

“NEVER LOOKING AT YOUR FACE, ONLY AT YOUR FEET:”  
RACE RELATIONS AT THE SAVOY BALLROOM: 1926–1958

Delaney Moran

The entrance to the Savoy was at street level. You went down one flight to check your coat, then you walked back up two flights to the ballroom which was on the second floor. As I was climbing the steps that led to the ballroom, I could hear this swinging music coming down the stairwell, and it started seeping right into my body. I got to the top step, went through the double doors, and stopped for a moment with my back to the bandstand, taking it all in. When I turned around and faced the room...well, I just stood there with my mouth open. The whole floor was full of people—and they were dancing! The band was pounding. The guys up there were wailing! The music was rompin’ and stompin’. Everyone was movin’ and groovin’.<sup>1</sup>

These were the remarks of Frankie Manning, a black dancer from Harlem, upon entering the Savoy Ballroom for the first time. This scene depicts a typical night at the Savoy Ballroom in 1930s Harlem. The Savoy was the most popular nightclub in the city and home to the best jazz and the best dancers New York had to offer.<sup>2</sup> Remarkably, it was completely integrated from its inception in 1926, despite segregation in almost every other section of the country, including New York City. Though the North did not subscribe to the Jim Crow laws that characterized race relations in the South during the first half of the 20th century, it

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did abide by a more cultural version of segregation. In New York, Harlem became an all-black neighborhood with the migration of thousands of African-Americans during the 1910s and 1920s. A stark line emerged between black Harlem and the mainly white rest of New York. Although there is evidence that during this period, people of different races were mingling clandestinely in the private sphere, the Savoy was the first institution to embrace race mixing in the public sphere. The opening of the Savoy Ballroom marked a watershed in dismantling the rigid racial barriers of segregation. Its policy of integration stood in direct defiance of the social norm. With this policy, the management of the Savoy Ballroom made a bold and intentional social, racial, and political statement by creating the first truly integrated place in New York.

The 1920s marked a period of great social change in the United States. Though segregation was in place, race relations were already starting to shift, especially in cities. Harlem, in particular, was at the core of this change. It experienced a rapid mass immigration of African Americans between 1910 and 1930.<sup>3</sup> This change in demographics also brought with it new artists, authors, poets, and musicians and the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance. At this time, white tourism to Harlem for entertainment started to thrive; it became “fashionable” to visit Harlem nightclubs.<sup>4</sup> White-only clubs with black entertainment, called Jim Crow clubs, sprouted up all over. The most popular segregated clubs known as the “Big Three” were the Cotton Club, Connie’s Inn, and Small’s Paradise,<sup>5</sup> but there were many others, including the Roseland, the Nest Club, the Spider Web, and the Saratoga Club.<sup>6</sup> Blacks called the act of whites coming to Harlem clubs “slumming.”<sup>7</sup> Norma Miller, an African American dancer, explained: “White people owned Harlem; it was said that Harlem was for Negroes in the A.M. but for whites in the P.M.”<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the most prominent Jim Crow nightclub was the Cotton Club, which opened in 1923.<sup>9</sup> Called the “Aristocrat of Harlem,”<sup>10</sup> it was the largest and most luxurious of the Jim Crow clubs<sup>11</sup> and strictest in its race policy.<sup>12</sup> The name itself called to mind antebellum cotton plantations, and the decor was made to

match this theme. Cab Calloway, a black musician and conductor who played regularly at the Cotton Club described it:

The bandstand was a replica of a southern mansion with large white columns and a backdrop painted with weeping willows and slave quarters...The waiters were dressed in red tuxedos, like butlers in a southern mansion, and there were huge cut-crystal chandeliers.<sup>13</sup>

Jungle scenery and artificial palm trees also ornamented the walls.<sup>14</sup> Duke Ellington, arguably the preeminent bandleader and composer at the time, even produced “jungle”<sup>15</sup> and “plantation”<sup>16</sup> themed music to satisfy the Cotton Club clientele. Black performers supplied the entertainment,<sup>17</sup> though they were prohibited from mixing with the white audience.<sup>18</sup> This policy created an environment where whites fearful of outright mixing could still dance the Charleston and watch black performers from a safe distance.<sup>19</sup>

Exclusively-black nightclubs existed as well, but they were not nearly as elegant. These included the Renaissance, the Alhambra, the Dunbar Ballroom, the Audubon Ballroom, the Rockland Palace, and the Golden Gate, among others.<sup>20</sup> The 1951 anniversary brochure, *Savoy Story*, called black nightclubs of this era “small and stuffy halls and foul-smelling, smoke-laden cellar night clubs which were the illegal, but prosperous upholstered sewers of the prohibition era.”<sup>21</sup> Until later in the 1930s, black musicians were mostly confined to these poorer clubs.<sup>22</sup> Thus, segregation typified the nightlife and entertainment in Harlem during this period.

