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Gordon Heath Papers

1913-1992 (*Bulk:* 1942-1979)

44 boxes (22.75 linear ft.)

Call no.: MS 372



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Read collection overview

A multi-talented performer, the African American expatriate Gordon Heath was variously a stage and film actor, musician, director, producer, founder of the Studio Theater of Paris, and co-owner of the Parisian nightclub L'Abbaye. Born in New York City, Heath became involved in acting as a teenager and enjoyed a career that spanned post-World War II Broadway to the Black Arts Movement of the 1970s. In addition to his many roles on film and stage, he and his partner Lee Payant enjoyed success as recording artists in the 1950s and 1960s.

The Heath collection includes personal and professional correspondence, scrapbooks containing photos and clippings from assorted television and film productions in addition to songs, poetry, and reviews of plays or playbills from productions he attended. The Papers also contain art work, sheet music, personal and production photographs, and drafts of his memoirs.

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Background on Gordon Heath

A multi-talented performer, Seifield Gordon Heath was born in the San Juan Hill district of Manhattan on September 20, 1918.¹ Heath and his half-sister Bernice were raised in a family of relatively recent immigrants: his mother, Harriette (Hattie), was a second generation American of African and Indian descent while his father Cyril Gordon Heath came originally from Barbados. As a steward for the Hudson River Night Line, Cyril had steady employment and in his later years, he was a devoted public servant, active in the local YMCA, neighborhood associations, and church-sponsored groups.

While studying at the Ethical Culture Society School in Manhattan and later at the Hampton Institute, Heath was drawn to the theater. As a child, he sang in St. Cyprian's Church choir and learned to play the violin and the viola with some skill, but the acclaim for his music was soon overshadowed by the attention he received on the stage. Winning a state-wide drama competition while still in high school, Heath began to get serious about acting, perhaps in reaction to his father's aspirations for music. In 1938, Gordon began to write and perform sketches for radio station WNYC and about the same time, he began training with a group of African American actors under the guidance of Marian Wallace. While in college at Hampton, he acted in several plays under the direction of his childhood friend Owen Dodson.

Heath landed his first Broadway role in 1943, playing the second lead in Lee Strasberg's *South Pacific*. Two years later, while working as a radio announcer, he was chosen for the lead in Elia Kazan's *Deep Are the Roots*, a provocative Broadway "race play." Playing the role of Brett Charles, an African American war hero who returns home to find that the "fight for democracy" in Europe had done little to change race relations in the Jim Crow South, Heath enjoyed a fourteen-month run in New York followed by five-months in London in 1947. In between, Heath made his directorial debut in the off-Broadway *Family Portrait*, in which he also played the lead. Widely acclaimed for his performances, Heath was soon lauded as "the next Paul Robeson."

Despite the success of *Deep Are the Roots*, Heath found that he and Brett Charles mirrored one another when it came to



Gordon Heath (l.) and Lee Payant, Paris

American race relations. After returning to the States from his time in London, Heath discovered the cold reality that racism limited his access to the types of roles he desired, and his nascent affection for Europe began to grow accordingly. Having met the man who would become his partner, an actor from Seattle named Leroy Payant, Heath left the U.S. in 1948 to try his luck in Britain. There, too, he was regularly passed over for coveted roles in favor of British actors, later remarking that in London, "each time, for each part... was a hustle."²

In search of "continuity in the theater," Heath relocated to the more congenial confines of Paris, where he and Payant established a nightclub called L'Abbaye. There, the two performed folksongs, spirituals, and the blues in an intimate setting, and soon discovered that their original aim of providing a living between acting gigs was selling themselves short. L'Abbaye quickly caught on in Paris, appealing especially to the community of expatriates and artists, and it remained a popular for 27 years.

