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Guide to the

Margaret Bonds papers

1939 - 1972

Sc MG 873

Summary

Creator: Bonds, Margaret

Title: Margaret Bonds papers

Date: 1939 - 1972

Size: 5.4 linear feet (11 boxes)

Source: Purchased from Wyatt H. Day Bookseller, 2013.

Abstract: The Margaret Bonds Papers (5.4 lin. ft.), are arranged in three series: PERSONAL PAPERS (.4 lin. ft.), CORRESPONDENCE (.8 lin. ft.), and CREATIVE WORKS (4.4 lin. ft.). Margaret Bonds produced a wide range of works spanning orchestral compositions, theatrical accompaniments and traditional African-American spiritual arrangements throughout her career. She is widely credited with creating new interest in traditional African-American musical forms, history and culture. The papers document her personal life and professional process through correspondence, her work notes, lyrics, scripts and sheet music.

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Language of the Material: English

Creator History

Margaret Allison Majors, a pianist and composer, was born in Chicago, Illinois on March 3, 1913. Her father Monroe Alpheus Majors (1864-1960), was a physician, author and civil rights activist, and her mother Estella C. Bonds (1882-1957), was a respected piano teacher and church organist. Her parents divorced in 1917, and Estella Bonds resumed her maiden name and assigned it also to her daughter.

Margaret grew up in her mother's household, a regular meeting place for many of the leading African-American artistic and literary figures that either lived in or visited the Chicago area, such as singer Abbie Mitchell, composer Noble Sissle and poet Countee Cullen. Her mother began teaching her piano early in life, and Bonds composed her first musical piece at the age of five. She studied composition and piano with Florence Price and William Dawson, both of whom played an important part in her development and style.

Bonds entered Northwestern University in 1929 at the age of 16, where she was allowed to study, but was forced to find living accommodations elsewhere. Her years there were her first direct exposure to racism. While attending Northwestern she had many accomplishments; her song *Sea Ghost* won first prize in the prestigious Rodman Wannamaker competition (1932). She also received a Rosenwald Fellowship (1933), which enabled her to finish her Master's degree in music. That same year she became the first African American to play as soloist with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra at the Chicago World's Fair.

After a short lived attempt at opening a music school, the Allied Arts Academy, in Chicago in the late 1930's, Bonds relocated to New York City and began working as an editor with Clarence Williams's music publishing company, thus gaining entry into New York's popular music scene. She also studied composition with American composer Roy Harris, took piano lessons from Djane Herz at the Juilliard School of Music and was an active composer, soloist and member of a duo piano team (consisting of 3 partners: Frances Kraft 1940-1942, Calvin Jackson 1942-1945, Gerald Cook 1945-1948) in the 1940s. Their repertoire included popular and classical songs which they played at New York's nightclubs and on radio station WNYC (1944). From 1947-1953, Bonds toured, playing concerts at historically black colleges in the South, and in cities such as St. Louis, Cleveland, Toledo and Chicago. In 1956, Bonds organized the Margaret Bonds Chamber Music Society, a group of black musicians which performed mainly the work of black classical composers.

Bonds met Langston Hughes in 1936 and over the years became close friends. Their collaborations are some of the most notable of her career. She had written a piece for voice and piano for Hughes's poem the *Negro Speaks of Rivers* in 1941, and during the 1950's they collaborated frequently. The song cycles from this period include, *Songs of the Seasons* and *Three Dream Portraits*, as well as music for the Hughes play, *Shakespeare in Harlem*, which opened in New York in February 1960. The debut of her Christmas cantata, *Ballad of the Brown King*, which again used words by Hughes, premiered at East Side Settlement House and was televised by CBS in December 1960. *Ballad of the Brown King* told the story of the Three Wise Men, focusing on Balthazar, the so-called "Brown King". The work combines elements of various black musical traditions, such as jazz, blues, calypso, and spirituals. The production was performed throughout the United States and abroad. Although she was never able to visit Africa, her music was being played with increasing frequency there due to the efforts of her friends Fela Sowande and Langston Hughes.

During the 1960s Bonds served on the music committee to establish the Harlem Cultural Community Center, organized the Harlem Jazz Mobile, served as the minister of music at a church in the area, and lectured on African-American music at nearby universities. She worked in a variety of roles from production staff and music director to audition pianist and soloist for the American Theatre Wing, Paper Mill Theatre, White Barn Theater and Fifty-two Association. Commissions continued to come her way, including requests from singers Leontyne Price and Betty Allen. One of Bonds's most well-known settings, *He's Got the Whole World in His Hand*, was composed for Price in 1963. The following year, she received the Woman of the Century Award and her first of three ASCAP awards.

In 1967, Bonds moved to Los Angeles to assume the music directorship with the Los Angeles Inner City Cultural Center and Repertory, where she composed and gave music lessons to local children.

