

Her castle's rockin'

Artists Rep stages the life of a celebrated blues singer—and doesn't leave out the lesbian bits

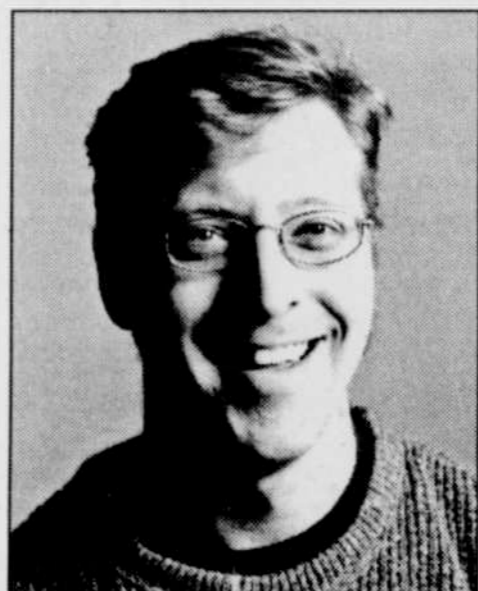
by **Kronda Adair**

You learn something new every day, or so my mother always told me. I like jazz as much as the next person, so I'm not sure why I'd never heard of Alberta Hunter.

If you've never heard of her either, she was a jazz and blues diva of the '20s, '30s and '40s with a long and varied singing career that took her to New York and Chicago as well as throughout Europe. She was one of the first blues singers ever to record and was the first black singer to be backed by a white band. This month, Artists Repertory Theatre brings her story vividly to life in its new production, *My Castle's Rockin': The Alberta Hunter Story*.

Director Stephen Alexander had never heard of Hunter either, but he did plenty of research in the course of developing the play. He even had the good fortune to

meet someone on a plane who had seen her perform in her later years. By all accounts, she was an outstanding singer and quite risqué for her time—even when performing for the president of the United States.



Director Stephen Alexander is glad he got to know Alberta Hunter

Hunter, or the Queen of Jazz as she was known, was married for a short time but apparently never consummated the union, reportedly telling her husband she didn't want to have sex in her mother's house. The truth was she was a lesbian.

But you wouldn't

know it from her songs, which often contained blatant innuendo directed toward

men—common for female blues singers—such as "Sometimes he'll wake up just before dawn, to trim the edges off my front lawn." Some of her stuff was a little too risqué to have made it into this production, but plenty of the diva's trademark flirtation is there, and so are the facts of her long-term lesbian relationship.

My Castle's Rockin' is blessed with talent at every level. Alexander brings both theatrical and musical directing experience to the production, while the exceptional Demene Hall brings Hunter to life. And no one could be more fitting to accompany her than Portland's own piano master, Janice Scroggins.



Actress Demene Hall gets a kick out of playing the Queen of Jazz

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