

HISTORY This Week EP 415: The Apollo Theater is Reborn

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

NOTE: This transcript may contain errors.

Sally Helm: HISTORY This Week. February 14, 1934. I'm Sally Helm.

Adelaide Hall is backstage, waiting. She's been in this position many times before, so she's familiar with all the sounds the orchestra tuning, the audience murmuring, people calling out to their friends who have come in late, to say, "I'm sitting over here!" She knows all the feelings, too—anxiety. Anticipation. The shift that happens in your body when you step out before a roomful of people who have come here just to watch you sing.

Hall, in 1934, is already famous. She's performed in Paris, at the Moulin Rouge. She sang at the Chicago World's Fair. She's appeared on Broadway and recorded with the great Duke Ellington. She's taken a 30-week tour to all the major cities of the United States. And she has performed many times here in New York City. After a show starring Hall at a famous Manhattan jazz venue the Cotton Club, a reviewer wrote that Hall sang the song *Stormy Weather* "so well that although you've heard it everywhere, you'll find new and deeper moods of blue in it."

Hall Stormy Weather 1937 Archival: *Can't go on, everything I had is gone, stormy weather...*

Sally Helm: But tonight's show at the Apollo Theater in Harlem will be different...because of the audience. In 1934, the Cotton Club filled its stage with African American stars like Adelaide Hall but only allowed white patrons to buy tickets. It's the same for Broadway shows. But the Apollo Theater has just recently opened its doors to Black audiences. When Adelaide Hall steps out onstage tonight, she'll be part of an important shift: the beginning of the end of segregated audiences.

After the show, Hall receives her usual rave reviews. One said her singing and dancing was "a thing of beauty and joy." Her performance helps put the Apollo Theater on the map.

Kamilah Forbes: If we think about Harlem being the capital of Black America, and if we think about the Apollo being the heartbeat, then we really sit at the nucleus of what is creating the culture of America.

Sally Helm: Today: a roundtable discussion with the Apollo's resident historian and its executive producer. How did this 88-year-old theater with 1,500-seats help catapult some of the nation's most well-known performers to stardom? And how did it change American music?

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: Let's start with some introductions and I'm wondering, the two of you work together, right?

Kamilah Forbes: Yes.

Billy Mitchell: Yes.

Sally Helm: Could you introduce each other?

Billy Mitchell: I would love to. Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Billy Mitchell, but I'd like to introduce you to our senior exec producer at the world-famous Apollo Theater, the incredible, the fabulous, the very intelligent, Kamilah Forbes.

Kamilah Forbes: Thank you Mr. Mitchell. I am Kamilah Forbes. But I have the honor and the pleasure, to introduce you to Mr. Billy Mitchell, better known as Mr. Apollo, because he is our in-house historian and most beloved member of the Apollo family.

Sally Helm: Oh, amazing. Mr. Mitchell, I wanna start with you. Can you tell me a little bit about your first personal memory of the Apollo?

Billy Mitchell: Well, I was born and raised in Mount Vernon, New York. I am one of eventually 14 children that my mom had. And, when I was 12, we were evicted from our place in Mount Vernon, so we moved to the South Bronx and I became the oldest member at home at age 15 and one day, uh, we had no food in the house. My mother sends me down to Harlem where she was born, to borrow some money from her cousin who just happened to live on 126th Street, which is where the backstage door of the Apollo Theater is located.

And while standing there, the door opens up and Frank Schiffman, who was the owner of the Apollo back then, he opens up the door and says, hey kid, what are you doing back here? You wanna make some money? And that question frightened the heck outta me because I didn't know where this guy was going with that question, right? So, I started backing up, getting ready to run, and he says, calm down. I'm not gonna mess with you. I'm asking you, do you wanna make some money by running to the store for people who are inside rehearsing for a big concert, and they're gonna need someone to go get their coffee and their newspapers and their shoes shined, etc. And if you run these errands, kid, they'll give you a little tip. And I started running errands that day, and that was my first introduction to the Apollo Theater. That was in 1965.

