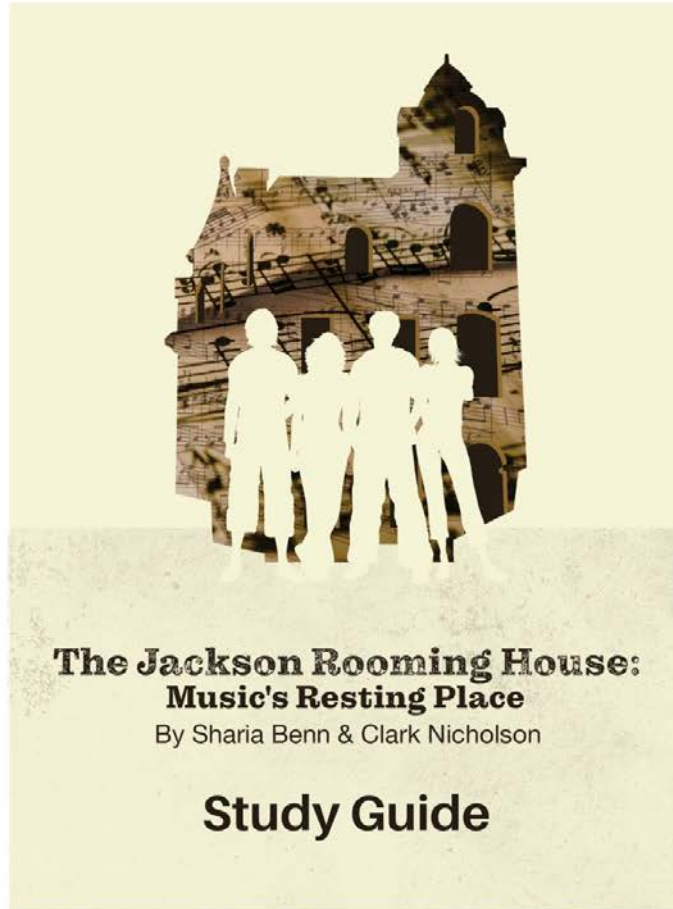




**GAMUT** | THEATRE GROUP



**The Jackson Rooming House:  
Music's Resting Place**

By Sharia Benn & Clark Nicholson

**Study Guide**



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**The Jackson Rooming House: Music's Resting Place**  
**by Sharia Benn and Clark Nicholson**

**Overview:** This play is a historical fiction that tells the story of the Jackson Rooming House, a Black-owned establishment in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, that hosted many famous Black musicians and performers from 1929 to 1960. The play uses music, dance, and dialogue to explore the themes of Black history, culture, and identity, as well as the challenges and opportunities of the Civil Rights era. The play also shows how the past can inspire and connect present and future generations.

**Characters:** The main characters of the play are:

**Sun and Shine:** Two contemporary characters who visit the Jackson Rooming House once a year to connect with the spirits of the past and honor their musical heritage. Sun is a singer and librarian at a local school and Shine plays the guitar and works at the Jackson House restaurant next door. They are the guides and narrators of the play. They represent the spirit and energy of the music.

**German and Betty Jackson:** The owners of the Jackson Rooming House, who appear as ghosts from the past. They were hosts to many famous Black artists who traveled through Harrisburg and provided them with a safe, comfortable, and dignified place to stay. They share their stories and memories with Sun, Shine, and the teens who have stumbled into the home.

**Shayla, Daryll, and Ronnie:** Three teens who stumble into the Jackson Rooming House on New Year's Eve 2023. They are unaware of the history and significance of the place and are initially skeptical and scared of the ghosts. However, as they learn more about the music and the people who stayed there, they become more interested and inspired. They also face their own personal challenges and decisions about their future.

**Plot:** The first part of the play introduces the characters and the setting. The teenagers enter the Jackson Rooming House and meet Sun, Shine, and the spirits from the past. Musical genres such as Blues, Gospel, and Jazz are explored, as well as the artists who performed them, such as Robert Johnson, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong, and Cab Calloway. The play then continues with the musical genres of Rock and Roll, Gospel, and Soul, and the artists who influenced them, such as Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Chuck Berry, Sam Cooke, and Ray Charles. This part of the play also shows how the young people are affected by the music and the stories, and how they resolve their conflicts and make their choices. The play ends with a celebration of the legacy and impact of the Jackson Rooming House and the music that was born there.