She died in 1972 at age 59. Her last major work, *Credo*, was performed by the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra one month after her death.

Note: Information for this biographical sketch was gathered from Margaret Bonds' autobiographical statement and Helen Walker Hill's book *From Spirituals to Symphonies: African-American Women Composers and Their Music*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007.

Scope and Content Note

The Margaret Bonds Papers (5.4 lin. ft.), are arranged in three series: PERSONAL PAPERS (.4 lin. ft.), CORRESPONDENCE (.8 lin. ft.), and CREATIVE WORKS (4.4 lin. ft.). Margaret Bonds produced a wide range of works spanning orchestral compositions, theatrical accompaniments and traditional African-American spiritual arrangements throughout her career. She is widely credited with creating new interest in traditional African-American musical forms, history and culture. The papers document her personal life and professional process through correspondence, her work notes, lyrics, scripts and sheet music.

Arrangement: Arranged into three series: Personal Papers (.4 lin. ft.); Correspondence (.8 lin. ft.); and Creative Works (4.4 lin. ft.).

Key Terms

Subjects

African American composers

Occupations

Composers.

Pianists

Names

Bonds, Margaret

Container List

Personal papers 1959 - 1967

This series (.4 lin. ft.) begins with a thorough, handwritten autobiographical statement containing reflections on her early development as a musician and composer, several versions of her resume, and a list of her published works. In the series are several finance-related letters, bank statements, cancelled checks, and royalty statements from Mercury Music Corporation and Chappell & Co. Incorporated (1965-1968). Lengthy address lists, several business cards, and a personal planner from 1961 with limited notes about her personal and professional meetings are included. There are several documents regarding her father's estate, cemetery receipts for Bonds and her mother, Estella Bonds, and obituaries for Margaret Bonds and composer Hall Johnson.

- b. 1 f. 1 Resumes and biographical statements 1959 - 1963
- b. 1 f. 2 Financial letters and bills
- b. 1 f. 3 Address lists 1967
- b. 1 f. 4 Address books
- b. 1 f. 5 Planner 1961
- b. 1 f. 6 Obituaries
- b. 1 f. 7 Estate documents and cemetery receipts

Correspondence 1939 - 1972

This series (.8 lin. ft.), contains letters exchanged between Bonds, her parents, other family members, friends, and professional associates. It is divided into three subseries: Family, Friends and Professional.

The FAMILY subseries (.4 lin. ft.) is comprised of correspondence between Bonds and her close family members. There are several letters from her father Monroe Alpheus Majors, notable in his own right, as a physician, civil rights activist and author. The letters from her father are somewhat difficult to decipher as he had become blind later in his life and appears to have typed them himself. Majors' letters to his daughter shed light on their relationship and his concerns as he nears the end of his life. Several letters to Bonds' mother Estella and her husband Lawrence Richardson are part of his correspondence. In general, the letters between Bonds and her mother, aunts, husband and daughter document her everyday life, family news, her travels and activities, and her musical plans and desires.

The Friends subseries (.1 lin. ft.) contains assorted letters to and from some of Bonds' friends. Much of the correspondence is about daily life and travel plans. Most notable are letters from actress Muriel Landers who writes about her tour in Europe, and from Nigerian musician and composer Fela Sowande. Letters from Sowande address a "Programme Exchange" for Nigeria that he was considering Bonds for, and a few letters of introduction he had written for her. Included with Sowande's letters are biographical and professional data, and a list of his original compositions.

The Professional subseries (.3 lin. ft.) consists of correspondence regarding her professional affiliations, awards and memberships, invitations, requests for copies of her compositions and photographs, and information about media events. In addition, newsletters from St. Philip's Church mentioning her performances, The American Guild of Musical Artists, ASCAP News, and American Society of African Culture featuring an article on African music are included.

Arranged into three subseries: Family; Friends; and Professional.

Family

- b. 2 f. 1 Bonds, Estella C 1939 - 1956
Majors, Monroe Alpheus
- b. 2 f. 2 Bonds, Margaret 1954 - 1956
- b. 2 f. 3 Bonds, Estella C 1955
- b. 2 f. 4 Richardson, Lawrence 1954

Correspondence (cont.)

Family (cont.)

