



The New York Public Library
Billy Rose Theatre Division

Guide to the

Portia Nelson papers

1939-2000

*T-Mss 2001-039

Compiled by Diana Bertolini, 2014

Summary

Creator: Nelson, Portia

Title: Portia Nelson papers

Date: 1939-2000

Size: 5.53 linear feet (13 boxes)

Source: Transferred from Rodgers and Hammerstein Archive of Recorded Sound in 2001.

Abstract: Portia Nelson (1920-2001) was an American singer, actress, songwriter and author. Her performing career was primarily in cabaret and recordings, but she also appeared in film and stage musicals. She also wrote songs, musicals, poems, and the popular book, *There's a Hole in My Sidewalk*. The Portia Nelson papers document her career and life with scripts, sheet music, photographs, scrapbooks, correspondence, and artwork.

Access: Some collections held by the Dance, Music, Recorded Sound, and Theatre Divisions at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts are held off-site and must be requested in advance. Please check the collection records in **the NYPL's online catalog** for detailed location information. For general guidance about requesting offsite materials, please consult: <https://www.nypl.org/about/locations/lpa/requesting-archival-materials>

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Processing note: Compiled by Diana Bertolini, 2014

Creator History

Portia Nelson was born Betty Mae Nelson on March 27, 1920 in Brigham City, Utah. Growing up on a family farm, Nelson taught herself to play the piano. She attended Weber College in Ogden, Utah, where she performed in shows and wrote songs and sketches. Nelson became famous going by a

nickname she'd taken from a popular radio show, *Portia Saves the World*.

After college, Nelson went to Los Angeles, where she joined the King Sisters musical group, as a member of the band. Through the King Sisters, she made connections at Universal Studios, where she worked as a publicist. She was discovered singing for free in a Los Angeles nightclub, by CBS head Walter Gross and soon signed a contract with Columbia Records.

During the 1950s Nelson was primarily a cabaret singer, performing successful engagements at such New York clubs as *The Blue Angel*, *Bon Soir*, and *Le Ruban Bleu*. Her recording career was also taking off. In 1952 and 1953 she performed on four studio recordings of musicals produced by Goddard Lieberson: *Oklahoma!*, *Roberta*, *On Your Toes*, and *The Boys from Syracuse*. Nelson recorded several solo albums during the 1950s, such as *Love Songs for a Late Evening* (1952), *Autumn Leaves* (1956), *Let Me Love You: Portia Nelson Sings the Love Songs of Bart Howard* (1956), and *Sunday in New York* (1959). She also produced a few of her own albums, as well as Elaine Stritch's *Stritch* (1955).

Nelson's Broadway career began with one of Broadway's most prestigious flops, *The Golden Apple* (1954). The musical, with a score by Jerome Moross and John Latouche, updated Homer's great epics to turn of the century Washington State. It only ran a few months but has developed into a cult favorite of many theatre fans. Nelson played Miss Minerva Oliver. Her only other Broadway appearance was in the short-lived revue, *Almost Crazy* (1955). In 1976, Nelson performed in another musical, destined for a cult following, *The Baker's Wife*. The Stephen Schwartz musical closed out of town and never made it to Broadway, but many of the songs, especially "Meadowlark" have become cabaret standards. Nelson appeared in regional productions of *Apollo* and *Miss Agnes*, and *The Boyfriend*.

Nelson's most remembered film role was Sister Berthe in *The Sound of Music* (1965). She appeared in such films as *The Trouble with Angels* (1966), *Doctor Doolittle* (1967), and *The Other* (1972). She was also on a few television series, most notably *All My Children*, and was in many television commercials.

Nelson began writing songs in high school and often performed her own compositions in her cabaret acts. Her songs were also covered by other prominent performers such as Jane Russell, Jo Stafford, Marilyn Horne, and Debbie Reynolds. In 1996 she released an album of her songs, *Portia Nelson: This Life: Her Songs and Her Friend*. In 1997 she won the MAC (Manhattan Association of Cabarets and Clubs) Award for Song of the Year for "As I Remember Him." She wrote book, concept, music, and lyrics for the musicals *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Happy Prince*.

After her first bout with cancer during the late 1970s Nelson wrote a book called *There's a Hole in My Sidewalk*, which she described as "a series of thoughts in free verse." The first poem, from which the book takes its title, has been popular with addiction recovery, self-help, and therapy groups since its publication.

Portia Nelson died of cancer in New York City on March 6, 2001.

