

NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY  
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture  
515 Malcolm X Boulevard  
New York, New York 10037-1801

HELEN ARMSTEAD-JOHNSON THEATER COLLECTION  
Opal D. Cooper Papers, 1915-1974, n.d.  
Sc MG 599

**Bulk Dates:** 1920-1935

**Extent:** Shelving Unit: 1 archival box, 3 pizza boxes  
Linear feet: 1.4 linear ft.

**Source and Date:** Helen Armstead-Johnson, December 1996.

**Processor's Name:** Steven G. Fullwood

**Date Finding Aid Completed:** October 2000

**Processed:** Processed as part of the *Blacks on Stage: African-American Theater Arts Collections Project*. Funding was provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the City and State of New York.

**Abstract:** Opal D. Cooper (1889?-1974) was a singer, pianist and actor. Collection contains biographical information, letters, and writings by Cooper, programs, sheet music, a scrapbook, and miscellaneous materials.

**Provenance:** The collection was donated to Helen Armstead-Johnson by Cooper's widow, Cora Cooper. It was subsequently donated by Helen Armstead-Johnson, along with other theater-related collections to the Schomburg Center.

**Organization note:** Collection is organized in two series: Personal Papers and Professional Papers.

**Access:** Unrestricted access

**Reproductions:** All requests subject to limitations noted in divisional policies on reproduction.

**Copyright:** Information on copyright (literary rights) available from repository.

**Other Source of Description:** RLIN #: NYPW00-A200

**Citation:** [Item], Opal D. Cooper Collection, Helen Armstead-Johnson Theater Collection, Sc MG 599, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library.

**Index Terms**

**Names:** Opal D. Cooper, Helen Armstead-Johnson.

**Subjects:** Actors; Afro-American Actors; Afro-American Composers; Afro-Americans in the Performing Arts; Afro-American Musicians; Afro-American Singers, Composers, Musicians, Singers.

## **Table of Contents**

Preface.....	i
Biographical Sketch.....	1
Scope and Content.....	1
Provenance.....	3
Container List.....	4
Separation Record.....	5

## **Preface**

This inventory was prepared as part of an archival preservation project to arrange, describe and catalog resources essential for the study of the African-American theater history. The necessary staff and supplies for the *Blacks on Stage: African-American Theater Arts Collections Project* were made available through a combination of funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the City and State of New York.

**OPAL D. COOPER (1889?-1974). PAPERS, 1915-1974, n.d. (bulk dates, 1920-1935).  
1 archival box, 3 flat boxes (1.4 linear feet).**

### **Biographical Sketch**

Opal D. Cooper was a singer, pianist and actor who experienced marginal success in the United States and parts of Europe during the 1920s and 1930s. Born in Cromwell, Kentucky (noted in some of his records as Cromwell, Ohio), one of Cooper first appearances was in the musical comedy *Darkydom* (book by Henry Troy, lyrics by Jesse Shipp, and music by Will Marion Cook) at the Lafayette Theater in New York City in 1915. The play also featured the comedy duo Miller and Lyles. Two years later, Cooper appeared as Madison Sparrow in the play *The Rider of Dreams*, written by Ridgely Torrence. One newspaper reported that Cooper was so nervous opening night that he gave a "miserable" performance. In later shows, his performance improved, and was generally well received as indicated by critic Louis Sherman who wrote that "...Cooper as the Rider of Dreams, a mixture of poet, savage and vagabond, brought down the house time and time again." Often described by critics as "robust," "large," or "a bronze giant," Cooper continued to make a name for himself by appearing at church benefits and as a featured guest in minstrel variety shows in the New York area.

In 1918, Cooper enlisted in the United States Army, and was assigned to the 807 Pioneer International Band, which performed overseas. He rose to the rank of sergeant, and following his discharge in 1919 he remained in Europe and joined the American Legion in Paris.

From 1920 to 1939, 'Ole' Cooper, as he was sometimes known, worked as a singer and musician in various theaters and restaurants in Paris, other parts of Europe, and in India. As a result of the lack of work due to the onset of World War II, he returned to the United States and resumed his career performing in clubs in New York City and in Hartsdale, New York.

Cooper performed with a number of bands during his career. Before joining the service, he was a member of the James Reese Europe's Octette of Singers and Players, managed by Noble Sissle. Other bands included the Five Red Devils and the International Four which featured Sammy Richardson, Freddy Brown and Wilbur White. He also performed in a group with composer DeKoven Thompson and singer Creighton Thompson, two cast members of the aforementioned *Darkydom*. Throughout his career, Cooper appeared alongside prominent singers and musicians of their day, among them Abbie Mitchell, Ella Fitzgerald, W.C. Handy, C. Luckeyth "Lucky" Roberts, Elizabeth Welch and Sidney Easton.

In 1949, Cooper married Cora Outten. In the late 1960s, the couple lived in the Bronx and Cooper worked as a licensed taxi driver, an occupation he held until his death in 1974.

### **Scope and Content**

The Opal D. Cooper Papers span the years 1918-1975, and highlight aspects of Cooper's career as a musician. Since Cooper spent much of his career performing in Paris, some of the documents are written and printed in French. The collection is arranged in two series, **PERSONAL PAPERS** and **PROFESSIONAL PAPERS**.