Sally Helm: Ms. Forbes, what was your first memory of the Apollo? Where did you grow up, first?

Kamilah Forbes: So, I grew up in Chicago, Illinois, so my first introduction to the Apollo was actually, you know, through the television.

Showtime 1988 Archival: *Tonight, from the village of Harlem in New York City...*

Kamilah Forbes: It was Showtime at the Apollo.

Showtime 1988 Archival: *...the world-famous Apollo Theater, where dreams are born, and legends are made.*

Kamilah Forbes: I remember I loved staying up at night to watch the competition show, to see the hottest, newest performers, but also to see the amateurs. But one of my favorite parts of Showtime is when they would do the Apollo moment, right? An Apollo history moment, where it was through these like five-minute segments that I really got a window into the lure, and the legend, which is the

Apollo Theater of the history and all of the amazing artists that walked across the stage, that made their name there.

Sally Helm: Mr. Mitchell, I know history's your area, so I wanna ask a little bit about the Apollo before this big moment in 1934. What would people who walked into the Apollo have seen and heard there? What was going on?

Billy Mitchell: Well, the building was built in 1914 actually, and it wasn't called the Apollo Theater back then. The building was originally a burlesque house known as Hurtig and Seamon's New Burlesque Theater, and it was segregated. African Americans weren't allowed to enter the building to sit down and see shows or perform on the stage or to work there.

You know, Harlem was different back then. Harlem was basically, Irish on the west side, Italian Latino on the east side. And where the Apollo Theater's now located, it was all Dutch and Jewish. but during that time, a lot of African Americans were moving into Harlem, as part of The Great Migration. It was the Harlem Renaissance and, Harlem had been the cultural mecca of America at that time with art and intellect and activism.

And after the Burlesque theater called Hurtig and Seamon's was shut down by the then Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, the owners, opened the theater as the 125th Street Apollo Theater. And they says, okay, we're gonna now allow African Americans to integrate with our white patrons to work here and to perform there. That's how that transformation came from being a segregated burlesque house to a place that highlighted African American talent.

Sally Helm: Ms. Forbes, I wanna bring you in here for a moment. Why is that change so important in the context of this time and place? We're saying Harlem in the 1930s, just after the Harlem Renaissance.

Kamilah Forbes: Yeah, so that moment of integration was really about a space of ownership. I live here, my culture is being born and created here, and this is for me. African Americans were moving and mobilizing around the country and in urban centers like New York, urban centers like Chicago, Detroit. Not only moving, but there was a really strong middle class being born. And Harlem amongst that all, because it's Harlem, because it's New York City, the African American mobilization really became the beacon for the nation. The capital of Black America is what a lot of times, you know, Harlem was referred to as. So, it was really important, what went on in Harlem, what went on in Harlem culture, and then consequently what happened at the Apollo Theater.

Sally Helm: I mean, it's obviously years later that you first walk into the Apollo Theater yourself, Mr. Mitchell, but, in those sort of early days in the thirties can you gimme a sense of, what it would've been like to be in the room as an audience member?

Billy Mitchell: I can only imagine cause I wasn't around back then, but you know, people would get dressed up to come to see us show at the Apollo Theater. They would, jazz was starting to become very, very popular. So, you saw the likes of the Benny Carter Orchestra and Duke Ellington.

Duke Ellington Archival: *[music playing] If I come close while we're dancing, I get a slap on the wrist.*

Billy Mitchell: They could sit down, they could dress up, they could feel good, they could see people that looked like them in a theater that previously no longer allowed African Americans in it. And can you imagine this all started on January 26th, 1934. 89 years the building's been called the Apollo Theater. The first production that was done that night was called Jazz à la Carte. It featured the Benny Carter Orchestra. It featured Anita Ward. It featured these incredible showgirls' dancers, and it was hosted by Ralph Cooper.

