

APOLLO

Where Stars are Born and Legends are Made™

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**If the Apollo Theater could talk,
imagine the stories it could tell. It
has witnessed a lot of history, and
seen a century's worth of excitement.**

The theater itself has stood proudly on 125th Street since 1914, when it started life as a burlesque house for whites only, Hurtig & Seamon's New Burlesque Theater. Dancers in skimpy costumes stripped down to flesh-colored leotards, and comics told bawdy jokes – that is, until then New York City Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia made the decision to close down burlesque houses all over the city. When the doors of the burlesque theaters were padlocked, the building was sold. By the time it reopened in 1934, a new name proclaimed itself from the marquee: the *125th Street Apollo Theatre*. From the start, the Apollo was beloved by Harlemites, and immediately became an integral part of Harlem life.

When the Apollo first opened, Harlem boasted a lot of theaters and clubs. But many didn't admit black audiences. Though the musicians who played in the clubs were black, the audiences were often white; the country still had a lot to learn about integration. But the Apollo didn't play primarily to whites. As soon as it opened its doors, black residents of Harlem streamed in themselves to enjoy the show.

In the early years, the Apollo presented acts in a revue format, with a variety of acts on each bill. Bands might be followed by singers, who'd be followed by dancers. Sprinkled throughout were the comedians, and their routines were the glue that held the lineups together. This sort of format for entertainment had been popular in vaudeville, and the Apollo opened its door at the tail end of that era.

Over the years, the Apollo has had a few owners. Sidney Cohen and Morris Sussman founded the Apollo and pioneered its progressive policies of integration. But the owners who managed it the longest were the Schiffman family. Frank Schiffman was a smart business operator who squeezed out his competition. His son Bobby was raised in the theater and developed a deep appreciation for and rapport with the performers.

Over the course of 40 years, the Schiffmans booked the most popular artists of the day. The roster of artists who performed at the theater over those decades corresponds to the changing tastes in American music. In the 1930s, audiences came to see swing bands, led by jazz royalty Duke Ellington and Count Basie. In the 1940s, they listened to Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker play a new, innovative style of jazz called bebop. In the 1950s, Harlemites lined up to hear rhythm-and-blues legends the Orioles. And in the 1960s, they cheered on stylish girl groups like the Shirelles and the Supremes. Musically, the Apollo presented it all: swing, bebop, rhythm and blues, soul, female vocalists, doo-wop, Motown, funk, gospel, the blues.

These were all major trends in American music. Black musicians have always been on the cutting edge, creating those trends, and many white musicians were inspired by what they heard. In the early years, those white musicians often had more opportunities in the music industry, and popularized what they heard at the Apollo. Elvis Presley,

The Soul of American Culture



for instance, borrowed directly from artists such as Bo Diddley. This wasn't always fair to individual Apollo artists, who didn't reap the benefit of their labor. Still, their work itself, and its influence, spread widely. As the years went on, black musicians themselves climbed to the skies and polished their own stars. By the 1960s, when James Brown, Aretha Franklin, and The Supremes hit the charts, their songs could be heard on record players and transistor radios all over the country. And by the time Michael Jackson came of age, he moonwalked his way across the heavens. All these artists performed at the Apollo, and many got their start there.

Black musicians also inspired each other. After they performed, they often gathered to jam and trade riffs. As did the tap dancers who worked at the Apollo, and the comics. There's long been a friendly competition among the performers that's been part of the fun. But there's also been a strong, supportive, family feeling. Technique and routines were handed down from one performer to the other. Today, when you watch Savion Glover dance, the rhythm tap he showcases was first developed and passed along by Apollo regulars John Bubbles, Honi Coles, and Sandman Sims. And when you laugh at the routines of comedians who are popular today – Chris Rock, Dave Chappelle, or Wanda Sykes – you can be certain that they've studied the work of the innovative Apollo comics who came before them – Moms Mabley, Pigmeat Markham, and Redd Foxx.

