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ADA "BRICKTOP" SMITH DUCONGE
PAPERS

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

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ADA "BRICKTOP" SMITH DUCONGE (1894-1984) PAPERS, 1920s - 1984.
7 record boxes, 7 lin. ft.

Biographical Sketch

The internationally known cabaret personality Bricktop was born Ada Beatrice Queen Victoria Louise Virginia Smith on August 14, 1894 in Alderson, West Virginia. She acquired the nickname "Bricktop" from Barron Wilkins (owner of the Barron's Exclusive Club in Harlem), establishing her red hair as her trademark. Bricktop began her career as an entertainer at the age of 16, performing on the vaudeville circuit and in salons. She went on to own her own nightclubs in Paris (1920s and '30s), Mexico City (1940s), and Rome (1950s).

In the early part of Bricktop's career she performed with Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles in *McCabe's Georgia Troubadours* minstrel show. Eventually she joined the Oma Crosby Trio, who performed on the white vaudeville circuit and the Theater Owners Booking Association or TOBA circuit that booked black acts. Other groups she worked with were the Ten Georgia Campers on the Pantages circuit and the Kinky-Doo Trio on the TOBA circuit. In 1911, she began performing at Roy Jones' saloon in Chicago, where she met boxer Jack Johnson, who invited her to work for him at his Cabaret de Champion, also know as Café Champ. By the time Bricktop was 19 years old, she had become a well-known entertainer in Chicago.

Bricktop continued to perform both on the vaudeville circuit and in saloons, in acts such as the Panama Trio with Florence Mills and Cora Green and as a headliner at Barron's Exclusive Club. According to her autobiography *Bricktop* (1983), while at Barron's she was responsible for leveraging the careers of Duke Ellington and Florence Mills. She also rallied for Mills to perform in the "all-Negro" production of *Shuffle Along*; her debut in that show marked the start of Mills' stardom.

While Bricktop was headlining at Connie's Inn (Harlem) she was approached by Sammy Richardson, an African-American entertainer who worked in Paris, who invited Bricktop to replace Florence Jones and headline at Le Grand Duc. In 1924, at the age of 29, Bricktop disembarked in France. Although she started out as a performer at Le Grand Duc, she ended up running it. Through the club, Bricktop developed relationships with celebrities such as Cole Porter, Josephine Baker, Paul Robeson and the Duke and Duchess of Windsor to name a few. Cole Porter became a close friend and wrote "Miss

Otis Regrets" for her. European and American writers often patronized Le Grand Duc such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Langston Hughes, John Steinbeck, Henry Miller, T.S. Eliot and James Joyce. Consequently, she formed many relationships with the "who's who" of the expatriate high society, during the 1920s and 1930s.

In Paris, Bricktop worked private parties as well, teaching the Charleston and the Black Bottom. Aga Khan, Dolly O'Brien and the Prince of Wales were among her pupils. Bricktop employed many renowned performers and musicians as well, including Billy Reardon, Louis Cole, and Mabel Mercer (who eventually became her business partner). In the late twenties Bricktop met and married Peter Duconge from New Orleans, a saxophonist with Louis Armstrong's band. Married in 1929, they separated only a few years later but never officially divorced. Bricktop never had children.

By 1939, the German invasion of France had begun, which forced Bricktop to leave Paris. Her homecoming was disappointing; she no longer was the sought-after personality she once was in New York City. She found it difficult to get booked as a performer and subsequently struggled to make a living. During this period she converted to Catholicism and took an oath of celibacy. In 1943, at the age of 50, she moved to Mexico City and opened another club, also called Bricktop's. Her efforts proved to be more successful in Mexico, where she managed several successful clubs.

After the war ended, Bricktop decided to return to Paris to pick-up where she had left off; however, by 1949, she found the city deeply changed. Among other things resentment towards Americans had formed as a consequence of the war, and attitudes towards African Americans began to resemble white racist sentiments in the U.S. More importantly, she had difficulties attaining a permit to reopen her club in Paris, causing her to relocate to Rome.

