

## NURSING THE BLUES: THE REMARKABLE ALBERTA HUNTER (1895-1984)

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### Introduction

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**M**y affair with Alberta Hunter began quite by accident. I say affair because as I have continued my study of her life, I have become more passionately involved. It was the vitality of the voice that first intrigued me. Then I happened to see a documentary of her performing at The Cookery in 1977 and knew that I needed to learn more about this remarkable woman. As I have learned more, my interest has redoubled. But let me back up.

In the late 1980's I was expanding my personal record collection and looking for works I could incorporate into a Popular Music class I had developed. Among the many jazz and blues recordings that I purchased was a sound track from a film entitled "Remember My Name." I had never seen, or even heard of, this film, but one of the songs listed on the album was "Downhearted Blues," which I had always associated with Bessie Smith. The soundtrack, however, claimed to be a collection of songs by Alberta Hunter, of whom I knew nothing. In fact, one of songs had been composed especially for the film. I was intrigued that someone who had a link to the city blues era of the 1920's was still active more than fifty years later. I placed the recording on the turntable and before I could even begin reading the liner notes, I was captivated. As I read the notes, I discovered that the rich vibrant voice I was hearing was that of Alberta Hunter, who was 82 years old at the time of the recording.

I became aware that I was listening to a near perfect acoustical treatment of what was going on in clubs and cabarets around the world in 1920. The 78rpm recordings available offered only the slightest glimpse of the sound of that music. Even the enhanced reissues in the long-playing stereo format were not satisfactory. But here on a long-playing record in stereo and with wonderful quality was a rendition of tunes that hadn't been heard for more than twenty years.

This was a performer who started her singing career in Chicago before King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, or Sidney Bechet had left New Orleans. She had worked and recorded with these greats along with Fletcher Henderson and Eubie Blake. She sang as Queenie in the London production of "Showboat" alongside Paul Robeson. She performed with Bricktop in Parisian cabarets. She was adored in Copenhagen and Amsterdam.

I discovered she was from Memphis and knew W. C. Handy. She even claimed to have introduced "St. Louis Blues" to Chicago audiences. She had made more than one hundred recordings on a variety of labels<sup>[1]</sup> and had composed "Downhearted Blues" in 1923, recording it the year before Bessie Smith. She had also composed numerous other songs throughout her career including blues tunes, ballads, and up-tempo numbers.

Alberta Hunter woman was a link to a vital era in American music and American society.

Both she and the era were in danger of becoming irrecoverable. Although there was a brief flurry of interest when she came out of retirement in 1977, a generation has gone by since then and she along with her contemporaries are once more being relegated to footnotes in surveys of the history of jazz. Even the recent Ken Burns documentary on jazz overlooked her contributions. For this reason I embarked upon this study.

I will briefly focus on two areas. First, her biography, which leaves us with as many questions as answers. Alberta turns out to have been a very private individual. She kept clippings, royalty check stubs, and other mementos mainly to prove that she had recorded or composed. She made no attempt to thoroughly document her life. She even kept numerous diaries in which she rarely wrote. According to her biographer, Frank Taylor, she wanted to talk as much about her contemporaries as she did about herself.[\[2\]](#)

The second area I want to discuss is her music and her rendition of it. Rather than analyze it musically, though, I want to examine what the lyrics and her delivery of them might reveal about her as an individual. The blues and popular songs of this era had emerged from a folk tradition that was an important method of communicating the hopes, feelings, and attitudes of the people who created them. They tell us a story. More than this, though, Alberta Hunter's music – her compositions – reveals aspects of her character she was reluctant to share and tells us her story.

