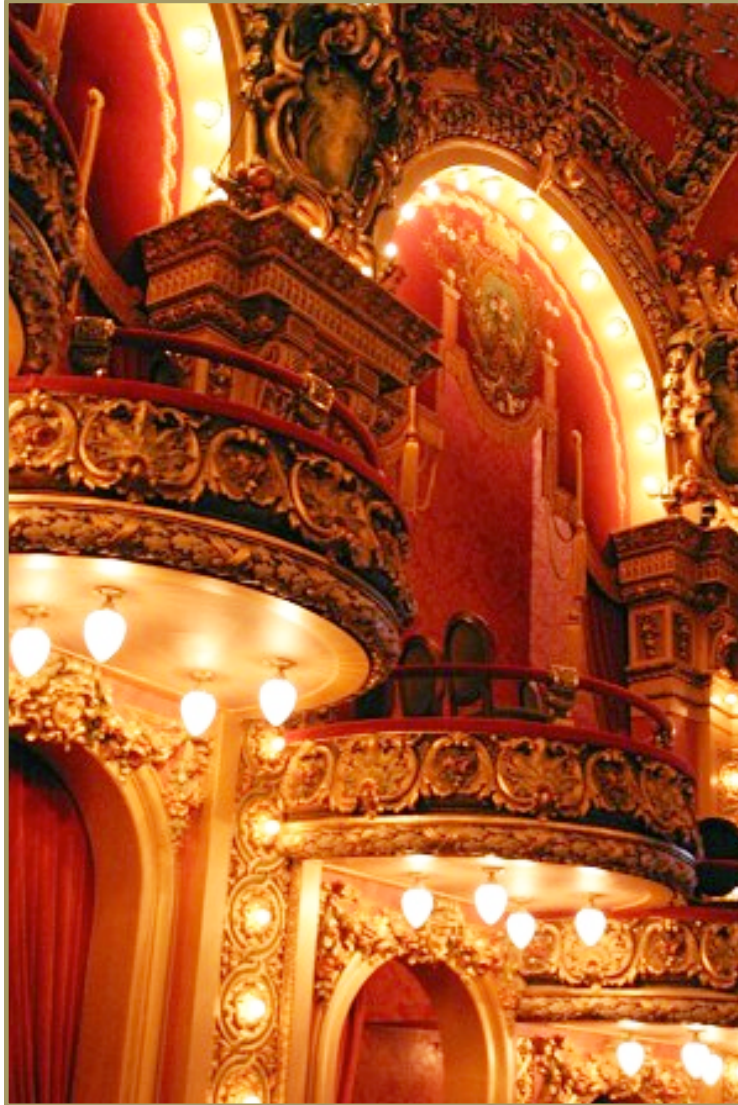


Alberta Nichols:  
*Was she the real thing?*



Molly Ruggles, April 30, 2011, LIS 435

## **Alberta Nichols: Was She the Real Thing?**

Molly Ruggles, April 30, 2011, LIS 435

### **Why Alberta Nichols?**

I am a pianist and a singer. One of my favorite songs from the 1930's is "Until the Real Thing Comes Along". The lyrics are poignantly ironic and the melody is sweet, even to 21<sup>st</sup> century ears. I had sung and performed the song for several years before taking a closer look at its attribution. It was credited as being written by Sammy Cahn, Saul Chaplin, L.E. Freeman, Mann Holiner, and Alberta Nichols. Five people was an unusually large number of collaborators for one song. Being slightly familiar with the work of Cahn and Chaplin, but completely unaware of the last three, I decided to learn more.

My research soon led me to Alec Wilder's book *American Popular Song*, in which he analyzes "Until the Real Thing Comes Along" from the point of view of melody and structure. He noted that the chorus was pleasant enough. However, he loved the bridge with its delightfully soaring phrases, full of color and nuance. Wilder purported to know a fair amount about Cahn and Chaplin's writing style, which seemed different from the style of the song. He also noted that Holiner was primarily a lyricist, and therefore,

through process of elimination, conjectured that it was probably Alberta Nichols who actually composed the melody, and most certainly in the noteworthy bridge. <sup>1</sup>

Wilder's supposition seemed plausible to me. Since Nichols, Holiner, and Freeman were less well-known, it is possible that Cahn and Chaplin had been added to the list of composers solely for the purpose of credibility and name recognition. However, as will be later revealed, other information emerged from my research that called into question Wilder's supposition.

Nevertheless, intrigued by the mystery behind the song, I resolved to learn more about the elusive Alberta Nichols: her life, her beginnings, her professional career, and her compositional output. This paper explores these topics as well as takes a deeper look into the complex and unusual history of "Until the Real Thing Comes Along."

