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A BRIEF HISTORY ON THE LIFE  
OF  
MATILDA SISSIERETTA (JOYNOR) JONES  
"THE BLACK PATTI"  
1869-1933

?

by  
Carl R. Gross, M. D.  
Providence, R. I.  
1966



## PREFACE

I became interested in the history of the Negro in Rhode Island when Governor William K. Vanderbilt appointed a group in 1935, to represent the Negro on the Rhode Island State Tercentenary Committee.

We met and organized, deciding to write something of the history of our race in the State. Different members were assigned various categories such as: Churches; the Civic field; Medicine and Allied Sciences; Law; Negroes in the General Assembly; noted Negroes in the State; the first and only Negro woman chosen to be American Mother, 1946 and others.

Some of the members gave me their material to go with mine forming a nucleus for furthering this endeavor as a hobby.

A request came from a student at Syracuse University, N. Y. to the Rhode Island Historical Society for information concerning Madame Jones and they referred her to me. Her doctoral dissertation is on the Negro's role in the 19th century concert life, her central figure being Madame Matilda Sissieretta (Joynor) Jones who had lived here in Providence, R. I. This caused me to type a brief history of Madame Jones, this and other material I had collected was made available to her.

In the meantime I heard that Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Mass., had sought information from her church here as they were sponsoring a biographical encyclopedia on Noted American Women which would include her. I also sent them a copy of my notes and they sent them to Mr. William Lichtenwanger of the music division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C., who is to write the article about her.

It has been a privilege and an honor to have personally known Madame Jones, the World's Greatest Negro Singer of her time and to have been able to collect the following information about her.

C. R. G. 1966



MATILDA SISSIERETTA (JOYNOR) JONES

"BLACK PATTI"

1869-1933

Matilda Sissieretta Jones was born in Portsmouth, Va., the 5th day of January, 1869, the daughter of Reverend Jeremiah M. and Henrietta B. Joynor. He was the pastor of an Afro-Methodist church there also chorister, being ably assisted by his wife, a soprano of exceptional ability. 1

In 1876 he received a call to a church in Providence, R. I. and he and his family came here, which was to be the scene of the first musical triumph of "Sissy" as she was called. 1

She started singing in Pond Street Baptist Church Sunday School entertainments. While a mere child, Madame Jones developed a voice of remarkable power and quality that she attracted the attention of the musical people of Providence.

She began to study at the Providence Academy of Music, when 15 under M. Mauros and Baroness Lacombe, ( a retired Italian singer), at 18, she continued at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, Mass., later going to New York where one of her teachers was Madame Louise Cappiani, another Italian voice teacher. 2

During a year of training at the Conservatory, she appeared in concert by invitation at Boston's Music Hall in 1887 before 5,000 people for the Parnell Defense Fund. (The Message, May 14, 1892) 1

It was after singing at the Sans Souci Garden in Providence, R. I., she received a call to come to New York to sing for Abbey, Schoeffel and Grau. She sang with such success at Wallack's Theatre that she was immediately engaged for a tour of South America and the West Indies, which lasted two years. This was the real start of her professional career in 1888. No other colored artist had ever appeared at Wallack's before. 1

She sang before 7,000, February 22, 1893 at the Talmage Tabernacle in Brooklyn, N. Y., before 300,000 at the Buffalo Exposition, before 75,000 in one week at the Madison Square Garden, 12,000 in Congress Hall Park in Chicago. She toured with the great Levy's Concert Band as soloist, all over the United States in auditoriums, expositions and halls. 1-2

Her voice in its early stages was a decided contralto and as it matured, still contained the velvety richness so noticeable in such singers as Scalchi and others. 1

1- Her personal scrap book.