From his base in Paris, Heath and Payant translated the popularity they enjoyed at L'Abbaye into at least three record albums and several tours through Europe and the Middle East. His efforts to build his career as an actor, however, proved somewhat less successful. He appeared fairly often on radio and television in Europe and took roles -- mostly supporting roles -- in films including *Sapphire* (1959), the *Nun's Story* (1959), and *The Madwoman of Chailot* (1969) while doing narration for the animated *Animal Farm* (1954) and other productions. On stage, whether in England, France, or the United States, Heath continued to find it difficult to achieve the artistic freedom and types of roles that he desired. As Helen Gary Bishop explained:

The French were only casting him black roles and, in their nationalistic zeal, would not give an American, however talented, a directing job - certainly not in any subsidized theater. There were even quotas on the number of American and English plays, which could be done in the commercial theater. And in England it appeared that he was being typecast as a West Indian.³

In the 1960s, Heath attempted to circumvent the racism he faced by founding the Studio Theater of Paris (STP), an English-speaking theatrical workshop and troupe comprised largely of expatriates from England and the U.S. During its ten years of operation, Heath's led the STP performers in such plays as the *Glass Menagerie*, *After the Fall*, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, *In White America*, *The Slave and the Toilet*, and *Kennedy's Children*. Heath served not only as director, but as an all-purpose impresario, creating the playbills and posters, working publicity, and booking venues for the performances through the American Church of Paris and other locations. STP also served as a forum for lectures from visiting professors and critics, and for round table discussions, and they sponsored Martin Luther King, who preached at the American Church during one of his visits. Although never defined solely by their racially- and politically-conscious productions, nor by the charge that they performed "art for politics sake," the STP lost much of its vigor after the progressive leader of the American Church was replaced by a more moderate successor.

In the 1970s, Heath began performing more frequently in the United States. He returned home for five months in 1970 to play the lead in *Oedipus* at the Roundabout Theater, and later that year he and Payant performed *Dr. Faustus* in Washington D.C. The changes affecting the American theater, and Black theater in particular, left him with mixed emotions. "Black theater was a reality," he noted, "off and off-off Broadway were healthy, and government subsidies and funding seemed abundant."⁴ At the same time, he feared that the younger generation of Black actors were rejecting their social past, the political past, and the theatrical past. Still, the turbulence of the time and the positive changes affected him deeply: "The fact of Negroes playing with public approbation, a general public....," he wrote, "playing these parts we never thought we'd get a crack at (such as Lear) is so exciting I can't tell you."⁵

Although a generation older than most of the artists associated with the Black Arts Movement, Heath developed a working relationship with artists such as the director Woodie King and writer A.B. Spellman. After Payant's death in 1976 and the subsequent shuttering of L'Abbaye, Heath appeared more regularly in the U.S., and even temporarily settled in New York, leavening his acting with politics by organizing a community group and a leading rent strike to improve conditions in the building in which he had grown up. Although he returned to Paris to live, he continued to perform on both sides of the Atlantic for the rest of his career. His final performance, a production of Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* done in conjunction with the choreographer Pearl Primus, with whom Heath had worked forty years earlier, was staged at the University of Massachusetts in 1987.

The memoir that Heath was writing at the time of his death on August 31, 1991, was published by the UMass Press in 1992 as *Deep Are The Roots: Memoirs of a Black Expatriate*.

Footnotes

As Heath reports in his memoirs, his "father and his genteel cohorts" had had the district renamed "Columbus Hill" during Gordon's youth. Gordon Heath, *Deep Are the Roots: the Memoirs of a Black Expatriate* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992) p.11.

Encore American & Worldwide News, April 5, 1976.

Helen Gary Bishop, "Gordon Heath - American Actor Between Two Continents," *The Soho Weekly News*, April 21, 1977. Ibid.

"The Two Worlds of Gordon Heath," *Encore American & Worldwide News*, April 5, 1976.

Chronology of Gordon Heath's Life

1918

Birth, September 20, 1918; Columbus Hill, New York City

1936-1940

Worked for the National Youth Administration's (NYA) Brooklyn branch

1938-1946

Script writer and performer on radio stations (WNYC & WMCA) in New York

1943

First Broadway performance; *South Pacific*, directed by Lee Strasberg

1945-1947

Became New York's first African American radio announcer (WMCA)

Starred in Elia Kazan's controversial wartime Broadway hit, *Deep Are the Roots*

1947

Directed first professional play; *Family Portrait*

Starred in five month London run of *Deep Are the Roots*, directed by Daphne Rye

1948

Moved to Paris to escape the limitations and typecasting faced by Black actors in the U.S.