For the performers, the Apollo felt like home. They knew they could be themselves there; they were playing for

audiences who understood them, and they were supported by the other artists.

The Apollo has also felt like home to the Harlemites in the audience. In Harlem, life hasn't always been easy, and residents have felt more than their share of economic and social struggle. But if Harlemites felt that doors were slamming in their faces, the doors of the Apollo always swung open to welcome them. They could dress up, stroll in on the arm of a date or with friends, take their seats, and forget the worries that plagued them outside.

The Apollo has also been remarkable because, from early on, it employed blacks in jobs offstage as well as on. This was unusual for the mostly white-owned businesses on 125th Street. Over the years, Harlemites protested against the neighborhood restaurants and shops that first wouldn't serve them, and later wouldn't employ them. Sometimes, angry race riots erupted, but they never targeted the Apollo. At the Apollo, blacks held prestigious jobs such as Production Manager, Technical Director, Sound Technician, and Rehearsal Band Conductor.

In the late 1970s, the theater hit hard times and was forced to close. It was bought and resurrected by Percy E. Sutton, the Harlem politician and media baron, who then turned it over to the state. In 1983, the building itself was granted landmark status, and is now managed by the Apollo Theater Foundation and its Board of Directors. This ensures that the doors of the theater will stay open and that it can continue in the role it has forged over the years – the soul of American culture.



What is... A Landmark

An historic landmark is an architecturally significant structure with a noteworthy connection to history. Harlem is a landmark community. The Apollo Theater is only one of the many landmarks that line Harlem's historic streets. The Apollo is historically significant because of its role as one of the nation's leading entertainment centers, its contribution to American culture as a showcase for new talent, and as the place where many of the world's most legendary entertainers have performed.

The building that houses the Apollo was built in 1914 and designed in the neoclassical style by George Keister, an architect who built several of New York City's famous theaters and movie houses at the turn of the 20th century. Despite many renovations over its 96 year history, the Apollo has retained the look and feel of its original interior and exterior design. It is also one of the few performance venues in New York City from the early 1900's still standing and operating today.

Since its opening in 1934, generations have seen the Apollo's marquee light up Harlem's 125th Street. Because the Apollo is listed in the National Register of Historic places and, by law, can never be torn down, future generations will also be able to see its iconic marquee.

Try This:

To learn more about historic landmarks, you can visit the National Register of Historic Places online. See what historic landmarks are in your community and learn more about them. Was a star born in your hometown? Did a great leader live in your neighborhood? Is your home built on a battleground? Discover what makes your local landmark unique. Find out how a place becomes a landmark. Visit: www.nps.gov/nr to find out.

Left: The Apollo marquee as it appeared in the 1930s; inset: The Apollo's blade still hangs high on 125th Street in Harlem



The stump of the Tree of Hope on the Apollo's stage. Performers rub the stump for "good luck".