2- Providence Sunday Journal, July 16, 1933



Morris Reno, president of the Carnegie Music Hall Association of New York, engaged her for a concert tour of the United States and Europe. She made her first appearance in Berlin, Germany and the Berliner Zeitung said, "no sooner had the real Patti departed than a most worthy substitute appeared in the person of the Black Patti from America!" The European engagement lasted eight months and no singer was ever received with more enthusiasm than Madame Jones. She received a royal command to appear before King Edward while in Britain and that popular monarch expressed the unqualified delight with her performance. 1

In February, 1892, President Harrison invited her to appear at a luncheon in the Blue Room at the White House. After the concert Mrs. Harrison was so delighted that she presented her with a bouquet of White House orchids. She also appeared at the homes of Chief Justice Fuller, Senator Andrews and others. She sang before President's Theodore Roosevelt and William McKinley. 2

Major J. B. Pond, the proprietor and manager of the American Lecture and Musical Agency was her manager. He also managed Clara Louise Kellogg, Anna Louise Carey, the Reverend T. DeWitt Talmage, Mark Twain, Henry Ward Beecher, Sir Edwin Arnold, George Keenan and others. 1

Once she remarked, "I woke up famous after singing at the Garden and didn't know it" when she sang before 75,000 people in one week. For one week's appearance at the Pittsburg Exposition, he demanded and received \$2,000, the highest salary ever paid a colored artist. Mrs. Alberta Wilson was under contract by Major Pond as the accompanist for Madame Jones. At a concert in Louisville, Ky., to the people who had never seen a finished colored pianist, she was a curiosity and a revelation. 1 (Louisville Courier Journal)

Later Messrs. Voelckel and Nolan became her managers and they organized the famous "Black Patti Troubadours" which toured the country in a special hotel Pullman car for many seasons. Madame Jones enjoys the distinction of appearing in more consecutive performances than any other living singer of her time. 1

A note of the hardships of early colored performers was that of Bob Cole, as it was his master hand that made the Troubadours the sensation they were. It was when the show was playing at Proctor's 58th Street Theatre in New York that he went to the managers for better pay for the troupe. Unable to better this condition, he took the score, (his music) and left. 4

- 1- Her personal scrap book
- 2- Providence Sunday Journal, July 16, 1933
- 4- Baltimore Afro-American, July 8, 1933



Voelckel and Nolan, the financial backers had Cole arrested but he could not be intimidated, so they had him black-listed inducing other managers all over the country to refuse employment to Cole or any of his sympathizers but not in Canada. A few staunch followers like Jesse Shipp, Billy Johnson, Lloyd Gibbs, Hen Wise and others decided to fight with Cole to the finish. 4

Cole issued the Colored Actor's Declaration of Independence, "We are going to have our own shows, we are going to write them ourselves, our own stage manager, our own orchestra leader, our own manager out front to count up, no divided houses, our race must be seated from the boxes back. Cole organized his "Trip to Coontown company and the managers dealt Cole another blow, no house could book another colored show. After terrific wild-cattin they wandered into Canada, obtaining a broken date in Ottawa, another in Toronto and the daily papers of the Dominion raved about the novelty of the show so much that the managers there bid for it. 4

The news of it reached New York and Klaw and Englander defied the lock-out, booking them for a New York opening at Jacob's 3rd Avenue Theatre during Holy Week, the worst week in the year for show business. Crouds were turned away at every performance thus paving the way for colored artists. Cole had won his battle. 4

The New York Clipper, a theatrical paper gave her the name, the "Black Patti" by which she became world famous, after singing at Wallack's Theatre in New York. It said, "she sings like Patti without the slightest effort". 2 Madame Jones was very distressed by that name, even while appreciating the comparison as a great honor, but I do not begin to sing like Patti can. I have been anxious to drop this name but it has been so identified with me, it is now impossible. 1 (Detroit Tribune, February 12, 1893)

She married while very young, D. Richard Jones, a handsome mulatto and had one child who died and this was a great loss to her. He was a race-track and gambling man whom she later divorced for sufficient reasons after he had a grand time spending her money. She was allowed to resume her maiden name but she preferred Madame Sissieretta Jones for the stage. 1

She was engaged to sing at the Madison Street Presbyterian Church in Baltimore, the gospel cafeteria of the first families. Arriving in the afternoon for a private rehearsal, her voice drifted across the street to the ears of one of the dowagers who was entertaining her club. Whose voice is that? On being told it was the Black Patti said, I'll allow her to sing for our party. She dispatched her colored cook to invite her over. Madame Jones looked at the cook, saying tell your mistress if she will contact my managers, arrange for an engagement, I will be happy to sing for her, but it will several months. The cook returned and were their faces of the blue bloods red. 4