1949-1976

Opened l'Abbaye, a nightclub in Paris's Left Bank where he and life partner and business associate Leroy Payant performed spirituals, the blues, and folk songs for their loyal following for more than twenty-five years. Heath closed l'Abbaye following Payant's death from cancer in 1976

1957-1958

Co-starred in movie, *A Nun's Story*, with Audrey Hepburn

1965-1979

Founded/directed the Studio Theater of Paris (STP)

1987

Final performance; *The Lion and the Jewel*, directed by Richard Trousdell, Amherst, Ma.

1991

Death, October 31, 1991; Paris, France

1992

Publication of *Deep Are the Roots: Memoirs of a Black Expatriate*

Scope of collection

The Papers of Gordon Heath 1913 [1942-1979] 1991 consist of personal and professional correspondence, and scrapbooks containing photographs, art work, poetry, clippings, plays, playbills, sheet music, and drafts of his memoirs. Heath's career as a performer is fully represented in the collection, as is much of his personal life. The scrapbooks of Heath's performances in film, theater, television, radio, and musical concerts, including the response of critics to these works, document his work in detail.

The Gordon Heath Papers are arranged in ten series as follows: Biographical Materials, 1913-1991, General Correspondence, 1930-1990, Subject Files, Writings, 1956-1991, L'Abbaye Files, 1949-1976, Production Scrapbooks, 1937-1987, Scrapbooks - General, Photographs, 1913-1987, Artwork, and Printed Materials.

Arrangement

This collection is organized into ten series:

Series 1. Biographical Materials, 1913-1991

Series 2. General Correspondence, 1930-1990

Series 3. Subject Files

Series 4. Writings, 1956-1991

Series 5. L'Abbaye Files, 1949-1976

Series 6. Production Scrapbooks, 1937-1987

Series 7. Scrapbooks-General

Series 8. Photographs, 1913-1987

Series 9. Artwork

Series 10. Printed Materials

Series descriptions

Series 1. Biographical Materials

1913-1991

Boxes 1-2

Series 1 consists primarily of biographical information about Gordon Heath and his family. The materials include Gordon Heath's obituary, personal papers -- including financial records and his passport -- and his parent's personal papers -- including a brief installment of Harriette Heath's journal -- as well as articles about Mr. Heath's life and career, including several autobiographical articles.

Series 2. General Correspondence

1930-1990

Boxes 3-7

Series 2 comprises incoming and outgoing letters on a wide range of subjects, both personal and professional. The general correspondence provides information about Heath's major interests, and includes letters of courtesy, as thank you notes and compliments on performances; personal business; inquiries about employment possibilities and logistics; discussions of books, plays, and artists; friendly correspondence; family matters; and love letters. Correspondence spans over 40 years, with the most thorough period of correspondence occurring between 1947 and 1976. The first box in the series consists of general correspondence, and is arranged alphabetically. Box 4 contains family correspondence, and consists primarily of postcards and letters that Mr. Heath sent to his parents between 1930 and 1978. Letters were written by Gordon Heath to his mother. However, letters from Leroy Payant to the Heath family and letters from Mrs. Heath to her son are also included. Box 5 consists of letters from Leroy Payant to Gordon Heath between 1947-1976, while Box 6 contains Heath's letters to Payant during the same period. These letters document both the professional (performances, concerts, L'Abayye) and personal relationship the two men shared during their nearly 30 years together. Box 5 contains Christmas cards created and distributed by Heath over a number of years. Also included is a list of recipients from 1952 to 1976. Boxes 2-5 are arranged chronologically.

Series 3. Writings

1956-1991

Boxes 8-9

Series 3 consists primarily of drafts of *Deep Are the Roots: Memoirs of a Black Expatriate*, Gordon Heath's memoirs. Materials include illustrations, pictures, newspaper, magazine, journal, and playbill clippings that Mr. Heath used as guideposts for his narrative or potential inclusion within the pages of the manuscript. Drafts include handwritten sections of the text, edited typed drafts, illustrated drafts, and the final proof. Also included is an article about spirituals written by Heath. Heath's other publications and writings can be located in Series 1, Biographical Materials, which contains autobiographical articles.

Heath's poetry has been separated from his manuscripts and is instead located in Box 39 (Series 9, "Artwork")

Series 4. Subject Files

Box 10

Alphabetically arranged subject headings include topics such as "Americans in Paris," "Negro spirituals," and the "Theater Arts Magazine," as well as names of individuals such as James Baldwin, Owen Dodson, Langston Hughes, and Pearl Primus. Materials include manuscripts, clippings, poetry, correspondence, lecture notes, and playbills.

