

SOUNDSCAPE

Objectives

- Students will think about and create the sounds of a specific location
- Students will explore sound using vocal variety, rhythm, found objects and repetition to communicate a specific place
- Students will imagine a day during the Harlem Renaissance and create a soundscape to communicate that day

Materials needed

- Printed quotes and nightclub map

Activity

The setting for *Blues for an Alabama Sky* is Harlem in New York City during the Harlem Renaissance. This activity will bring the setting of Harlem to life through sound.

- In groups of three, ask students to create a sound and a motion that communicates “city” to them. Any city. Everyone in the group will do the same sound and movement.
- Invite each group to share their sound and motion.
- To hear the cityscape, educators should conduct each group like an orchestra using hand signals to crescendo (get louder), decrescendo (get softer) and cut off (stop) all sound.
- Next, ask the students to get more specific and imagine the sounds of Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance. Share copies of the nightclub image and quotes with students so they can learn more about the Harlem Renaissance.
- Invite students, again in their trios, to create a soundscape for a day in the life of Harlem during the height of the Harlem Renaissance. Ask: What do you imagine are the sounds of morning, afternoon, evening, late night, late-late night? You can make the sounds vocally, percussively, you can use found objects in the room. We are just imagining what Harlem might sound like. Everyone in your group can do the same sounds or different sounds. Vary the speed and volume as the day progresses.
- Give them about 7 minutes to work, then invite them to share their soundscapes.

While you watch the play notice how the setting of Harlem impacts everything about the characters’ lives. Could this story happen in another city? What would be the same and what would be different? And listen for the sounds of Harlem - the everyday sounds, the sounds of sorrow and the sounds of celebration!

Lesson Extension

Blues for an Alabama Sky takes place as the Harlem Renaissance is coming to a close and the Great Depression is starting. Playwright Pearl Cleage describes the time and place saying “It is the summer of 1930. Harlem, New York. The creative euphoria of the Renaissance has given way to the harsher realities of the Great Depression.”

The character Angel says, “I’ve never seen things this bad all over. Nobody’s working and nobody’s got prospects.”

- Back in their trios, invite students to create the soundscape for this change. What is the sound of a day in the life of Harlem as the Great Depression begins? What of their original soundscape stays the same and what changes?
- Share the soundscapes.



The Poetry Foundation described Harlem at this time this way:

“The New York City neighborhood, encompassing only three square miles, teemed with black artists, intellectuals, writers, and musicians. Black-owned businesses, from newspapers, publishing houses, and music companies to nightclubs, cabarets, and theaters, helped fuel the neighborhood’s thriving scene.”

Langston Hughes said, “I can never put on paper the thrill of the underground ride to Harlem. I went up the steps and out into the bright September sunlight. Harlem! I stood there, dropped my bags, took a deep breath.”

And the Costume Designer for *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, Wendell Carmichael said: “If we talk about New York as a heartbeat, Harlem is the rhythm....it gave New York its’ soul.”