1- Her personal scrap book

2- Providence Sunday Journal, July 16, 1933

4- Baltimore Afro-American, July 8, 1933



She retained three of the seventeen gold medals which appeared across her bosom in concert, possibly for sentimental reasons. 6

One of these was given her for singing at a benefit for the Parnell Defense Fund in Providence, R. I. Inscribed was Madame Jones on the top bar; suspended another bar with the date April 4, 1889, holding a lyre surrounded with shamrocks and below the medal with a scroll in the center and around the outside, Presented by her Providence Friends. 1-6

The largest gold medal was from President Hippolyte of the Haitian Republic. From the top bar, a ribbon holding a bar inscribed Madame Jones and below the medal with Black Patti around the top with a diamond above, around the bottom, Republique-1891-Haiti with a diamond below. 1-6

The third was given by the Society of the Sons of New York, a leading colored organization who raised more than \$1,100 for the World Food Fund. Madame Jones was the star of the evening, her first number was the waltz song by Geli, "La Farfalla" and for an encore, "The Cows are in the Clover". Her second number was Gounod's "Ave Maria" with piano and violin obligato. The medal: From the Society of the Sons of New York on the top bar, below the medal with the insignia of the Society and in the center of this was the seal of the State of New York. 1-6

Some of the other gifts she received were; from the Governor-General of Demerara, the richest of all, a tiara of solid gold with three diamonds projecting; a huge rough nugget of gold also from Demerara; the costliest from the citizens of St. Thomas; a large solitaire diamond in the center of a bar with emeralds; the Governor of St Thomas gave her a bracelet of old gold coins, one being over 135 years old; from several gentlemen from Jamaica, a miniature gold crown set with rubies and pearls; a gold star from the Governor of Barbados; a necklace of gold Egyptian scarabei with a pearl pendant locket; an old gold Ivy Leaf from the American residents of Colon and many others. 1-3-6

Toward the close of her career her mother became ill and she came home to care for her until she passed. She intended to return to the stage but made one appearance at the Grand Theatre in Chicago, retiring to her nine room home at 7 Wheaton Street which she bought for her mother. She owned two houses across the street from no. 7 and two on Benefit Street around Church and Howland Streets. She lived in one of these (in the Benefit Street Restoration area) at one time when her mother remarried.

1-6

1- Her personal scrap book.

3- Baltimore Afro-American, July...1933, N. E. Edition.

6- Compiled with comments by Carl R. Gross, M. D., 1966



Madame Jones spent a quiet life with some of the treasures collected in her former days:- a large oil painting of the Grand Canal by C. Valette, a Corot, a Murat, and the "Old Mill" by C. Ruette, all famous artists. The top of her walnut piano was covered with autographed pictures of many artists, notably, Madame Melba, Cole and Johnson with their famous song, "Mudder Knows!" and many other pieces of sheet music. Also retained were her two fur coats, her wardrobe of some of the wonderful evening gowns loaded with sequins, some gorgeous airgrets, gloves and other finery, the three gold medals, her personal scrap book, photographs of herself and her parrot which she bought 28 years ago in Argentina. She loved flowers and when home summers spent hours in her rose garden. 3

She was very charitable, taking in motherless children, clothing and feeding them as if her own until poverty forced her to sell her jewelry, silver, her four other houses, retaining 7 Wheaton Street, going on relief she had to assign this to the State. 3

Madame Jones was very religious and while in retirement was baptized and joined Congdon Street Baptist Church here in Providence, R. I., where she sang on rare occasions during the service. 6

Mr. William P. H. Freeman, a Negro realtor and past president of the local N. A. A. C. P., during the last two years of her illness, paid her estate tax, water tax, wood and coal bills, etc. 3 I am told, he provided the grave to keep her out of "Potter's Field" where the destitute of the city are buried. 6 It was he who gave me the three medals, scrap book, photographs etc., and knowing I was interested in Negro history in Rhode Island, said, when my eyes are closed, these things might be thrown out and lost to posterity. He is still living and has told me many things about Madame Jones. 6

As a personal note about the most famous Negro singer of her time, I recall my mother visiting her mother many times. Later in 1903, my friend who roomed with her mother and I joined Jackson's Band in Pawtucket, so I was in the house quite often practicing. While she was home one summer, she introduced me to Mr. Voelckel who was there on a business trip. Once I asked her to sing for me so she picked up a piece of music, asking me to play it, this was the only time I heard that wonderful voice. 6