Series 5. L'Abbaye Files

1949-1976

Boxes 11-13

Series 5 consists of three boxes of correspondence, newspaper and magazine clippings, reviews, and photos related to "L'Abbaye," the Left Bank nightclub co-owned by Heath and Payant between 1949 and 1976. The two performed at the club nightly, singing spirituals, the blues, and folk songs for their loyal following. The club was opened initially to allow the men to be financially viable while acting. Ultimately, however, it became an institution on the Left Bank, and was patronized by many expatriates, tourists, and locals. Part of the club's appeal was its intimacy. Patrons snapped to applaud rather than clap, so as not to wake the neighbors. Also, patrons were expected to remain quiet during performances, a rarity in other Left Bank establishments. The materials in this series are arranged chronologically.

Series 6. Production Scrapbooks

1937-1987

Boxes 14-27

Series 6 consists of chronologically arranged scrapbooks of performances in which Heath performed or which he directed, or both. The series is divided into several sub series based on the medium of the performance: theater, film and poetry readings, television performances, radio and recordings, and musical concerts. Theater productions make up the majority of the series, and have been divided further to bring coherence to Heath's prolific career as a thespian. The theater subseries is sub divided into three categories; 1) General Scrapbooks - which consists of performances between 1935 and 1987; 2) Studio Theater of Paris (STP) Scrapbook; 1965-1976 - which consists of both organizational papers, correspondence, and scrapbooks of

productions either created, directed, or acted in by Heath; and finally, 3) Scripts - from productions that Heath either acted in or directed, and which contain notes, stage directions, and other supplementary comments.

Many of Heath's production scrapbooks contain photos from given productions. However, other photos from specific productions can be located in Series 8: Photographs.

Series 7. General Scrapbooks

1930-1976

Box 28

Series 7 consists primarily of miscellany that Heath had filed in scrapbooks but not documented or categorized. The series, alphabetically arranged by type of material, includes such materials as photos and clippings from assorted television and film productions, songs, poetry, miscellaneous reviews of plays or playbills from productions Mr. Heath attended.

Series 8. Photographs

1913-1987

Boxes 29-37

Series 8 contains both personal and production photographs ranging from Gordon Heath's childhood to his last performance in 1987. Personal photos have been subdivided into two categories, "family " and "friends and colleagues." Production photos are also subdivided, with Studio Theater of Paris photos separated from other productions. Production photos have been arranged chronologically where possible.

Series 9. Artwork

Boxes 38-40

Series 9 consists of drawings, sketches, prints, designs, poetry, and prints made by Mr. Heath. These materials include designs for book jackets, Christmas cards, letters, playbills, and advertisements. Other materials are included that seemingly were created either for fun, practice, or personal expression.

Inventory

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1913-1991

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Box 1: 2

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Box 1: 5

Harriette Heath in Paris

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Harriette Heath: journal

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O'Neil, Eugene. Long Day's Journey into Night (London: Butler & Tanner, 1956).

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Signoret, Simone. *La Nostalgie N'est Plusce Qu'elle e'tait* (Paris: Seuil, 1976).

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Administrative information

Access

The collection is open for research.

Provenance

Acquired from M. Alain Woisson, 1993

Bibliography

Deep Are The Roots: Memoirs of a Black Expatriate. Amherst: UMass Press, 1992.

Separated Material

One item, a journal entitled *The Mask: a Quarterly Journal of the Art of the Theater*, March 1908 to April 1911, (the first 12 issues of this European publication) was removed from the papers and catalogued to Special Collections and Archives.

Processing Information

Processed by David Goldberg, August 2001.

Language:

English

Acknowledgments

Encoding funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

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Cite as: Gordon Heath Papers (MS 372). Special Collections and University Archives, W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts Amherst.

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Baldwin, James, 1924-
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Heath, Gordon, 1918-1991
Heath, Gordon, 1918-1991--Correspondence
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Heath, Gordon, 1918-1991. *Deep are the roots*
Hughes, Langston, 1902-1967
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Contributors

Heath, Gordon, 1918-1991 [\[main entry\]](#)

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Genres and formats

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