



# HORNE SOLO

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PHOTOGRAPH FOR COLLIER'S  
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Lena Horne has a great voice, a fair voice, the voice of a screech owl—you can take your choice. On her, it looks good

**N**O MATTER what else may be said about Hollywood, it must be given credit for insanity.

This has been aptly illustrated by the success of a young Negro singer known as Lena Horne. Nothing more spectacular has been known in Hollywood since the Rudolph Valentino funeral. When seen at a small night club upon arrival in town, Miss Horne was an unknown girl who sang very simple songs in an engaging way. Men of international renown came and leaned their elbows on tables and gazed at her with the enraptured looks of sailors bewitched by mermaids.

"That is the greatest voice since—uh—

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since Tetrizzini," cried one great producer in an awed whisper.

"What charm, what grace, what beauty!" sighed another, blowing his nose hard to keep back the tears.

A local journalist wrote of Miss Horne in terms that had hitherto been reserved for Madame Récamier and Theda Bara. He spoke of Bernhardt and Clara Bow. He urged them rather sharply to move over and make room for their superior.

In the very nature of things, such adulation could lead only to lucrative servitude in one of the cinema's concentration camps and in due course Miss Horne was bound over for a period of seven years to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. They rewarded her rather evilly for such surrender of her poverty by casting her in Panama Hattie, which will run well up in competition with any collection of the screen's worst bores.

Her contribution to this shambles consisted entirely in providing short cinematic intervals in which members of the audience could crawl out from under their seats without danger of asphyxiation. The result was that she was starred in the motion-picture version of Cabin In the Sky, a film which it is hoped will break down the superstition that audiences will not pay to see pictures with an all-Negro cast.

### Difference of Opinion

About her singing, there is a difference of opinion. One group stoutly maintains that she is a reincarnation of Adelina Patti; the other merely waves a desperate hand like a man who has fallen in a rain barrel and fears he will not come up again. Lena Horne herself belongs to the latter school. In her case it is not modesty; it is fear.

"There's no use you trying to fool me," she says in a trembling voice and with a look over her shoulder which implies that she is being stalked. "Some day they're going to find *out*."

The truth is that she is an acceptable singer and an artist at projecting a song. The delicate weaving of her hands, the appealing earnestness of her voice and the general air of being somebody who is worthy of support have made her a sensation. The French have a word for this and the word is *diseuse*. In general it is used out of respect for one who is paid very large money for having charm and technical proficiency instead of a voice.

Like almost all female motion-picture stars, Lena Horne comes of a divided family. Her parents were divorced when she was a child, and she either moved about as an appendage to her mother's modest stage career or lived precariously in the families of various relatives.

When she was sixteen she was in the chorus at the famous Cotton Club in Harlem, getting that job through her mother who was then playing in stock at the old

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Lafayette Theater on Lenox Avenue. In addition to the performances at the club, the show was booked into theaters, and Miss Horne often did five other performances a day for the same salary, \$25 a week.

"There was no night-club union in those days," she explains; "but we put on a strike of our own; got it up to \$35 a week."

In the small hours of the morning when the waiters were yawning around waiting for the drunks to go home, they let Lena do some of the songs. She was the kid of the outfit and the worst singer, and it was hoped the patrons would have enough sense to get out before the music killed them. She had a shrill, piping voice that tended to burp when pressed, and she squeezed it regularly. However, she learned to use a mike and to face an audience and she picked up some tricks about phrasing. Two years later Sissle hired her as soloist with his band.

### **Hasty Marriage, Then Heartaches**

When they reached Pittsburgh, Mamma Horne was still there guarding Lena, who up to this time had enjoyed a romantic life approximately as torrid as that of a crustacean and in consequence was fair game for the first personable male who approached. This happened to be Louis J. Jones of that murky city and the marriage ensued almost immediately. From that circumstance came two children (Gail, 4; Teddy, 2), several long-sustained heartaches and an eventual divorce.

The divorce brought her back to New York and she was sitting in a movie house in Harlem easing her sorrow when a friend rushed in to say that Charley Barnet was rehearsing at the Apollo and needed a singer and why didn't she go after it? She did, and for a time was more or less satisfactorily employed.

In 1940, times were tough again when Barney Josephson took the excellent advice of John Hammond (who has discovered more Negro stars than any other human) and booked Lena into Café Society Downtown. Her name up to then had been Helena Horne, but Barney ruthlessly dropped the added letters. He also taught her a great deal about using her personality in her songs.

"The voice, Lena, is—" he wiggled his hands and creased his brow in distress.

She was there for six months, had a radio program on the side and finally fell for somebody who said she would be great in one of the Hollywood clubs. Her style was just about set—no thrilling high notes, no fake diminuendos, no tricks. She didn't sing hot, she didn't sing the blues, she sang the old songs very simply.

The Hollywood venture had all the earmarks of a major defeat at first, because

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the night club she was to overwhelm never managed to open. However, there was a smaller undertaking known as the Little Troc, where she appeared all atremble and bowled over the gentry as mentioned above. The town went so blithering mad about her that she was crowned queen of something or other overnight.

On the personal side, she is a soft-spoken, pleasant and intelligent girl. She lives in a small house cater-cornered across from Humphrey Bogart's and next door to Peter Lorre's, and there is considerable gossiping across back fences and yoo-hooing through open windows.

Her handling of Hollywood wolves has set a standard for all young ladies. She receives their attentions graciously, and assures them that she will be very happy to accompany them on an evening out.

"Come up to the house and meet the children and my mother," she says kindly.

This discourages wolves so inordinately that they invariably remember a previous engagement.

But Hollywood will accept no back talk about Lena, regardless. If you suggest that she may be something less than monumental, they give you a hard stare.

"Maybe you suffer from being nuts,"

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# Collier's

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