

BRICKTOP, 1894-1984.

Bricktop (Ada Beatrice Smith) papers, 1894-1984

Emory University
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Descriptive Summary

Creator: Bricktop, 1894-1984.
Title: Bricktop (Ada Beatrice Smith) papers, 1894-1984
Call Number: Manuscript Collection No. 831
Extent: 2.25 linear ft. (5 boxes)
Abstract: Papers of international African American cabaret performer and nightclub owner Ada Beatrice "Bricktop" Smith.
Language: Materials primarily in English.

Administrative Information

Restrictions on Access

Unrestricted access.

Terms Governing Use and Reproduction

All requests subject to limitations noted in departmental policies on reproduction.

Related Materials in Other Repositories

[Ada "Bricktop" Smith papers](#), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York, New York

Source

Purchase, 1999.

Citation

[after identification of item(s)], Bricktop (Ada Beatrice Smith), Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

Processing

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Collection Description

Biographical Note

Bricktop (1894-1984), international cabaret performer and nightclub owner in Paris, Mexico City, and Rome, was born Ada Beatrice Queen Victoria Louise Virginia Smith, in Alderson, West Virginia, on August 14, 1894. Her mother, Hattie E. Smith, and father, Thomas Smith, had three other living children--Robert, Blonzetta, and Ethel--when Bricktop, the last, was born. After Thomas Smith died, the family relocated to Chicago in 1900.

A natural performer, Bricktop (so-named because of her red hair) began doing local song-and-dance shows as a teenager. By 1910, Bricktop enjoyed a moderate success and was recruited for traveling vaudeville shows on the Theatre Owners Booking Agency (TOBA) circuit. Having gained more experience, Bricktop returned to Chicago and began performing at the then-famous Panama Club, where she eventually took the stage with two other rising stars, Florence Mills and Cora Green, as part of the Panama Trio.

At the request of Black nightclub promoters in Paris, Bricktop left the U.S. in 1924 for what she thought would be a limited European engagement. Her stay in Paris lasted almost two decades and catapulted her to international fame with the first in a series of "Bricktop's" clubs. Among her friends and admirers were Cole Porter, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Lady Mendl (Elsie de Wolfe). Bricktop married Peter Duconge, a New Orleans-born musician, in 1929; they separated a few years later (although they never officially divorced). At the urging of her friends, Bricktop relocated to New York in 1940 to escape World War II Paris. In 1943, she moved to Mexico City where she opened a club. In 1950, Bricktop returned to Europe, reopened her nightclub in Paris and soon after moved to Rome, where the last "Bricktop's" reigned until 1964. While in Rome, Bricktop--who had converted to Catholicism in 1949--developed relationships with Italian clergy and offered financial support to a variety of religious charities. Returning to the U.S. from 1965-1968, and then permanently in 1970, Bricktop continued to perform and remained a sought-after international personality until her death on February 1, 1984. *Bricktop* by Bricktop with James Haskins (1983).

Scope and Content Note

The collection consists of the papers of Bricktop from 1890-1982 (bulk 1950-1967). The papers include correspondence, photographs, newspaper clippings, religious documents, financial records, legal documents and general ephemera.

One-fourth of the collection is general correspondence, including Bricktop's letters to and from family, friends, admirers, business associates and religious charities. The earliest correspondence dates from the 1920s and sheds light on Bricktop's life in Paris (and in Mexico City, to a lesser extent). The largest portion of the correspondence is from the post-1950 period. In particular, letters from 1950-1963 include financial information about the nightclub and Bricktop's debts (some written in Italian). Thank-you letters from charities and individuals are included here as well. Prominent correspondents over the years include: Cole Porter, Lady Mendl, U.S. Ambassador James Dunn, King Farouk Fouad of Egypt (invitations), Ralph Bunche and Sydney Omarr.

The Bricktop papers include a collection of photographs dating from 1912. Bricktop appears with the Panama Trio in 1916 and in a series of portraits by Carl Van Vechten in 1932.

Photographs from the post-1950 period show Bricktop in the club. In an undated photograph, Bricktop is pictured with Josephine Baker.

The collection of newspaper clippings includes arts and entertainment features on Bricktop as well as brief references to Bricktop in society columns. Bricktop's own clippings of newspaper cartoons and comics, articles about friends, articles on religion and personal interest items are also included in the collection.

