

Singing Prettily: Lena Horne in Hollywood

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WHEN LENA HORNE first arrived at MGM in Hollywood, she was instructed on how to perform as a singer in front of a camera. She was told to make sure she stayed in the right place for the lighting and asked not to open her mouth so wide: »Try to sing with a pretty mouth«.¹

Both these instructions might not be intrinsically objectionable. The system of lighting in Hollywood was complex, and performers needed to be in the right position vis-à-vis any given lighting set-up; the wide-open mouth can look alarming, especially in close-up on a large screen, and singers did modify how much they opened their mouth when being filmed (as opposed to when being aurally recorded for synchronisation with the image). Yet the instructions to stay in place and make a pretty mouth are also suggestive when conjugated with norms of femininity and anxieties about blackness, such white anxieties bringing out the implicit whiteness of prevailing feminine ideals. Being told to stand still (know your place) and keep your mouth small (and your voice down) has especially sharp resonances for a black woman singer.

The instructions also suggest a perceived incompatibility between the norms of femininity and African-American women. Attendant trumpeting by MGM and in the press emphasised the fact that Horne was the first ›coloured‹ performer to be signed to a long-term star contract by a major Hollywood studio. Yet visually and aurally she came close to white notions of femininity: light skinned and no blues in the voice.

Hollywood didn't know what to do with her. The light skinned African American woman is disturbing: she messes with the comfortable binarism of white/coloured, and she is a reminder of the history of miscegenation, of white on black rape and *droit de seigneur*, and her beauty risks inciting more of it all over again. That is why the few Hollywood narratives allowed her are tragic:² she is punished for being what she is (or, implicitly but literally, for the sins of the fathers) and thus

¹ Horne gave an account of this in her one woman show *Lena Horne: The Lady and her Music* 1981-2, first performed on Broadway then on tour.

² See e.g. Donald Bogle: *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, New York 1974; Elspeth Kydd: *›Touched by the Tar Brush‹: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in Classical Hollywood Cinema*, PhD thesis, Evanston, IL 1996.

also complacently pitied for it. This however would not have been right for Horne, who was to be promoted as a star in the quintessential genre of US optimism, the musical. But she couldn't be given the kinds of roles white women were given in musicals, because this would have meant both centring the film more on her, a coloured woman, and involving her in interaction with white male characters and stars on screen and in the appeal to heterosexual white men in the audience. Not knowing what to do with her had the effect of pushing the instructions to keep in place and sing prettily so far as to separate Horne off, fix and contain her.

In what follows I look at the placing of Horne in visual and aural terms as a coloured star who could but didn't pass for white, who didn't fit, and at Hollywood's strategies for reining in this disturbing figure, in terms of narrative, editing and *mise-en-scène*. However, separating Horne out also could provide an opportunity for the expression of the black cultural traditions that she brought with her to Hollywood, and which were even in some measure the motivation for her going, and being urged to go, to Hollywood. The struggle between containment and expression structures this essay.

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In a way unimaginable in relation not only to white but also to most African-American performers, the question of Lena Horne's colour is recurrent to the point of obsession in contemporary coverage of her.³ She was bronze, copper, sepia, honey skinned, a ›Chocolate Cream Chanteuse‹, ›a milk chocolate-colored‹ entertainer, a ›café au lait beauty‹.⁴ Louella Parsons described Horne as ››different‹‹ and as coming ›from the West Indies‹, while Ted Le Berthon described her as ›beauty of the Negro race whom anyone might mistake for an aristocratic and exciting Latin American señorita‹.⁵

The harping on Horne's colour relates to the sense that she could have passed for white except for the fact that everyone knew and she insisted that she was black (though these are not the terms that she or most other people would have deployed at the time). It is said that on Broadway producer George White and agent Harold Gumm told her ›her best tactic would be to pass herself off as Spanish‹⁶; she appeared in advertisements for skin lightening creams, not because she used them

³ For a wider consideration of the history of colour discrimination and African-Americans, see Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson and Ronald Hall: *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color among African Americans*, New York 1992.

⁴ Shari Roberts: *Seeing Stars: Feminine Spectacle, Female Spectators and World War II*, PhD thesis, Chicago, IL 1993, pp. 152–153.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 114.