### **Early Beginnings**

Born on Dec 3, 1898 to Rev Albert and Mrs Olive Nichols, Alberta Nichols started her life in the mid-western town of Lincoln, Illinois, a small city about 2 hours north of Louisville, Kentucky.



**Reverend Albert Nichols**

Reverend Nichols was a pastor in the Church of the Disciples of Christ, a Presbyterian sect. The 1900 census listed him as a gospel minister. Through the kindness for Mr Richard Sumrall, Librarian of Lincoln Public library, I had the good

fortune to be introduced to Ms. Jayne Zimmer, historian for churches in Lincoln, Illinois. Ms. Zimmer described the Disciples of Christ as a very conservative sect that excluded all musical instruments from the liturgy. However, singing was allowed, and was frequently utilized throughout the service. This vocal component of religious worship may have been the first exposure to music that Alberta received as a very young child.<sup>2</sup>

When Alberta was born, the family was living on North Kickapoo Street near downtown Lincoln.<sup>3</sup> It was a modest neighborhood, with small one-story wooden houses organized neatly on a tree-lined street. The Nichols family soon welcomed a second child in 1903, a younger son named Lowell W. It is interesting that Albert and Olive chose to name their first born child Alberta, after the father, even though she was female. In early 20<sup>th</sup> century American culture, it was an unusual choice. Most families would reserve the father's name for a son. The Nichols' choice allows us to infer possible attitudes of the family in regards to gender and gender roles. The choice suggests that Reverend and Mrs. Nichols highly valued their first-born daughter, and expected her life and choices to embody accomplishments that would reflect favorably on her paternal namesake. It suggested an open-minded outlook and a modern perspective. However, along with this forward-thinking outlook, the presence of a conservative religious perspective brings to mind possible conflicts and unanswered questions. Did the parents approve of Alberta's interest in music? How did they react when she went to New York to write music for vaudeville, musical theatre and jazz clubs? One wonders how - and if - Rev Nichols made peace between his conservative religious beliefs and the choices of his eldest child. Although there was no known rift between Alberta and her family, it is interesting that

during her adult life, Nichols never returned to live in the town of her parents. Does this signify estrangement? Or was it simply that Nichols lived in a different world?

The Nichols family's heritage was an interesting mix of mid-western and European influences. Alberta's mother Olive had been born and raised in Switzerland, and was listed as 'Swiss' in the town census and as having French as her first language.<sup>4</sup>

Reverend Nichols was described as having Scot and English ancestry. This mix of European influence one generation removed from Alberta may have contributed to a family love of art, music, and culture. This, in turn, may have been another influencing factor's Alberta's interest in music.

### **Education**

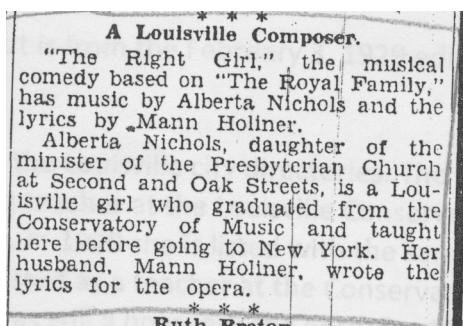
Rev Nichols served in several nearby churches. Before Alberta's birth he preached in Armington Illinois, and then moved to Lincoln for three years, during which time Alberta was born. Shortly after, the family moved to Plano Texas for three years.<sup>5</sup> At this point the thread becomes thin, but by the time Alberta finished high school the family had settled in Louisville Kentucky with Reverend Nichols continuing to preach in the local Disciples of Christ Church. It appears that the parents and son Lowell remained in Louisville for the rest of their lives. Only Alberta was to leave.<sup>6</sup>

Alberta attended Louisville Conservatory in Louisville, Kentucky from approximately 1918 – 1922. She studied piano with George Copeland, a concert pianist famous for

championing the works of Debussy and various Spanish composers. Nichols also studied with Alfred Calzin, a pianist best known as one of the accompanists for concert violinist Arthur Hartmann. <sup>7</sup>

Besides being a student at Louisville Conservatory, Alberta was listed on the school's faculty in 1919 and 1920. This suggests that her talents as a musician - in her own right - were far enough developed that by the age of 20 or 21 she was teaching others in addition to continuing her studies. <sup>8</sup>

The Louisville city directories include an address for Alberta Nichols up through 1923. We can safely assume that she moved to New York City sometime shortly after 1923. This assumption is supported by the first reports of her contributions to the New York music scene appearing in 1926 <sup>9</sup>. From this we can conclude that by the young age of 27 Nichols had already made the necessary connections and demonstrated the requisite talent to make her way into Tim Pan Alley. What is more remarkable is that after a mere three years in the city, she was composing material worthy of publicity in major local news media.



