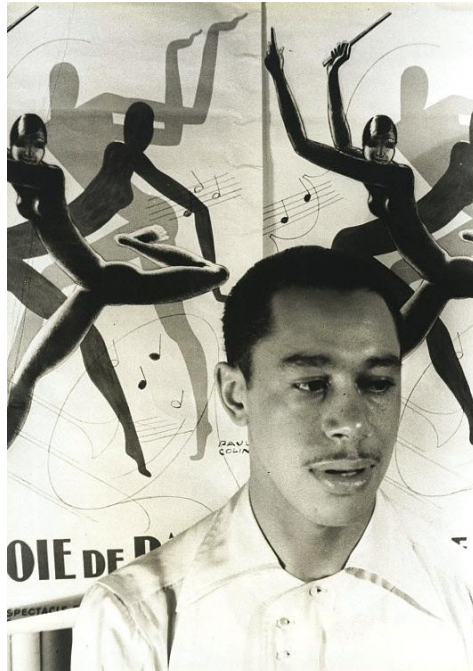


**“The Harlem Renaissance: Rebirth of African-American Arts”
Westbury Arts Remembers**

Cab Calloway

1907 – 1994

Bandleader, songwriter, composer, singer, actor and author



**Photograph of Cab Calloway by Carl Van Vechten
National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, © Carl Van Vechten Trust**

Cab Calloway’s persona and performance style symbolized the spirit of night life in Harlem during its “Renaissance.” His stage act has been described “lively and energetic,” and “injecting his band's performances with a festive exuberance.” Calloway became one of the most popular entertainers of the 1930s and '40s, in no short measure due to his charm, energy, and his eccentric dancing.

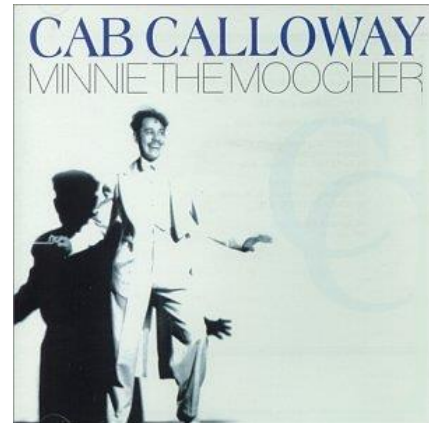
Born in Rochester, New York on Christmas Day in 1907 and named Cabell “Cab” Calloway III, the second of Cabell and Eulalia Reed Calloway's six children. His father, Cab Senior, practiced law and sold real estate. Young Cab enjoyed singing in church, but he was expected to follow in his father's footsteps and study law. However, his older sister Blanche was appearing as a singer with a show called *Plantation Days* in Chicago, and after high school graduation, Calloway appealed to her for advice. She sent him a train ticket and helped him find a job as a singer, too. This was the start of what became a 67-year career in show business.

By 1925 Calloway was working as a drummer with the Sunset Cafe band in Chicago. While performing at the Sunset Club, Calloway met Louis Armstrong, who became his mentor and taught him the art of scat singing (improvised jazz singing in which the voice is used in imitation of an instrument). By his twentieth birthday he had organized his own orchestra and was singing lead vocals. The group was hired to play at the Savoy Ballroom in New York City. Because that engagement did not go well so Calloway dissolved the band. He was about to return to Chicago when he landed a part in a Broadway comedy, *Connie's Hot Chocolates*, in which Calloway was praised for his rendition of "Ain't Misbehavin'."



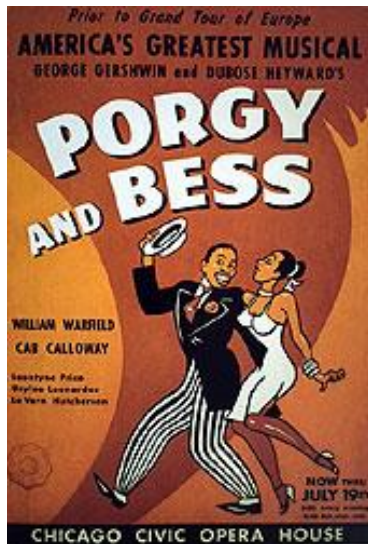
Calloway's breakthrough moment came at Harlem's celebrated Cotton Club, a nightspot that for years, due to racial segregation, featured prominent Black entertainers who performed for white audiences. He was initially hired to fill in for Duke Ellington while Ellington was touring, but he proved to be so popular that "Cab Calloway and His Orchestra" became joint house band with Ellington's. The story's been told that he was suddenly unable to remember the lyrics to his own song "[Minnie the Moocher](#)." To fill the void, he launched into improvisational scat, singing "hi-de-hi, hi-de-ho." His performance soon had the audience joining in, and his raucous finale, Calloway later recalled, "nearly brought the roof down." Forever after, "hi-de-ho" was an integral part of his identity as one of the "Swing" era's most popular and respected figures. Cab Calloway was, along with Louis Armstrong and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, one of the most famous male African American performers during the Harlem Renaissance. The Cotton Club, which was not only at the center of the Harlem jazz scene but the jazz world itself for a time, was the perfect venue for his performances.

