



Heath, Gordon (1918-1991)

by Linda Rapp

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African-American actor, director, and folk-singer Gordon Heath became a fixture on the Parisian cabaret scene from 1949 until 1976. After an early success on Broadway in the play *Deep Are the Roots* (1945), he went to Europe, where he spent most of the rest of his life. He settled in Paris, where he and his partner Lee Payant owned and entertained at a Left Bank nightclub. Heath performed in theater, film, television, and radio productions and also recorded several albums of folk music.

Heath's father, Cyril Gordon Heath, emigrated from Barbados to the United States. He settled in New York City, where he married Hattie Hooper. Gordon Heath, born September 20, 1918, was the couple's only child.

Heath's musical education began at age eight, when an aunt gave him violin lessons. He studied other instruments as well, but was most drawn to the guitar, finding it "friendly and sympathetic . . . to the touch."

As a youngster Heath also showed a talent for drawing, winning prizes for both art and music in high school. He began performing in amateur theater groups and took first prize in a municipal drama competition.

Heath earned scholarships to two music schools and briefly attended the Dalcroze Institute but decided to pursue an acting career instead. He worked on stage and in radio. When he joined radio station WMCA (New York) in 1945, he became the first black staff announcer at a major radio station in America.

In 1945 Heath scored a major success on Broadway in the play *Deep Are the Roots* by Arnaud d'Assue and James Gow. Heath starred as a military hero facing racism when he returns to the deep South after World War II and falls in love with one of the daughters in a wealthy family for whom his mother works as a housekeeper. Heath's electrifying performance won praise from the critics.

When the play closed on Broadway after a fourteen-month run, Heath went to London and reprised his role in a West-End production, again receiving critical acclaim.

When the run there ended, Heath decided not to return to America. In 1948 he settled in Paris, which he considered more hospitable to blacks and more accepting of his relationship with his white lover, Lee Payant, a fellow actor whom he had met in New York in the early 1940s. Like many other American expatriates fleeing racism and homophobia, Heath found a haven in cosmopolitan Paris.

In 1949 Heath and Payant became co-owners of a Paris club called L'Abbaye, so named because it was behind the abbey church of St Germain des Prés. For nearly thirty years the two entertained appreciative audiences, playing guitar and singing duets of American and French folk songs.

In 1957 Elektra Records released an album of their duets, *An Evening at L'Abbaye*, comprising seventeen songs, five of them in French. Heath and Payant also recorded an album entitled *French Canadian Folk Songs* in 1954, and the same year Heath had a self-titled solo album.

Even after acquiring L'Abbaye, Heath continued to act. He toured in Britain in 1950 as the title character in Shakespeare's *Othello*, a role that he repeated in Tony Richardson's 1955 version of the play on BBC.

Heath appeared in other British television productions, again playing the lead in *Deep Are the Roots* in 1950. He starred in Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* in 1953, and appeared in a television adaptation of Alan Paton's novel *Cry, the Beloved Country* in 1958.

Despite the positive reception of his performances on stage and television, Heath did not receive offers for major parts in movies. He narrated John Halas and Joy Batchelor's animated film of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* in 1956, and contributed supporting roles in a number of movies, including *Les héros sont fatigués* (1955, directed by Yves Ciampi), *The Madwoman of Chailot* (1969, directed by Bryan Forbes), and *L'Africain* (1983, directed by Philippe de Broca). He and Payant also dubbed many films.

In the 1960s Heath turned his talents to directing, working for a decade with the Studio Theater of Paris, an English-language company that staged plays by Thornton Wilder, Arthur Miller, and Bertolt Brecht, among others. Payant acted in many of the plays.

In December 1976 Payant died of cancer at age fifty-two. Devastated by his loss, Heath could not bear continuing to work at L'Abbaye alone. He returned to the United States, where he spent five years doing some acting and directing.

Eventually, however, he decided to go back to France, and there he found a new partner, Alain Woisson.

Heath died in Paris on August 28, 1991, of an AIDS-related illness

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About the Author

Linda Rapp teaches French and Spanish at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She freelances as a writer, tutor, and translator. She is Assistant to the General Editor of www.glbtq.com.