

**B**lack **H**istory **M**onth

**E** for Empress of the Blues

By JANUS ADAMS

In 1903, on the streets of Chattanooga, Tennessee, you could hear Bessie Smith sing for nickels and dimes. Twenty years later, you could hear her everywhere. On February 15, 1923 – after failing several auditions, including one for the black-owned Black Swan Records – the self-described “tall and fat and scared to death” singer made her first recordings. With “Down Hearted Blues” by Alberta Hunter on the A side and “Gulf Coast Blues” on the B, she was a hit, and Columbia Records was soon known as *the house that Bessie built!*

If ever an African American artist was called “untrained,” it was Bessie Smith. She honed her craft before listeners with little cash and less patience for anything but the real thing – their blues, their truths.

By the time her record hit, not only was she “ready,” she had built a small following of fans who knew her name. Bessie Smith’s records soon sold 100,000 copies *per week*, making her the highest paid black performer of her day. No wonder she was called the “Empress of the Blues.”

**F** for Father of Baseball

By CLAUD ANDERSON, Ed.D.

In 1920, Andrew “Rube” Foster brought the various Black baseball teams together into an association similar to the white leagues. Rube Foster had been involved in every aspect of the game, beginning when he was a small boy. He had little formal education. When he was old enough, he quit elementary school and became a professional baseball player. Foster soon learned that he was a better organizer and businessman than he was a professional baseball player. His greatest achievement came when he organized Black baseball leagues for all the aspiring young baseball players and fans.

He became known as “the father of Black

baseball,” and his National Association of Professional Baseball Clans became known as the Negro National League. As the first president of the league, Foster provided Black players a place to play and investors with financial opportunities. The Negro National League initially included such teams as the Kansas City Monarchs, the Indianapolis ABC’s, the Chicago American Giants, The Detroit Stars, the St. Louis Stars, and the Western Cuban All-Stars.

**G** for Garveyism

By JANUS ADAMS

In the 1920s, with a proud plan for African uplift, a fanciful plumed commodore hat, uniformed parades of the men and women of his African nation-in-the-making, and himself as its provisional president, Marcus Garvey had seized the imagination of the Pan-African world. Raised and educated in Jamaica, he had gone off to see the world. He returned home from his youthful travels in Europe and the Americas matured – disgusted with racism and determined to end it. In 1914, with superior skills as an orator and an organizer, he founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association. Within five years, his empowerment philosophy spread throughout the United States. In 1920, in New York’s Madison Square Garden, his first convention attracted over 25,000 people. Challenging the crowd to rid itself of the shackles of colonialism and segregation, he issued the call: “Up you mighty race, you may be what you will.” Garvey was industrious. So successful was his weekly newspaper, *The Negro World*, that colonial governments meted out

five-year jail terms to anyone caught reading it – and in Dahomey, the sentence was life! Still Garvey flourished, with an estimated six million active followers.

**H** for Hollywood

By JANUS ADAMS

On December 15, 1939, as a full regiment of media troops stormed Atlanta for the film premiere of Margaret Mitchell’s book, dear ole Dixie might have been *Gone With the Wind*, but its dear ole Mammy was here to stay. Her myth, for years so carefully fantasized, was now more real than ever. There, in Technicolor, was her too-beautiful portrayal by Hattie McDaniel. Significantly, McDaniel was racially barred from the premiere but broke the blackout on Academy Awards night in 1940, winning an Oscar for the role, the first ever awarded an African American.

Other attempts to enshrine Mammy had been made over the years. In 1912, a statue to Mammy on the Washington, D.C., Mall was proposed. And as historian Catherine Clinton has written, “Most treacherous of all, for over 100 years she has haunted kitchen shelves; even with the handkerchief removed from her head after a 1980s update, we still recognize this pernicious incarnation grinning down at us – Aunt Jemima.”

Assessing her own film history, McDaniel said

caustically, “I’d rather get paid \$1,500 a week to play a maid, than \$15 a week to be one.” Such were the options of the day.

**I** for Islam

By SCHOMBURG CENTER

Islam was first introduced to North America by enslaved Africans from Muslim regions of West Africa, though there is no indication that their beliefs were perpetuated into the succeeding generation of African Americans. The religion did not have a significant impact on the African American community until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1913, Noble Drew Ali (1886-1929) founded the Moorish

Science Temple of America in Baltimore, arguing that African Americans were in fact Moors from Morocco who had been stripped of their identity (and religion) by whites. Following Ali’s death, his teachings were expanded by one of his followers, Wallace Fard Muhammad – mysteriously disappeared, the movement was headed by Elijah Muhammad, who eventually moved its headquarters to Chicago.

As the Nation of Islam was growing, other African Americans were drawn to Islam through the Muslim Mission of America, established in 1920 by Sheikh Daa’wud Faisal, a Bermudan immigrant to New York. Still others joined groups of Ahmadiyya Muslims, inspired by immigrants from East Asia entering North America via West Africa.

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Marcus Garvey was the driving force behind the back-to-Africa movement and proposed to resettle African Americans in Liberia: To this end, his organization purchased three ships and created the Black Star Line. When funds from subscribers vanished and the Black Star Line collapsed, the blame fell on Garvey. Though many people believed he was framed, Garvey was convicted of mail fraud in 1925 and served two years in prison.

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