

D. C. Copeland's

# JITTERBUG!

## Literature Student Questionnaire

### Key Ideas & Details

(A)

(A-1)

a. What does *Jitterbug!* say explicitly as well as inferring about the time and place of the dancical in terms of equality, racism, and the American zeitgeist? What doesn't it say, i.e., about its main fictional characters: Billy, Tharbis, Candy, and Miss Thelma?

(A-2)

b. Two central themes: 1) Irrepressible American optimism (embodied by Billy Rhythm's character and the music and dancing from that period) butting heads with 2) the reality of the times (racism and the Great Depression). Determine two or more themes or central ideas found in *Jitterbug!* and analyze their development over the course of the dancical, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account by providing an objective summary of the text.

(A-3)

c. Analyze the impact of the playwright's choices regarding how he developed and related elements of the dancical (e.g., the dancical's setting, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

## **Craft & Structure**

### **(B)**

#### **(B-1)**

a. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in *Jitterbug!*, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful such as in the scene where Billy admits he can't do it (stepping through that door Langston Hughes suggests to his black readers to be patient in going through) without Tharbis' help. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors such as the Harlem Renaissance writers and poets Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen and the “hep cat” jive coined and/or assembled by Cab Calloway in his [Hepster's Dictionary](#), the “official jive language reference book of the New York Public Library.”)

#### **(B-2)**

b. Analyze how the playwright's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of *Jitterbug!* (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a scene, the choice to provide a comedic, tragic, or open ended resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

#### **(B-3)**

c. Analyze *Jitterbug!* for examples of satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement.

## **Integration of Knowledge & Ideas**

### **(C)**

#### **(C-1)**

a. Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text. (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist.)

#### **(C-2)**

a. Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat themes or topics similar to those found in *Jitterbug!*

## **Historic Jitterbug! Character References**

**Harold Arlen:** Son of a Jewish Cantor, Arlen was only in his twenties when he and his songwriting partner/lyricist Ted Koehler began writing songs for the mob's Owney Madden who owned the Cotton Club. He later went on to write the music for *The Wizard of Oz* (lyrics by E.Y. “Yip” Harburg) which included, of course, “Somewhere Over the Rainbow.” Here's a [link](#) to a 1954 TV special featuring Arlen playing a piano while stars like Frank Sinatra sing his songs. You can read his online bio [here](#).

**Cab Calloway:** The coolest cat ever to have lived and another one of America's great gifts to the world. As a band leader no one had ever seen anything like him before-- or since. A true original. [Here](#) is a one-stop-place on YouTube for everything Cab. If you don't have a lot of time, make sure you watch the 1933 clip of him singing his hit *Zaz Zuh Zaz*. It's a compilation of many of his performances of his hit songs including *Minnie the Moocher* with him appearing in white tails and a white Zoot Suit. You can read his online bio [here](#).

**Vincent “Mad Dog” Coll:** Born Uinseann Ó Colla, this Irish-American gangster business model of kidnapping rival gangsters came back to bite him in the ass when Owney Madden made him pay the ultimate price for kidnapping his partner at the Cotton Club, George “Big Frenchy” DeMange. Coll died of multiple gunshot wounds in a phone booth at the London Chemists drug store on 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 23<sup>rd</sup> Street in Manhattan. He was 23-years old at the time of his death. You can read more about him [here](#).

**Ella Fitzgerald:** As a teenager, she was discovered in an Apollo Theater talent competition. Chick Webb hired the 18-year-old in 1935 to sing for his band. When he died in 1939, she took over managing it. You can read her amazing online bio [here](#).

**Owney Madden/Big Frenchy DeMange:** Mobster boss and his partner. They owned the Cotton Club. You can read their online bio [here](#).

**Bill “Bojangles: Robinson:** Considered by many to be the greatest of the early hoofers. [Here's](#) a one-stop-place on YouTube for everything Bojangles. You can read his online bio [here](#).

**Stephanie St. Clair/Ellsworth “Bumpy” Johnson:** Born in Martinique, the entrepreneurial St. Clair partnered with Ellsworth “Bumpy” Johnson to bring the illegal numbers game to Harlem where she was called Madam St. Clair (the disrespectful “Queenie in the rest of NYC). When white gangster Dutch Schultz decided to “annex” her business, a gang war broke out with over 40 dead in the process. You can read more about Madame and Bumpy [here](#).

