The announcement of the death, by accident, of James Weldon Johnson in the summer of 1938 came as a great shock to his personal friends of several races and was felt as an irremediable loss by many who never knew the man himself at all, but who had experienced his influence and inspiration. He was, I might say without any of that exaggeration which is considered permissible when one is speaking of the dead, a well-nigh perfect human being who had consecrated his whole existence to the elevation and celebration of the race to which he was proud to belong. He sought, in all quarters, towards a better understanding for that race.

by Carl Van Vechten

Like W. E. B. DuBois, James Weldon Johnson demonstrated his talents as a poet and songwriter, novelist, essayist, and interpreter of Spirituals, anthologist and interpreter of Negro poetry, consul to Nicaragua and Venezuela, diplomat, lawyer, teacher and professors. Engenia W. Collier has pointed out that "the change in the handling of folk material in poetry by Negro writers, from traditional dialect to an imitation of the idiom, is the most apparent in the work of James Weldon Johnson." In light of this, it may seem preferable to
discuss his important role as a bridge between the pre-Harlem Renaissance period and the Harlem Renaissance as a novelist, this article will focus on that role on the eve of the Harlem Renaissance.

He was born in Jacksonville, Florida on June 17, 1871 and was raised in a cultured family which moved from Nassau in the Bahamas to the mainland. His father was a self-educated headwaiter at The Royal Victoria Hotel, a resort hotel. Although his father had no formal education, he read Shakespeare and Plutarck for pleasure and knew Spanish as well as English. In his later life he became a preacher and was made pastor of “a very small church made up of very poor people.”

His mother was a teacher at the Stanton Public School for blacks. He says in Along This Way (1933), his autobiography, that “she was my first teacher and began my lessons in reading before ever I went to school.” “My mother was also my first music teacher. She had less than ordinary proficiency on the organ and piano, but she knew enough to give me and my brother a start.” Her character was “artistic mad more or less impractical” and in his father’s opinion she “had absolutely no sense about money.” She was a splendid singer and had a talent for drawing, though, and she was his first teacher as well as the first black woman of Public School teacher in Florida.

Johnson was educated at Atlanta University, from where he graduated in 1894. For seven years after graduation he was principal of the Stanton Public School in Jacksonville. Meanwhile he studied law. In 1897 he was the first black to be admitted to the bar in Florida. While living in Jacksonville he frequently made trips to New York to collaborate with his brother Rosamond Jackson on song writing, at which they proved very successful. His famous poem, “Lift Every
Voice and Sing", written for Stanton School's commemoration of Lincoln's birthday in 1900, set to music by his brother, became a sort of black national anthem during the early forties. In 1900 he moved to New York, and there, he formed a partnership which produced songs and plays with his brother Rosamond and his brother's partner Bob Cole. The Cole and Johnson Company became one of the best known entertainment groups of the decade. The company had its headquarters in the Marshall Hotel on Fifty-third Street, which later became the mecca of an industrious group of black artists and entertainers. The team produced "The Maiden with the Dreamy Eyes," "My Castle on the Nile," "Oh! Didn't He Ramble," "The Maid of Timbuctoo," and "Congo Love Song." In his spare time from 1903 to 1906 he undertook graduate study at Columbia University in English and drama, forming a close friendship with Brander Matthews.

In 1906 Johnson accept the post of the United States consul to Puelto Cabello in Venezuela. He remained there until 1909 when he was transferred to Corinto, Nicaragua, where he served until 1912. When he returned the United States for a while he married Grace Nail. His novel The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man was completed in Nicaragua and published anonymously in 1912.

In 1914 he left the public service and became an editorialist for The New York Age, one of the oldest black newspapers in New York. Then in 1916 he joined the NAACP and for many years was its executive secretary. Among his achievements with this organization are; sparking the drive behind the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill in 1921; leading the fight against the lily-white primary which made it illegal for blacks to be denied participation in southern primary elections, and so on. Meanwhile in 1917 he published a volume of his verse, Fifty years
and other Poems, American Negro Poetry (1922), the first anthology of black verse; The Book of American Negro Spirituals (1925), together with his brother Rosamond; The Second Books of Negro Spirituals (1926); God's Trombone (1927), a collection of seven folk sermons in verse; St. Peter Relates an Incident of the Resurrection (1930), an ironic poem on the unknown soldier; Black Manhattan (1930), the record of the blacks progress on the New York stage; Along This Way (1932), a formal autobiography (1933); and Negro American What Now? (1934).