**Themes:** The play explores several themes, such as:

**Black history and culture:** The play shows how Black music reflects the experiences, struggles, and achievements of Black people in America, and how it has shaped and influenced American culture and society. The play also highlights the role of the Jackson Rooming House and other Black-owned businesses in providing a safe haven and a community for Black travelers during the Jim Crow era and the Civil Rights movement.

**Identity and belonging:** The play shows how the characters struggle with their sense of identity and belonging, and how they find inspiration and connection through the music and the stories of the past. The play also shows how the music transcends racial and generational boundaries and creates a common ground for understanding and appreciation.

**Dreams and choices:** The play shows how the characters have different dreams and choices for their future, and how they face the challenges and opportunities that come with them. The play also shows how the music and the stories of the past motivate and empower the characters to pursue their dreams and make their choices.



## Glossary

**Belting** : Belting (or vocal belting) is a specific technique of singing by which a singer carries their chest voice into their head voice with a growling, rumbling vocal style. This was originally employed by Blues singers like Ma Rainey to not only express emotion, but also to enable her to top the backing instruments without the aid of a strong microphone.

**Blues**: Blues is a musical genre that originated in the Deep South of the United States in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. Blues incorporated spirituals, work songs , and call-and-response structure which expressed deep felt emotion, both happy and sad, from the experiences of African-American culture. Blues spawned many other genres of music, including Jazz, Swing, Rhythm and Blues (R&B), and Rock and Roll.

**Gospel** : Gospel music is a traditional form of Christian music produced for aesthetic pleasure, ceremonial purposes, as well as an entertainment product for the marketplace. It evolved from African American and American folk music styles, and has endured over many years. It has evolved from a primarily vocal presentation to encompass varied instrumentation, and has produced and inspired other musical genres, such as Soul music.

**Green Book**: The Green Book, published as “The Negro Motorist Green Book”, was a 1936–1966 segregation-era travel guide originally published by Victor H. Green that provided African American travelers with recommendations for safe and hospitable travel options.

**Jazz** : Jazz is a genre of music that originated in the African-American communities of the Southern United States, particularly New Orleans, Louisiana, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and is founded on the various forms of Blues and Ragtime. It is characterized by complex musical chords, polyrhythms (multiple rhythms), and improvisation.

**Jim Crow laws** : The Jim Crow laws were state and local laws established in the American South in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that enforced racial segregation. "Jim Crow" was an offensive slang term for an African-American. Many of these laws remained in effect until the mid-1960s. Despite these laws originating in the South, both formal and informal segregation policies were also present in other areas of the country, as well, in public accommodations, travel, and voting.

**Lindy Hop** : The Lindy Hop is an American dance which emerged from the African-American communities of Harlem, in Manhattan, NYC, in the late 1920s. It is a fusion of many dances that came before it or were popular during its development but is mainly based on Jazz, Tap, and The Charleston. The Lindy Hop combines elements of both partnered as well as solo dancing utilizing the moves and improvisation of African-American forms along with the formal structure of European partner dances.

**Scat Singing** : Scat singing, or scatting, is vocal improvisation utilizing wordless nonsense syllables. In scat singing, the singer improvises melodies and rhythms using the voice as an instrument rather than as a speaking method.

**Swing Music** : Swing music developed in the United States during the late 1920s and early '30s. It is a style of Jazz, and its name derived from its emphasis on the “off beat”, or nominally weaker beat in the musical measure. The danceable swing style of Big Bands and band leaders such as Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, and Count Basie made Swing the dominant form of American popular music from the mid-1930s to the mid-1940s. This time was popularly known as the Swing Era, when people were popularizing dances such as the Lindy Hop.

**Ragtime** : Ragtime is a musical style that had its peak at the turn of the 19th and into the 20th Century. It has a syncopated, or "ragged" rhythm. Ragtime pieces (or "rags") are typically composed for and performed on the piano, though the genre has been adapted for a variety of instruments and styles. It is closely related to the musical style of the March, with additional polyrhythms from African music.

