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LENA HORNE:

The Lady: The Legend

'I didn't ask to be where I am today, but I'm glad I'm here because I can help other people.' She hated show business as a child, but became one of our greatest stars.

By Frederick Douglass

Lena Horne is the ultimate symbol of black femininity — not just because of the sensuous sexuality which she retains despite her 62 years — but because she embodies the durability, and wisdom and spirituality which black women have used over the centuries to survive in a world that is often hostile toward them.

Lena Horne knows what it is like to feel the psychological welts raised by the unkind lash of hostility and racism. She was forced into being a performer by her mother who had worked as an actress with the Lafayette Players, a black theatrical company, and who was determined to live out her fantasies of being a superstar through her daughter's life.

"I didn't ask to be where I am today, but I'm glad I'm here because I can help other people," says Lena Horne. "My mother made me go into show business, something I really hated when I was a child. It's crazy!

"There are people who spend every second from the time they come on this planet trying to become a star and they never make it. Me, I didn't want it... but I got it. I hated show business so much I ran away from my mother when I was working with Noble Sissle's band to marry Louis Jones, my first husband.

"Things didn't work out, other than the fact we had two very beautiful children. We got divorced in 1940. There I was, stranded. I had no skills, except the skills as a performer that my mother forced me to learn.

"It's like the life of Beethoven whose father forced him to practice playing the piano for

hours a day when he was a child.

My mother forced me to become an entertainer and that's all I ever knew how to do. So after I got divorced, I ended up going back to the thing I hated most — show business."

Lena was into show business at an early age. By the time she was 16, she was dancing in the chorus line at Harlem's Cotton Club. "That was during the depression," says Ms. Horne. "Times were hard and we needed some M-O-N-E-Y, so my mother took me to the Cotton Club to audition and I got the job. I was a teenager, but I was travelling in fast company and I learned a lot.

"I was working with people like Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Ethel Waters and Count Basie, so there was no time for half stepping. It was a very instructive period in my life.

"Then I got a chance to join Noble Sissle's band. I was still dancing, but he began training me as a singer and I really had to work hard to get that part of my act together because I'd never really gotten into singing before.

"But Noble believed in my voice and spent a lot of time helping me get my phrasing and articulation together. Everything was going great for me, but I still hated show business.

"When Louis Jones came along and wanted to get married, that was pure music to my ears. I really thought I had found a way to get away from my mother and show business, but it backfired and I ended up back on the stage again."

Leaving Pittsburgh and going back to New York in 1940, Lena



Lena Horne

Horne contacted some of her friends from the Cotton Club days and landed a gig singing with the Charlie Barnet Orchestra.

This experience brought her in direct confrontation with racism because she could not perform before white audiences in certain cities, especially in the South.

"It didn't really bother me that much," says Lena. But the flaring glint in her eyes belies her words.

"Charlie and the guys in the band were pretty nice and when we hit the more racist towns, I djust wait for them in the bus until the show was over.

"They tried to be extra nice to me when we hit those cracker towns, and I really appreciated that. But as long as I got paid I wasn't about to let the rednecks

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