⁶ James Haskins with Kathleen Benson: *Lena*, New York 1985, p. 70, cf. also *Lena Horne and Richard Shickel: Lena*, Garden City, NY 1965, p. 106.

but as an image of what using them could supposedly do.⁷ On the other hand, when she first arrived at MGM they sought to black her up, in effect asking her to wear blackface, to ensure that her place within racial categories was clear, persuading Max Factor to develop a make-up entitled ›Light Egyptian‹.⁸ In her bearing and gestures (and class background) she was lady-like, something assumed to be a white prerogative. Yet she was known to be coloured: no matter what she looked like, what she was was coloured.

One can see both her ladylikeness and her evolving relationship to black modes in the two films she made before moving to MGM, *THE DUKE IS TOPS* (USA 1938, William S. Nolte) and *BOOGIE-WOOGIE DREAM* (USA 1944, Hans Burger). The former was made by the independent studio Million Dollar productions, based in Hollywood, specialising in African-American movies but in fact white owned and controlled.⁹ Originally packaged as a vehicle for the studio's major star, Ralph Cooper, with Lena Horne featured in the ›All-Negro‹, ›all colored cast‹,¹⁰ it was re-released in 1943 as *THE BRONZE VENUS*.

One number in *THE DUKE IS TOPS*, ›Don't Let Our Love Song Turn into a Blues‹ (Ben Ellison/Harvey Brooks), is especially suggestive in terms of Horne's ethnic / musical position. Its title and refrain explicitly mean ›let's keep our love happy‹, underlined musically by an opposition between norms of the love song derived from parlour balladry and those of the blues. Horne alters her performance style for the different elements: her voice is just a little deeper for the blues and she occasionally introduces variations into a note; she remains still, smiling sweetly, with lady-like gestures, for the love song sections, but smiles broadly, sways her hips, rolls her shoulders a little and extends her arms out for the blues.



›Don't let our love song ...



... turn into a blues.‹

⁷ Roberts: *Seeing Stars* (as note 4), pp. 93–94.

⁸ Horne and Schickel: *Lena* (as note 6), p. 136.

⁹ Arthur Knight: *Disintegrating the Musical*, Durham, NC 2002, p. 176.

¹⁰ The first phrase is from the headline for the review in *Variety*, the second from an ad for a screening at the Regal Theater, Chicago; see *ibid.* pp. 176–7, which also reproduces the ad.

At one point, on the words »As long as life lasts / Let's be true to one another«, a love song phrase, she gestures to her right and the camera follows her direction and swings across to show two light-skinned men (an agent and a producer) in a box watching her with pleasure and approval. On the bluesy phrase »lost on its cruise«, sung straight out ahead of her, there is a 180° cut to the audience, dark and also loving the show. The alignment of the love song with the white-like and powerful men in the box and the blues with the black audience dramatises Horne's own position between white and black styles. Moreover, despite the words (that explicitly don't want love songs to be displaced by the blues), it would surely be hard to feel that Horne isn't as happy, maybe even happier, with the blues.

In *THE DUKE IS TOPS*, Horne touches on black entertainment traditions; in the short *BOOGIE-WOOGIE DREAM* she is shown very deliberately to embrace them. She plays a washer-up in a night-club, while the boogie-woogie pianists Albert Ammons and Pete Johnson¹¹ play a decorator and piano tuner respectively. After hours, they fantasise working with the Teddy Wilson Band and, by means of movie magic, they find themselves, in swanky clothes, singing and playing to the band's accompaniment. Horne announces that she'd like to do »a little number of my own: ›Unlucky Woman‹.«¹² The song is classic twelve-bar blues in structure, the lyrics drawing upon the combination of defiance and lament common in women's blues; Horne sings it with greater attack on the beginning of syllables and sometimes a harsher timbre than in any of her performances in *THE DUKE IS TOPS* but still hitting the high notes with perfect and sweet pitch; she sways her body some, uses, along with some of the ladylike gestures, some jerkier ones and moves her head sensually from side to side while looking straight ahead. In short the style here signals an embrace of black music (and, compared to spirituals, ragtime or jazz, a less socially acceptable form of it), in the style as well as in the claim that the song is her own.

THE DUKE IS TOPS and *BOOGIE-WOOGIE DREAM* showcase Horne as a woman who could pass for white, vocally as well as visually, but who is nonetheless incorporated into black entertainment and self-consciously incorporates elements of black musical tradition into her performance without abandoning the white ones. However, if in the context of black cultural production, Horne's belonging, her blackness, seems to have been unproblematic, for white Hollywood it was confusing. One index of this is the creation of numbers that place her somewhere between black and Latin American imagery. These distance her from WASP connec-

¹¹ Generally considered to be the originators of the style (see e.g. Konrad Nowakowski: A Few Historical Remarks on Boogie-Woogie Dream, under <http://www.colindavey.com/BoogieWoogie/articles/bwdream2.htm> (07.06.2010)).