**Rock and Roll**: Rock and roll is a popular music genre that evolved in the United States during the late 1940s and on into the early 1950s. It emerged from African-American musical styles such as Rhythm and Blues (R&B), Boogie-Woogie, Electric Blues, Gospel, Jazz, as well as Country and Western music. In the earliest rock and roll styles the piano was usually the sole or dominant instrument, but this instrument was eventually replaced or supplemented by guitar in the middle to late 1950s.



## **Background of German Jackson and The Jackson Rooming House**

German Jackson became a successful hotel owner and doorman by working hard, providing quality service, and seizing opportunities. He was the son of a slave who moved to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in the early 20th century. He started working as a bellhop at the Penn Harris Hotel, a prestigious downtown hotel, where he impressed the guests and the management with his professionalism and personality<sup>2</sup>. He also learned the hotel business and made connections with many prominent people, especially in the entertainment industry.

Jackson used his savings and skills to buy a brick Second-Empire-style building on North Sixth Street in the 1920's, which he converted into a rooming house for Black travelers and performers. He also owned a sister establishment in Atlantic City, NJ, that catered to the same clientele. Jackson's hotels offered a safe, comfortable, and dignified place to stay for Black travelers and many famous Black celebrities who were not welcome in the segregated hotels of the time. Jackson also ran a coffee shop next to his Harrisburg hotel, which became a popular spot for locals and visitors alike.

Jackson continued to work as a head doorman at the Penn Harris Hotel until his retirement in 1960, balancing his two careers and earning respect and admiration from both the white and Black communities. He was known for his generosity, kindness, and optimism, as well as his passion for music and history. He died in 1971 at the age of 82. His legacy lives on in the Jackson House sandwich shop, which he left to his friend Dave Kegriss, and in the Jackson Rooming House, which became a historic landmark and a mural project. The building crumbled on January 7, 2023.



## Famous Visitors to The Jackson House

- **Joe Louis:** A famous boxer who showed his moves at the Jackson House lobby.



- **Pearl Bailey:** A singer and actress who brought beauty and class to the Jackson House.



- **Ella Fitzgerald:** A jazz vocalist who would sit and scat at the Jackson House.



- **Billie Holiday:** A blues singer who rehearsed one of her songs at the Jackson House.





- **Cab Calloway:** A band leader, showman, dancer, and scat singer who performed at the Hippodrome.



- **Count Basie and Duke Ellington:** Two of the greatest jazz and swing orchestra leaders who also played at the Hippodrome.



- **Sister Rosetta Tharpe:** A gospel singer and guitarist who played at a nearby Jackson family's house.



## The Jacksons as Civic and Social Change Agents



By German I. Jackson—Self Made Success

### What American Free Enterprise Means to Me

This is the fifth of a series of articles on "What American Free Enterprise Means to Me," presented by ACES—Americans for Competitive Enterprise System.

Believe in God. Don't expect something for nothing. Save a portion of what you earn. Own your own home however humble. These were the precepts instilled in me by my parents.

When I was ten years old, I was earning 50 cents a week

★ ★ ★



GERMAN I. JACKSON

carrying grocery baskets. This I gave to my mother each Saturday night. It wasn't the amount that counted but the experience I was gaining by hard work and saving.

Through the years I have held to what my parents taught me. Blessed with a wonderful wife and loyal friends, I have security. Through contacts made upon the advice of friends and Franklin Moore who has been a brother-adviser to me, I have been given courage to enter new enterprises.

To me this is the American free way of life. To keep it secure I must help to protect the Constitution of the United States for in it is everything one needs. It gives me the right to work and prosper according to my ability.

To start out each morning with a smile and a kindly feeling toward everyone regardless of race or creed and with the privilege of working hard, this to me is America's precious freedom of opportunity.

★ ★ ★

German Jackson was born and reared in Winchester Va. Member of the staff of a local hotel for 34 years, he has been bell captain for the last several years. He and his wife maintain real estate holdings and conduct business enterprises in Atlantic City and Harrisburg.

he out fear and trembling.  
ut "Should they fail to repeal the  
n, unjust laws now upon the books  
nt they had best heed the example of  
at- the man who has just passed away."  
ge  
he  
e-  
ey The Capital City Democratic Club  
he will hold an installation tea tomor-  
it- row evening at 8 o'clock at the home  
w- of Mrs. German Jackson, 1006 North  
Sixth street. Democratic candidates  
for city offices will speak.