[Louisville Courier Feb 3, 1929](#)

Nevertheless, Alberta was not easily forgotten in Louisville. In 1929, a small article in the Louisville Courier appeared referring to Nichols and her recent success in New York writing the music for the musical comedy "The Right Girl". <sup>10</sup>

It is unfortunate that there is such little information about Alberta's early years, especially her time at Louisville Conservatory, which must have been an influential period in her development as a musician and composer. One of the reasons for lack of information is the demise of Louisville Conservatory in 1930-31. A casualty of the Great Depression, the Louisville Conservatory went bankrupt and closed down. Shortly after this, the school buildings and remaining faculty were subsumed into the University of Louisville School of Music.<sup>11</sup> It is unlikely that any of the Conservatory's papers or archives have survived. The archivist for the University of Louisville believes that they have been lost.<sup>12</sup>

### New York City

We assume that Alberta arrived in NYC sometime in between 1923-1925, as by 1926 we see the first mention of her in New York's entertainment media. The New York Times advertised an evening of entertainment at the Art Studio Club, and the song, "Hum a Little Tuner" was featured, written by lyricist Holiner and composer Nichols.<sup>13</sup> It is important to note that Alberta's first publicized song as a

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professional composer featured lyrics by Mann Holiner. He was to remain her partner in both professional and personal life until she died. It seems likely that she met Holiner very shortly after she arrived in New York, as this first published song already reflects their songwriting partnership. There is no information as to when they married, but it must have been relatively soon after they met because they were referred to as a husband and wife team throughout their career. Interestingly, however, Alberta kept her maiden name and was always referred to as Alberta Nichols, never Alberta Holiner.

#### THE OPENINGS

*New York Times (1923-Current file); Dec 2, 1928;*  
ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2007)  
pg. 139

## THE OPENINGS

**ANGELA**—Tomorrow night at the Ambassador Theatre. Being a musicalization of the not uncelebrated play called "A Royal Family," which Annie Russell acted when the century was young. The players will include Jeanette MacDonald, Eric Blore, Alison Skipworth and Florenz Ames. Book by Fanny Todd Mitchell, lyrics by Mann Holiner, music by Alberta Nichols.

[New York Times Dec 2, 1928](#)

Scarcely two years later, Nichols and Holiner were again listed as composer and lyricist for the upcoming Broadway show, "Angela", in 1928.<sup>14</sup> Alberta's career was beginning to take off.

### Rhapsody in Black

By 1931, Alberta and Holiner were involved with writing the music for the review *Rhapsody in Black*. Referred by the Boston Herald as a "theatrical concoction [which] is not a musical comedy, probably not a revue, and just misses being a concert,"<sup>15</sup> *Rhapsody in Black* was a theatrical collection of songs, dances and orchestral pieces held



together by minimal dialog. It featured a full vocal chorus and show orchestra. Some of the musical numbers were well-known pieces such as *Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue*, but many pieces were written expressly for the show. The show also featured a cast of well-known (if unusual) performers, all of whom were African-American. Valaida Snow was both a dancer and trumpeter whose additional talents included being able to sing in Russian. The Berry Brothers were known as some of the best show business dancers of the time. And Early 'Snakey-hips' Tucker apparently had a show stopping number that he did with his 'wiggly' partner Bessie Dudley.<sup>16</sup>

But the shining talent of the show was none other than the super-star of the day, Ethel Waters. A larger than life personality with a tragic past and a honey-toned voice that filled any room, Waters was an internationally popular singer and performer. She was the centerpiece of "*Rhapsody in Black*" and several composers were hired to create songs expressly to showcase her talents. One of the best lyricists of the day, Dorothy Fields, contributed material, along with her compositional partner Jimmy McHugh. Also enlisted to assist with new material were Pat Carroll, Ken Macomber and the Nichols-Holiners. It is interesting to note that while all the performers in the show were African-American, the composers and lyricists were primarily, if not exclusively, white. (Information is available on Fields, McHugh, Holiner and Nichols who were all white; no information is available on Carroll and Macomber). Throughout Nichols' career we will see that she travelled freely among disparate racial communities. This was no small feat, for although the entertainment industry was one of the more relaxed in this regard among performers and musicians, performance venues were often strictly bounded along racial lines.

