

## Lena Horne Live

Welcome to a deep dive I'm Reggie. In this episode, we're going to take a deep dive into two live recordings by Lena Horne one recorded at the Sands Hotel in Las Vegas, the other at the Waldorf Astoria in New York.

Two live recordings by one of the greatest live performers of her generation.

I think you'll wanna add these to your collection.

Be sure to stick around for the end of the episode because there might even be a giveaway.

Thanks for joining me for Lena Horne Live.

When I was younger I had this dopey idea that the female jazz vocalist world was neatly divided into two camps, either you loved Sarah Vaughan or Ella Fitzgerald, you couldn't love both. This didn't exist for male vocalists because for me there was only one and that is Johnny Hartman. A dopey idea I know.

Over the years my appreciation for Vaughan and Fitzgerald has grown but if I were faced with one of those desert-island disk situations I would choose recordings by Sarah Vaughan hands down.

A part of my devotion to Vaughan can be contributed to the fact that I got to see Sarah Vaughan work live many times and those performances linger and heighten my listening pleasure right until today.

Is that true for you as well? Has the experience of hearing or seeing musicians or music live enhanced your listening pleasure afterward?

One of the things Lena Horne's contemporaries would say is her recorded work is great but you've got to see her in person.

The Sand's and Waldorf Astoria recording are just as vibrant and dynamic as if they were recorded a few years ago very little of the material is dated.

Before we get to the recordings themselves I think it might be helpful to know a bit about some of the events that helped shaped Lena Horne as an artist and activist.

One other note. While there is some sound of Lena Horne speaking about her career in this podcast due to copyright restrictions you won't hear any of the music from the Sands or Astoria.

I've included links to some of the music and videos of Horne performing in around this period on the deep dive website. Feel free to pause the episode, check them out and come back.

Lena Mary Calhoun Horne was born on June 30, 1917. Lena Horne seems to have been influenced from birth by twin impulses that ran through her family, fighting for racial equality and dedication to her craft. The Horne's mother and father were born into respected families who

were members of the black bourgeoisie in Brooklyn New York and they were both the black sheep of their families.

Her father Edwin Fletcher Horne, Jr. became a number's runner or a loan shark, as they're referred to today, instead of going to college and settling into a profession as a doctor or lawyer.

It's rumored he worked for the gangster Dutch Schultz. The other family lure is that he made a ton of money in the Red Socks scandal of 1919.

Lena Horne's mother came from an even more wealthy family than her father. Edna Louise Scottron was a third-generation Brooklynite and granddaughter of the wealthy and successful inventor and civil rights activist Samuel R. Scottron.

Instead of marrying well and leading a life of decorative refinement as was the prescribed life for a woman of her station. She became an actress which was tantamount, black or white, to becoming a prostitute.

So, you can imagine what her family thought of her husband's profession.

As it turns out Edna's would have been parents right. 3 years into the marriage Horne's father abandoned his wife and 3-year-old daughter when in 1920 he moved to Seattle. Lena Horne wouldn't see her much loved father again for several years.

Her mother continued to work as an actress which meant Lena Horne was sent to live with her father's parents in Brooklyn, and this is where the seeds of her activism were planted.

Horne's fraternal grandmother Cora Calhoun Horne was a formidable person. Horne called her grandmother an iron butterfly the actor, activist, and family friend Paul Robeson said Cora Calhoun Horne was one of the toughest people he'd ever met. A civil rights activist and suffragette Cora Calhoun Horne and husband Edwin were among the black bourgeoisie who helped financially support and highlight many of the artists and writers who became leading members of the Harlem Renaissance.

In a future episode, I'll come back to the topic of the black bourgeoisie their contributions which have been obscured by time.

After years of living with her father's parents, Horne's mother decided to take Lena Horne with her as she toured the south as a member of several all-black acting troupes.

This would have been the first time Lena Horne was confronted with such a stark class divide meeting black children who did not grow up with French and piano and lessons. In the south, she met black people living under the brutal weight of southern poverty. There was northern Jim Crow of course but its practice in the south was particularly crushing.

Horne's nomadic exists of months on the road with her mother, where she often lived with strangers, then back to the stability of her grandparents in Brooklyn finally came to an end due to a lack of acting work, so Horne her mother and her newly minted stepfather moved back New York.