¹² In fact written by Leonard Feather.

tions (which of course she had) while still accounting for her lack of conformance to unambiguous ideas of what coloureds looked and sounded like. In *PANAMA HATTIE* (USA 1942, Norman Z. McLeod), her first MGM film, she does a number ›The Sping‹ (Phil Moore/Jeanne Le Gon/Alfred Moore), composed specially for the occasion. The intro to the song goes:

Below the borderline of old Harlem
 Down to one hundred and tenth
 There's a dance that they do – the Sping
 From the West Indies it came
 With its wild Spanish strain
 To be mixed with an indigo blue.

The mix of Latin and black American elements in the lyrics are evident also in the combination in the arrangement of lazy bongos (connoting Africa / the Caribbean) and hard drumming (black American). Later in the song, a series of references to Caribbean islands, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, Trinidad, themselves half way between North and South America, has Horne put on the accents of each one. Her outfit combines Harlem signifiers (sheath skirt, stack heels) with Latin (bandana, short sleeved blouse) and (Caribbean) island ones (seashells, netting, bobbles). As a friend of mine said of it, this dress has just not been left in peace: it is as if, not knowing how to place Horne (beyond not placing her as Anglo white), one thing after another has been tried out and left there.

The title of ›Brazilian Boogie‹ (Hugh Martin/Ralph Blane) in *BROADWAY RHYTHM* (USA 1944, Roy Del Ruth) itself expresses the hybrid – Latin and Harlem – character of the number. Performed in a nightclub called the Jungle Club, the mise-en-scène for this show plays on black / Latin elements: bamboo canes, tropical flowers, a totem pole (African or Pacific), black male dancers in white straw hats, and Horne in a skirt split up to the top of the thigh, yellow flowers in her hair and big ring earrings. The words of the song promote the idea of such imprecise Brazilian blackness crossed with US blackness:

It's just a half-breed
 'cause its mammy was a samba
 And its papa was swing.

Such numbers seem part of a strategy of putting the, for Hollywood, confusingly raced Horne safely in no place. It is to other aspects of this strategy that I now turn.

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In the movies Horne could, if she would, make a pretty mouth on screen, while opening it as wide as need be in the recording. Sometimes, the discrepancy between the look and what would have been required to produce the sound is evident. The climax of the dramatic song ›Why Was I Born?‹ (Jerome Kern/Oscar Hammerstein II) from *TILL THE CLOUDS ROLL BY* (USA 1946, Richard Worf) occurs on a run up to a long held high note: ›I'm a poor fool but what can I do?‹; to hit and sustain the note you need to breathe deeply and open your mouth wide, which Horne must have done in the sound recording, but on film she is doing what she is told, presenting a pretty little oval. The manipulation of sound-image match is evident if one compares these with the long last note of ›Honey in the Honeycomb‹ (John Latouche/Vernon Duke) in *CABIN IN THE SKY* (USA 1943, Vicente Minnelli), on ›There's love in me!‹, where not only does Horne open her mouth wide in accordance with what the sound requires but also keeps her mouth open in a sustained smile with glistening teeth, as if prolonging the triumphant joy of the song.

As well as a small mouth, Horne was confined to a fixed, limited space. This has often been commented on.

›I became a butterfly pinned to a column singing away in Movieland.‹¹³

›The image of Lena, always elegantly gowned, singing while draped around a marble column in a lavishly produced musical sequence, would become virtually standardized.‹¹⁴

›Horne was featured, usually propped against a marble column, in a musical number that was supplemental to the narrative of the film.‹¹⁵

To be pedantic, there are no numbers in any of her films in which Horne is positioned against a column. However, the fact that the image of her thus, draped and pinned, is so insistent in the memory, including Horne's own, suggests that if not literally true, it is metaphorically so. It is an effect achieved in narrative, editing and mise-en-scène.

Except in the black-cast films, Horne has virtually no connection with the narratives of her films. One of the distinctive features of the musical is the relation of the number to the narrative. In most backstage musicals (and all of Horne's MGM films are this apart from the black-cast *CABIN IN THE SKY*), this may mean no more than the number being an important moment in a character's career, but even this means there is a considerable emotional investment in it, and usually

¹³ Lena Horne, cited in Bogle: Toms, Coons, Mulattoes (as note 2), p. 178.