I failed to find a full-score manuscript of *Rhapsody in Black*, but the Brown Collection at the Boston Public Library had a hard-bound ‘selections’ collection that featured sheet music for four songs from the show. Nichols and Holiner wrote three of these songs, and I was thrilled to learn that one of the songs was “Til the Real Thing Comes Along”.

Before delving deeper into this song, and revealing what I discovered at the Boston Public Library, it will be useful to understand the evolution and life-cycle of Broadway shows in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was customary for shows to open for a trial period in New York, and from there to go on the road to cities such as Philadelphia, Boston, Pittsburgh, etc., with the intent that – while on the road – imperfections would be eliminated and improvements would be made. Often the shows that would return to New York three to nine months later would be quite different than the ones that left.

### **Rhapsody in Black – Out-of-Town trials**

*Rhapsody In Black* underwent an out-of-town trial period such as this, and Boston was among the cities it toured. One compelling reason for *Rhapsody in Black*'s out-of-town tour was the opportunity – and necessity – to remake itself in light of the poor reviews it initially received during its trial period in New York. The New York Tribune had the following lackluster comment about the show's music, “A quartet of songwriters, Ken Macomber, Pat Carroll, Mann Holiner and Alberta Nichols have fashioned the rest of the music and lyrics, none of it very distinctive...”<sup>17</sup> And even more damning: *Rhapsody in Black* “...lacks punch... high spirits.”<sup>18</sup> From criticism such as this, it is safe to assume

that over the course of the out-of-town trials, several songs may have been re-written, discarded, or re-arranged. Nevertheless, it is very probable that the four songs in the Brown Collection must have been a part of the show when it was performed in Boston, because included with the sheet music were several pages of clippings from local reviews from the show. Presumably a fan of the show would not have bought sheet music for songs that were not part of a show that they attended.

From newspaper accounts, it appears that Boston was actually a pivotal city for the show's success. After it's initial lackluster reception in New York, audiences in Boston were astoundingly enthusiastic:

“When an audience in it its anxiety to applaud, batters its hands close to the blistering stage, when it stops the show for encores not once but three or four times, when it tosses in a few friendly yells for good measure; and when these evidences of satisfaction come from a house jammed literally to capacity with men and women standing four deep... then the task of the reviewer becomes a simple one. With such evidence on hand it can be said that this is beyond question a mighty fine show.”<sup>19</sup>

Even better, two of Nichols' and Holiner's songs were directly responsible for Ethel Waters' success in the show:

“Miss Waters.... fully deserves and ably supports the stardom to which she has ben [been] raised. Few entertainers, be they black or white, can equal her in versatility and ability. In the little song "What's Keeping My Prince Charming", and again in the totally different hit with which her name has become identified, "You Can't Stop Me From Loving You", she is equally at home and equally effective.”<sup>20</sup>

Both the above-mentioned songs were penned by Nichols and Holiners for *Rhapsody in Black*.

After Boston, the show moved to Philadelphia where it also received rave reviews from critics and an enthusiastic audience.

### Brown Collection at Boston Public Library



Title page of 1st version (1931)

Imagine my excitement to know that original sheet music of “Until the Real Thing Comes Along” and other tunes from *Rhapsody in Black* were available for me to peruse at the Boston Public Library, just a scant few miles from where I lived. Perhaps the sheet music in the collection was the first edition publication of the song, and perhaps Boston was the first city where it was performed. My spirits were high the day I went to the library to look over the material. Because the music

was part of the BPL’s Brown Collection, it was only available to view in the library reading room. Furthermore, according to copyright policies, patrons were not allowed to photograph or photocopy the actual musical scores. However, the music librarian Charlotte Kolczynski had given me permission to photograph the title pages of the songs.

When I was handed the bound collection I noticed that of the four songs in the collection, three were written by the Nichols-Holiner team, and one had been written Dorothy Fields and Jimmy McHugh. As I turned the yellowed brittle pages, I wondered what the piano arrangements and settings would be like. Not able to contain my excitement, I turned directly to “Til the Real Thing Comes Along” ... and stared, unbelievably at music that was *completely different* from the music of the song I had known and loved for many years. Incredulous, I quickly looked at the front page of the score. It was the correct title and Nichols and Holiner had written it. A closer look at the lyrics revealed that they were the lyrics that I was familiar with (with a few changes in nuance). However, the melody and the harmony were that of a completely different song. My heart sank -- both with disappointment for not finding what I had expected, and also for the newfound realization that I would be unable to play or listen to this ‘new’ version of the song, as BPL policies prohibited photocopy or photography of the score. I left the library in a confused daze, unsure of the meaning of what I had discovered.