### **Who was Alberta Hunter?**

Alberta Hunter was born on April 1, 1895 in Memphis, Tennessee. From that moment it seems that she was out to beat the odds. She was a frail and sickly infant, but survived. Her father left when she was quite young.[\[3\]](#) Her mother became the breadwinner, working two jobs to provide a comfortable a home as was possible during those days of institutionalized segregation. Yet Alberta never seemed overtly bitter about her childhood. In fact her childhood experiences with hardship as well as racism instilled in her a strong desire and determination to succeed. Although far from being rich, Alberta always had nice clothes and a clean comfortable home to live in. This became important to her for the rest of her life, and while many of her show business companions lived flamboyantly, Alberta was careful to avoid excess. And while not a passionate person, she constantly demonstrated compassion towards others.

There are many curious details about her childhood. This is true partly because most of this information comes from her recollections when she was in her eighties and at times she knowingly mixed up details of her past simply because she had always done it that way and didn't want to confuse anyone, least of all herself, by changing the story. She simply didn't remember other moments in her life that obviously had little importance to her. . . .[\[4\]](#)

The story of her departure from Memphis is but one example.

The usual tale, which Alberta told and which has been reprinted in many sources, was that when she was ten or eleven she was on the way to the store to purchase bread when she met her school teacher, Mrs. Floyd Cummings, whom the children called Miss Florida. Miss Florida was traveling to Chicago and just happened to have an unused child's pass. Alberta, who had

heard that singers could earn up to ten dollars a week in Chicago, asked if she could go along. She was told she could as long as her mother gave permission. According to Alberta, she ran and hid for a length of time, then came back and told her teacher that she had received permission to go. With that it was off to Chicago – with only the clothes on her back, ten or fifteen cents cash, and no clear idea of what she would do or where she would live when she arrived. The story continues with her taking a trolley in Chicago and intuitively ending up at the apartment of Helen Winston,<sup>[5]</sup> the daughter of a friend of Alberta's mother. Helen arranged for Alberta's first job, peeling potatoes and helping in the apartment house for six dollars per week and room and board.<sup>[6]</sup>

Taylor, without providing any source, places the date of her departure as 1911, making Alberta sixteen rather than ten or eleven.<sup>[7]</sup> This seems more reasonable. By this age her schooling would have been finished. It is also apparent that she was doing some singing in Memphis and might have developed the idea of a singing career before leaving.<sup>[8]</sup> Her knowledge of how much she could earn in Chicago would have been an enticement. Once in Chicago, Alberta began taking steps toward that career through the age-old formula of determination, persistence, and good fortune.

Although underage, Alberta landed a singing job at Dago Frank's, a seedy club on Chicago's south side that was frequented by gamblers, gangsters, prostitutes and pimps. She knew only a few songs, but immediately began expanding her repertoire by learning a new song each day.<sup>[9]</sup> At Dago Frank's she not only learned how to perform, but how to dress and how to handle the pimps, coaxing generous tips from them.

She soon generated a following and eventually moved up through a series of clubs until, by 1919 she was singing in the Dreamland with King Oliver's Band. From there over the next thirty years her career took her to New York, Paris, London, Amsterdam, Copenhagen and parts of Asia and Africa. She worked with many renowned musicians like Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet, and Fletcher Henderson. She starred as Queenie in the London production of Showboat. She became as well known in Parisian clubs like the Jockey Club and the Casino de Paris as she was in New York and Chicago. She recorded for Black Swan, Paramount, Victrola (RCA), and other labels. When World War II prevented European travel, she joined the USO and performed for servicemen at home and abroad.

By the late 1940's Alberta was finding it difficult to maintain recording and club dates. She was in her fifties; tastes had changed; television as well as movies had taken their toll on audiences. She did get offers to travel to Europe, but these were not as attractive to her anymore. Finally, with the death of her mother in 1954, Alberta quit show business completely.

One of the themes that had run throughout her life was that of service to others. To some extent she saw her performing career as a service. A few years earlier, Alberta had done volunteer work in a Harlem hospital.<sup>[10]</sup> She now decided to turn that into a career path and, although sixty years old, talked her way into an LPN licensure program. Upon completing that training she began working for Goldwater Memorial Hospital on Welfare Island. For the next 20 years she worked as a nurse. Few people even knew of her career as a cabaret singer, and she never sang for her patients. She was coaxed to do a couple of recordings in the 1960's, but with

those exceptions she left her singing career to the past.

