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ROYAL AMERICAN SHOWS
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JIG SHOW

LEON CLAXTON'S HARLEM IN HAVANA

A docuseries by Leslie Cunningham

Film Guide for Educators

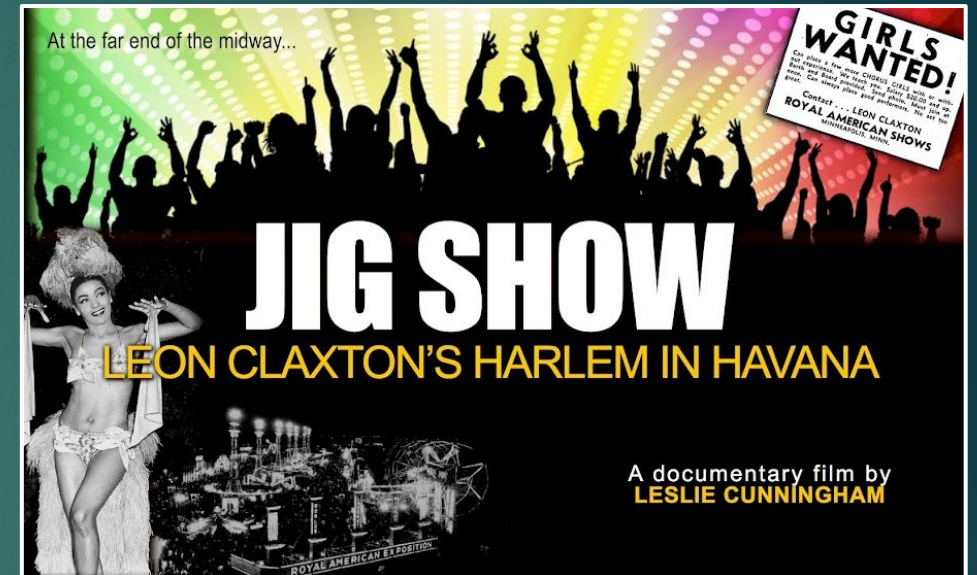
For High School, College and
Community Classrooms

JIG SHOW | Leon Claxton's Harlem in Havana

A docuseries by Leslie Cunningham

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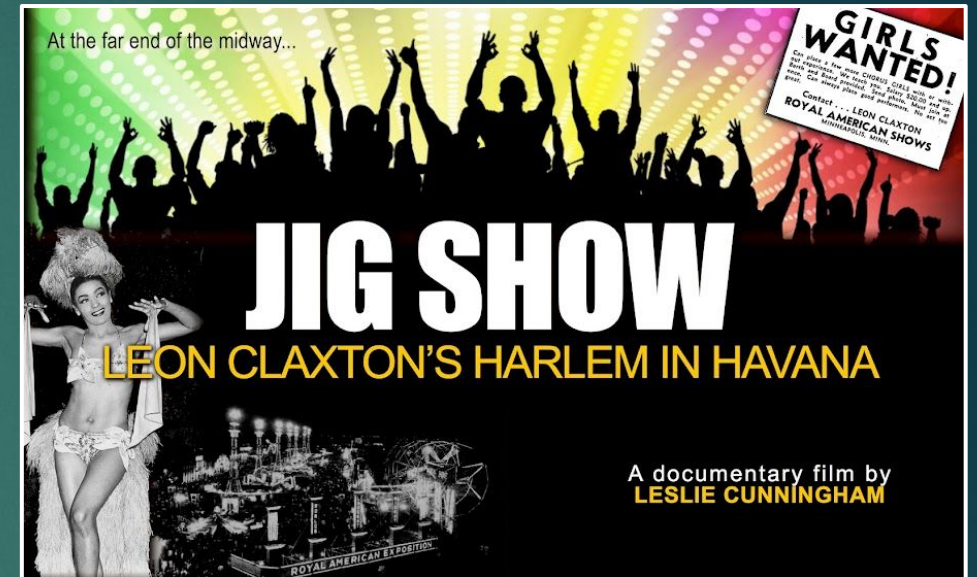
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How to Use This Guide:

This guide is designed to support educators in exploring the groundbreaking documentary series [JIG SHOW | Leon Claxton's Harlem in Havana](#).

Whether you're teaching media literacy, American history, African American studies, or performance arts, these lessons offer an entry point into conversations about entertainment, and cultural reclamation. Each episode summary includes suggested discussion prompts and activity ideas to deepen engagement. Educators are encouraged to tailor materials to grade level and curriculum standards.



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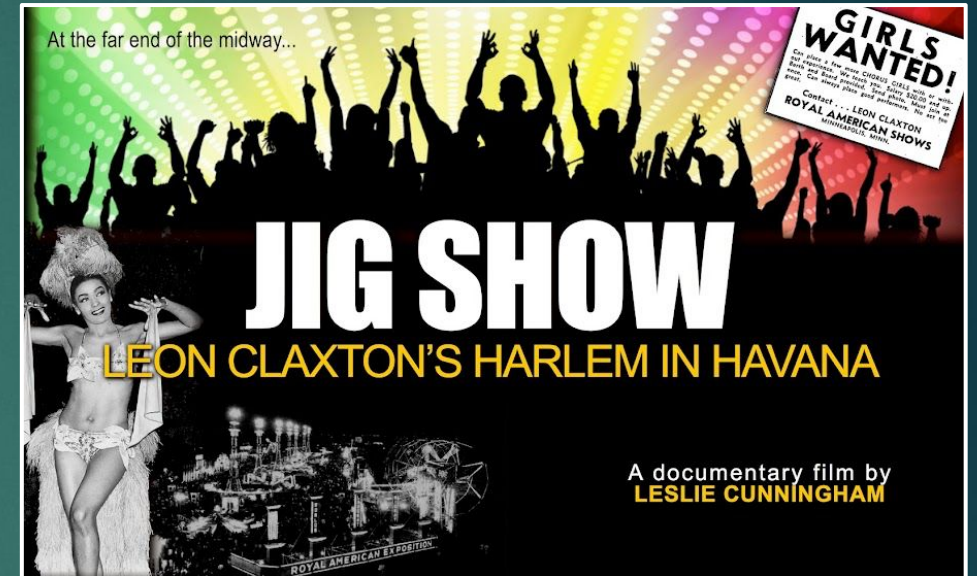
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About the Film Series

JIG SHOW | Leon Claxton's Harlem in Havana is an engaging [8-part documentary series streaming for free on YouTube](#). It uncovers the untold story of **Harlem in Havana**, a groundbreaking Black and Cuban traveling revue that captivated audiences from the 1930s through the 1960s.