Mulling it over later that evening, I realized that I *must* know the melody and harmony of this newly discovered ‘mystery’ version of the song, and I resolved to return to the library the next day to beg for permission to photocopy. Unfortunately, upon return, I learned that Ms. Kolczynski was away at a conference. The substitute librarian indicated that I could *photograph* the music (as long as I did not *photocopy* it) but I was slightly uncomfortable in doing so given that I had been given a different directive from Ms Kolczynski and was hesitant to go against her initial wishes. So I took a deep breath, pulled out my pencil and music notation paper, and began writing down the melody and

chords in short-hand transcription in hopes that I could reconstitute the song at home and play it.

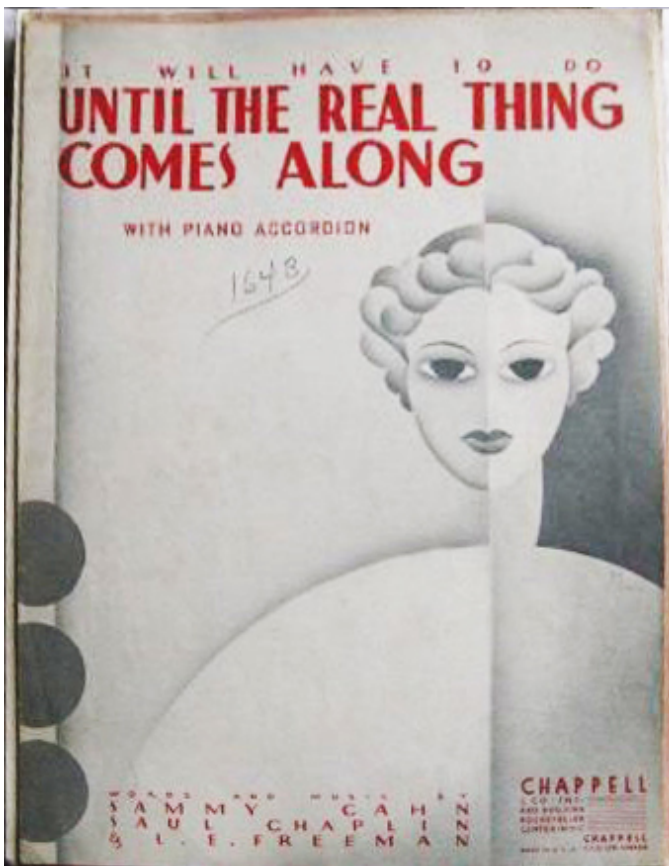
### **Until the Real Thing Comes Along**

Nichols and Holiner's most famous and well-loved song, "Until the Real Thing Comes Along" now revealed itself to have a very unusual history. From the information above, gleaned from my research at Boston Public Library, I learned that there were two completely different versions of the song. The first version – the 1931 version – from *Rhapsody in Black*, was actually titled "Til the Real Thing Comes Along" (and I will refer to the 1931 version in this manner throughout the paper, though there were occasional later inconsistencies with the second version *also* having this title, either due to faulty scholarship or sloppy typesetting.)

When I reconstituted the song at home from my notes, my first and lasting impression was that this first version of the song was inferior to the second version, and I was not surprised that it had drifted into obscurity. One of the only interesting qualities of the song was that it began in a minor key that quickly resolved to its relative major, though in a very predictable manner. The melodic lines had little dynamism as they closely paralleled the voice-leading of the chord changes. The bridge modulated to the sub-dominant (extremely predictable). The melody and harmony of the bridge was so pedestrian, to my ears, that it was difficult to remember it without the music in front of me. The only other interesting aspect of the song was its fairly strong 'hook'. The 'hook' of a popular song usually uses the title for lyrical content and contains the strongest and

most memorable melodic material. In this first version, the melody of the ‘hook’ broke away from the previous voice-leading pattern and instead arpeggiated the tones of the tonic chord in syncopated rhythm with the lyrics. The result was a catchy and memorable riff.

Let’s take a look at the second version of the song. Published in 1936, it is not clear whether it was written earlier than 1936 and actually used in ‘*Rhapsody in Black*’ as a replacement to the first version. However, we do know that the second version of the song became the popular theme song for Andy Kirk’s renowned band ‘Dark Clouds of



Title page of 2nd version (1936)

Joy’ in the mid-1930’s. One of the best jazz and dance bands of the 1930s and 40s, and only overshadowed by Duke Ellington’s band, Andy Kirk’s ‘Dark Clouds of Joy’ toured throughout the country to packed audiences. With this ensuing popularity, the second version of the “Until the Real Thing Comes Along” went on to become the enduring favorite that is still familiar to today’s ears. It has since been recorded by over 50 artists over the past 70 years, including Frank

Sinatra, Aretha Franklin, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, but also recorded by such contemporary artists such as Natalie Cole, Rod Stewart and many others.