¹⁴ Haskins with Benson: Lena (as note 6), p. 103.

¹⁵ Shane Vogel: Lena Horne's Impersona, in: *Camera Obscura* 67, 23:1 (2008), pp. 11–45, here p. 15.

there is more to it. In *THE DUKE IS TOPS*, Horne's first number, ›You Remember‹ (Ben Ellison/Harvey Brooks), is both the moment when she is discovered by an agent and the occasion for expressing the love between her and Duke (emphasised by cross-cutting between her looking into the wings and his looking from them to her); moreover, her being discovered in this number is also the beginning of her being taken away from him by virtue of her success. When she reprises the song in the final show, it is all the more poignant for being the moment of their reconciliation as well as equal show biz success. Some of the emotional force of the number derives then from its expression of the intertwined narrative concerns of love and success.

Horne is deprived of the possibilities of these emotional resonances in her white-cast films. She cannot be shown in a relationship with a white man (and white Hollywood had promoted no African-American man to Horne's stellar status). She also could not be shown to be a huge success, since that would have to be in contrast with some-white-one else's lesser success. And she couldn't be shown just interacting with white folks precisely because she might be mistaken for being one of them.

One result of this is that she mostly plays herself, often plopped into the unfolding story, sometimes with generous introductions: ›The one and only Lena Horne‹ (*THOUSANDS CHEER*, USA 1943, George Sydney), ›The Sands takes pleasure in presenting a great artist, Miss Lena Horne‹ (*MEET ME IN LA VEGAS*, USA 1956, Roy Rowland) and so on. In *WORDS AND MUSIC* (USA 1948, Norman Taurog), many of the well-known guest stars play the parts of earlier stars who had worked with Rodgers and Hart, the subjects of the film, but Horne is introduced anachronistically in an otherwise white 1930s night club as ›Miss Lena Horne‹.

BROADWAY RHYTHM looks for a while as if it was going to be the exception to Horne's narrative placing in the white MGM films (though even this it achieves without Horne having a line of dialogue, which is to say interaction with another character). She even has a character name, Fernway de la Fer. The main character, Johnny Demming, is putting together a show and goes to see Fernway performing at the Jungle Club, where he is so impressed that he signs her for the show; later we see her rehearsing ›Somebody Loves Me‹ (Buddy De Sylva/Ballard MacDonald/George Gershwin), before an enraptured company, who all say how wonderful she is, and a man called Eddie (Eddie Anderson) offers himself as her agent; then we see Eddie going to the Jungle Club with a bunch of flowers saying ›these posies are going to make me Harlem's number one impresario‹ and looking at a picture of Hazel Scott (as herself) which fades to the latter's number. Fernway/Horne is never seen again, despite this secondary narrative strand about securing her involvement; and the story about Eddie as agent veers away from Fernway in a white show to Hazel Scott in a black one.

TILL THE CLOUDS ROLL BY, a biopic about Jerome Kern, opens with an extended sequence of numbers from *SHOW BOAT*; this does not spell out the show's story, but it is embryonically present in the opening introduction of the characters and *SHOW BOAT* was, in addition to being a bestselling novel, one of the most famous of all Broadway shows, already by 1947 twice filmed. This makes all the more glaring Horne's simultaneous inclusion in the sequence and separation from its vestigial narrative. She is introduced by the show boat's owner and barker, Captain Andy, alongside her acting partner: ›Steven Baker, the handsomest leading man! And beautiful Julie LaVerne‹. However, after Julie / Horne takes a gracious bow and stands for a moment beside the others, she sweeps off screen left, almost as if she has been all along in front of a back projection, while moments later we see Steven with a blonde girl on each arm. If you know the show you know that Julie and Steven are married, but here their connection is dispersed by an overdeterminedly white heterosexual image (him and two blondes). The sequence next runs from a chorus celebrating the show boat's show through two of the big songs from *SHOW BOAT* as if in a continuous performance; there is then a pause in the orchestral playing, a shot of the orchestra and a dissolve to Julie / Horne's performance of ›Can't Help Lovin' That Man of Mine‹ (Kern/Hammerstein II). Pause and dissolve both indicate temporal separation, and an overhead shot, different set and no-one also around also suggest a spatial change as well. The other numbers in the sequence are shot frontally, as if from the stalls or front circle of the theatre; the camera in ›Can't help Lovin'‹ remains close and circling throughout the number (so that you never see where Horne is in relation to the stage as a whole). Horne is thus subliminally disconnected from the show.