The Savoy Ballroom changed all this. Opened in 1926 by Moe Gale, and managed by his black business partner, Charles Buchanan, the Savoy provided an integrated alternative to the Roseland Ballroom (after which it was modeled). It was considerably more upscale than all other venues open to blacks. In fact, the Savoy became the most popular club in all of Harlem for blacks and whites alike, and home to the best dancers and musicians of the city.<sup>23</sup> On its opening night a crowd of 4,000 people, black and white, rushed through its doors,<sup>24</sup> and over the span of its operation, the Savoy served an estimated 10 million people.<sup>25</sup> A true destination, it was also a stop on nightlife bus tours.<sup>26</sup>

The Savoy occupied the entire block on Lenox Avenue between 140th and 141st street, and at 12,500 square feet was the largest ballroom at the time.<sup>27</sup> It boasted marble steps at the entrance, a crystal chandelier,<sup>28</sup> and a brass rail around the perimeter of the dance floor.<sup>29</sup> One step up, a tired dancer could sit at one of the many round tables and enjoy refreshments.<sup>30</sup> However, the polished maple and mahogany dance floor was treated with special reverence and on it drinking and smoking were prohibited.<sup>31</sup> The constant dancing did cause considerable wear on the floor, which consequently had to be replaced every three years.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps the Savoy's most notable feature, however, were its two bandstands that allowed continuous music; one band could pick up where the other left off, so the music and dancing never ended.<sup>33</sup> For all of this dancing, the Savoy was nicknamed "Home of the Happy Feet."<sup>34</sup>

The Savoy Ballroom was Moe Gale's first involvement in show business.<sup>35</sup> Born into a Jewish family<sup>36</sup> from the Lower East Side,<sup>37</sup> his given name was Moses Galewski.<sup>38</sup> He initially worked for a luggage manufacturer<sup>39</sup> and aspired to be an accountant.<sup>40</sup> When he purchased the Savoy Ballroom, he also opened his own booking agency and became the personal manager of many black musicians.<sup>41</sup> Through this agency he could book the musicians he managed into clubs other than his own, extending his customer base. He discovered and publicized Cab Calloway, Chick Webb, Ella Fitzgerald, and the Ink Spots. He also managed Benny Carter, Erskine Hawkins, Lucky Millinder, Coleman Hawkins, and many other big names.<sup>42</sup> He was instrumental in publicizing these black musicians who, without a white manager, would not have been able to attain fame in the entertainment world controlled by whites.<sup>43</sup> He had sway in the entertainment industry, and he used it to continually introduce African Americans into the sphere of white audiences during the 1930s and 1940s.

He featured these musicians at the Savoy. Most often, Chick Webb and his Orchestra played on the number one bandstand.<sup>44</sup> There were several other house bands over the years including those led by Erskine Hawkins, Lucky Millinder, Teddy Hill, Buddy

Johnson, Fess Williams, Tiny Bradshaw, and Willie Bryant, all African American.<sup>45</sup> However, the Savoy also showcased white musicians including Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, Artie Shaw, Benny Goodman, and Glenn Gray and his Casa Loma Orchestra.<sup>46</sup> The most eminent musicians, including Louis Armstrong,<sup>47</sup> Leopold Stokowski,<sup>48</sup> Dicky Wells,<sup>49</sup> Fletcher Henderson,<sup>50</sup> Lena Horne, Billie Holiday, Dinah Washington, Sarah Vaughan, Frank Sinatra, the Andrews Sisters, Jo Stafford, and Jimmy Rushing,<sup>51</sup> could also be seen there on occasion. Nevertheless, Frankie Manning, a black swing dancer, explained that the dancers at the Savoy were not biased in their musical preferences: "If the music was good, it didn't matter to the Savoy crowd whether the band was black or white. By the same token, if the music wasn't good, they wouldn't blame it on the color of the musicians."<sup>52</sup> This attitude was proven when Guy Lombardo's Orchestra, a white orchestra, broke the attendance record the night they played at the Savoy.<sup>53</sup> Norma Miller, another black Savoy dancer, explained that the race mixing of musicians was necessary to progress. She reflected in 1996, "jazz needed a place to develop where innovation was not only accepted but was encouraged; indeed, where those who were timid were left behind. That place was the Savoy. It was where white and black musicians mixed."<sup>54</sup> This mix of musicians simply could not be found anywhere else in Harlem.

While the performers contributed to the Savoy's fame, integration distinguished it from all other venues. The norm at the time was segregation, as exemplified in its most extreme by the Cotton Club. There were no other institutions comparable to the Savoy in its racial acceptance. Norma Miller said of the Savoy Ballroom:

The Savoy was built for black patrons; there was no separate entrance for whites. There were no balconies where the white customers would watch the blacks perform. The opening of the Savoy marked a change in the social pattern. For the first time in history, the status quo in America was challenged. At last there was a beautiful ballroom with no segregation. Black people and white people danced on the same dance floor, they sat and ate across from one another in the booths; everyone's money was the same at the Savoy.<sup>55</sup>

Race mixing on the dance floor was perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the Savoy. Black and white patrons danced with each other, and what they danced was the Lindy Hop, a dance that, in itself, radically altered social norms. It defied all ballroom conventions.<sup>56</sup> It was revolutionary also in that it was the first dance created in America and the first dance originated by blacks in the North rather than being brought north by blacks from the South.<sup>57</sup> The originator was Shorty Snowdown at the Savoy.<sup>58</sup> Instead of being structured and formal, the Lindy was wild and casual. Into the early 1930s, it was not taught at dance schools or by formal lessons;<sup>59</sup> dancers taught themselves by watching others at nightclubs.<sup>60</sup> Female dancers wore short skirts and practical shoes for easy mobility. Girls also spent a lot of the time in the air and with their legs wide apart. This dance also bridged the wealthy and the poor in that people from every economic stratum danced it.<sup>61</sup> As Norma Miller said, “All taboos were broken when it came to the Lindy,<sup>62</sup> so it follows that race taboos could and would be broken too.

