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HELEN ARMSTEAD-JOHNSON THEATER COLLECTION
Sidney Easton Papers, 1913-1980, n.d.

Sc MG 599

Bulk Dates: None

Extent: Shelving Unit: 2 archival boxes, 1 scrapbook
Linear feet: 1.6 linear ft.

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

Processor's Name: Steven G. Fullwood

Date Finding Aid Completed: December 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: Sidney Easton (1886-1971) was an actor, playwright and songwriter. Collection contains personal and professional papers including letters, writings by Easton, legal documents regarding his suit against 20th Century-Fox Corporation, and research notes.

Provenance: The collection was donated to Armstead-Johnson Foundation for Theater Research by Easton's widow, Harriet, in the mid 1970s. It was subsequently donated by Helen Armstead-Johnson, along with other theater-related collections to the Schomburg Center.

Organization note: Collection is organized in four series: Personal and Professional, Writings, Legal and Helen Armstead-Johnson Notes.

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 #: NYPW01-A13

Citation: [Item], Sidney Easton 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:

Sidney Easton, Bert Howell, Helen Armstead-Johnson,
Ethel Waters

Subject:

20th Century-Fox Film Corporation; Action and Defenses;
Actors; Afro-American Actors; Afro-American
Composers; Afro-American Dramatists; Afro-American
in the Performing Arts; Afro-American Musicians;
American Drama, Afro-American Authors; Composers,
Lifeboat; Playwrights; Vaudeville, United States.

SIDNEY EASTON
PAPERS

The New York Public Library
Schomburg Center for Research
in Black Culture
515 Malcolm X Boulevard
New York, New York 10037

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Preface

This inventory was prepared as part of an archival preservation project to arrange, describe and catalog resources essential for the study of 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.

SIDNEY EASTON (1886-1971). PAPERS, 1913-1980, n.d.
3 archival boxes (1.6 linear feet).

Biographical Sketch

Sidney Easton, actor, playwright and songwriter was from Savannah, Georgia, the first born of six children of King and Eva Easton. His father worked on the railroad and for the Merchant and Miners Steamship Company. Easton ventured into show business for the first time at the age of twelve when he and his friends produced an animal tent show with stray cats and a kazoo band. Shortly thereafter, Easton went to work for the John Robinson Circus and later the A.G. Allan Minstrel Show.

In 1913, Easton married Sarah Dooley, a fellow performer, who he met while they both worked at the Savannah Theatre. He performed with his wife for a number of years, until she died in the 1920s. Devastated by his loss, Easton took six months off from show business.

During the 1930s and 1940s, Easton's career was on an upswing; he collaborated with Tom Delaney to write a song called "Jump Steady Ball," which was the first recording by Ethel Waters. Easton and Waters went on to collaborate on "Go Back to Where You Stayed Last Night," a song Waters included in her repertoire. Pearl Bailey also recorded this tune in later years. Other songs written by Easton include "When the Melon's Ripe in Dixie, That's When I'm Coming Home," and "Who's Dat Says 'Who's Dat.'"

Throughout his fifty years in show business, Easton brushed shoulders with a number of show business luminaries such as W.C. Handy, Canada Lee, Leigh Whipper, and Tim Moore ("Kingfish" from the television show Amos and Andy), and also worked with the parents of the Nicholas Brothers.

Easton appeared as an actor and musician in many films, plays, and a few television shows and programs. The films include His Woman (1931), starring Gary Cooper and Claudette Colbert; In the Garden of Eatin', a short with Ethel Merman; Drums of the Night, with Sheldon Leonard and Fredi Washington; Othello in Harlem, Murder on Lenox Avenue (1935) and Killer Diller (1948) with Dewey Pigmeat Markhan and Babe Matthews.

He appeared in the road company of *Shuffle Along* as the lead 'Steve Jenkins,' and in *Sons of the Rest* (1927). The latter was produced by Easton and Joe Simms, with music and lyrics by Easton and Robert Warfield. Also in the 1930s, Easton toured with a number of acts including Kilpatrick's Minstrels, which was staged by J.A. Shipp. It was during this time that he married Harriet G. Hill, with whom he had one child, Sidney, Jr.

Other plays he appeared in were *How Have You Been* (1925), *Darktown Scandals* (1927) and *Miss Trudie Fair* (1954), which also was written by Easton and directed by Stanley Greene. The play

starred Juanita Bethea and Frank Catrell. The following year, Easton appeared as a guest artist with Eva Jessye's Choir in "Minstrelsy U.S.A." at Pennsylvania State University. In television, Easton had a role on the series The Black Robe (1950) and played Isaac in the Hallmark sponsored production of The Green Pastures.

Easton formed a number of comedic acts and musical partnerships during his career including Easton and Easton (featuring Bob Ricketts and others), Easton and (Jimmy) Stewart, Easton and Baby Goins Joyce and Easton and (Bert) Howell. The last duo, Easton and Howell, which occasionally featured singer and dancer Martha Copeland, had the longest association.

In the 1940s, Easton sued 20th Century-Fox Film Corporation charging them with having used his play, *Lifeboat #13* as the basis for the film Lifeboat, starring Tallulah Bankhead and co-starring Canada Lee. In his memoirs, Easton claims that Leigh Whipper took the play to Hollywood and sold it without his permission. Easton settled four years later with the film company for a few thousand dollars, and relinquished the copyright for the play.

Source:

Sidney Easton, "Autobiography," 316 pages, Sidney Easton Collection.

Scope and Content

The Sidney Easton Collection spans the years, 1913-1980, and partially documents aspects of Easton's long and varied career in show business.