As each female performer appears in *THOUSANDS CHEER*, there is a cut to the comedian Ben Blue who sighs and makes some remark about this one being his true love, the girl for him and so on: Kathryn Grayson, Eleanor Powell, Gloria de Haven, June Allyson, Judy Garland, all save Horne. Only in one number is Horne as an object of desire made explicit, ›Somebody Loves Me‹ in *BROADWAY RHYTHM*. Here the white company looks on from audience space and the camera cranes round from pointing at them to pointing at Fernway / Horne. However, Eddie is sitting onstage and the number thus seems addressed and is primarily received by him, so that black addresses black, and a black man holds the sexual gaze, intermediary between Lena Horne and the white audience in the film and in the cinema.

Narrative and editing contain Horne, and so does *mise-en-scène*. The first number in *PANAMA HATTIE*, ›I've Still Got My Health So What Do I Care?‹ (Cole Porter), is performed by Hattie who comes on behind the orchestra, walks down stairs at the side of it and moves around the nightclub floor and tables. Horne, on the other hand, stays in one spot for the film's next number, ›Just One of Those

Things» (Cole Porter). »If You Can Dream« (Sammy Cahn/Nicholas Brodsky), from her last MGM film MEET ME IN LAS VEGAS, is the nearest to the classic description above of the Horne MGM mise-en-scène. She appears first as a silhouette in semi-profile standing on a plinth against a blue backdrop with a transparent curtain in front of her. This draws back and the light comes up but Horne remains on the spot until towards the end, when she moves a few steps up onto another plinth and the lights dim so that she is now in a more frontal silhouette. The positioning, vestigial setting and colouring of the number (which last about 1¾ minutes) are stiff, cold and restrictive.



»If You Can Dream«, *Meet Me in Las Vegas*

Yet if she most often has literally little room for manoeuvre, this does not mean that the space does in fact utterly contain her. She has a small cabaret space for »Come Out of the Clouds« (THE DUCHESS OF IDAHO, USA 1950, Robert Z. Leonard), for instance, which she enters down a short and narrow flight of stairs. Yet as the number proceeds, the camera follows her movements to encompass an ever widening space, which even towards the end takes in some clients sitting at a table. At one point near the beginning of the number, while Horne is still at the end of the short run of steps, she puts her left foot up on a bench to the side of the stairwell, crooking her leg, and puts her hand on her hip, as the song admonishes »Baby, come of the clouds«; it is a somewhat unusual pose for a woman and even more for Horne, suggesting a deliberate taking up of space and one that precedes her beginning to make fuller use of the small performance space available. It is a little defiance of confinement.

STORMY WEATHER (USA 1943, Andrew L. Stone), not made at MGM, with an all-black cast but nonetheless white directed and produced and very conventional in its backstage love-versus-success story structure, suggests further spatial possibilities. For »I Can't Give You Anything But Love« (Dorothy Fields/Jimmy McHugh), she and Bill Robinson perform, jazzily, all over a big space, one that evokes in its pillars and chandeliers Southern mansions and, in its glass floor, sky-

scraper backdrop and clean lines, Van Nest Polglase's art deco designs for Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, in other words, a confident occupying of spaces overdetermined at the level of iconography as white. (All the more ironic given the burden of the song's title.) The ›Stormy Weather‹ (Harold Arlen/Ted Koehler) number starts with Horne standing by a window with windblown curtains singing of her sadness that her man has gone away; but then she walks away from this set, down steps through the orchestra ranks and to the centre of the dance floor. Here she catches sight of Bill sitting in the audience and both her reaction before the cut to him and then her expression on the cut back to her, indicates that she has seen him, and the song becomes explicitly about her sadness at being separated from him. So here not only does she come and take up space but also the song is emotionally meaningful vis-à-vis the story.

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Not knowing what to have Horne do, the push of her films is to have her do nothing: keep her trap shut, stay out of the story, edit her out of the film's overall space-time co-ordinates, keep the space for performance small. Yet I have already indicated occasions when she does open her mouth and keep it exultantly open and when she does take up space and reach out beyond that allotted to her. Something was achieved against the odds.

