

The harlem
renaissance: john
birks gillespie and
selma burke



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The Harlem Renaissance was a time of great accomplishments among African Americans. Many works of art, poetry, and music during this time became notable even to today. Two very inspiring people of this time period were John Birks Gillespie and Selma Burke. John Birks "Dizzy" Gillespie was born on October 21, 1917 in Cheraw, South Carolina. He was the youngest of nine children. His father, James Gillespie, was a bricklayer and a musician on the side. His mother, Lottie Powe Gillespie, was a house wife and a full time mother. By the age of 12, Gillespie had experience in playing the piano and hoped to someday join the school band.

He first started playing the trombone but switched to the trumpet because he liked the sound better. His family struggled with poverty after his father died when he was ten. This prevented him from getting his own instrument. Although, through his struggles, he still managed to be a very skilled trumpet player but only in one key. He earned a scholarship to Laurinburg Tech in North Carolina. He studied theory and harmony and decided that music would be his profession. While Gillespie was with the Frankie Fairfax band, the band leader, Fats Palmer, jokingly gave "Dizzy" his name.

Gillespie played in several musical groups including the Teddy Hill Orchestra (1937), the Cab Calloway Band (1939), and the Earl Hines Band (1941). He had many distinctive characteristics about himself that became his trademarks. His most popular trademarks were his ballooning cheeks, upturned horn, and fun personality. To earn more money, he wrote arrangements for other bands. Including one of his first arrangements, "Pickin' the Cabbage", written for Cab Calloway. In the 1930s, with the help of

Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, and Kenny Clarke, Gillespie created a new genre of music called “ bebop”.

At first, many musicians did not take to the new form of music. But after playing with popular musicians, including Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, and many more, Gillespie founded his own band in 1945. In 1947 Gillespie made songs synthesized with bebop and Afro-Cuban rhythms. Some of these songs become best-sellers, like the song “ Cubana Be, Cubana Bop”. Gillespie’s band made its official debut at Carnegie Hall in September of 1947 (Smith, 459). He continued to refine bebop and in 1956 the U. S. Department of State asked Gillespie to represent the country and take a band on a tour of Europe, Africa, and the Middle East (Smith, 459).

Gillespie continued making music and performing up to 300 shows a year. In 1988 his new band recorded ‘ Dizzy Gillespie and the United Nations Orchestra: Live at Royal Festival Hall in London’ which won a Grammy Award in 1991. He won two more Grammys before that in 1975 and 1980. In 1992 he was honored with a year-long diamond jubilee for his 50 years of performance and his 75th birthday (Smith, 460). He performed for four presidents and won the prestigious Kennedy Center Award. Gillespie also wrote an autobiography called ‘ To Be Or Not to Bob Memoirs’ published in 1979.

He died of pancreatic cancer on January 6, 1993 at the age of 76. He will be remembered for his amazing talent and great personality by all whom he loved and inspired. Another notable African American during this time was Selma burke, an inspiring artist and sculptor. Selma Hortense Burke was

<https://assignbuster.com/the-harlem-renaissance-john-birks-gillespie-and-selma-burke/>

born on December 31, 1900 in Mooresville, North Carolina. She was one of ten children of Neal and Mary Jackson Burke. Her love for art started when she was quite young. Her father was a minister that traveled the world and when he'd come back from overseas he would bring traditional fine art objects along with him.

Burke also had two uncles who also traveled mostly to Africa. They brought back lots of traditional religious African figures and masks which were given to the Burkes after their deaths. Therefore, African art was one of Selma's first references to art (Hine, 191). Burke attended the only black elementary school in the Washington, D. C. area. Unfortunately, the school offered no encouragement for the arts. She, instead, was home schooled by William Arial, a white man who also encouraged her love for art. She later attended Winston-Salem High School and her mother urged her to get a practical education.

So she went to St. Agnes School of Nursing and became a registered nurse in 1924. After moving and continuing her education in nursing, Burke married Durant Woodward who eleven months later, died of blood poisoning. She became a personal nurse for a wealthy Otis Elevator heiress and was pretty much unaffected by the Great Depression. Burke moved to New York in 1935 and took on a modeling job and co-wrote the 'Liberator' with Claude McKay. In 1938, she spent a year in Europe learning about different techniques and arts. After that she pursued a professional degree in sculpture at Columbia University.

She graduated with an M. F. A. in 1941 and even got a chance to show her work at the McMillen Galleries in New York City. But during World War II, Burke joined the navy but was hospitalized after a back injury. She later entered a competition to create a profile portrait of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1944. She had multiple private sit-downs with the president himself to get the portrait just right. She wanted this “ to be the best piece of sculpture I had ever done” (Hine, 192). She created a 3’6” by 2’6” bronze plaque in profile with the four freedoms listed along the top.

It was put in the Recorder of Deeds Building in Washington, D. C. The plaque was revealed by Frederick Weaver on September 24, 1945. John R. Sinnock, the man who designed Roosevelt’s profile on the dime, use Selma’s plaque as a main reference. Burke taught at many schools throughout her life. She even got remarried and moved to Pennsylvania. Burke opened the Selma Burke art Center in Pittsburg in 1968. She won multitudes of awards and her works are in many public and private collections. Burke retired for the active life of a sculptor and passed away August 29, 1995.