The collection of religious documents includes prayer cards, prayer books, religious pamphlets and certificates. These documents date from the 1950s and relate to Bricktop's religious conversion to Catholicism and her patronage of religious charities.

A large portion of the collection consists of financial records. Files contain unpaid customer bills from "Bricktop's," inventory logs, records of employee salaries, and general bookkeeping notes. While these records are often undated, dated information about financial matters can be found by examining her general correspondence from 1950-1963. Other financial records include hotel bills, bank statements, and tax returns.

The collection of legal documents dates from the 1890s and includes property deeds, loan agreements, and other legal forms addressed to or signed by Bricktop's mother, Hattie Smith, or Bricktop's sister, Blonzetta Lowary.

Included under general ephemera are: an old address book, a file of calling or business cards, a 45" Lionel Hampton record, and a colorful counted cross-stitch tapestry.

Arrangement Note

Arranged by record type.

Container List

Correspondence

Box	Folder	Content
1	1	undated
1	2	1920-1929
1	3	1930-1939
1	4	1940-1949
1	5	1950-1953
1	6	1954-1957
1	7	1958-1959
1	8	1960-1961
1	9	1962-1963
1	10	1964-1965
1	11	1966-1969
1	12	1970-1979

Photographs

2	1	Bricktop alone, undated
2	2	Bricktop in club, w/friends, undated
2	3	Unidentified persons (family), undated
2	4	Family Home
2	5	Bricktop w/family
2	6	Bricktop, San Francisco, 1912
2	7	Panama Trio and Trio w/Friend, 1916
2	8	Bricktop in New York, 1923
2	9	Photographs by Carl Van Vechten, 1934, Paris [includes note from Van Vechten discussing the photos]
2	10	Bricktop, alone, 1950
2	11	Bricktop in club alone or w/friends, 1950-1965
2	12	Friends of Bricktop (Bricktop not shown)
2	13	Religious Ceremonies and Figures
2	14	Honorary Degree

Newspaper Clippings

2	15	On Bricktop or "Bricktop's", 1962-1984
2	16	Friends or Important Figures
2	17	Cartoons and Comic Strips
2	18	Religious Newspaper and Magazine Clippings
2	19	Miscellaneous, general interest

Religious Documents

- 2 20 Undated
- 2 21 1952-1967
- 2 22 Official Certificates and Invitations

Financial Records

- 3 1 Receipts on "Bricktop's" Letterhead, undated
- 3 2 Receipts on "Bricktop's" Letterhead, Paris, 1950
- 3 3 Receipts on "Bricktop's" Letterhead, 1954-1957
- 3 4 Receipts on "Bricktop's" Letterhead, 1958-1959
- 3 5 Receipts on "Bricktop's" Letterhead, 1960-1964
- 3 6 Receipts and Invoices, undated
- 3 7 Receipts and Invoices, 1930-1949
- 3 8 Receipts and Invoices, 1950-1953
- 3 9 Receipts and Invoices, 1954
- 3 10 Receipts and Invoices, 1955
- 3 11 Receipts and Invoices, 1956
- 3 12 Receipts and Invoices, 1957
- 3 13 Receipts and Invoices, 1958
- 3 14 Receipts and Invoices, 1959
- 3 15 Receipts and Invoices, 1960
- 3 16 Receipts and Invoices, 1961
- 3 17 Receipts and Invoices, 1962
- 3 18 Receipts and Invoices, 1963
- 3 19 Receipts and Invoices, 1964-1984
- 3 20 Bank Statement
- 3 21 Statements of Earnings and Tax Returns
- 3 22 Insurance Payments
- 3 23 Phone Bills, 1982

Writings by or Collaborations with Bricktop

- 4 1 Personal Writings and Poetry
- 4 2 Notes and Interviews for Book Project w/James Haskins

Legal Documents

- 4 3 Legal Contracts and Documents
- 4 4 Family Records and Deeds
- 4 5 Citizenship Documentation and Empty Passport Folder

Ephemera

4	6	Bricktop's Address books
4	7	Assorted Business Cards and Handwritten phone numbers
4	8	Guest Book and Program from Blonzetta's Funeral
4	9	List of Donations made to the DuSable Museum (several copies)
4	10	Lionel Hampton record (45 rpm), possibly autographed
4	11	Hotel Memorabilia
4	12	Party Mask (worn) and Book Cover
4	13	Blank Cards and Stamps
4	14	Jokes
5		Colorful cross stitch tapestry
