



by Robyn-Denise Berryhill

There were two central themes employed for black movie roles in the 1940's: calvacade's of blacks cast in musical extravaganzas that had little or no plot and Negroes who had troubles because they wanted to pass for white.

Without a doubt, **Lena Horne** proved to be the biggest black box office attraction of this particular era. Her first film with MGM was "Panama Hattie," starring **Red Skelton** and **Ann Southern**. In this she sang a Latin song and dance number in a tight-fitting gown and danced her way off the set.

This was just the beginning of a series of musicals starring whites where she was allowed to entertain all-white audiences with an all-black orchestra backing her up. She was never identified in any of these roles and was for a time mistaken for a Latin American. MGM received so many complaints about this mistaken identity from black movie-goers, that they were forced to star her in the two major all-black musicals of the 1940s: "Cabin in the Sky" and "Stormy Weather," both made in 1943. These two movies until

this day live on as a trademark associated with **Lena Horne**. However, soon after their release she lost favor with MGM because of her marriage to white musician **Lenny Heyton**.

Other black performers who appeared in these musical bonanzas were **Eddie "Rochester" Anderson**, musician **Fats Waller**, the dance team of the **Nicolas Brothers**, the "heidi-ho" man himself, **Cab Calloway**, the **Duke Ellington** Orchestra and a songstress by the name of **Hazel Scott**.

**Hazel Scott** was born to wealthy and educated parents in Trinidad in the 1920s. She was a child prodigy on piano at the age of three and began improvising the classics at age five. While still quite young she moved to America with her parents and made her professional debut on piano in a Greenwich Village nightclub at age eighteen. She became an overnight sensation and went on to Hollywood.

Once in Hollywood, she firmly established herself as virtually the only black woman to simply play herself in a motion picture. Any other roles that were offered to her for black women were con-

sidered by her to be degrading and undignified. Because of her refusal to play the traditional stereotyped roles offered to black women, she was soon phased out of the Hollywood movie scene. Later she went on to marry the popular New York congressman, **Adam Clayton Powell**.

With all the light-skinned blacks in America, one wonders why it was found necessary to cast whites in the roles of Negroes who attempted to pass for whites. The most popular of these movies, "Imitation of Life" (1934), "Pinky" (1949) and "Lost Boundaries" all cast whites in the major roles. Later on, the musical "Showboat" was to follow suit.

"Pinky" starring **Jeanne Crain** as the tragic mulatto and **Ethel Waters** as the God-fearing grandmother, tells the story of a fair-skinned girl who is raised to be black but later goes off to nursing school up North where she succeeds in passing for white. Her charade nets her a young white intern for a fiancée. After nursing school, she returns to her home in the South where she makes a sincere effort to live as a black. But numerous circumstances make

this clearly impossible. A near-rape and a chance for immediate marriage bring her fiancée south. When he finds out her true identity, he is gone swiftly.

Grandmother gets into the act and condemns **Pinky** for her sinning. "It's a shame before God to deny who you are," she bellows. **Pinky** is then ordered by her grandmother to "fall to your knees and beg, beg, beg, beg for mercy and forgiveness." Forgiveness shall be granted, deems grandmother, if **Pinky** will consent to act as nursemaid to a very old, very poor, very cynical and very sick, once rich, Southern belle named **Miss Em**. **Miss Em** currently has one foot in the grave, looks like death and is despised by the whole town save **Ethel Waters**. **Pinky** agrees to care for her and when she dies, she leaves her house and a half-a-million dollars to **Pinky**. After a lengthy court battle over the validity of the will, **Pinky** wins and opens up a school to train black nurses in the mansion named in honor of **Miss Em**.

During this time an independent black filmmaker by the name of **Oscar Micheaux** was also making

movies about the problems of "passing" and the dilemma's of middle-class blacks. But financial problems and poor technical quality along with segregation, prevented any of these from becoming a major success.

Blacks continued to sing and dance their way into the 1950's in musicals like "Carmen Jones" and "Porgy and Bess." In these musicals faces like **Dorothy Dandridge**, **Pearl Bailey**, **Sammy Davis, Jr.** and **Harry Belafonte** emerged. Also, movies that attempted to place the credit of the race on the accomplishments of black athletes sprang up. "The Jackie Robinson Story" and "The Joe Louis Story" are good examples. But, by the end of this decade, a young actor who had brought a new type of image to the screen emerged. His name was **Sidney Poitier**.

**Sidney Poitier** went on to become one of the most important actors black or white of the 1960s. His performance in "Lilies of the Field" made him the first and only black man to win an Oscar for "Best Actor."

With the Civil Rights era of the 1960s, a series of integrated movies began to pop up. Movies that encouraged interracial dating were made: "One Potato, Two Potatoes," "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" and "The Great White Hope." The underlying theme behind this seems to be that these relationships can occur but in the end the price paid for it may not have been worth the trouble.

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## 'Colored Girls' Shows Beauty Of Black Women

There is currently a play on Broadway, "For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow is Enuf," that is a smashing success and so controversial that it has evoked the criticism of many alongside the praise of many others.

I have not had the privilege of seeing the play but from the sound of the original Broadway cast recording it is definitely a winner.

The play itself is a series of poems written by a lady who I am sure is headed for unmatched success in the theater world, **Ntozake Shange**. The poems go through the stages of a black woman — in love. They catch the spirit of being loved, hated, betrayed, and rejected by a man.

In these poems the total psyche of a black woman is revealed in a way that very few black women could deny being able to relate to.

What is striking about the poems is that they are real with no dressing, simply the bare facts. They discuss pain and sorrow in a way that makes one feel like dealing with them instead of succumbing to them.

In the beginning of the record one of the actresses begs for somebody to please sing a black girl's song, to sing a song of her possibilities. The record concludes with that song of her possibilities. The song is refreshing and brings with it a regeneration of the spirit. Moreover, it brings the realization that a woman is her own woman belonging to herself, not someone to be patronized, walked over or rejected.