

Ethel Waters had a long and wildly successful career.

It was only for a few years - in the early twenties - that she was what we'd consider - a classic blues singer.

But Ethel Waters clearly had "it" - whatever "it" is right from the start.

Waters began singing in 1917. There was a party at Jack's Rathskeller. The scheduled singer with the band hadn't shown up and someone shouted use Ethel she's always singing.

Ethel Waters didn't hesitate – she loved to sing.

That night would be just the first - in an entire life of firsts.

Ethel Waters was born in Chester PA, on all hallows eve 1896, as the result of her teenaged mother Louise Anderson being raped by jazz pianist, and a family acquaintance, John Waters.

According to Ethel, her mother Louise was only 13 when she was born – but some research suggests she might have been 16.

Her father John Waters had nothing to do with his daughter - and shortly after Ethel was born, Louise married Norman Howard.

Her mother found it hard to accept a child conceived of rape – especially after she and her new husband had a daughter of their own named Juanita.

So, Ethel Waters was passed from relative to relative – never staying any one place longer than 15 months.

No one really wanted her except her Grandmother Sally Anderson. Sally raised her granddaughter as a modest religious girl. When Louise wanted to hurt Grandma Sally she took Ethel to live with her aunts Vi and Ching – who were often physically abusive.

As a result - Ethel Waters mostly grew up on the streets of Philadelphia's "Bloody Eighth Ward," a self-admitted shoplifter and "ring leader" of street gangs.

She was thin as a rail - and never had enough food to bring a lunch to school. To avoid being teased by the other kids she'd intentionally cause trouble in the morning, and be sent to detention for lunch. Eventually the teachers figured it out and she was sent to the teachers' lounge instead - where they shared their lunches with her.

Waters got married in 1910 when she was reportedly just 13, but her husband was abusive and she eventually left him.

Her first job was as a house cleaner, when she was 8.

Her dream job was as a lady's companion – so she'd always have roof over her head and food to eat.

But - but after that birthday night - when she sang at Jack's Rathskeller - her career took an unexpected turn.

What she didn't know was that two producers were there - and invited her to join their show.

She needed some songs so she wrote to W. C. Handy for permission to sing "St Louis Blues." As a result, Ethel Waters became the first woman granted permission to sing the most famous blues song of all time.

Waters was tall - 5' 10' and skinny - so she began billing herself as "Sweet Mama Stringbean."

As gigs came and went – Waters took other jobs at cafeterias, and hotels to stay solvent.

For a girl who grew up on the streets, stability was everything.

Once she got to New York though, she found plenty of performing work.

Within two years - she was on Broadway in the cast of "Hello 1919."

Two years after that she was recording for Cardinal Records and Harry Pace's Black Swan Records.

For those early sessions, she was accompanied by Fletcher Henderson, Coleman Hawkins, James P. Johnson and Duke Ellington. Later she recorded with Jack Teagarden, Benny Goodman and Tommy Dorsey – which attracted white audiences.

She was so popular - Harry Pace made her the highest paid black recording artist of her era.

When Paramount bought Black Swan - Waters stayed with the new label - for a while - before moving to Columbia Records. Her recording of "Dinah," for Columbia became an international hit in 1925.

Her popularity on stage was growing too.

In 1923 Earl Dancer – convinced her to audition for a white Chicago theater – part of the Keith Vaudeville Circuit – which she referred to as White Time.

She quickly became the star of the show – earning an unheard of \$1250 a week in 1928 – roughly \$21,600 a week adjusted for inflation.

Suddenly everybody was taking credit for discovering her – even though she'd been touring in vaudeville and playing black clubs for half a dozen years.

Ethel Waters was a huge star up north – but in the south, she was still the subject of racism and Jim Crow – like every other black performer.

Music was a tough life. Waters was injured in a car accident and was left untreated - nearly losing her leg. In another close shave - she escaped town moments before she was about to be lynched.

But Waters persevered, continuing to perform and record, in a crucial era of American music.

Even the most cursory listen makes it clear that Ethel Waters was one of the pivotal links bridging the gap between blues and jazz.

She sang a lot of pop songs.

Legend has it that while on a bill with Bessie Smith in Atlanta - Ethel Waters was warned away from singing the blues. Smith was the blues singer on that bill - and told Waters so - in no uncertain terms.

Unfazed - Waters sang pop songs instead.

She'd learned well on Broadway where she was respected for her acting as well as her singing.

Her credits on the great white way include "Rhapsody in Black," "Stormy Weather," "Cabin in the Sky," "Rufus Jones For President" – with a child star named Sammy Davis Jr. and Irving Berlin's "As Thousands Cheer" – where she introduced the Berlin classics "Heat Wave," and "Supper Time," a heart wrenching song about a mother who has to fix dinner for her children right after their father had been lynched.

