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Odetta Papers, ca. 1950s-1990s, n.d.

Sc MG 317

Bulk Dates:	1980s
Extent:	Shelving Unit: 12 record cartons, 1 a.b. Linear feet: 12.4 linear ft.
Source and Date:	Odetta, 1998.
Processor's Name:	Steven G. Fullwood
Date Finding Aid Completed:	July 2010
Abstract:	Odetta (1930-2008) was a folk singer, musician and activist. Collection contains personal and professional papers including biographical materials, journals and date books, writings, letters, sheet music, recording contracts, performance contracts, financial records and memorabilia.
Provenance:	The collection was donated to the Schomburg Center.
Organization note:	Collection is organized in two series: Personal and Professional.
Access:	
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Citation:	[Item], Odetta Papers, Sc MG 317, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library
Index Terms	
Names:	Odetta, Bert Howell, Helen Armstead-Johnson, Ethel Waters
Subject:	20 th Century-Fox Film Corporation; Action and Defenses; Actors; Afro-American Actors; Afro-American Composers; Afro-American Dramatists; Afro-American in the Performing Arts; Afro-American Musicians; American Drama, Afro-American Authors; Composers, Lifeboat; Playwrights; Vaudeville, United States.

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Biographical Note

Odetta, international folk singer, musician and activist, began her career in the 1950s. In the ensuing decades she established herself as one of the voices of the Civil Rights Movement. Armed with an acoustic guitar and throaty, full-bodied voice, the preeminent entertainer whose repertoire included blues, spiritual, jazz, and work and civil rights songs, was a mainstay on the music scene after the folk music resurgence in the 1950s and 1960s, and continued to perform and tour into the 21st Century until her death December 2, 2008 at the age of 77.

Born December 31, 1930, Odetta (which means “wealth” in German) Holmes was one of two girls born to Rueben Holmes and his wife, Flora, in Birmingham, Alabama. When she was an infant her father died. Her mother remarried Zadock Felious, and, in the early 1930s, her family moved Los Angeles. On suggestion from a teacher, her mother enrolled young Odetta in opera training classes at the age of 13. She continued to explore music in college, and attended Los Angeles City College, graduating with a degree in Music.

Although Odetta’s first professional experience in 1944 was musical theater as an ensemble member for four years with the Hollywood Turnabout Puppet Theatre, her break came in 1949 when she received a small role in a production of *Finian’s Rainbow*. The show moved to San Francisco where she met up with her childhood friend, Joanne Maples, who introduced Odetta to folk music. Maples took the young singer to a nightclub called the hungry i, and told the owner that a folksinger on a concert tour was in the audience. The owner asked Odetta to sing. She did and was offered a job on the spot. The headliner at the club objected, but later Odetta was asked to open a new club, Tin Angel, and stayed there for a year, dropping her last name to professionally become simply, Odetta.

Odetta’s career in recordings, films, television specials, documentaries, tours, special events, and collaborations spans fifty years. Her discography alone includes 19 studio albums, 7 live albums, 11 compilation albums and one tribute and cover album.

In 1953, Fantasy Records released “Odetta & Larry,” an album recorded with folk singer, Larry Mohr. One year later, Odetta released her debut solo album, “Tin Angel,” but it was her second album, “Odetta Sings Ballads and Blues,” released in 1956, that critics describe as a key moment in folk music revival. Her subsequent live album, “At the Gate of Horn” in 1957 established her as a musician of merit. In the early years luminaries such as Paul Robeson, Pete Seeger, and Harry Belafonte were among those who supported and encouraged the young musician.

During the 1960s she recorded prolifically, releasing 16 albums in that decade alone. They included a live set recorded at Carnegie Hall, “Odetta and the Blues,” in 1962, and a collection of Dylan songs. Although by the late 1970s she recorded less, she continued to tour regularly performing at folk and jazz festivals nationally and internationally.

