

BOOK REVIEW



Smoketown: The Untold Story of the Other Great Black Renaissance

By Mark Whitaker

Simon & Shuster, 2018

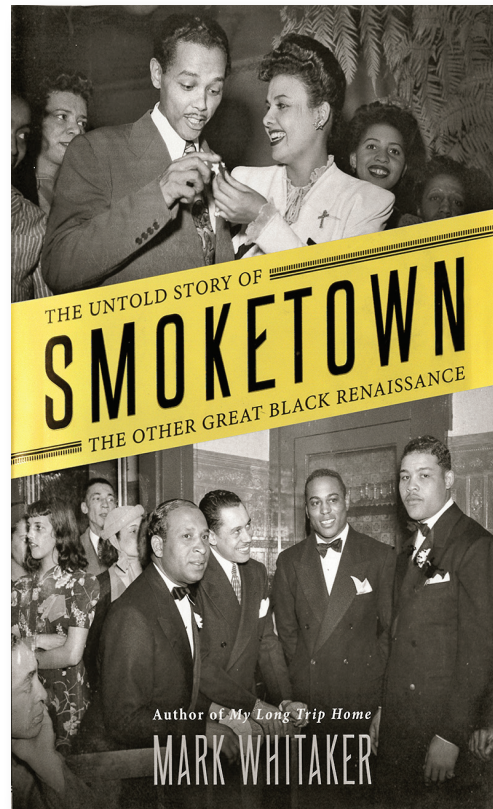
432 pp., 25 B&W photos

Hardcover, \$30.00

Reviewed by Samuel W. Black, Director of African American Program, Senator John Heinz History Center

Much of the lore of black Pittsburgh is set in the mid-20th century and is around jazz, Negro League Baseball, and the *Pittsburgh Courier* newspaper. Numerous academic studies, theses, dissertations, documentaries, newspaper articles, and essays have focused on one aspect of the lore or another. Very few published histories of this era have brought all aspects of the experience together in a tightly woven fabric of life, history, culture, politics, art, and enjoyment than Mark Whitaker's *Smoketown*. The book is filled with 25 Charles "Teenie" Harris photographs that provide a visual interpretation and documentation of Whitaker's writing that paints a picture of black life in Pittsburgh. Each chapter flows into the following chapter with such ease and precision that the reader could step back and imagine viewing this history like Gulliver looking down on Lilliput.

Smoketown begins with the pounding experience of heralded heavyweight champion Joe Louis. The Pittsburgh connection for Louis is the *Pittsburgh Courier* where Whitaker explains the talented approach of the *Courier's*



journalism that featured black celebrities that had a significant impact on world culture. The journalistic cause of the paper ventures into sports as a promoter of Joe Louis but also as a champion for the integration of baseball, telling the Dorie Miller story and other causes. But the *Courier* promoted Louis' campaign for the heavyweight championship with a first ever biography of the fighter and doing personal stories instead of the basic boxing news that other publications were doing. The *Courier* knew the cause of a black champion and was careful to put Louis in a light opposite Jack Johnson in order to assure his campaign for the heavyweight crown.

Whitaker's talent is that he ventures into the biographical background of noted people such as Robert L. Vann, editor, publisher, and president of the *Courier* and his political idealism that moved black voting blocks from the party of Lincoln, Republican, to

the Democratic Party starting with the 1932 presidential election. Vann was the first African American graduate of the University of Pittsburgh School of Law and was hired to incorporate the Pittsburgh Courier Publishing Company in 1910. Although much more could have been said about the founder of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, Edward Nathaniel Harleston, whose background was more extensive than the working-class man Whitaker portrays. Harleston had owned a funeral home in his native Charleston, South Carolina, and was also known as a master carpenter. When Harleston was moved out by the Loendi Club connected officers, Robert L. Vann was chosen as editor and treasurer of the corporation. Andrew Buni's book, *Robert L. Vann of the Pittsburgh Courier* is the recognized authoritative scholarly study of Vann and the newspaper, Whitaker doesn't challenge that contention but offers interesting anecdotes.

The background of the relationship between the *Courier* sports writers and Joe Louis, and the sports journalism and friendship of Wendell Smith and Jackie Robinson, place the *Courier* at pivotal points in American sports history. The front row seat Whitaker provides builds anticipation even if you are familiar with the story. Not lost on this path of sports heroism is the triumph and tragedy of Josh Gibson. Probably the greatest of all Negro League stars, Gibson, whose talents was honed in Pittsburgh, hit more home runs than anyone else in the American sport but like being passed over for Jackie Robinson in the integration scheme, Gibson's legacy was also passed over for Robinson's that reverberated from Major Leagues to other sports in American society.

