



The Great Black Way L.A. in the 1940s and the Lost African-American Renaissance

R J Smith

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This book, like a major archaeological dig, unearths a littleknown, now vanished civilization and changes how we understand history. In the 1940s, when FDR opened up the defense industry to black workers, it inspired a massive wave of black migration to a small area of Los Angeles along Central Avenue—and cultural ferment in the arts, culture, and politics. In a neighborhood densely packed with black musicians, independent labels and after hours spots, rhythm and blues was spawned. Chester Himes fathered the black detective novel and a noir sensibility. Black comics took off minstrel blackface for the first time and addressed audiences directly with socially-tinged humor. And, Smith suggests, the civil rights movement helped get its start, as the strategy of building mass movements and giving power to ghetto dwellers gained favor in opposition to the top-down strategies of the NAACP and the Urban League. Harlem's Renaissance had been driven by the intellectual elite. In L.A., a new sense of black identity arose from street level. But when the moment was over, many hopes and lives were swept away with it. Based on original research and interviews, told through an engaging narrative, this book shows convincingly that much that we take for granted today, from hip hop and slang to modern-day street fashion, all flowed from the 1940s scene along the Great Black Way.

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