In her autobiography Lena written with Richard Schickel, Horne says her going into show business was motivated almost entirely by the need to earn some money. It was 1933 the

depression was underway and even though Horne was only 16 she said she needed to support herself, her mother and her barely employed stepfather.

She was cast as a dancer/singer at the Cotton Club. She said, "I couldn't sing or dance but I was cute and, that was just what those gangsters who ran the place were looking for." For Horne joining the Cotton Club was exciting and most folks were just happy to have a job during the depression.

The Cotton Club was the sort of confection that could only have been constructed in the screwed up topsy-turvy Jim Crow world of enforced racial segregation.

Located in Harlem a predominately black and Latino neighborhood in Manhattan. The Cotton Club was owned and run by the mafia it started as a speakeasy under prohibition and it was so popular it became a mainstay where patrons could get the best of everything New York had to offer world-class American and Chinese food, booze, and the creme de la creme of black singers, dancers, and musicians.

The one caveat at the Cotton Club was that no blacks were allowed as patrons with the exception of famous performers and even they were often expected to literally sing for their supper. For the first year, Horne said she felt like she was finally a part of a family of performers but eventually the racism, the poor pay (she was making \$25 a week before and after she was given a solo) and the other conditions including not being able to use the club's bathrooms all became too much to cope with.

While it's true that hardly any night at the Cotton Club would be complete without a musical number featuring a jungle motif, It's also true that in turn Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway were the house orchestras and in Lena Horne's time there, 1933-34 Ted Koehler and Harold Arlen served as the house songwriters and composers meaning the Cotton Club served up some of the most beautifully literate music being performed by black performers anywhere in the world.

Songs like Harlem Holiday, Get Yourself a New Broom, Happy as the Day Is Long made reference to African American life in Harlem wrapped in smooth, jaunty rhythms and lyrics that Fred Astaire would have killed for. Then there were the sublime songs like Ill Wind, As Long As I Live and Stormy Weather which remain standards today.

As she began her second year at the Cotton Club Horne's mother and stepfather felt that she was trapped in the "lifetime" contract of \$25 a week and that she'd never earn a dollar more than the day she signed it even after she been given a solo number and had been singled out in the press.

Her stepfather attempted to negotiate a raise, suggesting that Horne might quit if she didn't get one. This resulted in the stepfather being seriously beaten by the club's mob henchmen. I guess he didn't know the employment policy at the Cotton Club, you can be fired at any time but no one quits. The family escaped Manhattan to Philadelphia where Horne was hired on by Noble Sissel to sing with his orchestra.

Noble Sissel was an African-American jazz composer, lyricist, bandleader, and playwright, best known for the legendary 1921 Broadway musical Shuffle Along which he co-wrote with Eubie Blake. One of the show's big hits was I'm Just Wild about Harry which Truman used in his run for President years later.

In addition to enduring the nightmare of traveling through the Jim Crow south as an all-black band, Horne says her mother was driving her nuts.

By this time, the combination of her mother's hypervigilance in protecting Horne's virtue combined with managing her career created a situation Horne felt she could no longer endure so she escaped and got married.

The marriage produced two children and a separation in 1940 followed by divorce four years later. Needing and wanting to work in 1940 Horne took a job with Charlie Barnett and his orchestra. Barnett was one of the first white bandleaders to integrate his band. Lena Horne was the first African American singer to travel and sing with an all-white band.

In the beginning, Horne said she loved working with Barnett because he told her that in order to learn who you are as a singer you need to focus on learning the ins and outs of one song at a time until you have it down cold then on to the next one and before you know you've got a group of songs that are yours.

## **CAFE SOCIETY**

In 1940 Horne asked the jazz record producer John Hammond to get her an audition at Cafe Society.

In many ways, Café Society was the perfect environment for Lena Horne, a musical venue who's artists were the guiding lights of jazz including Sarah Vaughan, Art Tatum, and Billy Holiday who introduced her song Strange Fruit from the stage at Cafe Society. The club was racially mixed on the bandstand and in the audience by design.

10:37 instead of below According to her, Lena Horne didn't just learn to become a better singer at Café Society this was the place where her consciousness began to be expanded. Barney Josephson, the owner of Cafe Society, introduced Horne to writers, painters, and people like Walter White, the founder of the NAACP and Paul Robeson who knew her grandmother and grandfather.

