

Cab Calloway

Background information

Birth name	Cabell Calloway
Born	December 25, 1907
	Rochester, New York, U.S.
Died	November 18, 1994 (aged 86)
	Hockessin, Delaware, U.S.
Genres	Jazz, blues, swing
Occupation(s)	Bandleader, singer-songwriter
Instruments	Vocals
Years active	1930–94
Associated acts	The Cab Calloway Orchestra

Website www.cabcalloway.com

Cabell "Cab" Calloway III (December 25, 1907 – November 18, 1994) was a jazz singer and bandleader. He was strongly associated with the Cotton Club in Harlem, New York City, where he was a regular performer.

Calloway was a master of energetic scat singing and led one of the United States' most popular big bands from the start of the 1930s through to the late 1940s. Calloway's band featured performers including trumpeters Dizzy Gillespie and Adolphus "Doc" Cheatham, saxophonists Ben Webster and Leon "Chu" Berry, New Orleans guitar ace Danny Barker, and bassist Milt Hinton. Calloway continued to perform until his death in 1994 at the age of 86.

Biography

Early years

Calloway was born in Rochester, New York, on Christmas Day in 1907. The family relocated to Baltimore, Maryland. His mother, Martha Eulalia Reed, was a Morgan State College graduate, teacher and church organist. His father, Cabell Calloway, Jr., was a graduate of Lincoln University of Pennsylvania in 1898 and worked as a lawyer and in real estate.

Cab Calloway spent his adolescent years growing up in West Baltimore's Sugar Hill, considered the political, cultural, and business hub of black society. There he grew up comfortably in a middle-class household. Early on, his parents recognized their son's musical talent and he began private voice lessons in 1922. He continued to study music and voice throughout his formal schooling. Despite his parents' and teachers' disapproval of jazz, Calloway began frequenting and performing in many of Baltimore's nightclubs. As a result he came into contact with many of the local jazz luminaries of the time. He counted among his early mentors drummer Chick Webb and pianist Johnny Jones.

After his graduation from Frederick Douglass High School, Calloway joined his older sister, Blanche, in a touring production of the popular black musical revue, *Plantation Days*. (Blanche Calloway became an accomplished bandleader before her brother did, and he would often credit her as his inspiration for entering show business.) His parents had hopes of their son becoming an attorney following after his father, so Calloway enrolled in Crane College. His main interest, however, was in singing and entertaining, and he spent most of his nights at the Dreamland Ballroom, the

Sunset Cafe, and the Club Berlin, performing as a drummer, singer, and MC. At the Sunset Café, Cab cut his teeth as an understudy for singer Adelaide Hall and it was here that he met and performed with Louis Armstrong who taught him to sing in the "scat" style. He eventually left school to sing with a band called the Alabamians.

Success

The Cotton Club was the premier jazz venue in the country, and Calloway and his orchestra (he had taken over a brilliant, but failing band called "The Missouriians" in 1930; later on, the band changed its name to Cab Calloway and His Orchestra) were hired as a replacement for the Duke Ellington Orchestra while they were touring (he joined Duke Ellington and Mills Blue Rhythm Band as another of the jazz groups handled by Irving Mills). Calloway quickly proved so popular that his band became the "co-house" band with Ellington's, and his group began touring nationwide when not playing the Cotton Club. Their popularity was greatly enhanced by the twice-weekly live national radio broadcasts on NBC at the Cotton Club. Calloway also appeared on Walter Winchell's radio program and with Bing Crosby in his show at New York's Paramount Theatre. As a result of these appearances, Calloway, together with Ellington, broke the major broadcast network color barrier.

Like other bands fronted by a singing bandleader, Calloway initially gave ample soloist space to its lead members and, through the varied arrangements of Walter "Foots" Thomas, provided much more in the way of musical interest. Many of his records were "vocal specialties" with Calloway's vocal taking up the majority of the record.

In 1931 he recorded his most famous song, "Minnie the Moocher". That song, along with "St. James Infirmary Blues" and "The Old Man of the Mountain", were performed for the Betty Boop animated shorts Minnie the Moocher (1932), Snow White (1933), and The Old Man of the Mountain (1933), respectively. Through rotoscoping, Calloway not only gave his voice to these cartoons, but his dance steps as well. He took advantage of this and timed his concerts in some

communities with the release of the films in order to make the most of the attention. As a result of the success of "Minnie the Moocher," he became identified with its chorus, gaining the nickname "The Hi De Ho Man". He also performed in a series of short films for Paramount in the 1930s. (Calloway and Ellington were featured on film more than any other jazz orchestras of the era.)

In these films, Calloway can be seen performing a gliding backstep dance move, the precursor to Michael Jackson's "moonwalk"—Calloway said 50 years later, "it was called The Buzz back then." The 1933 film *International House* featured Calloway performing his classic song, "Reefer Man," a tune about a man who favors marijuana cigarettes.