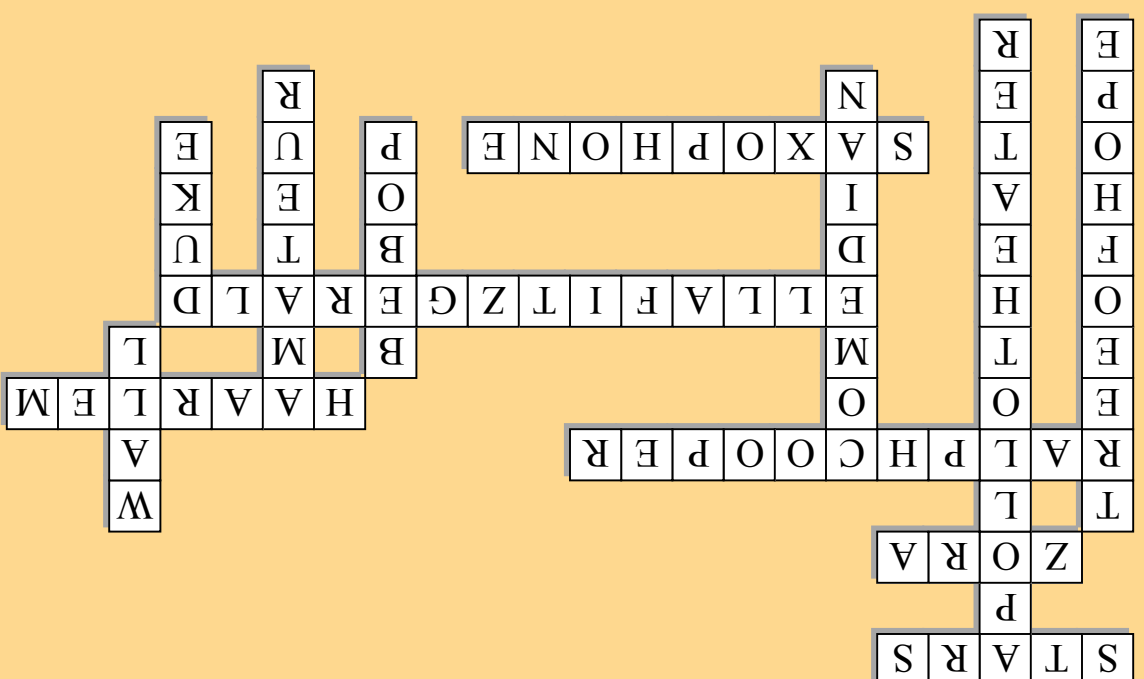
THE TREE OF HOPE

The legend and tradition of The Tree of Hope began outside the famous Lafayette Theatre once located between 131st and 132nd Streets on Seventh Avenue in Harlem. From 1912 – 1933, the Lafayette was one of Harlem's most well known theaters. Its shows featured some of the most well known African-American performers of the day, such as tap dancer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson; Vaudeville, blues and jazz performers Ethel Walters, Florence Mills, Bessie Smith, and Duke Ellington. It was nicknamed "The House Beautiful", by its fans because it was one of the first theaters to desegregate.

The Tree of Hope stood proudly on the meridian that runs along Seventh Avenue from 110th street to 155th Street. The section where the tree was located in front of the Lafayette Theater was at times called The Boulevard of Dreams, The Stroll or, simply, The Corner. In those days, The Tree of Hope was where unemployed performers would gather to chat or wait for some kind of work. Soon, because booking agents realized that this gathering was a good place to find talent, many of those same performers found jobs. As a result, performers considered the Tree a good luck charm.

Did you know....

In Harlem, Seventh Avenue is also known as Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Boulevard. It was renamed in 1974 in honor of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., an ordained minister, community activist and United States Congressman.





Drop Me Off In Harlem

NYC'S HISTORIC NEIGHBORHOOD

In the early 1930s, the great jazz composer/ band leader Duke Ellington wrote a song called Drop Me Off in Harlem. As the legend goes, he was sharing a cab with a friend who was a lyricist. “Where to, Duke?” asked the friend.

“Drop me off in Harlem,” said Ellington. The friend ended up writing lyrics with those words, and Ellington composed the music. And so the song was born.

It was no wonder that Ellington was headed to Harlem. Harlem had become a hotspot. Everybody was going there.

EARLY HARLEM

Though it might have been hard for Duke to picture at the time, Harlem had not always been hopping with nightlife. A few short centuries before, the only night sounds might have been bobcats and owls. The area was forest and meadow, and home to Native American tribes.

The first European settlers to arrive were Dutch. They named their new village after Haarlem, a city they had left in the Netherlands. When English settlers replaced the Dutch, they kept the name, shortening it to “Harlem.” In those days, Harlem was not yet part of New York City. It was a small and separate farming town, far from the bustling life of lower Manhattan, connected only by a road, that we now know as Broadway, which had once been a Native American trail.

