

A couple of years before Bessie Smith recorded her legendary "Down Hearted Blues" - Alberta Hunter cut it - and had some success with it. It makes sense. She wrote the song - with her friend "Lovie" Austin.

Alberta Hunter wasn't a woman to be trifled with.

Late in life she embarked on a second career - completely outside of performing. Then successfully came back to the music business after twenty years away.

She was a fiercely private woman - Personally and professionally. And - Unlike many of her co-stars of Classic Blues - Alberta Hunter had no intention of ending up - hurt and penniless.

Alberta Hunter was born on April Fool's Day 1895, her father Charles, was a Pullman porter.

George Pullman - who designed the sleeper cars for railroad lines - began hiring former slaves to work on his train cars shortly after the emancipation. Their job was to carry luggage, fold down the beds and generally serve passengers.

Pullman Porters were all black until the 1960s - and contributed greatly to the evolution of the black middle class.

But that middle class wasn't to be for Alberta Hunter.

She never knew her father. He died a few months before she was born, and to make ends meet - her mother Laura worked as a chamber maid, in the legendary Memphis brothels on Gayoso Street - a block north of Beale Street.

Her mother remarried in 1906 - but according to some accounts her step father was violent - and Hunter ran away when she was 10 or 11 years old.

Hunter herself told the Memphis papers in a 1978 interview - that she didn't leave home because she was mistreated - rather - her move was spurred on when she learned singers were making \$10 a week in Chicago - and she was still working in a Memphis laundry for a dollar a week.

Hunter got a juvenile pass for the train and headed north. But soon discovered, she was too young to play clubs - and found work peeling potatoes in a boarding house for \$6 dollars a week. It was still better wages than Memphis, and she was able to send \$2 a week home to her mother.

To find singing gigs - she dressed up to look older, but it still didn't work.

Finally, she got a call to audition at a mob run club called “Dago Frank’s,” - where prostitutes and pimps hung out - on Chicago’s Southside. Roy the manager didn’t want her, but Bruce the piano player did, and Hunter sang at Frank’s for the next year and ten months.

When club’s owner and gangster Francisco Cirofici – was convicted of murder - and executed in Sing Sing - Hunter moved on to the Panama Club and the Dreamland Ballroom.

At Dreamland, she made \$17.50 a week, but sometimes pulled in as much as \$100 bucks a night in tips.

Put that in perspective - the average earning for - men in the first decade of the 20th century was \$11.16 a week - for women it was \$6.17. So, a hundred dollars a night in tips was a literal fortune.

But it wasn’t just the money, Hunter got to sing with the house band, which included legendary musicians Joe Oliver, Baby Dodds, Lil Hardin, Louis Armstrong and Jelly Roll Morton. Pretty soon Hunter was billed as “The Sweetheart of Dreamland.”

Once she had saved enough money - Hunter moved her mother to Chicago, but Laura Hunter didn’t like the city, and soon headed back to Memphis.

By 1914 Alberta Hunter was writing her own songs and studying piano with Tony Jackson.

She married Willard Townsend – whom she’d met on a gig in Cincinnati, but the marriage was short lived, when Townsend learned his wife was a lesbian.

Hunter kept her lifestyle private - concerned it might hurt her career, but she soon realized that Townsend deserved - as she put it - a better wife - who would pay attention to him.

She got a passport on the down low - and one night while she supposed to be working - she and her life partner Lottie Taylor, slipped away to Europe.

In 1917 - Hunter found her home - in Paris and London.

“Unlike American audiences – Europeans treated blacks as artists.”

Hunter told her biographer – “The negro artist went to Europe because we were recognized and given a chance. In Europe they had your name up in lights. People in the United States did not give us that chance.”

When she came back to America after having lived a star’s lifestyle - she found the same ol’ Jim Crow world she’d left a few years earlier.

But that wasn’t gonna stop Alberta Hunter.

In 1922 she broke through the race barrier – making history as the first black singer to perform with an all-white band – the Original Memphis Five.

That was the same year Paramount signed her to a record deal - but while she was waiting to record for them - she dropped in at Harry Pace's Black Swan records - and recorded four sides there in May of 1921.

So - even though she was a Paramount artist - Alberta Hunter's first record was "He's a Darn Good Man (To Have Hangin' Around)," recorded with Ray's Dreamland Orchestra and released on Black Swan in 1922.

He's A Darn Good Man - wouldn't be the last time Alberta Hunter jumped her contract

During her Paramount days - Hunter recorded for at least five other labels - Black Swan, Gennett, Victor, Columbia, Harmograph Records & Okeh – all while still under contract to Paramount.

To disguise the ruse - she recorded under several pseudonyms - including May Alix, Monette Monroe and Josephine Beatty - her half-sister's name.

The players on her sessions were a who's who of American jazz - including Fletcher Henderson, Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet and Perry Bradford.

And Paramount - if they knew of her label jumping - were still happy have her - and kept her on their roster.

Settled in New York - Alberta Hunter developed an interest in theater appearing in a number of Broadway plays. She replaced Bessie Smith as the lead in the Broadway musical "How Come."

In the late 20s she was back on tour in Europe - when she got a call from Nobel Sissle to come to England and play a benefit concert.

Turns out - Florenz Ziegfeld, Jerome Kern, & Oscar Hammerstein were all in the audience – and as a result of her performance - hired her to play Queenie - opposite Paul Robeson - in the West End Production of "Showboat."

She followed "Showboat," with another tour of Europe.

