



The New York Public Library
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture,
Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division

Guide to the

Flournoy Miller collection

1928-1971 [bulk 1941-1951]

Sc MG 599

Compiled by Steven G. Fullwood; machine readable finding aid created by FAKER. "Blacks on Stage: African-American Theater Arts Collections Project," funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the City and State of New York

Summary

Creator: Miller, Flournoy E., 1886-1971

Title: Flournoy Miller collection

Date: 1928-1971 [bulk 1941-1951]

Size: 1.3 linear feet (4 archival boxes)

Source: Donated by Helen Armstead-Johnson, December 1996. Additions purchased from Fredi Gordon, 2012.

Abstract: Flournoy Miller (1889-1971) was an actor, comedian, playwright, lyricist and producer. Collection contains personal papers that include biographical information and correspondence; professional papers, including contracts, memberships, writings and production files.

Preferred citation: [Item], Flournoy Miller collection, Sc MG 599, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library

Language of the Material: English

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Related Materials:

Bessie Miller, Helen Armstead-Johnson Miscellaneous Theatre Collection. Schomburg Center. Olivette Miller, Helen Armstead-Johnson Miscellaneous Theatre Collection. Schomburg Center. Aubrey Lyles, Helen Armstead-Johnson Miscellaneous Theatre Collection. Schomburg Center. Eubie Blake, Helen Armstead-Johnson Miscellaneous Theatre Collection. Schomburg Center. Noble Sissle, Helen Armstead-Johnson Miscellaneous Theatre Collection. Schomburg Center.

Creator History

Flournoy Miller, actor, comedian, playwright, lyricist and producer was born in Columbia, Tennessee. He began his entertainment career while attending Fisk University where he met and began collaborating with his soon to be long time partner, Aubrey Lyles. During their time at Fisk, they formed a comedy act which produced amateur shows that ultimately helped to fund a science building on campus. Miller was not the only member of his family to pursue a career in the entertainment business. His brothers Irvin and Quintard, also spent their lives in the entertainment business as playwrights and comedians. His wife Bessie (1888-1974), whom he met while they were both performing in *Charity Girl*, was a chorus girl; and their daughter Olivette was a renowned jazz harpist.

In 1906, Miller and Lyles were offered their first professional positions as playwrights for the Pekin Stock Company in Chicago. They were hired by theater owner Robert Motts and remained with the company for four years, until around 1909. The first play they wrote was *The Man from 'Bam*, followed by *The Mayor of Dixie*. Some years later portions of this latter play were rewritten and produced as the Broadway sensation *Shuffle Along* (1921). Another Pekin Stock Company production written by Miller, Lyles and Irvin Miller, in which they also appeared, was *The Colored Aristocrats* (1909). The play featured two characters, Steven Jenkins (Flournoy Miller) and Sam Peck (Aubrey Lyles) who would later reappear in *Shuffle Along*. The comedic duo utilized the Jenkins and Peck characters as the core for many of their vaudeville skits. Prior to the staging of *The Colored Aristocrats* in April 1908, Miller joined with Marion A. Brooks to form the Bijou Stock Company in Montgomery, Alabama, which produced *Queen of the Jungle* and *Ephraim Johnson from Norfolk*. After the company closed in May 1908, Miller reunited with Lyles and began touring the vaudeville circuits.

In 1915, Miller and Lyles found success while starring in *Darkydom*, the first major black musical comedy. That same year they toured the Keith vaudeville circuit increasing their popularity. Their biggest success came in 1921. Miller and Lyles joined with Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle to write and produce *Shuffle Along* which had a successful three-year run on Broadway. *Shuffle Along* was the first Broadway musical produced entirely by African Americans. The next year Miller and Lyles produced a three-act drama, *The Flat Below*, and Miller's production of *Going White* which premiered at the Lafayette Theater in Harlem. Both shows also received great reviews. Following the closing of *Shuffle Along* in 1924, the team's popularity continued to grow and they produced a variety of Broadway musical comedies which included *Runnin' Wild* (1924), *Backbiters* (1925), *Honey* (1925), *Rang Tang* (1927) and *Keep Shufflin'* (1928). After the unsuccessful run of *Keep Shufflin'*, Miller and Lyles broke up ending a twenty-five year partnership. Lyles traveled to Africa and stayed for a year. Upon his return he produced *Runnin' De Town*, which also closed without success. During this time Miller wrote and appeared in Lew Leslie's *Blackbirds* (1930). One year later, the team reunited for one last time and produced *Sugar Hill* in conjunction with James P. Johnson. In 1932, Aubrey Lyles died in New York leaving the entertainment world to suffer a great loss.

