**Whitman Sisters**

**Summary**

Mabel (1880-1942), Essie (1882-1963), Alberta (1888-1964) and Alice (1900-1969) were the daughters of Albery Allson Whitman, a reverend in the African Methodist Episcopal church (and a notable poet), and his wife Caddie Whitman. They began performing by singing and dancing in their father’s church and on evangelical tours. Later, they formed a touring company and took on other acts, most notably child performers. In the later years of the company, The Whitman Sisters were the highest paid act on the black vaudeville circuit, called the Theater Owners Booking Association (or Toby), and one of the longest surviving touring companies (1899-1942). The performance group was considered the greatest incubator of dancing talent for black shows on or off Toby, and significantly contributed to American theatre and dance modernism particularly as they challenged race and gender discrimination and stereotypes. While keeping their audiences entertained, they managed to push new ideas about aesthetics, race, class, gender and show business practices. The sisters succeeded in breaking many of the barriers for black women in show business and helped pave the way in the entertainment industry for subsequent black performers by launching the careers of many stars including Count Basie, Bunny Briggs, Jeni Legon, Willie Robinson, Butterbeans and Susie, Billy Kersands, Jackie “Moms” Mabley, Ma Rainey, and Ethel Waters.

**Early Careers**

Mabel, Essie, Alberta and Alice began performing by singing and dancing in their father’s church and on evangelical tours. As their repertory grew, they drew from not only Euro-American performance traditions and the short history of African Americans on stage, but also from the long tradition of African-American performance. The shows offered something for everyone: jubilee songs and coon shouts, cakewalks and breakdowns, comedians, midgets, cross-dressers, beautiful dancing girls, pickaninnies, a jazz band, and, after their invention in the 1920s, talkies.

The sisters challenged representations of race by slipping in and out of racial identity, passing for both white and black. In one popular act the sisters performed in black-haired wigs and blackface. At one point they left the stage took off the make-up and wigs, let their dyed blonde hair down and came back onstage. Essie claimed, ‘The audience was always puzzled and someone was sure to ask, “What are those white women doing up there?” Then they would recognize us as the performers and laugh in amazement’. Alberta Whitman also challenged gender representations by cross-dressing, while Alice capitalized on her image as an adorable baby doll in some acts and performed in the mostly male line of business—tap dancing. By maintaining a high-class image, they were able to challenge fictions of racial and gender identity.

Mabel Whitman was the only black female manager at the time, garnered the best acts, and was a champion for desegregating theatres and fighting corruption in the vaudeville industry. Stars such as singer Ethel Waters, musician Count Basie, and dancer Aaron Palmer credit the Whitman sisters for guiding them to success through their ‘maternal’ style of management. In 1928, the Whitman Sisters bought a new house in Chicago, which became a home base for many travelling African-American performers. During the Depression, Essie founded the Theatrical Cheer Club to aid performers down on their luck.

In the later years of the company, the Whitman Sisters joined the black vaudeville traveling circuit TOBA. The circuit earned a bad reputation due to its difficult conditions and poor salaries. The Whitman Sisters’ company had top billing, however, and was therefore spared many of the hardships of the lesser acts. From 1930 to 1943 the company produced at least six shows that toured on TOBA and independent black houses. The known shows are *Faststeppers* (1930), *Spirit of 1930* (1930), *Wake up Chillun'* (1930), *January Jubilee* (1931), *Step Lively Girls* (1931), and *Swing Revue* (1936). After *Swing Revue* closed, Alice went on to perform in other New York revues and was a soloist in nightclubs and theaters. Mabel performed with Pops and Louis (a child act) under the auspices of the NBC radio chain and Essie became a preacher.

Though they may not be household names in the history of modernism, many black stars throughout the twentieth century owed their beginnings to the Whitman Sisters. Many modern performance styles were decimated through the company’s tours. Many new industry standards were established due to their leadership. In short, the black entertainment world would not be the same without the work of the Whitman Sisters.

