



Hollywood: Her Story February 2021 ENewsletter Celebrating Black History Month

During February 2021, Black History Month, we profile a potpourri of African-American women in the movie industry throughout its history. We have profiled women in past newsletters, including: director **Ava DuVernay**, actress **Evelyn Preer**, **Hattie McDaniel** – the first African American to win an Oscar, winning for Best Supporting Actress, **Whoopi Goldberg** – the second African-American woman to win the Best Supporting Actress Oscar, **Dorothy Dandridge** – the first African-American actress nominated for best leading actress, **Halle Berry** – the first African-American actress to win the Oscar for best leading actress, stuntwoman **LaFaye Baker**, costume designer **Ruth E. Carter**, director **Kathleen Collins**, and director **Julie Dash**. Let's discover more women as we celebrate Black History Month.



Director **Madame E. Toussaint Welcome** is now acknowledged as one of the few, if not the only, African-American woman filmmaker during the silent film era. Working with her husband, Welcome produced a 12-part documentary that detailed the contributions of African-American soldiers during World War I. It is titled *Doing Their Bit*.



Actress **Madame Sul-Te-Wan** had a career in movies, on stage and on television that spanned five decades. Known as a character actress, she acted in the epics of the silent film era – *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916). She made the transition to talking films, although many of the roles that she portrayed were the stereotypical roles available to African-American women. She successfully broke out of that mold in the 1954 movie *Carmen Jones* for which Dorothy Dandridge was nominated for the Best Actress Oscar. Madame Sul-Te-Wan has been inducted into the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame.



Conductor **Eva Jessye** served as the choir director for the 1929 King Vidor movie *Hallelujah!* which had an all-black cast. Jessye spoke out about the discrimination that she experienced on the set – for which she was touted in the black press. Later, she directed her choir for the Broadway musical *Four Saints in Three Acts* and the opera *Porgy and Bess*. She composed her own choral works and arranged music as well. *Hallelujah!* has been selected for preservation in the National Film Registry at the Library of Congress.



Similarly to Madame Sul-Te-Wan, actress **Louise Beavers** found the roles available to her to be limited and stereotypical. In 1934, she again played a housekeeper in *Imitation of Life*, but with a secondary plot line. At the time it was said that this was “the first time in American cinema history that a black woman's problems were given major emotional weight in a major Hollywood motion picture.” As Beavers grew in national prominence, she spoke about the portrayal and treatment of African Americans in Hollywood. Beavers was one of three actresses to play Beulah on *The Beulah Show*, the first television show that starred a black person. Beavers has been inducted into the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame.

Poet and writer **Maya Angelou** was the first African-American woman to have a screenplay produced when the movie *Georgia, Georgia* was released in 1972 by a



Swedish film company. She also wrote the soundtrack for the movie. Angelou acted and danced in several other movies and was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame.



Joi McMillon became the first African-American woman nominated for the Best Film Editing Oscar (2017) for her work on *Moonlight*. She has been active as a film editor for movies and television since 2003.



Screenwriter and director **Dee Rees** became the first African-American woman to direct a movie for which an actor or actress was nominated for an Academy Award. This occurred in 2018 when Mary J. Blige was nominated for Best Supporting Actress for *Mudbound*. Rees' debut feature film *Pariah* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival. Rees has also done work in television and has been nominated for Emmys..



Mary J. Blige (left) was the first woman to be nominated for both an acting and a songwriting Oscar in the same year. She was nominated for Best Supporting Actress for her role in *Mudbound*. She and **Taura Stinson** (right) shared the best original song nomination for *Mighty River* from the same movie. Blige has won a total of nine Grammy awards.



Finally, we pay tribute to actress **Cicely Tyson**, who died in January 2021 at the age of 96. Over a career spanning seven decades, Tyson was nominated for the Best Actress Oscar for her role in *Souder*, won three Emmys including two for her work in the television drama *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, and, at age 88, won a Tony Award for best leading actress in *The Trip to Bountiful*. Tyson said, "I come from lowly status. I grew up in an area that was called the slums at the time. I still cannot imagine that I have met with presidents, kings, queens. How did I get here? I marvel at it." Among her many honors, Tyson received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the Kennedy Center Honors and an Honorary Oscar, the first African-American woman to receive that award.

Women in front of and behind the camera make the movies that we all welcome into our hearts and homes. Women across all the areas of moviemaking from actress to animator, editor to stuntwoman, costume designer to screenwriter, producer to director have contributed to the success of the movie industry since its founding in the 1890s. Help us celebrate these women who are written into movie history in *Hollywood: Her Story*.

Jill S.Tietjen and Barbara Bridges

[Visit Our Website](#)