

ALBERTA HUNTER

1895 – 1984

“Woman of the World”

All Alberta Hunter wanted from life was to make \$6 a week singing in Chicago. Tiny, homely and dirt poor at 14, she took advantage of a free train ticket from Memphis to Chicago, knowing no one there except the daughter of her mother’s friend for whom she had no address. Her indomitable spirit, which would lead her to become an international star, shattering race, gender and age barriers her entire life, carried her fearlessly forward on that train.

By some fortunate twist of fate, she got off the streetcar right in front of the building in which her one Chicago contact, Ellen Winston, lived. Ellen secured her a job peeling potatoes in a boarding house and a place to sleep. But sleep wasn’t what young Alberta was after: night after night she’d prowl the streets trying to gain entry into anywhere the music was. And in 1910 music was cascading out of every doorway. A new sound was migrating north from New Orleans, syncopated, rapid, inventive, joyous. Alberta managed to finally get a slot singing at a run-down joint called Dago Frank’s. She says the prostitutes liked her because she was no competition, the johns felt sorry for her, and the tips inspired her to keep learning new songs, strengthen her voice (no microphones back then) and develop her own winning persona and style. Early on she grasped that every song had a message, and with her warm personality, hand on one hip, expressive face, and throaty, velvety voice, she delivered that message to a growing audience.

By 1915 she was so popular that songwriters sought her out and paid Alberta to introduce their new tunes, knowing she could put a song over with an audience. She was one of the first to sing “**Sweet Georgia Brown**” for Maceo Pinkard, and W. C. Handy reverently handed her an ink-fresh “**St. Louis Blues**”.

1917 brought her to the Dreamland Café, where, for \$17.50 a week, she became the toast of Chicago. People poured in to hear her. World famous vaudeville stars like Sophie Tucker, Al Jolson were front and center night after night, mesmerized by her. King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band, with a new trumpeter named Louis Armstrong, backed her up on stage, beginning what was to be a life-long friendship with pianist Lil Hardin (soon to be Lil Hardin Armstrong).

Always eager to broaden her horizons, she accepted an offer to record for the first black owned phonograph company, Black Swan, while she was trying to break onto Broadway in New York. She also recorded for Paramount Records with Fletcher Henderson, Fats Waller, Eubie Blake and Louis Armstrong often accompanying her. These were mostly ragtime songs featuring her sure way with rhythm. But it was a blues that she wrote in 1922 which forever secured her a place in music history.

Her friend, pianist Lovie Austin, heard Alberta humming and singing a tune over and over and thought it was so good, she encouraged her to finish it. As Ms Hunter told biographer Frank C. Taylor, quoting Lovie:

“ ‘Ooh, that’s wonderful honey’. Lovie told her that this was a song that ought to be recorded. ‘Well, okay,’ Alberta told her, needing her help to write down the music. “If you think it could be a good song, you can have the tune that I’m humming, and I’ll take the words.”

*Lovie sent the manuscript of the music and lyrics to Washington, D.C. where they were copyrighted on April 25, 1922. The fact that she put the lyrics in Alberta’s name forever impressed Alberta with Lovie’s honesty when everyone else was taking advantage of other composers. ‘She could have stolen the whole thing from me, and I would never have known the difference,’ Alberta said. “ – **Alberta Hunter: A Celebration in Blues**, Frank C. Taylor*

“**Down Hearted Blues**” became a stupendous hit. Alberta’s own recording did fairly well, sheet music sales went sky high and people packed the clubs to hear her sing that song, so full of heartache, pain and attitude. But it was Bessie Smith’s recording that really shattered all records. In 6 months, Bessie’s “Down Hearted Blues” on Columbia Records sold 780,000 copies. Yet all that Alberta Hunter received from that song during those years was \$368. Due to some fairly legendary shady practices in the publishing world, her rights were sold without her knowledge to other publishing firms, and it took her until 1948 to correct that particular wrong.

Although she briefly married around 1926, Alberta Hunter in fact preferred women to men, a fact that she never came out and admitted, but which was known about and accepted by her many friends and peers.