A picture of the sheet music from the second version is accessed from eBay where an enterprising soul was selling it for an exorbitant price. Interestingly, this copy of the sheet music only displays Cahn, Chaplin and Freeman as the composers. Subsequent versions of the song in songbooks and anthologies usually display the five composers. Whether this omission of Nichols and Holiner is a significant indication of who actually wrote the second version will be discussed further.

When we consider the mystery as to *who* actually wrote *what* in the second version of the song, at least we know that there were two lyricists (Holiner and Cahn), two composers (Nichols and Chaplin), and one mystery contributor (L. E. Freeman) of which more will be said later. Is it possible to parse out who contributed what? I think there are some inferences that can be pulled from the music, especially if we compare the first version to the second, knowing that version one was written solely by Nichols and Holiner, while version two was purportedly written by all five. Let's begin by first learning about each of the additional composers, in turn.

### **The composers**

Saul Chaplin was a musician and composer who wrote more than 150 songs over the span of his career. Early in life he teamed up with lyricist Sammy Cahn and wrote most



of his best material with him. The team of Cahn and Chaplin wrote for vaudeville and Tin Pan Alley. Chaplin was also well-known as an orchestrator and music arranger.

Of all Chaplin's songs, "Until the Real Thing Comes Along" is his best-known work. Lesser-known songs were "the Anniversary Song" which he adapted from a Romanian melody written by Ivanovici and "Bei Mir Bist Du Schon" which he adapted from a Yiddish folk tune written by Sholom Secunda.<sup>21</sup> It is interesting to note that Chaplin's three most well known tunes were all adaptations or collaborations.

Sammy Cahn, the other member of the Cahn and Chaplin partnership, was primarily a lyricist. His more famous tune "Three Coins in a Fountain" was written with Jule Styne. Cahn also wrote with James Van Heusen, and Lou Levy, among others.

Of the five composers, L.E. Freeman is the most mysterious. No other published song lists Freeman as a composer. Freeman is not mentioned in any reference works about songwriters, lyricists, or the music business of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, exactly what s/he contributed as 5<sup>th</sup> collaborator on the song remains shrouded in mystery.

However, there are some promising hints that give suggestions as to who L.E. Freeman was and what his role might have been. Of the entire New York City metropolitan area during the 1920's, 30's and 40's there is only one 'L.E. Freeman' mentioned in New York Times articles. This Mr. Freeman was a top executive in the Standard Oil Corporation. He was also an avid amateur golfer who placed well in charity golf meets in the New York area. He and his wife were also occasionally mentioned in Society

columns as summering at various places outside the city.<sup>22</sup> From this information we can imagine that Freeman was quite wealthy and because of this may have wielded considerable influence in various circles. I found myself wondering if this wealthy society golfer and oil executive was perhaps the same L.E. Freeman mentioned as co-writer in “Until the Real Thing Comes Along” and whose contribution was perhaps of the monetary variety. If so, this would have been similar to the convention often used in Hollywood with the tradition of crediting financial ‘angels’ as producers of the film, even when they did nothing more than put their signature on a check. One wonders if L.E. Freeman had a similar role in the naissance of “Until the Real Thing Comes Along” and as a form of appreciation, his name was listed along with the rest. We will never know.

If we explore at the melodic content of the second version of the song, we see a very different landscape from the first. The melody seems to drift above chord changes which themselves have an intriguing harmonic arc. The bridge, interestingly, modulates up a major third (not a typical modulation) and here the melody presents completely new ideas, extremely memorable, and within a nicely contoured phrase. Over all, I find the second version more compelling melodically and more interesting harmonically.

However, the one instance where the second version falls short in comparison to the first is the ‘hook’. The lyrical content of the hook is changed slightly in the second version from:

*I guess it'll do til the real thing comes along* (as it was in the first version)

To:

*It'll have to do until the real thing comes along* (as it is in the second version)

The melodic material that supports this 'hook' in the second version is completely devoid of any interest. At the end of the first chorus, the 'hook' sits on low notes at the bottom of the vocalist's range. Just before the bridge, the 'hook' is presented again and the melody sits on the same note for *8 beats*. There is little melodic interest here, and thus the song defies traditional rules of songwriting by having such a weak 'hook'. However, the song seems to overcome this deficiency with strong melodic content in other parts of the song, as well as the compelling lyrics in the 'hook', which serve to carry it along in spite of the weak melody.