Filmmaker **Leslie Cunningham** embarks on a personal journey to reclaim the legacy of her grandfather, **Leon Claxton**, a visionary producer and cultural pioneer. This series offers a rich resource for classrooms exploring history, culture, and performance.



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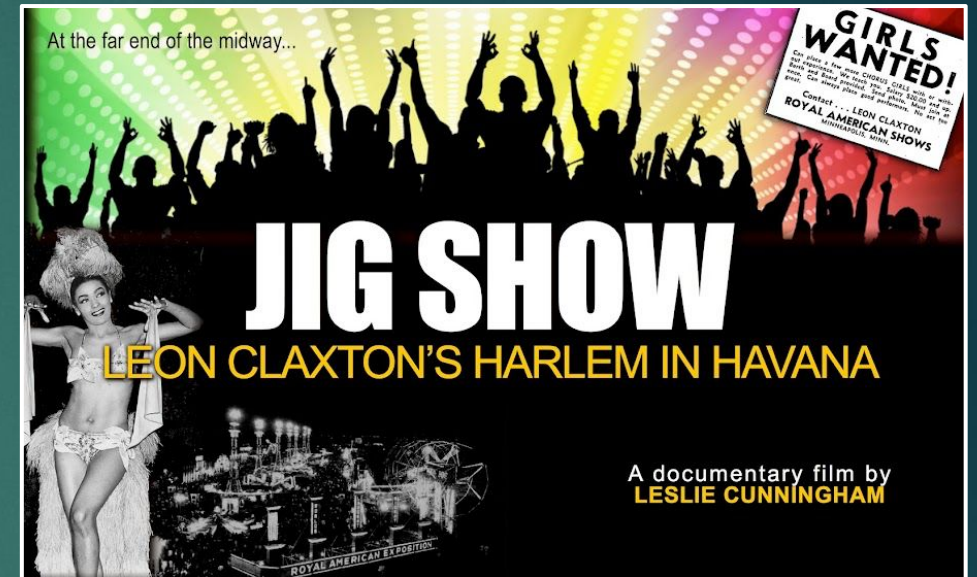
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Key Subjects

- African American History
- Latinx & Afro-Cuban Studies
- U.S. History (20th Century)
- Performance & Theater Studies
- Gender & Sexuality Studies
- Documentary Film & Media Literacy



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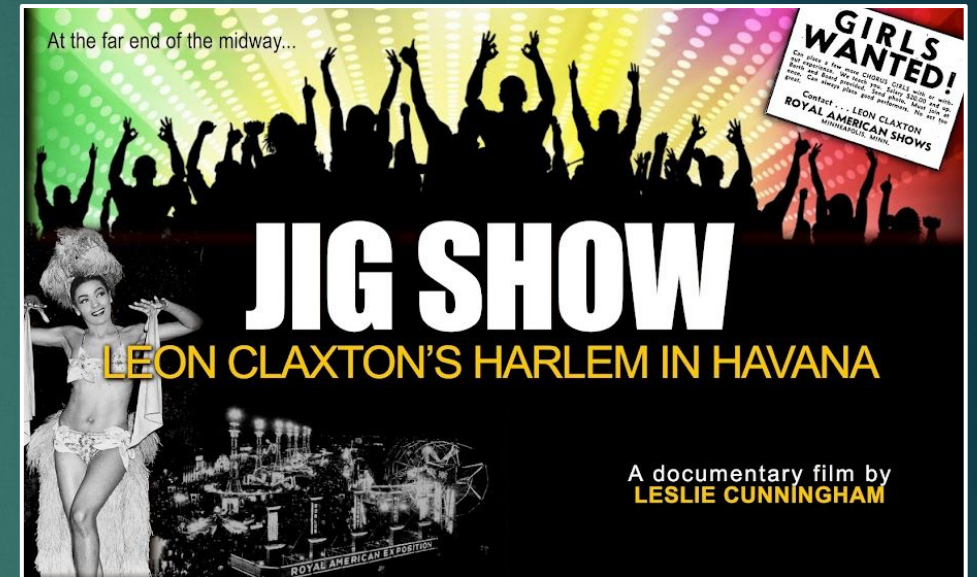
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Learning Objectives

Students will:

- Understand the impact of Black and Cuban artists on American entertainment.
- Explore cultural resistance through performance.
- Analyze intersections of race, gender, and public spectacle.
- Reflect on archival storytelling and historical erasure.
- Investigate the evolution of carnival culture and girl shows.



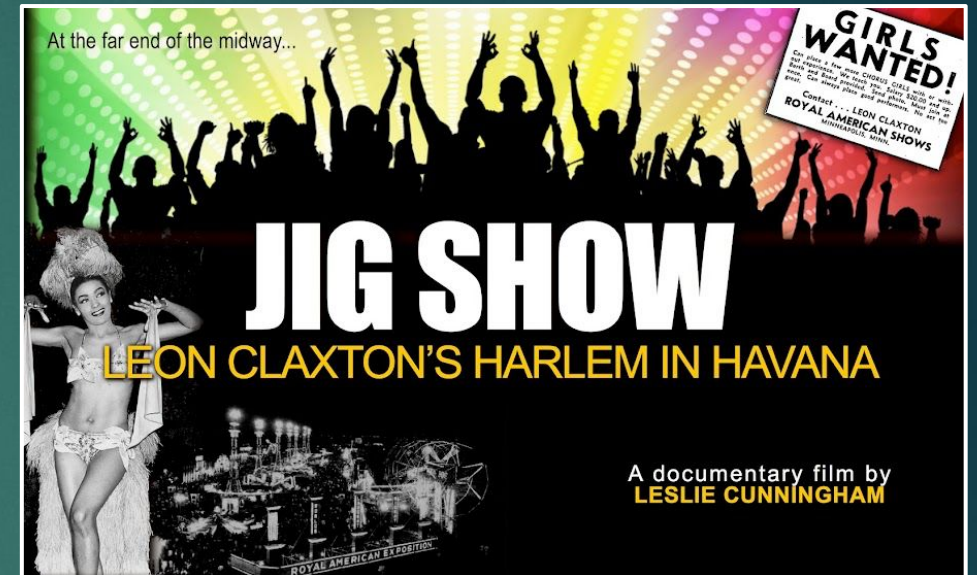
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Episode Planning & Discussion Questions



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Episode Planning (Synopses).