Replacing Bessie Smith in “How Come?” a show billed as “A Girlie Musical Darkomedy” in New York, she stopped the show, bringing a star-studded opening audience to its feet cheering her number. Smack in the middle of the Harlem Renaissance, Alberta loved these thrilling days of the Cotton Club, Langston Hughes

poetry readings and a booming economy that finally allowed room for even Negroes to move up in society and the arts. From 1923 to 1927 she reigned supreme, but longed for wider horizons; and so sailed to France hearing about the success of Bricktop and Josephine Baker in the clubs of Paris. Once in Paris she became a great success in the supper clubs that were abounding at that time. She also loved the wide open embrace France gave to African-American. There was none of the terrible treatment she and many musicians suffered in America once they were off stage. Instead they were embraced as beautiful, exotic and cherished artists.

She travelled to England to sing in a benefit for the flood victims of the Thames in 1928, little realizing that Oscar Hammerstein was in the audience looking for singers to star in a British production of their musical *Show Boat*. She became an international star playing the part of Queenie, singing “**Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man of Mine**” to the profoundly beautiful and talented Paul Robeson night after night. Even King George V came to Drury Lane to see it as an enthusiastic fan.

Alberta returned to America right after the great Crash, finding vaudeville dead, and black artists fairly shut out of Hollywood. Always longing to work and travel, she put together a cabaret act that toured from Stockholm to Cairo, learning to sing in 7 languages before an impending World War II made it unsafe for her to travel on her own. But without much work for her in the States, she joined the USO, forming part of the first black USO unit. She travelled ceaselessly, even after the war ended, making 7 tours in all.

But her inability to find consistent work in the US, the death of her beloved mother Laura, and a feeling that the music world no longer appreciated her style of music led her to retire and apply for nursing school at age 50 (although she lied and said she was 38). Few of her co-workers or patients were aware that she once was an internationally renowned singer and songwriter. But Alberta Hunter had not been entirely forgotten by the music world.

Record producer Chris Albertson pulled her out of retirement in 1961 to record with Victoria Spivey and Lucille Hegamin for an LP entitled “**Songs We Taught Your Mother**”. The album did so well, she was invited to record again, this time reuniting her with Lovie Austin and Lil Armstrong.

She loved being a nurse, and never missed a day of work in 32 years, when she was forced to retire at 82. A very full life, indeed, and one might look back on the amazing journey of the skinny girl from Memphis and be ready to let her live out her remaining years remembering how she had won over so many stages in cities around the world.

But the most endearing and perhaps enduring legacy of Alberta Hunter was yet to come.

Barney Josephson asked her if she could come and sing at his popular club in Greenwich Village, The Cookery. She jumped to action, and a whole new generation flocked to see and hear her, in clubs and concert halls all over the United States. Having always enjoyed writing songs, she made a point of airing out many of her originals: “**Chirpin’ the Blues**”, “**You Got to Reap What You Sow**”, “**He’s Got a Punch Like Joe Louis**”, “**Amtrak Blues**”, “**The Love I Have For You**”, “**My Castle’s Rockin’**” and of course “**Down Hearted Blues**” were always featured in her repertoire.

The award winning video ***My Castle’s Rockin’*** captured her performance at the Cookery and looked back on her astonishing career. This footage clearly demonstrates her well-deserved place in music history. Her powerful rhythm drove home every tune, even without a drummer on stage. Her voice was so strong and sure, having weathered years of performing without a microphone, and deepened by her years. Every gesture, coy eye movement, hand on hip stance spoke of a woman who knew how important the story of a song is to an audience, and how to bring out each lyric as if it were a gift.

This surprising and wonderful second career, which took her all the way to the White House to sing for President Carter, lasted until Ms. Hunter was over 89 years old, when old age finally caught up with her. She died peacefully in her armchair.

Sources:

Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazzwomen, Linda Dahl, Pantheon Books, 1984

Alberta Hunter: A Celebration in Blues, Frank C. Taylor with Gerald Cook, McGraw Hill Books, 1984.

My Castle’s Rockin’, VIEW Video Jazz Series, 1992, DVD- don’t miss this award winning documentary packed with live and rare footage of Ms Hunter. (available in DVD format)

Alberta Hunter: www.redhotjazz.com

Alberta Hunter: www.allmusic.com

Suggested Listening:

Most of Alberta Hunter's earlier recordings don't show off her voice very well – due mostly to poor recording equipment. But download her version of “Down Hearted Blues” as an essential part of your music library!

The Legendary Alberta Hunter: '34 London Sessions - (re-mastered in 1989) a good taste of Ms Hunter singing the 'Big Band' show tunes, good recording quality.

Songs We Taught Your Mother - (1961) a must have!!

Alberta Hunter with Lovie Austin's Blues Serenaders - (Chicago -- The Living Legends) 1961

Amtrak Blues - OBc Label, 1978