Rome's "Bricktop's" opened in 1951, and as in Mexico, the club was very popular. She ran Rome's Bricktop's for thirteen years, and at the age of 69, retired her club once and for all, although she remained in Rome for several years after. For Bricktop, club life as she knew it had all but disappeared. She continued to make appearances in the U.S.

and abroad, primarily performing the songs of the 20s and 30s until her death in 1984. She appeared on radio broadcasts, performed at various establishments such as The Club Tango in Chicago, and introduced Josephine Baker for her "come-back" engagement at Carnegie Hall in 1973. Bricktop co-authored *Bricktop* (1983), her autobiography, with James Haskins.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bricktop and James Haskins, *Bricktop*, New York: Atheneum, 1983.

Scope & Content

The Ada "Bricktop" Smith DuConge Papers, 1920s-1984, primarily documents the latter part of Bricktop's life and career. The Papers consist of letters and cards, daily planners, news clippings, religious thoughts and notes, address books, financial papers, and sheet music. The letters contain very little substantive information; none of the personalities Bricktop is known to have been associated with are included. The diaries may be of interest to a researcher well versed in Bricktop's life and the periods under study (the volumes span 1926 to 1983). The news clippings cover the relationships Bricktop had with well known personalities; however, there are few from the early part of her career while she was in New York City, Paris and Mexico City. The papers are organized in seven series, **Diaries, Letters and Cards, Professional, Financial Records, Music, Religion, and News Clippings.**

The **DIARIES 1920s-1983 (1 lin. ft)** series consists of multiple volumes that served as diaries as well as daily planners and account books. The volumes hold information pertaining to both her personal and professional life. The earliest volumes are primarily account books, noting the purchasing or selling of alcohol possibly for her club Bricktop's. The volumes from 1926, for example, list salary and liquor amounts, the amount celebrities such as Cole Porter paid for bottles of alcohol, and Charleston and Black Bottom lessons. Bricktop often attended Charleston cocktail parties, hosted at the private residences of people such as the Prince of Wales, Cole Porter, and Elsa Maxwell, where she taught dance lessons to Dolly and Jay O'Brian, Arturo Lopez, Lady Mendle, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, and the Duchess of Marlborough to name a few. In

1926, Bricktop made her first attempt to open her own club, the Music Box, which is noted in one of the volumes. To christen its opening, she threw a party for the Prince of Wales. In the summer of '26, Bricktop also accompanied the Porters to a residence at Rezzonico in Venice where she gave Charleston lessons and performed with Leslie "Hutch" Hutchinson. The volumes note as well other details such as the arrival date of Florence Mills in Paris and her address in London. In the later diaries, after the 1950s, Bricktop began to write prayers and scripture. There are also entries regarding dinner dates with people, e.g. Ruth and Ralph Bunche. The volumes list daily appointments and addresses, serve as daily food logs, as well as hold traditional journal entries noting her activities, thoughts, etc.

The **LETTERS AND CARDS 1940-1983 (3 lin. ft)** series is organized alphabetically. The materials contain primarily letters and cards sent to Bricktop, although there are a few items written by her with her signature. The letters in the collection do not document the early part of her career while in Paris, New York, or Mexico City. The earliest letters date from the 1950s, after she moved to Rome. Some of the folders hold additional materials that are relevant to the content of the letters, e.g. in the Josephine Baker folder there are letters addressing the *Josephine Baker Story* written by Hank Kaufman and Jack Jordan, correspondence between Baker and Jordan discussing a law suit, an annotated speech written by Bricktop introducing Baker at Carnegie Hall, 1973, and several news clippings. The Benjamin Aslan folder includes a consent form, script, program and reviews for *Red, Hot & Cole*, 1977, which was written by Randy Strawderman, James Bianchi, and Muriel McAuley with music and lyrics by Cole Porter. Letters from prominent people consist of author James Haskins (includes a book contract and correspondence discussing the progress of Bricktop's autobiography); Hugh Shannon (ca.1924-), a salon singer who performed with Bricktop in Rome (includes a published piece about Shannon by Magnum Pomum, 1981, in which Bricktop is quoted, and a first and revised draft of *Hugh Shannon "True Blue Hugh"* written by Bricktop); Gimi Beni (1924-1999), a singer, writer and composer (includes an outline for proposed film *Bricktop* and news articles); David Hanna, a writer with whom Bricktop began writing her autobiography (includes transcripts edited by Bricktop); Earl

Blackwell (ca.1910-1995), the celebrity promoter; Ruth Ellington (1915-2004), Duke Ellington's sister; Bishop Fulton Sheen (1895-1979), an American archbishop of the Catholic Church who played a role in Bricktop's conversion to Catholicism; and Jack Jordan, manager and producer (includes a letter to Bricktop discussing the terms for her agreement to have a cameo role in the film "Honey Baby, Honey Baby" produced by Jordan. Other letters discuss the prospect of authors such as James Baldwin writing Bricktop's autobiography, Jordan's discontent with Josephine Baker and letters to Eartha Kitt and Diana Ross).

