

# Jitterbug!

By D.C. Copeland

African-American Male | 30's-40's

**About the Play:** *Jitterbug!* is a dramatic play with music and dance set in Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance and the Swing Music Era. It is based on real and imagined characters and incidents.

**Time:** Circa 1931.

**About the Scene:** Herbert White was an actual person. A former boxer, he founded the legendary Harlem street gang The Jolly Fellows around 1926. He was also the head bouncer at the Savoy Ballroom and later began a series of dance troupes that toured the world and appeared in Hollywood movies. His most famous was “Whitey's Lindy Hoppers.” In this scene, he is confronting the hero of the play, Billy Rhythm, who made the mistake of leaving the gang without White's blessing in pursuit of his dreams of becoming a professional dancer. When that failed, he returned to Harlem hoping to start where he left off. Unfortunately, White was there to set him straight. Since the play is annotated for historic info and slang, the end notes have been included for this section of the play. “Madame Hotsy-Totsy” is the real-life Madame Stephanie St. Clair, the Harlem “Numbers Queen” who had tried to convince White to team up with her and some other Harlem gangs to stop white mobster Dutch Schultz from moving in on her gambling territory. Whether she did or didn't is unknown, but it helps make this a better story which, in this *dancical*, White refuses to do (based on research of his character).

## WHITE

Rhythm? You got balls showing up here. Whatcha doin back here, boy? The T.O.B.A<sup>1</sup> season ain't over yet. You a Jolly Fellow, right? Jolly Fellows are supposed to be good dancers, right? In Harlem? Then you givin the Jolly Fellows a bad name comin back with lint in your kick<sup>2</sup>. You left thinkin you had somethin; that you were better than us. Yeah, but who's gonna believe you? Are the Meteors gonna believe you? Are the Buffaloes gonna believe you? Are the 40 Thieves gonna believe you?<sup>3</sup> Don't ever assume anything about me, Billy Rhythm! We let you in the Jolly Fellows 'cause you love to dance— not 'cause you the best—'cause you ain't. Without the Jolly Fellows, Billy Rhythm in Harlem is nothing. You want to live and dance in the Land of Darkness<sup>4</sup>, yo do it our way and the Jolly Fellows will do anything for ya. But what do you go and do? You dump us when we needed you the most. You coulda helped us put away the 40 Thieves once and for all at the Savoy<sup>5</sup> and put Madame Hotsy-Totsy in her place but you weren't there for us. You were on the niggas' vaudeville circuit tryin to make a name for yourself. That told us you didn't need us. You used us, man, like the icky<sup>6</sup> ofays<sup>7</sup> use our high-yeller<sup>8</sup> hos. You ain't a Jolly Fellow no more. That means you're livin' without insurance. That means the Savoy is off limits. You can't dance in Cat's Corner<sup>9</sup> no more. Now get out of here!

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1 T.O.B.A: Theater Owners Booking Association (the Negro Vaudeville circuit of theaters).

2 Kick: Pocket.

3 Harlem gangs.

4 Land of Darkness: Harlem

5 Savoy: Hepcats always put the accent on the second syllable.

6 Icky: An unhip stupid person who can't “collar the jive.”

7 Ofay: A white person.

8 High-Yeller (yellow): Light skinned Negroes.

9 Cat's Corner: the uncrowded NE corner of the Savoy Ballroom reserved for the Jolly Fellows. Intruders would get beat-up for using the space to dance.