- **Episode 1: Family Legacy in Lights: From Bally to Brown Skin Showgirls**
Leslie Cunningham travels to Tampa to uncover her family's hidden history with her grandmother Shirley Bates and father John Cunningham. Features burlesque legend Bebe Bardeaux and showgirl Aquarius Moon.
- **Episode 2: Introducing The Showman**
Explores Claxton's rise as a pioneering Black producer defying Jim Crow, with Leslie uncovering her own family secret and reclaiming erased history.
- **Episode 3: Claxton Takes the Stage**
Chronicles Claxton's early career from Memphis contortionist to a Chicago stage producer, highlighting his success at the 1934 World's Fair and influence on carnival culture.
- **Episode 4: Sisters, Stars & the Birth of Harlem in Havana**
Introduces the Bates Sisters and the creation of Harlem in Havana, blending Afro-Cuban and Black artistry amid wartime shifts.

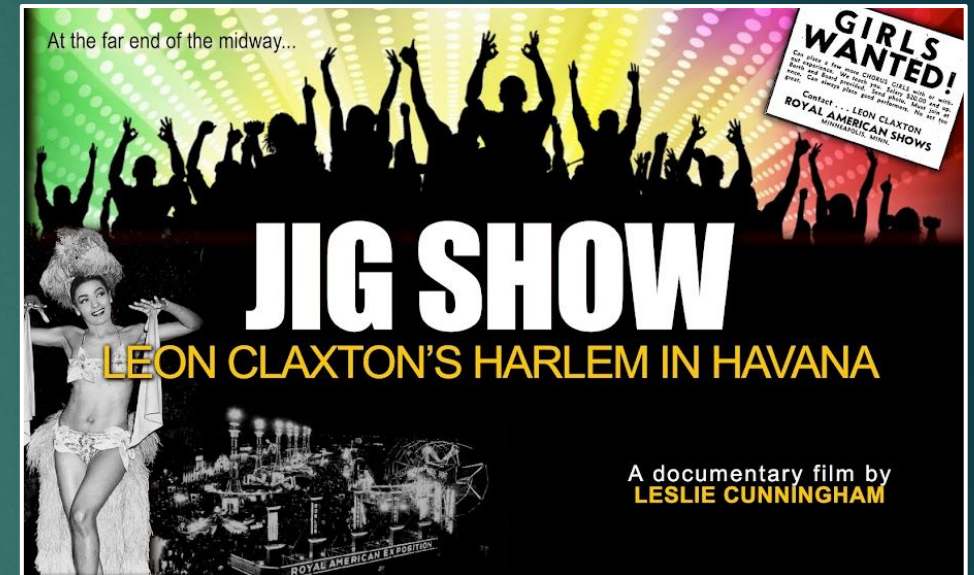
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Episode Planning (Synopses)

- **Episode 5: Jim Crow on the Road – Life on Train Car 66**
Dramatizes the touring life amidst segregation, dangers, and resilience, featuring Shirley Bates' emotional departure from the revue.
- **Episode 6: Behind the Curtain – Change is Coming**
Examines backstage life as Civil Rights and Cuban Revolution pressures reshape the show's future.
- **Episode 7: The Fall of the Revue**
Details the revue's decline and Claxton's pivot to business, with risqué performances that challenged norms.
- **Episode 8: Legacy in Motion**
Reflects on the personal and cultural legacy of Harlem in Havana through the eyes of surviving cast members.



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Episode 1: Family Legacy in Lights: From Bally to Brown Skin Showgirls

Synopsis: Leslie Cunningham interviews her grandmother Shirley Bates, a former exotic dancer, and her father John Cunningham, tracing family stories and performance legacy.

Themes: Intergenerational memory, performance legacy, oral history.

Discussion Questions:

- What role does family storytelling play in preserving history?
- How are Black women reclaiming the burlesque stage today



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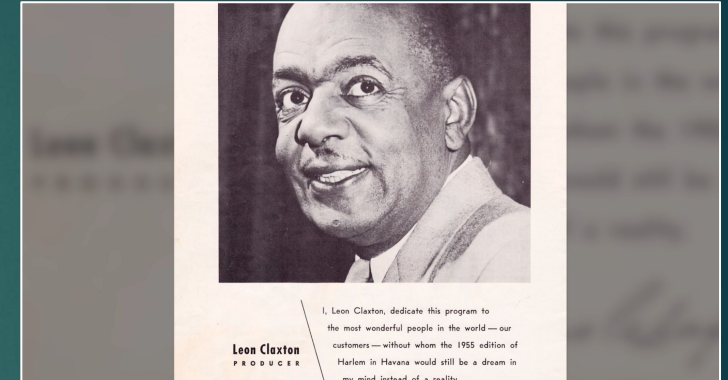
Episode 2: Introducing the Showman

Synopsis: Leon Claxton's rise as a Black producer defying Jim Crow laws through bold artistic entrepreneurship.

Themes: Identity, legacy, entrepreneurship

Discussion Questions:

- What obstacles did Claxton face as a Black showman?
- How does the film blend personal and public history?



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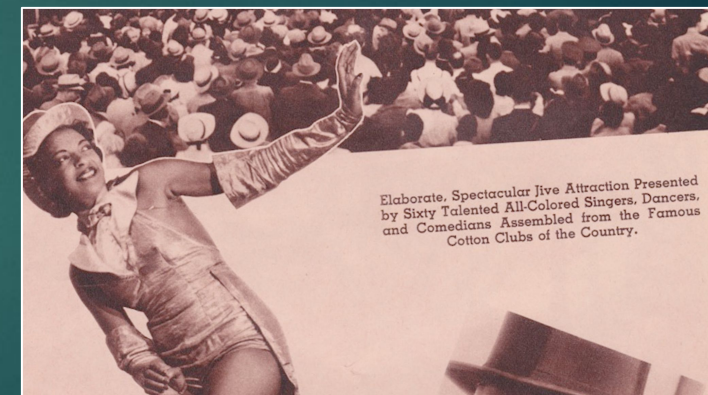
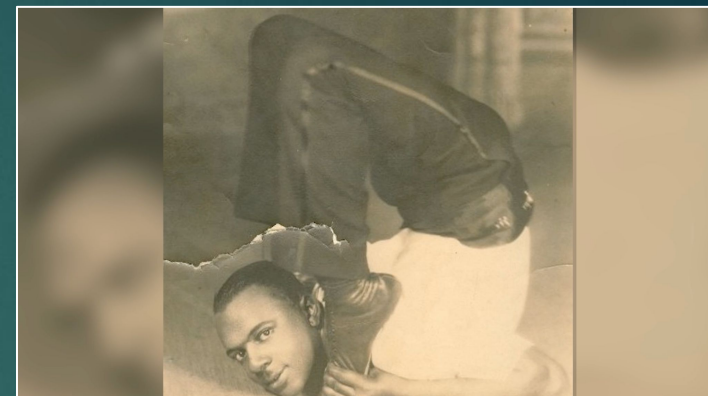
Episode 3: Claxton Takes the Stage

Synopsis: Claxton's early years culminating in his breakthrough at the 1934 Chicago World's Fair.