But of course, New York City grew. And grew. The El came to Harlem — elevated trains! — and with the trains came great waves of immigrants who were flowing into the city. Developers couldn’t erect new housing — from tenements to townhouses — fast enough. In the 1800s, Harlem welcomed a polyglot population of Jews, Germans, Italians, and Irish. Their cultures all bumped up against each other as people learned to live alongside others who spoke different languages, ate different foods, and practiced different religions.

But these were all European cultures. In the early days of New York City, people of African descent lived farther downtown. The African Burial Ground recently discovered near Wall Street in 1991 housed the remains of nearly 20,000 people buried there during the 17th and 18th centuries. In the mid-19th century, many freed slaves settled in Seneca Village, a thriving community of homes, schools, and churches in what is now the west part of Central Park from 82nd to 88th Streets. And at the end of that century, many blacks lived on the Westside, in the 20s, 40s, and 60s. So how did Harlem come to be home to the large black community that lives there today?

THE GREAT MIGRATION

In the early 1900s, another great migration started. This one did not involve people traveling across the ocean from Europe to America. This one was within America. Blacks who had been living in the South began to come north. When the Civil War ended in 1865, the vast majority of African-Americans lived in the South, in states that had been slave-holding. Most struggled to survive on the meager livings they made as rural sharecroppers. But blacks soon realized that there wasn’t much economic opportunity in the South, and that the racism there was deeply ingrained. They yearned to escape the South’s harsh and punishing Jim Crow laws. The North, on the other hand, was industrializing. It promised factory jobs, service jobs, and life in big cities such as New York, Chicago, and Detroit. And so, in the early part of the 20th century, millions of blacks migrated north. This was a huge population shift in our country, one we now call The Great Migration. During this same period, people were also arriving from the Caribbean.

THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

Many of the migrants ended up in Harlem. And, when they arrived, something very exciting happened. Sometimes, at certain points in history and in certain places, there is an electric crackle of art and ideas, and it sparks into a bright flare of artistic achievement. That happened in Harlem in the years 1919 to the early 1930s. It’s almost as if a bolt of lightning flashed, pointed its electric finger at Harlem, and supercharged it. We call that time The Harlem Renaissance. During those years, Harlem was home to a vibrant community of artists and intellectuals. It nurtured prominent writers such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, famous artists such as Palmer Hayden and Augusta Savage, and progressive thinkers such as W.E.B. DuBois and Marcus Garvey. The talented photographer James Van Der Zee was kept busy documenting the lives of all the well-to-do families living in the proud brownstones of Sugar Hill and Strivers’ Row.

And the musicians? Their names could fill page after page! The new art form called jazz was in full bloom. People from downtown were flocking to the glittering uptown clubs such as The Cotton Club and Small’s Paradise. Should they go to hear Duke Ellington or Cab Calloway? Count Basie or Fletcher Henderson? Ethel Waters or Bessie Smith?

Imagine! All those artists producing groundbreaking work at the same time, all feeding off and inspired by each

other. It was a thrilling time to be in Harlem. When Duke Ellington composed the music to the song Drop Me Off in Harlem, he knew he was celebrating someplace special.

MORE CHANGES

But in 1929, The Great Depression hit, and it hit hard, all across the country. Suddenly, jobs were scarce, as was money, even food. People could no longer spend money on entertainment. Still, Harlem continued to be a breeding ground for creativity. In the years following World War II, when the economy again began to grow, the civil rights movement took hold. Harlem, which had come to be considered the black spiritual and cultural capital of the entire country, was once again electrified by political fervor. Preachers used their pulpits to call publicly for an end to segregation, and people were emboldened, demanding their rights.

Musically, it was an expansive time as well. In jazz, swing music evolved into bebop. Rhythm and blues flourished, giving birth to rock and roll, and evolving further into a style of music called soul. The trends rolled out, and Harlem continued to host them.