Now Ralph Cooper aside from being an actor, he had one of the top radio shows in New York at the time, which was a talent show. It was called the Harlem Amateur Hour Radio Show. And Ralph Cooper and Frank Schiffman worked out a deal to bring that radio show slash talent show to the stage of the Apollo, and it became known as Amateur night at the Apollo.

Sally Helm: Ms. Forbes, can you tell me what is Amateur Night at the Apollo and why is it such an institution?

Kamilah Forbes: Mm. So Amateur Night is the longest running talent show. You know, predates American Idol, predates star search, predates all of those. And it's ultimately, it's a talent show. But it's one under which the judges are the audience.

Showtime 1992: *We're gonna bring back all our contestants. All right. Let's give it up for PRS seven. How you like them?*

Billy Mitchell: The entire audience judges you. If the audience members like you, they applaud you. If they don't like you, they literally will boo you, you know?

Showtime 1992: *[audience boos]*

Kamilah Forbes: Like Mr. Mitchell said, people come to boo for sure, it's all part of the fun of it, but I also think, what's really remarkable about Amateur Night is that the countless number of artists that have been discovered there. People that were given opportunity. You don't need an agent to get on, you don't need a manager. You come in and you sign up. And so, if you've got that bit of burning desire and or talent, you can perform on one of the largest stages, which is the Apollo stage that so many of our major American performers have performed on.

Billy Mitchell: And incidentally Ella Fitzgerald was born on amateur night the Apollo. The first year it opened up, Ella Fitzgerald was one of the first females to win the competition.

Sally Helm: I'd love for you to tell me that story. How does that happen? How does the night unfold?

Billy Mitchell: Well Ella, of course, she had to audition, and throughout that night, there were other people that were performing, particularly these two sisters that were dancers that Ella was scheduled to compete against as a dancer. And Ella thought they were so much better than her that she went to Ralph Cooper and changed her mind about competing and dancing against them. So, he says, well, what else can you do? Come on, we got a show to run. She says, well, my friends and family tell me I can sing a little bit. So, she went out there, she started singing the song, and the

crowd just loved her. And after doing amateur night, she started being the lead vocalist for the Apollo Theater Band, the Chick Webb band at a very young age, maybe 17, 18 years old.

Ella and Chick Webb Band 1939: *[Ella singing]*

Sally Helm: Amazing. Ms. Forbes, have you thought about that famous Ella Fitzgerald performance?

Kamilah Forbes: Oh my gosh. All the time.

Sally Helm: What do you imagine?

Kamilah Forbes: Well, you know, you think about it, right? She's performing in front of 1500 people, having to like switch her act in the last minute. I mean, that's a lot of guts. It really proves, you know what you're made of. But it also proves to me, how welcoming the audience can be at the same time, right? And that's something special that you don't always see. That kind of call and response activation when it all works well, right? That happens with the audience. I mean, we talk about the boos, but also, they're with every single note, every single moment, every single tap, every single step right there with you. That doesn't happen at every theater.

Showtime 1992: *[audience cheers]*

Kamilah Forbes: Right. Audience sit back waiting to be entertained versus audience leaning forward, you know, to root for you to cheer you on, to let you know when you've made a right move and will let you know when you made a wrong, and that's participation in another level.

Sally Helm: Mr. Mitchell, can you tell me about some of the sort of rituals and traditions that have defined the Apollo?

Billy Mitchell: One of the traditions that still exists to this day is that when the contestant is introduced to walk out on stage to perform, they must stop and rub the tree of hope. That tree stump, which it really is, was once located on 131st Street and seventh Avenue, directly across the street from one of the most famous theaters in Harlem back then the Lafayette Theater. And people would gather around that tree hoping that someone from the Lafayette would notice them and offer them a job. And before you know it, people started getting hired and they thought that the reason they were hired is because the tree that they were standing around was giving off good luck.

People were very superstitious. and then there were plans to fix the sidewalk, in order to do that, the tree must be cut down. But Ralph Cooper and other city officials decided to take the stump of the tree off and bring it to the Apollo theater so that on amateur night when the contests were called to come out to perform, they can now just rub the stump for good luck, hoping that the audience receives them well and they don't get booed.