Themes: Carnival culture, Black ingenuity, survival during the Great Depression

Discussion Questions:

- How did Claxton use performance to subvert oppression?
- What risks did Black performers face on the carnival circuit?



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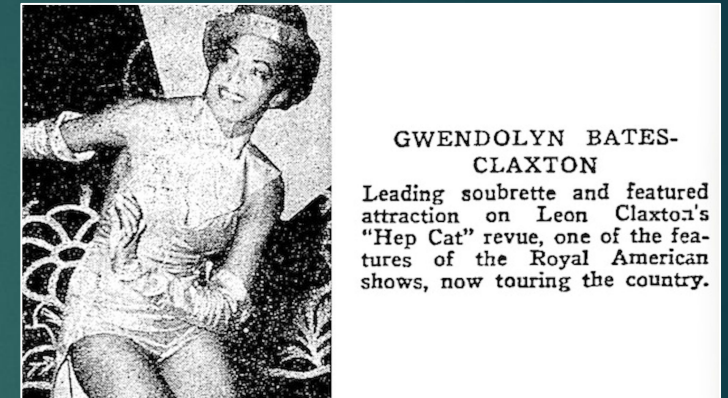
Episode 4: Sisters, Stars & the Birth of Harlem in Havana

Synopsis: The Bates Sisters rise as headliners while Claxton launches Harlem in Havana, fusing Black and Afro-Cuban artistry.

Themes: Black sisterhood, Afro-Cuban fusion, survival through art

Discussion Questions:

- How did the show challenge ideas of race and gender?
- In what ways was Harlem in Havana both entertainment and activism?



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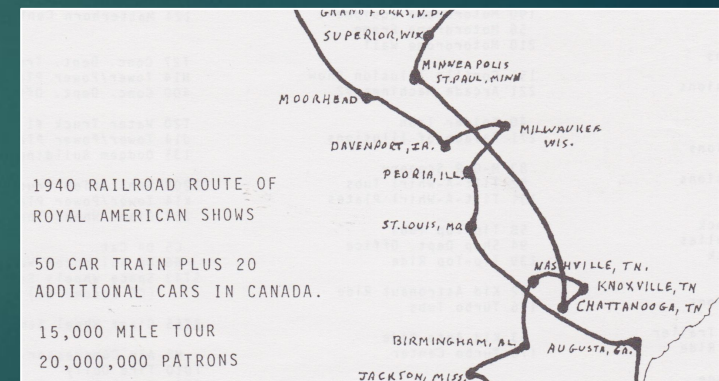
Episode 5: Jim Crow on the Road – Life on Train Car 66

Synopsis: Touring the Jim Crow South aboard Royal American Shows' Train Car 66, performers navigate segregation, danger, and resilience.

Themes: Resilience, segregation, danger on the road, duality of glamor and grit

Discussion Questions:

- How did segregation laws impact Black performers on tour?
- What does Shirley Bates' story reveal about the toll of touring?



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Episode 6: Behind the Curtain – Change is Coming

Synopsis: Backstage during the Civil Rights Movement and Cuban Revolution, the revue faces political and cultural upheaval.

Themes: Political upheaval, artistic resilience, cultural blending, societal change

Discussion Questions:

- How did national and global political shifts affect Harlem in Havana?
- How did performers respond artistically to these pressures?



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Episode 7: The Fall of the Revue

Synopsis: The revue's final years in the 1960s show risqué performances alongside Claxton's transition to business and philanthropy.

Themes: Evolution of entertainment, boundary-pushing art, legacy and decline

Discussion Questions:

- How did the revue adapt to changing social norms?
- What does this shift indicate about Black entertainment's evolving landscape?



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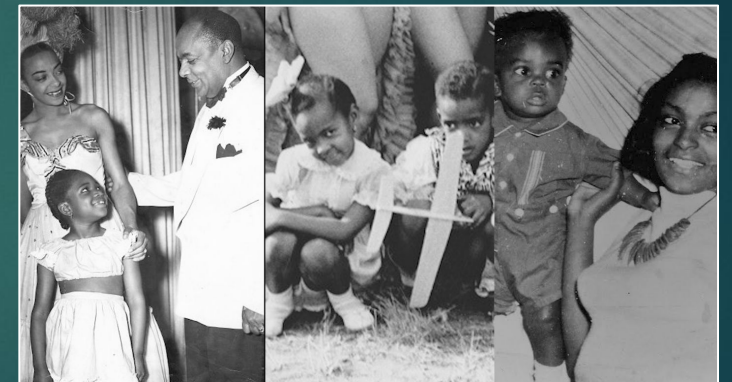
Episode 8: Legacy in Motion

Synopsis: Reflections by John Cunningham and Shirley Bates on Harlem in Havana's enduring legacy and cultural impact.

Themes: Memory, sacrifice, legacy, cultural influence

Discussion Questions:

- How does Harlem in Havana challenge mainstream historical narratives?
- What lessons do performers' experiences offer today's artists and activists?



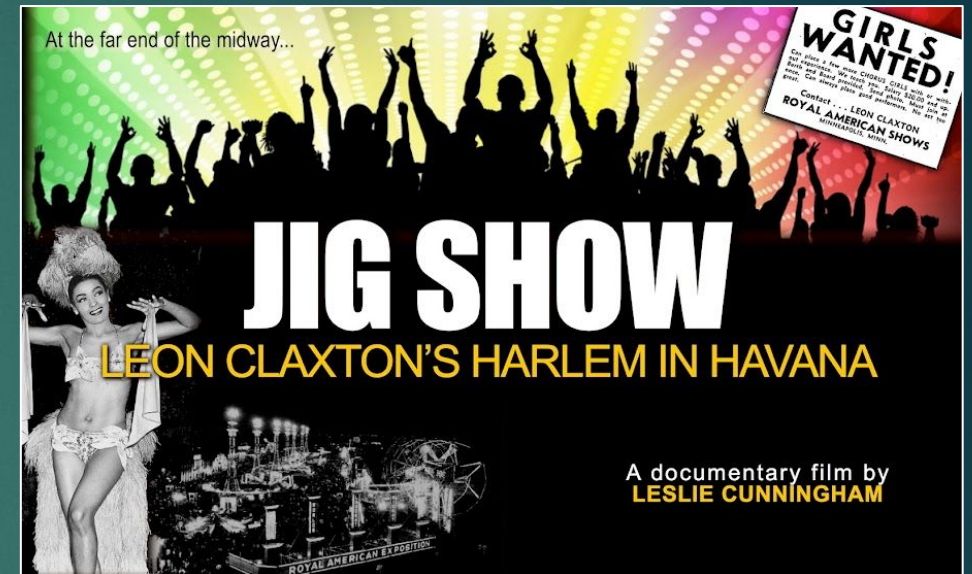
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Activities & Assignments