EL BARRIO

After World War II, there were other changes in Harlem. There was a new flow of Spanish-speaking immigrants, many of whom were from Puerto Rico. The eastern part of the neighborhood — from East 96th Street to East 125th Street - was now called Spanish Harlem. When the writer Piri Thomas wrote his autobiography Down These Mean Streets, the Harlem he illuminated had a new, Latin beat. Latin jazz musicians, such as Ray Barretto and Tito Puente, played alongside and influenced black musicians, just as black jazz influenced them. Once again, cultures were cross-pollinating and it was a fertile time.

WHAT’S NEXT?

The history of Harlem is the history of change. As people have flowed into the area and settled, they have enriched it greatly. The culture they have produced has, in turn, flowed out from Harlem and seeded the culture of the entire country, indeed, of the whole world.

What’s next for Harlem? Only time will tell. But if history is any indication, we can expect this: the culture it produces — its music and rhythms, its language and poetry — will enrich us all.

Above: Harlem Street Scene taken in the 1930s.

BEHIND THE SCENES:

The Production Department

There are lots of important jobs behind-the-scenes at a theater, and without them, the show would not go on.

When audiences come to The Apollo, they definitely notice the performers. Who could miss them? They're the ones at the microphone, wearing the flashy costumes, catching our eye. But not everyone who loves the theater dreams of singing in the spotlight. Some dream of running the spotlight. There are lots of important jobs behind-the-scenes at a theater, and without them, the show would not go on.

Steve Jones, the **DIRECTOR OF PRODUCTION** at the Apollo, knows just how exciting jobs in technical production can be. Before coming to the Apollo, he was the Road Manager for the performer and activist Harry Belafonte, touring extensively through Europe, Africa, and Asia. At the Apollo, he regularly meets with a wide variety of performers. Steve's job begins as soon as an artist decides to appear at the Theater. He discusses what they want their shows to look like, and how the Apollo can produce that technically. Dancers need special flooring. Singers require different numbers and groupings of speakers. A band with a lot of instruments will need a large sound. A rap group needs extra bass.

Once Steve determines the requirements, other workers help carry out the technical aspects of the show. These jobs include:

LIGHTING

While the show is in rehearsal, the **LIGHTING DESIGNER** programs lights for the show. Will there be spotlights? Gels for colored lights? Gobos, or patterns that run through the light? The Lighting Designer programs the sequence of lighting cues into the computer. Later, when

Steve Jones is the Apollo's Director of Production



The Apollo's Saturday Workshop Series teaches high school students about careers in production. Here, two students learn how to operate the lighting board.

the show is actually running, the **BOARD OPERATOR** takes over. During the show, he or she presses the right buttons ensuring that the different lighting effects appear at the right time.

AUDIO

The Apollo has two mixing consoles for audio, or sound. One sits at the back of the orchestra seats and is for the front of the house, meaning the audience. The other console is just off the stage, and controls the sound on the stage itself, since musicians hear something very different than the audience hears. Each console has a **SOUND ENGINEER** running it. Before a show, the Engineers conduct a sound check to EQ (or equalize) the room, making sure the sound is heard properly throughout the orchestra and two balconies. Other audio workers are the A2s, who place the microphones, or change them during the show. One drum kit, for instance, might require 6-12 mikes! How all those mikes are positioned affects the sound the audience hears.

STAGE MANAGER

The **STAGE MANAGER** sits just offstage and "calls" the show. During the show, he or she: watches a monitor to see exactly what is happening onstage; talks via headset to both the Lighting Board Operator and the two Sound Engineers stationed at their consoles; alerts the performers in their dressing rooms when it's time to come to the stage. The Stage Manager has a playbook, much like a quarterback does in football, and gives the "cues," telling the others when to do what. Nothing happens onstage – no lighting or sound changes, no curtain raising or set changes – unless the Stage Manager calls it. Two or three **ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGERS** help with the job.

How does one train for a technical job in a theater? Internships and jobs themselves can provide some training. But some colleges also offer degrees in the field. Steve Jones earned both an undergraduate and a master's degree that helped him prepare for his career. Are you ready for the challenge? Do you think you might enjoy a job running a console or communicating by headset? The show must go on!

