Waters, Ethel

(b. Oct. 31, 1896/1900, Chester, Pa., U.S.--d. Sept. 1, 1977, Chatsworth, Calif.), American blues and jazz singer and dramatic actress, associated with songs she made famous, particularly "Dinah," "Heat Wave," and "Stormy Weather." Her singing was based in the blues tradition, and her full-bodied voice had a wide range and slow vibrato. Many popular composers wrote songs for her, and during the 1930s she made records with such great jazz artists as Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman.

In her autobiography, *His Eye Is on the Sparrow* (1951), Waters said of her early years of extreme poverty, "I stole food to live," and she described her marriage at the age of 12 while still attending convent school. At 13 she became a chambermaid in a Philadelphia hotel, and the same year she sang in public for the first time in a local nightclub. By the time she was 17 she was singing professionally in Baltimore at a weekly salary of $9. It was there that she became the first woman to sing the W.C. Handy classic "St. Louis Blues" on the stage.

Her professional rise was rapid, and she moved to New York City. In 1925 she appeared at the Plantation Club in Harlem. Her Broadway debut came in 1927 in the all-Negro revue *Africana*, but it was not for another three years, when she starred in the *Blackbirds* revue, that she became fully established. In 1933 she scored a notable success in Irving Berlin's *As Thousands Cheer*, in which she sang "Heat Wave," one of the songs later to become identified with her.

In 1940 came the transition from singer to dramatic actress, with her sensitive performance in *Cabin in the Sky*, and in 1943 she went to Hollywood to appear in the screen version of the play. She returned there five years later to appear in *Pinky* (1949), a film dealing with racial issues. She made another remarkable appearance in Carson McCullers' *Member of the Wedding*, on the stage in 1950 and in the 1953 film version.