Now that we have an overview of the two songs, we can begin to ferret out who might have contributed what. I have a few suspicions. The lyrics in the chorus of the song change very little from the first version to the second. The lyrics for the bridge are completely different, however, and there are slight but significant changes in the wording of the 'hook' as mentioned above. From this, we might conclude that Cahn was responsible for this new material.

Melodically, the second version is entirely different from the first. Could it be that Chaplin provided the entire melodic content for the second version? It is possible. However, we also know that Chaplin was, at his best, an adapter of other people's material, so chances are another person had contributed something as well, probably Nichols. Another hint that Nichols may have had a hand in the second version is the

unusual modulation to the major third in the bridge of the second version. Nichols uses this same modulation in one of her other songs, “Where’s My Prince Charming.”

Ultimately, however, the comparison of the two versions leaves one with more questions than answers. It also suggests the possibility that Nichols had *no* involvement in the writing of the second version. Perhaps her husband, sensing that there was a hit song in the making, insisted on including her in the group of composers in spite of her scant contribution. It is also worth noting that Sammy Cahn, in his autobiography did not write about his experience creating this mysterious hit song. The omission is significant, given that the song, for all of the composers and lyricists involved, was one of their most popular. Silence from so many vantage points leads one to wonder if, like sausage-making, some processes are so complex and convoluted that the truth is impossible to find.

### **Later Career**

Alberta Nichols went on to have a very successful career writing for jazz, vaudeville, musical theatre, and later movie musicals, although none of her songs experienced the success of “Until the Real Thing Comes Along”.

One of her songs of note, however was used in Billy Holiday’s first recording session. The first song that the famous jazz songstress ever recorded was a tune by Alberta Nichols and Mann Holiner, “My Mother’s Son-in-Law”.<sup>23</sup> Scorned by some as a frothy, silly song, and not worthy of Holiday’s talent, it nevertheless it proved that Nichols was a

solid participant in the jazz scene. Nichols and Billie Holiday also remained close friends for the rest of their lives and Holiday recorded several other Nichols compositions.<sup>24</sup>



It was clear that Nichols straddled several worlds. Her music was sung by eminent jazz greats, such as Ethel Waters, Billie Holiday and others, but she was also deeply entrenched in vaudeville and musical theatre.

Being a white woman, Nichols was able to pass freely through these different worlds, which did not always overlap. In addition to her jazz songs, she wrote songs for *Two Girls and a Sailor*, a frothy “lily-white” musical of young romance featuring June Allyson who, as America’s

girl next door, was far removed from the sultry, shady world of the jazz club. Similarly, Nichols wrote the music to “*Angela*” a musical that featured operatic singer, Jeanette McDonald.

Alberta Nichols’s career spanned over 20 years, and – to a song – she collaborated exclusively with her lyricist husband Mann Holiner. Nichols did not publish a single composition without Holiner’s lyrical imprint. And Holiner, in similar fashion, wrote almost every lyric he published with Nichols. One song survives which he collaborated on with Werner Janssen: “Come on Let’s Make Whoopee”, from the show “*Luckee Girl*”.

The Nichols-Holiner team was one of the longest-running collaborations in jazz and musical theatre and it is further remarkable in that they were husband and wife. It is also worth noting that Nichols retained her maiden name throughout her life and career. It is clear that she was her own person, but it is also clear that Holiner was her muse.... as she was his.

Information about Nichol's later life is slim. She continued composing though the 1940s and then fell from view. Her husband, Mann Holiner, pursued a second career in radio management and served in the US Army during WWII where he was a program director for US radio shows aimed toward service men. In specific, several of his shows were aimed towards the African-American service men. Like Nichols, Holiner, although a white man, travelled freely in several worlds.

The only existent photo of Holiner is from his service in the army.



Pictured above from left to right: Frank Sinatra, Major Mann Holiner, Dinah Shore & Bing Crosby. The pianist is unknown.

It was not possible to find an obituary for Alberta Nichols, however secondary sources report that she died in Hollywood California on Feb 4, 1957 at the age of 58.<sup>25</sup> One wonders what her last years were like: 58 was a relatively young age to die. Did Nichols fall prey to the same ills that Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker, Ethel Waters and others of the time succumbed to: the lure of the drink, the drug, and the hard life of jazz and show business?

