

APOLLO EDUCATION

THE APOLLO THEATER STUDY GUIDE

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SPECIAL EDITION GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS

SHOWTIME AT THE APOLLO

THE EPIC TALE OF HARLEM'S LEGENDARY THEATER

BY TED FOX ILLUSTRATED BY JAMES OTIS SMITH



The world famous Apollo Theater, located in New York City in the village of Harlem, is the place “Where Stars are Born and Legends are Made.”™



Since its inception as an African American theater in 1934, the Apollo has led the way in the presentation of jazz, rhythm and blues, gospel, soul, funk, and hip-hop—along with the latest in dance and comedy. The Apollo’s artistic genius inspired the imagination of the world, and it became a uniquely special place for its artists and community. The theater has nurtured and featured thousands of performers, many of whom have gone on to become legends of American arts and entertainment. Some would call them heroes. The beauty they have given the world—their art—transcends the hatred, ignorance, and intolerance that they often faced.

ABOUT THE GRAPHIC NOVEL

Setting the scene at today’s Apollo, where its legend lures top stars like JAY-Z, Bruce Springsteen and President Obama, **“Showtime at the Apollo: The Epic Tale of Harlem’s Legendary Theater”**, by Ted Fox, illustrated by James Otis Smith, is a graphic novel adaptation of Fox’s original 1983 classic history of the Apollo. *Showtime at the Apollo* takes readers through the sweeping history of one of America’s most important and mythic cultural institutions. The book is your visual gateway to an epicenter of American music and culture in the heart of Harlem and shows how the Apollo both shaped and was shaped by its times. The story is told by those who lived it, including Billie Holiday, James Brown, Dionne Warwick and a host of other great African-American performers, many of whose careers were launched at the Apollo. With Smith’s breathtaking art, this graphic novel illuminates the theater’s legendary significance in music, African American history, and American popular culture. It is, as Fox writes, “the stuff of which myths are made.”

SHOWTIME AT THE APOLLO

GRAPHIC NOVEL

A Guide for Educators

This study guide for the graphic novel “Showtime at the Apollo: The Epic Tale of Harlem’s Legendary Theater” has been developed for students grades 6 and above. The guide draws from the Apollo’s learning library of resources to support your historical, cultural, and visual engagement with the graphic novel.

MORE THAN A MARQUEE:

Cultural Landmarks and the Significance of the Apollo Theater in Harlem

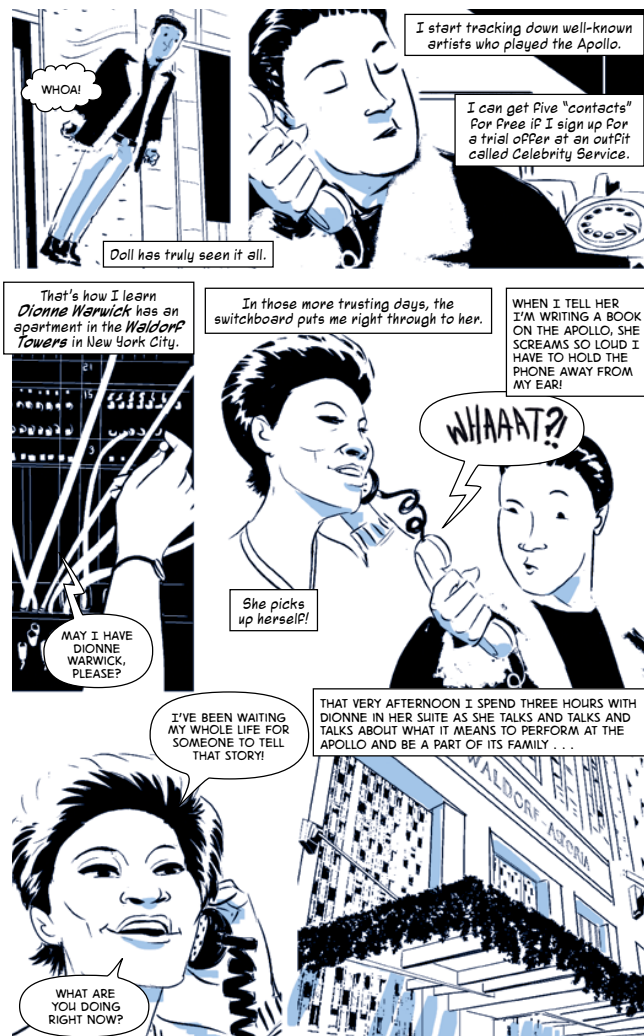
In many ways, the story of the Apollo Theater embodies the story of Black America over the span of 85 years...explore the history of the landmark in *The Soul of American Culture Study Guide* - “*The Soul of American Culture*” and “*What is a Landmark*”.

- How do the stories of the artists reflect the social and cultural challenges faced by people of color over time?

- How does the characterization of the Apollo audience paint a picture of the Harlem community? *The Soul of American Culture Study Guide* - “*Drop Me Off In Harlem: NYC’s Historic Neighborhood*”

- How does Frank and Bobby Schiffman’s story illuminate different aspects of show business, e.g. securing venues, talent management, and audience development? How has the business of entertainment changed over time?





