

Singer, actress dead at 92

Lena Horne, 1917-2010

By John Andrews
13 May 2010

Lena Horne's death in a New York City hospital last Sunday, less than two months shy of her 93rd birthday, is an occasion not only to review her remarkable 65-year show business career, but also to consider briefly the conditions during which that career unfolded.

The span of her life is itself significant. Born June 30, 1917, two months after US entry into World War I and four months before the Russian Revolution, Horne lived through the Depression, the Second World War, the birth of the Cold War, the eruption of the Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War, the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union and countless other major historical episodes.

How and to what extent these events helped shape her life and career are complex questions, but her status as a social personality—perhaps the almost inevitable fate of an outspoken African-American entertainer at the time—makes them unavoidable ones. Individuality does not consist in a human being's independence from social processes and experiences, but in how those various processes and experiences find a unique expression.

Undoubtedly, the emergence of a mass movement for civil rights in the US in the middle of the last century, against both the Jim Crow segregation of the South and more subtle forms of anti-black racism in the North, was central to Lena Horne's life and experience. In its best aspects, Horne's career embodied the struggle for equality.

Due to her striking beauty—and light skin color—Horne was recruited by movie mogul Louis B. Mayer in 1942 to be the first “glamorous” African-American film star. To her credit, she never accepted the premises underlying her supposed role as a sort of Jackie Robinson of Hollywood, and, partly as a result, she died with few meaningful film credits.

Lena Horne was born into an educated, middle class Brooklyn household. Her parents separated shortly thereafter, however, and she bounced between her show-business mother and her paternal grandmother, herself a suffragette and ardent supporter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the civil rights organization founded in 1909. Horne's childhood years coincided with the flowering of the “Harlem Renaissance,” which saw the emergence of a highly talented group of black artists, musicians and writers, centered in uptown Manhattan.

In 1933, at the age of 16, Horne became a dancer at the Cotton Club, the famous Harlem venue where black entertainers—Cab Calloway's *Brown Sugar* revue was the main attraction at the time—performed for generally all-white audiences. Horne later mused that although her dancing was terrible, she was attractive and therefore a success.

Plucked out of the chorus line because of her appearance, Horne began a career as a vocalist, making her first recordings with the all-black Noble Sissle Society Orchestra in 1936. At age 19, she married a minor politician in Pittsburgh, giving birth to a daughter, Gail, in 1937 and a son, Teddy, in 1940. Her marriage soon disintegrated, however, and Horne returned to show business as a singer in the Charlie Barnet Orchestra, one of the most popular swing bands of the period.

As jazz vocalist Billie Holiday—two years Horne's senior—had already learned during her short stint with the Artie Shaw Orchestra, touring with an all-white band was a degrading and humiliating experience for an African-American performer. Through no fault of Barnet, Horne could not eat in the same restaurants or stay in the same hotels as the other band members. When she performed, entering through back doors and kitchens, she was often subject to racial taunts from the audience.

In 1941, noted impresario and left-winger John Hammond (also an heir to the Vanderbilt fortune), arranged for Horne to become the featured singer at Café Society Downtown, a Greenwich Village nightclub renowned for its racially integrated performances and audiences.

The club was the creation of Barney Josephson, and its name was meant to be ironic, an attack on “high society” venues like the Stork Club, which excluded black patrons and were popular with the designated opinion makers of the time, such as gossip columnist Walter Winchell. Café Society proudly marketed itself as “The right place for the wrong people,” and was a magnet attracting the New York radical intelligentsia, including many members and fellow travelers of the Communist Party.

In interviews done in later years, Horne spoke somewhat wistfully about her stint at Café Society, where she came under the influence of Paul Robeson, W.E.B. Du Bois and other major black artistic and intellectual figures of the time.

It was during her stay at Café Society that Horne participated in the making of *Boogie-Woogie Dream*, a remarkable short subject film shot in 1941, but not released until 1944. In his recent biography of Horne, James Gavin describes the film as the product of “a group of left-wing hell-raisers,” including Austrian-born director Hans Burger, already responsible for an anti-Nazi documentary, and writer Herbert Kline, “an avowed Communist.”

In the 13-minute film, Horne falls asleep while doing dishes in a restaurant. In a dream sequence, after a performance by boogie-woogie virtuosos Albert Ammons and Pete Johnson, Horne sings with an orchestra led by the great swing-era pianist, Teddy Wilson. Horne interprets “Unlucky Woman,” a traditional blues, with plenty of heart and enthusiasm. Her performance is available here. Gavin comments, “Unlike nearly all the black characters in white-produced films of the day, the ones in here reveal not a hint of stereotyping. Instead, the film treats jazz and the blues with reverence.”

