

## “The Harlem Renaissance: Rebirth of African-American Arts”

### Westbury Arts Remembers

### Langston Hughes

1902 - 1967

American Poet, Novelist, Playwright, Columnist and Social Activist



Portrait of [Langston Hughes](#) (1927) by Winold Reiss New York World-Telegram & Sun Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

*“An artist must be free to choose what he does, certainly, but he must also never be afraid to do what he might choose.” Langston Hughes*

Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance, the Harlem Renaissance and Langston Hughes; it's difficult to think about one without the other.

The Harlem Renaissance was a blossoming of African American culture, particularly in the creative arts, and one of the most influential movements in African American literary history. Hughes was a prolific artist who wrote essays, short stories, operettas, children's books, plays, and mountains of poems. There wasn't much that Langston Hughes couldn't do. He celebrated the spirit of the African-American community and captured the condition of everyday life of Black people through his art in a time when many Black artists were adverse to doing so for fear of feeding racial stereotypes. Hughes wanted to tell the stories of his people in ways that reflected their actual culture, including both their suffering and their love of music, laughter, and language itself. He is also known as an innovator of the jazz poetry art form. Many of Hughes's poems carry the music, rhythm, and meter found in blues, jazz, and African-American spirituals.

James Mercer Langston Hughes was born February 1, 1902, in Joplin, Missouri. He brought a world of experiences to his writing. Before he was twelve years old he had lived in six different American cities. By the time Hughes turned 24 and his first book of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, (Knopf, 1926), was published, he had already been a truck farmer, cook, waiter, college graduate, sailor, and door

attendant at a nightclub in Paris, and had visited Mexico, West Africa, the Azores, the Canary Islands, Holland, France, and Italy. Four years later his first novel, *Not Without Laughter*, (Knopf, 1930) won the Harmon gold medal for literature. Hughes said of his writing, It's about

"workers, roustabouts, and singers, and job hunters on Lenox Avenue in New York, or Seventh Street in Washington or South State in Chicago—people up today and down tomorrow, working this week and fired the next, beaten and baffled, but determined not to be wholly beaten, buying furniture on the installment plan, filling the house with roomers to help pay the rent, hoping to get a new suit for Easter—and pawning that suit before the Fourth of July."

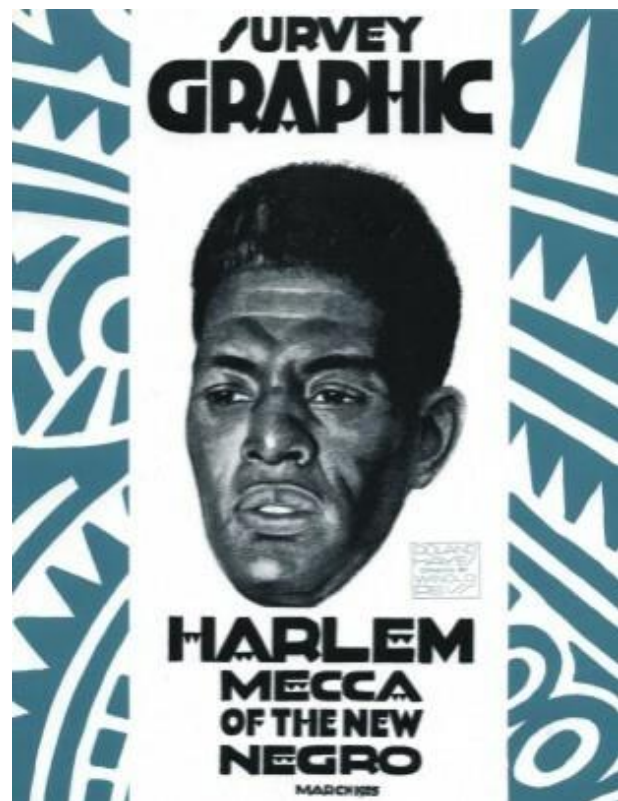
"I, Too, Sing America" is a poem written by Langston Hughes that shows a yearning for equality through perseverance while disproving the idea that patriotism is limited by race. It was first published in March 1925 in a special issue of the magazine *Survey Graphic*, titled *Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro*.