After Lyles' death, Miller teamed up with comedian Mantan Moreland and they toured the vaudeville circuits. In 1936 they appeared in the motion picture "Harlem on the Prairie," the first all-black western. During the 1940s and 1950s they were featured in other black cast pictures, and in the 1950s Miller wrote for the television show "Amos and Andy." In the 1930s, Miller and Lyles had appeared on the radio version of "Amos and Andy." Flournoy Miller died in a California hospital in 1971.

Custodial History

Initial collection was given to Helen Armstead Johnson, by Bessie Miller, the widow of Flournoy Miller. It was subsequently donated by Helen Armstead-Johnson, along with other theater-related collections to the Schomburg Center in 1996. Additions were purchased from Fredi Gordon, Miller's granddaughter, in

2012.

Scope and Content Note

The Flournoy Miller Papers, 1928-1971, documents Miller's life as a show writer, producer and entertainer. The collection consists of correspondence, contracts, skit scripts and clippings.

Arrangement: The Flournoy Miller Collection are organized in the following series: Personal Papers
Professional Papers About Flournoy Miller

Key Terms

Subjects

African American actors
African American comedians
African American dramatists
African American entertainers
African Americans -- Music
African Americans in the performing arts
Musicals
Television comedy writers

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Biographies
Love letters
Lyrics
Scores (documents for music)
Scripts

Names

Blake, Eubie, 1883-1983
Lyles, Aubrey L., d1932
Miller, Bessie Oliver, 1888-1974
Miller, Flournoy E., 1886-1971
Miller, Olivette
Sissle, Noble, 1889-1975
Amos 'n' Andy
Helen Armstead-Johnson Collection
Shuffle along
Sugar hill

Container List

Personal Papers

Within the PERSONAL PAPERS, 1937-1971 (bulk dates 1944-1954) series are materials that focus on Miller's personal and family life. The series contains three subseries, Biographical, Correspondence and Miscellaneous. The biographical documents include a funeral program and obituary for Miller and the incomplete manuscript (64 pages) of his autobiography. The correspondence contains general and personal correspondence 1943-1965, and includes love letters between Miller and his wife Bessie.

Biographical

- b. 1 f. 1 Funeral Program and Obituaries
- b. 1 f. 2 Autobiography - Manuscript Drafts undated

Correspondence

- b. 1 f. 3 General 1944-1965
- b. 1 f. 4 Eubie Blake 1949-1966
- b. 1 f. 5 Noble Sissle 1923-1952, undated
- b. 1 f. 6 Family 1943, 1952, undated
- b. 1 f. 7 Miscellaneous 1937-1946

Professional Papers

The PROFESSIONAL PAPERS, 1924-1966 (bulk dates 1940-1959) series makes up the bulk of the Miller papers. This series is divided into seven subseries, Contracts, Memberships (e.g., ASCAP, Songwriter's Protective Association, Dramatists Guild, Authors League), Writings which contain lyrics and scripts for skits and manuscripts, Performance Teams, Production Files, and Printed Matter. The Performance Teams subseries documents the partnerships Miller formed with Aubrey Lyles and their collaboration with Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle. These files contain a team history for Miller and Lyles, letters, clippings, 1943-1954, contracts, skit scripts and programs. The largest of the subseries are the Production Files. These files include production materials for "Amos and Andy", *Shuffle Along*, *Sugar Hill*, and an array of other productions. Within these files are handwritten histories of the "Amos and Andy Show" and *Shuffle Along*, scripts, letters, stage directions for *Mama Charlestons' Boarding House*; cast lists for *Queen of the Range*; news clippings, contracts for *Shuffle Along* and *Sugar Hill* and a broadside for *Shuffle Along*. The *Sugar Hill* files contain handwritten letters from James P. Johnson (collaborator on *Sugar Hill* to Miller.

- b. 1 f. 8 Contracts 1933-1943
- b. 1 f. 9 Financial 1943-1966
- b. 1 f. 10 Memberships 1950-1966

Writings

- b. 1 f. 11-12 Lyrics undated
- b. 1 f. 13 Lyrics and Skits c. 1940

Manuscripts

- b. 1 f. 14 Black Theater History, 22 pp undated
- b. 1 f. 15 The History of Show Business (photocopy), 151 pp., undated
- b. 1 f. 16 Pekin Theater, 14 pp undated
- b. 2 f. 1 *Ragtime - History and Article, 1971* undated
- b. 2 f. 2 *Runnin' Wild, 3 pp* undated
- b. 2 f. 3 White Minstrels, 4 pp undated
- b. 2 f. 4 Music Scores: "Let's Bury Mr. Hate," and "Judgement Day," 1958, undated
- b. 2 f. 5 Scripts, 12 pp undated

Professional Papers (cont.)