Matilda Sissieretta (Joynor) Jones died penniless June 24, 1933 in the Rhode Island Hospital in Providence, R. I., and was buried in Grace Church Cemetery here. 6

"This piece of history is fast passing into discard as one by one, the pioneers of the stage pass on, "Black Patti" is at the end of her line". 4 (Baltimore Afro-American, July 8, 1933)

3- Baltimore Afro-American, New England edition, July 1933

4- Baltimore Afro-American, July 8, 1933

6- Compiled with comments by Carl R. Gross, M. D., 1966



Some quotes from her personal scrap book about her voice.

The Globe, Toronto, 10-13-93; The unsurpassed songtress, Madame Jones sings in concert under the auspices of the Elder Street Presbyterian Church, the 18th... Mrs. Alberta Wilson, a most excellent pianist is the accompanist for Madame Jones.

The Empire, Toronto, 1891; I have had an offer to sing in the new opera, "Scipio Africanus" by the composer of Cavalleria Rusticana. .... I prefer the concert platform for the present.

Cincinnati, 3-14-93; Van Cleve's estimate of the power of her voice;.....in one of her encore songs she took the A above staff and held it for 15 seconds... both her voice and her school remind me more of Nordica than Patti.

The Washington Post, no date; A Phenominal Attraction..... the upper notes of her voice are clear and bell-like, reminding one of Parepa Rosa and her low notes are rich and sensuous with a tropical contralto quality..... In fact, the compass and quality of her registers surpass the usual limitations and seem to combine the height and depth of both soprano and contralto.

The Free Press, 2-11-93; Her first number was the aria, Robert toi que j'aime, which would test the resources of any prima donna.

The New York Review, no date; Carnegie Music Hall presented an animated appearance Monday night, where the brilliant audience hung with breathless stillness upon the clarion notes of the most gifted singer the age has produced.... It was the first time any company of colored artists had ever occupied the hall.

The New York Echo, no date;.... the Black Patti rendered a piece by Verdi, called "Senpre Libria".... and if Madame Jones is not the equal of Patti, she at least can come nearer than anything the American public has heard.... Her notes are as clear as a mocking bird and her enunciation, perfect.

The Detroit Tribune, no date; ... Her musical voice is of extraordinary compass and even power. It is rich and full in the upper register..... Her second number was a waltz song, "La Farfalla"... her encore was the gem of the evening, "Way down upon the Swanee River and she sang it with a clearness and a feeling that was wonderful.

The Message, 5-14-92;...in Boston's Music Hall in 1887, she sang before 5,000 for the Parnell Defense Fund.....Shortly after she made a tour of New England and after that a tour of England and Scotland.....she was a source of curiosity, especially to the lower class in England..... she relates a similar experience in Spain, where the Moor is the only type of black seen commonly.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1- Her personal scrap book, press releases from newspapers all over the United States and Canada, Her picture on the front cover and on the back side a clipping, no name, no date telling of her birth, parents and when they came to Providence in 1876 also her signature.
  - 2- The Closing Chapters of the life of "Black Patti", by F. C. Terry, Providence Sunday Journal, July 16, 1933.
  - 3- BLACK PATTI LEFT ONLY A SMALL ESTATE by Lydia T. Brown, The Baltimore Afro-American, New England Edition, July 1933.
  - 4- The Baltimore Afro-American, July 8, 1933, Baltimore edition.
  - 5- To Mr. William P. H. Freeman, a former president of the local N. A. A. C. P., a deep sense of gratitude for her personal scrap book, three gold medals out of seventeen which she retained,, several photographs of Madame Jones, a dodger of the Troubadours, 13th season, 1908-1909 showing pictures of the troupe and the special hotel Pullman car in which they traveled all over the United States.
- Mr. Freeman now ninety years old, feared that when his eyes closed, this material might be thrown out and knowing my interest in the History of the Negro in Rhode Island gave this to me.
- 6- Compiled with comments by Carl R. Gross, M. D., Providence, R. I., 1966

All this material is presented to the Moorland Collection on Negro History, Howard University, Washington, D. C. , 1966.