The Savoy extended their welcoming and all-encompassing attitude to different kinds of dancers as well, hosting competitive dancers, performance dancers, and social dancers all under one roof.<sup>63</sup> The ballroom was open all seven days and tried to appeal to as many people as possible. Tuesday nights were restricted to members of the 400 Club, the serious elite dancers. Thursday night was Kitchen Mechanics’ Night, created for female domestic laborers, and women could enter free of charge. Saturday night was Square’s Night for the “downtowners”<sup>64</sup> and the night for the weekly Lindy Contest,<sup>65</sup> and Sunday night was the most glamorous night. The entrance fee was 50 percent higher,<sup>66</sup> and one might see celebrities in the crowd.<sup>67</sup> The Savoy also experimented with Latin dances (which were advertised in Spanish-American newspapers),<sup>68</sup> folk-themed dances, as well as fancy-dress cabaret events<sup>69</sup> to attract a wide variety of clients. It was a place where the upper class came to socialize, the tourists came to visit, and the locals came simply to dance.<sup>70</sup> In 1928, the Savoy management designated the northeast corner of the ballroom for the elite dancers.<sup>71</sup> Termed the “Corner” and later “Cat’s Corner,” it allowed the “wild” elite

dancers to have their own space where they would not kick or bump into other patrons.<sup>72</sup> This compromise created an environment where both elite and social dancers could feel comfortable, advantageous because both groups were so important; the social dancers provided continuous business and the elite dancers drew a crowd. Frankie Manning wrote in his autobiography:

At the Renaissance, going to the Savoy was our one ambition because they had the best bands and the best dancers...we put the Savoy on a pedestal. Nobody but the greatest dancers went, or at least those who thought they were.<sup>73</sup>

The clientele at the Savoy shifted during the Great Depression, when more and more poor whites started to frequent the ballroom, and less and less of the rich, “white carriage trade”<sup>74</sup> that had been coming before. As a result, a new type of integration emerged. The ballroom was sensitive to the socioeconomic diversity of its patrons and kept the entrance fee low enough to maintain its accessibility to everyone.<sup>75</sup> It held different events each night of the week, some very formal, some not, so as to ensure that people from all strata could attend. Manning said that people were usually so preoccupied by dancing and having a good time that they “didn’t pay that much attention to famous people if they couldn’t dance. If somebody said, ‘Hey, there’s Clark Gable!’ the only thing we wanted to know was, can he dance?”<sup>76</sup> People “never looked at your face, only at your feet.”<sup>77</sup> The *Amsterdam News*, an African American-run newspaper in Harlem reported that: “At the Savoy Ballroom, social, racial, and economic problems fade away to nothingness.”<sup>78</sup> Race and class did not matter on the dance floor of the Savoy.

### Moe Gale’s Motives

The Savoy was truly a revolutionary achievement considering its resounding success in a city steeped in racial discrimination. It is therefore of great interest to look into the motives behind founding such a radical place. The Savoy Ballroom made a clear social and racial statement. Was that owner Moe Gale’s purpose when he bought the ballroom in 1926?

Until the purchase of the Savoy, Gale was not a particularly noteworthy figure in Harlem. In fact, little is written about his early life. However, he quickly developed two distinct spheres of influence in Harlem in the 1930s and 1940s: the Savoy Ballroom and his booking agency. Combined, these gave him great sway over Harlem's music industry.<sup>79</sup> A 1941 *Saturday Evening Post* article called him "Harlem's Great White Father."<sup>80</sup>

Initially Gale's agency started for the purpose of booking musicians at the Savoy. In 1940, he, along with his brother Tim Gale founded the Gale Agency, which specialized in black talent, not only at the Savoy, but in the entire city.<sup>81</sup> Agencies like Gale's had developed in the 1920s to book musicians at different venues and expose them to the public.<sup>82</sup> The largest of these agencies were the Music Corporation of America, General Amusements Corporation, and William Morris, and they only managed white bands.<sup>83</sup> Some black musicians, like Fletcher Henderson, survived for a while without a personal agent, but with the onset of the Great Depression, it became necessary for him and all other musicians, especially blacks, to seek a manager in order to maintain enough employment.<sup>84</sup> In this way, a market to manage black talent emerged, and Moe Gale, along with a very small handful of others, took advantage of this opportunity and opened his own agency for that purpose.

Control of such an agency and ownership of the Savoy meant that Gale played a huge role in the fates of black musicians. Critic George Simon wrote in 1935, "It seems to be a custom for most of the really good colored bands to get started at the Savoy"<sup>85</sup> and this is undoubtedly due to Gale's influence. The same 1941 *Saturday Evening Post* article about Gale proclaimed: "Gale affects the life of every Negro maestro, even those not under his wing, because most of them can't come out ahead without playing six to twelve weeks a year at the Savoy."<sup>86</sup> Later the article declared:

Because the average Negro musician is emotionally stormy, it requires years of patience and discipline to develop them. Gale has mastered the art of gently cracking the whip, and over the years he has turned countless colored folk into box-office celebrities.<sup>87</sup>



Clearly racial stereotypes have seeped into this description. Mention of the whip is a direct reference to the fact that Gale was white.

This allusion brings up the question: Was Moe Gale Harlem's benevolent "father" as the title suggests or an exploitative racist holding the "whip"? It seems that Maurice Zolotow, the author of this *Post* article, was conflicted. It is not known whether Gale brought African American musicians to fame out of a genuine desire for equality and integration, or because they provided a lucrative market that he could greatly profit from. What is known is that Gale paid musicians who performed at the Savoy unusually low wages: \$33 a week instead of the standard \$50.<sup>88</sup> It was also his policy as an agent that the more prosperous a musician became under his patronage, the larger the percentage he pocketed for himself.<sup>89</sup> These policies suggest mercenary motives. Yet Gale was also willing to lose tens of thousands of dollars over the course of several years on a band before it finally made him a profit.<sup>90</sup> This patience and perseverance seem to suggest that he did have a genuine desire to help his clients succeed. Also, as a Jew not unfamiliar with persecution, perhaps his experience as part of a minority led him to have an openness about racial equality. Regardless of what they were, Moe Gale's motives behind employing African Americans do not detract from the end result. Whether Gale did it for his own fiscal advancement or for the greater good, he still established the Savoy Ballroom as a haven from segregation and created a precedent of racial mixing unheard of at the time.

