

## **Ethel Waters**

Ethel Howard Waters was born in Chester Pennsylvania on October 31, 1896. Ethel was raised in abject poverty and at the age of 12 she was married while still attending convent school.

Ethel was without doubt, the finest female jazz singer of all time and her rise to stardom was quite rapid. She had a full-bodied voice that ranged from a low E to a high F, (over two octaves).

At the age of 13, Ethel sang for the first time at a local night club. She also began working in a Philadelphia hotel as a chambermaid. Ethel moved to Baltimore in 1913 and began singing jazz and blues professionally under the stage name of Sweet Mama Stringbean. She was the first woman to sing W.C. Handy's classic St. Louis Blues on stage.

Ethel moved to New York City and began recording for the Black Swan label in 1921. In 1925 she sang Dinah at the Plantation Club in Harlem which led to a Broadway appearance and a contract with Columbia Records.

Ethel appeared in the all-black revue Africana in 1927 and in Blackbirds on Broadway in 1930. In 1931 she starred in Rhapsody in Black. While singing her rendition of Stormy Weather at the Cotton Club in 1933 she was noticed by Irving Berlin, who signed her to perform in the musical As Thousands Cheer. This was her first appearance in a show with a white cast. Ethel also recorded with Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman.

Ethel starred in Dorothy Heyward's Mamba's Daughters in 1938 and appeared in both the Broadway and film versions of Cabin in the Sky. Ethel won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award in 1950 for her stage performance in The Member of the Wedding. She also starred in the 1953 movie version.

Some of Ethel's other films included Cairo, Pinky and The Sound and the Fury. Ethel's autobiography made the best seller list in 1951. From 1955 to 1961, Ethel worked mostly in television and during the sixties and seventies she traveled with Billy Graham on many of his crusades.

Ethel Waters died in Chatsworth, California on September 1, 1977.

Sources:

[Encyclopedia Britannica](#)

[Encyclopedia Africana](#)

[Atlanta Music Group \(AMG\)](#)