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Activities & Assignments:

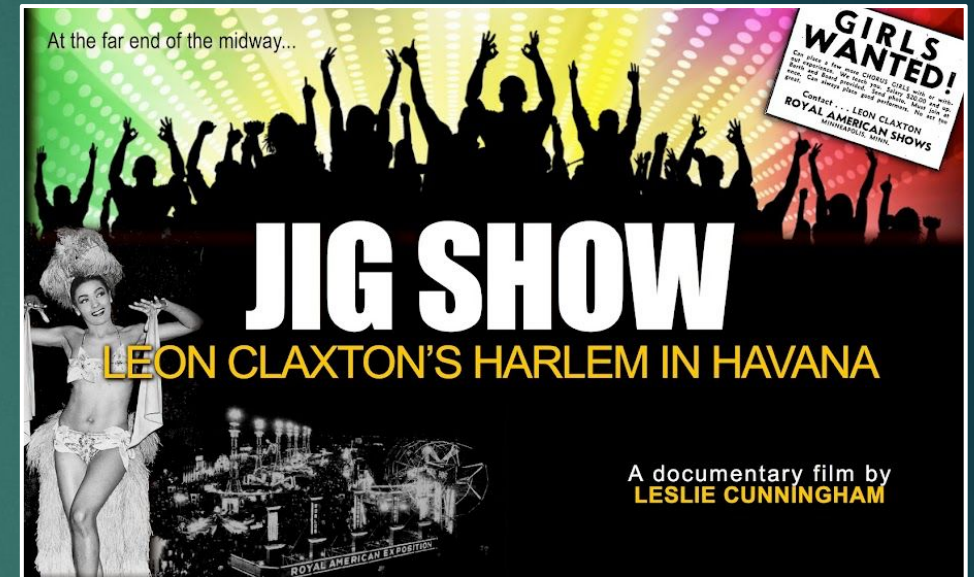
- **Critical Essay:** Analyze how Harlem in Havana used performance as resistance during segregation.
- **Creative Project:** Design a 1940s-era Harlem in Havana poster or digital ad.
- **Oral History:** Interview a family/community member about a forgotten story and present it creatively.
- **Archival Analysis:** Examine historical press materials and discuss inclusion/exclusion of performers.
- **Compare & Contrast:** Relate Harlem in Havana to the Harlem Renaissance or contemporary Black art movements.

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Extended Learning



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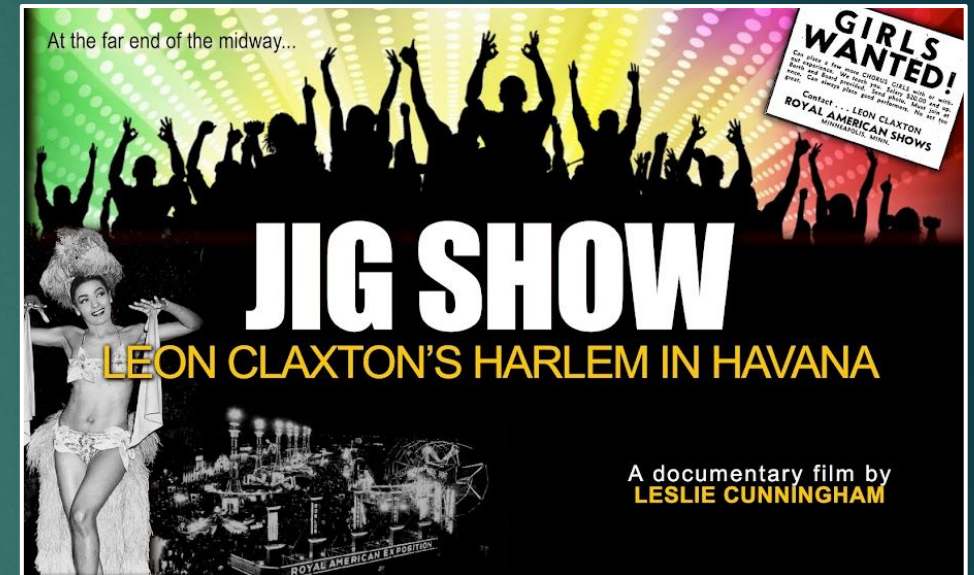
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Extended Learning:

- [Royal American Shows](#)
- Chicago World's Fair (1934)
- [Claxton Manor](#) & Black-owned motels
- Latin music's influence on American pop culture
- Black drag and gender performance history



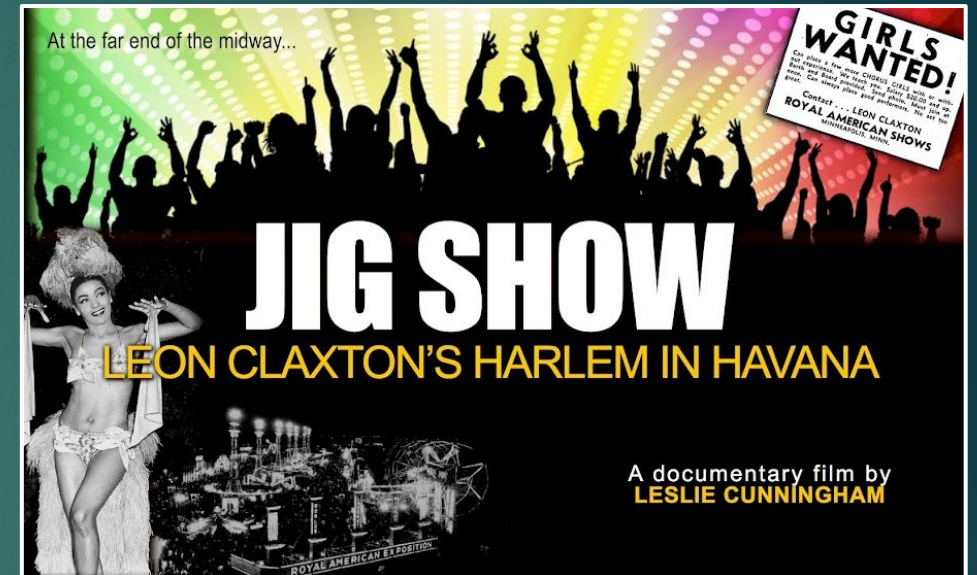
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Class Activities