Calloway made his "first proper Hollywood movie appearance" opposite Al Jolson in *The Singing Kid* in 1936. He sang a number of duets with Jolson, and the film included Calloway's band and cast of 22 Cotton Club dancers from New York. According to music historian Arthur Knight, the film aimed in part "to both erase and celebrate boundaries and differences, including most emphatically the color line." He also notes that "when Calloway begins singing in his characteristic style – in which the words are tools for exploring rhythm and stretching melody – it becomes clear that American culture is changing around Jolson and with (and through) Calloway...."

Calloway's was one of the most popular American jazz bands of the 1930s, recording prolifically for Brunswick and the ARC dime store labels (Banner, Cameo, Conqueror, Perfect, Melotone, Banner, Oriole, etc.) from 1930 to 1932, when he signed with RCA Victor for a year. He was back on Brunswick in late 1934 through 1936, when he signed with manager

Irving Mills's short-lived Variety in 1937, and stayed with Mills when the label collapsed and the sessions were continued on Vocalion through 1939, and then Okeh Records through 1942. After a recording ban due to the 1942-44 musicians' strike ended, he continued to record prolifically.

Calloway's vocal style is a blend of hot scat singing and improvisation coupled with a very traditional vaudeville-like singing style. Many of his ballads are devoid of tone bending jazz styling.

In 1941 Calloway fired Dizzy Gillespie from his orchestra after an onstage fracas erupted when Calloway was hit with spitballs. He wrongly accused Gillespie, who stabbed Calloway in the leg with a small knife.

In 1943 Calloway appeared in the high-profile 20th Century Fox musical film Stormy Weather. Stormy Weather was one of the first films that featured an all-star black cast.

In 1944 The New Cab Calloway's Hepsters Dictionary: Language of Jive was published, an update of an earlier book in which Calloway set about translating jive for fans who might not know, for example, that "kicking the gong around" was a reference to smoking opium.

Calloway and his band starred in *Hi-De-Ho* (1947), an all-black full-length film directed by Josh Binney. Caricatures of Calloway appeared in the Porky Pig cartoons *Porky at the Trocadero* and *Swooner Crooner*.

The band also formed its own barnstorming baseball and basketball teams during the 1930s, starring Calloway, Milt Hinton, Chu Berry, Benny Payne and Dizzy Gillespie.

In the late 1940s, Calloway wrote a regular humorous pseudo-gossip column called "Coastin' With Cab" for *Song Hits Magazine*. It was a collection of celebrity snippets such as this one, in the May 1946 issue: "Benny Goodman was dining at *Ciro's* steak house in New York when a very homely girl entered. 'If her face is her fortune,' Benny quipped, 'she'd be tax-free'." In the late 1940s, however, Cab Calloway's bad financial decisions as well as his gambling caused his band to break up.

Later years

In the 1950s Calloway moved his family from Long Island, New York, in order to raise the three youngest of his five daughters in Greenburgh, New York.

In his later career Calloway appeared in a number of films and stage productions that used both his acting and singing talents. In 1952 he played the prominent role of "Sportin' Life" in a production of the Gershwin opera, *Porgy and Bess*, with William Warfield and Leontyne Price as the title characters. Another notable role was "Yeller" in *The Cincinnati Kid* (1965), with Steve McQueen, Ann-Margret, and Edward G. Robinson.

One of Cab Calloway's zoot suits on display in Baltimore's City Hall, October 2007

Calloway appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show* on March 19, 1967, with Chris Calloway. In 1967, Calloway co-starred opposite Pearl Bailey as Horace Vandergelder in an all-black cast change of *Hello, Dolly!* on Broadway during its original run. It revived the flagging business for the show^[15] and RCA released a new cast recording, rare for the time. In 1973–74, Calloway was featured in an unsuccessful Broadway revival of *The Pajama Game* alongside Hal Linden and Barbara McNair.

1976 saw the release of his autobiography, *Of Minnie the Moocher and Me* (Crowell). It included his complete Hepsters Dictionary as an appendix.

Calloway attracted renewed interest in 1980 when he appeared as a supporting character in the film *The Blues Brothers*, performing "Minnie the Moocher", and again when he sang "The Jumpin' Jive" with the Two-Headed Monster on *Sesame Street*. This also was the year the cult movie *Forbidden Zone* was released, which included rearrangements of, and homages to, Calloway songs written by Calloway fan Danny Elfman, performed by Elfman and his band, *The Mystic Knights of the Oingo Boingo*.

Calloway helped establish the Cab Calloway Museum at Coppin State College (Baltimore, Maryland) in the 1980s, and Bill Cosby helped establish a scholarship in Calloway's name at the New School for Social Research in Manhattan.

In 1985, Cab and his Orchestra appeared at The Ritz London Hotel where he was filmed for a 60-minute BBC TV show called *The Cotton Club comes to the Ritz* that also had Adelaide Hall, Doc Cheatham, Max Roach, and the Nicholas Brothers appearing on the bill.

In 1986, Calloway appeared at World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE)'s *WrestleMania 2* as a guest judge for a boxing match between Rowdy Roddy Piper and Mr. T that took place at the Nassau Coliseum. Also in 1986, Calloway headlined

to great success a gala ball for 4,000 celebrating the grand opening of one of the top hotels in the U.S. at the time, the Dallas-based Rosewood Hotel Co.'s Hotel Crescent Court in Dallas, Texas.