1000 VOICES, 1 EPIC TALE: Oral History and the Art of Storytelling

Ted Fox conducts oral history interviews to gather the first-person narratives of life behind-the-scenes at the Apollo. In the Introductory Chapter “A Quest”, Fox recounts his investigative journey beginning with a conversation with Francis “Doll” Thomas, a.k.a. “Mr. Apollo” (Page 3). That first conversation leads to him to Dionne Warwick and then to Sammy Davis Jr., and so on. Discuss how these first-person narratives add authentic voice, multiple perspectives, and layers of interconnected experiences throughout the graphic novel.

● **Who’s who?:** Hundreds of artists are featured in the graphic novel. Students can immerse themselves in the story of one individual artist from the graphic novel, such as Ella Fitzgerald, Dionne Warwick, Bo Diddley or James Brown. The *Apollo Theater Walk of Fame Study Guides*, offer insights into the lives and careers of artists who have been inducted into the Apollo’s Walk of Fame.

● **Classroom Walk of Fame:** Using the Apollo Theater Walk of Fame Study Guides as a model, students can select one performer from the graphic novel (check out the Apollo Amateur Night Winners Hall of Fame on Page 77) and create a portrait of their lives including biographical information, social context of their times, images, and a playlist of their music. Consider using digital media platforms to assemble and present information.

● This graphic novel teaches us a lot about the living histories in our local communities that are waiting to be documented. Using *Principles and Best Practices for Oral History Education Classroom Guide*, you can plan an oral history project that will bring history to life for your students.



CHRONICLING THE PAST:

Using Archival Records and Newspapers to Chart the Apollo's History

Ted Fox talks about how he used the Apollo's weekly advertisements from the New York Age newspaper archives to help him reconstruct a chronology of the shows and performers. "From these ads I transcribed-by hand, in script, on yellow lined pads-every show (with very few gaps) and most performers for each week of the Apollo's history, from its inception in 1934 until the early 1970." (See more in "A Note on Sources and Methods" on pages 221- 222).

● Discuss how newspapers were essential tools of mass communication in this period, and subsequently, how they are chronicles of culture, politics, entertainment, and communities.

● Put together a fantasy show at the Apollo: In Chapter 3, the components of a great show is described and illustrated in great detail from opening acts to closing acts. In the 1930s jazz was the popular music of the day and the very first show at the Apollo in 1934 was Jazz a la Carte with bandleader Benny Carter. How would you compose your fantasy show at the Apollo? Who are the performers that you would choose to represent today's popular music? Or, use the Apollo's decade by decade breakdown of popular performers that appeared on its stage to help you assemble your show. Link: <https://www.apollotheater.org/about/history/>

THE ANATOMY OF AN APOLLO SHOW:

Genre Study by the Decades

● The graphic novel depicts how the Schiffmans and the Apollo producers and managers assembled shows with talent from all categories of performance, including music (musicians and singers), dance, comedy, chorus lines, and orchestras. Students can trace the evolution of one of these art forms through the decades represented by each chapter of the graphic novel: Chapter 3: The 1930s Swingin'; Chapter 5: The 1940s: Boppin'; Chapter 6: The 1950s: Boppin'; Chapter 8: The 1960s: Soulful; and Chapter 9: The 1970s: Funky. Additional support for your genre studies can be found in a

number of resources from Apollo Education: Links to [*Rhythm and Blues Study Guide*](#), [*Afro-Latin Jazz Study Guide*](#), [*The Soul of American Culture \(Educator Resource Guide\)*](#), [*Tapping at the Apollo*](#), and [*Meeting Dee Dee's Voice, Dee Dee Bridgewater/New Orleans Jazz Orchestra Study Guide*](#).

● Explore the Showtime at the Apollo [Spotify playlist](#) created by Abrams Books to study the sounds of each genre in the graphic novel including contemporary artists featured in the book from the 1980s to the present.

BRINGING THE PAST TO LIFE IN PICTURES:

Visual Literacy and the Art of James Otis Smith

James Otis Smith uses a unique visual style to illustrate *Showtime at the Apollo*, his debut graphic novel. Discuss the various elements of his dynamic aesthetics including:

- 1) his use of black, white, and blue as the color palette for this graphic history;
- 2) the way he depicts movement, emotion, and high energy in the bodies of the performers and audience members throughout the novel;
- 3) his minimalistic, yet distinctive portraiture that gives character to the many voices featured on each page; and
- 4) how historical artifacts are interwoven into the narrative to support the chronologies and provide context for memories and historical events.



● Observe how the illustrator uses different craft elements to create the visual story and discuss individual pages or spreads that stand out to you for its use of one or more of the following: panel shape and size; sound effects; repetition; character design; symbolism; settings; dialogue; etc.

● Analyze This: Use the visual thinking strategy of observation to describe what you SEE in this panel, then discuss how the visual elements construct meaning and inform what you THINK about the story being depicted.

Credits

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