That this brief film, written and directed by left-wingers (and which never found a distributor), was one of the few opportunities for Horne to shine unimpeded on screen is a commentary on Hollywood and the eventual consequences of the purge of socialist-minded elements in the film industry in the late 1940s.

In 1942, Horne moved to Los Angeles, entering into a seven-year commitment to MGM, making her the first black actress ever under a major studio contract, and the highest-paid black entertainer in the United States. To her credit, Horne insisted on provisions prohibiting MGM from casting her in demeaning roles. “They didn't have me play a maid,” she

would later comment, “but they didn’t let me play anything else either.”

After a few singing appearances, Horne had a major acting role in Vincente Minnelli’s first credited directorial effort, the moralistic, all-black musical *Cabin in the Sky*, released in 1943. Horne played Georgia Brown, a temptress used by Lucifer in his failed attempt to capture the soul of Eddie “Rochester” Anderson’s Little Joe, the weak-kneed husband of Ethel Waters’ God-fearing Petunia.

Although packed with racial stereotypes that make the film difficult to stomach in places, there is a remarkable cameo by Louis Armstrong as the Devil’s trumpet-playing assistant (complete with horns fashioned in his hair), and excellent musical performances by Waters, Horne and the Duke Ellington Orchestra.

In 1943, MGM loaned Horne to Twentieth Century Fox for a film aimed at lifting the morale of African-American troops conscripted for World War II. The result was *Stormy Weather*, whose thin plot about an on-and-off-and-on-again romance between Horne and tap dance legend Bill Robinson—then 40 years her senior—served as a framework for almost non-stop musical numbers, including one by the great composer and pianist Fats Waller, in his last film appearance.

The film takes its name from the tune by songwriter Harold Arlen and lyricist Ted Koehler, written a decade earlier for a Cotton Club revue and turned into a hit by Ethel Waters. Horne’s exquisite performance during the film’s climax—over eight minutes long—sandwiched around a somewhat dated “modern dance” interlude by Katherine Dunham and Her Dancers—is available online and is highly recommended. What will never look dated is the astounding tap dance routine by the Nicholas Brothers, physically jumping over the Cab Calloway Orchestra, which followed Horne, bringing the film to an exuberant end.

“Stormy Weather” remained Horne’s signature throughout the rest of her career, and serves as the title of Gavin’s recent biography, along with a recent excellent musical revue starring Leslie Uggams as Ms. Horne.

During her contract years, Horne received intensive training from MGM in vocal technique and audience handling. To promote its pictures, the studio also funded singing tours and arranged recording sessions that resulted in several hits, including “Deed I Do,” “As Long As I Live,” and, of course, “Stormy Weather.”

Along with her MGM contract, Horne spent the war years entertaining troops, often doing two separate shows, each to a segregated audience. There was a notorious incident in Arkansas where Horne came out to perform for the black troops and found German prisoners of war seated in the front rows. She went to the back of the room and performed from there, rather than from the stage.

Horne also appeared regularly on “Jubilee” recording sessions for Armed Forces Radio Service, which featured many of the best musicians of the period. There is one recording of the legendary Billy Eckstine Orchestra alternating numbers by Lena Horne with its regular female vocalist, newcomer Sarah Vaughan, and instrumental performances featuring emergent bebop master Fats Navarro.

Due to Horne’s refusal to perform stereotyped black characters or impersonate a Latina, coupled with the studios’ unwillingness to portray black and white actors as equals in pictures, Horne had no more significant acting roles through the rest of her contract. Instead, after the war, MGM used her vocals as what Horne called “window dressing” in films with otherwise all-white casts. She had no interaction with the actors and no role in the plot. Horne would simply appear and sing a musical number, which could be excised from the picture before its exhibition in the South.

In Paris, in 1947, Horne married Lennie Hayton, an arranger at MGM. They kept the marriage a secret for over two years because of anti-miscegenation laws. When the marriage finally became public, they were vilified by white racists, and also attacked by black nationalists.

Horne belonged to a generation of black artists and intellectuals that, in

part out of its own bitter experiences with American capitalist “democracy,” as well as the powerful appeal of the Russian Revolution, was generally attracted to the left. The degeneration of the Communist Party under Stalinism, although these artists only dimly recognized it or didn’t recognize it at all, was a major blow to them. They were ill-prepared for the postwar period and the wave of reaction that swept over American public life.

Horne maintained her political activism and outspokenness despite her contract with MGM. In 1947, she and Robeson were among the headliners, with former Vice President Henry Wallace, at a massive Progressive Citizens of America rally in Madison Square Garden, a doomed attempt to revive a type of American “Popular Frontism.”

