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STUDENT HANDOUT

RED LEVEL  
GO DEEPER

# The Sound of Harlem

Grades 5–8 · Music

ADMIT ONE

NAME

DATE

CLASS

**Critical frame:** Duke Ellington's 1932 hit insisted: "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing." Analyze one recording's full structural architecture, then compose an original phrase within the blues framework, and write a critical essay connecting jazz structure to its cultural and historical context.

## ACTIVITY 1

Full structural analysis: analyze one recording in depth

Recording selected:

ELEMENT

WHAT YOU HEAR

WHAT IT DOES — FUNCTION OR EFFECT

Harmonic structure (12-bar / other)

Syncopation (where / how)

Call-and-response (which instruments)

Improvisation (who / when)

Rhythm section role

Dynamics / expression

What is the single most striking musical choice in this recording? Why?

## ACTIVITY 2

### Composition task: write a 4-bar melody over the blues

Using the 12-bar blues framework (bars 1–4 are chord I), write an original 4-bar melody. Use standard notation, solfège, or letter names for each beat. Your melody must include at least one **syncopated note** (off-beat accent) and one **“blue note”** (flattened 3rd or 7th).

Key of C — Bars 1–4 all use chord C (I). Time signature: 4/4

#### BAR 1 — C

Beat 1 + Beat 2 + Beat 3 + Beat 4 +

#### BAR 2 — C

Beat 1 + Beat 2 + Beat 3 + Beat 4 +

#### BAR 3 — C

Beat 1 + Beat 2 + Beat 3 + Beat 4 +

#### BAR 4 — C

Beat 1 + Beat 2 + Beat 3 + Beat 4 +

Where did you place your syncopated note?

Bar

Beat

What blue note did you use?

What effect does it create?

## ACTIVITY 3

### Critical essay

Duke Ellington’s 1932 hit insisted: “It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing.” Using your structural analysis and what you know about the Harlem Renaissance, write 4–5 sentences arguing: **what did jazz make possible for Black Americans in the 1920s that other art forms could not?**

#### MINI MUSEUM DEEP DIVE

In the **Jazz Lab**, isolate the rhythm section (bass, drums, piano). Listen to how the music changes without it. What does the rhythm section actually do — is it accompaniment, or something more fundamental? How does your answer connect to the African rhythmic traditions that gave jazz its foundation?

[minimuseumproject.org/exhibitions/harlem-renaissance](https://minimuseumproject.org/exhibitions/harlem-renaissance)