

Harlem Voices

Poets, blues singers and
speakeasies in 1920s Harlem.



Harlem Voices

Programme running: 1 x 30 mins Production: Angel Eye for The Open University



“Oh to be in Harlem again...” Ragtime and blues played all night, while experimental poets scribbled down new verses. Described as “a magnet for intellectuals”, 1920s Harlem was a unique crucible in which black culture could thrive.

This Manhattan neighbourhood gained a near mythical status though its depiction by the artists of the Harlem Renaissance. An explosion in art, literature and music in the 1920s included Duke Ellington and Count Baisey.

Two writers, Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, fell in love with Harlem. As Hughes’ work mapped

Harlem street by street, he captured the rhythms of blues singers, jazz saxophones and speakeasies in his modern poetry.

Black intellectuals had identified the arts as one area in which black people could get equal rights and recognition. Could this lay the foundation for civil rights?

Langston Hughes found a sense of life and vibrancy in Harlem, which he never found anywhere else. Yet this haven was threatened by the violence, bitterness and decay which McKay witnessed.

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