I, too, sing America.  
I am the darker brother.  
They send me to eat in the kitchen  
When company comes,  
But I laugh,  
And eat well,  
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,  
I'll be at the table  
When company comes.  
Nobody'll dare  
Say to me  
"Eat in the kitchen,"  
Then.

Besides,  
They'll see how beautiful I am  
And be ashamed-

I, too, am America.



In addition to leaving us a large body of poetic work, Hughes wrote eleven plays and countless works of prose, including the well-known "Simple" books including : *Simple Speaks His Mind*, *Simple Stakes a Claim*, *Simple Takes a Wife*, and *Simple's Uncle Sam*. His popular fictional character, Jesse B. Simple, is a poor man who lives in Harlem, a kind of comic no-good, a stereotype Hughes turned to advantage. His tales of his troubles with work, women, money, and life in general often reveal,

through their very simplicity, the problems of being a poor black man in a racist society. "White folks," Simple once commented, "is the cause of a lot of inconvenience in my life." Donald C. Dickinson, a Hughes biographer, wrote the

"the charm of Simple lies in his uninhibited pursuit of those two universal goals, understanding and security. As with most other humans, he usually fails to achieve either of these goals and sometimes once achieved they disappoint him. . . . Simple has a tough resilience, however, that won't allow him to brood over a failure very long."

Considered among the greatest poets in U.S. history, Langston Hughes' body of work fostered giant strides for African Americans politically, socially and artistically.



In his memory, his residence at 20 East 127th Street in Harlem has been given landmark status by the New York City Preservation Commission, and East 127th Street has been renamed "Langston Hughes Place." The house has been open to the public and it's also home to the [I, Too, Arts Collective](#), a non-profit committed to nurturing creativity within underrepresented communities that offers poetry salons, workshops and affordable work space.

Hughes occupies a position as a poet of the people precisely because he recognized that 'we possess within ourselves a great reservoir of physical and spiritual strength,' and because he used his artistry to reflect this back to the people. He used his poetry and prose to illustrate that 'there is no lack within the Negro people of beauty, strength and power,' and he chose to do so on their own level, on their own terms."

He died in May 1967, in New York City at the age of 66 from complications after abdominal surgery related to **prostate cancer**. His ashes are interred beneath a floor medallion in the middle of the foyer in the [Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture](#) in Harlem. It is the entrance to an auditorium named for him. The design on the floor is an African **cosmogram** (pictured to the right) entitled *Rivers*. The title is taken from his poem "**The Negro Speaks of Rivers**". Within the center of the cosmogram is the line: "My soul has grown deep like the rivers".



***Perhaps the mission of an artist is to interpret beauty to people - the beauty within themselves.***  
***Langston Hughes***

Compiled by Stanley Turetsky

### To Learn More

1. "Langston Hughes Biography" Kansas Heritage Group  
<http://www.kansasheritage.org/crossingboundaries/page6e1.html>
2. Biography of Langston Hughes, Poet, Key Figure in Harlem Renaissance  
<https://www.thoughtco.com/biography-of-langston-hughes-4779849>
3. Langston Hughes Biography  
<https://www.123helpme.com/essay/Langston-Hughes-Biography-252132>
4. "Ten of Hughes Most Popular Poems" Biography.com  
<https://www.biography.com/news/langston-hughes-poems#:~:text=While%20Hughes%20is%20best%20known,the%20Broadway%20musical%20Street%20Scene>
5. "Langston Hughes" National Museum of African American History and Culture  
<https://nmaahc.si.edu/LGBTQ/langston-hughes>
6. Langston Hughes Bibliography – Wikipedia  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Langston\\_Hughes#Bibliography](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Langston_Hughes#Bibliography)