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Guide to the Olivette Miller and Bunny Briggs Collection

JWJ MSS 364



Karen Spicher and Monika Lehman

April 2022

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Collection Overview

REPOSITORY: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library
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New Haven, CT 06520-8330
(203) 432-2977
beinecke.library@yale.edu
<http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/>

CALL NUMBER: JWJ MSS 364

CREATOR: Miller-Briggs, Olivette

TITLE: Olivette Miller and Bunny Briggs collection

DATES: 1942–2019

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: 4.88 linear feet (7 boxes)

LANGUAGE: English

SUMMARY: The collection includes materials related to both the personal and professional lives of Olivette Miller and Bunny Briggs. The collection includes Miller's contacts' addresses, correspondence, a scrapbook of clippings, and photographs. Scripts, contracts, and photographs related to Briggs' career are included. Also included are programs from performances that Miller and Briggs appeared in. Photographs and writings related to Flournoy E. Miller's biographical materials potentially relate to research conducted by Sandra Seaton, the donor and a relative of Flournoy E. Miller. Also included are two videocassettes of performances of Bunny Briggs and Olivette Miller.

ONLINE FINDING AID: To cite or bookmark this finding aid, please use the following link: <https://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/beinecke.millerbriggs>

Requesting Instructions

To request items from this collection for use in the Beinecke Library reading room, please use the request links in the HTML version of this finding aid, available at <https://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/beinecke.millerbriggs>.

To order reproductions from this collection, please send an email with the call number, box number(s), and folder number(s) to beinecke.images@yale.edu.

Key to the container abbreviations used in the PDF finding aid:

b. box
f. folder
■■■■■ item barcode

Administrative Information

Immediate Source of Acquisition

Gift of Sandra C. Seaton, 2021.

Conditions Governing Access

The materials are open for research.

Box 6: Restricted fragile materials. Reference copies may be requested. Consult Access Services for further information.

Preferred Citation

Olivette Miller and Bunny Briggs Collection. James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

Processing Information

The Dramatist citation: Seaton, Sandra, "Shuffle Along and Ethnic Humor: 'The Proper Push,'" *The Dramatist*, May/June 2016, 45-50.

Biographical / Historical

Olivette Miller (1914-2003) was an African American jazz harpist and singer. Her parents were Flournoy Eakin Miller and Bessie Oliver Miller. She performed on Broadway, on television, and on national tours most notably in Las Vegas nightclubs. Miller Briggs also appeared in the film "A Rage in Harlem." She married Bunny Briggs in 1982. Miller dedicated her life to educating the public about her father's contributions to the world of entertainment and performing arts, including a memoir entitled "The Laughmaker."

Biographical / Historical

Bunny Briggs (1922-2014) was an African American and Tony nominated tap dancer. Briggs was born with the name Bernard Briggs in Harlem, New York. He danced on Broadway in productions including "Black and Blue" and in jazz clubs with the Duke Ellington orchestra, becoming known as "Duke's dancer" after a Briggs's starring role in "David Danced Before the Lord". He also toured and performed with the big bands of Earl Hines, Tommy Dorsey, Jimmy Dorsey, Charley Barnet, and Count Basie. Briggs performed in films including "Slow Poke" and "Tap" and was featured in the documentary "No Maps on My Taps". Briggs also mentored dancers Gregory Hines and Savion Glover. Briggs received an Honorary Doctorate of Performing Arts in American Dance from Oklahoma City University in 2002.

Scope and Contents

The collection includes materials related to both the personal and professional lives of Olivette Miller and Bunny Briggs. The collection includes Miller's contacts' addresses, correspondence, a scrapbook of clippings, and photographs. Scripts, contracts, and photographs related to Briggs' career are included. Also included are programs from performances that Miller and Briggs appeared in. Photographs and writings related to Flournoy E. Miller's biographical materials potentially relate to research conducted

by Sandra Seaton, the donor and a relative of Flourney E. Miller. Also included are two videocassettes of performances of Bunny Briggs and Olivette Miller.

Arrangement

Organized by type of material.