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**CHILD'S LEG IS BROKEN**  
LOYSVILLE, Sept. 10.—When he  
fell on the porch at his home, Ches-  
ter Schlusser, Jr., 2, suffered a frac-  
ture of the left leg. A New Bloom

mean?  
10. Who discovered the Strait of  
Magellan?

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**LEAGUE TO MEET**  
The Colored Women's Democratic  
League will meet tomorrow night at  
8 o'clock at the home of Mrs. Ger-  
man Jackson, 1006 North Sixth  
street. Mrs. William H. Bond, presi-  
dent, will preside.

**Civic Participation and Activism:** What forms of civic participation did Betty and German Jackson engage in during their time? How did their involvement impact their local community and beyond? What motivated them to take action and advocate for change? How did the Jackson Rooming House serve as a hub for the African-American community in Harrisburg? Why was it essential during an era of racial segregation? What lessons can we learn from their commitment to providing accommodations and fostering connections?

**Social Responsibility:** What does social responsibility mean to you? How can individuals contribute to their communities? How did Betty and German Jackson demonstrate social responsibility through their actions? What are some ways students can actively engage in social responsibility today?

**Challenges and Impact:** What challenges did Betty and German Jackson face as African-American business owners during their time? How did they overcome these challenges to create a positive impact? What lessons can students draw from their resilience and determination?



## For Discussion

**The significance of the Jackson House:** How does the Jackson House represent a safe haven and a cultural hub for Black musicians and travelers in the past? How does it inspire the young characters in the present to connect with their history and pursue their dreams?

**The influence of music:** How does music serve as a bridge between different generations, cultures, and experiences? What are some of the musical genres and artists that are featured or mentioned in the play? How do they reflect the social and historical contexts of their times?

**The theme of change:** How do the characters cope with the changes and challenges in their lives, such as moving, losing loved ones, or facing discrimination? How do they support each other and find hope and resilience? How does the crumbling of the Jackson House symbolize the loss and transformation of the past?

**The role of storytelling:** How do the characters use storytelling to share their memories, emotions, and aspirations? How do the stories of the past inform and inspire the present and the future? How does the play use multimedia elements, such as projections, sound effects, and music, to enhance the storytelling?

**The Jackson House as a safe haven:** How did the Jackson House provide a refuge and a community for Black travelers and musicians in a segregated and hostile society? What challenges and dangers did they face on the road? How did they use music to cope and express themselves?

**The influence of Blues and Gospel on popular music:** How did Blues and Gospel music originate from the experiences and traditions of Black people in the South? How did they evolve and spread to other regions and genres? What are some of the musical elements and styles that they introduced or influenced?

**The role of women in music history:** How did women like Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Sister Rosetta Tharpe break barriers and stereotypes in the male-dominated music industry? How did they use their voices and instruments to convey their emotions, passions, and struggles? How did they inspire and mentor other female artists?

**The connection between music and social movements:** How did music reflect and respond to the historical events and issues of the time, such as the Great Depression, the Civil Rights movement, and wars? How did music serve as a tool for protest, awareness, and solidarity? How did music shape the identity and culture of different groups of people?

## Classroom Activities

**Scat-It-Yourself:** As a class, watch a video of Duke Ellington and his band performing their classic “The A Train”. There is a good clip of it on YouTube under the ‘@morrisoncoursevids’ channel. Take note of how much of it is instrumental, with very few vocals. As you as a group become familiar with the tune, let individuals take a turn at ‘scatting’, or using various tones and nonsense syllables to improvise your own contributions to the tune. Don’t use actual words; think of each individual voice as a musical instrument.

**Music History:** Choose one of the famous musicians who spent time at the Jackson House. Research five interesting facts about your chosen musician, and find a video clip of them either singing, playing, or leading their band. Share your information and the video with your class. Discuss your thoughts about the style of music, the performance, and how that style of music might have influenced the music we listen to today.

**Artistic Personal Reflection:** The play shows how the characters struggle with their sense of identity and belonging, and how they find inspiration and connection through the music and the stories of the past. Reflect on your own experiences and think about things from your past that help you find inspiration and connection. It could be a family photo, stories from older family members, music, movies, the possibilities are endless. Journal, draw, or create a story or poem that represents one of these elements.