

Ethel Waters Is Dead at 80: Ethel Waters, Singer and Actress On Stage and Screen, Dies at 80

By C. GERALD FRASER

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By C. GERALD FRASER

Ethel Waters, the singer and actress whose talents took her from honky-tonk night spots to Broadway, into motion pictures and on to radio and television, died yesterday, apparently of kidney and heart failure. She was 80 years old and lived in Chatsworth, Calif., with friends in whose home she died.

Miss Waters was at the head of the long line of black entertainers who achieved recognition, fame, money and success in show business. She triumphed on sheer ability and versatility as a singer and actress. She sang the "St. Louis Blues" when it was a new song. She also made famous both herself and such songs as "Dinah," "Takin' a Chance on Love," "Cabin in the Sky," "Stormy Weather" and "Am I Blue."

Miss Waters performed in more than

a dozen Broadway productions, starting with "Africana," in 1927 and ending with "Evening With Ethel Waters" in 1959. Her most notable stage role was as Berenice Sadie Brown in "Member of the Wedding" in 1950, a role she repeated in the film.

Miss Waters appeared in nine motion pictures in all, the first of which was the musical "On With the Show" in 1929, and the last "The Sound and Fury" in 1959. She received an Academy Award nomination for her dramatic performance in "Pinky" in 1949.

In the late 1950's Miss Waters first appeared at the Rev. Billy Graham's evangelistic meetings. She then began regular participation in the Graham "crusades," often singing the hymn her grandmother

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had taught her, "His Eye Is on the Sparrow," which was also the title of her best-selling autobiography.

Lines from the hymn said:

*"Why should I feel discouraged  
Why should the shadows come  
Why should my heart be lonely  
And long for heaven and home  
When Jesus is my portion  
My constant friend is He  
His eye is on the sparrow  
And I know He watches me."*

There were, however, reasons for Miss Waters to be discouraged. "I was never a child," she said on the first page of her autobiography. "I never felt I belonged. I was always an outsider. I was born out of wedlock."

Her career, although it moved along in a normal show-business fashion, was essentially cyclical.

On New Year's Day in 1949, for example, she later remembered that she fingered her Bible and paused at the 70th Psalm: "But I am poor and needy, make haste unto me O Lord."

But she could also say that soon afterward she got the role of grandmother in "Pinky," a movie about a young black woman who passed for white.

## Had Tax Trouble

She had reportedly earned more than a million dollars, but in 1957 she was in trouble with the Internal Revenue Service for not paying taxes. "Where I come from," she once told an interviewer, "people don't get close enough to money to keep a working acquaintance with it. So I don't know how to keep it."

Her roots were certainly in poverty. She was born in Chester, Pa., on Halloween, 1896. ("Not 1900 as reported in my previous book, but 1896," she wrote in "To Me It's Wonderful," written in 1972 and dedicated "To my precious child Billy Graham and my entire Team family.")

"I was a real Dead End kid," she said. She stole food to keep from going hungry and was working as a \$4.75-a-week chambermaid in a small Philadelphia hotel when she first hit the stage.

After an amateur-night appearance in Philadelphia, Miss Waters got a job singing and dancing in Baltimore that netted her \$9 a week—two of her friends weekly skimmed \$16 for getting her the job. She then made appearances at a host of small-time nightclubs, many of them on the black Theater Owners Booking Association circuit.

By now she was billed as "Sweet Mama Stringbean," and was earning a reputation for singing "St. Louis Blues."

"I sang them out of the depths of the private fire in which I was brought up," she said later. "Only those who are being burned know what fire is like."

Coming to Harlem, she found work at some of the night clubs that gave that community its lively, jazzy 1920's aura. She performed at Edmond's Cellar and the Cotton Club. In 1924, she substituted for Florence Mills, a black singing idol of the 1920's, on Broadway at Sam Salvin's Plantation Club.

Later, at the Cotton Club, Irving Berlin heard her sing "Stormy Weather" and signed her for "As Thousands Cheer," her first Broadway triumph, in 1933. She was featured in a cast of such Broadway luminaries as Clifton Webb, Marilyn Miller and Helen Broderick, and sang three of Mr. Berlin's most enduring songs—"Heat Wave," "Harlem on My Mind," and "Supper Time," a lament by a Southern black woman whose husband has been lynched—"That man of mine ain't comin' home no more."

She had, however, already been a Broadway star. In 1927, her performance in "Africana," an all-black musical revue, led a critic to write: "This week's Negro invasion of the New York theater began auspiciously with the presentation of a black-and-tan frolic in which Ethel Waters is starred. Miss Waters is a comedienne and one of considerable talents. She is expert in the effortless re-tailing of a slightly 'blue' song."

Her next Broadway appearance was in "Vaudeville" in 1927, followed by "Lew Leslie's Blackbirds of 1930" and "Rhapsody in Black" in 1931. After "As Thousands Cheer," she performed in 1935 in "At Home Abroad," a revue with Beatrice Lillie.

Brooks Atkinson, the critic, said of Miss Waters:

*"A few words in praise of Ethel Waters, the gleaming tower of dusky regality, who knows how to make a song stand on tiptoe."*

Her next Broadway appearance was in 1939 in her first dramatic role, as Hagar in "Mamba's Daughters," the story of a grandmother and mother who rise nobly to the occasion of a talented daughter in the third generation. This time, Mr. Atkinson's feeling were mixed. He said that she gave the play "a sturdy quality" but that she had a "limp, plodding style." The production was short-lived.

A year later, and back to a musical, "Cabin in the Sky," Miss Waters won unstinted praise and a long run as Petunia Jackson, singing such songs by Vernon Duke as the title song and "Takin' a Chance on Love."

Miss Waters achieved her greatest heights in the American theater in 1950, playing the dramatic role of a maid in a Southern household in Carson McCullers's "The Member of the Wedding." The play, directed by Harold Clurman, brought renown to Julie Harris and Brandon De Wilde. Miss Waters was nominated for an Academy Award for the same role in the film in 1952.

Brooks Atkinson wrote: "As the Negro



Bob Galby

Ethel Waters with Julie Harris and Brandon De Wilde in the stage version of "The Member of the Wedding." The performance was in 1950.

sing decent things, but they wouldn't let me. They didn't even know I could."

She hated to sing, she said. "I do it for a living. I'd rather act." She explained her acting style by saying: "I have no acting technique. I act instinctively. That's why I can't play any role that isn't based on something in my life."

In the last two decades of her life, her religious spirit came to the fore more and more. She was brought up as a Roman Catholic, but said that she was a Baptist, a Methodist, "everything that's help to people."

Through the Billy Graham crusades she rededicated herself to Jesus. Life was never very easy. She was diabetic and often immensely overweight, even though she was essentially a big woman. At one time she weighed 350 pounds; at 64 years of age she weighed 236.

She sang at worship service at the White House in 1971, during Richard M. Nixon's Presidential term, and attended the wedding there of his daughter Tricia.

Miss Waters was married twice, once in 1914, to Merritt Purnsley, and later to Edward Mallory.



Brown Brothers

Miss Waters with Hamtree Harrington in the play "As Thousands Cheer"