Apart from everything else, these bits of film preserve her performances. As Donald Bogle¹⁶ argues more generally of black stars in Hollywood, Horne's performances triumph over the limitations on their presentation. Even in the least propitious circumstances (MEET ME IN LAS VEGAS), you can't keep a good performer down and Horne still gives the least interesting material an edge of sweet intensity. Always we get the detail and nuance of the performances, their at once subtle and thrilling blending of black and white elements.

The camera in Horne's numbers often seems to respond to her, not only in photographing her as always lovely and glamorous, but in picking up on the performance. Sometimes this means simply offering the performance in one take, ensuring that its rhythms, nuances and developments seem to emanate only from her, with no effects of editing. Sometimes too camera movement and other elements seem to be inspired by the performance. In ›Can't Help Lovin‹, the camera tracks back away from her on her anxious ›When he goes away / That's a rainy day‹, following the direction of her outstretching arms, and then forwards towards her on ›But when he comes back / That day is fine‹; then, as she turns her head slightly to the right and upwards on ›The sun will shine‹, a yellow light comes up giving her face a beatific glow.

¹⁶ Bogle: Toms, Coons, Mulattoes (as note 2).

›Where or When‹ (Richard Rogers/Lorenz Hart) is dislocated in narrative and spatial terms from *WORDS AND MUSIC*. On the other hand, it contains a gorgeous and audacious camera movement in its last moments. The camera tracks back fast and high away from her, bringing a chandelier into view; the latter emphasises the sense of spectacular distance as well as providing its own modicum of dazzle. Then the camera tracks down again and as it does so, Horne lifts the skirt of her white dress to reveal vivid folds of pink and red, spectacular in themselves as well surely vaginally suggestive (and given the company Horne kept, discussed below, there is no reason to presume this was unconscious). Finally the camera takes up a position just above Horne, as she looks into middle distance, makes an odd, delicate gesture with her raised, crooked hand and ends the song on a note other than the tonic, reinforcing the overall sense of the déjà vu strangeness in the song.



›Can't Help Lovin'‹, ›Where or When‹ and others (e.g. ›Honeysuckle Rose‹ (Andy Razaf/Fats Waller) and ›Why Was I Born?‹ (Kern/Hammerstein II)) stand out not just by virtue of Horne's performance (which is matched by many of her other numbers) but by an elaboration in the treatment not found in the other numbers in the film. Rather less obvious in their camerawork, ›Just One of Those Things‹ and ›The Sping‹ in *PANAMA HATTIE* also lift what is otherwise a dull film. These were directed by Vincente Minnelli, who also worked with her on *CABIN IN THE*

SKY and I DOOD IT (USA 1943) and is said to have worked with her on many other numbers.

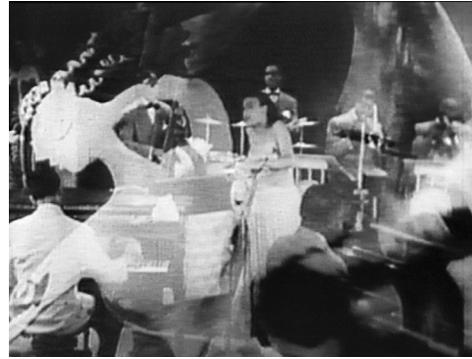
Whether or not his direct involvement was wider than those for which he received a screen credit, Minnelli was one of a network of friends, collaborators and contacts, all of whom had something invested in doing something a bit different, socially, artistically, politically, in Hollywood. Many of the values and styles of this network had been forged in New York, in the overlapping and interaction of Harlem and Greenwich village circles, of black, gay, leftist and bohemian cultures, embracing Broadway and swing as well as jazz and the avant-garde.¹⁷ Among those in this Hollywood network closest to and most influential on Horne, in addition to Minnelli,¹⁸ were Kay Thompson (MGM's vocal coach, who encouraged Horne to find lower and edgier timbres in her delivery) and arranger Phil Moore (who had done the arrangements for *THE DUKE IS TOPS* and became her regular cabaret accompanist). At MGM she was supported especially by producer and composer Roger Edens and arranger and conductor Lennie Hayton (whom she married). Key African-American figures transitory to Hollywood included dancer and choreographer Katherine Dunham and dancer Marie Bryant, composers Billy Strayhorn and Harold Arlen (doyen of Jewish ›black‹ composers), press columnist Billy Rowe and performers Eddie Anderson, Hazel Scott and Cab Calloway. There were also African-Americans established in Hollywood, such as tap dancer and instructor Willie Covan and actors Canada Lee and Hattie McDaniel, as well as white ex-New Yorkers with left leanings, such as Gene Kelly and Betsy Blair, Frank and Nancy Sinatra, John Garfield and Roberta Seidman, Richard Conte and Ruth Storey.¹⁹

