



Waters, Ethel (1896-1977)

by Tina Gianoulis

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Ethel Waters is perhaps best remembered for the depth and acuity she brought to her fat "mammy" roles in plays and films such as Carson McCullers's *Member of the Wedding* (1950, 1952) and television shows such as *Beulah* (1950), in the title role of which she replaced the redoubtable Hattie McDaniel. However, Waters had a long, varied, and colorful career.

She began as "Sweet Mama Stringbean," a slender and glamorous blues singer, whose technical and emotional agility made her one of the major stars of the Harlem nightclubs of the 1920s.

Her ability to infuse dramatic meaning and intensity into her music made her a natural in musical theater as well, and for a time in the 1930s she was the highest paid performer on Broadway, winning rave reviews for her roles in such plays as *Blackbirds* (1930) and *Mamba's Daughters* (1938).

She earned an Academy Award nomination for her supporting performance in the film *Pinky* (1949) and a New York Drama Critics' Circle Award as Best Actress of 1950 for her luminous performance on Broadway as the maid in *Member of the Wedding*, a role she reprised on film to further acclaim two years later.

Waters climbed to stardom from a childhood of crushing deprivation. Born on October 31, 1896 in Chester, Pennsylvania, the daughter of a twelve-year-old rape victim, Waters herself was married to her first husband by the age of twelve and divorced by fourteen.

In her autobiography, *His Eye Is on the Sparrow* (1950), she described her rough upbringing: "I never was a child . . . I just ran wild as a little girl. I was bad, always a leader of the street gang in stealing and general hell-raising. By the time I was seven I knew all about sex and life in the raw. I could out-curse any stevedore and took a sadistic pleasure in shocking people."

As a teenager, while working as a chambermaid in a Philadelphia hotel, Waters gathered her courage one Halloween and sang for the first time on a nightclub stage--behind a mask. Heartened by her success, she began to sing professionally in Philadelphia and Baltimore. Then she moved to New York to join the dynamic explosion of African-American creativity that was the Harlem Renaissance.

Singing such trademark blues songs as "Dinah," "Heat Wave," and "Stormy Weather," Waters quickly became a star in the Harlem clubs, and she also traveled a nightclub circuit from Chicago to St. Louis and throughout the South.

Marked by a vitality that gloried not only in black artistic achievement but also in black identity, the Harlem Renaissance also celebrated sexuality with a remarkable lack of judgmentalism. Like most blues singers of the time, Waters sang her share of raunchy, openly suggestive songs such as "Organ Grinder Blues"



Ethel Waters in *As Thousands Cheer* (top, 1933) and in *The Member of the Wedding* (above, 1950).

and "Do What You Did Last Night."

And, like many other women blues singers of the day, such as Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, and Alberta Hunter, she was known to have sexual relationships with other women.

Although she was not as open as Rainey about her same-sex relationships, Waters had at least one quite public affair with a dancer named Ethel Williams, with whom she flirted from the stage and had notorious lovers' spats. She is also rumored to have had a brief liaison with British novelist Radclyffe Hall, whom she mentions in her autobiography.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Waters was able to remake herself as an actress. She first appeared in several Broadway revues, then gradually garnered non-singing dramatic roles on both stage and screen.

During her later years, Waters considerably toned down her "red hot mama" image and redefined herself as an evangelical Christian. Her last performances were as a member of Billy Graham's crusade. She died on September 1, 1977.

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Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.