Ethel Waters

(Continued from Page 17)

ted" by Carl Van Vechten, who achieved note writing "Nigger Heaven" the first novel of consequence on Harlem's social life. Carl's wife, the Russian actress Fania Marinof shared that friendship. When Miss Waters scored a block busting success on Broadway, the Van Vechtens presented her a magnificent pair of jade pendant earrings. For years, they were a Waters' "trade mark." That friendship ripened, expanding to include others of similar tastes. Miss Waters never sought friends outside her own folk, yet she had an army of white admirers not counting her agent, her lawyer and adviser and a number of lesser lights from leaner days.

That year, Florence Mills, the reigning black star and a headliner at Broadway's top rated "Plantation Club" decided to go on the road for a change. The management at the "Plantation" called in Ethel to headline the show. A new song was written especially for her. It was "Dinah," a sensational hit. Owner Sam Selvin was reluctant to release Miss Waters when Miss Mills returned, but Ethel graciously bowed out saying the spot belonged to Miss Mills.

Both were extremely talented and practically the same age — Florence was a year older — yet both were very different performers. Neither used microphone to get their songs over — they were unknown — as were the electronics now used to "make" stars.

Their paths crossed again in 1926. The revue "Blackbirds of 1926" starring Florence Mills came to Harlem, playing the Keith Alhambra Theater at 126th and Seventh for a "shake down" run. That run became a stay of three months, playing to packed houses, far beyond producer Lew Lewlies' biggest dreams. Then, it took off to Europe. Ethel then brought her revue to Frank Schiffman's Lafayette Theater — five blocks away, later opening downtown at Daly's 63rd Street theater, where a number of black musicals got started. Ethel's revue was "Africana," and it opened in 1927. At the time, black shows weren't welcome in the better Broadway theaters, only Florence Mills' "Dixie to Broadway" had cracked the barrier. Most black shows went twenty one blocks north where the former vaudeville house was empty and accepted any rent paying tenant. Both "Blackbirds" and "Africana" were revues, a new form of entertainment. Blacks had become accustomed to musicals which had some kind of a plot with leading men, "heavies" and "juveniles," leading ladies and "soubrettes" and "ingenues" titles which vanished long ago in the theater. The new revues were without plots, a single star carrying the load. The rest was a collection of separate unrelated vaudeville acts tied together with a chorus of high kicking "ponies" as the gals were called. Frequently, the chorus gave better performances than the rest of the company. Josephine Baker got her start cutting up monkeyshines as an "end" gal in a chorus line.

Despite many road blocks along the way, Ethel went on to the top — the highest paid black performer on Broadway — and she topped Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, whose white manager Marty Forkins never shaved his price $1500 a week and that was money. Even the fabulous "Cotton Club" had a rep for slave wages — the hard working chorus gals got all of $25.00 a week for doing three shows a night, seven nights a week with no extra pay if the management booked the show into a vaudeville house

Ethel Waters with Johnny Carson in a television special — "Sun City Scandals"

— which is what one gal wrote.

Ethel invested some of her earnings in a home for the "family." Besides, she did other unreported charitable acts, like the case of Pearl Wright her accompanist for years. Pearl was stricken with a fatal illness and Ethel kept her on the payroll at full pay the many months the pianist was unable to work. Her generosity reached out to others not even close to her.

One report is that Miss Waters died broke. She may have been penniless, but she was rich in memories and friends — which money cannot buy.

Last time I heard Ethel in person was when she sang her "theme song" "His Eye is on the Sparrow" at the funeral of a mutual friend, Harlem's beloved eccentric, George Woods — who ran Harlem's "Red Rooster." Richmond-born George Woods was Ethels' kind of people and in his funeral eulogy, the "Hustlers preacher" the Rev. Mr. Monroe a former assistant at Adam Powell's Abyssinian Baptist Church, explained it all to the overflow crowd of every social strata that makes Harlem. That was in 1955, even then, the fading Ethel manipulated her magnificent "pipes" like a skilled organist.

That's not the Ethel I remember best.

That was the Ethel of 1925.

That spring, the vaudeville actors planned a big contribution to the building fund of the Cathedral of St. John Divine, you know the big Protestant Episcopal cathedral way up the hill at 110th Street, looking down on Harlem. To raise the money, it was decided to present a "midnight benefit concert" at the Palace Theater. Every top act in vaudeville scrambled to get on that bill. Since Ethel was a top artist, the committee sent her a special invitation to perform. She accepted. The directors decided that she would close the long show. That spring night, twenty-two of vaudeville's greatest went

Despite roadblocks all along the way, Ethel went to the top on Broadway to become the highest paid of her day

Ethel Waters

on ahead of Ethel. It was nearing three o'clock when her act was announced. The crowd was getting restive but the Waters name was magic. The audience settled down in anticipation. Then, the usual fanfare by the orchestra, the heavy curtain rose.

On stage, dead center, was a grand piano at which the pianist, the incomparable impeccable Reggie Bean, sat waiting the star. Apparently nervous, as he kept glancing at his wrist watch. A minute an hour long it seemed, of graveyard silence . . . then Reggie turned to the befuddled audience . . .

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, "Miss Ethel Waters was scheduled to appear in this closing act, but she hasn't been seen or heard from, we ask your indulgence . . .

A rustle and bustle across the stage interrupted him.

"Yes," he turned to the source of the noise, "may I help you . . . we were expecting Miss Ethel Waters. Who are you?"

A tall, brown skinned woman, in a worn sweater and a gingham apron answered, sarcastically in Harlemeese.

"Well, I ain't Sophie Tucker."

The audience tittered.

She walked slowly over to the piano, took a position and announced, "I'm ready."

Bean went to work immediately and on cue Ethel came in, no popular song for which she was famous, but the highly emotional Hebrew lament, "Eli, Eli," (pronounced A-lee, a-lee) singing the lament with all the proper inflections and gestures.

Ethel knew full well what she was singing — a Jewish friend and neighbor in her old stamping grounds had taught it to her, explaining its meaning . . . the rest was up to Ethel and you'd better believe, she knew how to project that song most effectively to her audience of which, the majority surely was not Protestant. And it listened in stunned, respectful silence. Heck, I didn't know a damned word Ethel was singing, neither did my girl friend, New York born and bred. When the song ended, Miss Waters stood, bowed in reverence. Slowly, she looked up at the audience, a patented Waters smile lighting up her face. The silence was murder — then it was shattered with thunderous applause that shook the old theater, quite accustomed to applause — but none like this. There was heavy foot stomping before the jam packed theater rose to its feet shouting its pleased approval. They couldn't believe it even if they had heard it — a black woman singing a cherished Hebrew traditional number in its original tongue. Once again, Miss Waters dropped her head acknowledging the tribute, only this time, when she looked up, tears were mixed with that wonderful smile. It had been a magnificent performance by a magnificent performer, Ethel Waters at her very best.

One final bow.

Then, the curtain.

The orchestra on cue whipped into the usual closing number, the reluctant audience moved slowly to the exits into the long familiar lobby then out to Broadway-quiet, almost deserted.

I heard Ethel Waters perhaps fifty or more times after that event — uptown (where she could let her hair down and did) downtown (where some white folk just didn't get her style of comedy and humor) — I heard she was deeply religious — I heard she was hell-on-wheels — no matter, she was a human being wasn't she? And after that midnight performance at the Palace — that was the Ethel Waters I always remembered. .....

Ethel Waters in 1940 singing pose

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