The collection is arranged into four series, **Personal and Professional Papers, Writings, Legal,** and **Helen Armstead-Johnson Notes**. The first series, **Personal and Professional Papers, 1913-1983, n.d.**, contains Easton's marriage license to Sarah Dooley, his first wife. Other materials in this series are a small amount of career related documents including advertisements for Easton and Howell that appear to have been taken from a scrapbook. This file also includes three programs, one featuring

Easton and Howell in Quebec, Canada. The clippings contain information about Easton's performances and activities. There is also a file of sheet and manuscript music written by others that Easton probably performed. Included here are two copies of sheet music for the Alex Rogers and Bert Williams' classic "Nobody," autographed by Eva Jessye. In addition, there are two pieces of manuscript music of "Judge Roy Hyde" by Sheldon Brooks, Jr. and Edgar J. Hayes, and "I'm Taking Back All Those Clothes" by Sheldon Brooks, Jr. and Clarence Muse. There is also a list of all the performers with whom Easton had some association over the span of fifty years in show business.

The Miscellaneous file contains letters from Easton's second wife, Harriet to Helen Armstead-Johnson regarding Sidney Easton's papers. This file also contains printed materials. Of interest is a scrapbook, 1928-1934, n.d., essentially containing numerous reviews of performances by Easton and Howell, Easton and Easton, Easton and Stewart, and Easton and Baby Goins Joyce in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In addition, there is a souvenir program from the S.S. Haiti, aboard which he sailed to Haiti to film a sequence of Drums of the Night, and an article on C. Luckeyth "Lucky" Roberts, one of Easton's songwriting contemporaries, by George S. Schuyler.

The **WRITINGS, 1920-1950, n.d.**, series is divided into four subseries: Autobiography, Play Scripts, Other Writings and Music. These subseries represent the different genres of Easton's work. The Autobiography file, c.1966, contains Easton's 316-page typescript memoir. There is also a 30-page synopsis of the autobiography.

The Play Scripts, n.d., subseries includes the plays *Lifeboat #13*, *Miss Trudie Fair*, *The Obliging Burglar*, *Shanty Car* and the playlet *She Never Heard of the Blues*.

In the Other Writings, n.d., file there are monologues, short stories, skits and television scripts, in addition to a partial list of songs written by Easton.

The Music, 1920, 1932, 1950, n.d., subseries consists of both manuscript and sheet music. There is manuscript music for "Shanty Car," parts of the songs "Rhythm of Song," "I Ain't Poor No More," "Enjoy Yourself," and a few untitled pieces. Also found here are a number of pieces of sheet music written by Easton including "Who's Dat Says 'Who's Dat,'" "When the Melon's Ripe in Dixie, That's When I'm Coming Home," and a book of sheet music, "Ten Original Jazz Tunes," all of which were written by Easton.

The **LEGAL, 1944-1947, n.d.**, series documents Easton's claim against Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation. It contains correspondence between Easton and his lawyers B. Leo Schwartz and Charles S. Rosenschein, an affidavit given by Easton, settlement documents pertaining to the case, and clippings. In addition there are two versions of Lifeboat, a manuscript by John Steinbeck and a screenplay by Jo Swerling. Easton's *Lifeboat* #13 can be found in the WRITINGS series.

The last series, **HELEN ARMSTEAD-JOHNSON NOTES, n.d.**, contains notes Johnson kept while researching Easton and her communications with his wife, Harriet.

Povenance

The collection was donated to Armstead-Johnson Foundation for Theater Research by Easton's widow, Harriet G. Easton in the mid-1970s. It was subsequently donated by Helen Armstead-Johnson, along with other theater-related collections to the Schomburg Center.

Related Collections

Bert Howell Collection in the Helen Armstead-Johnson Miscellaneous Theater Collections.

Helen Armstead Johnson Theater Collection (Sidney Easton artifacts: spats, gloves, socks, dark blue suit, pair of black and tan shoes, pants and jacket) in the Art and Artifacts Division.

Processed by S.G. Fullwood
August 2000

Container List

<u>Box</u>	<u>Folder</u>	
1		Personal and Professional Papers
	1	Marriage License, 1913
	2	Career Information, 1926, 1933, 1941, n.d.
	3	Sheet Music by Others, 1956, 1965
	4	Miscellaneous, 1933, 1942, 1976, 1980, 1983, n.d. *Scrapbook, 1928-1934, n.d.
		Writings
		Autobiography (untitled), n.d.
	5	Synopsis, n.d.
	6	Chapters 1-7
	7	Chapters 8-11
	8	Chapters 12-18
		Play Scripts
2	1	<i>Lifeboat No. 13</i> , n.d.
	2	<i>Miss Trudie Fair</i> , n.d.
	3	<i>The Obliging Burglar</i> , n.d.
	4	<i>Shanty Car</i> , n.d.
	5	<i>She Never Heard the Blues</i> , One-act Playlet, n.d.
	6	Other Writings, n.d.
		Music
	7	Manuscript Music, n.d.
	8	Sheet Music, 1920, 1932, 1950
		Legal
		Easton vs. 20 th Century-Fox Film Corp., 1944-1947
	10	<u>Lifeboat</u> , John Steinbeck, Screenplay, n.d.
11	"Lifeboat," Jo Swerling, Manuscript, n.d.	
12	Helen Armstead-Johnson notes , n.d.	
3		Scrapbook, 1928-1934, n.d.

* Scrapbook is in box 3

SEPARATION RECORD

The following items were removed from:

Name of Collection/Papers The Sidney Easton Collection

Accession Number MG 599

Donor: Helen Armstead-Johnson

Gift X

Date received: December 1996

Date transferred: May 2000

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:

Spats, gloves, socks, dark bluesuit, 1 pair of black and tan dress shoes, pants, and jacket.