



## E-Newsletter | March 2014

## Entertainment Pioneers

The recent death of Shirley Temple Black has brought many newspaper articles about her uplifting effect as a child actor. It was maintained that with her acting, singing and dancing, she actually helped people who suffered through the Great Depression. In this month's e-newsletter, we feature two women who were early entertainers in America: Sissieretta Jones and Molly Picon.

**Sissieretta Jones** made her singing debut in 1888. Trained in opera, she was considered the greatest African-American singer in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Because she sang opera, she was dubbed "Black Patti" (a nickname she disliked) after Adelina Patti, the foremost operatic singer at the time. Jones sang as a soloist or with groups until 1896 in the U.S., Canada, England, and on the European continent. In 1892, she sang for President Benjamin Harrison at the White House; she also appeared at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893.



Sissieretta Jones



Molly Picon

Her troupe, the Black Patti Troubadours toured from 1896 to 1916. Although members of the troupe performed songs from many genres and the troupe included acrobats and comedians, Jones solely sang opera. Her appearances eventually included costumes and scenery.

Another early entertainer was **Molly Picon**, who literally grew up in Yiddish theater as her mother sewed costumes for actresses at a theater in Philadelphia. At age five in 1903,

Picon won first prize in a children's contest for musical arts. She left school at age 16 to perform in vaudeville.

In the Yiddish theater in the 1920s, she played many roles that were written by her husband; almost all of them were girls who dressed as or masqueraded as boys. She became one of the preeminent Yiddish-speaking actresses. She sang and danced in New York's Second Avenue Theatre for more than thirty years. In 1934, Picon began radio broadcasts (first sponsored by Jell-O and then by Maxwell House). In the 1940s, she started to appear in English-speaking roles in plays and movies. Well known for her humanitarian efforts, she performed at many Army bases in the U.S. and Canada during World War II. After World War II, she and her husband were some of the first entertainers to tour displaced persons camps.

The Molly Picon Theater, on Second Avenue in New York City, was named after her in 1931. In 1963, she starred as an Italian mother opposite Frank Sinatra in "Come Blow Your Horn" for which she received an Academy Award nomination. She also received a Tony Award for Best Actress for her musical performance in "Milk and Honey." Picon is also remembered for her role in the 1971 film "Fiddler on the Roof" as Yente, the matchmaker. She continued to perform well into her eighties.

As with many of the women in *Her Story: A Timeline of the Women Who Changed America*, Sissieretta Jones and Molly Picon were well-known in their day but have faded somewhat from memory. We salute their significant legacies and the paths they blazed that other women have followed.

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**Her Story: A Timeline of the Women Who Changed America**

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