When World War II broke out she toured France and England with the USO - and later played for the troops in Korea where she spent 52 days on the front lines.

After one performance - she heard applause coming from up in the hills - but there was no audience over there. It was the enemy applauding - from North Korea.

By the early fifties - music was changing - rock and roll took to the air waves in 1954 - the same year Laura Hunter died.

With no one left to send money home to - Alberta Hunter wanted a change.

“I went as far as you could go,” she said. “I played Broadway, I played the Royal Theater in London. I played Paris... and I figured I had gone to the top.”

So, the day after her mother was buried, Alberta Hunter lowered her age twelve years, invented a high school diploma and applied for nursing school.

At age 60 - after 35 years in the music business - she became a licensed practical nurse.

She went to work at Goldwater Memorial Hospital on Roosevelt Island in New York City. Still as private about her life as always - none of her hospital colleagues knew she was an international singing star.

She didn't perform at all, for decades, and as far as anyone knows only made one recording during that period - a cleverly titled album called “Songs We Taught Your Mother,” with fellow Classic Blues artists Victoria Spivey and Lucille Hegemin.

Hunter worked as a nurse for 22 years – never missing a day – and was never late once.

She told a biographer -

“I was the most hurt person in the world when they retired me from the hospital... 65 is mandatory to retire. Well, they gave me 5 more years, they thought I was 70... I was 82.”

For Alberta Hunter nursing was a true vocation - “...if the time was up and my patients were restless,” she said. “I stayed right there and tried to soothe them to sleep before I could go home - and that learned me how to try to be kind to my fellow man.”

Invited to a party by her friend Bobby Short - Hunter didn't want to go - but grudgingly agreed. It was from that party - a New York club owner Barney Josephson convinced her to come out of retirement.

She was offered a limited engagement at “The Cookery,” in Greenwich Village. When she opened in 1977 lines formed round the block. Her two-week engagement was so popular it turned into a six year stay - and her hospital co-workers finally discovered who they'd been working alongside all those years.

Mildred Crisp Little – a co-worker at Goldwater Memorial told biographer Frank C. Taylor – “When you saw Alberta walking around the halls of Goldwater [Hospital] starched and crisp in her uniform, you would never think that she could get up there and be so risqué and flirting.”

Legendary filmmaker Robert Altman had hired Hunter to write the score for the film “Remember My Name,” produced by Altman, directed by Alan Randolph and starring Anthony Perkins, Moses Gunn, Geraldine Chaplin, and Jeff Goldblum.

The score consisted of several new songs by Hunter - and several of her original recordings.

The film premiered at the Orpheum Theater in Memphis, with Hunter playing a benefit at Number One Beale.

Tennessee Governor Ray Blanton declared Alberta Hunter Day, and Memphis mayor Wyeth Chandler gave her the key to the city.

She told the paper it was a far cry from the last time she was in town - she hadn't been back since 1952 when there were still segregated drinking fountains and separate entrances to stores.

Late in life - Alberta Hunter appeared on the Dick Cavett Show, the Mike Douglas Show, performed at the Kennedy Center, did a live concert for the series Jazz at the Smithsonian, and played Carnegie Hall.

She performed at the White House for President Jimmy Carter. After first turning him down. When asked how she could decline an invitation to the White House she replied simply - “It was my day off.”

That same year - John Hammond signed her to a new deal with Columbia and she recorded four new albums. This time she didn't jump labels.

Her biggest album for Columbia was “Amtrak Blues,” which was nominated for a Best Traditional Blues Album - Grammy Award in 1980. Hunter won Best Traditional Female Blues Artist that year.

Alberta Hunter was still performing until a few weeks before she died on October 17th, 1984.

A TV Movie about her life called “Alberta Hunter - My Castle's Rockin'” premiered in 1988.

A musical about her life – “Cookin at the Cookery, The life and times of Alberta Hunter” opened in 2003.

In 2011 she was inducted into the Blues Hall of Fame – she joined the Memphis Music HOF in 2015.

A play about her life long relationship with Lottie Tyler called “Leaving the Blues” opened in New York in 2020.

Her song Downhearted Blues - was included in the National Endowment for the Art’s - Songs of the Century List - and the Rock n Roll Hall of fame lists is in 500 songs that shaped Rock.

Bessie Smith’s recording - the best-known version of the song is on the national recording registry at the library of Congress, and in the Grammy Hall of Fame.

Unlike so many of her Classic Blues co-stars though, Alberta Hunter didn’t die penniless.

There are no lifelong tragedies in Hunter’s legacy - just a woman who entertained several generations of Americans, and was a minister of mercy to still another.

Alberta Hunter’s sixty plus year career gives us a look at exactly how much an artist and her music can develop and grow with the times.

The Alberta Hunter of the 70s and 80s is a wiser, more mature artist than the young girl who played for prostitutes and pimps on Chicago’s Southside, or even the woman who played the West End, but there was still a sparkle in her eyes, and a mischievous streak in her voice and lyrics.

There’s a link in the episode notes to the Alberta Hunter - The Founding Mothers - playlist - featuring all the music mentioned in this episode and more.

ALBERTA HUNTER – THE FOUNDING MOTHERS PLAYLIST

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/36zaVCddpCOLXap9HPyj93?si=6cc3d79e41ec439a>

JAZZ AT THE SMITHSONIAN: ALBERTA HUNTER

<https://youtu.be/1NxfXfwDmFM?si=edWsWxfkQtQmc-31>