Then in 1977 at age 82 she was forced into retirement. The officials at the hospital thought she was 70 and felt good about letting her work a few years past age 65, which was the mandatory retirement age. Alberta, however, did not feel good about it. She was devastated and retreated to her apartment. For perhaps the first time in her life, her drive and determination were forsaken. Luckily, though, this condition was short-lived.

Through a complex series of events, Barney Josephson, who was operating a small club in Greenwich Village, located her. The club, The Cookery, was the type venue in which she had thrived during the 20's and 30's – intimate, crowded, and noisy. Although she couldn't believe anyone would be interested in hearing an old lady sing, Josephson convinced her that she would be well received and put her in touch with pianist and arranger Gerald Cook. After a few tentative rehearsals she opened at The Cookery.

As Barney predicted, she was a hit and, at age 82, became an overnight sensation. The Cookery was filled each night, other bookings were arranged, she made the talk show circuit, newspaper and magazine articles appeared in profusion, and her biography was written. She also began touring again and made recordings (several of which are now available on compact disc). In fact it was during this period that much of what is known about Alberta was finally recorded in written form.

Alberta's health began declining only at the very end of her life. She had suffered a fall in 1981 and fractured her leg.[\[11\]](#) But she wouldn't slow down. She kept up a demanding schedule of performances and recording sessions. Finally, in October of 1984, six months away from her ninetieth birthday, Alberta Hunter died peacefully in her Manhattan apartment, sitting in her favorite chair.

## The Music

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The development of the blues is difficult to trace. While it appears to have origins in the spiritual and field hollers of the nineteenth century, it is uncertain when other elements such as the three-line stanza, the blues scale and harmony, and special vocal techniques came into existence. The term blues itself didn't appear until the twentieth century and well after the form had developed.[\[12\]](#)

Alberta Hunter was the right age and in the right place at the right time. Chicago and New York from 1920 until World War II were centers of the blues craze. That's not to say that Alberta limited her repertoire to the blues. Throughout her career she maintained an impressive and varied number of types and tempos. The cabaret singer had to be ready to please the clientele, who frequently made specific requests. And, of course, tunes had to be danceable.

Starting in Chicago with only two tunes, *Where the River Shannon Flows*, and *All Night Long*,[\[13\]](#) Alberta eventually developed a repertoire of several hundred songs, some in French.[\[14\]](#) The songs ranged from standard blues to up tempo tunes. Her own compositions, *Chirping the Blues*, and *My Castle's Rocking* are good examples. She also included a number of

saucy numbers, like *Handy Man*<sup>[15]</sup>, that were filled with double entendres:

*He threads my needle  
Creams my wheat  
Heats my heater  
Chops my meat  
My man is such a handy man.*

And although she made a point of maintaining a scrupulous public image, refusing to talk of things she considered extremely private, she enjoyed these numbers immensely.

Her delivery of the songs was as important as the music and lyrics. She interacted with her audience with winks, sly asides, and gestures. That she enjoyed what she was doing was readily communicated to the audience. Within only a few minutes she would take control “as she effortlessly moved from blues to French Cabaret songs, or to an old favorite like “Love Will Find a Way” from Sissle and Blake’s *Shuffle Along*.”<sup>[16]</sup>

While she was not as successful a recording star as Bessie Smith, she recorded with major labels throughout her career. One of the limiting factors was that she acted as her own agent and didn’t receive the amount of publicity of many of her contemporaries. And in spite of the numerous recordings, unlike Smith’s recordings with Columbia, most were marketed to only the black population as “race records.”<sup>[17]</sup> There were also wide fluctuations in her recording output from one year to the next.

