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Hello, and welcome to Busy Kids Love Music, a podcast that helps you discover the stories behind classical music, one composer—or sometimes one musical movement—at a time. I’m Carly Seifert, creator of Busy Kids Do Piano, and I’m so glad you’re joining me today.

Today we’re traveling back about one hundred years to a neighborhood in New York City called Harlem—a place bursting with creativity, dancing, poetry, paintings, and brand-new sounds. This exciting time in American history is called the Harlem Renaissance. And in this episode, we’re going to explore how music helped shape it—and how the Harlem Renaissance helped shape music.

Let’s jump in!

The word renaissance means “rebirth” or “new beginning.” During the 1920s and 1930s, Harlem became a center for African American artists, writers, and musicians who were creating bold new ideas and sharing their voices with the world.

Many families had moved north from southern states in search of new opportunities—a movement historians call the Great Migration. Harlem quickly filled with people bringing musical traditions, stories, and rhythms from many parts of the country.

When all those influences came together in one place... something special happened.

So what kinds of music could you hear walking down the streets of Harlem?

You might hear: Jazz pouring out of clubs, blues-inspired melodies or big bands rehearsing . Pianists might be playing fast, exciting rhythms and singers would be performing songs full of emotion.

One very popular piano style was called stride piano.

Stride piano gets its name because the pianist's left hand "strides"—or jumps—back and forth between low bass notes and chords, while the right hand plays lively melodies. The left hand basically becomes the rhythm section. Listen to this example of a left hand accompaniment played by jazz composer and pianist Oscar Peterson:

Here are a few seconds of the right and left hand together:

Many important musicians were part of this creative explosion during the Harlem Renaissance. Let's meet a few.

James P. Johnson, whose music you're hearing in the background, was one of the pioneers of stride piano and helped shape jazz piano playing for generations. Fats Waller was a brilliant pianist, composer, and entertainer whose larger-than-life personality made audiences smile just as much as his music did. He grew up in Harlem and became famous for his incredible stride-piano skill and also wrote many popular songs, including "Ain't Misbehavin'" and "Honeysuckle Rose," which are still played today. When he performed, he often joked, sang, and talked to the audience, making concerts feel fun and welcoming instead of formal. Duke Ellington, whom we have talked about previously on the podcast, was another brilliant Harlem Renaissance artist who led a famous orchestra and wrote music that blended jazz with rich harmonies and colorful instrumental sounds.

These musicians didn't just perform in Harlem—they helped spread its music across the country through radio broadcasts and touring bands.

Harlem's music scene came alive in legendary venues. One famous spot was the Cotton Club, where Duke Ellington and other bands performed. Another was the Savoy Ballroom, known for its huge dance floor and exciting swing dancing. The Apollo Theater, which would become famous later on, also began building its reputation during this era. Imagine dressing up, heading out for the evening, and hearing brand-new music that no one had ever experienced before!

The Harlem Renaissance wasn't only about music. Writers, painters, dancers, and musicians inspired each other every day. Poets like Langston Hughes wrote about everyday life, dreams, struggles, and hopes—and composers sometimes turned poetry into songs. Artists shared ideas in apartments, cafés, and rehearsal spaces, helping each other experiment and grow. It was like one giant creative workshop for the entire neighborhood.

So why do we still talk about the Harlem Renaissance today?

Because it helped change American culture. Music from this time influenced Broadway shows, film soundtracks, swing bands, modern jazz, and the pop music that you maybe listen to today. It also opened doors for African American artists to gain national attention and recognition during a time when opportunities were often unfairly limited. The sounds born in Harlem didn't stay in Harlem—they traveled across the country and around the world.

Check out the curated playlist of Harlem Renaissance music I've put together for in the show notes at busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/170. As you listen, try to hear

- The steady beat that makes you want to tap your foot
- Instruments taking turns playing solos
- Fast piano patterns
- Bright brass sounds like trumpets and trombones

Next time on Busy Kids Love Music, we're going to zoom in on one composer who worked closely with Harlem Renaissance poets and blended classical music with spirituals and jazz colors. Her name is Margaret Bonds—and she helped carry the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance into concert halls and classrooms.

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Thanks for listening to Busy Kids Love Music. You can find today's listening playlist and a transcript of the show at busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/170, and don't forget to subscribe so you don't miss our next episode. I'm Carly Seifert, and I'll see you next time—when we explore another amazing musical story.