### The Birth of the Harvest Moon Ball

Though "social, racial, and economic problems" may have faded away amid the energetic dancing and phenomenal music within the walls of the Savoy, they were still as intense as ever outside of those doors. The Savoy was an obvious exception to the racial norm. Prejudice and discrimination affected every other aspect of life.

On March 19, 1935 a Puerto Rican boy was caught attempting to steal a pocketknife from a five-and-dime store on

Lenox Avenue.<sup>91</sup> The police came to the scene of the crime and a crowd started to gather. It was said that the white manager of the store beat the boy.<sup>92</sup> When a hearse passed by (unrelated to the incident), rumors started that the clerk had killed the boy.<sup>93</sup> This incident provoked two days of rioting during which four people died<sup>94</sup> and 100 people were injured.<sup>95</sup> Much property was damaged, including the Savoy Ballroom, which was forced to close down for repairs for a short period of time.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, this incident awakened a deeper frustration about discrimination among the locals. Whites owned Harlem, and at the time, there were very few non-whites working in this neighborhood where blacks spent most of their money. The few who were employed held jobs doing menial labor,<sup>97</sup> and blacks were the first to lose their jobs during the Depression.<sup>98</sup> It did not matter that the boy was Puerto Rican and not black. What mattered was that it was another instance of discrimination. Adam Clayton Powell Jr., a local black pastor and civil rights advocate, intervened, starting a picket with the slogan "Don't buy where you can't work."<sup>99</sup> Dormant feelings of resentment and indignation surfaced and ignited the community.

In an effort to soothe racial tensions, the Savoy's black dance manager, Herbert "Whitey" White, manager Charles Buchanan, and owner Moe Gale met to discuss how to repair the ballroom as well as boost morale.<sup>100</sup> It was of utmost importance to reopen the Savoy because it was the only beacon of racial harmony that the community had, and its closing sent out a symbolic message. The Savoy management sought to maintain a positive model of harmonious racial mixing, especially while race tensions were high around the city.

Shortly after the race riot, Buchanan and Whitey met with two men from the *Daily News* and decided to host the Harvest Moon Ball, a citywide dance contest open to participants of all races. The Ball would be a charity event put on by the *Daily News* and the proceeds would benefit the News Welfare Association, which paid for vacations for impoverished children.<sup>101</sup> The contest would include the Lindy Hop, Waltz, Fox Trot, Rhumba, and Tango,<sup>102</sup> with Abe Lyman's "white society band" for the ballroom dances,

and Fletcher Henderson's swing band for the Lindy.<sup>103</sup> According to Norma Miller, the prevailing social unrest was the impetus for the contest's creation.

At first, Whitey and Buchanan were slightly hesitant about Lindy dancers competing with dancers of other styles because they feared that the Lindy hoppers might be unfairly disadvantaged due to the drastically different style and criteria for judging.<sup>104</sup> Norma Miller explained:

It was the popularity of the Lindy Hop that inspired the contest, but it was the one dance that didn't fit the rules of ballroom dancing. All of the other categories had the same standards: elegance, smoothness, grace, and fluid lines. Partners were always to touch each other and their feet had to remain on the floor at all times. None of these applied to the Lindy Hop.<sup>105</sup>

However, Buchanan and Whitey knew that that this contest would gain a lot of publicity for the Savoy Ballroom, and so agreed.

The Harvest Moon Ball was to be held on August 15, 1935 at Central Park.<sup>106</sup> The night before, all of the competing dancers dined together. All of the teams besides the Savoy Lindy Hoppers were white.<sup>107</sup> Norma Miller, one of the chosen Savoy dancers, did not know whether the racial acceptance that was intrinsic to the Savoy would extend out of the ballroom to this event, and so described "the eerie feeling when [the Savoy dancers] entered the room en mass." However, she continued to say that to her surprise, "the atmosphere was natural, happy, and [they] fell right in as if [they] had known each other forever."<sup>108</sup> The audience of the contest, likewise, was not deterred by the fact that the dancers came from all races. A huge crowd of 150,000 assembled at Central Park to watch;<sup>109</sup> there were so many people, in fact, that the dancers' bus could not make its way to the stage, and the contest had to be postponed because of crowd control problems.<sup>110</sup> The make-up Harvest Moon Ball was held at Madison Square Gardens two weeks later,<sup>111</sup> and was extremely well attended again. The audience was especially excited to watch the Lindy competition, and it roared with the entrance of the Lindy Hoppers.<sup>112</sup> There were several white couples from other ballrooms in the Lindy competition whom

Miller found “clumsy.” She remembers: “Watching them butcher our dance made our tempers flare, and this made us even more determined to take the crown home.”<sup>113</sup> The Savoy dancers were next to take the stage. The rules were in direct opposition to the style of the Lindy (they would have prohibited the breakaway and the jump, signature moves), so they ignored them.<sup>114</sup> And in doing so, the Savoy dancers claimed first, second, and third place.<sup>115</sup>