It must have been like that moment many of us have experienced when the lessons and teachings of your parents or other elders begin to come into focus for you personally.

Horne was a hit at Café Society and before too long Hollywood and the NAACP would propel her into a Hollywood career and the accompanying struggles of being the first.

## **Hollywood**

The film critic Donald Bogle called the 1930s, the age of the black servant. Seemingly, the only images of black men and women that were acceptable to most studio heads and southern white audiences specifically were those of the mammy or the befuddled childlike black man. Often black actors or actresses weren't even credited for the roles they played. Hattie McDaniel had won an Oscar for *Gone with the Wind* but she didn't have a contract with a movie studio.

The NAACP had been trying to improve the image of African Americans on screen since the horrors of the wildly popular film *Birth of a Nation*. They were also trying to increase the number of black technical workers behind the camera.

So after much protestation, MGM committed to hiring more black actors and actresses to play more "realistic" people and not just bug-eyed comic relief.

In 1942, Lena Horne became the second African American person to sign a full Hollywood contract with MGM. The first person was Nina Mae McKinney who was signed to a 5-year contract in 1929. That contract was abandoned almost immediately when the studio realized they couldn't offer much to do. Under contract, Horne played an uncredited cafe singer in the 1942 film *Panama Hattie* Horne sing a sizzling version of the Cole Porter songs "It was just one of those things."

The next two films both released in 1943 were *Stormy Weather*, an all-black musical featuring the song *Stormy Weather* which Horne sang and made a huge hit.

Later in 1943 Vincent Minnelli choose to make his film directorial debut by directing the film *Cabin in the Sky* and all-black musical. The film starred Ethel Waters, Eddie Rochester Anderson, Louis Armstrong, and Lena Horne. The film grossed 1.9 million dollars even though movie theaters in many cities, particularly in the southern United States, refused to show films with prominent black performers. On July 29, 1943, in Mt. Pleasant, Tennessee, the film was pulled after the first 30 minutes on orders from the local sheriff. A crowd gathered outside the theater and someone threatened to "pull the switch."

Lena Horne said she had a ball making these two movies and the future seemed bright but in fairly short order the much-ballyhooed progress for the images of blacks on screen began to grind to a halt. Even though both *Cabin in the Sky* and *Stormy Weather* had been big hits MGM seemed to lose its nerves and retreated from producing integrating films resorting instead to placing Lena Horne alone in musical numbers that could be cut out when they were shown in the south.

In film after film Lena Horne never spoke. Dressed beautifully, lit beautifully she would appear in a nightclub scene sing a gorgeous number beautifully arranged take a bow then disappear.

There was also a mini-revolt on part of the black actors and actresses who felt their jobs were being jeopardized by Lena Horne and the NAACP's activism, the general feeling seemed to be it was better to play a maid than to be one.

There were meetings held to address the "Horne problem" and Horne attended every one. After all, she understood their anger and their fear but she also hoped things would improve for them all, but it was not to be.

It seems the final straw came with two blows at the urging of the NAACP Lena Horne turned down the musical *Saint Louis Woman*, with a score by Johnny Mercer and Harold Arlen with songs like *Anyplace I Hang My Hat Is Home*, *I Had Myself a True Love* and *Come Rain or Come Shine*. The problem was the character Horne was being asked to play was a prostitute. Reluctantly, Horne agreed not to do it and as was the practice, she was suspended by the studio.

Then, according to Horne, she found out the musical of *Showboat* was being made into a film and she desperately wanted to be cast in the role of Julie, a mixed-race singer but the studio turned her down and that was it for Horne. She'd had enough.

In March of 1950, the *Hollywood Reporter* announced that Lena Horne and MGM had agreed to cancel the singer's contract.

26:31- Horne said that she was little more than a butterfly pinned to a pillar. Finally, the light dawned.

I'm sure that leaving Hollywood must have felt like a crushing defeat but Horne didn't leave empty-handed.

In 1947, right as things were coming to an end at MGM Horne secretly married, secretly because it was illegal for whites and blacks to marry, conductor and arranger Lenny Hayton, who she had met while working at MGM. Lenny Hayton was nominated for six Oscars for scoring a musical picture in his studio career.

