**ETHEL WATERS**  
1896 - 1977

<table>
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<th>Waters, Ethel</th>
<th>(b. October 31, 1896?, Chester, Pa.; d. September 1, 1977, Chatsworth, Calif.), American singer and actress who brought black urban blues into the mainstream.</th>
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Ethel Waters was born to a 12 year old mother, Louise Anderson, who had been raped by a white man, John Waters. Although she was raised by her maternal grandmother, she took her father's surname. Reared in poverty, she left school at the age of 13 in order to support herself through domestic housework.

Waters performed for the first time at the age of five in a children's church program. She was called Baby Star and later, performing on the black vaudeville circuit, became known as Sweet Mama Stringbean. After moving to New York City in 1919, at the start of the Harlem Renaissance, Waters recorded songs for Black Swan Records and then Colombia Records while playing in revues and performing on the white vaudeville circuit during the 1920s. Two of her more popular songs were "Dinah" (1925) and "Stormy Weather" (1933). By refining the lyrics and the performance, Waters introduced urban blues to a white audience. Her stylistic alterations created a niche for the black nightclub singers who gained popularity from the 1930s through the 1950s.

In 1927, Waters's career as an actress began with the musical *Africana*. She played singing roles in other Broadway productions: *Blackbirds* (1930), *Rhapsody in Black* (1931), *As Thousands Cheer* (1933), *At Home Abroad* (1936, and *Cabin in the Sky* (1940). Waters played more dramatic roles in *Mamba's Daughters* (1939) and *The Member of the Wedding* (1950). Appearing in nine films between 1929 and 1959, she received an Academy Award nomination as Best Supporting Actress in *Pinky* (1949). Through these roles, Waters transformed the image of the older black woman from that of the servile "Mammy" to the self-sufficient Earth Mother. She toured with evangelist Billy Graham from 1957 to 1976. Waters is the author of two autobiographies: *His Eye is on the Sparrow* (1951) and *To Me It's Wonderful* (1972).

Contributed By: Aaron Myers

Reference: Microsoft Africana

http://www.wntb.com/blackachievers/etlwaters/  
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