The Harvest Moon Ball became an annual event, and every subsequent year until 1950 with the exception of 1943, black dancers won the Lindy hop section.<sup>116</sup> (In 1943 there was a race riot during which Mayor LaGuardia had the Savoy closed down for a time. There were protests against this but to no avail, and no black dancers or musicians appeared at the Harvest Moon Ball that year.)<sup>117</sup> The Lindy competition, nonetheless, maintained its popularity, so much so that starting in 1936 the second-place Lindy couple was also given the same prize as the first-place winner in all genres, a weeklong contract at Loew’s State Theater. This exception was not made for the second-place dancers in any other style. Starting in 1938, the prize even extended to the third-place Lindy couple.<sup>118</sup>

### Exportation of the Integrated Image

The first Harvest Moon Ball in 1935 brought the largest audience yet to see the Savoy Lindy Hoppers, now known as Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers. Later the dancers found out that the contest was also filmed and shown in theaters,<sup>119</sup> and with this their audience became exponentially greater. Now people outside of Harlem were viewing this interracial dance contest where blacks not only shared the stage with whites, which was radical enough, but also took the top prizes. In years to come publicity for Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers grew and grew. They were in feature-length films such as MGM’s *A Day at the Races* (1937), Republic Pictures’ *Manhattan Merry-Go-Round* (1937), RKO’s *Radio City Revels* (1938), MC Pictures’ *Keep Punching* (1939) (which was released again in 1943 as a short *Jittering Jitterbugs*), Universal’s *Hellzapoppin* (1941), and MGM’s

*Cabin in the Sky* (1943).<sup>120</sup> They were also featured in “soundies,” the music videos of the time, including *Air Mail Special* (1941), *Hot Chocolate* (also known as *Cottontail*) (1941), *Outline of Jitterbug History* (1942), and *Sugar Hill Masquerade* (1942).<sup>121</sup> Whitey’s dancers even appeared on Broadway in *The Hot Mikado* (1939) and *Swingin’ the Dream* (1939).<sup>122</sup> They also performed at the 1939 World’s Fair.<sup>123</sup> Their audience was becoming enormous. This publicity was both good and bad for the Savoy.

### Reaction to Integrated Dance

It is important to remember that the small niche of racial coexistence at the Savoy and the Harvest Moon Ball was not a microcosm of the rest of New York, or even the rest of Harlem. Though the judging of the contest demonstrated no bias based on race, prejudices and tensions still existed in the audience of the Harvest Moon Ball, and certainly among the viewers of the footage and the shows and soundies in years to come.

For example, one of Norma Miller’s dance partners, Billy Hill, had a white girlfriend, and Miller saw the two of them in the audience the night of the first Harvest Moon Ball, both looking “very happy and excited,” but Miller “could tell they were trying to stay at arm’s length. [She] assumed it was to avoid any problems, that was just the way things were.”<sup>124</sup> In fact, a strange dichotomy emerged surrounding the Harvest Moon Ball and later publicity of the Savoy dancers: it both represented a huge step toward acceptance and integration, and at the same time, highlighted and intensified already existing racial tensions.

While Whitey and the Savoy management were celebrating their victory at the first Harvest Moon Ball, they simultaneously had to face new problems that the explicit publicity of integration brought. There were people who desired to shut the Savoy down to eliminate interracial mixing.<sup>125</sup> This sentiment was not new; the management had been battling it since its opening. The ballroom’s policy of integration made a loud and direct attack on segregation, so naturally there was backlash. In 1933 the Savoy

started hosting cabaret events called the “Savoy Vanities” and received gangster threats from other Harlem nightclubs whose white clientele started to drop off and attend the Savoy instead.<sup>126</sup> At this point, the Savoy backed off from the cabaret events and shifted its focus more to the shim sham shimmy, a new dance fad, and organizing competitions.<sup>127</sup> Even the patrons at the Savoy were aware of the precariousness of the ballroom. When Miller first met Hill’s white girlfriend, she said to him privately, “What are you thinkin’ about, running around with a white girl like that? She looks like a rich one too. Don’t you know that’s exactly the kind of thing got people wanting to close us down?”<sup>128</sup> Hill was naive in his response, Miller thought, saying that people at the Savoy did not care that she was white because the Savoy was integrated.<sup>129</sup> Similar stories were common. According to a *New York Amsterdam News* article, a 17-year-old white girl met a 30-year-old black man at the Savoy. Apparently, “[t]hey danced, they dined, and two days later decided to marry.”<sup>130</sup> When the girl’s parents found out, they charged the man with abduction with the justification that their daughter was still a minor.<sup>131</sup> Though people may have been open to this mixing at the Savoy, clearly not everyone approved outside.

But now more than ever, after the first Harvest Moon Ball, opponents tried to shut down the Savoy. Miller wrote:

Action was being taken to keep the (white) downtown money from flowing uptown to Harlem. White businessmen had been unhappy about Harlem being New York’s playground for quite some time, and the dissatisfaction was increasing.<sup>132</sup>

This time, rumors were circulating that some were conspiring to implicate the Savoy in a prostitution scandal.<sup>133</sup> In response, the Savoy Ballroom management talked to the hostesses to ensure that there were no grounds for claims that relationships existed between them and the clients or musicians.<sup>134</sup>

### Perspectives of Patrons

While there were many from the outside who were disturbed by the racial mixing at the Savoy, firsthand accounts suggest that

most Savoy patrons supported it. Miller wrote that the diversity was the best part of the Savoy:

We had Italian boys that used to come from the Bronx. You had the Jewish boys that came from Brooklyn, and this melting pot... of everybody trying to outdance each other...we had a wonderful thing going with all races and that's what made the Savoy such a wonderful place.<sup>135</sup>

Frankie Manning describes a similar reaction:

As far as I know, it was the only integrated ballroom in the country at the time, and by that I mean that blacks and whites could dance with each other. It was an extraordinary place. At the Savoy, it didn't matter what color you were, black, white, green, yellow, or whatever. I don't even remember noticing people's skin color.<sup>136</sup>

Bob Bailey, a black singer at the Savoy, remarked upon his first visit:

The ballroom was awesome. It just flabbergasted me. The decor, the two bandstands, and the sharpest people I had ever seen before. Plus, all races together. Being from a segregated neighborhood in Cleveland, seeing this just floored me.<sup>137</sup>

This feeling extended beyond the group of regulars at the Savoy. A black author discussed the ballroom in the *New York Amsterdam News*, an African American-run newspaper. He wrote in 1933:

I became interested [in the Savoy Ballroom] because it was the only place of its kind in Harlem where all races could enter together without causing alarm upon the part of those who would, in their misdirected apprehension, keep the Nordics pure...I noticed that the place has assumed an angle, which I would designate as one of the most leveling in race adjustment.<sup>138</sup>

Despite these positive descriptions, there was tension among blacks as well. Naturally, some resented that whites were partaking in the culture of dancing that blacks had created. Later in the same *Amsterdam News* article, the author admits,

There was a time, and perhaps even now, when I bitterly resented the coming of whites to our amusement places to find the pleasure which they seek and receive courtesies grudgingly given to members of my race in their own community. At the Savoy this does not obtain, and it is most refreshing to note that here all hands mix without the least bit of friction.<sup>139</sup>

This author testifies that the atmosphere of the Savoy was able to dissolve this resentment. However, in the following editorial sent in to the *Amsterdam News*, one disgruntled citizen expressed frustration even with the Savoy Ballroom.

To the Editor of the *Amsterdam News*,

Dear Sir — Why should we permit whites to crowd the Savoy Ballroom? I thought the place was for Negroes. We can hardly get in for the whites. Would a Negro be permitted the same privileges in a white dance hall where he would come in contact with white women? Can't something be done about it?—Ernest Golden<sup>140</sup>

There were whites who supported the Savoy too. John Hammond was the founder of the Benny Goodman Band, a regular at the Savoy, and a friend of Moe Gale and Charles Buchanan.<sup>141</sup> He was a civil rights activist who had his own column in the newspaper, *People's Voice*, the most progressive newspaper at the time.<sup>142</sup> His goal was to expose the exploitation of black artists to the public,<sup>143</sup> specifically emphasizing musicians. In Norma Miller's autobiography, she wrote that Hammond "knew that the black and white musicians had to come together if the music was to progress, and he began fighting for more integration."<sup>144</sup> She later called him "one of the many important people who had a lifetime to pass to the Savoy."<sup>145</sup> In summary, opinions differed among locals on the radical integration of the Savoy.

### The Savoy in the Press

Thus far, the perspective into the Savoy Ballroom has been through the eyes of Harlem natives or regulars at the Savoy. However, in analyzing the reactions of the period to the Savoy, the perspective of those who may have never been to the Ballroom is also important. Thus, it is useful to investigate the representation, or lack thereof, of the Savoy Ballroom and its integrated policy in the press.

The *Daily News*, sponsor of the Harvest Moon Ball, provided news coverage on the contest, but the articles and accompanying photographs focused mostly on the elegant white dancers, and



only briefly mentioned the Lindy competition, despite its popularity.<sup>146</sup> They did not mention the black bands that performed at the Harvest Moon Balls. Furthermore, in the next 10 years, only one respectable picture of African American dancers from the Harvest Moon Ball was published.<sup>147</sup> In all others, black dancers were shown with either their mouths gaping open, their eyes rolling, their faces goofy, female dancers upside-down, or their legs or buttocks exposed.<sup>148</sup> All the while, no undignified photos of white dancers appeared in papers.<sup>149</sup>

*Life Magazine* also published several articles for the general public on the dancing that occurred in the Savoy. *Life* was produced for a mainly white audience that extended beyond New York geographically. It projected the image of the Savoy to the rest of America. And the image it projected reflected the common racial stereotypes of the period. In an issue published in 1936, *Life Magazine* called the Lindy Hop “a jungle dance in its wilder manifestations.”<sup>150</sup> The author of this article wrote that the “single girls...at the Savoy may dress as they please, make friends with whom they choose...often they prefer to watch their friends cavorting than to dance themselves.”<sup>151</sup> The mention of “making friends” is certainly a disapproving allusion to race mixing. A more direct reference to this mixing came later, as well as commentary on dancing women: “All female couples...are not an uncommon sight at the Savoy despite the large stag line. Mixed black-and-white dancing is also allowed and visitors see a good deal of it.”<sup>152</sup> Sensational statements like these pointedly highlighted social and racial taboos that would have evoked excitement and/or disdain from a white audience. *Life* also tended to describe African Americans as unrefined and overly sexual;

The black boys and girls...require no great alcoholic stimulant in order to find ways to keep busy and amused between dances. “A kiss can be more dangerous than a bomb,” a public health official announced recently. If so, the Savoy is a very dangerous place. As unselfconscious in their kissing as in their dancing, Savoy customers seek no secluded corners for their fun.<sup>153</sup>