He won two for *On the Town* and *Hello Dolly* and in him, in addition to a husband Horne found a powerful musical partner. Together they embarked on triumphant performances across Europe perfecting the musical style they poured into the two Sands and Waldorf evenings. Las Vegas & Waldorf Astoria

In the period between 1950 and 1969, many Hollywood stars who no longer had leading roles in films began to make forays into live performances with varying degrees of success.

Lena Horne and the Sands and Lena Horne Live at the Waldorf Astoria were recorded just a couple of years apart and though the Waldorf recording came first I'm going to talk about it last.

The Sands Hotel opened December 15, 1952, and like all the hotels on the Las Vegas strip, the Sand was segregated meaning black performers could only play at the Hotel but they couldn't stay in the hotel, they weren't even allowed to step onto the casino floor, and they certainly weren't allowed to eat in the restaurants. Lena Horne had to be escorted by security across the Sands casino floor to make her entrance in the Copa Room where she was performing.

From her MGM days, Horne had long gained a reputation as a fighter for racial equality. Unlike many other black performers, she wouldn't boycott a segregated venue, Horne would insist that it be integrated before she'd agree to go on and it almost always worked. It worked at the Sands Hotel. She and Lenny were given a penthouse suite to live in while they worked and the audience was integrated.

In 1961 Las Vegas itself was in the midst of its heyday. Headline performers were paid handsomely routinely are \$25,000 per night which Horne got. Horne also got star treatment being one of the first African American performers to headline the Copa with featured billing on the Sands famous billboard and all of its advertisement.

Lena Horne at the Sands was recorded over three nights, November 3rd through the 5th of 1960. The recording was released the following year by RCA Victor.

By the way, some of you might be familiar with the Copa Room because it was the place where the Rat Pack became a legend.

From photos I've seen the Copa Room was a traditional nightclub or small venue where food and drink are served. The seating arrangement seems flexible accommodating long banquet tables and chairs and on other occasions the sort of table and chair arrangement you might find today in a jazz club.

As was there custom Horne and Hayton used the house orchestra consisting of with Hayton conducting his own arrangements.

The Sands recording has nine songs consisting of ballads and up-tempo numbers, using his arranging skills Hayton put together some pretty spectacular medleys often featuring a specific composer.

The Sands recording starts with a drum roll befitting a queen's arrival, which seems completely appropriate, it reaches a crescendo and the announcer announces, "Ladies and gentlemen Jack Entratter. , the club manager, is proud to present Miss Lena Horne followed by applause as the orchestra plays Horne on stage.

### Sands Hotel

Maybe, a Billy Strayhorn tune written for Lena Horne. Like many nightclubs acts the song is used to welcome the audience and start the show. The lyric changes at the end to "Tonight I'm here with you"

The Man I Love written by George and Ira Gershwin for the 1929 musical Lady Be Good. This version is a great example of why the great American Songbook has lasted so long.

Normally this beautifully melodic song is sung with longing and more than a hint of melancholy. Horne's version, accompanied by piano and bass is sung with quiet reflective confidence. Instead of questioning if love will arrive she sings it with an air of alright, I'm ready for love but if it doesn't come just yet, no problem.

I won't go through all of the numbers I'll just point out the ones that I think make the recording shine.

As I said this set contains three medleys. A medley is a group of songs often with a thematic relationship to one another play together as one musical moment. Here the relationship other than the topic of romance is that each medley is a group of tunes written by the same composer.

In the Sands recording, there are three. The first one is a tribute to Jules Styne including A Ride on a Rainbow from the 1957 television musical, Ruggles of Red Gap lyrics by Leo Robin, Never-Never Land from Peter Pan, lyrics by Comden and Greene, I Said No from the 1947 movie Sweater Girl lyrics by Frank Loesser the song is used here as a bit of a novelty number with a surprise ending. The medley ends with a swinging version of Some People from the 1959 Broadway musical Gypsy lyrics by Stephan Sondheim of course. You'll never hear Mama Rose sing the line "Come on papa, Whittaya?" in quite the same way again.

The next medley is a tribute to Rodgers and Hammerstein. The medley begins with the song Only a Cock-Eyed Optimist from the musical South Pacific then I Have Dreamed from the King and I ending with an exquisite version of Surrey with a Fringe on Top from Oklahoma.

