



The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



Ethel Waters

(October 31, 1896—September 1, 1977)

"First African-American to Star in her own Television Show"

"First African-American Woman to be Nominated for a Primetime Emmy Award"

Ethel Waters was born October 31, 1896, in Chester, Pennsylvania, to Louise Anderson, a quiet, religious, 16-year-old girl. Due to the violent circumstances of her conception, Ethel was raised by her grandmother, in the rough streets of South Philadelphia's "Bloody Eighth Ward." She moved quite often throughout her childhood and married young at the age of 13. The marriage ended after four years and Ethel began working as a maid, making \$4.75 a week.

One night in 1917, two producers heard Ethel sing at a local bar and convinced her to travel with them, performing on the black vaudeville circuit. She quit her job and toured with the group until they reached the city of Chicago. There, she parted ways with the carnival and left for Atlanta. Finding herself in competition with revered blues singer, Bessie Smith, Ethel moved again, this time to Harlem, where the Harlem Renaissance was thriving. Enjoying great success, Ethel recorded her first record with New York's, Cardinal Records and then for Black Swan Records from 1921 through 1923. Her contract made her the highest paid black recording artist at the time. Over her lifetime, she recorded over 250 songs and is considered a crucial link between blues, pop and jazz music.

Until 1923, Ethel had only performed for black audiences, but after an audition for a white Chicago theater, that changed. Making a higher salary than she had ever earned, Ethel became the first black singer to break the color line in the local theater. Her new found fame, however, did not protect her from the harsh realities of deeply racist attitudes. Ethel revealed that while she starred in the show, her dressing room was located in the basement of the building, near the furnace, where the air quality was poor. She suffered from migraines for years afterwards.

All of those struggles aside, in 1925, her song *Dinah*, had become an international sensation.

In 1929, she appeared in her first motion picture, *On With the Show*, where she sang "Am I Blue," a tune that would become a number one hit. She also made a few short feature films for Vitaphone studios in New York, including *Rufus Jones for President* and *Bubbling Over*.

In 1939, during her very successful theater show, *Mamba's Daughters*, Ethel was asked by the NBC radio network to perform on an experimental broadcast for a new medium. She agreed - and made broadcast history. The new medium in development was called "television" and the program was *The Ethel Waters Show*. And on June 14, 1939, Ethel Waters became the first African-American to star in her own TV show. The 15-minute broadcast was a one-night experiment to gauge how audiences would respond to this new form of entertainment, the "Television." Ten years later, Ethel was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for the film *Pinky*. In 1952 the film version of *The Member of the Wedding* brought Ethel another Oscar nomination. Her appearance in a 1961 episode of *Route 66* received a 1962 Primetime Emmy Award nomination, the first dramatic performance by a black performer, as well as the first black woman nominated for an Emmy.

Three of Ethel's recordings were inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame and her recording of "Stormy Weather" was listed in the National Recording Registry by the National Recording Preservation Board of the Library of Congress in 2003. In her lifetime, she appeared on stage more than 20 times, had 25 Top 20 songs, and starred in 21 movies and tv programs. Her autobiography, "His Eye Is On The Sparrow" was published in 1951 and in 1971, she performed at the White House.

Ethel Waters died on September 1, 1977. She was 80 years old.

On September 1, 1994, the US Postal Service issued a stamp in her honor.



HIS EYE IS ON THE SPARROW
AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY BY
ETHEL WATERS
WITH CHARLES SAMUELS
New Preface by Donald Spivey