Central characters like numbers racket king Gus Greenlee and Woogie Harris, singer/


actress Lena Horne, jazz composer Billy Strayhorn, Lena Horne's father and club owner Teddy Horne, *Courier* staff members Bill Nunn, Sr., Chester Washington, Frank Bolden, Wendell Smith, Robert L. Vann, Evelyn Cunningham, Edna McKenzie, Cum Posey, jazz musicians Earl "Fatha" Hines, George Benson, and playwright August Wilson, along with a host of others get their due in this story. One of the significant chapters in *Smoketown*

is Whitaker's profile of the experiences of the women of the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Finally, the talents of Evelyn Cunningham and Edna Chappell McKenzie are profiled. The effectiveness of the civil rights reporting of Cunningham in the South and McKenzie in Western Pennsylvania gave the paper front seat reporting and brought the issues of equality and the action of the Civil Rights Movement home to many readers. In fact, by

the 1950s three of the top four share holders in the Pittsburgh Courier Publishing Company were women.

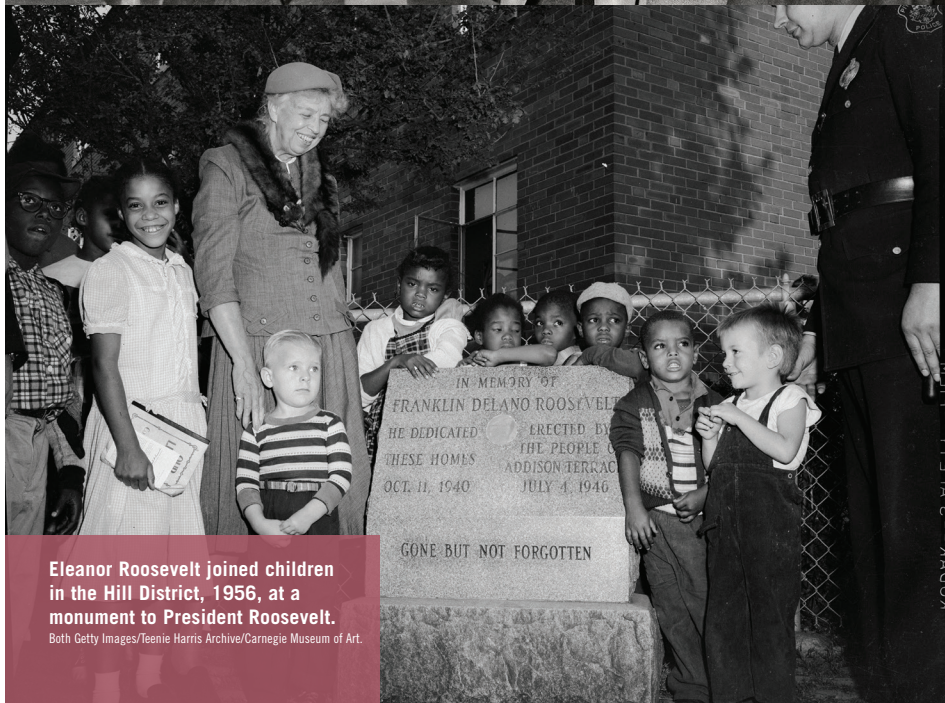
Smoketown spends ample space telling the Pittsburgh story of some of the greatest jazz artist of all time. Staryhorn, Hines, Billy Eckstine, Erroll Garner, Kenny Clarke, Benson, and Mary Lou Williams are introduced as children and Whitaker allows the reader to follow their progression into adult jazz artists who were instrumental in various styles and changes of the genre. New York had its Cotton Club and 52nd Street while Pittsburgh had its Crawford Grill and Hurricane Club. The irony of Pittsburgh's black renaissance is that its jazz musicians left the city to find stardom and success. But Pittsburgh held a special place in the hearts of these artists.

The epilogue of the book focuses on August Wilson. A noted playwright whose 10-play 20th-century cycle helped to frame the urban oppression of African Americans of that century. Whitaker follows Wilson from birth to death and centers his bio on the formative years of a teenage Wilson struggling with the distorted views of the Pittsburgh educational system. Much like the jazz musicians of his youth, Wilson too left Pittsburgh to achieve his greatness. *Smoketown* is framed by the *Pittsburgh Courier* and defined by Wilson's cycle.

Smoketown is part history and part historical enjoyment. It references the seriousness of black life as second-class citizens who were making a cultural stand of the highest level in art, sports, politics, and business. Notes for each chapter are listed at the end of the book with the index following. The ease of the reading of this book should make it a widespread, must-have journal of black pride and perseverance. 



By the 1940s, women had prominent roles at the *Courier* such as gossip columnist Toki Schalk (far left) and Evelyn Cunningham (center).



Eleanor Roosevelt joined children in the Hill District, 1956, at a monument to President Roosevelt.

Both Getty Images/Teenie Harris Archive/Carnegie Museum of Art.