I have selected four songs to discuss: “Down Hearted Blues,” her most famous composition; “Chirping the Blues,” composed in 1924; “The Love I Have for You” from 1940; and “You’ve Got to Reap Just What You Sow,” from 1952. This last one was based on a song by Alexander Robinson, which she had recorded in 1923.<sup>[18]</sup>

In addition to providing us a glimpse into the early blues era, the lyrics to these songs reveal much about Alberta’s character and are more revealing than she may have intended. “Down Hearted Blues” starts with a four-bar introduction and a 16 bar blues on the first verse in AABB rhyme :

*Gee but it’s hard to love somebody when that somebody don’t love you.  
I’m so disgusted, heartbroken too, I’ve got those down hearted blues.  
Once I was crazy ‘bout a man, he mistreated me all the time.  
The next man I get he’s got to promise to be mine, all mine.*

The lyrics can’t be accepted as completely autobiographical, the theme of the jilted lover being a popular subject. But in a sense the first line may refer to how she felt about her family during her childhood, rather than being directed at a particular unfaithful lover as seems intended. While Alberta did have some romantic liaisons throughout her life, and was married for a brief time, she never claimed to have been a jilted lover. If anything, she did the jilting. But Alberta felt resentment that her mother favored her older sister, and although Alberta took care of her mother until her death in 1954 and claimed to be very close, she remained somewhat detached. She had

very little contact with her sisters after she left Memphis.[\[19\]](#)

After the initial verse, the tune becomes a standard 12 bar blues in the three-line AAB format. There are six verses. Alberta usually sang all the verses, but sometimes rearranged their order or altered some of the lyrics to suit her mood. Her early version was faster-paced than those from the 1970's and 1980's, as was Bessie Smith's 1924 rendition. This may suggest a difference in approach that evolved over the years; one that was for dancing and one that was for listening.

There is some humor, even in this down hearted tune. *I've never loved but three men in my life, my father, my brother, and the man who wrecked my life.* The humor derives more from her delivery, though than in the text itself. There is a slight delay and emphasis on "the man who wrecked my life." In live performance she added gestures like placing her hands on her hips and rolling her eyes.

The last verse reveals her desire for control in her life, *I have the world in a jug, the stopper right here in my hand, the next man I love's going to come under my command.* There is special emphasis on the word command, which rises to the tonic and is accented. This desire for control was one of the reasons she wouldn't hire an agent for herself. A concern for accumulating wealth, at which she was quite successful, may have actually hampered her performing career. She was adamant that she wouldn't share even a percentage of her earnings and maintained her own bookings throughout her career.

Even more revealing is the verse from "Chirping the Blues," *I'm fatherless, motherless, sisterless, brotherless, too.* While Alberta never knew her father or brother,[\[20\]](#) she most definitely had a mother and sister. This may allude to the resentment she felt toward both her mother and sister regarding their closer relationship. Alberta was also resentful of her younger half-sister Josephine Beatty.[\[21\]](#) In short, she was the middle child. But while she made a point of taking care of her mother, she never talked much of her sisters and seemed to have kept her distance from them.

I should point out that on the 1978 soundtrack recording to "Remember My Name" she doesn't include this verse. Perhaps by this time she had resolved any conflicts over her childhood. Then again, it could be that she had merely forgotten it. Another song on that soundtrack, "The Love I Have for You," was felt to have Academy Award potential. Alberta had purportedly written it for the movie. It was later found out that it had been composed in 1940 and therefore could not be considered in the best song category. When asked about this, Alberta replied, "I guess I just forgot. I think I found it in a trunk. But it was a real song!"[\[22\]](#)

*The Love I Have for You* is a touching ballad that reveals another side of Alberta's personality. Her rendition of it is sincere, lacking any vaudevillian melodrama. She felt a need to serve others, and whatever warmth she may have lacked in her personal relationships, she communicated a deep compassion. *You can search the wide world through, but darling if you do, you'll never find a love like the love I have for you.*

Alberta didn't admit to being much of a churchgoer. She had memories of being taken to church on a regular basis by her grandmother and rebelled against the notion of attending those

long, drawn out services as soon as she was able. The influence of the hymns and of the sermons she must have heard, though, is present throughout her work. It is especially apparent in this last tune, “You’ve Got to Reap Just What You Sow.” Alberta had already used this line in a verse of Down Hearted Blues and seems to be using this idea as a central theme to her life.