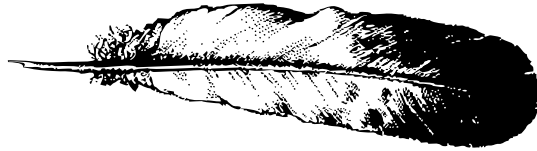
This sexual and even animalistic undertone remained a theme continued in articles for years to come. In an article depicting

Savoy dancers from the 1939 World's fair, *Life* referred to the show as "the evolution of Negro dance forms."<sup>154</sup> In a later issue from 1941, an article titled, "Harlem's New 'Congeroo' Gives Girls a Workout"<sup>155</sup> depicts Ann Johnson and Frankie Manning dancing. A series of photos shows Johnson in mid spin with her underwear showing. It describes the dancing using violent words like "yanked" and "struggling,"<sup>156</sup> and the last panel shows a picture of Johnson kicking Manning, sending him flying. The caption reads, "Ann satisfies her suppressed desire as the congeroo ends,"<sup>157</sup> another sexual implication.

These descriptions might have been the only view into the Savoy that the general public outside of Harlem got. They are key to understanding why the opening of the Savoy was such a radical change; these articles would have shocked the audience at the time. *Life Magazine* further played into this shock factor in their word choice and picture selection.

The Savoy Ballroom managed to stay open until 1958 (except for the temporary closing in 1943),<sup>158</sup> but its glory days ended long before then.<sup>159</sup> Still, its impact was immense. During its 30-year operation, the management of the Savoy Ballroom openly condemned segregation and created a place where blacks and whites could mix freely. The decision to create an integrated ballroom was no accident. Though Moe Gale's personal motives are unknown, anyone at the time would have understood that promoting integration was against the status quo. Perhaps he did it out of economic pragmatism to attain a greater customer base. Perhaps his motives were initially more commercial than that. In any case, the Savoy management resolved to remain integrated, even in the face of violence and gangster threats. The fact that the management continually and intentionally made integration public by participating in events like the Harvest Moon Ball and later a myriad of films and productions indicates an intention to make a political statement. Despite the ingrained prejudice of the time, Gale and the Savoy management cultivated and exported the image of integration to a wider and wider audience, pushing racial boundaries to the limit. Thousands of people found out about

the Savoy when they attended the Harvest Moon Ball. Thousands more watched the many films and stage productions featuring Savoy dancers and witnessed racial equality in action. Those who did not may have read about the Savoy in *Life Magazine*. Though publicity of integration made many people uncomfortable, it also planted the seed in the American consciousness of what the future held. The opening of the Savoy Ballroom was one of the first milestones in the fight for civil rights that continued in the 1960s.



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- <sup>2</sup> Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns, Jazz: A History of America's Music (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000) p. 174
- <sup>3</sup> Norma Miller and Evette Jensen, Swingin' at the Savoy: The Memoir of a Jazz Dancer (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996) p. 20
- <sup>4</sup> Laban Carrick Hill, Harlem Stomp!: A Cultural History of the Harlem Renaissance (New York: Little, Brown, 2003) p. 98
- <sup>5</sup> Steven Watson, The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African-American Culture, 1920–1930 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995) p. 125
- <sup>6</sup> Hill, p. 101
- <sup>7</sup> Miller and Jensen, p. 27
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 27–28
- <sup>9</sup> Watson, p. 126
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 126
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 126
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 126
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 126
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 126
- <sup>15</sup> Joel Dinerstein, Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture between the World Wars (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003) p. 51
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 349
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 349; Hill, p. 98
- <sup>18</sup> Watson, p. 128
- <sup>19</sup> Hill, p. 98
- <sup>20</sup> Manning and Millman, p. 67
- <sup>21</sup> Quoted in Julie Malign, Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009) p. 126
- <sup>22</sup> Miller and Jensen, p. 32
- <sup>23</sup> Ward and Burns, p. 174
- <sup>24</sup> Watson, p. 138.
- <sup>25</sup> Gena Caponi-Tabery, Jump for Joy: Jazz, Basketball, and Black Culture in 1930s America (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008) p. 56
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 56
- <sup>27</sup> Ward and Burns, p. 174
- <sup>28</sup> Watson, p. 138

- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 138
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 139
- <sup>31</sup> Malnig, p. 129
- <sup>32</sup> Ward and Burns, p. 174
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 174; Watson, p. 139; Miller and Jensen, p. 31; David W. Stowe, Swing Changes: Big-band Jazz in New Deal America (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994) p. 19
- <sup>34</sup> Ward and Burns, p. 174; Stowe, p. 19
- <sup>35</sup> Scott Knowles DeVaux, The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) p. 138
- <sup>36</sup> Alan M. Wald, Trinity of Passion: The Literary Left and the Antifascist Crusade (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007) p. 109
- <sup>37</sup> DeVaux, p. 138; Stowe, p. 104
- <sup>38</sup> Alyn Shipton, Hi-de-ho: The Life of Cab Calloway (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) p. 43
- <sup>39</sup> DeVaux, p. 138
- <sup>40</sup> Stowe, p. 104
- <sup>41</sup> Manning and Millman, p. 68
- <sup>42</sup> Stowe, p. 103
- <sup>43</sup> Stuart Nicholson, Ella Fitzgerald: A Biography of the First Lady of Jazz (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994) p. 144
- <sup>44</sup> Manning and Millman, p. 69
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 69
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 69
- <sup>47</sup> Ward and Burns, p. 113
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 221
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 178
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 220
- <sup>51</sup> Miller and Jensen, p. 34
- <sup>52</sup> Manning and Millman, p. 69
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 69
- <sup>54</sup> Miller and Jensen, p. 32
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 28
- <sup>56</sup> Malnig, p. 133
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 133
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 133
- <sup>59</sup> Caponi-Tabery, p. 59
- <sup>60</sup> Malnig, p. 138
- <sup>61</sup> Manning and Millman, p. 46