Collection Contents

Correspondence

b. 1, f. 1	Father's Day card from Olivette to Bunny	1984 June 16
b. 1, f. 2	Greeting cards and addresses	circa 1993
b. 1, f. 3	Performance programs and photographs	undated
b. 1, f. 4	Business correspondence	1990–2003
b. 1, f. 5-6	Greeting cards and photographs	1979–1992
b. 1, f. 7	Medical correspondence photocopy	1990
b. 1, f. 8-9	Contract and agreement correspondence	1978–2001
b. 1, f. 10	Lewis, Jerry correspondence	1991 September 1
b. 1, f. 11	General correspondence	1994–1999
b. 1, f. 12	Leberfing, Lorna correspondence	1999 February 19

Photographs

Some materials present, including photographs and ephemera, depict blackface minstrelsy tropes and related comedic performance. Blackface minstrelsy was among the leading popular stage entertainments in the U.S. from the mid-19th century well into the 20th century. It incorporated and perpetuated racist, stereotypical depictions of African Americans into comedy sketches and songs. It was marked by and takes its name from the practice of donning darkening makeup or face paint as a part of the caricature. Both white and Black performers adopted blackface techniques, though white performers far outnumbered Black performers. Items in this collection include a cartoon depiction of Miller and Lyles, the comedic duo of Flournoy E. Miller and Aubrey Lyles, as well as photographs of Charles Correll, a white blackface stage performer who also voiced the radio program *Amos 'n' Andy* (F.E. Miller at one time considered suing Correll and his partner Freeman Godsen for plagiarizing portions of Miller and Lyles's act). As playwright, librettist, and historian Sandra Seaton has written, "F.E. [Miller] was quite willing to make use of ethnic stereotypes associated with ethnic humor if the end result was not denigration but instead the ridiculing of prejudice through laughter. He was more than willing to make jokes about traits supposedly typifying African Americans and, by implication, about those so foolish as to accept seriously the ethnic or racist stereotypes of the time." As Olivette Miller told Seaton, "Her father's pose was that of a black man making fun of the way white people make fun of black people." Seaton also notes that writers from Langston Hughes to August Wilson thought that Miller's *Shuffle Along* was a vitally important artwork and should be understood within its historical context.

b. 1, f. 13	Jackson, Laurence Donald	undated
b. 1, f. 14	Zeisset, Marie-Christin	undated
b. 1, f. 15	Calloway, Cab	undated
b. 1, f. 16	Warwick, Dionne with Olivette and Bunny	undated

b. 1, f. 17	Polaroid photographs Includes photographs of Bunny and Olivette at their home.	undated
b. 1, f. 18	Home photographs	undated
b. 1, f. 19	<i>Mystery in Swing</i> photograph Flournoy Miller is in the photograph.	circa 1940
b. 1, f. 20-21	<i>Tap</i> photographs and photocopies	circa 1989
b. 1, f. 22	<i>Black and Blue</i> photographs	undated
b. 1, f. 23	Miller, Olivette and Briggs, Bunny photograph	undated
b. 1, f. 24	Briggs, Bunny framed photograph	undated
b. 2, f. 25	Dietrich, Marlene	undated
b. 2, f. 26	Glover, Savion	1988 May 7
b. 2, f. 27	Miller, Olivette with harp	undated
b. 2, f. 28	Lee, Mabel obituary clipping	2019 February 15
b. 2, f. 29	Briggs, Bunny	undated
b. 2, f. 30-32	Miller, Olivette negatives	undated
b. 2, f. 33	Briggs, Bunny negative	undated
b. 2, f. 34	Latin Quarter program and related materials	circa 1949
b. 2, f. 35	Briggs, Bunny	undated
b. 2, f. 36	Briggs, Bunny	undated
b. 2, f. 37	Miller, Olivette	undated
b. 2, f. 38	Performance and backstage photographs	1989-1993
b. 2, f. 39	Miller, Flournoy E. and Blake, Eubie	undated
b. 2, f. 40	<i>Shuffle Along</i>	undated
b. 2, f. 41	Eldridge, Roy photocopy	undated
b. 2, f. 42-44	Miller, Olivette	undated
b. 2, f. 45	Miller, Olivette at home	undated
b. 2, f. 45a	Olivette Miller and These Gentlemen	undated
b. 2, f. 46	Bailey, Jim	undated
b. 2, f. 47	R.K.O. Palace	undated
b. 2, f. 48	Lewis, Robert Q., autographed	undated
b. 2, f. 49	Gosden, Freeman, autographed	undated