Scope and Content Note

Nelson's career as a performer, which encompassed singing in cabarets, acting in theatre, film and television, and appearing in commercials, is documented with scripts, photographs, publicity materials, artwork, and sheet music. There are scripts for films Nelson appeared in, such as *The Sound of Music*, *Doctor Doolittle*, and *The Other*; and the television special *The Ghost of Thomas Kempe*. Also included is a copy of *The Sound of Music: The Making of America's Favorite Movie*, (1993), in which some of Nelson's personal photographs were reproduced, inscribed by the author. A mounted photo collage

illustrates Nelson's extensive work in television commercials. There is a painting (with fabric swatches) of Nelson's costume for *The Golden Apple*, and a notebook of Nelson's sketches of her fellow actors in the musical *The Baker's Wife*. There are many photographs of Nelson performing in night clubs and on stage, as well as production shots from films. Her live cabaret performances are documented with flyers, clippings, and posters for cabaret engagements; a photograph of various cabaret performers; and a silhouette drawing of Nelson singing into her microphone. Nelson's career as a recording artist is represented by album covers and liner notes from solo albums and cast albums on which she performed. There is also sheet music for several songs by the composer Bart Howard. Materials collected and created by Nelson during her performing career may also be found in the scrapbooks.

Nelson's writing career is documented with scripts, outlines, sheet music, and artwork. There are scripts for projects such as *A Pocket Filled with Dreams*, *Debbie Reynolds and the Sound of Children*, *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere*, *The House of the Seven Lively Hearts*, and *Tahoe: The World of Temple Jones*. In addition to scripts, photographs and flyers also document *Sleeping Beauty*; and slides of color animation renderings document *The Happy Prince*. Also contained here are scripts, photographs, programs, and notes from the 1984 performance piece Nelson adapted from her book, *There's a Hole in My Sidewalk*. There is sheet music from musical projects with songs by Nelson, such as *The Happy Prince*, and *Debbie Reynolds and The Sound of Children*; as well as individual songs by Nelson, including "Make a Rainbow," the song performed by Marilyn Horne at President Clinton's inauguration. There are drafts of two poetry collections, *Lost*, and *The We of Us*, which Nelson wrote with Howard Lee. Nelson was constantly working on new projects on her own or with collaborators like Hal Hackaday, Andrew Burnstine, and Scott and Vivian Holtzman. These proposed projects, which are documented here with outlines, proposals, notes of ideas, and sometimes with script excerpts, song lyrics, and sheet music, include *The Adventures of Greta Goose*; *The Third By-Line...Barrington*; *Claudia Claus*; *Cucumber, the Second*; *Granny*; *It's in the Star*; *Kosmo Kat*; *The Last Two Weeks in August (Outline)*; *Look Out for Harriet*; a *Micheline Musselli Pozzo di Borgo* biography; *Paper*; *Picadilly Pickle*; *The Prank, Rockefeller Center*; *See as the Children See*; *There's a Hole in My Sidewalk Musical*; *Waltons Idea*; *Wanderguy*; and *The Wizard That Was*. Materials collected and created by Nelson in her writing career may also be found in the scrapbooks.

Personal materials document Nelson's private life and her career in general. Biographies, interviews, clippings, headshots, resumes, and personal photographs of Nelson with friends and colleagues are present. Her achievements are documented with certificates, photographs, flyers, and invitations from awards ceremonies; and a thank you letter from Bill Clinton. Also contained here is a commemorative volume of facsimiles of letters from the Columbia Records president and producer Goddard Lieberson, who Nelson worked with many times during the 1950s.

Most of Nelson's correspondence contained here consists of cards and letters written to her during the 1980s and 1990s, including get well cards and birthday cards from 1989 to 1990, signed with first names only. Nelson's correspondents from 1995 included fans and friends like Jerry Herman, Burt Bacharach, Julie Andrews, Alan and Marilyn Bergman, and Sheldon Harnick. Their letters often include praise for her book, *There's a Hole in My Sidewalk* and her album, *This Life*; as well as general life and career updates. A folder of 1975 correspondence between Nelson and Howard Lee documents a dispute they had over the copyright to the song "Half a Love is Better than None," and also contains a copy of Lee and Nelson's 1970 collaboration "The We of Us." There is one folder of contracts and business correspondence. Nelson kept many letters sent to her by fans from 1977 to 1994.