"Supper Time," brought the notoriously cynical Broadway audiences to tears nearly every performance.

She captured the hearts of the theater going public again in DuBose Heyward's "Mamba's Daughters," playing the role of Hagar.

She channeled her mother's hurt, and rage into the character – but said she also saw all black women in the character of Hagar as well.

Her first performance as Hagar received 17 curtain calls.

By the 30s she was one of the highest paid performers on Broadway.

By 1940 she was out of work.

Waters did what everyone else did in those days... She headed to Hollywood. Where - as expected - she once again found success.

Her first film was 'On With The Show,' in 1929 where she sang "I Am Blue."

In all she appeared in nine films including - "Cabin in the Sky," "Stage Door Canteen," "The Sound and the Fury," and - in 1949 she played Granny in the Elia Kazan film "Pinky."

Kazan had replaced John Ford who quit because he hated Waters - saying she had a "truly odd" combination of "old-time religiosity and free flowing hatred."

Whatever she had it worked. She was nominated for a Best Supporting Actress Oscar.

She would receive a second nomination for her work in Fred Zinneman and Stanley Kramer's film "Member of the Wedding" – reprising her role from the play she starred in a year earlier.

Waters initially didn't want the part in the play – she said there was "no God" in the character – who was a rough, foul mouthed cook.

She had known many women like the character growing up in Philly. It was a good well-developed part – but it just wasn't her.

The production team didn't give up though. They wanted her.

Finally, Waters agreed to a meeting – unless some other offer arose. Fortunately for the play, the phone never rang.

So, Waters went to New York to meet with the woman who'd written the play Carson McCullers.

To Waters surprise they wanted her so bad they agreed to tone down the character.

Emboldened by this, the singer brought up the second act song – planned as a Russian lullaby. Waters pointed out that no black woman she'd ever known would sing a Russian song – what she recommended was a song she'd been singing all her life – "His Eye Is On The Sparrow," but she wasn't willing to take the name of Jesus out of the lyric.

McCullers asked to hear the tune and by the time Waters was finished singing - the author was sitting on her lap in tears.

Waters took the part and won the Drama Critics Best Actor Award for the role in 1951. "His Eye Is On The Sparrow," would remain Waters signature song throughout the rest of her life.

When her half-sister had a baby she couldn't care for – Waters took the little girl in and gave her the stability she had never received as a child.

Her niece lived with her for 12 years.

Throughout her life Waters provided a home for nearly twenty young people.

By 1957 – Sweet Mama String Bean – had blossomed to 350 lbs.

Feeling bad about herself was a tipping point in changing the direction of her career.

She'd been nursing a cough – and one night it got worse. She ended up in intensive care. All that fat was making it difficult for her heart to beat.

She took the warning seriously – dropped 200 lbs, and joined the Billy Graham Crusade.

She'd attended the Graham Crusade at Madison Square Garden - and the religion she'd never completely given up - led her in a new direction.

She sang with Billy Graham until 1975.

Ethel Waters lived a life of firsts -

Way back on April 21, 1922 she'd been the first black woman to appear on radio.

She starred in a network radio show in 1933.

On July 14th, 1939, she'd been the first black woman to appear on television starring in "The Ethel Waters Show."

She'd been the first black woman to headline the Palace Theater in New York.

In 1950, she'd become the first black woman to star in a weekly TV series called "Beulah," – but she left the show in 1951 – complaining that the way blacks were portrayed was degrading.

She was the first black woman to have 50 hit records.

And the first to be nominated for a Primetime Emmy – for her role in an episode of Route 66 – called "Goodnight Sweet Blues," in 1962.

Ethel Waters cleared a path for nearly everyone who followed in her wake.

She saw songs as stories, perhaps it's why she was so good as an actress, as well as a singer.

In 1994, she was commemorated on a US Postal Service Stamp.

Her recordings of "Stormy Weather," "I Am Blue," and "Dinah," are all in the Grammy Hall of Fame.

She's a member of both the Gospel Music and Christian Music Halls of Fame.

A one woman show "Ethel," was written and performed by Terry Burrell in 2012.

Ethel Waters died of cancer in 1977.

To listen to all the music mentioned in this episode - and more check out the Ethel Waters - Founding Mothers Playlist on Spotify.

There's a link in the episode notes.

Ethel Waters - The Founding Mothers Playlist

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/15FfDoO9uBRppBlxwAeMpz?si=4d4ae473a118404d>