The **PROFESSIONAL 1937, 1960-1983 (.6 lin. ft)** series encompasses promotional materials that relate to Bricktop's career as an entertainer, e.g. flyers, programs, including the program from Josephine Baker's first return engagement at Carnegie Hall, invitations, including two from Bricktop's in Paris in 1937, letters from broadcasting agencies and from magazines noting Bricktop's appearance dates and arrangements, correspondence, contracts and book outlines for possible books on or about Bricktop and membership records and documents to the various entertainment agencies to which she belonged. Additionally, there are published and unpublished writings on or about Bricktop, her club and even a brief chronological sketch of her professional performances. The writings include: A "*Must*" for the American in Rome written by Guglielmo Biragai, 1956; *As it Happened* by Bill Paley, 1979; *A Night Club in Rome: Where Bricktop Sings at Midnight*, by L. G. Walmsley, 1953; a sample column from the *N.Y. Post* by Curt Davis; and a press release from *News from Playboy*.

The **FINANCIAL RECORDS, 1960-1983 (.5 lin. ft)** series consists mainly of documents from her later years while living in New York. There are receipts for publicity services and hotel stays, bank passbooks and statements along with legal documents on the estate of her sister Blonzetta Lowary. In addition, there are leases, rent payments and bills from 1972 to 1981.

The **MUSIC (.1 lin. ft)** series holds sheet music that Bricktop may have used for her performances. Most of the sheets are annotated. Included is a list (compiled in 1959) of compositions by Cole Porter that had been used in various productions.

The **RELIGION (1 lin. ft)** series contains religious materials. Bricktop, who had been converted to Catholicism in 1943, earned the nickname the "Holy Hustler" while in Rome, because she often shamed her patrons into giving to the various religious charities she financially supported. The bulk of this series is made up of prayer books; however, there are notations of personal and religious thoughts, prayers and dreams.

The **NEWS CLIPPINGS 1932-1984 (1 lin. ft)** series includes featured stories and arts, entertainment and society columns about Bricktop. The news clippings show the relationships Bricktop had with well known personalities. The clippings are substantial, highlighting the persona that was Bricktop and her long career as an entertainer. Some of the articles are from the Italian press.

Complementary Collections

Additional papers of Ada "Bricktop" Smith are located at Emory University's Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.

Provenance

Donated by James Haskins, 1985
SCM 85-65, MG 247

Processed by Miranda Mims
2011

Container List

Box Folder

		DIARIES, ca.1920-1983
1	1	1920s-30, 1926
	2	1937-1939
	3	1948-1949
	4	1950-1951
	5	1952-1953
	6	1954-1957
	7	1958-ca.1960
	8	1961-1962
	9	1963-1964
	10	1965
	11	1966-1967
	12	1968
	13	1969-1970
	14	1971
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	19	1978-1981
	20	1980
	21	1981-1983
	22	1983
	23	Calendars
		LETTERS AND CARDS, 1940-1983
2	1	Letters from Smith, 1962-1977, n.d.
	2	Aslan, Benjamin - "Red, Hot and Cole," 1977, 1979
	3	Letters B, 1956-1983
	4	Baker, Jean-Claude, 1981-1983, n.d.
	5	Baker, Josephine, 1970-1983
	6	Beni, Gimi - Film Outline (2 copies), News Articles, 1969-1979
	7	Blackwell, Earl, 1967-1983
	8	Letters C, 1952, 1975-1983
	9	Letters D, 1974-1976, 1983
	10	De Guigne, Christian, 1965-1980
	11	Letters E, 1983
	12	Ellington, Ruth, 1980