At the end of 1930 he resigned his post as General Secretary of the NAACP and then with the request of Dr. Thomas Jones, President of Fisk University he became a professor. In 1934 he was a Visiting Professor at New York University. In the same year he was awarded the Spingarn Medal, “the most distinguished badge of merit that an American Negro may wear,” and the Hermon Award. Talledega College and Haward University conferred the degree of Litt. D. him.

He was killed in an accident when a train struck his car at railroad crossing near his summer home at Dark Harbor, Maine on June 26, 1938.

II

The relationship between James Weldon Johnson and Carl Van Vechten provides an important key to the revival of The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man in 1927 and to understanding the so-called controversy surrounding Nigger Heaven in 1926. Carl Van Vechten says he was introduced to James Weldon Johnson in 1924 through Walter White. After Van Vechten published Peter Whiffle (1922), he began become extremely interested in blacks. It was almost an addiction. Van Vechten met Walter White in connection with book The
Fire in the Flint (1924), through Alfred A. Knopf. At the same time Van Vechten was one of the major contributors to Knopf's new publishing company. Then White arranged for Van Vechten to meet James Weldon Johnson. Johnson and Van Vechten became "intimate friends almost immediately." Johnson and White "took Van Vechten to their first NAACP cabaret party, held at Happy Phone's (night club). This marked the beginning of their close association and of Van Vechten's close relation to black culture, association with black writers, poets and various black notables, and the Harlem Renaissance. The next year Van Vechten sent a letter to Johnson:

Dear Mr. Johnson,

I read through The Autobiography of an-Ex-Colored Man at one sitting, and Marinoff is engaged in reading it now. I shall, of course, return Mr. Nail's copy to you, but remember that I am looking for a copy for myself and that if you run into one you can do no better than present it to me! It is remarkable book in more ways than one, but in no way more so than in the gentle irony which informs the pages from beginning to end. You have everything there was to say and said it without passion. The book lacks, I think, sufficient narrative interest; the hero might have had more personal experiences, but after all you were chiefly concerned with presenting facts about Negro life in an agreeable form, through the eyes of a witness who had no reason personally to be particularly disturbed.

I was particularly interested to discover that you were apparently the first to sense the musical possibilities of ragtime and to predict for it a future as an art form. In reviewing [Alexander] Wooll-
cott's book about Irving Berlin for the New York Tribune. I have
founded the opportunity to give you credit for this."

By the end of 1925, Van Vechten had become the closest of friends
with Mr. and Mrs. Johnson and addressed them as; "Thank you—and
bless you. Perhaps the most important things to me of the past year
has been the growth of our intimacy. Christmas morning, 1925."
In February, 1926, Van Vechten reviewed Johnson's The Book of Ameri-
can Negro Spiritual under the title "Moanin' Wid A Sward In Ma
Han'" in Vanity Fair. The publication of Van Vechten's Nigger Heaven
in September 1926 aroused a raging storm of controversy and a
fierce battle over the novel was fought among blacks. James Weldon
Johnson was a leading advocate of Van Vechten's point of view.
When Johnson republished his The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored
Man with Alfred A. Knopf in 1927, Van Vechten wrote the introduc-
tion. When Arna Bontemps, who was one of Van Vechten's friends
at the time, wrote the introduction for the 1960 reprint by Hill and
Wang, Inc., he mentioned that "It was Carl Van Vechten who made a
point of calling The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man to the atten-
tion of a reading public that had only then become ready for it."
About Van Vechten, Johnson stated:

Carl Van Vechten had a warm interest in colored people before
he ever saw Harlem. In the early days of the Negro literary and
artistic movement, no one in the country did more to forward it
than he accomplished in frequent magazine articles and by his
many personal efforts in behalf of individual Negro writers and
artists. Indeed, his regard for Negroes as a race is so close to
being an affectionate one, that he is constantly joked about it by
his most intimate friends.19)

Van Vechten’s, Alfred A. Knopf’s and James Weldon Johnson’s
birthday fell on the same day of the same month and so they celeb-
rate together:

Mr. Van Vechten’s birthday, that of young Alfred Knopf, and
mine, fall on the same day on the same month. For four or five
years we have been celebrating them jointly, together with a
small group of friends. Last summer we celebrated at the country
place of the Knopfs.20)

Regarding their birthday party, Langston Hughes says of Van Vech-
ten:

For several pleasant years, he gave an annual birthday party for
James Weldon Johnson, young Alfred A. Knopf, Jr., and himself, for
their birthdays fall on the same day. At the last of these parties
the year before Mr. Johnson died, on the Van Vechten table there
were three cakes, one red, one white, and one blue—the colors of
our flag. They honored a Gentile, a Negro, and a Jew—friends
and fellow-Americans. But the differences of race did not occur
to me until days later, when I thought back about the three colors
and the three men.21)

However, Johnson’s death in 1938 terminated their close friendship.
Van Vechten describes his feeling on the death of his friend:
I feel a selfish grief over the death of James Weldon Johnson because one of my dearest friends has passed away, but, more than that, it is easy to realize that the world has lost one of its great men. Putting aside his work as an artist, which is very important, I think it can be said that no one ever has done more for interracial understanding (and when I say interracial I am referring to ALL races) than James Weldon Johnson. He had a genius for tactful decisions and on many occasions his mere presence has been sufficient to make new friends for his race. He was widely known from coast to coast in America and he will be missed and remembered as long as anyone in American history is missed and remembered.22)

Johnson's death shocked Van Vechten greatly23). He served as a pallbearer at the funeral soon after he planned a Johnson memorial. In 1924 he established the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of Negro Arts and Letters at Yale University, for the friend he loved so much.24)

III

The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man is a story in which a light-skinned black boy, who was born in a little town in Georgia a few years after the close the Civil War, grows up and passes into the white world. The hero, "I", is a mulatto with a black mother and a white father, one of the greatest men in the country with the best blood of the South. His school days are pleasant. His ability to paly
piano at school exercises is considered marvelous for someone his age. His mother encourages him in his studies by giving him many books to read. Although his shin color is ivory white and his mother insists, "you are not a nigger"; "you are as good as anybody; if anyone calls you a nigger, don’t notice them," he gradually realizes his heritage and his misgivings and fears deepen.

One day when he returned home, his mother all smiles saying that there is someone who wants to see him. He sees a tall, handsome, well-dressed gentleman of perhaps thirty-five. His mother tells him, "This is your father," but before he gets to know this man whom he has wanted to meet for such a long time, they have to part. After that he is able to see his father only once more. A couple of weeks later he receives a beautiful, brand-new, upright piano from him. The older he becomes, the more thought he gives to the question of his and his mother’s and relationship to his father and to society in general.

After working very hard for many years as a seamstress his mother can no longer continue to work. Because the expense of medicines, doctors, and someone to look after her, his college fund begins to diminish rapidly. In spite of all the care given her his mother dies. Because he is an excellent pianist, his music teacher suggests a concert tour. To ensure the success of his concert he raises about four hundred dollars in capital. He has a strong determination to go to college and he decides on Atlanta University. On the way to Atlanta, he meets one of the Pullman car porters, who is a student. In Atlanta they stay overnight at an apartment, and the next day when comes back from the university office he finds his money stolen and his friend gone. As a result he has to give up entering the uni-
versity. Another porter, who is kind-hearted, lends him fifteen dollars in addition to allowing him to travel in a Pullman porter's closet. He deeply appreciates the porter's kindness; however, in reality the porter is the one who has stolen all his money as revealed in later chapter.

He begins working at one of the cigar factories in Jacksonville. After he has been in the factory a little over a year, he studies Spanish under the tutelage of the Cuban workers and hires a piano to teach private piano lessons at home. Through his music teaching he becomes acquainted with the upper class blacks in Jacksonville.

Later he casts his lot with four friends bound for New York. For him, New York City is most fatally fascinating place in America. They stay in a lodging-house on Twenty-seventh Street, just west of Sixth Avenue. On the first night they go to a gambling house with New York friends. Luckily he wins more than two hundred dollars in less than three minutes. Then they all go to the "Club," where they enjoy drinking and rag-time music. In New York he works steadily for some weeks: however, he spends his earning between the "crap" game and the "club". This experience changes his life style completely and he almost becomes a gambler. Fortunately, through continually listening to the music at the "club" and through his own previous training, his natural talent and perseverance, he develops into a remarkable player of rag-time, the best rag-time-player in New York at that time.