In Oklahoma Surrey is sung by Curly as a boost in his attempt to persuade Laurey to go to the box social with him. The arrangement in the musical is brilliant the rhythm replicants the sound of horses trotting. In the Hayton and Horne arrangement, the rhythm is slowed a bit and instead of a boast, Lena Horne's version is a seduction sung softly enough that you can feel the audience lean in so they don't miss a single syllable. You can hear little eruptions of laughter at Horne's knowing phrasing. When she sings, "Shhh you bird, my babe is sleepin maybe got a dream with

worth a keepin” you can feel the energy of the room suspended until the last cord is played the singer and piano accompaniment finishes together. The set is rounded out by a tribute to Yip Harburg with a version of The Beget from Finnan’s Rainbow. This is a song sung by four people. Horne and Hayton’s performance and arrangement are spectacular. It feels as though you’re watching the 11 o’clock number in a Broadway show.

Lena Horne at the Waldorf-Astoria When Lena Horne at the Waldorf-Astoria was recorded the Waldorf Astoria was the height of glamour and sophistication and after Horne opened there on New Year’s Eve 1956 she would come to define what elegance and sophistication meant to the nightclub set.

The cover charge at the Empire Room was \$25, one of the highest in town. This wasn’t a problem apparently, Horne’s new year’s eve show sold out so fast that they added another show at 1:30 a.m.

Instead of going into too much detail about the individual songs that are on the recording I’d like to give you some idea of Horne’s performance style and the thinking behind it and the reception to it.

Like the Sands recording, The Waldorf performance starts the same drum roll followed by an introduction.

Horne’s would enter through a pair of doors near the bandstand to a small stage with Lenny Hayton conducting the Nat Brand-Wynne house orchestra. The Empire Room was a 400 hundred seat horseshoe configuration meaning some of the audience was behind Horne.

The playwright Arthur Laurents recalling Horne’s entrance said she had a “geisha walk” taking small but rapid steps and deferential bows. “She came out as a paradox,” he said. “Then she looked at you, and ooh, you reared back. This was a formidable person.”

The eleven-song set began with:

Today I Love Everybody written by Harold Arlen and Dorothy Fields Like at the Sands there are three melodies that frame the evening the first is a tribute to Cole Porter.

The first two songs are How’s Your Romance and the seldom performed, then and now, After You. Who? from the Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire 1933 picture The Gay Divorcee followed by the equally gorgeous Love of My Life from the 1948 Judy Garland, Gene Kelley & Vincent Minelli musical film The Pirate.

The medley ends with a slam-bang version of It’s Alright with Me from the 1953 Broadway musical Can-Can. Cole Porter, who lived in the Waldorf came down to see Horne perform often. Porter enjoyed how Lena Horne sang his other tunes but word has it that he didn’t like this version It’s Alright With Me. Cole intended the song to be a mournful tune of love’s lost souls. Lena Horne’s version is anything but that. As the bass bows, the last notes of Love of My Life the horns come in establishing an up-tempo swing that lays the carpet for It’s Alright with Me.

This transition is so seamless and invigorating you can hear members of the otherwise rapt audiences yell out, bravo as one song shifts into another.



In this version, the woman is asserting in spite of her heartbroken she's ready and willing to make things happen right now.

The arrangement smolders and grooves while Horne sings the last few words of the song in an insistent staccato "That if some night you're, it's alright, it's alright with me" Horns blaring the songs ends with any doubt about the singer's intentions.

It's this sort of phrasing and attitude that makes the recordings so contemporary.

I think the Horne/Hayton version is a major achievement in terms of interpretation. I'm not 100% certain but I think Horne's version of the song became THE version of the song because soon after the album of the concert was released there were lots of uptempo versions of It's Alright with me that started to crop up with Frank Sinatra being one of the notable exceptions. He had sung it in the film of Can-Can.

Until he rerecorded it in the 1980s with Quincy Jones and that version was up-tempo too.

The other notable songs on this recording include a Duke Ellington tribute, Fats Waller's Honeysuckle Rose, Day in-Day Out, A New Fangled Tango and my favorite version, sorry Sarah Vaughan, of From This Moment On.

Neither recording includes the song Stormy Weather which was often saved as an encore.

Lena Horne at the Waldorf was only supposed to be a News Year's Eve engagement but it was so popular it stretched into an 8-week gig.