¹⁷ On this context, see David A. Gerstner: *Manly Arts: Masculinity and Nation in Early American Cinema*, Durham, NC 2006; Brenda Dixon Gottschild: *Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Relations in the Swing Era*, New York 1999; Charlene Regester: *Hazel Scott and Lena Horne: African-American Divas, Feminists, and Political Activists*, in: *Popular Culture Review* 7 (1996), pp. 81–95; Joanna Skipwith: *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance*, London 1997; Karen Sotiropoulos: *Staging Race: Black Performers in Turn of the Century America*, Cambridge, MA 2006.

¹⁸ Horne and Minnelli knew each other from New York and in 1939 Minnelli had planned ›a sophisticated black show‹ (Vincente Minnelli with Hector Arce: *I Remember It Well*, New York 1974, p. 106) to star Horne, *SERENA BLANDISH*, an all-black musical version of the white sophisticated comedy based on the novel *A Lady of Quality* by Enid Bagnold; in his discussion of it (ibid.), Minnelli sets it in the context of contemporaneous all-black-cast works such as *Four Saints in Three Acts* (Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson, with choreography by Frederick Ashton) and Orson Welles's *Voodoo Macbeth*. (See James Naremore: *The Films of Vincente Minnelli*, Cambridge, MA 1993, pp. 60–62 for an account of the modernist aesthetic of the plans for *Serena Blandish*.)

¹⁹ Gail L. Buckley: *The Hornes: An American family*, New York 1986, p. 210.

All of these provided a context of ideas, approaches and, not least, confidence and support that goes some way to accounting for the distinctiveness of some of Horne's films. The broadly modernist sensibility involved is evident in *BOOGIE-WOOGIE DREAM*, quite apart from the very fact of it showcasing boogie-woogie and Horne essaying a bluesy style of singing. Horne, Ammons and Johnson perform in front of murals very much in the style of those in the radical New York cabaret Café Society.²⁰ The instrumental section after Horne has sung the number completely abandons continuity editing, consisting entirely of superimpositions, in itself an avant-garde procedure. At some points the superimpositions are not only of Horne and the musicians but also of the murals, notably one superimposition in which the mural seems to rotate clockwise over Horne and the band. In all this sequence, Horne remains in the centre of the image, utterly immersed in this visual evocation of modernist jazz making.



There is nothing as developed as this in the Hollywood films, yet something of the sensibility remains. Horne is cut off from the surrounding proceedings in *THOUSANDS CHEER*, not performing against the same beige drapes as everyone else, not shot frontally, not the object of Ben Blue's adoration; but this separation is also an opportunity. The number begins with the beige curtains sweeping back to reveal saxophonist Benny Carter wearing a navy blue jacket, shot against an impenetrably black background, a startling shift in the whole colour tone of the film. As the camera tracks back, he is joined by other members of the band, arranged in a circular visual pattern (rather than bandstand formation). The rest of the number follows suit. Horne, dressed in white, performs in front of an array of mirrors, all draped in a shocking pink, producing multiple images of her. In the second, jazzier time through, editing responds to the words, notably on 'Gee it's sweet when you / stir it up', where at the break indicated the image jumps from a frontal to an overhead and much closer shot as Horne twirls round, cut and movement producing visually the words' sweet stirring. The vividness and sophistication of this number, with its modified modernist aesthetics and pink and witty take on the song, is perhaps the loveliest survival into Horne's MGM numbers of the Harlem / New York / Café Society sensibility, aided perhaps by not only a black band but also black composers, Andy Razaf and Fats Waller.

²⁰ It is often assumed the film was actually shot in Café Society, although Nowakowski (see note 11) doubts this.