One night he is asked to play piano at a party given by a white millionaire. The millionaire then becomes his patron. He goes to France with his patron and, while there goes sightseeing, to the Opera and so on. At the opera house, he sees his father and sister. In shock, without saying any thing to them he stumbles out of the
theater. When his benefactor tires of Paris, they go to England, which he thinks is ugly a place as man can contrive to make. After a stay of six or eight weeks they go over to Holland, and Germany. By that time he is tired of such a life. In spite of his patron's advice he decides to go back again to the United States and the terrible handicaps as a black. He travels to Washington with a new friend, whom he made on the ship and continues to travel to Richmond and Nashville with letter of introduction from his friend. During his travels he gathers material for work, jotting down in his notebook themes and melodies, and in attempt to catch the spirit of the "black". "Big meeting", an institution something like a campmeeting impresses him greatly because of the powerful preacher and the wonderful chorus director. One night while staying in a boarding house with black school teacher, he hears the sound of hurrying footsteps and the gallop of a horse in the silence of the night. He goes out and following the sound reaches a railroad station where he witnesses a lynching scene: the poor victim's hands are behind him, ropes tied around his body are fastened to the saddle horns of his double guard. He is then fastened to a railroad tie, which is sunk into the ground, with a chain. Then he is burned.

That incident shocks, humiliates and shames him. He is ashamed that he belongs to a race that can be dealt within such a manner. On the way back to New York he finally makes up his mind that he will neither disclaim the black race nor claim the white race; but that he will change his name, grow a mustache, and let the world take him for what it will. Although he knows that passing as a white in this way is shameful, he feels compelled to do so in order to live without humiliation and cruelty.
He enters a business college, which forces him to cut down on his expenses, and then gets a job as clerk in a downtown wholesale house. He saves a considerable amount of money and invests it in New York real estate. He becomes the owner and part-owner of several apartment houses and begins to mingle in the social circles of the men with whom he does business. Then he meets a very beautiful white woman at a musical. Overcoming several difficult obstacles, he, at last, marries her and has two children, a girl and a boy. They spend happy days together; however, their happy life is terminated by her sudden death. After her death he feels that he have chosen “the lesser part and that he has sold his birthright for a mess of pottage.”

IV

James Weldon Johnson published *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* in 1912, but he had written the first draft in the spring of 1905 before he left Columbia University. He reminisced in his real autobiography:

Before I left I talked with Professor Matthews about my more serious work, and showed him the draft of the first two chapters of a book which, I said to him, I proposed to call *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. He read the manuscript and told me he liked the idea and the proposed title, and that I was wise in writing about the thing I knew best.

In 1906 he went to Puerto Cabello, Venezuela as the United States Consul and there he again began earnest work on the novel. He stated:
The story developed in my mind more rapidly than I had expected that it would; at times, outrunning my speed in getting it down. The use of prose as a creative medium was new to me; and its latitude, its flexibility, its comprehensiveness, the variety of approaches it afforded for surmounting technical difficulties gave me a feeling of exhilaration similar to that which goes with freedom of motion. I turned over in my mind again and again my original idea of making the book anonymous. I also debated with myself the aptness of The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man as a title... but my brother had thought it was clumsy and too long; he had suggested The Chameleon. In the end, I struck to the original idea of issuing the book without the author's name, and kept the title that had appealed to me first."

Following his first intuition he published the book without the author's name. Naturally, this aroused various conjectures and speculations concerning the author's identity although the books sales were not good. He says about the situation at that time:

But I did get a certain pleasure out of anonymity, that no acknowledged book could have given me. The authorship of the book excited the curiosity of literate colored people, and there was speculation among them as to who the writer might be—to every such group some colored man who had married white, and so coincided with the main point on which the story turned, is known. I had the experience of listening to some of these discussions. I had a rarer experience, that of being introduced to and talking
with one man who tacitly admitted to those present that he was
the author of the book. Only two or three people knew that I
was the writer of the story—the publishers themselves never knew
me personally; yet the fact gradually leaked out and spread. The
first printed statement was made by George A. Towns, my class-
mate at Atlanta University, who wrote a piece in which he gave
his reasons for thinking I was the man. When the book was
republished, I affixed my name to it, and Carl Van Vechten was
good enough to write an Introduction, and in it to inform the
reader that the story was not the story of my life. Nevertheless,
I continue to receive letters from persons who have read the book
inquiring about this or that phrase of my life as told in it. That
is, probably, one of the reasons why I am writing the present
book.29)

