet, Los Angeles, ca. 1947–57. Huntington Library.



*Play it,  
Jazz band!  
You know that tune  
That laughs and cries at the same time.*

Langston Hughes, "Jazz Band in a Parisian Cabaret"



*The California Cotton Pickers, ca. 1924. Mayme A. Clayton Library.*

# Jazz

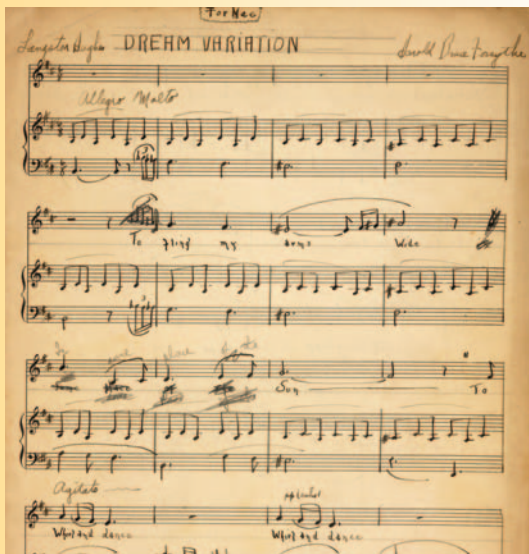
Central Avenue, the social, cultural, and commercial center for black Angelenos, became widely known for its jazz scene. Clubs catered to whites as well as to African Americans, who were excluded from such venues in other parts of the city. Club Alabam was one of the best-known clubs, and there were many others, like the Downbeat, the Flame, the Casablanca, and Jack's Basket Room, run by former boxer Jack Johnson. Local performers played in these clubs, along with nationally celebrated entertainers on tour, such as Lena Horne, Billie Holliday, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Jelly Roll Morton.

## *Black Out of Africa Me and my Song.*

Langston Hughes, "Me and my Song"

African Americans attained distinction in classical music composition as well as in the jazz and blues for which Central Avenue became so well known. Combining African themes and musical traditions with European classical forms, these composers produced a new body of music with a unique sound. One of the most prominent, William Grant Still (1895–1978), settled in Los Angeles in 1934. Best known for his "Afro-American Symphony," he collaborated with other area composers. Samuel Browne (1908–1991) also earned distinction as a conductor and teacher, establishing a music program at Jefferson High School in which he taught jazz alongside music theory and harmony. Harold Bruce Forsythe (1908–1976) attended Manual Arts High School before studying piano and composition at Juilliard School of Music in New York. He composed many songs for solo piano and for voice with piano accompaniment.

Harold Bruce Forsythe, autograph musical score for "Dream Variation," setting for a poem by Langston Hughes, ca. 1924–33. Huntington Library.



Ardie Allison and Diana Levy in a scene from "Swan Lake," ca. 1946–54. Huntington Library.

Joseph Rickard (1918–1994) founded the First Negro Classical Ballet Company in 1946 after watching, outraged, as a Los Angeles ballet studio turned away an African American mother and daughter and referred them to a school for tap dancing nearby. Rickard, who was white, opened a ballet school in a deserted ballroom at Jefferson Boulevard and Normandie Avenue. First teaching children and then drawing their parents into his classes, Rickard created a dance company that garnered critical acclaim and popularity throughout California. The ballet company's prima ballerina was Bernice Harrison, the woman whose daughter had been denied ballet lessons.

Claudius Wilson (pictured on front cover) served as both composer and accompanist for the ballet company. He teamed with Joseph Rickard to create contemporary versions of classic ballets like "Cinderella" and "Swan Lake." He wrote music for African American stories such as "Raisin' Cane," about sugar-cane croppers, with sequences such as "Juba," "Speakeasy," and "Pas de Jitterbugs." The ballet company flourished until about 1954, when funding difficulties forced the group to disband.

# Dance

*To fling my arms wide  
In some place of the sun,  
To whirl and to dance  
Till the white day is done.*

Langston Hughes, "Dream Variation"

*Comedians in vaudeville  
And band-men in circuses—  
Dream-singers all,—  
My people.*

Langston Hughes, "Laughters"

**A**frican Americans in Los Angeles brought enormous talent to the stages of Central Avenue, and audiences responded with enthusiasm. Whether they desired vaudeville, plays, concerts, recitals, or poetry readings, black Angelenos could steep themselves in performances to inspire the spirit or inform the mind. The venues along the avenue brought "dream-singers" from near and far to provide cultural experiences and opportunities for their audiences.



