

The Cotton Club

THE ARISTOCRAT OF HARLEM

THE COTTON CLUB was the most glamorous and glitzy of Harlem's night clubs during the prohibition era of the 1920s and 1930s. Located upstairs on 142nd Street in Harlem, it opened in 1920 as the Club Deluxe by former heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson. It became the Cotton Club in 1923, when it was bought by mobster Owney Madden.

The club was a magnificent ensemble of vast dance floor, stage, and opulent décor. The entrance was in log cabin style, but the bandstand was done in a Southern plantation mansion motif. From the ceiling hung enormous chandeliers. The club seated between 500 and 700 people. It is little wonder the Cotton Club was dubbed "the aristocrat of Harlem" by a British visitor.

The \$5 entrance charge (roughly equivalent to \$50 today) bought the most spectacular show in town. The main visual attraction at the club were the 30 to 50 chorus girls, advertised as "the most beautiful Creoles." They had to be at least 5' 11" tall (180 cm) and very good looking. Their job was very demanding—they changed costumes after every song—but they were well paid. The club opened at 10 p.m. with swinging dance music. Two shows followed at midnight and 2 a.m., and the club closed at 3 a.m. A number of jazz musicians, including the best known stars of the day, played there. Perhaps the most notable band to play at the Cotton Club was Duke Ellington's orchestra, which played there from 1927 to 1931. Their performances at the club were broadcast

nationwide on the radio. Later the bands of Cab Calloway and Jimmie Lunceford took the stage.

Although the entertainers and waiters were black, the clientele was white, with only a few black stars ever admitted. This was not an uncommon practice at the time, and though it is clearly racism by today's standards, it helped pave the way to integration. Temporarily at least, the Cotton Club provided a place for whites to experience black culture where black artists and entertainers were seen favorably—handsome, accomplished, talented, and elegant.

Yet bigotry remained the norm of the day, and the Cotton Club closed its doors on February 16, 1936 after riots in Harlem in 1935. It was reopened in September 1936 at a new location and operated until June 1940. Today, the Cotton Club retains its aura of exotic mystique, and conjures up images of a great jazz age gone by. Gone, but not forgotten, the Cotton Club remains an icon of jazz history.

COTTON CLUB

"The Aristocrat of Harlem" presents
DAN HEALY'S New Revue
2 Distinctly Different 2
SHOWS NIGHTLY
CAST OF FIFTY!
Beautiful Girls
Music and Lyrics by
JIMMIE McHUGH and
DOROTHY FIELDS
(Authors of "Blackbirds")
Dance to the Tunes of
DUKE ELLINGTON'S
RECORDING ORCHESTRA
Lenox Avenue at 142d St.
Reservations
Bradhurst 7767-1687

Alexander Dux

Newspaper ad, 1932

This advertisement is typical of those for nightclubs in Harlem in New York City.