**PERSONAL PAPERS** includes passports and other forms of identification including membership cards from the Association of Musicians of Greater New York, the American Legion, the Negro Actors Guild, a personal business card and chauffeur and taxi driver licenses. Also included is a copy of Cooper's honorable discharge from the U.S. Army. Letters, 1914-1974, found in this series contain information about Cooper's career in the U.S. Army, principally illuminating his career as a musician performing in Paris and New York. Other subjects include the American Legion, Local 802, A.F.M., and personal matters. Among his correspondents are Elliot Carpenter's wife, Mauvolyene, and Rollin (Van) Smith. There is also a letter from Helen Armstead-Johnson to Cooper's widow, Cora concerning her husband. The miscellaneous material includes an obituary, an *Extract Du Registre D'Immatriculation* (Extract of the Register of Registration) issued by the Republic of France to foreign residents. Also included are two artists' contracts (both dated 1935), and an application for Trades and Skilled Occupations to the United States Civil Service Commission. The application contains information about Cooper's employment in the military and as a musician living in Paris, as well as personal information.

**PROFESSIONAL PAPERS** is comprised of three subseries, **Writings, Programs, Music**, in addition to a Scrapbook and folder of Miscellaneous materials. The first subseries, **Writings, n.d.**, consists of two folders, Composition Notebook and Index Cards, n.d., and Skits, Lyrics and Other Writing, n.d. Both folders are filled with notes for lyrics and skits, and are distinguished primarily by the different formats on which they appear. Included in the second folder are handwritten and typed notes of the aforementioned genres.

The **Programs, 1932-1940, n.d.**, subseries contains programs from shows that Cooper performed in in Paris and New York. There are programs for the play *The Rider of Dreams* in 1917, and for grand openings where Cooper shared featured billing with Elizabeth Welch, John "Babyface" Maclin, and Charles Lewis. There is also a program for the musical *Marie Galante*, which featured Cooper in the orchestra and a program for Cooper's appearance at the Taj Mahal Hotel in India in 1936.

The **Music, 1901-1954, n.d.**, subseries, is divided into two categories, Black Composers and Other Composers, containing both manuscripts and sheet music, and is the largest component of the collection. Both categories contain music performed by Cooper, the majority of which was created by white composers. The Black Composers found here are Will Marion Cook, W.C. Handy, Eubie Blake, J. Rosamond Johnson, Duke Ellington, Lew Brown, Ray Henderson, Fleece Moore, Arthur Porter, Antoine "Fats" Domino, and Nat King Cole. Other Composers are arranged alphabetically, and contain such composers as Mozart, Beethoven, and Cole Porter. In addition, there are two music books, Opera Songs, 1901, and The Everybody Sing Book, 1932.

The Scrapbook 1915-1935 (1915-1917) contains newspaper clippings of reviews of plays and appearances by Cooper that were pasted into the volume with no particular order. The majority of the reviews pertain to three one-act plays produced on Broadway in 1917 all written by

Ridgely Torrence. The three plays: *The Rider of Dreams* (in which Cooper appeared), *Granny Maumee*, and *Simon the Cyrenian*, were directed by Robert Edmond Jones, who was also the set designer. J. Rosamond Johnson was the show's musical director, accompanied by the Clef Club Orchestra. Reviews of the three dramas appeared in several newspapers. Other play reviews include *A Fool There Was*, *St Augustine's Vaudeville*, and *Darkydom* (Cooper appeared in all of these plays). Reviews of Cooper's performances at the Café de Paris and the Taj Mahal (1927 and 1935) are also in the scrapbook. In addition, there is a flyer featuring Cooper and Lee Hutchinson, a notice of Cooper appearing as a tenor at an African Methodist Episcopal Church, and an editorial in the Crisis on Mrs. Emily Hapgood, producer of Torrence's three one-act plays.

The Miscellaneous, 1917-1942, n.d., folder contains a generous amount of clippings, table cards, hand cards, reviews of shows featuring Cooper, and an invitation to the inauguration of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1941. There are also notes by Helen Armstead-Johnson which contains information on Cooper's career and contact information for George Outten, Cooper's brother-in-law.

### **Provenance**

The collection was donated to Armstead-Johnson Foundation for Theater Research by Cooper's widow, Cora. It was subsequently donated by Helen Armstead-Johnson, along with other theater-related collections to the Schomburg Center.

Processed by Steven G. Fullwood  
October 2000

Container List

<u>Box</u>	<u>Folder</u>	
1		PERSONAL PAPERS
	1	Passports and Identification Cards, 1930-1974
	2	Miscellaneous, 1931, 1935, 1955, 1974, n.d.
		PROFESSIONAL PAPERS
		Writings
	3	Composition Notebooks and Index Cards, n.d.
	4	Skits, lyrics and other writing, n.d.
	5	Programs, 1915, 1932-1935, 1940, 1951, n.d.
	6	Miscellaneous, 1917-1942, n.d.
		Music
	7	Black Composers
2		Other Composers
	1	A
	2	B
	3	C
	4	D
	5	E – F
	6	G – H
	7	I – J
	8	K – L
3	1	M – N
	2	O – R
	3	S
	4	T
	5	U – W
	6	X – Z, fragments
	7	<u>Opera Songs, 1901, and The Everybody Sing Book,</u> 1932, Sheet Music Booklets
4	1	Scrapbook

**SEPARATION RECORD**

The following items were removed from:

**Name of Collection/Papers** Opal D. Cooper Papers

**Accession Number** SCM96-38, MG 599

**Donor:** Helen Armstead-Johnson

**Gift** X                    **Purchase** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date received:** December 1996

**Date transferred:** December 1996

The item(s) listed below have been sent to the division indicated, either to be retained or disposed of there. Any items that should receive special disposition are clearly marked.

**Schomburg Photographs and Print Division:**

One folder of photographs.

**Schomburg Art and Artifacts Division:**

White dress shirt, gray tie, black tuxedo jacket/pants, gray kimono, female amateur costume:  
jacket with (faded butterscotch), check vest, yellow pants, worn by mother of Mrs. Jackie  
Partington, Jr. (Mom's Mabley's mother-in-law.)