● **FLYMAN**: The Flyman stands offstage at the fly rail, which is a series of vertical ropes in a pulley system. Each rope is connected to an object onstage that moves up and down, for instance the curtains or scrims (screens) or scenery flats. The Flyman pulls on a rope the way a sailor might pull on the rigging of a boat to hoist a sail, and up goes the curtain!

● **PROP MASTER**: The Prop Master takes care of any props the performers need. In a play, these might include a pair of glasses used by a performer, or a book set on a table. The prop person "sets" any props where they are needed before each show. At the Apollo, he or she also takes care of the stage – vacuuming carpets, taping down cables – making sure it's clean and safe for performers.

● **LOADING IN AND LOADING OUT**: When a show comes in, the production crew must bring everything into the theater that will be needed for the production. Often, artists bring their own equipment. A star coming to perform might bring two to three semi-trucks full of equipment – instruments, costumes – to be loaded in. At the end of the show, it also takes time to load out, or get everything out of the theater.

WORDS TO KNOW

Amateur Night

THE STARS OF YESTERDAY, TODAY AND TOMORROW



Amateur Night at the Apollo: a tradition since 1934.

The Time: A Wednesday night

The Place: The Apollo Theater

As the house band cuts loose, the emcee comes out and introduces a performer. An amateur steps onto the stage, rubs the Tree of Hope, and faces the audience. Will they cheer? Will they boo? Will the “Executioner” tap dance out from the wings and shoo him off the stage?

One thing is certain: the night will be fun. It’s Amateur Night at the Apollo!

The word “amateur” means someone who is not yet professional, someone who does something for the love of it. At Amateur Night, newcomers who love to sing or dance or perform comedy get a chance to stand in the spotlight and try out their acts.

The show was founded by Ralph Cooper, an actor with a savvy theatrical idea and a keen eye for new talent. He brought the show to the Apollo shortly after it opened in 1934. In the early years, the show was broadcast on the radio. Later, in the 1950s and 1990s, versions of the show were adapted for television audiences. This ensured that both Amateur Night and the Apollo Theater became household names. Ralph Cooper himself remained at the helm, hosting the show for nearly 60 years, from the 1930s until the 1990s.

Amateur Night at the Apollo has many traditions. One is that the audience decides the winners. When the audience loves a performer, they send cheers and support pouring toward the stage. But when they don’t, they boo – LOUDLY! The boos summon the “Executioner,” who tap dances out in crazy costumes and hustles the performer from the stage.

Over the years, a long and impressive list of amateurs have won the love of the audience and gone on to become stars. These include Dionne Warwick, Sarah Vaughn, Pearl Bailey, Little Anthony & the Imperials, Gladys Knight & the Pips, and the Ronettes. James Brown is a dramatic example of a performer who shot from amateur to pro. When he first appeared on Amateur Night in the 1950s, he arrived from the rural Southern gospel circuit. At the Apollo, he polished his act and his distinctive R&B sound. By 1962, when the Apollo hosted his sold out, historic concerts, Harlemites lined up around the block to see the man we now know as The Godfather of Soul.

Another Amateur Night tradition is the Tree of Hope. Before performing, each performer rubs the stump that sits on stage. The stump was originally part of a tree that stood between two other famous Harlem theaters, the Lafayette and Connie’s Inn. The tree had been a popular gathering place for performers, and was considered lucky, since agents frequently stopped there, looking to book performers who were out of work. When the city decided to chop down the tree, Ralph Cooper secured a piece of it, set it prominently on a Greek column on the stage of the Apollo, and invited the amateurs to rub it for good luck. All these years later, they continue to do so.

Ralph Cooper died in 1992, but Amateur Night lives on. Every Wednesday night, amateurs step on stage and face the Apollo audience. Who will be the stars we love tomorrow?

Look to the winners today!

APOLLO STAR OF TOMORROW: Austin Paul, Jr.

