

CELEBRATING BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Making the Way

*Heroes in the
passionate adherence to
their hearts and goals,
three gay African
Americans set beacons
for others to follow*

by Gip Plaster

ALBERTA HUNTER

1895-1984
Blues singer, nurse

Alberta Hunter lived much of her later life in the closet, hiding her true identity. She was a lesbian—but it was her career as a blues singer she was trying to hide.

Hunter, an African American, ran away from home when she was 11. She became a successful



singer who played Broadway and other famous venues around the world. In 1919, she met and fell in love with Lottie Tyler; their relationship lasted



James Baldwin

for many years although both dated men from time to time.

"Lottie had the most beautiful legs that were ever on a person," Hunter told Frank C. Taylor, author of *Alberta: A Celebration in Blues* (McGraw Hill, 1987).

When Hunter decided that she had reached the top of her singing career and there was nowhere left to go, she quit. She started looking for ways to help people.

In 1955, she began volunteering at a hospital and decided to take her elementary equivalency test. In 1957, she graduated as a licensed practical nurse. (The person who helped her get into nursing school adjusted Hunter's age back 12 years just to get her in the program.)

She kept her former fame a secret as much as possible so people wouldn't treat her any differently. After being forced to retire from nursing because of her age (81), she returned to singing and became a frequent performer at the White House for President Carter. She was among the performers at the first-ever Kennedy Center

Honors in 1978.

Hunter spent a lot of her life in one closet or another trying to escape the prejudices that sought her because of her color, her orientation and her fame. Somehow, though, the humble caring for others that led her to become a nurse helped her to shine through circumstances that might have dimmed other lives.

JAMES BALDWIN

1924-1987
Author, civil rights activist

James Baldwin was a gay African American man born at a time when homosexuality was considered an illness and black men and women were kept separate and unequal. He should be remembered simply for surviving, but he was an author who secured his own place in history.

Baldwin, who was born at Harlem Hospital to an unmarried 20-year-old woman, was teased as a

child because he was small and effeminate. When he was 3, his mother married David Baldwin, a laborer and Baptist preacher who was often violent and abusive to his family.

At age 24, James Baldwin was scared and unhappy about the way black people were treated in this country. He had only \$40 in his pocket, but he escaped to Paris, where he did much of his writing.

His passion for issues involving race and sexuality led him to write abundantly. He published more than 22 books of essays, fiction, poetry and drama, including *Go Tell It on the Mountain* in 1953, *Notes of a Native Son* in 1955 and *Giovanni's Room* in 1956.

One idea Baldwin explored in his 40-year career was that blacks should not hate whites for their racist attitudes. He called the idea of black people being victims because of white oppression a "dread, chronic disease" for which "one has the choice, merely, of living with it consciously or surrendering to it."

"My life, my real life, was in danger and not from anything that other people might do but from the hatred that I carried in my own heart," Baldwin wrote.

Most gay and lesbian people know oppression in their lives in some way, and for many, the simplest response is hatred toward the oppressor. Baldwin wrote that black people should not feel hatred toward bigoted white people; perhaps Baldwin also intended his message to apply to the lesbian and gay community about our heterosexual oppressors.

The lives of many gay men and lesbians may be in that kind of danger.

ANGELINA WELD GRIMKÉ

1893-1961
Teacher, writer

Angelina Weld Grimké didn't waste any time. When she was 16, she wrote to one girl that if she weren't too young, she would ask the girl to be her wife.

"How my brain whirls, how my pulse leaps with joy and madness when I think of those two words, 'my wife,'" she wrote.

After getting a degree in physical education in 1902, Grimké, whose father was the son of a white man and a black woman and whose mother was from a prominent white family, taught gym until 1907. She then became a writer and taught English.

Because much of her poetry reveals her love for women, it was deemed unpublishable in her time.

"Being a black lesbian poet in America at the beginning of the twentieth century meant that one wrote (or half wrote)—in isolation," author Gloria Hull wrote of Grimké in *Color, Sex and Poetry* (Indiana University Press, 1987). "It meant that when one did write to be published, she did so in shackles—chained between the real experience and convention that would not give her voice."

To date, only about a third of Grimké's poetry has been published. She is perhaps best known for a play called *Rachel*, the only one of her works to be published in a book. It is about an African American woman who rejects marriage and motherhood and refuses to produce children for white society to torment with its racism.

Grimké's poems tell her story, though.

"Toss your gay heads, / Brown girl trees; / Toss your gay lovely heads," she wrote in the poem "At April." In "Rosabel" she wrote, "Winds, that breathe about, upon her, / (Since I do not dare) / Whisper, twitter, breathe unto her / That I find her fair."

Those lines reveal the love that was not publishable in her day and the writer that society did not allow to share her art with the world.

Gip Plaster is an independent journalist based in Fort Worth, Texas. He can be reached on-line at gayscribe@aol.com