In his review for the New York World-Telegram, Robert Dana wrote. "I can't remember when I've so literally been swept off my feet by a feminine performance," "The woman is so stunningly gowned to accent a beautiful figure that this, in itself, would catch an audience's attention. But the ultimate hypnotic effect is the music, the arrangements and an intensity of delivery that finds its essence in eyes that seem to bore into you." As with many women in and out of show business, Lena Horne's beauty was the subject of a great deal of comment. Layered over this is the issue of race and that intersection for Horne caused a lot of pain and anger.

Hired at the Cotton Club because as she said she was young and cute. Asked by the NAACP to be the face of African American respectability in the movies mostly because of her of light-skinned beauty and then her talent.

By the time we get to these recordings, Lena Horne is an astute woman well aware of what others thought about her and African American women in general. Seen as a sexualized object not quite good enough to be invited into one's circle but hot enough to, well you know.

In part to cover her rage, at the racial injustice that was roiling around her, in part because singing cabaret meant you were exposed no character to hide behind Horne developed what Bobbie Short called her Hauteur.

The legendary acting teacher Uta Hagen told a student preparing a monologue from Othello that Lena Horne's performances were a great study in controlled rage.

In between songs Horne barely spoke to the audience except to introduce the next song or set of songs and to thank them for their applause.

Juxtaposed to this reserve and coolness between songs was a fire that burned under every song she sang. Horne used her sensuality as well as the perception as humor, a knowing taunting as if to say, “Yes, yes I know what you think and what you want but this is all you get.”

Martha Graham remarked after seeing Horne, “There’s nothing natural it’s all planned like Kabuki or a Hindu dance.”

Horne said, “My distance and aloofness gave my performances the psychological framework they needed.” “In a funny way, the audience and I reversed roles. Usually, performers seek the audience’s approval, but in my experience, they had to seek mine.” “That is where the tension is and therefore the excitement in my work.”

As theater, it must have been a little dislocating for the audience and thrilling. You can hear the thrills in both recordings.

Lena Horne at the Waldorf-Astoria was one of the first non-classical live albums to be recorded in Stereo, the album peaked at #24 in the Billboard Hot 200 and became the best-selling record by a female artist in the history of the RCA Victor label.

When the Empire Room 8 weeks was done and before she took up of residency at the Sands Hotel Horne starred in the Broadway musical Jamaica. The 1957 musical with music and lyrics by Harold Arlen and Yip Harburg. The historically multi-racial cast included Ricardo Montalban as her co-star along with Ossie Davis, Adelaide Hall, and Alvin Ailey. The show ran for over a year and Horne became the first African American woman to be nominated for a Tony Award in the lead actress category.

After her date at the Sands ended Lena Horne increased her civil rights activity. She held events to raise money for SNCC, she spoke at the March on Washington alongside Martin Luther King. She traveled to Mississippi to support the young freedom riders in that same visit she was invited to perform a small concert to support Medgar Evers she sang the song this little light of mine to the delight of Evers who was murdered soon after. Horne and members of the NCCAP were the last people to see Evers before he was assassinated by white supremacists. Evers's death shook Horne to her core.

In 1981, Lena Horne: The Lady and Her Music a one-woman musical revue opened to rave reviews on Broadway. Gone was Horne’s Hauteur replaced with warm freewheeling interactions with the audience and songs that told the story of what it took to arrive in a place where she could just be herself in her own voice.

The show won nearly every theater award there was and two Grammys for Horne and Quincy Jones who produced the score. The show ran for 333 performances closing on Horne’s 65th birthday. Horne toured with the show in the USA, Canada, London, and Stockholm. Which is where I saw the show. I was so blown away that I bought a ticket for a second night as well.

Horne’s made her final concert appearances, at New York's Carnegie Hall in 1994. In 1996 she won another Grammy for best vocal jazz performance on the album An Evening With Lena Horne a concert that was also filmed.

In 1998 she made her final television appearance on the Rosie O'Donnell Show where she sang a powerful version of Stormy Weather. She made her final studio recording in 2000 contributing to

an Ellington album singing the song Maybe written for her by her life-long pal & her greatest musical influence, Billy Strayhorn.

Horne died on May 9th, 2010 at age 92.

Such a rich musical and cultural legacy to leave behind.

We all owe her a debt of gratitude.