When Ralph Cooper founded Amateur Night, he hoped to provide opportunities for young people with talent. Before the adult amateurs compete, the show hosts a “Stars of Tomorrow” segment that showcases children and young teens. While the young people are performing, the audience is instructed to cheer and encourage. (No booing allowed!) Many marquee-name stars first appeared on Amateur Night when they were young – Ella Fitzgerald performed when she was 17, Michael Jackson when he was 9, and Leslie Uggams at 7.

These days, there’s a new crop of young people reaching for the stars. One of these talented young performers is Austin Paul, Jr., a saxophonist who hails from Pensacola, Florida. Austin Paul rose through the tiers of Amateur Night, wowing the audiences at each step and reaching the final platform, Super Top Dog.

Austin Paul first began playing the saxophone when he was 8, when he joined the third grade band at his school. A few years later, someone who heard him play suggested that he get in touch with Marion J. Caffey, the Producer of Amateur Night, and audition. When he was 14, Austin Paul and his mom made the journey to New York so he could perform on the show.

Of course, it was exciting to step onto the stage of the Apollo. “It was amazing to be there,” Austin Paul

recalls, “because all the greats were there.” But he was also nervous. He’d heard about the Apollo audiences and how tough they are. “That was terrifying,” he admits. How did he handle it? “Really, I just closed my eyes,” he says, laughing. “So I didn’t have to see the audience!”

Like many of the other artists who have performed at the Apollo over the years, Austin Paul found the people he met to be particularly friendly and helpful. In the grand tradition of the Apollo, many offered tips and advice. “It was very educational for my instrument,” he says. “There was one saxophonist I met backstage who taught me to do a different scale. He was young, too, so we were showing each other different tricks. Mr. Caffey (the show’s producer) told me I should play mostly long tones. And Ray Chew (who leads the house band) is great to work with. He knows exactly what you need.”

Austin Paul enjoys “the jazz greats like John Coltrane and Charlie Parker,” but particularly likes the genre of jazz known as “smooth jazz,” which he describes as “smoother and more relaxing. It’s played by artists like Grover Washington, Jr., Kirk Whalum, and Kim Waters. I got inspiration from them, so I started playing that style.”