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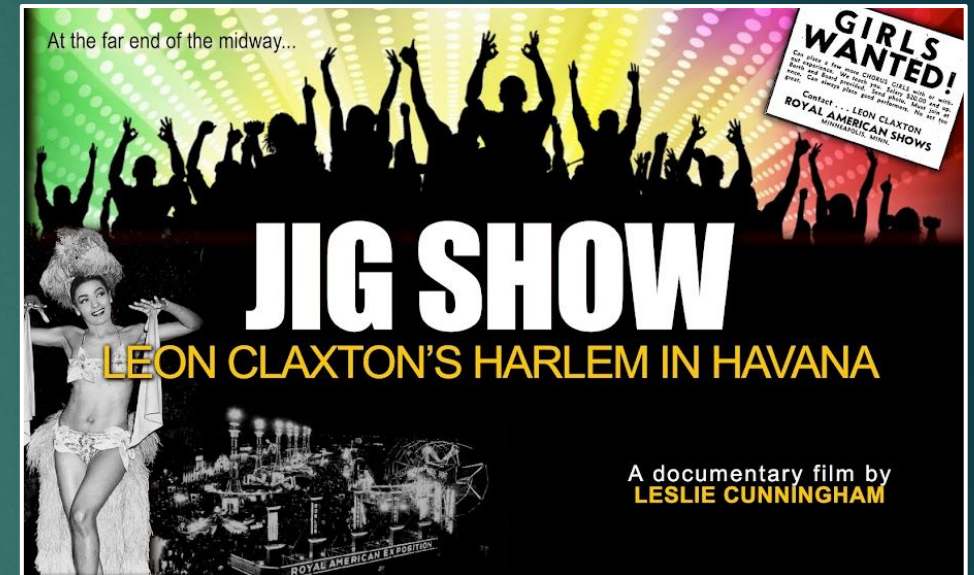
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Activity 1: Design a Harlem in Havana Poster

- Use 1930s-40s Black and Latinx visual motifs.
- Include show title, date, venue, and a tagline reflecting resilience and celebration.
- Present in class or display publicly.



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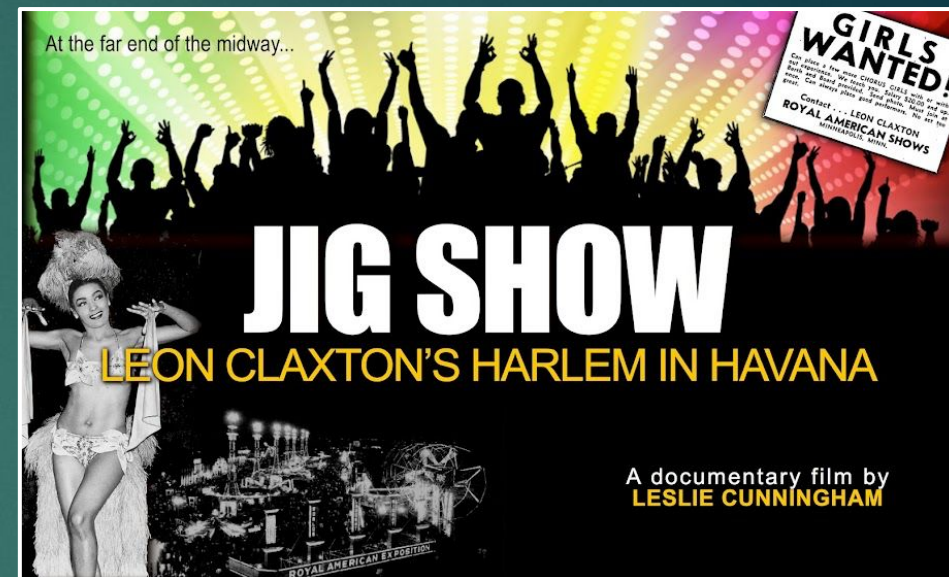
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Activity 2: Archival Media Analysis Worksheet

- Analyze historical press materials (newspaper clippings, posters).
- Who is represented or missing?
- What imagery and language are used?
- How do these reflect or challenge societal views of race and gender?



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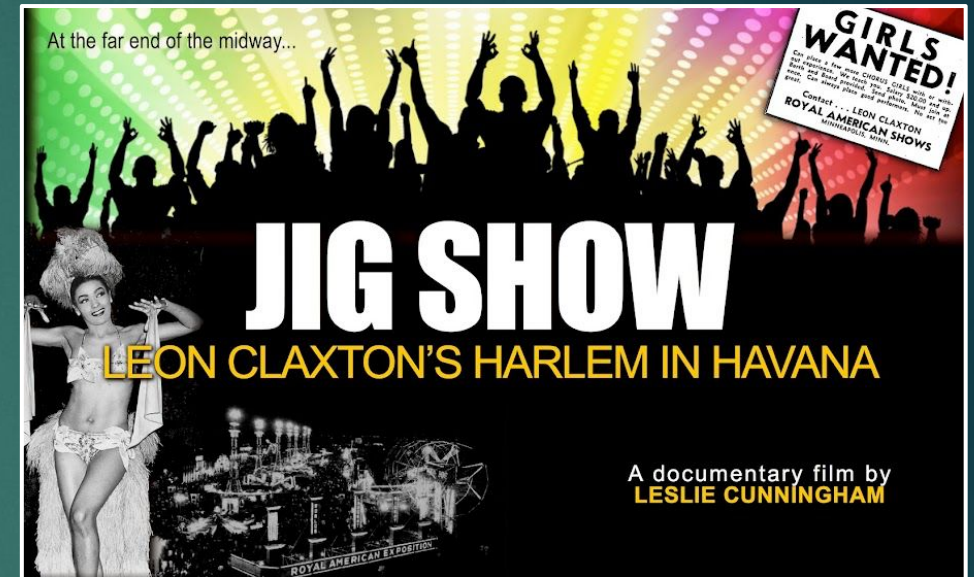
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Activity 3: Compare & Contrast Chart

- Compare Harlem in Havana with another Black cultural movement (e.g., Chitlin Circuit, Harlem Renaissance).
- Include columns: Time Period, Key Figures, Artistic Mediums, Political Impact, Cultural Legacy.