Calloway's recording of "Minnie the Moocher" (1931), became a No. 1 hit that sold more than one million copies. The tune's famous call-and-response "hi-de-hi-de-ho" chorus became Calloway's signature phrase for the rest of his career. The audience would take part by repeating each scat phrase and eventually Calloway's phrases would become so long and complex that the audience would laugh at their own failed attempts to repeat them. The song "Minnie the Moocher" was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 1999. The regular radio broadcasts from the Cotton Club led to Calloway becoming nationally known within a brief time. While radio audiences could not see his hyper and sometimes nutty conducting or his dancing, they could experience the joy and wild abandon in his singing.



“For African American musicians of the swing era, Scott Yanow wrote in his “Profiles in Jazz” that playing in the Calloway Orchestra was one of the best jobs in the profession. The musicians were well paid, had fringe benefits, and enjoyed regular vacations. All they had to do was show up on time, play flawlessly, and look like they were enjoying themselves onstage no matter what Calloway was doing. The leader was always the star, but he hired first-class musicians, was proud of them, and featured his top players on occasional instrumentals.” The standout musicians Calloway performed with include saxophonist Chu Berry, trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie and drummer Cozy Cole. Calloway and his orchestra had successful tours in Canada, Europe and across the United States, traveling in private train cars when they visited the South to escape some of the hardships of segregation.

Throughout his lengthy career, Calloway was able to successfully transition to a variety of entertainment settings and his fame reached beyond the jazz world., He made appearances in several movies, such as *The Big Broadcast* (1932), *International House* (1933), *The Singing Kid* (1936), *Stormy Weather* (1943), *Sensations of 1945* (1944), and *Hi De Ho* (1947). While Calloway usually just performed a number or two, in *Stormy Weather* he had a small part, sang a rousing version of “The Jumpin’ Jive,” and conducted his orchestra behind a remarkable dance routine by the Nicholas Brothers. His voice was also used in some cartoons (including Betty Boop).



In 1952 Calloway began two years of playing the role of “Sportin’ Life” in a successful Broadway production of *Porgy and Bess* which also starred Leontyne Price. That he would eventually play this role was highly proper since George Gershwin had originally based that character’s personality on Calloway. In the 1960s Calloway took another Broadway role, as the male lead in the all-black version of *Hello, Dolly!* co-starring with Pearl Bailey and his daughter, Chris Calloway. He again starred on Broadway in the 1970s in the hit musical *Bubbling Brown Sugar*. He had a few other notable acting roles, playing a dramatic part in the fictional W.C. Handy biography *St. Louis Blues* (1958), appearing with Steve McQueen in *The Cincinnati Kid* (1965), and singing “Minnie The Moocher” in *The Blues Brothers* movie (1980).

Cab Calloway received many accolades and honors during his lifetime. Most importantly he was inducted into the Big Band and Jazz Hall of Fame in and the International Jazz Hall of Fame. President Bill Clinton presented Calloway with a National Medal of the Arts in 1993 and in 2008 he received a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award. Calloway was also made an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts by the University of Rochester and the Cab Calloway School of the Arts was set up in his honor in Wilmington, Delaware.



Calloway's later years were spent in White Plains, New York, until he had a stroke in June 1994. He died on November 18, 1994, at the age of 86. He was survived by his wife, Nuffie, whom he married in 1953, five daughters, and seven grandsons. Now, more than 100 years from when Cab Calloway started his career, one of his grandsons, Cab Calloway Brooks conducts the Cab Calloway Orchestra.

When once asked if he had any heroes in the music business, Calloway scoffed at the very idea.

"I'll tell you who my heroes are," he said. "My heroes are the notes, man. The music itself. You understand what I'm saying? I love the music. The music is my hero."

Compiled by Stanley Turetsky

To Learn More

1. Biography: "Cab Calloway"
<https://www.biography.com/musician/cab-calloway>
2. IMDb: "Cab Calloway Biography"
https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0130572/bio?ref=nm_ov_bio_sm
3. *Britannica* "Cab Calloway American composer and singer"
<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Cab-Calloway>
4. Scott Yanow, February 27, 2020, "Profiles in Jazz"
<https://syncopatedtimes.com/cab-calloway-profiles-in-jazz/>
5. *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, "Cab Calloway Biography"
<https://www.notablebiographies.com/Br-Ca/Calloway-Cab.html>
6. Sutori, "Cab Calloway, A jazz artist from the 1920's"
<https://www.sutori.com/story/cab-calloway--YGUcXRgqNRLigUaWETefMm31>

To Hear More

1. [Blues Brothers - Minnie the Moocher \(Cab Calloway\)](#)
2. [Cab CALLOWAY "St. James Infirmary"](#)
3. [Jumpin Jive - Cab Calloway and the Nicholas Brothers](#)

