**Directions: As you read this passage, highlight the nonfiction signposts you come across. Underline or circle answers to the questions that follow the passage and put a number next to it indicate which question it is answering.**

**The Cotton Club**

By Jessica McBirney

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*The Cotton Club was a whites-only night club that showcased several prominent African American entertainers during the 1920s and 1930s. In this informational text, McBirney explains the club’s influence in Harlem and its representation of African American entertainers. As you read, take notes on the positive and*

*negative parts of The Cotton Club.*

In the 1920s and 1930s jazz clubs were extremely

popular social gathering spots, especially in big



cities like New York City. One of New York’s most

famous jazz clubs was the Cotton Club.

**A Bootlegger’s Dream**

Originally located in Harlem, a majority-African-

American neighborhood in New York City, the

Cotton Club opened in 1920. It was started by

Jack Johnson, the first African American boxing

champion, but three years later Owney “The

Killer” Madison bought the club. Madison was a

famous white gangster and bootlegger.1 His

primary goal was to use the Cotton Club to

illegally sell alcohol.

In the 1920s the U.S. government passed a law outlawing the manufacture and sale of alcohol across the country. The era came to be known as Prohibition. Because alcohol was illegal, gangsters like Owney Madison could make a lot of money by selling it to people willing to take the risk. The Cotton Club was briefly shut down for selling alcohol, but it restarted without much trouble.

**An Unusual Racial Situation**

The Cotton Club was “whites-only” — only white people were allowed to come inside and enjoy the atmosphere and entertainment. On one hand, this rule was not too surprising, because during the 1920s most of the U.S. was racially segregated.2 White Americans did not want to see African Americans in their social gathering places.

But on the other hand, the rule was quite surprising. First, Harlem was about 70% African American, yet none of those African Americans could go to the famous club right in their own neighborhood. Second, most of the performers at the Cotton Club were African American. The managers coordinated this intentionally.3 Madison wanted to give “authentic black entertainment to a wealthy, whites-only audience.”

Unfortunately, his view of African American culture was simplistic and racist. Most of the Cotton Club shows included a “jungle” theme, based on a common idea of the time that non-Western cultures were wild and savage. Dancers wore exotic clothes, and were made to move like animals. Other shows recreated the southern plantations of the early 1800s, where African Americans had been enslaved.

The dancing, music, and entertainment were extremely popular, but they reinforced negative stereotypes4 of modern African Americans.

**A Jazz Institution**

Despite the racist undertones, the Cotton Club featured many of the most famous African American musicians and performers of the time. Duke Ellington, a successful jazz musician, started his career as the leader of a jazz orchestra at the club. He encouraged the management to begin letting some African American customers attend the performances. Other famous performers at the Cotton Club

were Cab Calloway, Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, and Ella Fitzgerald.

**The Legacy of the Cotton Club**

Race riots hit Harlem in 1936, causing the Cotton Club to close down. It re-opened in a different part of the city later that year, starting out with a well-publicized, Broadway-level show. The club stayed in its new location until 1940, when it closed down permanently.

Today the Cotton Club is remembered as a cultural hotbed that groomed some of the greatest jazz musicians in the world, while also perpetuating harmful racial relationships. Poet Langston Hughes criticized the club for reducing its African American performers to zoo animals and forcing the closure of other local African American bars in the Harlem community.

**Text-Dependent Questions**

***Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.***

**1. PART A: Which of the following identifies the central idea of the text?**

1. The Cotton Club allowed African American talent to gain popularity, while also encouraging racial stereotypes and segregation.
2. The Cotton Club caused more harm than good, as the attention that African American performers received was all negative.
3. The Cotton Club played a key role in breaking down the divide between African American and white performers.
4. D. The Cotton Club exposed whites to important African American history and culture during a time when it was not discussed.

**2. PART B: Which section of the text best supports the answer to Part A?**

1. “The Cotton Club was ‘whites-only’ — only white people were allowed to come inside and enjoy the atmosphere and entertainment.” (Paragraph 4)
2. “Second, most of the performers at the Cotton Club were African American. The managers coordinated this intentionally.” (Paragraph 5)
3. “Other shows recreated the southern plantations of the early 1800s, where African Americans had been enslaved.” (Paragraph 6)
4. “Despite the racist undertones, the Cotton Club featured many of the famous African American musicians and performers of the time. (Paragraph 8)

**3. PART A: What does the word “hotbed” mean as it is used in paragraph 10?**

1. a place of decline
2. a place of growth
3. a place of shame
4. a place of diversity

**4. PART B: Which detail from paragraph 10 best supports the answer to Part A?**

1. “groomed some of the greatest jazz musicians in the world”
2. “perpetuating harmful racial relationships.”
3. “reducing its African American performers to zoo animals”
4. “forcing the closure of other local African American bars in the Harlem community.”

**5. How do paragraphs 4-5 contribute to the key concept of the article?**

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**Short Answer Questions**

***Directions: Answer the following questions below using the ACE strategy.***

1. Despite the Cotton Club’s role in showcasing important African American entertainers, the Cotton Club was also racist: why is it important to keep this in mind when discussing the club’s history? (Think about the benefits of the club versus the negatives.)

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1. In the context of the text, how has America changed over time? How have the roles of African Americans in entertainment changed over the years? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

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1. In the context of the text, how does prejudice emerge? How can art and entertainment keep prejudice alive? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

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**Use your highlighted signposts to complete the signpost frames below. Write your answer in the opens space below.**

Contrasts and Contradictions: **When the writer presents something that contradicts what you know or think, or when the writer shows you a sharp contrast between people, groups, or ideas, STOP and ask, *“What does this make me wonder about?” Answer frame:*** In chapter /line/On page \_\_\_\_\_\_ there is the statement, “\_\_\_\_\_\_.” This statement is an example of (contradiction/contrast) because \_\_\_\_. This makes me wonder \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

Absolute or Extreme Language: **When the author makes a statement that allows for no interpretation or seems unreasonable, STOP and ask, *“Why did the author use this language?”*** **Answer Frame:** In chapter/line/ On page \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ the author writes, “ \_\_\_\_\_.” This is (extreme/absolute language) because\_\_\_\_\_\_. This language was used (because/to) \_\_\_\_\_.

Numbers and Stats: **When the author uses specific numbers or statistical information, STOP and ask, *“Why did the author use these numbers?” Answer frame:*** In chapter/line/On page \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ the writer states, “ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ .” These (numbers/stats) are used (to/for) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

Quoted Words: **When the author chooses to quote someone, STOP and ask, *“Why was this person quoted, and what did the quote add?” Answer Frame:*** In chapter/line/ On page \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ appears this quote, “\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.” This person was quoted (to/because) \_\_\_. The quote adds \_\_\_\_\_ to the passage.

Word Gaps: **When the author uses a word or phrase you don’t know, STOP and ask, *“Does this look like a word that’s only used with this topic? Would I know this word in another place? Do I see any clues that might help me figure it out?”*** In chapter/ line/On page \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ the author used the following (word/ phrase), “\_\_\_\_\_.” This word means \_\_\_\_\_ in this paragraph.