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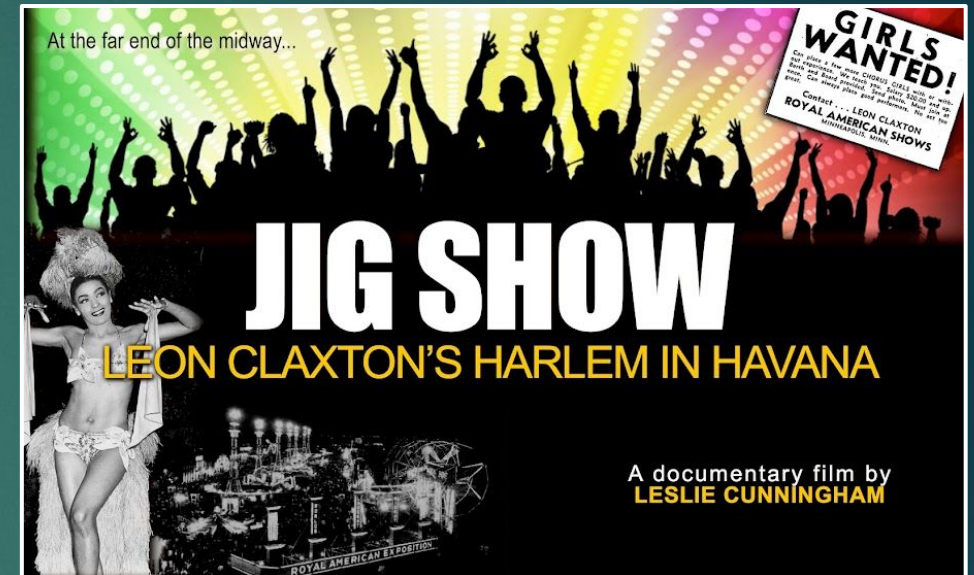


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Lesson Plans



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Lesson 1: Exploring Family Legacy and Oral History

Episode 1: Family Legacy in Lights: From Bally to Brown Skin Showgirls

Objective: Analyze how family stories preserve cultural history and shape personal identity.

Materials: Episode 1, discussion questions, notebooks/journals

Activities:

- [Watch Episode 1](#) as a class.
- Group Discussion:
 - How does oral history contribute to cultural memory?
 - What roles do Shirley Bates and John Cunningham play in preserving the legacy?
 - Why might family stories be critical to reclaiming erased histories?
- **Homework:** Interview a family or community member about a meaningful story or tradition and prepare a 3–5 minute oral presentation or a creative retelling (e.g., poem, artwork, video). Optionally share in next class.

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Lesson 2: Challenging Jim Crow through Performance

Episode 2: Introducing the Showman

Objective: Understand how performance challenged segregation and racial barriers.

Materials: Episode 2, excerpts from Jim Crow laws or segregation-era texts, writing supplies

Activities:

- [Watch Episode 2.](#)
- Document Analysis: Read and discuss excerpts from Jim Crow laws and firsthand segregation accounts.
- Class Discussion:
 - How did Leon Claxton use entertainment to confront racial barriers?
 - What risks did Black entertainers take by touring during segregation?
- **Writing Assignment:** Write a 1–2 page essay on Claxton's role as an artist and entrepreneur challenging Jim Crow laws, using evidence from the episode and readings.

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Lesson 3: Performance as Resistance on the Carnival Circuit

Episode 3: Claxton Takes the Stage

Objective: Analyze carnival culture as a space of cultural resistance and Black ingenuity.

Materials: Episode 3, archival images/articles on carnival shows, poster design materials

Activities:

- [Watch Episode 3.](#)
- Small Group Research: Investigate carnival midways' history and significance in Black entertainment.
- Discuss how these spaces allowed resistance and cultural expression despite oppression.
- Creative Project: Design a Harlem in Havana show poster or digital ad incorporating historical imagery and themes.
- Present posters explaining symbolism and design choices.

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Lesson 4: Intersectionality in Harlem in Havana

Episode 4: Sisters, Stars & the Birth of Harlem in Havana

Objective: Explore intersections of race, gender, and cultural identity in the revue.

Materials: Episode 4, scholarly articles on Afro-Cuban culture and Black feminism, writing supplies

Activities:

- [Watch Episode 4.](#)
- Seminar Discussion:
 - How did Harlem in Havana blend Afro-Cuban and African American elements?
 - How did the Bates Sisters challenge norms of race, gender, and nationhood?
 - Discuss the revue as entertainment and activism.
- Essay Prompt: Write a 2–3 page essay analyzing Harlem in Havana as cultural resistance focused on identity intersections.

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Lesson 5: Life on the Road – Jim Crow and Harlem in Havana

Episode 5: Jim Crow on the Road – Life on Train Car 66

Objective: Understand the realities and risks of touring as Black performers in the Jim Crow South.

Materials: Episode 5, primary sources on segregation and travel restrictions, touring route maps

Activities:

- [Watch Episode 5.](#)
- Class Discussion:
 - What challenges did the cast face in segregated towns?
 - How did Jim Crow laws affect performers' lives?
 - What does Shirley Bates' decision to leave reveal about the toll of touring?
- Map Activity: Trace Harlem in Havana's touring route, marking segregation laws/events.
- Reflective Journal: Write about how segregation might impact a person's sense of freedom and identity.

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Lesson 6: Behind the Curtain – Political and Cultural Change

Episode 6: Behind the Curtain – Change is Coming

Objective: Analyze how the Civil Rights Movement and Cuban Revolution influenced Black and Cuban performers.

Materials: Episode 6, articles/videos on Civil Rights and Cuban Revolution

Activities:

- [Watch Episode 6.](#)
- Research Presentations: Students research and present either Civil Rights or Cuban Revolution's cultural impact.
- Class Debate:
 - How do political/social movements influence art?
 - Can entertainment be apolitical?
- Creative Writing: Write a diary entry imagining you are a Harlem in Havana performer reflecting on the changing world.

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Lesson 7: The Fall of Harlem in Havana and Shifting Cultural Tides

Episode 7: The Fall of the Revue

Objective: Examine the revue's decline amid cultural shifts in the 1960s.

Materials: Episode 7, articles on 1960s entertainment culture and LGBTQ+ history

Activities:

- [Watch Episode 7.](#)
- Discussion:
 - What contributed to the revue's decline?
 - How did risqué performances reflect wider cultural shifts?
 - What does this reveal about Black entertainment and respectability politics?
- Research: Study drag and gender performance history in Black entertainment during the 1960s.
- Group Presentations on Harlem in Havana's place in entertainment trends.

