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Notable Black American Women

Jessie Carney Smith,
Editor

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Nagueyalti Warren

Sara Martin

(1884-1955)

Singer

Blues singer Sara (Sarah) Dunn Martin, also known as Margaret Johnson and Sally Roberts, was born June 18, 1884, in Louisville, Kentucky. Sara was born to William Dunn and Katie (Pope) Dunn and began solo vaudeville acts as a teenager in her hometown. Around 1915 she moved north and formed a singing act in a vaudeville circuit out of Chicago. By the early 1920s she was singing in the cabarets and clubs of New York City, and Clarence Williams collaborated with her on several blues songs during her tenure with Okeh Records from 1922 to 1928, the earliest being "Uncle Sam Blues" and "A Green Gal Can't Catch On." She also recorded on the Columbia label with her own Brown Skin Syncopators in 1922 and with Fats Waller, Eva Taylor, and Shelton Brooks on the Okeh label in 1923.

Martin's singing engagements expanded to include theatrical houses. She performed at the Princess Theater in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in 1922. The next year she worked at the Bijou Theater in Nashville, the Lyric Theater in New Orleans, the Regent Theater in Baltimore, the New Star Casino in New York, the Monogram Theater in Chicago, and the Paradise Cabaret in Atlantic City. Martin was popular on the Theatre Owners Booking Association (TOBA) show circuits and toured extensively with Fats Waller from 1922 to 1923 and with the W. C. Handy Band in 1923. During the next three years she had many engagements throughout the United States, including the Dunbar Theater in Columbus,

Mason

Ohio, the Howard Theater in Washington, D.C., and the Grand and Coliseum theaters in Chicago.

Sara Martin was known for her dramatic stage presence as well as her lavish gowns, which were changed two or three times during a performance. Her song repertoire reflected versatility ranging from the traditional twelve- and sixteen-bar blues to vaudeville comedy songs. She also sang fox-trots that reflected Sophie Tucker's singing style and was billed as "The Colored Sophie Tucker." Her singing encompassed the moaning style as well as the country ballad style. During the 1920s Martin created a family act with her three-year-old son and her husband, William Myers, on the banjo that heightened her popularity.

Throughout her career Martin appeared in many reviews, theatrical shows, and musicals, including the *Jump Steady Revue* at the Lafayette Theater in New York in 1922 and the *Up and Down* show, which toured the east coast in 1922. Four years later she was featured in Leigh Whipper's *Golden Brown Reasons*. In 1927 she worked with the Doc Straine Company at the Lincoln Theater in New York. She also appeared with Eva Taylor in the musical comedy *Bottomland* at the Savoy Theater in Atlantic City and at the Princess Theater in New York in 1927. Her tours with William Benbow's *Get Happy Follies Revue* (1928) took her to theaters in Cuba, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico, among others. In 1929 she appeared with Mamie Smith in the musical comedy *Sun-Tan Frolics* at the Lincoln Theater. During the next year Martin toured the theaters of the East Coast and the clubs of Cleveland, Ohio.

Martin's audiences also extended to radio; she appeared on WFAA in Dallas (1924) and with the Clarence Williams Trio on WHN in New York (1927). She has been credited with having appeared in one film, *Hello Bill* (1927).

In the latter part of her career she shifted from blues singing to gospel and began working with Thomas A. Dorsey, who had made the same transition. They toured together in local churches in the Chicago area in 1932. Martin was never noted for singing gospel, however, as she had been for singing the blues.

More than a decade before her death, Martin made another career change, this time outside the field of music. She owned and operated a private nursing home in Louisville, Kentucky. On May 24, 1944, she died of a stroke at the Louisville General Hospital and was buried at the Louisville Cemetery.

Sara Martin was one of four outstanding female blues singers produced in Louisville—the others being Edith Wilson, Helen Humes, and Edmonia Henderson. As a contemporary of Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, Martin had a lengthy career as a vaudeville blues queen and was instrumental in popularizing the blues through recorded and stage performances during the 1920s.

Martin's recorded songs include "Cage of Apes," "Can't Find Nobody to Do-Like My Daddy Do," "Daddy Ease This

Pain of Mine," "Death Sting Me Blues," "Don't You Quit Me Daddy," "Down at the Razor Ball," "Every Woman Needs a Man," "Gonna Be a Lovin' Old Soul," "Good Bye Blues," "Got to Leave My Home Blues," "Green Gal Can't Catch On," "Guitar Blues," "Guitar Rag," "I Can Always Tell When (My/A) Man is Treatin' Me Cool," "I Won't Be Back If I Don't Find My Brown At All," "I'll Forget Your Blues," "I'm Gonna Hoodoo You," "I'm Sorry Blues," "I've Got to (Go and) Leave My Daddy Behind," "It's Too Late Now to Get Your Baby Back," "Longing for Daddy Blues," "Mama's Got the Blues," "Mistreating Man Blues," "Papa Papa Blues," "Roamin' Blues," "Sad and Sorry Blues," "Squabbling Blues," "Strange Lovin' Blues," "Sweet Man's the Cause of It All," "Troubled Blues," "Uncle Sam Blues," "What More Can a Monkey Woman Do?," "You Don't Wan Me Honey," and "Your Going Ain't Giving Me the Blues."

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Collections

Materials on Sara Martin are in the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University. Materials on Martin dating around 1924 are in the Music Division, vertical files, New York Public Library, Lincoln Center.

Marva Griffin Carter

Biddy Mason

(1818-1891)

Entrepreneur, midwife, nurse, philanthropist,
humanitarian

Born into slavery on August 15, 1818, and named Bridget this former slave turned entrepreneur quickly came to be known as Biddy and retained that name the remaining year of her life. The exact place of her birth is unknown. Researchers have given both Georgia and Logtown, Mississippi