Sally Helm: We've been talking about it through time, but I really imagine that some of the emotions on amateur night would be sort of timeless, would be the same now as they were in the thirties and forties.

Kamilah Forbes: Completely.

Sally Helm: Can you tell me about those emotions, Ms. Forbes, I could sort of see you almost starting to feel them. What does it feel like?

Kamilah Forbes: I mean, it's electric in the room. I love being in the room with the audience, but I also love being backstage with the artists. The artists come from far and wide to compete every week. It's a weekly show that happens every single Wednesday. Has always happened every single Wednesday since 1934. And there was a, I remember a couple years ago we had a sax player, who moonlighted as a bartender, out of Ohio. And Tuesday night, sure enough, right after he would get off his shift at 3:00 AM in the morning, he was driving across country to New York to make sure that he was there for the amateur night to compete on the stage.

Sally Helm: On Wednesday, so he does this overnight drive Tuesday?

Kamilah Forbes: He was doing this overnight drive exactly. And then wait to see if he advances to the next week. And for him, this was his big opportunity, right? This was his big opportunity to live out his dream, performing in front of an audience, you know, as an artist. And, that's a kind of really exciting energy that's happening backstage, you know, it's just brimming with possibility.

Sally Helm: Possibility that, over the years, has started so many performers on the path to fame and success. After the break, we'll talk about some more of them: how they got their break in Harlem – or how, after they made it big, they just had to play the Apollo.

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: I kind of just wanna broaden it out and ask you both, what are some sort of key moments, anecdotes, really notable performances that have happened at the Apollo, the stories that sort of define the place to you over time.

Billy Mitchell: Well, I'll let Kamilah go because I have so many.

Kamilah Forbes: Yes. Yes. No, go for it.

Billy Mitchell: One of them was, uh, I think I was 17 or 18 years old, running errands for amateur night, and I remember these little boys about to perform on the stage. They were known as the Jackson Brothers, right? They were introduced. They walked out and they literally slayed the audience. We had never seen kids that talented. They had that barbershop quartet type of harmony. Their choreography was just incredible. They weren't even teenage. I think Michael was about eight or nine years old when I first saw the Jacksons on Amateur Night. And then when they signed up to Motown, I says, my God, we were hoping that someone would manage them and take them to another level because they were that good.

Jackson Five Motown Audition: [Michael Jackson singing]

Billy Mitchell: I remember speaking to Machine Gun Kelly, when he did amateur night, you know, he came and said he was gonna be a rapper. So, I go downstairs, I'm speaking with all the amateurs, you know, wishing them well, and I said, "oh, you're a rapper, huh, bruh?" He says, "yeah, I'm a rapper. I'm from Cleveland, Ohio." I says, "okay, well, you know, you're at the hip hop capital of the world, so you better be good." And he absolutely won the competition that year.

Sally Helm: Ms. Forbes, what comes to mind for you if you sort of think of the broad sweep?

Kamilah Forbes: Gosh, there's so many. Another two, you know, moments which are aren't quite performances, but I, but I, I think are significant moments is when the passing of Aretha Franklin and Michael Jackson happened. People from all over New York City and the Northeast gathered under the marquee of the Apollo Theater.

Aretha Franklin Memorial Archival: *[cheering]*

Kamilah Forbes: We responded quickly and put speakers out front. The second that we heard, because we knew people would gather to celebrate their life and legacy but also to mourn collectively with community. And it became right under, in front of our theater, under the marquee on one 25th Street. And so I think this is, that, that kind of really goes to show a bit of how we operate as a gathering place as a town hall, if you will in New York City, in Harlem, unlike any other space.

Sally Helm: Mr. Mitchell, I wanna ask you, you do tours of the Apollo. Are there places where you stand in the Apollo that bring you back in some way? Places where you stand, where you feel some important presence of history?