So he had to write his real autobiography, Along This Way in 1933.
Regarding the source of the novel, Eugene Levy suggested that “al-
though none of the major events which befall the narrative’s hero
actually occurred in Johnson’s life, his friends provided certain raw
material. The most significant of these friends was his boyhood com-
ppanion and former law partner, J. Douglass Wetmore, who had passed
as a white man on number of occasions.”33) In any case, Carl Van
Vechten mentions, “The autobiography, of course, in the matter of
specific incident, has little enough to do with Mr. Johnson’s own life.”
However, “it is imbued with his own personality and feeling, his views
on the subjects discussed, so that to a person who has no previous
knowledge of the author’s own history, it reads like real autobio-
graphy.”31) (To be continued.)
NOTES


3) His other publication:
   Poetry... Fifty Years and Other Poems (Boston, 1917), St. Peter Relates an Incident (N. Y., private ed., 1930; trade ed., 1935).


5) Ibid., p. 12.


7) Ibid., p. 11.

8) Carl Van Vechten... (music critic, writer, photographer, 1880-1964) He was born in Ceder Rapids, Iowa, on June 17. He received a Bachelor of Philosophy degree at the University of Chicago. After working for the United Press, Chicago American, and Chicago Inter-Ocean, he moved to New York and then worked for the New York Times as an assistant music critic. From 1913 he began to associate with Mabel Dodge Luhan, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, H. L. Menken and Joseph Hergesheimer. In the same year he published Music After the Great War, an essay on musical criticism; in 1916. Music and Bad Manners; in 1917, Interpreters and Interpretation, essay on art; The Merry-Go-Round, essay on dance, comic opera, etc., ; Music of Spain, in 1919; In the Garret in 1920; The Tiger in the House, on the history and character of cats; in 1921 Lord of the Housetops, collected and edited cat tales, from 1922 to 1930 as a novelist he published Peter Whiffle (1922), The Blind Bow-Boy (1923), The Tattooed Countess (1924), Firecrackers
(1925), *Nigger Heaven* (1926), *Spider Boy* (1928), and *Parties* (1930). During the time he associated with and had close friendships with many black notables. Among them there are Walter White, James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Wallace Thurman, Bessie Smith, Bert Williams and so on. In 1932 he became a photographer and left many valuable photographs of black notables. The backs who sat for him included: Langston Hughes, Bessie Smith, Countee Cullen, Joe Louis, Walter White, Chester Himes, Richard Wright, Marian Anderson, Ann Petry, Ralph Bunche, James Baldwin, W. E. B. DuBois and so on. Moreover, he contributed widely to black culture. (See *Carl Van Vechten: His Role in the Harlem Renaissance* by Hisao Kishimoto, Seibido, Tokyo, 1983).

Other publications: *Red*, essay on music in 1925; *Exacavation*, essay on music in 1926; *Feathers*, cat tales in 1930; *Sacred and Profane Memories*, a complication of earlier essays in 1932.

9) See *Carl Van Vechten*, Hisao Kishimoto (Tokyo Seibido, 1983), p. 33. (hereafter referred to as CVV. HK)

10) Bruce Kellner, *op. cit.*, p. 117.


12) Carl Van Vechten's wife. See CVV. HK, pp. 6-9.

13) John E. Nail (1883-1947)

According to Bruce Kellner. Nail was “brought up in New York City and was a friend of James Weldon Johnson and other members of the black cultural and business elite.” Johnson married Nail’s sister. “Nail was successful as well as popular. He was the first president of the Negro Board of trade in Harlem, the first black elected to the Real Estate Board of New York, a member of the Mayor’s Housing Committee, and vice-president of the Republican Business Men’s Club of New York City, an exclusive and predominantly white organization. He was also active in support of the National Urban League.” (Bruce Kellner. ed., *The Harlem Renaissance*, Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut. 1984) p. 258.


16) See CVV. HK, pp. 73-93.


19) *Along This Way*, op. cit., p. 382.
23) See CVV HK, p. 100.
27) *Along This Way*, op. cit., p. 193.