Holiner outlived his wife by just two years and tragically shot himself on Oct 30, 1958. Holiner's obituary in the LA Times lists his accomplishments and then poignantly adds at the end: "Friends of Holiner said he had been despondent since the death of his wife composer Alberta Nichols two years ago"<sup>26</sup>

Alberta Nichols' legacy to this present day is both as a composer as well as an independent female artist. Although her talent did not allow her to soar to the heights of such contemporaries as Duke Ellington, Fats Waller, Gershwin, and others, she remained a solid contributor to the industry and worked steadily for many years. Her ability to write for various different styles and genres was also worthy of note.

Nichols lived in a time where racial segregation in society and the workplace was the norm. Most people lived in the white world or the black world, but not both. By the mid-1930's there were signs that some walls were starting to fall, however the interim stages

were quite odd. Take, the example, the situation at the Cotton Club. Hailed as Harlem's pearl of the entertainment world, only the best and the brightest of the world's performing artists were invited to perform at the Cotton Club. A wide range of jazz and blues singers, swing bands, vaudeville artists and dancers adorned its stage. However, they were all artists of color. And all the audience members at the Cotton Club were white. Occasionally, an African American luminary would gain one of its coveted tables, but it was a rare and hard fought prize when it occurred.<sup>27</sup>

It seems, however, that Alberta Nichols moved easily in the world of the black entertainer: respected and accepted, and even considered a friend, as for example, by Billie Holiday. How did Alberta Nichols, child of a mid-western clergyman, find her way to such a wider world than her parents is the final question I pose. But this question has an answer: Alberta Nichols *was* the real thing. She stepped out of the cornfields of Illinois into the bustle of Tin Pan Alley and, through the force of her own hard work and talent, made a name and a life for herself. For that, she should be remembered



## Footnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Wilder, Alec (1990). *American Popular Song: The great innovators*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. (p. 491)

<sup>2</sup> Material supplied by Jayne Zimmer in email, photocopies, and subsequent phone conversation on April 21, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> *Shaffer's Lincoln City Directory*. (1900) Rock Island Ill: C. H. Shaffer & Co. (p. 123)

<sup>4</sup> Census information supplied by Jayne Zimmer.

<sup>5</sup> Geneology information supplied by Jayne Zimmer.

<sup>6</sup> Census information supplied by Jayne Zimmer.

<sup>7</sup> Claghorn, Charles Eugene (1996). *Women Composers and Songwriters: a concise biographical dictionary*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press. (p. 157-158)

<sup>8</sup> Information supplied by Carrie Daniels, Interim Director/Interim Archivist, University of Louisville, Kentucky.

<sup>9</sup> New York Times, March 17, 1926.

<sup>10</sup> Information supplied by Carrie Daniels, Interim Director/Interim Archivist, University of Louisville, Kentucky.

<sup>11</sup> "The School of Music Celebrates Noteworthy Milestone", Kevin Rayburn, <http://louisville.edu/music/about/75-years-of-beautiful-music>

<sup>12</sup> Information supplied by Carrie Daniels, Interim Director/Interim Archivist, University of Louisville, Kentucky.

<sup>13</sup> New York Times, March 17, 1926.

<sup>14</sup> New York Times, Dec 2, 1928.

<sup>15</sup> Boston Herald, Sept 22, 1931.

<sup>16</sup> Boston Globe, Sept 22, 1931.

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<sup>17</sup> New York Tribune, Mar 6, 1931.

<sup>18</sup> Bogle, Donald (2011). *Heat Wave: The life and career of Ethel Waters*. New York, NY: Harper Collins (p. 196).

<sup>19</sup> Boston Globe, Sept 22, 1931.

<sup>20</sup> Boston Globe, Sept 22, 1931

<sup>21</sup> Wikipedia entry for Saul Chaplin, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saul\\_Chaplin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saul_Chaplin), accessed April 26, 2011.

<sup>22</sup> New York Times: May 10, 1933 (Standard Oil); June 4, 1934 (golf); April 14, 1933 (society pages).

<sup>23</sup> Hasse, J.E. (Ed.) (2002). *Jazz: the first century*. New York, NY: William Morrow. (p. 207)

<sup>24</sup> Jensen, J., Gwathmey, J., Cullum, J. Riverwalk Jazz. (2011, April 21). Retrieved from <http://www.riverwalkjazz.org/jazznotes/womencomposers/>

<sup>25</sup> Grattan, Virginia (1993). *American Women Songwriters: A biographical dictionary*. Westport, CN: Greenwood Press. (p. 29-30).

<sup>26</sup> “Ex-radio Man Holiner Kills Self”, Los Angeles Times, Oct 31, 1958.

<sup>27</sup> Hasse, J.E. (Ed.) (2002). *Jazz: the first century*. New York: William Morrow. (p. 43)