**Chronology**

* June, 1875—Caswell Whitman, brother to the Whitman sisters born in Xenia, OH.
* May, 1880--Mabel Whitman is born in Lawrence, KS or Van Wert, OH.
* 07/04/82--Essie Barbara Whitman is born in Oseceola, AR.
* ca 1887--Alberta Whitman is born in Pratt, KS.
* ca 1890s--The sisters begin performing with Rev. A. A. Whitman in Kansas City, MO.
* ca 1899--Mabel and Essie begin singing professionally.
* 05/01/99--The Whitman Sisters’ Comedy Co. plays Savannah, GA, theaters to both white and black audiences.
* ca 1900--Alice Whitman is born, probably in Atlanta, GA.
* ca 1900--The Whitman Sisters Comedy Co. plays Augusta Grand Opera House, Augusta, GA; Burbridge’s Opera House in Jacksonville, FL, and Savannah Theatre in Savannah, GA. They then tour all of the leading Southern houses.
* June 29, 1901--The Reverend Albery Allson Whitman dies.
* 02/22/02--The Whitman Sisters’ Novelty Co. opens midwinter at the Grand Opera House, Augusta, GA.
* 07/11/04 through 07/23/04--The Whitman Sisters’ New Orleans Troubadours plays at the Jefferson Theatre, Birmingham, AL.
* 12/10/04--The Whitman Sisters Concert Co. tours Kentucky.
* ca 1905--The Whitman Sisters Concert Co. moves its base of operations to Chicago, IL.
* 03/04/05--The Whitman Sisters Concert Co. tours Arkansas.
* 10/14/05--For four weeks, the Whitman Sisters Concert Co. tours the leading churches in St. Louis, MO.
* 10/08/06--The Whitman Sisters plays in Worcester, MA.
* ca 1906--Will Marion Cook places the Whitman Sisters on a program of a private musicale held in honor of a Judge Gray at the Waldorf Astoria in New York.
* 05/01/06--The Whitman Sisters plays at the Palm Gardens.
* 01/01/07--The Whitman Sisters plays in Lowell, MA.
* 05/09/08--The Whitman Sisters plays Washington, D.C. at the Second Baptist Church.
* 05/11/08 through 06/11/08--The Whitman Sisters plays the following D.C. churches for one month:
* Ebenezer A. M. E. Church, Monday, May 11, 1908.
* Friendship Church, Friday, May 15.
* Mt. Airy Baptist Church, Tuesday, May 19.
* Vermost Avenue Baptist Church, Wednesday, May 20.
* Trinity A. M. E. Church, Thursday, May 21.
* Tenth Street Baptist Church, Friday, May 22.
* Metropolitan A. M. E. Church, Monday, May 25.
* St. Paul A. M. E. Church, Tuesday, May 26.
* Return engagement Second Baptist Church, Monday, May 18.
* Lane C. M. E. Church, Wednesday, May 27.
* Walker Memorial Baptist Church, Thursday, May 28.
* Return to Ebenezer A. M. E. Church, Friday, May 29.
* Metropolitan Baptist Church, Monday, June 1.
* Ebenezer A. M. E. Church, Wednesday, June 3.
* Cosmopolitan Temple Baptist Church, Thursday, June 11.
* 12/26/08--The Whitman Sisters plays in San Jose, CA.
* ca 1909--Al Sutherland signs the Whitman Sisters to the Pantages circuit.
* 05/08/09--Caddie Whitman (mother) dies in Atlanta, GA. Funeral at Big Bethel A. M. E. Church in Atlanta.
* 1910--Alice Whitman joins the company. (By this time the sisters played most of the major vaudeville circuits in the South, East, and Northeast.)
* 01/02/10 through 01/29/10--The Whitman Sisters plays at Lagman’s Theatre, Mobile, AL.
* 02/12/10--The Whitman Sisters and Billy Kersands’ vaudeville company play Lagman’s Theatre, Mobile, AL.
* 06/04/10--The Whitman Sisters plays a five-week engagement at the Colored Air Dome Theatre, Jacksonville, FL.
* 10/15/10--The Whitman Sisters plays Atlanta, GA, for three weeks.
* 11/26/10--The Whitman Sisters performs at Swords Theatre, Chattanooga, TN.
* 1910--The company tours with a show titled “The Whitman Sisters Review.”