Philippa Duke Schuyler, Oct. 18, 1950. Huntington Library. Schuyler (1931–1967) was a child prodigy as a pianist and writer. As a news correspondent she perished in Vietnam when her helicopter crashed on a mission to rescue orphans. The inscription is to Harlem Renaissance artist Richmond Barthé.



Jeni LeGon and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, ca. 1935–40. Mayme A. Clayton Library. LeGon and Robinson were an enormously popular dance team, on both stage and screen.

*The head of Lincoln  
looks down from the wall  
While movies echo  
dramas on the screen.*

Langston Hughes, "Lincoln Theatre"

## Film

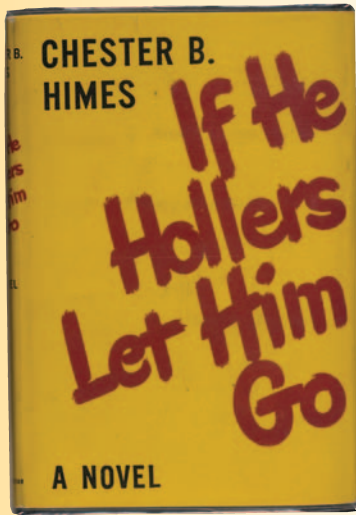
**T**he exciting and glamorous new world of film in Hollywood beckoned aspiring actors of all races. But, the major studios had little to offer African American performers beyond stereotyped roles such as porters and house servants, so African Americans began to write, direct, produce, and act in their own films. Clarence Muse and Spencer Williams directed feature films that enabled black actors and musicians to perform in a wide variety of genres and roles, portraying people in all walks of life, engaged in the full range of human activities.

Detail from the film poster for *Harlem on the Prairie*, 1937. Mayme A. Clayton Library. This Associate Pictures film starred Herb Jeffries, known as the *Singing Cowboy* and the *Bronze Buckaroo*.





African American literature came of age during the first half of the 20th century, and Los Angeles figured prominently, both as the home for major writers and as the setting for black novels and stories. Langston Hughes (1902–1967) is identified closely with the Harlem Renaissance, but he had deep ties to Los Angeles, as well, living in the city while writing for Hollywood in the late 1930s. He also traveled to Los Angeles often for lectures and poetry readings and to visit his long-time friends Loren and Juanita Miller.



Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. First edition (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1945). Huntington Library.

Chester Himes (1909–1984) lived much of his life in France and Spain, but in the 1940s he lived in Los Angeles, working as a screenwriter and producing two novels. *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945) is the story of a black shipyard worker in Los Angeles during World War II struggling against racism as well as his own violent reactions to racism.

*There is so much to write about  
In the Negro race,  
So many thrilling stories  
Time cannot erase.*

Langston Hughes, "A Ballad of Negro History"



California Eagle, Dec. 5, 1908.  
Mayme A. Clayton Library.

*All the time the written record grows—  
"The Crisis," "Phylon," "Opportunity."*

Langston Hughes, "Prelude to Our Age"

African Americans created their own "written record" in publications throughout the country. In its national magazine, *The Crisis*, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People concentrated on civil rights advocacy and political lobbying. *Phylon*, whose name is the Greek word for "race," was a scholarly journal. The National Urban League founded its magazine, *Opportunity*, in the 1920s.

The Los Angeles community added its own voice to these national serials. The *California Eagle* was founded in 1879 by John G. Neimore, who turned it over to Joe and Charlotta Spear Bass in 1912. The *California Eagle* and the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, begun in 1932 by Leon Washington, conveyed the daily news but also urged citizens to challenge racial discrimination. Other Los Angeles publications included the *Western Informant*, a general interest magazine, and *Flash*, a journal of politics, culture, and literature.

# Loren and Juanita Miller



Loren Miller, ca 1945–50.  
Huntington Library.

**L**oren and Juanita Miller were leaders in black Los Angeles, working for racial equality and promoting philanthropic and artistic causes. Loren (1903–1967) purchased the *California Eagle* in 1952 from Charlotta Bass and also practiced law. Alongside Thurgood Marshall, Miller worked actively for civil rights, especially directing his efforts against restrictive housing covenants. In 1964, Gov. Edmund G. Brown appointed him to the Superior Court of Los Angeles County.

