

**GUIDE TO THE  
MICROFILM EDITION OF**

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**THE PAPERS OF  
FREDI WASHINGTON  
1925-1979**

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## Note to Researcher

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**Biographical Notes**  
**Fredi Washington, 1903-1994**  
**(a.k.a. Mrs. Hugh Anthony Bell)**

[actress, dancer, singer, casting consultant, journalist, and equal rights activist]

- 1903** born Fredericka Carolyn Washington on December 23 in Savannah, Georgia
- father: Robert T. Washington; deceased 1965  
mother: Harriet Walker Ward Washington; deceased 1915  
stepmother: Gertrude Washington; deceased 1963
- 1922-1926** chorus dancer in *Shuffle Along* and at Club Alabam'
- 1926** played feminine lead in *Black Boy* opposite Paul Robeson
- 1927-1928** formed ballroom dance team Moriet and Fredi, which played New York supper clubs and toured European cities
- 1929-1930** dancer in musical *Great Day*; feminine lead in musical *Black and Tan*; dancer in musical revue *Hot Chocolates*
- 1930-1931** role in musical drama *Singin' the Blues*; role in *Sweet Chariot*
- 1932** southern dance tour with Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle's orchestra; dance team featured with Duke Ellington and orchestra in Chicago and other cities
- 1933** feminine lead in *Run, Little Chillun!* (drama with music); feminine lead in musical short with Cab Calloway; lead opposite Paul Robeson in film *Emperor Jones*; female lead in *Drums in the Jungle* (filmed in Kingston, Jamaica, British West Isles)
- married Lawrence Brown, trombonist with Duke Ellington and son of a Methodist minister
- 1934** featured in *Imitation of Life* as adult Peola; won 1934 Academy Award
- 1935** personal appearance tours in connection with *Imitation of Life*
- 1937** one of the founders of the Negro Actors Guild (NAG); served as first executive secretary
- 1937-1938** lead in *One Mile from Heaven* opposite Bill Robinson

- 1939-1941** supporting role in *Mamba's Daughters* starring Ethel Waters (scenes from play produced for television by RCA)
- 1942-1947** theater editor and columnist for the *People's Voice*, published in New York (Adam Clayton Powell Jr., editor); second female lead in adaptation for Negro cast of *Lysistrata*; participant in special events program for the National Urban League
- 1948-1951** feminine lead in *A Long Way from Home*; served nine-month tenure as executive secretary of NAG; appeared as guest on the television show *The Goldbergs*; served as administrative secretary for the Joint Actors Equity and Theater League Committee on Hotel Accommodations for black performers throughout the states; registrar for Howard Da Silva's School of Acting, New York
- 1949** cast in *How Long Till Summer*
- 1950** presented a scroll by the Committee for the Negro in the Arts for outstanding contributions as an artist
- 1951** divorced Lawrence Brown
- 1952** married Dr. Hugh Anthony Bell, dentist; moved to Stamford, Connecticut
- 1970** widowed
- 1975** inducted into Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame
- 1979** recipient of CIRCA Award for lifetime achievement in the performing arts
- 1994** died at age 90 on June 28 in Stamford

## Scope and Content of the Collection

This collection was acquired as a gift in three deposits from Fredi Washington. The two acquired in 1975 have been interfiled in a single arrangement. The thirteen items comprising the 1979 addition are filed as one unit at the end of Box 2 and pertain to the career of the donor and other persons in the performing arts.

Approximately one hundred items of correspondence from 1933 to 1979 are contained in the *Papers of Fredi Washington*. The correspondence includes letters (six of which are outgoing), telegrams, cards, notes, and memoranda. The arrangement is chronological except for the order of congratulatory telegrams received during the performance of *Lysistrata* (1946) and *How Long Till Summer* (1949). These are organized alphabetically by sender within their respective folders.

Most of the correspondents are represented by a single item, and no one is represented by more than four items. The bulk of the correspondence is from the 1940s; there are no letters during the 1960s. Letters from the mid-1930s include several items of fan mail. Also, some writers of this period expressed their views on passing for white as an option for those of African descent who did not possess obvious characteristics that identified them as such. Fredi Washington's role as Peola in the film *Imitation of Life* generated interest on the subject of passing. Other letters, however, voiced Fredi's strong opinion on discrimination in the theater and stereotypes in casting. Still other correspondence pertained to honors bestowed upon the actress, and most letters dating from the 1970s are in this latter category.

Notable correspondents include Countee Cullen, Harlem Renaissance luminary and playwright; Ossie Davis, actor; Owen Dodson, writer; Duke Ellington, composer and band leader; Mary Garden, operatic star; Dorothy Heyward, playwright; Edith Isaacs, theater historian; Isabel Powell (Mrs. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.), sister of Fredi and an actress prior to her marriage; and Walter White, author and civic activist.

Within this collection, items not relating to correspondence include an important group of clippings dating from 1937 to 1979. These clippings have a dual interest because they contain reviews of the various productions in which the actress appeared, as well as feature articles on some of her fellow performers. Fredi was cast in dramas and musicals that included notables such as Ethel Waters, Paul Robeson, and J. Rosamond Johnson. Etta Moten starred in one of the comedies in which Fredi had a part, and Noble Sissle, Eubie Blake, Duke Ellington, and other show business greats were among the stars whose paths also crossed Fredi Washington's. The clippings provide information about many of these contacts.