- b. 2 f. 5 Boswell, Grace Majors 1949 - 1956
- b. 2 f. 6 Jeffries, Claude and Victoria 1946 - 1966
Richardson, Lawrence
- b. 2 f. 7 Bonds, Margaret 1943 - 1972
- b. 2 f. 8 Richardson, Djane 1952 - 1958
- b. 2 f. 9 Condolence letters 1972
- b. 2 f. 10-11 Richardson, Djane 1959 - 1983
Includes miscellaneous correspondence from 1963-1983.
- b. 2 f. 12 Miscellaneous family 1957 - 1964
- b. 3 f. 1 Condolence cards 1957 - 1964

Friends

- b. 3 f. 2 Abdul, Raoul 1959
- b. 3 f. 3 Cooper, Ida Cullen 1970
- b. 3 f. 4 Clark, Ruby 1960 - 1965
- b. 3 f. 5 Harper, Nese 1944 - 1967
- b. 3 f. 6 Holloman, Charlotte 1963 - 1969
- b. 3 f. 7 Holt, Nora 1959 - 1963
- b. 3 f. 8 Landers, Muriel 1952 - 1960
- b. 3 f. 9 Rorem, Ned 1951 - 1963
- b. 3 f. 10 Sowande, Fela 1957 - 1966
- b. 3 f. 11 Miscellaneous

Professional

- b. 3 f. 12 Award and membership letters 1959 - 1967
- b. 3 f. 13 From Bonds, Margaret 1955 - 1968
- b. 3 f. 14 To Bonds, Margaret 1950 - 1972
- b. 3 f. 15 Church and religious organizations 1951 - 1966
- b. 3 f. 16 Government/state 1941 - 1969
- b. 3 f. 17 Invitations 1947 - 1963
- b. 3 f. 18 Media and publishing 1956 - 1964

Music

- b. 3 f. 19 ASCAP 1952 - 1963
- b. 3 f. 20 Chappel and Company, Inc 1956 - 1974
- b. 3 f. 21 Handy Brothers Music Company 1961 - 1963
- b. 3 f. 22 National Association of Negro Musicians 1961 - 1969
- b. 3 f. 23 Miscellaneous 1949 - 1971
- b. 3 f. 24 Theater organizations 1942 1967
- b. 3 f. 25 Universities, colleges, and schools 1956 - 1963
- b. 3 f. 26 Various organizations 1956 - 1963
Includes NAACP and Ira Aldridge Society.
- b. 3 f. 27 Miscellaneous papers 1952 - 1966
- b. 3 f. 28 Newsletters

Creative works

This series (4.4 lin. ft.) is composed of lyrics, scripts, poetry and sheet music, along with printed materials such as programs and newspaper clippings related to performers and performances. It is divided into three subseries according to the creator of the works.

The Margaret Bonds subseries (1.6 lin. ft.) provides insight into Bonds' creative life and musical process. A significant portion of the subseries is comprised of her scores, arranged alphabetically by title, including compositions with both words and music, as well as her arrangements of songs. Within the sheet music is a folder of fragments and notes for piano lessons and a handwritten copy of the score for "Midtown Affair." Of interest is a composition notebook where Bonds lists her goals as pianist, composer and teacher, and six music composition books with hand written exercises and scales, and notation of spirituals and popular songs, such as "Didn't It Rain", "Deep River" and "Dancing on the Ceiling." A collection of handwritten, typed or printed lyrics composed or arranged by Bonds, along with scripts for her production "The New Kid" and "Midtown Affair" are included. In addition, there is a scrapbook with various newspaper clippings about her, and her students and associates, the Allied Arts Academy (Bonds' music school in Chicago), and performance programs, several featuring Bonds accompanying singer Etta Moten. There are several press releases about presentations given by Bonds, and a handwritten copy of her lecture for the Quest Club that discusses a variety of composers and sheds light on her own musical influences.

The Collaboration with Langston Hughes subseries (1.0 lin. ft.) holds some of the most notable works of her career. Correspondence between Bonds and Hughes discusses publishing issues, lyrics to be set to music, the travels and events they were planning or attended. The correspondence consists primarily of postcards, telegrams, short handwritten notes and greeting cards. There is also a small collection of postcards and notes to Bonds from George Houston Bass (Langston Hughes' secretary and literary assistant from 1959-1964). Copies of the librettos "Mister Jazz," "Port Town," and music cues for Ask Your Mama, along with poems and possible lyrics written by Hughes are addressed to Bonds for her consideration to set them to music. Of special interest is a typed copy of Shakespeare in Harlem with handwritten notes about the music and chord progressions written next to the text. The subseries contains two columns written for the "Chicago Defender" by Hughes, "Young Artists Do Not Live by Praise Alone" and "National Association of Negro Musicians has Great Heritage" with handwritten note thanking Bonds for her help. Several newspaper clippings and printed programs featuring Hughes, and a ticket to a show called "Music and Poetry of the Negro" with Hughes as narrator and Margaret Bonds as pianist are part of the subseries. Handwritten sheet music featuring poems by Hughes and music by Bonds is arranged alphabetically by title.

