

“Stormy Weather”—Ethel Waters (1933)

Added to the National Registry: 2004

Essay by Stephen Bourne (guest post)*



Ethel Waters

In 1933, the African American blues singer and revue star Ethel Waters accepted a lucrative offer to perform at the Cotton Club, New York’s famous showcase for the black stars of cabaret. She was offered the highest salary they had paid any other star. Composer Harold Arlen and lyricist Ted Koehler had written a superb new torch song for Ethel to sing in the twenty-second edition of the “Cotton Club Parade.” The song was called “Stormy Weather” and Ethel’s interpretation was a turning point in her career.

Arlen and Koehler had created “Stormy Weather” with the bandleader and entertainer Cab Calloway in mind, but Calloway had not been signed to appear in the twenty-second edition of the “Parade”; Duke Ellington had been signed instead. So, Ethel was invited to sing “Stormy Weather” with Ellington and his orchestra.

Arlen and Koehler were convinced that Ethel would be the perfect interpreter of their new song. Ethel had only recently returned to New York from Chicago. Her career was at a standstill, and her personal life had hit another low point because her marriage to Eddie Matthews was breaking up.

The “Stormy Weather Show,” as the 1933 “Parade” came to be known, opened on April 16 and was one of the most successful ever staged at the Cotton Club. Ethel singing “Stormy Weather” became the talk of New York. People who had never visited the Cotton Club came to see her and hear her sing.

For Waters, “Stormy Weather” was, according to her 1951 autobiography “His Eye Is On the Sparrow”:

The perfect expression of my mood, and I found release in singing it each evening. When I got out there in the middle of the Cotton Club floor I was telling the things I couldn’t frame in words. I was singing the story of my misery and confusion, of the misunderstandings in my life I couldn’t straighten out, the story of the wrongs and outrages done to me by people I had loved and trusted.... I sang “Stormy Weather” from the depths of the private hell in which I was being crushed and suffocated.

Irving Berlin, arguably America’s greatest songwriter, did not often visit New York’s cabarets, but he travelled to Harlem to hear Ethel sing “Stormy Weather,” and that visit opened the door

for a brand new career for her. The day after Berlin saw the “Parade,” he offered Ethel an opportunity to appear in his new Broadway revue “As Thousands Cheer,” which was about to go into rehearsal.

Ethel would always credit “Stormy Weather” as *the* turning point in her career because the Berlin revue led to her further appearances on Broadway and later a career in Hollywood movies including the classic MGM musical “Cabin in the Sky” (1943).

Ethel recorded “Stormy Weather” on May 3, 1933 for Columbia, and this became her next crossover hit, a success even larger than her 1925 recording “Dinah.” In 2003, Ethel’s 1933 recording of “Stormy Weather” was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in the category of Jazz (Single). In 2004, the Library of Congress honored the song by adding it to the National Recording Registry.

Stephen Bourne is the author of “Ethel Waters – Stormy Weather” (Scarecrow Press, 2007).

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.