By that time, however, Barney Josephson, whose brother Leon was an open Communist Party member, and others in Horne’s pre-war circle were coming under relentless attack from Westbrook Pegler and the various anti-communist witch-hunters. Patrons stayed away, and in 1950 Café Society was forced to close its doors. MGM refused to renew Horne’s contract, and she was named in the notorious *Red Channels*—an anti-communist tract published in June 1950, which fingered 151 alleged Communists in the entertainment industry, including Orson Welles, John Garfield, Arthur Miller and Artie Shaw.

According to Gavin’s biography, Horne later told an interviewer that “M-G-M had given her an ultimatum. If she wanted to be considered for any future roles she had to write an apology to the Screen Actors Guild [for her left-wing connections]. She cooperated.” Horne explained, “The letter said, ‘I’m black. I have these friends. I didn’t know anything about their politics.’” Apparently, the apology did not entirely do the trick.

Gavin asserts that Horne’s failure to win the part of Julie, the mixed-race singer who unsuccessfully tries to pass for white, in MGM’s 1951 remake of *Show Boat*, to Ava Gardner—a close friend of hers—had less to do with the blacklist and more to do with race. In any event, this was a significant career blow about which Horne complained the rest of her life. Most commentators have noted that she was never in serious contention for the role, although Gardner’s singing voice had to be dubbed.

Apparently barred from television and movies, and embittered by her Hollywood experience, Horne became primarily a nightclub performer during the early 1950s. Some thought that the warmth she exuded in her earlier performances had diminished, replaced by an aloofness, sometimes combined with histrionics, both readily apparent in the otherwise excellent 1965 performances of “Love Me or Leave Me” and “The Eagle and Me”.

Employment opportunities gradually returned in the late 1950s, highlighted by a starring role in Broadway’s long-running *Jamaica*, opposite Ricardo Montalban. Horne appeared on television regularly during the 1960s, notably in her own special, “Lena in Concert.” She also recorded a number of popular albums, including songs from the George and Ira Gershwin opera *Porgy and Bess*, with fellow civil rights activist Harry Belafonte.

Horne was resolute about standing up to bigotry. In one famous incident, a drunken patron in a Beverly Hills restaurant referred to her with a racial epithet. In rapid succession, she reportedly struck him with a lamp, ashtray and several glasses, leaving the man bloodied. Congratulatory “phone calls and telegrams came from all over,” she later beamed.

Horne was an active advocate of the civil rights movement of the 1960s; she was present on the Washington, D.C., podium in August 1963 when Martin Luther King gave his famed “I Have a Dream” speech. She traveled to Mississippi to speak alongside Medgar Evers on the night Evers was assassinated. Horne said, in response to that murder, “Nobody black or white who really believes in democracy can stand aside now; everybody’s got to stand up and be counted.”

Her personal life was complicated—no doubt the pressures weighing on her and those around her did not help. Horne had an ambivalent relationship with her husband, Lennie, whom she sometimes claimed to have married just for help with her musical career, but whom she also always defended against the jibes of the nationalists, who insisted she should have married a black man.

According to her *New York Times* obituary, Horne said “the only man I ever loved” was Duke Ellington’s musical associate Billy Strayhorn, who was gay. “He was just everything I wanted in a man,” Horne once said, “except he wasn’t interested in me sexually.”

Personal tragedy struck in the early 1970s. First, Horne’s father passed away in 1970. Months later, her 30-year-old son Teddy died due to kidney failure arising from past substance abuse. That was followed the next year by the sudden death of her husband Lennie from a heart attack.

After shaking off depression, Horne emerged again in the mid-1970s, performing a series of concerts with Tony Bennett. She returned to the screen in 1978, playing the good witch Glenda opposite Diana Ross and Michael Jackson in *The Wiz*, directed by Sidney Lumet, then married to her daughter Gail.

The crowning glory of Horne’s later career was the success of her one-woman show, *The Lady and Her Music*, which she opened on Broadway in 1981 and eventually performed there 333 times, before taking it on tour. The show finally closed in 1984. This writer attended a performance in Los Angeles and remembers vividly Horne’s ability to hold the audience’s attention singlehandedly for more than two hours with her combination of humor, charm and beautiful music.

Horne continued her professional activity until 1998, when she issued her final recordings and performed “Stormy Weather” one last time, on Rosie O’Donnell’s daytime talk show. She made her final public appearance in 2000.

The traumas and contradictions of the twentieth century did not leave Horne personally unscathed or her career undamaged, but then only insignificant artists were left untouched by those. Horne was an extraordinary woman living and working during an extraordinary historical period.

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