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The Immortal Hattie McDaniel

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The Immortal Hattie McDaniel

by Sherri Burr

Good afternoon. It is a pleasure for me to be here to participate in honoring a great lady.

The last time I contributed to a portrait unveiling, I was in a gallery in Honolulu. I had met the artist two months before and he asked if he could paint me. I said yes. After the unveiling of my portrait, someone came up to me and said, "How does it feel to be immortal?" I was startled at the question because I thought the concept doesn't apply to me. It does, however, apply to Hattie McDaniel.

Ms. McDaniel is truly among the immortals. Actresses and actors become stars because their lights shine brightly as they walk among us. Long after they are gone, they continue to light paths that others follow.

There is an old saying that "our talents are God's gift to us and what we do with our talents is our gift to God." Hattie McDaniel gave God, and her fellow human beings, a tremendous gift. Her talents as a comedian, blues singer, recording artist, and actress on film, television, and radio were legendary.

McDaniel was born into a talented family, headed by two former slaves on June 10, 1893. By the time she came along as their last child, her father Henry was in his fifties and her mother Susan was in her forties. After the Union army liberated Tennessee, McDaniel's father joined the fight to free the rest of the South.

Hattie got her start in talent shows, some of which were put together by her brother Otis. She became a comedian, spoofing White people who tried to mimic the way black people dance. McDaniel traveled in the Black vaudeville circuit. She came to Kansas City in 1926 (80 years ago). She became a recording artist, recording songs such as "Quittin' my Man Today" and "Brown Skin Baby Doll" that she wrote.

She arrived in Hollywood in 1931, at the ripe age of 38. Her brother Sam moved there before her, and she learned about casting directors and how to get roles as an extra. In the 1930s, Black women played the roles of mammies or maids. Black men played the roles of butlers, waiters, and porters. While there was criticism of these roles as stereotypes, particularly by lighter skinned blacks, these roles represented a lot of jobs that black people occupied at that time. Hollywood producers preferred hiring darker skinned blacks for these roles, cutting out those of lighter skin.

Indeed, Hattie McDaniel had worked as a maid. She used the income to support her entertainment career. As her Hollywood career progressed, she went from playing extra roles to speaking parts. Later in her career, McDaniel responded to criticism about her playing maid roles by saying, "I can be a maid for \$7 a week or I can play a maid for \$700 a week." Between those extremes, she played several roles as extras for \$7.50 a

day. When she received her first speaking part, she was paid \$300 for 11 days of work. Her last role as the first black woman to headline her own radio show paid \$1500 a week in 1950. Hattie McDaniel was not only the highest paid black actress, she was one of the higher paid actresses in Hollywood. In the 1930s, there were no Hollywood black directors, producers, or crew members. And there was segregation.

One of the sponsors of this event is Delta Sigma Theta. Hattie McDaniel appeared at a scholarship benefit for the Deltas to raise money for young, college-bound black women. She was a generous woman, contributing monetarily to causes and helping her family. When she went out, she dressed up, often appearing in evening gowns, as a way of separating Hattie McDaniel the woman from the characters she played.

Then came the book *Gone With the Wind* in 1936. Hattie McDaniel read it and felt she could make the role of Mammy unique and different. Hollywood conducted a world-wide search for its casts. The last two roles to be cast were that of Scarlet and Mammy. To save time, Vivian Leigh and Hattie McDaniel read together. They hired Leigh. Controversy swirled around the pre-production process, as Blacks sought to persuade David Selznick to abandon the project. He did not, although he fought with the censors over the use of the N-word. He thought it was okay as long as it was the black characters, like Mammy, saying it. Eventually the censors won and he dropped it.

McDaniel did bring something “distinctive and unique” to “Mammy.” She made her the moral core of the movie. Rhett was the blockade-running scoundrel. Then there was Scarlet—“If I have to lie, steal, cheat or kill, as God is my witness, I’ll never go hungry again”—O’Hara. This is not exactly the moral code of a spiritually evolved person. Instead, it was Mammy who Rhett sought approval from, and he finally won it by showing how much he cared about his daughter Bonnie.

At one point, McDaniel said, “I’ve played everything but the harp.”

There were many firsts in McDaniel’s life. She was The first Black to be nominated for an Academy Award, which began in 1929, and the first to attend an Academy Award ceremony. When she came into the hall, the white actors gave her a standing ovation. She became the first to win. It would take 25 years for the second (Sidney Poitier in 1964). When she won, she said, “I want to be a credit to my race and craft.”

This event today demonstrates that Hattie McDaniel was then and continues to be a credit to her race and her acting profession. It is my honor and delight to participate in this unveiling of this postage stamp featuring the immortal Hattie McDaniel.