In 1998 she recorded “To Ella,” an album dedicated to the recently deceased Ella Fitzgerald, and followed it a year later with “Blues Everywhere I Go,” a tribute to the female blues singers of the 1930s which was nominated for a Grammy award. Three years later Odetta recorded “Looking for a Home,” a collection of songs by Leadbelly. Her final release, “Gonna Let It Shine” in 2007, (also Grammy-nominated) was a set of gospel and spiritual songs.

Odetta has also appeared in two films, “Cinerama Holiday” (1955) and “Sanctuary” (1961) based on the William Faulkner’s novel, and the television drama, “The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman” (1974) based on Ernest J. Gaines’s novel. Her television appearances were numerous, primarily performances and interviews on specials and talks shows nationally and internationally such as “Tonight With Belefonte” (1959) for which she won an Emmy Award, “Les Crane Show” (1965), “The Dick Cavett Show” (1969) and “Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher” (2001). In 2001, when David Letterman’s Late Show returned to the airwaves from its New York TV studios a week after 9/11, Odetta’s voice was chosen to lend the necessary dignity to the occasion.

Odetta also taught at Evergreen State College in Tacoma, Washington (1982), Middlebury College in Middlebury, Vermont (1988), and conducted a class for Arts for Transit for the Metropolitan Transit Authority sometime in the late ‘80s or early ‘90s.

Although she married three times, Daniel Gordon in 1959, Gary Shead in the late 1960s, and blues musician Iverson “Louisiana Red” Minter in 1977, she never had children.

Many hallmarks dot the landscape of Odetta’s life and influence as a performer. Before Martin Luther King, Jr., gave his historic “I Have a Dream Speech,” in 1963, Odetta sang “I’m On My Way,” to hundreds gathered at the Lincoln Memorial plaza. King dubbed her “the Queen of American folk music.” Popular folk singers Bob Dylan and Joan Beaz cite her music as influential. Dylan claimed that after listening to “Odetta Sings Ballads and Blues” he was persuaded to sell his electric guitar and amplifier and buy an acoustic guitar. Janis Joplin reportedly listened to Odetta and imitated her when she began singing professionally.

In 1999 President Bill Clinton presented Odetta with a National Endowment for the Arts award. In 2005 the Library of Congress conferred on her its Living Legend Award.

In 2008, she embarked on her last US tour, and although in declining health she sang from a wheelchair. She was scheduled to sing at Barack Obama’s inauguration in January 2009, unfortunately she was admitted to hospital with kidney failure and died in December 2008.

Scope and Content

The Odetta Papers, ca. 1950s-1990s, offer a substantial look at the musician’s life and career, as well as highlighting her social, political and personal concerns in her own words and in articles and reviews about her and her work.

Series

PERSONAL PAPERS	Box
Biographical Information	1
Calendars, Journals, Itineraries and Date Books	1-2
Writings	2
Interviews	2
Awards	2
Correspondence	2-3
PROFESSIONAL PAPERS	
Music	4
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There are two series, **PERSONAL PAPERS** and **PROFESSIONAL PAPERS**, the latter constituting the larger of the two. The **PERSONAL PAPERS** series, **c. 1956 to 1991 (2.4 lin. ft.)** includes six subseries, **Biographical Information, Calendars, Journals, Itineraries and Datebooks, Writings, Interviews, Awards, and Correspondence**.

The **Biographical Information** subseries, **c. 1958-1980s, n.d. (.3 lin. ft.)** includes biographical sketches, obituaries, a will, a passport and identification cards. The **Calendars, Journals, Itineraries and Date Books** subseries, **1960s-1990s (.8 lin. ft.)** contains a substantial amount of both personal and professional information about the musician's life at home and on the road. The materials detail her thoughts about her work, the venues, and other musicians. Some materials were found loose and have been filed within the appropriate year span. A small file for Odetta's third husband, Iverson "Louisiana Red" Minter (restricted), is also filed here.