Billy Mitchell: When I provide tours, I don't let anyone sit in the front row, and I always have to explain to people, you can start sitting in a second row and go on your way to the back. And I said, the reason why I do is because, I feel the spirit of Duke Ellington right over there. I feel the spirit of, of Ella Fitzgerald, Marvin Gaye, Johnny Cash, Michael Jackson, prince, you know, so I never let anyone sit in the front row. And I feel this, this energy in whenever I walk in that theater, I don't know what it is. I don't know how to describe it. You know, God just puts this, this energy around me and I literally feel it. And I think I'm being protected by the people who perform there and making sure that I continue to tell their story.

Sally Helm: You're not the only one. I saw you mentioned in one interview that some artists prefer to use the sort of older dressing rooms.

Billy Mitchell: Yeah. We, we have, you know, more up to date dress rooms and a lot of the performers prefer to use the old dress rooms cause that's where the Nat King Coles got dressed. That's where the Billy Holidays got dressed. That's where the Louis Armstrong's got dressed. You know, so the, the Beyonce's of the world want to use the old dress rooms because of all the people that also used those dresses before they hit the stage.

Sally Helm: I wanna pull out the impact that the Apollo has had on American music more broadly. Can you speak to that? Why has the Apollo been important in the history of American music?

Kamilah Forbes: When I think about the history of American music, what sits at the core is Black music. You know, we always use this tagline that Apollo is the soul of American culture. But that's quite simply stated, right? And if we think about Harlem being the capital of black America, and if we think about the Apollo being the heartbeat, then we really sit at the nucleus of what is creating the culture of America. And it's a responsibility I think we take very seriously. That also means, how do we make sure that we are always being inclusive to how culture is moving and changing and shaping? We always like to say, you know, we're a place where stars are born, and legends are made. And I'm always thinking about, yeah, and who's up next?

Sally Helm: Mr. Mitchell, is there anything you'd add to that?

Billy Mitchell: Well, yeah. Yeah. She's talking about, you know, being inclusive, you know, just imagine a couple of months had the Red Heart Chili Peppers and, Pearl Jam at the Apollo Theater. I've witnessed Bruce Springsteen at the Apollo. So, these are acts that people normally may not associate with performing in Harlem or at the Apollo Theater, but we are very inclusive, and we celebrate all types of music. Every race, every culture, every ethnic group has been, represented and expressed on the stage. The Apollo to everybody. Most people that don't know about the Apollo think that only black people come to the Apollo Theater or perform there, and I have to let them know that everybody's invited to the party.

Sally Helm: All right. Thank you both so much for joining me for this interview. It's been so great to hear about, about your work and about the history of this institution.

Kamilah Forbes: Such a pleasure.

Billy Mitchell: Absolute pleasure.

[CREDITS]

Sally Helm: Thanks for listening to History This Week. For more moments throughout history that are also worth watching, check your local TV listings to find out what's on the History Channel today. If you want to get in touch, please shoot us an email at our email address, HistoryThisWeek@History.com, or you can leave us a voicemail: 212-351-0410.

Special thanks to our guests: Kamilah Forbes, the Apollo theater's executive producer, and Billy Mitchell, its historian and tour guide.

Billy Mitchell: If anybody wants to know more about what we do at the Apollo Theater, go to our website, apollotheater.org. You can see everything that we're doing. The frequently asked questions are answered you can also submit an audition piece to appear on Amateur Night.

Sally Helm: I would love it if someone hears this interview and gets inspired to go to amateur night and their life changes. It's really, it's exciting to think about.

Billy Mitchell: It, their life can change and I've seen it happen personally with a lot of people.

This episode was produced by Julia Press. It was story edited by Jim O'Grady and sound designed by Brian Flood. HISTORY This Week is also produced by Corinne Wallace, and me, Sally Helm. Our associate producer is Emma Fredericks. Our senior producer is Ben Dickstein. Our supervising producer is McCamey Lynn, and our executive producer is Jessie Katz.

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