In 1990, he was the focus of Janet Jackson's 1930s-themed music video "Alright", and he made a cameo appearance at the end playing himself. In the United Kingdom, he also appeared in several commercials for the Hula Hoops snack, both as himself and as a voice for a cartoon (in one of these commercials he sang his hit "Minnie The Moocher"). He also made an appearance at the Apollo Theatre.

Cab enjoyed his final years as a celebrated and well loved member of a retirement community in northern Delaware (between, and short train rides from, his beloved Baltimore and New York City), such that, in 1994, a creative and performing arts school, the Cab Calloway School of the Arts, was dedicated in his name in Wilmington, Delaware.

On June 12, 1994, Calloway suffered a severe stroke. He died five months later on November 18, 1994, at age 86. His body was cremated and his ashes were given to his family. Upon the death of his wife Zulme "Nuffie" Calloway on October 13, 2008, his ashes were interred next to her in the Rosewood mausoleum at Ferncliff Cemetery in Hartsdale, New York.

A profile of Calloway, Cab Calloway: Sketches, aired on the PBS program American Masters in February 2012.

Honors

In 1993, the University of Rochester presented Calloway with the honorary degree of Doctor of Fine Arts

In 1993, he was presented with the National Medal of Arts

In 1998, The Cab Calloway Orchestra (directed by Calloway's grandson C. "CB" Calloway Brooks) was formed to honor his legacy on the national and international levels.

Selected awards and recognitions

Grammy history

Year	Category	Title	Label	Result	Notes
2008	Grammy	Lifetime Achievement Award		Honoree	
1999	Grammy Hall of Fame Award	"Minnie the Moocher"	Brunswick (1931)	Inducted	Jazz (Single)

Other honors

Year	Category	Title	Result	Notes
1987	Big Band and Jazz Hall of Fame		Inducted	
1967	Best Performances	Outer Critics Circle Awards	Winner	Hello, Dolly Musical

Discography

Charting singles

Release date	Title	Chart positions
1930	"Saint Louis Blues (song)"	16
1931	"Minnie the Moocher"	1
	"Saint James Infirmary"	3
	"Nobody's Sweetheart"	13
	"Six or Seven Times"	14
	"You Rascal, You"	17
	"Kicking the Gong Around"	4
	"Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea"	15
	"TICKERATION"	8
1932	"Cabin in the Cotton"	17
	"Strictly Cullud Affair"	11

	"Minnie the Moocher's Wedding Day"	8
	"Reefer Man"	11
	"Hot Toddy"	14
	"I've Got the World on a String"	18
1933	"I Gotta Right to Sing the Blues"	17
1934	"Jitter Bug"	20
	"Moon Glow"	7
	"Chinese Rhythm"	7
1935	"Keep That Hi-De-Hi in Your Soul"	20
1936	"You're the Cure for What Ails Me"	20
	"Copper Colored Gal"	13
1937	"Wake up and Live"	17
	"Congo"	17
	"Peckin'"	18

	"She's Tall, She's Tan, She's Terrific"	17
	"Moon at Sea"	19
	"Mama, I want to Make Rhythm"	20
1938	"Every Day's a Holiday"	18
	"Mister Toscanini, Swing for Minnie"	19
	"F.D.R. Jones"	14
	"Angels With Dirty Faces"	3
1939	"The Ghost of Smokey Joe"	13
	"(Hep Hep!) The Jumping Jive"	2
1940	"Fifteen Minute Intermission"	23
1941	"Bye Bye Blues"	24
	"Geechee Joe"	23
	"I See a Million People"	23
1942	"Blues in the Night"	8

1943	"Ogeechee River Lullaby"	18
1944	"The Moment I Laid My Eyes on You"	28
1945	"Let's Take the Long Way Home"	28
1946	"The Honeydripper"	3
(R&B)		
1948	"The Calloway Boogie"	13
(R&B)		

Stage appearances

Porgy and Bess (1953)

Hello, Dolly! (replacement in 1967)

The Pajama Game (1973)

Bubbling Brown Sugar (1976)

Uptown...It's Hot! (1986)

Filmography

Features

The Big Broadcast (1932)

International House (1933)

The Singing Kid (1936)

Manhattan Merry-Go-Round (1937)

Stormy Weather (1943)

Sensations of 1945 (1944)

Ebony Parade (1947)

Hi De Ho (1947)

Rhythm and Blues Revue (1955)

St. Louis Blues (1958)

Schlager-Raketen (1960)

The Cincinnati Kid (1965)

The Blues Brothers (1980)

Short subjects

Minnie the Moocher (1932)

Snow-White (1933) (voice)

The Old Man of the Mountain (1933)

Betty Boop's Rise to Fame (1934) (voice)

Cab Calloway's Hi-De-Ho (1934)

Cab Calloway's Jitterbug Party (1935)

Hi De Ho (1937)

Mother Goose Goes Hollywood (1938)

Meet the Maestros (1938)

Caldonia (1945)

Basin Street Revue (1956)