Writings (cont.)

Skits

- b. 2 f. 6 1930, undated
- b. 2 f. 7 undated

Performance Teams

Miller and Lyles

- b. 2 f. 8 Team History undated
- b. 2 f. 9 Letters and Clippings 1915, 1943-1954
- b. 2 f. 10 Contracts 1943, 1948
- b. 2 f. 11 Vaudeville Skits undated
- b. 2 f. 12 Programs 1924, undated
- b. 2 f. 13 Miller and Crothers - Correspondence and Scripts 1951-1952
- b. 2 f. 14 Miller, Sissle and Blake - Skit undated
- b. 2 f. 15 Miller and Vigal - Skits undated

Production Files

"Amos and Andy"

- b. 2 f. 16 History and Audition Arrangements undated
 - b. 2 f. 17 Letters 1941, 1950-1951, undated
 - b. 2 f. 18 Skits and Scripts undated
 - b. 2 f. 19 Clippings 1950, 1957
 - b. 2 f. 20 *Equal Got MS - Scripts* undated
 - b. 2 f. 21 Everybody Shout - Script, undated
 - b. 2 f. 22 *Indefinite Talk- Skit* undated
- Hittin' the Stride*
- b. 2 f. 23 Skits and Scripts 1943
 - b. 2 f. 24 Copyright Registration 1943
 - b. 2 f. 25 *The Lathrop Residence - Stage Directions* undated
 - b. 3 f. 1 *Mama Charlestons' Boarding House - Stage Directions and Scripts* undated

Scripts undated

- b. 3 f. 2 *Mayor of Fairville - Script* undated
 - b. 3 f. 3 *Moneymoon - Correspondence* 1948 -1949, undated
 - b. 3 f. 4 *Money Talks - Skit and Lyrics* undated
 - b. 3 f. 5 *Othello - Skit* undated
 - b. 3 f. 6 *The Oyster Man by Hal Reid - Script* undated
 - b. 3 f. 7 *Queen of the Range - Cast List and Script* undated
 - b. 3 f. 8 *Rang Tang - Programs* 1927
 - b. 3 f. 9 *Rustabout's Dream - Lyrics* undated
 - b. 3 f. 10 *Rusty and Rascoe - Scripts* undated
 - b. 3 f. 11 *Shall Us - Let's - Skit* undated
- Shuffle Along*
- b. 3 f. 12 History undated
 - b. 3 f. 13 Programs 1922 - 1942

Professional Papers (cont.)

Production Files (cont.)

Scripts (cont.)

Shuffle Along (cont.)

- b. 3 f. 14 **Broadside and Advertisement, c. 1923**
- b. 3 f. 15 **Letters and Telegrams 1943 - 1956**
- b. 3 f. 16 **Clippings 1945 - 1960**
- b. 3 f. 17 **Contracts 1947 - 1973**
- b. 3 f. 18 **Fact Booklet 1952**
- b. 3 f. 19 **Scripts undated**
- b. 3 f. 20 ***Skeets and Lasses - Skit* undated**
- b. 3 f. 21 ***Slim and Slam - Skit* undated**
Sugar Hill
- b. 3 f. 22 **Letters 1947 - 1957**
- b. 3 f. 23 **Contracts 1947 - 1949**
- b. 3 f. 24 **Box Office Statements and Receipts 1949**
- b. 3 f. 25 **Clippings 1949**
- b. 3 f. 26 **Lyrics 1949**
- b. 3 f. 27 **Sheet Music 1949**
- b. 4 f. 1 ***Tribe Wants You - Script* undated**

Printed Materials

- b. 4 f. 2 **Newsclippings 1928 - 1971**
- b. 4 f. 3 **Programs 1933 - 1950**

About Flournoy Miller

This series contains material about Flournoy Miller, which includes information about his foundation, the Flournoy Miller Foundation for the Performing Arts; and biographies written by his wife, Bessie, and daughter, Olivette.

- b. 4 f. 4 **Flournoy Miller Foundation for the Performing Arts 1979**
- b. 4 f. 5 **Bessie Miller, "The Life of the Famous Flournoy Miller," 292 pp undated**
Olivette Miller, "The Laughmaker: An Autobiography" undated
- b. 4 f. 6 **Typescript, 268 pp**
- b. 4 f. 7 **Screenplay, 153 pp**
- b. 4 f. 8 **Correspondence 1972 - 1986**
- b. 4 f. 9 **Correspondence, biographical 1972**