On various occasions, one of the performers with whom the actress had similar interests was J. Rosamond Johnson. In 1941 he marked fifty years in the business and had gained recognition as a composer, author, vaudeville and musical comedy star, director, producer, and actor. Many people associate the Johnson brothers with the so-called Negro National Anthem; however, a December 19, 1939, clipping from the *Detroit News*, written by George W. Stark under the byline "We Old Timers," provides an informative account of Johnson's theatrical career. Fredi and Johnson had parts in *Mamba's Daughters*. When picketing the theater where the play was being presented threatened the jobs of the cast, including the black performers working there, he and Fredi appealed to the leaders of the movement and avoided further confrontation. Eleanor Roosevelt's

column, "My Day," in the *Washington, D.C. News* for January 25, 1940, expressed the First Lady's disapproval of crossing picket lines. This article is included in the scrapbook (Box 3).

The columns that Fredi wrote for the *People's Voice* are available in the clippings, and some of them, written under "Headlines—Footlights" in 1943 and 1944, have been preserved. Her purpose in writing was "to provoke progressive thought, to help people of the theater . . . and to criticize those of us who need it." Her columns centered on black performers in the legitimate theater, concert, screen, radio, and behind-the-scenes organizations.

A substantial number of the clippings are reviews and criticisms of Fredi's performances. Typical of the complimentary reviews that followed her performances was one from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* for November 7, 1939, in which Calvin McPherson wrote that "Fredi Washington, the grown up Lissa, is perhaps the most talented Negro actress in the business."

Two categories of programs, spanning approximately thirty years but clustering in the 1940s, are also included in the general arrangement. The first group is for performances in which Fredi appeared; the second is for collected programs. Two of the earliest programs date from the mid-1920s. One is a souvenir program from Club Alabam' where Fredi was a dancer; the other is for a 1926 production of *Black Boy* at the Stamford Theater. This three-act play starred Paul Robeson opposite Fredi. Several Robeson items are included in this collection, and they document a continuing respect and admiration for the man and artist for whom neither time nor circumstance has dimmed.

Other programs of interest include one for a 1943 Marian Anderson concert (it bears the autograph of the famed contralto), and another for one of Duke Ellington's concerts contains penciled comments by Fredi; both performances were held at Carnegie Hall. Her first husband, trombonist Lawrence Brown, had been a member of Ellington's orchestra for fourteen years when the group played Carnegie Hall in 1946.

Although the photographs were not microfilmed, Box 3 contains approximately twenty black and white photos. These pictures document Fredi's activities and include several dating from the mid-1920s (the earliest in this collection) of her with Al Moore, her partner of the ballroom dance team Moriet and Fredi.

The next decade in the actress's career is represented by photographs from the 1930s of releases for *Imitation of Life* and a group picture with Bill Robinson; his wife, Fannie; the Adam Clayton Powells; and Fredi at 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Studios after the completion of *One Mile from Heaven*. Photos from the 1940s show Fredi at an art exhibit, in the uniform of the Women's Voluntary Service during World War II, and at a banquet with members of the Negro Actors Guild. Among the individual photos of Fredi are two undated ones by Carl Van Vechten. In addition, this collection contains several other undated photos, both group and individual, as well as two of Fredi's sister, Isabel.

Also included in the acquisition are seven scripts, two of which are for the Cullen/Bontemps 1946 musical *St Louis Woman*. The scripts generally seem to be among those submitted to the actress for her consideration, including one written by Dorothy Heyward about Denmark Vesey's rebellion and called "Set My People Free," and another by Paul Peters about the Nat Turner insurrection. Items in the collection indicate that Robeson was being considered for the lead in Heyward's play. Such scripts were



especially of interest to Fredi because of her objection to any role that depicted blacks as subservient or comic rather than as heroes. However, *St. Louis Woman* was produced, and Fredi and Walter White were among those who believed that the musical perpetuated an undesirable portrayal of blacks.

Although materials dating from the 1960s are generally sparse in this collection; the Negro Actors Guild yearbook for 1961 is an interesting and important item from that period. Among the deceased, it lists the organization's historian, Harold Jackman, and Muriel Rahn, a member of the executive board. Fredi was a founding member of the Guild and its first executive secretary. Noble Sissle, of Sissle and Blake, was its first president, and he served in that capacity for twenty years.

Notable items from the 1970s pertain to honors conferred on Fredi or her acquaintances. One of the leaflets lists the first group to be elected to the Theater Hall of Fame in 1972. Two of the 122 persons so honored were special to Fredi; they were Paul Robeson and Bert Williams. Other items pertain to Fredi's induction into the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame in 1975 and include an invitation to a dinner dance, brochures for the 1974 and 1975 awards named in honor of Oscar Micheaux, and a small group of items relating to Fredi's nomination for the CIRCA—Life Achievement Award in 1979. The Micheaux Award was conferred in Oakland, California, and the CIRCA Award was presented in Detroit.

The scrapbook contains clippings, letters, programs, announcements, and photographs. The clippings are predominantly from newspapers and are reviews of the films and stage plays in which Fredi appeared. The items from the 1920s mostly pertain to her Club Alabam' period and to the cabaret dance duo that she and Al Moore formed. There are also items from both the European and American press. Publicity and reviews for appearances of the team in Paris, Dieppe, Hamburg, and Philadelphia comprise a majority of the items from this decade.

The bulk of the scrapbook items are from the 1930s. Especially interesting are those for *Sweet Chariot* (based on Marcus Garvey's "back-to-Africa" movement), *Imitation of Life*, and *Mamba's Daughters*, the latter of which debuted in 1940 and was seen by Eleanor Roosevelt at a benefit performance. For her role in *Mamba's Daughters*, George Jean Nathan named Fredi Washington "best young colored dramatic actress."

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**THE PAPERS OF  
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1925-1979**

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**Reels 1-2**



*The Papers of Fredi Washington, 1925-1979*

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*The Papers of Fredi Washington, 1925-1979*

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