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Lesson 8: Legacy in Motion – Reflection and Reclamation

Episode 8: Legacy in Motion

Objective: Reflect on Harlem in Havana's lasting impact and the importance of reclaiming lost histories.

Materials: Episode 8, reflection prompts, multimedia tools

Activities:

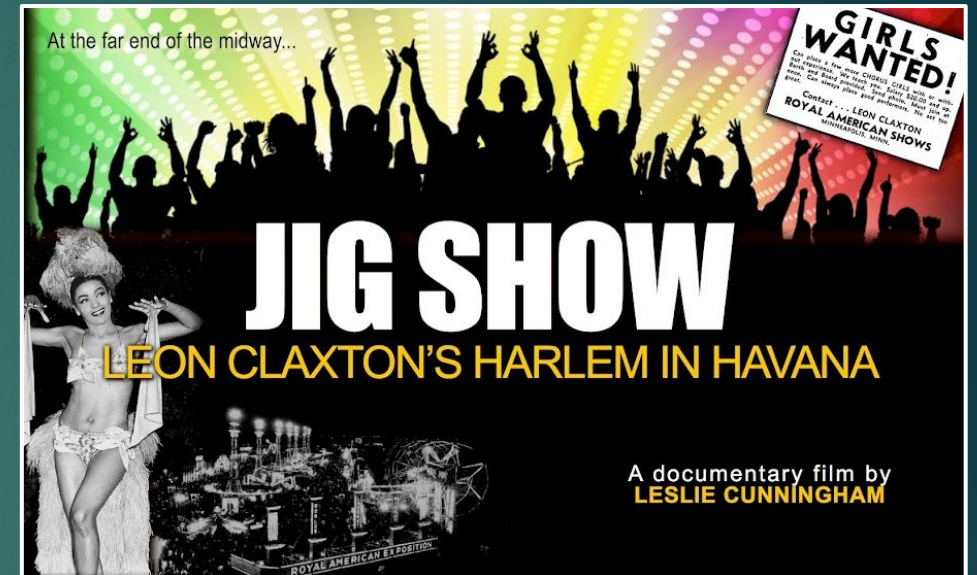
- [Watch Episode 8.](#)
- Group Discussion:
 - How did John Cunningham and Shirley Bates shape the legacy?
 - Why reclaim hidden histories?
 - How does the show influence contemporary Black and Latinx culture?
- Creative Project: Produce a multimedia tribute (video, digital collage, podcast) celebrating Harlem in Havana.
- Final Essay: Write a 3–4 page essay synthesizing the series themes, focusing on honoring cultural legacies.

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Glossary



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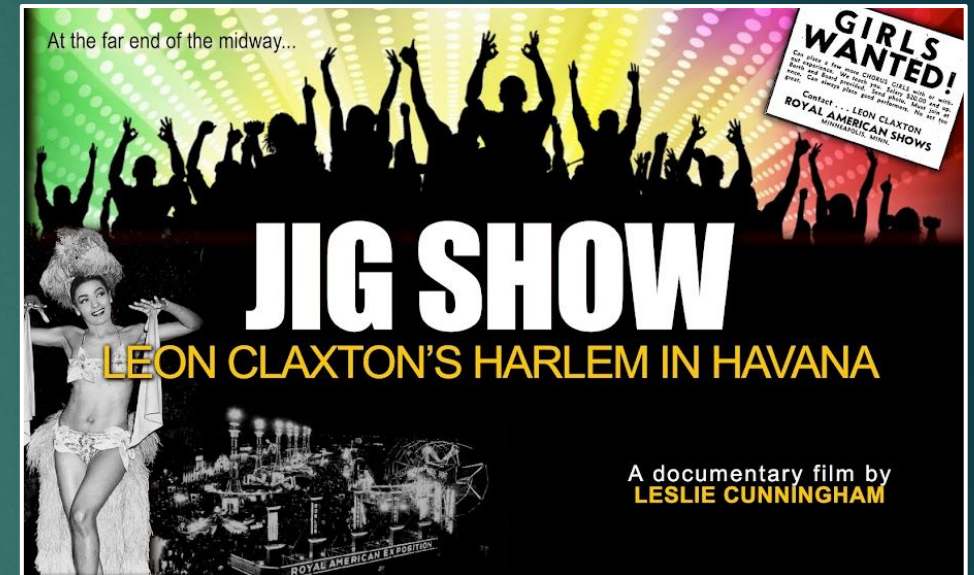
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Glossary

- Bally
- Carnival Midway
- Burlesque
- Afro-Cuban
- Showgirl
- Tent Show



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Bring It to Your Campus!

Filmmaker [Leslie Cunningham](#) is available for:

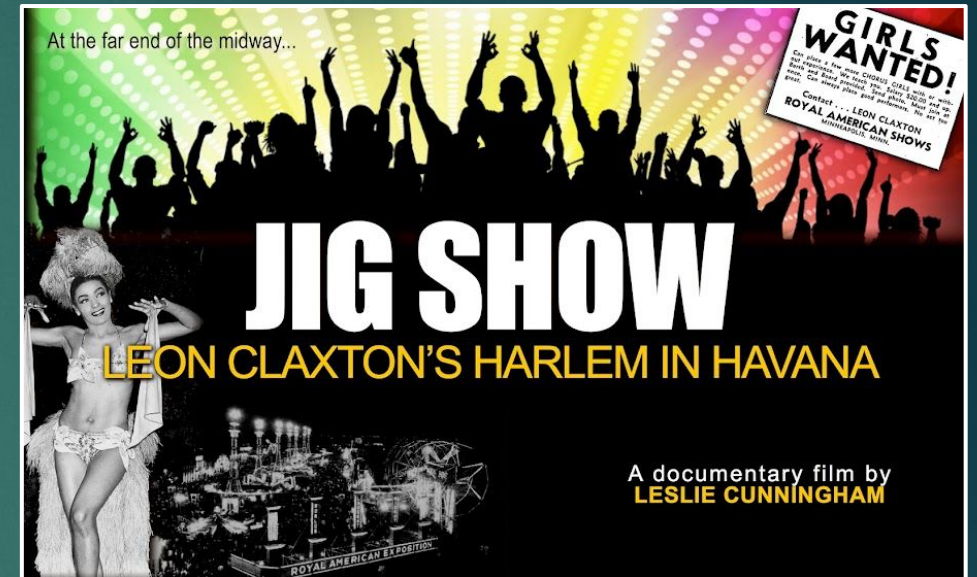
- Guest lectures
- Q&A sessions
- Screenings and panel discussions
- Workshops on Black documentary filmmaking and archival storytelling

Contact:

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Visit: harleminhavana.com

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