The song is set up in a verse chorus structure of 16 bars each. The chorus is *You’ve got to reap just what you sow, Yes you’ve got to reap just what you sow, On the mountain or in the valley, You’ve got to reap just what you sow.* The second verse presents us with Alberta’s own sermon, *You can inconvenience others to make things easy on your self, You can steal some poor man’s ideas just to accumulate great wealth, But there is one thing that is going to happen, It’s been tried and proved before, You’re going to reap just what you’ve sowed.*

## Conclusion

The early jazz era seems quite remote as we enter the twenty-first century. Recent developments like the Ken Burns series on Jazz and the popularity of young stars like Winton Marsalis are helping to keep the music alive. In addition much of the music from the early days of recording is available now in enhanced versions on compact discs. But it is also important to remember the people who created the music. Theirs was an artistic endeavor as well as a response to social customs and cultural events.

Alberta Hunter was one of many cabaret singers during the blues craze, and while she was not an innovator, she composed one of the most popular blues tunes from that era. She was an extremely talented performer who overcame many hardships to achieve worldwide fame. She is a wonderful role model for what can be achieved through dedication and perseverance.

Her persistence and dedication to doing “something for her fellow man,” [23] her ability to overcome prejudice without becoming bitter, and her desire to be productive to the day she died should be an example for all of us to follow. As Alberta herself said, “It’s a great pleasure to spread love . . . , to be one of the messengers. I came to bring a message and I’m trying to deliver that message. I’m waiting for you to accept it.”[24]

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### **Biographical Sketch**

David H. Evans received the D.M. from Indiana University. He also has degrees from Truman State University and Southern Illinois, Edwardsville. He has taught at HSU since 1999. A native of St. Louis, jazz and blues has been a lifelong interest. His first clarinet instructor was a local bandleader and dixieland clarinetist; his high school band director a jazz pianist.

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[1] Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 200.

[2] Frank C. Taylor with Gerald Cook, *Alberta Hunter: A Celebration in Blues*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1987), xviii-xix.

[3] Frank C. Taylor *Alberta Hunter*, 2. According to Taylor, Mr. Hunter was listed in Memphis



directories at another address until about 1900. Alberta claimed he died of pneumonia.

[4] Taylor, *Alberta Hunter*, 5

[5] According to Taylor the girl's name was Ellen Winston, but for some reason changed it to Helen in Chicago.

[6] Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 202.

[7] Taylor, *Alberta Hunter*, 21.

[8] Lynn Gilbert and Gaylen Moore, *Particular Passions: Talks with Women Who Have Shaped Our Times*, (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1981), 245.

[9] Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 203. Alberta never did learn to read or write music.

[10] Taylor, *Alberta Hunter*, 222.

[11] Taylor, *Alberta Hunter*, 271. This was actually her second serious fall in less than a year.

[12] Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 37.

[13] Taylor, 26-27.

[14] In France, Alberta took the Berlitz course and became fluent in French; see Taylor.

[15] The original title is "My Man Isn't Handy Anymore" but on the documentary video, *My Castle's Rockin'*, the title given is *Handy Man*.

[16] Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 26.

[17] Will Friedewald, *Jazz Singing: America's Great Voices from Bessie Smith to Bebop and Beyond*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990), 5.

[18] Taylor, *Alberta Hunter*, 189.

[19] Ibid.

[20] According to Harrison there were four children in the Hunter family. Some sources list a brother who died in infancy.

[21] Taylor, *Alberta Hunter*, 16. Alberta's mother Laura had remarried in 1906 or 1907.

[22] Taylor, *Alberta Hunter*, 245.

[\[23\]](#) Taylor, *Alberta Hunter*,

[\[24\]](#) Gilbert, *Particular Passions*, 252.

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