Harlem's Music Makers

Spell Success For 'Bubbling Brown Sugar'

The great black Harlem musicians of 1910-40 are being celebrated on Broadway these days.

Eubie Blake, Duke Ellington, Billy Strayhorn, Alexander C. Rogers, Earl "Fatha" Hines, Billy Holiday, Noble Sissle, Bert Williams, Andy Razak — their names are a veritable Who's Who of popular American music of the period.

And their songs — "Honeysuckle Rose," "Solitude," "Sophisticated Lady," "God Bless the Child," "Nobody," "Take the 'A' Train," "I Got It Bad," "Stompin' At the Savoy," "Stormy Monday Blues" — have become classics.

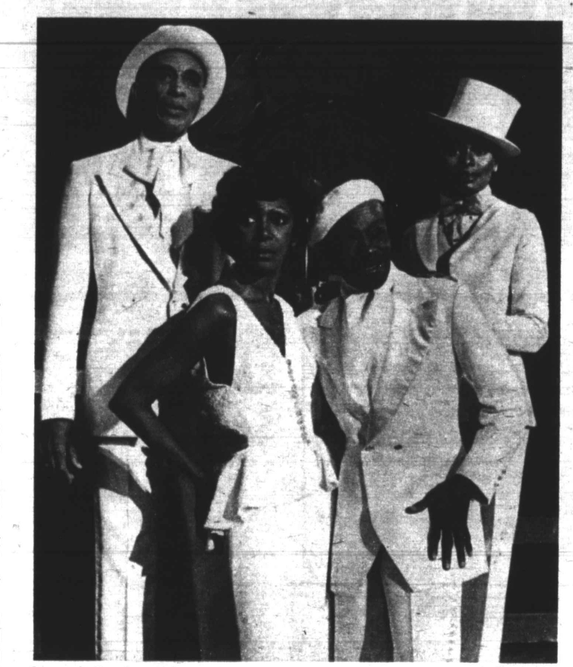
Renewed interest in these legendary Harlem music makers is generated nightly at the ANTA Theatre on Broadway where "BUBBLING BROWN SUGAR," the sell-out musical hit of the season, takes audiences on a musical tour of Harlem.

The composers-lyricists-performers came from varied backgrounds, traveled all over the world touring with shows and bands, but, sooner or later, found their way to Harlem. Here they collaborated with each other, performed with each other, fought with each other and produced a body of music that has rarely been equaled. Each brought his own special background and combined that with the pulse of Harlem.

From Baltimore came EUBIE BLAKE. He was a pianist and organist in cafes and vaudeville theatres before joining Noble Sissle in a vaudeville team. His Broadway stage scores include "Shuffle Along," "Chocolate Dandies," "Blackbirds of 1930" and "Swing It."

He collaborated chiefly with Noble Sissle and Andy Razaf to produce such songs as "I'm Just Wild About Harry," "Love Will Find A Way," "You Were Meant For Me," "Bandanna Days," "Lovin' You the Way I Do" and "Green Pastures." Born in 1883, he remains a delightful entertainer.

DUKE ELLINGTON came to Harlem via Washington, D.C. where he was born April 29, 1899. He organized his first orchestra in 1918 and first appeared at the Cotton Club in 1927.



From left, Joseph Attles, Josephine Premice, Avon Long and Vivian Reed, stars of 'Bubbling Brown Sugar.'

A very partial list of his songs include "Solitude," "I Got It Bad and That Ain't Good," "Awful Sad," "Ring Dem Bells," "It Don't Mean A Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing," "Bojangles," "Satin Doll" and "Jump For Joy."

A chief collaborator of Ellington's was BILLY STRAYHORN, who was born in Dayton, Ohio in 1915. He became a leading composer and arranger for the Duke Ellington Orchestra, and also a pianist. His songs and instrumental arrangements include "Chelsea Bride," "Take the 'A' Train," "After All," "Day Dream," "Raincheck," "Johnny Come Lately," "Clementine," "Passion Flower," "Satin Doll" and "Grievin."

ALEXANDER C. ROGERS started his career when he left Nashville at the age of 18. A prolific lyric writer, librettist and actor, he wrote the words to nearly 2,000 songs, some with Will Cook Marion, a composer of Negro musicals, and others with Bert Williams, with whom he wrote "Nobody."

Together, he and Williams wrote "Abyssinia," "Bandanna Land" and "Lode of Koal." Their greatest success was "In Dahomey," which played for a long time in New York, successfully toured the United States and then played a year in London.

EARL "FATHA" HINES was born in Duquesne, Pennsylvania in 1905 and formed his own band in Chicago in 1928, with which he toured until he joined Louis Armstrong in 1948. His compositions include "Everything Depends On You," "Deep Forest," "Stormy Monday Blues," "Rosetta."

THOMAS "FATS" WALLER, a native Harlemite, learned to play the organ at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York where his father was pastor. He accompanied such singers as Bessie Smith and then organized his own orchestra. He composed such songs as "Honeysuckle Rose," "Ain't Misbehavin'" "Concentratin' On You," "My Fate Is In Your Hands."

BILLY HOLIDAY, who collaborated with Arthur Herzog Jr. on "God Bless the Child," first performed at the age of 16 as a dancer at the Log Cabin in New York. She changed to singing, began drawing crowds, and shortly moved on to the Apollo Theatre.

Vivian Reed in "Bubbling Brown Sugar" all dressed for a featured number

Working with her favorite pianist, Teddy Wilson, she developed her deep sense of blues. During the 30's she made her first recordings, with Benny Goodman. She sang with Artie Shaw and his band, also. Before she died in 1959, she appeared at Carnegie Hall, and she left behind recordings of great poignancy and style.

NOBLE SISSLE was an author, conductor and actor who formed a vaudeville team with Eubie Blake in 1915. He was a drum major in Jim Europe's band during World War I and led the band after Europe's death. Later he organized his own orchestra, which toured the United States and Europe. He was the organizer and first president of the Negro Actors Guild.

BERT WILLIAMS was a member of the vaudeville team of Williams and Walker. After George Walker died, Williams went on to play the Ziegfeld Follies from 1912-19.

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