- <sup>62</sup> Miller and Jensen, p. 80
- <sup>63</sup> Malnig, p. 129
- <sup>64</sup> Watson, p. 139
- <sup>65</sup> Manning and Millman, p. 82
- <sup>66</sup> Ward and Burns, p. 174
- <sup>67</sup> Watson, p. 139
- <sup>68</sup> Malnig, p. 135
- <sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 137
- <sup>70</sup> Caponi-Tabery, p. 56
- <sup>71</sup> Malnig, p. 134
- <sup>72</sup> Quoted in Manning and Millman, p. 64
- <sup>73</sup> Manning and Millman, p. 61
- <sup>74</sup> Malnig, p. 135
- <sup>75</sup> Caponi-Tabery, p. 56
- <sup>76</sup> Manning and Millman, p. 71
- <sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 71
- <sup>78</sup> Quoted in Hill, p. 96
- <sup>79</sup> Shipton, p. 46.
- <sup>80</sup> Stowe, p. 103
- <sup>81</sup> "Sigmund Gale Dies in N. York," The Billboard  
(September 16, 1950)
- <sup>82</sup> DeVeaux, p. 122
- <sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 122
- <sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 122
- <sup>85</sup> Quoted in DeVeaux, p. 138
- <sup>86</sup> Quoted in Ibid., p. 138
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- <sup>88</sup> DeVeaux, p. 141
- <sup>89</sup> Christopher Wilkinson, Jazz on the Road: Don Albert's  
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- <sup>91</sup> Ward and Burns, p. 217
- <sup>92</sup> Miller and Jensen, p. 53
- <sup>93</sup> Ward and Burns, p. 217
- <sup>94</sup> Miller and Jensen, p. 53
- <sup>95</sup> Ward and Burns, p. 217
- <sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 217; Miller and Jensen, p. 55
- <sup>97</sup> Miller and Jensen, p. 54
- <sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 35
- <sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 54
- <sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 55
- <sup>101</sup> Caponi-Tabery, p. 61

- <sup>102</sup> Miller and Jensen, p. 55
- <sup>103</sup> Caponi-Tabery, p. 61
- <sup>104</sup> Miller and Jensen, p. 56
- <sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 65
- <sup>106</sup> Caponi-Tabery, p. 61
- <sup>107</sup> Dinerstein, p. 272; Caponi-Tabery, p. 61
- <sup>108</sup> Miller and Jensen, p. 72
- <sup>109</sup> Caponi-Tabery, p. 61
- <sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 61; Miller and Jensen, p. 73
- <sup>111</sup> Caponi-Tabery, p. 61
- <sup>112</sup> Miller and Jensen, p. 80
- <sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 81
- <sup>114</sup> Caponi-Tabery, pp. 61–62
- <sup>115</sup> Miller and Jensen, p. 82
- <sup>116</sup> Caponi-Tabery, p. 62; Dinerstein, p. 276
- <sup>117</sup> Dinerstein, p. 276
- <sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 272
- <sup>119</sup> Manning and Millman, p. 91
- <sup>120</sup> Caponi-Tabery, p. 59
- <sup>121</sup> Ibid., p. 59
- <sup>122</sup> Ibid., p. 59
- <sup>123</sup> Dinerstein, p. 303
- <sup>124</sup> Miller and Jensen, p. 82
- <sup>125</sup> Ibid., p. 83
- <sup>126</sup> Malnig, p. 135
- <sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 135
- <sup>128</sup> Miller and Jensen, p. 78
- <sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 78
- <sup>130</sup> “Law Interrupts Mixed Marriage,” ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Amsterdam News (New York) p. May 10, 1933, 1922–1938 edition
- <sup>131</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>132</sup> Miller and Jensen, p. 83
- <sup>133</sup> Ibid., p. 83
- <sup>134</sup> Ibid., p. 85
- <sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 221
- <sup>136</sup> Manning and Millman, p. 71
- <sup>137</sup> Quoted in Miller and Jensen, p. 120
- <sup>138</sup> “My Observations: The Observing Eye Discovers a Few Things,” ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Amsterdam News (New York) (May 10, 1933) p. 8
- <sup>139</sup> Ibid., p. 8

<sup>140</sup> Ernest Golden, “Interracial Dancing,’ Hard One to Answer: To the Editor of the Amsterdam News,” ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Amsterdam News (New York) (January 12, 1935), 1922–1938 edition

<sup>141</sup> Miller and Jensen, p. 110

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p. 110

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., p. 110

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., p. 112

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., p. 117

<sup>146</sup> Dinerstein, p. 271

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p. 275

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., p. 275

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p. 275

<sup>150</sup> “Life Goes to a Party,” Life (December 14, 1936) p. 67

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., p. 67

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., p. 67

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p. 68

<sup>154</sup> “New York Opens the Gates to the World of Tomorrow,” Life (May 15, 1939)

<sup>155</sup> Frankie Manning named one of his acts the “Congaroo,” as it incorporated the Lindy Hop with the conga, a Cuban social dance. Manning and Millman, p. 204. It was found with a different spelling in Life Magazine.

<sup>156</sup> “Harlem’s New ‘Congeroot’ Gives Girls a Workout,” Life (June 16, 1941) p. 49

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., p. 50

<sup>158</sup> Malnig, p. 141

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., p. 199; Manning and Millman, p. 218



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