Some materials present, including photographs and ephemera, depict blackface minstrelsy tropes and related comedic performance. Blackface minstrelsy was among the leading popular stage entertainments in the U.S. from the mid-19th century well into the 20th century. It incorporated and perpetuated racist, stereotypical depictions of African Americans into comedy sketches and songs. It was marked by and takes its name from the practice of donning darkening makeup or face paint as a part of the caricature. Both white and Black performers adopted blackface techniques, though white performers far outnumbered Black performers. Items in this collection include a cartoon depiction of Miller and Lyles, the comedic duo of Flournoy E. Miller and Aubrey Lyles, as well as photographs of Charles Correll, a white blackface stage performer who also voiced the radio program Amos 'n' Andy (F.E. Miller at one time considered suing Correll and his partner Freeman Godsen for plagiarizing portions of Miller and Lyles's act). As playwright, librettist, and historian Sandra Seaton has written, "F.E. [Miller] was quite willing to make use of ethnic stereotypes associated with ethnic humor if the end result was not denigration but instead the ridiculing of prejudice through laughter. He was more than willing to make jokes about traits supposedly typifying African Americans and, by implication, about those so foolish as to accept seriously the ethnic or racist stereotypes of the time." As Olivette Miller told Seaton, "Her father's pose was that of a black man making fun of the way white people make fun of black people." Seaton also notes that writers from Langston Hughes to August Wilson thought that Miller's Shuffle Along was a vitally important artwork and should be understood within its historical context.

b. 2, f. 50	Photo album	1970–1974
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b. 7, f. 118	Charles Correll signed photograph	undated
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b. 7, f. 119	Charles Correll and Freeman Gosden photograph	undated
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U.S. from the mid-19th century well into the 20th century. It incorporated and perpetuated racist, stereotypical depictions of African Americans into comedy sketches and songs. It was marked by and takes its name from the practice of donning darkening makeup or face paint as a part of the caricature. Both white and Black performers adopted blackface techniques, though white performers far outnumbered Black performers. Items in this collection include a cartoon depiction of Miller and Lyles, the comedic duo of Flournoy E. Miller and Aubrey Lyles, as well as photographs of Charles Correll, a white blackface stage performer who also voiced the radio program Amos 'n' Andy (F.E. Miller at one time considered suing Correll and his partner Freeman Godsen for plagiarizing portions of Miller and Lyles's act). As playwright, librettist, and historian Sandra Seaton has written, "F.E. [Miller] was quite willing to make use of ethnic stereotypes associated with ethnic humor if the end result was not denigration but instead the ridiculing of prejudice through laughter. He was more than willing to make jokes about traits supposedly typifying African Americans and, by implication, about those so foolish as to accept seriously the ethnic or racist stereotypes of the time." As Olivette Miller told Seaton, "Her father's pose was that of a black man making fun of the way white people make fun of black people." Seaton also notes that writers from Langston Hughes to August Wilson thought that Miller's Shuffle Along was a vitally important artwork and should be understood within its historical context.

b. 7, f. 120	Group photographs	undated
b. 7, f. 121	Flournoy E. Miller and Aubrey Lyles photograph 2017.jwj. 0013 from Sandra Seaton.	undated
Funeral related materials		
b. 2, f. 51	Funeral rites planner, blank thank you cards, and printed New York Times obituary	2014 November
b. 2, f. 52	Angelius Funeral Home guest book	undated
b. 3, f. 53- 54	Angelius Funeral Homes guest book	undated
b. 3, f. 55	<i>The Dramatist</i> Includes an article, "Shuffle ALong and Ethnic Humor: 'The Proper Push'" by Sandra Seaton.	2016 May
Biographies		
b. 3, f. 56-57	Bunny Briggs typescript and notes	undated
b. 3, f. 58-59	Flournoy E. Miller typescript	undated
b. 3, f. 60	Irvin C. Miller photocopy	undated
b. 3, f. 61-62	Olivette Miller typescript	undated
b. 7, f. 122	Governor's Commendation certificate The commendation was presented to Bunny Briggs from Frank Keating, the governor of Oklahoma.	2002 February 22