* 1911-1913--The sisters split up briefly between 1911 and 1913, with Alice leaving the show temporarily, Mabel doing a single act in Southern houses, and Essie and Alberta forming a small vaudeville group that plays throughout the East.
* 1914--The sisters are again united and work independently of a circuit. A small company that includes two picks known as Aaron and Sambo joins the Whitman Sisters. The new larger company is featured on the Family United circuit and spends about 20 weeks in and around Boston.
* 11/30/14--The Whitman Sisters plays Boston Theatre in Lynchburg, VA, with the S. H. Dudley Circuit.
* 12/25/15--The Whitman Sisters plays in Cincinnati at the Lincoln.
* 1916--The Whitman Sisters produces and performs “The Black Coachman.”
* 01/26/18--The Whitman Sisters performs at the Owl Theater in Chicago.
* ca 1920s—The Whitman Sisters joins TOBA (Toby).
* 10/16/20--Alberta Whitman writes the song “Think of Me, Little Daddy,” which is published by Pace and Handy Music Co. Inc.
* 1924--The Whitman Sisters produces and performs “Rompin’ Through.”
* 1924--The Whitman Sisters produces and performs “Their Gang.”
* 1925--The Whitman Sisters produces and performs "Going Some."
* 1926--The Whitman Sisters produces and performs "Going Some."
* 1926--The Whitman Sisters produces and performs "Rompin' Through."
* 1926--The Whitman Sisters produces and performs “Watermelon Morn.”
* 1926--The Whitman Sisters produces and performs "Miss New York."
* 1927--The Whitman Sisters produces and performs "Dancing Fools"
* 1928--The Whitman Sisters company is booked for a year run on the Publix Circuit.
* 1928--The Whitman sisters buy a home in Chicago.
* 01/19/29--Alice Whitman dances at the Royal Theatre for a week.
* 1929--The Whitman Sisters produces and performs "Hello Dixieland."
* 1929--The Whitman Sisters performs at the 81 Theater in Atlanta, GA.
* 1930--The Whitman Sisters produces and performs "Faststeppers."
* 1930--The Whitman Sisters produces and performs "Spirit of 1930."
* 1930--The Whitman Sisters produces and performs "Wake Up Chillun'."
* 1931--The Whitman Sisters produces and performs "January Jubilee."
* 1931--The Whitman Sisters produces and performs "Step Lively Girls."
* 1931--The Whitman Sisters and Moten’s Band play at the Lafayette Theater in NYC.
* 12/??/31--The Whitman Sisters performs at the Howard Theater in Washington, D.C.
* 12/17/32--The Whitman Sisters plays the Lincoln Theatre in New Orleans, LA, for two weeks and tour Southwest to California, Oregon, and Washington.
* 04/27/35--Alice Whitman performs in "Connie's Hot Chocolates of 1935" at Connies Inn in NYC.
* 1936--The Whitman Sisters produces and performs "Swing Revue."
* 04/04/36--Caswell Woodfin Whitman, brother of the Whitman sisters, and one of the country’s leading musicians, dies in Chicago, IL.
* 10/03/36--Essie Whitman stops performing to become an evangelist.
* 01/23/37--Alice Whitman performs in "Harlem Stompers" at the Apollo in NYC.
* 05/07/42--Mabel Whitman (62?) dies in Chicago, IL.
* 05/07/63--Essie Barbara Whitman (81) dies in Chicago, IL.
* 06/27/64--Alberta Whitman (76) dies in Chicago, IL.
* 01/30/69--Alice Whitman (68?) dies in Chicago, IL.
* 2/11/77--The Whitman sisters are recognized in a New York exhibit “Dixie to Broadway.”

**Nadine George-Graves**

**Further Reading**

George-Graves, Nadine. *The Royalty of Negro Vaudeville: The Whitman Sisters and the Negotiation of Race, Gender and Class in African American Theatre 1900-1940*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000.