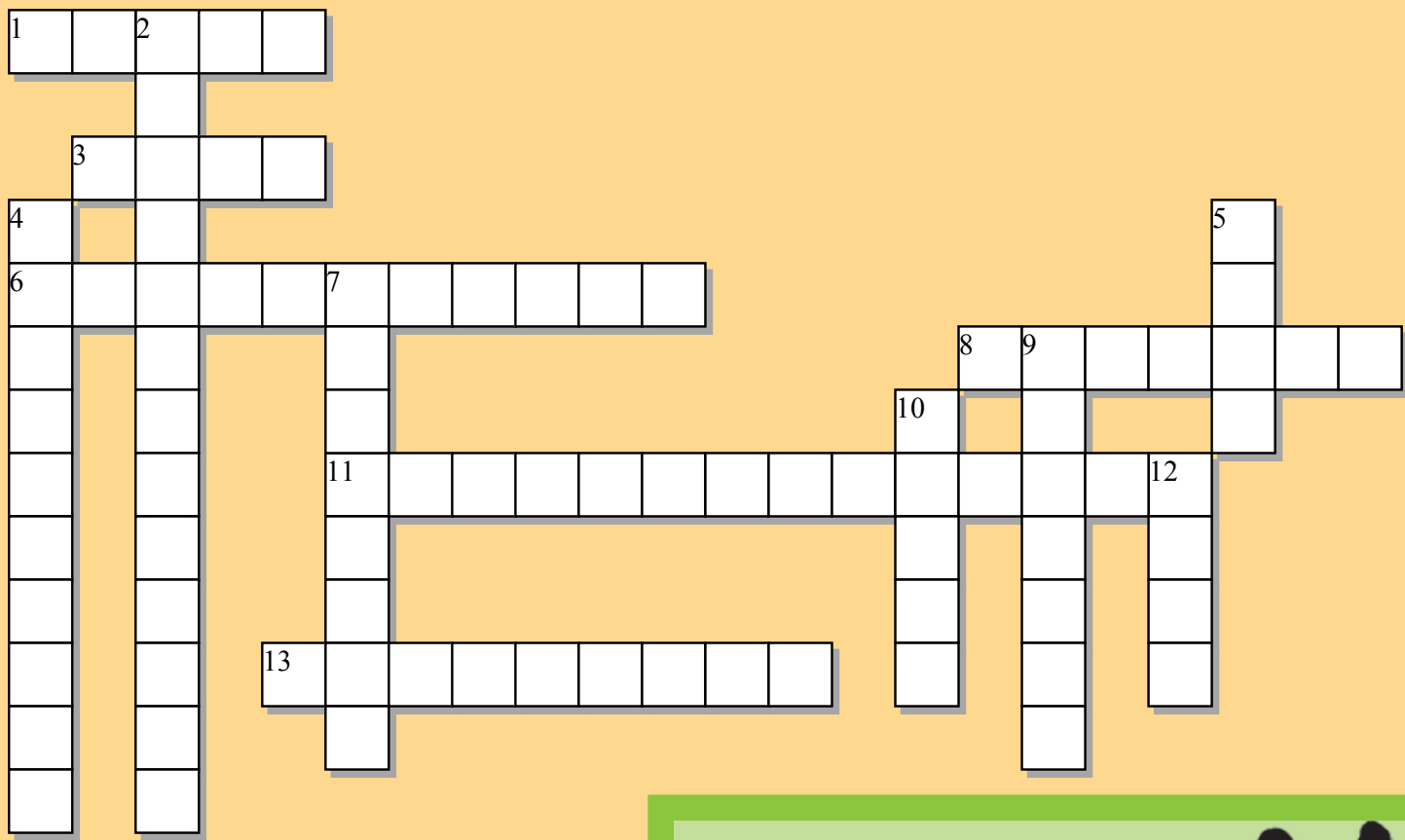
Now that he’s climbed the ladder to Super Top Dog, Austin Paul is back in his hometown, juggling his high school responsibilities and his many musical commitments. “School comes first,” he says. “I have to do my homework before I practice.” He continues to study both classical and



jazz saxophone, and to perform on the weekends. And for the future? “I hope to get a scholarship to Berklee College of Music,” he says. “And then I want to be playing gigs and going all across the world.”

His ticket to the future is, of course, his immense talent on the saxophone. “It’s an amazing instrument,” he says. “I love the sound it produces. It’s soothing and nice and broad.” His love for the saxophone is evident when he adds, “It’s awesome!”

puzzling...



ACROSS:

- 1 - You can see these in the night sky
- 3 - Harlem Renaissance writer, _____ Neale Hurston
- 6 - He created Amateur Night
- 8 - This is a city in the Netherlands
- 11 - She won Amateur Night at age 17
- 13 - Instrument played by Austin Paul, Jr.

DOWN:

- 2 - It's a landmark in Harlem
- 4 - Amateurs rub it for luck
- 5 - The African Burial Ground was discovered near this street in 1991
- 7 - This person tells jokes
- 9 - Not yet professional
- 10 - A style of jazz music
- 12 - _____ Ellington

POSSIBLE ANSWERS:

Amateur, Apollo Theater, Bebop, Comedian, Duke, Ella Fitzgerald, Harlem, Ralph Cooper, Saxophone, Stars, Tree of Hope, Wall, Zora

Answer on page 4

Help the singers find their way to the stage



PHOTO CREDITS

Page 1: Apollo Mural, Wasserman Studios
Page 2: inset, Apollo Theater blade, photo by C. Bay Milin
Page 3: Photograph of a Harlem Street Scene courtesy National Archives, photo no. 306-PS-50-4743
Page 4: Amateur Night photo by Shahar Azran, Shahar Azran Photography; Austin Paul, Jr. photo by Tim Golden
Page 5: Saturday Workshop Series, Steve Jones photo by Jennella Young
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