Music

b. 5, f. 63	<i>You Can't Lose a Broken Heart</i> sheet music Oversize	undated
b. 5, f. 64-65	Olivette Miller musical scores	undated
<p>Audiovisual materials</p> <p>Box 6 (videocassettes): Restricted fragile materials. Reference copies may be requested. Consult Access Services for further information.</p>		
b. 6, f. 66, ■■■■ 39002140902421	Bunny Briggs <i>1 Videocassette (Betamax) 03:51:24 Duration (HH:MM:SS.mmm)</i> Intermittent picture breakup and visible tracking errors on tape. Tape switches speed and audio sounds slow temporarily before switching back to normal speed. This is the best pass of multiple attempts for quality. Includes segments entitled "News", "LV Profile", "On Stage Amer", and "The Tonight Show". Audiovisual material: Restricted fragile. Reference copies may be requested. Consult Access Services for further information.	undated
b. 6, f. 67, ■■■■ 39002140902439	Bunny Briggs and Olivette Miller <i>1 Videocassette (Betamax) 02:15:45 Duration (HH:MM:SS.mmm)</i> Tape is in poor condition. Edge damage and wrinkles are on the tape. The videocassette is labeled "Bunny and Olivette Jazz Tap, San Francisco". Audiovisual material: Restricted fragile. Reference copies may be requested. Consult Access Services for further information.	undated
<p>Clippings and publicity materials</p>		
b. 3, f. 68	Tap Dance calendar	1999
b. 3, f. 69	Empty class folders	undated
b. 3, f. 70-71	Dance magazines Includes issues of "Dancer" and "On Tap".	1959-2002
b. 3, f. 72	General correspondence	1989-2000
b. 3, f. 73	Clippings	1965-1999
b. 3, f. 74	Photocopied clipping	circa 1997
b. 3, f. 75	<i>The Real Legends of Tap</i> program	1999
b. 3, f. 76	Tony Awards Playbill	1989 June 4
b. 3, f. 77	Performing Artists Series program	1985-1986
b. 3, f. 78	National Tap Dance Day Celebration Gala programs and related materials	1988-2000
b. 3, f. 79-80	Clippings and programs	1995-1999
b. 3, f. 81	Contracts	undated
b. 3, f. 82	<i>The Playgoer</i> and clipping	circa 1970
b. 3, f. 83	<i>Black and Blue</i> souvenir brochure and <i>International Tap Association Journal</i>	circa 1990

b. 3, f. 84	Dance Magazine Awards	2002 February
b. 3, f. 85	<i>The Ladies Who Danced Inc's Tribute to Duke Ellington</i>	1992 April 24
b. 5, f. 86	Scrapbook Includes clippings about Olivette Miller's career.	circa 1955
b. 3, f. 87	<i>Mo' Funny: Black Comedy in America</i> ephemera Includes blackface cartoon.	circa 1993
b. 4, f. 88	Clipping	1989 April 14
b. 4, f. 89-90	Photocopied clipping	circa 1994
b. 4, f. 91	<i>Gingerbread Lady</i> program	1981
b. 4, f. 92	<i>A Bit of Mirror Magic</i> program	1942 June 27
b. 4, f. 93	<i>Jazz in the City Jazz Masters</i> series program	circa 1991
b. 4, f. 94	<i>My One and Only</i> program	undated
b. 4, f. 95	Olivette Miller performance programs	1944-1990
b. 4, f. 96-98	Olivette Miller clippings	1942-1973
b. 4, f. 99	American Society of Composers membership agreement	1995
b. 4, f. 100-101	Programs	1942-1977
b. 4, f. 102	Contracts	1961
b. 4, f. 103	<i>Performing Arts</i> magazine	1985 September
b. 4, f. 104	<i>Jazz Tap Summit</i> magazine	1990 June
b. 4, f. 105	<i>Theatrical News Photos</i> and correspondence	circa 1947
b. 4, f. 106	Olivette Miller photograph and photocopied marriage certificate	circa 1977
b. 4, f. 107	Photographs and programs	1943-1989
b. 4, f. 108	Hollywood Comedy Club certificate of appreciation The certificate was presented to Olivette Miller.	1964 May 2
Scripts		
b. 4, f. 109	<i>Black and Blue</i> photocopied reviews Includes reviews in French.	circa 1996
b. 4, f. 110	<i>Black and Blue</i> letter of agreement	circa 1996
b. 4, f. 111	<i>Black and Blue</i> contact list, letter of agreement, and memo	1989 September
b. 4, f. 112	<i>Tap</i> screenplay	1988
b. 4, f. 113	<i>Alphabetic Jive</i> lyrics	undated

b. 4, f. 114	Untitled script pages	undated
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Addresses

b. 4, f. 115	Olivette Miller's addresses for contacts	undated
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b. 4, f. 116-117	Pages from Olivette Miller's address book	undated
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Selected Search Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the Library's online catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically therein.

Subjects

African American dancers
African American musicians
Minstrel shows
Musicians -- United States -- 20th century.
Sheet music

Occupations

Dancers -- United States -- 20th Century

Genres / Formats

Audiovisual materials -- United States -- 20th Century
Photographs -- United States -- 20th Century

Contributors

Miller-Briggs, Olivette
Briggs, Bunny