The Creative Works by Others subseries (2.2 lin. ft.) contains sheet music, scores, lyrics, poetry and scripts written by other composers. Highlights of this subseries are handwritten, bound copies of "The Griffin" by David Hughes, "Eight Inventions for Piano" (1946) by Ulysses Kay (published as the "Four Inventions for Piano", with four parts remaining unpublished), "Thumbnail Sketches of a Day in the Life of a Washerwoman" by Florence B. Price, and manuscript sheet music for "A Quiet Afternoon – Nine Piano Pieces" and "Second Sonata for Piano" by Bonds' student and Pulitzer Prize winner Ned Rorem. In addition, there is a typed copy of Countée Cullen's "Heritage" and a printed copy of "Mary, Mother of Christ" autographed by Countée Cullen. Sheet music is arranged alphabetically by composer and by title. A small collection of practice sheet music by some notable composers: Harry T. Burleigh, Hall Johnson and Florence B. Price are from the "Estella C. Bonds Collection." The printed materials in this subseries include performance programs of others performing Margaret Bonds' songs and newspaper clippings about other artists.

Arranged into three subseries according to the creator of the works: Margaret Bonds; Collaboration with Langston Hughes; and Works by others.

Margaret Bonds

- b. 4 f. 1 Conference lectures and press releases
- b. 4 f. 2 Composition notebook with work notes
- b. 4 f. 3-4 Music composition books (6)
- b. 4 f. 5 Lyrics by Bonds, Margaret
- b. 4 f. 6 Lyrics by Bonds, Margaret and Richman, Ernie
- b. 4 f. 7-8 Scripts
Includes *The New Kid* and *Midtown Affair*.

Creative works (cont.)
Margaret Bonds (cont.)

- b. 4 f. 9-10 **Programs**
Includes programs for Margaret Bonds's performances and the Inner City Theatre.
 - b. 4 f. 11 **Newspaper clippings**
 - b. 4 f. 12 **Music instruction books**
 - b. 4a **Scrapbook**
 - Sheet music**
 - b. 5 f. 1 **A - F**
 - b. 5 f. 2 **G - L**
 - b. 5 f. 3 **M - R**
 - b. 5 f. 4 **S - Z**
 - b. 5 f. 5 **Miscellaneous**
Includes fragments and lesson materials.
 - b. 5 f. 6-7 **Scores**
Includes *Midtown Affair* and *Peachtree Street*.
- Collaboration with Langston Hughes**
- b. 6 f. 1 **Biographical information on Langston Hughes**
 - Correspondence**
 - b. 6 f. 2 **Bonds and Hughes 1940 - 1965**
 - b. 6 f. 3 **Hughes and others**
 - b. 6 f. 4 **Bonds and Bass, George 1961 - 1963**
 - b. 6 f. 5 **Libretto**
 - b. 6 f. 6 **Lyrics**
 - b. 6 f. 7 **Poetry**
 - b. 6 f. 8 **Newspaper clippings**
 - b. 6 f. 9 **Printed programs**
 - b. 6 f. 10 **Printed sheet music**
Includes *Freedom Land* by Langston Hughes.
 - Sheet music**
 - b. 7 f. 1 **Bonds, Margaret and Hughes, Langston**
 - b. 7 f. 2 **Hughes, Langston**
- Works by others**
- Scores**
 - b. 7 f. 3 *Hughes, David, The Griffin*
 - b. 7 f. 4 *Kay, Ulysses, Eight Inventions for Piano*
 - b. 7 f. 5 **Price, Florence**
 - b. 7 f. 6 **Rorem, Ned**
 - Sheet music**
 - b. 7 f. 7 **Cullen, Countee (words by)**
 - b. 7 f. 8 **Dett, R. Nathaniel**
 - b. 7 f. 9 *Gershwin, George and Ira, Porgy and Bess*
 - Sheet music by composer/arranger**
 - b. 7 f. 10 **A - G**

Creative works (cont.)

Works by others (cont.)

Sheet music by composer/arranger (cont.)

- b. 7 f. 11 H - O
- b. 7 f. 12 R - Z
- b. 7 f. 13 Sheet music by title
Arranged alphabetically.
Printed sheet music
 - b. 8 f. 1 Grenet, Eliseo
 - b. 8 f. 2 McKinney, Bessie
 - b. 8 f. 3 Nickerson, Camille
 - b. 8 f. 4 White, Clarence Cameron
 - b. 8 f. 5 Classical
 - b. 8 f. 6-9 Popular
Includes a book of popular Cuban music; *Guys and Dolls*; and *West Side Story*.
- b. 9 Estella C. Bonds collection of sheet music
Traditional and spiritual music.
- b. 10 f. 1 Lyrics
Poetry
 - b. 10 f. 2 Cuney, Waring
 - b. 10 f. 3 Miscellaneous
 - b. 10 f. 4 Scripts
Includes scripts by Helen Calogredes and cowritten by Ray Kabaker and Stefan Morad.
- b. 10 f. 5-6 Programs
Includes programs of others performing music by Margaret Bonds and miscellaneous programs.
- b. 10 f. 7 Newspaper clippings