**Chick Webb:** The diminutive drummer and bandleader held reign at the Savoy Ballroom from 1931 until his death in 1939. Because the Savoy loved staging “Battle of the Bands” with any swing band that might be in town, one was set up with the Benny Goodman Orchestra. When word got out, 25,000 people were lined up outside of the Savoy trying to get in while 5,000 were already squeezed inside. As it turned out, “Harlem's House Band” took on the big and powerful Benny Goodman band and put them away. The only video we could find of Chick Webb and his Orchestra is from a 1929 short called [After Seben](#) (skip forward to 11:30) Although it only shows part of his band, the video has some other things going for it. First it stars James Barton, one of the top white vaudevillians who came out of the

minstrel shows, i.e., he performed in black face (stay around to see his “eccentric” dance at the end). Secondly, the dancers are all from the Savoy Ballroom-- including George “Shorty” Snowden. Steps include the Charleston, the Cakewalk, and the Breakaway (which Snowden takes credit for inventing). Finally, you gotta admire the clothing style of the first woman dancer-- especially that way cool mini-boot. You can read Webb's online bio [here](#).

**Herbert “Whitey” White:** Head bouncer at the Savoy Ballroom, founder of the Jolly Fellows, a Harlem gang of the 1920's and 30's, and various Lindy dance troupes such as Whitey's Lindy Hoppers. You can read his online bio [here](#).

### **Historic Jitterbug! Scene References**

**Cotton Club:** The legendary Cotton Club was owned and operated by gang boss Owney Madden as a way of selling his “Number One” beer that he brewed in Canada and snuck and bribed past US authorities to sell in his club during Prohibition. It was once known as “Club Deluxe” and owned by the first African American World Champion Heavyweight prize fighter Jack Johnson. Madden persuaded the champ to sell it to him by making him “an offer he couldn't refuse.” Located at 142<sup>nd</sup> Street and Lenox Avenue, it lasted from 1923 to 1935. Following the 1935 Harlem race riot it shut down in 1936 and reopened later in that year at Broadway and 48<sup>th</sup> (where Broadway and 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue meet in Manhattan). [Here's](#) a rare look of an actual Cotton Club show when the dashing young genius Duke Ellington was working there before going to Hollywood and Cab Calloway took over. [Here's](#) a 1934 YouTube link to Cab performing in what may or not be the Cotton Club-- it could have been shot in Hollywood but it has the most accurate, intimate feel for the Club. His actual performance begins around 3:24 but the prelude is also worth a watch to see his showmanship).

**Lafayette Theater:** To learn more about the legendary theatre, please click [here](#) and scroll down the page until you get to the Lafayette items which includes rare footage of 20-year-old Orson Welles 1936 staging of *MacBeth* with the first all African American cast.

**Savoy Ballroom:** When it opened in 1926 on Lenox Avenue between 140<sup>th</sup> and 141<sup>st</sup> streets in Harlem, it was the largest ballroom in the world, big enough to accommodate 5,000 people at a time. It had two band stands and its block-long wood dance floor was spring loaded (and replaced every three years). Owned by Moe Gale, a Jewish man, and managed by Charles Buchanan, a black man, it was instrumental for [breaking down racial barriers](#) where people of all colors and economic strata could dance to swing music-- despite white police trying to stop white patrons from entering in the Savoy's early days. George “Shorty” Snowden received a gilt lifetime pass for helping put it on the map when he won the Savoy's first dance marathon. After a 33-year run, the Savoy is only a legendary distant memory. [Here's](#) an interesting look at the Savoy with interviews, including one with the son of Moe Gale.

### **Jitterbug! Bibliography**

[Cab Calloway's Hepster Dictionary](#) (1944). Long out of print, much of it can be found at the Calloway website.

[The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes](#) (2008). 736 pages, Vintage Classics. ISBN 978-1439571736

[The Cotton Club](#) (1977). James Haskins. 213 pages. Hippocrene Books. ISBN 978-0781802482

[Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance](#) (1994). 508 pages. Marshall and Jean Stearns. DeCapo Press. ISBN 978-0306805530

[Jookin!: The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African American Culture](#) (1992). 248 pages. Katrina Hazzard-Gordon. Temple University Press. ISBN 978-

[My Soul's High Song](#) (1990). 618 pages. Countee Cullen. Anchor. ISBN 978-0385412957

[Nigger Heaven](#) (1999). 336 pages. Carl Van Vechten. University of Illinois Press. Originally released in 1926 during the Harlem Renaissance. ISBN 978-0252068607

[Of Minnie the Moocher and Me](#) (1976) 282 pages. Cab Calloway. Thomas Y. Crowell Company. Autobiography. ISBN 978-0690010329

[Precious Lord: The Great Gospel Songs of Thomas A. Dorsey](#) (1994). MP3. Sony

[Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Politics in the Swing Era](#) (2002). 288 pages. Brenda Dixon Gottschild. Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN: 978-0312294434

[When Harlem Was in Vogue](#) (1997) 448 pages. David Levering Lewis. Penguin Books. ISBN 978-0140263343