**Hattie McDaniel**

Hattie McDaniel was born on June 10, 1893 in Wichita, Kansas. Her family moved to Denver, Colorado shortly after her birth and she would be raised there. As the youngest of her parents 13 children, Hattie never lacked confidence. By the age of 6, Hattie knew exactly what she wanted to be when she was older, an actress. Her confidence and ambition paired with her siblings having similar desires to be entertainers helped pave the way for Hattie’s legendary career. Around the age of 15 or 16, Hattie dropped out of high school to pursue her career. Her brothers owned a carnival company and Hattie would join them as they traveled the country. After traveling with brothers for over a year or so, she created a women’s minstrel show with her sister, Etta, called “The McDaniel Sisters Company”. The creation of the show also marked the start of Hattie playing the stereotypical maid role that would help her gain notoriety and criticism throughout her career.

While touring with her brothers and her minstrel show were great starting places, they weren’t always the most profitable places for Hattie. She would spend the next few years working odd jobs while looking for new opportunities. In the 1920’s, she was able to start working with Professor George Morrison’s orchestra named ***The Melody Hounds***. Hattie excelled as the lead singer of the jazz orchestra and as a result she was invited to perform on Denver’s KOA radio station. She continued performing as a blue’s artist and started performing at Sam Pick’s Suburban Inn in Milwaukee, Wi. Performing as a blues singer was helping make ends meet, Hattie wanted to be an actor. She decided to move to Los Angeles after being urged by her brother and sister to come join them, as they already had minor acting gigs in Los Angeles. Hattie’s brother was also working on an KNX radio show called “The Optimistic Do-Nuts”. Shortly after arriving in Los Angeles, Hattie received the opportunity to appear on the show. She was able to secure her first small role as a housekeeper in “The Golden West”. Seeing that it was still difficult to land acting gigs for blacks, she still had to pick up odd jobs as she did in Denver. Eventually in 1934, she landed a major on-screen role in “judge Priest”. The following year, she was able to win the role of Mom Beck in “The Little Colonel”. Hattie would star opposite of Shirley Temple and Lionel Barrymore and her role as Mom Beck helped her catch the attention of more Hollywood directors. AS a result of her newly heightened profile, she earned the opportunity to play the role of Queenie in the film “Showboat” in 1936. In 1939, Hattie landed the role of Mammy in “Gone with the Wind”. The movie was huge success and Hattie won the 1940 Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress. The achievement made McDaniel the first African American to win an Oscar. Despite her success, Hattie still dealt with racism in the workplace just like other African Americans. Following “Gone with the Wind” Hattie still found it difficult to find new roles, obviously due to race. As a result, she returned to radio and took the starring role on CBS radio’s “The Beulah Show” in 1947. The show was a hit and would be moving to television in 1951. Hattie had been dealing with complications from diabetes and breast cancer during this time and suffered a heart attack that would force her to retire from the film industry.

Hattie McDaniel broke many barriers for African Americans in the film industry, but she still faced criticism from some African Americans who felt that the roles she portrayed were stereotypical and degrading. This criticism started as early as her role as Mom Beck in “The Little Colonel”. Hattie responded to her critics by stating, “I have been told that I have kept alive the stereotype of the Nero servant in the minds of theatre-goers. I believe my critics think the public is more naïve than it actually is”. On the flip side, she had white critics who felt she was too bold and sassy in her roles. While the criticism from some African Americans did bother Hattie, she did not allow it to factor in her decisions to accept such roles. “I can be a maid for $7 a week or I can play a maid for $700 a week”, she once said in regards to the roles she played. The money that she made playing those roles allowed her to live the Sugar Hill community in Los Angeles. The neighborhood was considered the Black Beverly Hills. In 1945, white homeowners tried to push the African American residents out of the area. Hattie took the lead in fighting back and gained over 250 supporters. On December 5, 1945, a court decided that racially restrictive deeds and covenants were unconstitutional. The case would serve as a precedent in the ongoing fight against housing discrimination. Hattie was also infamous for having an open-door policy for fellow African Americans in the film industry.

Hattie McDaniel passed away on October 26, 1952. She left a legacy full of accolades that included being the first black woman to sing on radio in the United States. She had 10 blues sides issued between 1926 and 1929. She has two stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in Hollywood, one for her contributions to radio and one for her acting career. She was inducted into the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame in 1975. In 2010, she was inducted into the Colorado Women’s Hall of Fame. She was the first black Oscar winner with a U.S. postage stamp. Her greatest accolade was her ability to inspire other African Americans as she stated regarding her Academy Award, “My people were especially happy, they felt that in honoring me, Hollywood had honored the entire race. That was the way I wanted it. This was too big a moment for my personal back slapping. I wanted this occasion to prove an inspiration to Negro youth for many years to come”. Job well done.

* <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2021/04/hattie-mcdaniel-gone-with-the-wind-oscars-autobiography>
* <https://www.cogreatwomen.org/project/hattie-mcdaniel/>
* <https://www.biography.com/actor/hattie-mcdaniel>
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