Box Folder

	13	Letters F, 1943, 1977, 1983
	14	Fan Letters, 1975-1983
	15	Letters G, 1972, n.d.
	16	Letters H, 1961-1982
		Hanna, David,
	17	1961-1969
	18	1970-1971
	19	Haskins, James - Correspondence - Book Contract, 1973-1983
	20	Letters J, 1969-1982, n.d.
	21	Jordan, Jack, 1972-1982
	22	Letters K, 1975-1981, n.d.
	23	Letters L, 1940, 1950-1983
	24	Luciana, Elsa, 1960-1976
	25	Letters M, 1957-1983, n.d.
	26	Letters N, 1972, n.d.
	27	Letters O, 1956-1981, n.d.
	28	Letters P, 1965-1978, n.d.
	29	Priests and Nuns(English and Italian), 1953-1983, n.d.
	30	Letters R (English and French), 1954-1983, n.d.
	31	Letters S, 1961-1983
	32	Shannon, Hugh, 1977-1981
	33	Shaw, Allan, 1970-1976
	34	Sheen, Bishop Fulton
	35	Schiff, Sheldon
	36	Smith, Bruce and Virginia Cloud, Visit to West Virginia Cultural Center, 1972-1978
	37	Letters T, 1983, n.d.
	38	Letters V-W, 1961-1975, n.d.
	39	Unidentified, 1954-1982, n.d.
	40	Telegrams, 1938, 1959-1980
	41	Third Party Correspondence, 1957, 1976
	42	Cards A
	43-44	Cards B
	45	Ballentine, Danny,
3	1	Beni, Gimi
	2	Cards C
	3	Carpenter, Thelma
	4	Cards D
	5	Dixon, Florence and Diggy (Josephine Baker's Friends)
	6	Cards E
	7	Cards F
	8	Cards G

Box Folder

- 9 Mr. Gypsy
- 10-11 Cards H (Ian Harris, Susan Healy)
- 12 Cards J
- 13 Cards K
- 14 Cards L
- 15 Cards M
- 4 1 Mass Cards
- 2 McCormick, Jim
- 3 Cards N and O
- 4 Cards P
- 5 Priests and Nuns
- 6 Cards R
- 7 Cards S
- 8 Cards T
- 9 Cards U and V
- 10 Cards W and Z
- 11 Cards X, Y and Z
- 12 Unidentified Cards
- 13 Bricktop's Address Lists
- 14 Address Books
- 15-17 Loose Addresses

- 5 1 PROFESSIONAL, 1937, 1960-1983
- 2 Appearances, 1960-1982
- 3 Correspondence - Book Contracts, 1975-1983
- 4 Invitations - Bricktop Promotional Material, 1937, 1962-1978
- 5 Programs, 1973, 1977
- 6 Honors, 1976-1983
- 7 Writings on Bricktop, 1953-ca.1980s
- 8 Notes on Prince George/Duke of Windsor
- 9 Passports, 1953-1983
- 10 Memberships, Work Permits, 1969-1979
- 11 Invitations to Other Events, n.d.

- 12 FINANCIAL RECORDS, 1960-1983
- 13 Bills and Receipts, 1960-1979
- 14 Chase Manhattan Bank, 1969-1983
- 15 Estate of Blonzetta Lowary - Legal Records, 1966-1979
- 16 First National Bank of Chicago, 1969-1981
- 17 Income Taxes, 1967-1983
- 18 Milford Management - Leases/Rent/Bills, 1972-1981

Box Folder

	17-18	Miscellaneous Financial Notes, ca.1970s
	19	Social Security, 1973-1974
		MUSIC, 1959, 1976-1977
	20-21	Sheet Music
	22	Scripts
	23	Porter, Cole, 1959
		RELIGION
6	1-3	Personal and Religious Thoughts/Prayers
	4-13	Prayer Books
	14	Miscellaneous - Prayers and Saints - Annotated
	15-16	Miscellaneous
		NEWS CLIPPINGS, 1932-1984
7	1	1932, 1934, 1939
	2	1950-1955
	3	1956-1959
	4	1960
	5	1961-1963
	6	1964-1966
	7	1967-1969
	8	1970-1971
	9	1972-1973
	10	1974
	11	1975
	12	1976
	13	1977
	14	1978-1979
	15	1980-1982
	16-17	1983 - Book Reviews
	18	1984 - Obituaries
	19-20	Miscellaneous Clippings
	21-22	Miscellaneous Scrapbooks