Taking this sensibility into account may make one look differently at numbers now less immediately appealing than ›Honeysuckle Rose‹. The fact that ›The Sping‹ was part written by Phil Moore, himself African-American, and his wife, Jeanne Le Gon, with whom Horne had worked in *THE DUKE IS TOPS*, might make one willing to see it as an exuberant pasticcio of the many strands – African, Caribbean, Latin, American – of black American (and not least Horne's) genealogy, and might then make ›Brazilian Boogie‹ easier to take. Similarly, many²¹ have argued that *CABIN IN THE SKY* is a sophisticated, knowing presentation of the ›black folks‹ tradition in representing African-Americans, artfully pitting a supposedly approved simple, rural, God-fearing life (embodied in Ethel Waters' *Petunia* and scenes of church and village life) against a disapproved, but vividly evoked, sinful, urban life (of which Horne's fashionably dressed Georgia Brown is a key representative). I will not add to that discussion here, except to emphasise the sense of the film having it both ways, producing a film that can be seen as merely reiterating a racial ideology (that blacks are better when poor, dangerous when sexy) while allowing itself to be taken as ironic and so alright.

›Jericho‹ (Leo Robin/Richard Myers)²² in *I DOOD IT* seems to be trying to negotiate a tortuous path between giving Hollywood what it wants in terms of black representation yet at the same time defying it. This number is performed on a stage where a show called ›Dixie Lou‹ is normally performed. The latter is a plantation drama, evoking the kind of show featured in the second part of *SHOW BOAT*, with Southern belles, Civil War veterans and black servants devoted to the emotional anxieties of their masters and mistresses. There is piquancy in having ›Jericho‹ performed in this space: not only are the performers all black and performing with relish and confidence, but the number itself references black culture, in that it is a riff on the Negro spiritual ›Joshua fit the battle of Jericho‹, even using these words in the last line, as well as more generally referencing the Negro spiritual tradition in the soloist and chorus structure of an extended account of an Old Testament episode and the occasional use of black vernacular (›ya! ya! ya!‹, ›yeah Joshua! yo Joshua!‹). Yet while it affirms black performers and performance traditions, it also seems to be working at a distance from the Negro spirituals tradition,

21 Notably Catherine de la Roche: Vincente Minnelli, *New Zealand Film Institute 1959*, p. 5; Naremore: Vincente Minnelli (as note 18), pp. 51–70; Adam Knee: *Doubling, Music, and Race in Cabin in the Sky*, in: Gabbard, Krin (ed.): *Representing Jazz*, Durham, NC 1995, pp. 193–204; Knight: *Disintegrating the Musical* (as note 9), pp. 147–155; Gerstner: *Manly Arts* (as note 17), pp. 165–211.

22 Joel E. Siegel: *The Musicals*, in: Penny Yates (ed.): *The Films of Vincente Minnelli*, New York 1978, pp. 30–34, here p. 30, notes that the number ›is the partial recreation of an all-black revue which Minnelli and Rodgers and Hart tried unsuccessfully to mount on Broadway in the mid-thirties‹.

even perhaps lightly sending it up. The vocal arrangement, by Kay Thompson, sounds much more like the sound she generally sought to produce at MGM, smooth and warm, though also unthreateningly chromatic; and if Horne was barely a blues or jazz singer yet, she was even further removed from the trained voices of spirituals singing. Having her appear in a modishly elegant gown, having the flow of the sequence interrupted by a boogie-woogie number from Hazel Scott and having the singing and facial expressions of the chorus constantly playful, all seem to cut against any presentation of this as straight, authentic, old-time Negro music. In other words, this very early number not only centres and imports African-American culture, it also, as later theorists might have it, signifies on it.

However, what might have been meant and made available as complex, ironic or signifying could still be read within traditional perceptions of coloured primitivism and naïveté. Moreover, the opportunities for such creativity diminished as Horne's Hollywood career faltered, the filming of her more and more attenuated, with ›If You Can Dream‹ (MEET ME IN LA VEGAS), discussed above, the cold, lifeless logical outcome. Hollywood won. Apart from a creditable acting performance in a Western, DEATH OF A GUNFIGHTER (USA 1969, Don Siegel/Robert Totten), with her only song over the credits, Lena Horne did not make another film in Hollywood after MEET ME IN LAS VEGAS until THE WIZ (USA 1978, Sidney Lumet). Here she appeared as the Good Witch Glinda who gives Dorothy (Diana Ross) the advice she needs to get home, in this all-black version of THE WIZARD OF OZ. The advice is ›Believe in Yourself‹ (Charlie Smalls), a song that could be taken as emblematic of both Horne free of Hollywood and her conscious espousal of the black pride sensibility of the 1960s and 70s. Here she does not so much take up space as float commandingly in it. And she opens her mouth wide as can be.