Nelson's scrapbooks, arranged by topic, contain photographs, flyers, adds, programs, clippings, and correspondence. The scrapbook "Honors Received" documents the performance of Nelson's song "Make a Rainbow" at the 1992 Clinton inauguration; her being made a charter member of the organization *Women in Film: The Legacy of Women in Film and Television 1992*; her being named a

Distinguished Utahn in 1996; and her receiving the 1996 Backstage Bistro Awards Lifetime Achievement Award. The scrapbook "Books, Songs, Musicals" documents Nelson's performing and writing career from 1963 to 1997, with materials created and collected while she worked in cabaret, in the show Demi-Dozen, and while she wrote the book and the subsequent performance piece, There's a Hole in My Sidewalk. There are also photographs, flyers, and articles covering Nelson's 1997 MAC Award-winning song: "As I Remember Him." The two scrapbooks entitled "Film" cover Nelson's early life, college years, and the beginning of her career in the film industry; as well as The Sound of Music, Doctor Doolittle, The Trouble with Angels, The Other, All My Children, and various commercials. These also contain photographs, publicity materials, and autobiographical notes Nelson wrote on the filming of The Sound of Music. The scrapbook "Stage" covers Nelson's theatre career from 1953 to 1978, with photographs, programs, flyers, and clippings she collected while appearing in The Golden Apple, The Baker's Wife, and Apollo and Miss Agnes.

Arrangement: This collection is arranged in the following groups: Performance Materials, Writings, Personal Files, and Scrapbooks.

Key Terms

Occupations

Actresses
Composers
Lyricists
Pianists
Poets
Singers
Writers

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Correspondence
Photographs
Scores
Scrapbooks
Scripts

Subjects

Motion pictures
Musical films
Musicals -- New York (State) -- New York -- 20th century
Nightclubs -- New York (State) -- New York
Popular music

Container List

- Performance Materials 1948-1999
 - b. 1 f. 1 Album Covers and Liner notes
 - b. 1 f. 2 *The Baker's Wife* 1976
 - b. 1 f. 3 Cabaret Flyers and Clippings 1990-1999
 - b. 12 f. 1 *The Golden Apple* 1954
 - b. 1 f. 4 Photographs of Nelson in Performance 1950s-1990s
 - b. 12 f. 2 Posters and Photographs 1984
- Scripts
 - b. 1 f. 5 *Doctor Doolittle* 1966
 - b. 1 f. 6 *The Ghost of Thomas Kempe* 1979
 - b. 1 f. 7 *The Other* 1971
 - b. 2 f. 1-2 *The Sound of Music* 1964, 1993
Includes 1993 book *The Sound of Music: The Making of America's Favorite Film*
 - b. 10 f. 1-3 Songs by Bart Howard 1948-1965
Sheet Music
 - b. 10 f. 4 Television Commercials
Photograph Collage
- Writings 1968-1995
 - Debbie Reynolds and the Sound of Children* 1969
 - b. 2 f. 3 Script
 - b. 11 f. 1 Sheet Music
The Happy Prince 1970s-1995
 - b. 12 f. 3 Animation Paintings
 - b. 2 f. 4-6 Scripts and Color Animation Renderings
 - b. 3 f. 1-3 Scripts
 - b. 11 f. 2-3 Sheet Music
 - b. 3 f. 4 *The House of the Seven Lively Hearts*
 - b. 3 f. 8 *Lost*
Poetry Collection
 - b. 3 f. 5 *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere* 1972
 - b. 3 f. 6-7 *Sleeping Beauty* 1972
 - b. 4 f. 1-4 *There's a Hole in My Sidewalk* 1984
 - b. 4 f. 5 *The We of Us* 1970
Poetry Collection
- Outlines and Proposals
 - b. 4 f. 6-11 B-G
 - b. 5 f. 1-15 K-W
 - b. 11 f. 4-5 Songs by Nelson 1968-1993
Sheet Music
- Personal 1950s-2000
 - b. 5 f. 16 Awards 1990s

Personal (cont.)

- b. 11 f. 6 Award Certificate 1992
- b. 5 f. 17-19 Biographies, Interviews, Headshots, and Resumes 1980-2000
 - b. 6 f. 1 Contracts and Business Correspondence 1972-1981
 - Correspondence
 - b. 6 f. 2-6 1970-1997
 - b. 7 f. 1-2 1989-1992
 - b. 7 f. 3-5 Photographs 1950s-1990s
 - b. 12 f. 3 Drawing of Nelson 1962
 - b. 13 f. 1 Doll
- Scrapbooks 1939-1997
 - b. 8 f. 1 Books, Songs, Musicals 1963-1997
 - b. 8 f. 2-3 Cabaret 1950-2000
 - b. 8 f. 4 Early Years and Cabaret 1939-1981
 - b. 9 f. 1-3 Film, Commercials 1966-1994
 - b. 9 f. 4 Honors Received 1992-1997
 - b. 8 f. 5 Stage 1953-1978