Juanita Miller is best known as a co-founder of the League of Allied Arts in 1939, with Dorothy Verna Johnson. That year, Langston Hughes wished to present a play in the city, but no venue would accept a black performance. Miller and Johnson created a theater space on Central Avenue, where Hughes' play *Don't I Wanna Be Free* was presented. The League continues to support the arts and award scholarships.

*I dream a world where all  
Will know sweet freedom's way.*

Langston Hughes, "I Dream a World"

*Hold fast to dreams  
For if dreams die  
Life is a broken-winged bird  
That cannot fly.*

Langston Hughes, "Dreams"

**A**mong the many gifted people who enriched the Harlem Renaissance era, Marie Dickerson Coker was especially distinguished and versatile in her accomplishments. Born in Tulsa, Okla., in 1906, she left home for Hollywood. Once in Los Angeles, she performed in clubs along Central Avenue and in other areas of the city. Not only a singer and dancer, Coker also played the piano and string bass. Captivated by the lure of flying, she became one of the first women pilots.

# Marie Dickerson Coker



Marie Dickerson Coker (right),  
ca. 1925. Lincoln Avenue Airfield,  
Los Angeles (above), 1930.  
Mayme A. Clayton Library.



## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Clara Bryant et al., eds., ***Central Avenue Sounds: Jazz in Los Angeles*** (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

Lawrence B. de Graaf, Kevin Mulroy, and Quintard Taylor, eds., ***Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California*** (Los Angeles: Autry Museum of Western Heritage, in association with the University of Washington Press, 2005).

Douglas Flamming, ***Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America*** (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

Langston Hughes, ***The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes***, ed. Arnold Rampersad (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

David Levering Lewis, ed., ***The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*** (New York: Penguin Books, 1994).

Martin Schiesl and Mark Morrell Dodge, eds., ***City of Promise: Race and Historical Change in Los Angeles*** (Claremont, Calif.: Regina Books, 2006).

R. J. Smith, ***The Great Black Way: L.A. in the 1940s and the Lost African American Renaissance*** (New York: PublicAffairs, 2006).

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Mayme A. Clayton Library

THE HUNTINGTON  
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## RELATED PROGRAMS

***Events below will be held at The Huntington in Friends' Hall and are free, no reservations required, unless otherwise indicated.***

Oct. 28 (Wed.), 7:30 p.m. – ***Black Angelenos: Roots and Renaissance***, a lecture by Judy Narcisse, Pan-African Studies Department, California State University, Los Angeles.

Nov. 12 (Thurs.), 7:30 p.m. – ***Clarence Muse: Central Avenue and Beyond***, a lecture by independent scholar Renita Lorden.

Nov. 18 (Wed.), 7:30 p.m. – ***An Evening of Jazz with Ron McCurdy***, a celebration of great jazz innovators like Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway. *Reservations required. Members: \$25; Non-Members: \$35. Call 626-405-2128 for tickets.*

Nov. 21 (Sat.), 10-11 a.m. – ***FAMILY PROGRAM Make Music with Rhythm Child!*** Norman Jones will have children and parents alike tapping their feet and dancing. *Reservations required. Members: \$10; Non-Members: \$15. Call 626-405-2128 for tickets.*

Nov. 23 (Mon.), 7:30 p.m. – ***The Music of Harold Bruce Forsythe*** performed by soprano Elizabeth Tatum, baritone Conrade Immel, and pianist Philip Smith.

Dec. 9 (Wed.), 7:30 p.m. – ***A Night at the Movies Central Avenue Live!*** a film by S. Pearl Sharp and Rosie Lee Hooks, for the City of Los Angeles' Cultural Affairs Dept., featuring interviews with some of the jazz greats. ***Mama Laura's Boys*** is a 30-minute documentary about Babe's and Ricky's Inn, a Central Avenue blues club founded in 1955 and still operating.

### ***Event at Clayton Library***

Nov. 21 (Sat.), 3 p.m. – ***Central Avenue Revisited: Masters of Jazz***. A panel discussion featuring master musicians Ernie Andrews, Clara Bryant, Buddy Collette, Jackie Kelso, Charles Owens, and Gerald Wilson. Moderated by Leroy Downs, radio host, 88.1 FM, KKJZ, with Michael Dolphin, Jeffrey Winston, and Chet Hanley. Screening of film *Central Avenue Live!* and jazz photography exhibition by Warren Berman. Free, but reserve your place by calling 310-202-1647.