A sampling of the musician's **Writings, c. 1960s, n.d. (1 folder)** can be found here; they include lyrics by others and notes about performances. The **Interviews** subseries, **c. 1980s-1990 (2 folders)** includes a transcripts for an undated interview with writer Ben Page for an unnamed publication in the 1970s, and another with Charles J. Fuss for Goldmine, a music magazine in 1990, as well as published interviews in magazines and newspapers. The **Awards** subseries, **1975, 1986, 1990 (1 folder)** contains a sample of letters, programs and certificates pertaining to awards Odetta received in the 1970s and 1990s, including information about her Honorary Doctorate of Arts bestowed upon her by Middlebury College in 1990.

In the last subseries, **Correspondence, 1969s-1990s (1 lin. ft.)** consists of letters from her husbands, Daniel Gordon and Gary Shead (both restricted), her mother Flora Felious, friends, admirers and paramours.

The **PROFESSIONAL PAPERS, ca. 1956 -1990s, n.d. (9.4 lin. ft.)** are divided into five subseries: **Music, Record Companies, Performances, Financial Records** and **Memorabilia**. The **Performances** subseries is further delineated into five sub-subseries, **Contracts, Programs, Reviews, Other Works and Correspondence**.

The Music subseries, **1960s-1980s, (.5 lin. ft)** contains material written, arranged and/or performed by Odetta, as well as music collected by her, or sent to her which may have never been performed. Some of the sheet music and scores have been annotated by Odetta. There is a file called Lyrics, some of which are in Odetta's handwriting, and many by others (more lyrics can be found in the Writings file in the Personal Series.) Also included here are songbooks featuring songs written or recorded by Odetta, as well as file of playlists of songs for concerts.

Odetta recorded for several different **Record Companies, 1960s-1980s, (.5 lin. ft.)** over the course of her 50 years in the music business. There are files for over a dozen record companies comprised of contracts, royalty statements, and lawsuits on behalf of Odetta. There is also a file for ASCAP containing royalty statements. Other general royalty statements can be found in the Financial section.

The largest and most substantive part of the series is the **Performances** subseries, **1953-1991, n.d. (5 lin. ft.)** These records span Odetta's career from the early 1950s, and contain contracts, programs, posters, itineraries, reviews, and fan mail, as well as other promotional material for performances nationally and internationally.

The Contracts section offers a fairly comprehensive view of Odetta's performances from the 1960s on, and illuminates her popularity in specific states and countries. These voluminous files contain contracts for performances, nationally and internationally, beginning in 1960 until 1989. The file Belafonte Enterprises concerns Odetta's duet with Belafonte, "Hole in the Bucket," (1960), and her appearances on his television show, "Tonight with Belafonte." (Scripts for her Emmy Award-winning appearance on "Tonight" are filed in the Other Works section.) Two of her management companies, Kazuko Hillyer International (1978-1989), and the William Morris Agency (1960-1961), are represented here, as well as files for managers Leonard Rosenfeld (1980-1986) and Douglas A. Yeager (1980-1984). Files for commissioned work, and cancelled contracts and miscellaneous contracts are also in this series.

Augmenting the Contract section are the Performance and Reviews files. The Performance files are comprised primarily of programs and fliers for performances nationally and internationally beginning 1950s, slightly earlier than the Contract files. There are files for national performances, primarily solo concerts. The international files include information for concert tours in Australia, Austria, Canada, Japan, Malaysia, Poland, Spain, and other countries in the late 1960s through the 1980s. The Reviews section begins in 1953 and ends in the 1990s, and contains newspaper and magazine reviews of Odetta's performances, the majority of which were overwhelmingly glowing.

Odetta's talents as a singer and musician led to other performing opportunities in film and theater as well as employment as a teacher. The Other Works section contains scripts and files for several films and television appearances including "Sanctuary," (1961) and the television movie "The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman" (1974). There are a number of scripts for network shows and specials such as "Tonight With Belafonte" (1959-1960) and "The Ford Show" (1960) and PBS series including "With Ossie Davis and Ruby

Dee” (1980). There are also scripts that were sent to Odetta, some of which are undated. It is unclear whether these scripts evolved into productions, and if Odetta was involved.

Two productions featuring Odetta in starring roles, *New Orleans* and *The Effects of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds*, are highlighted in this section. The file for *New Orleans* (1982), an opera written by Toni Morrison, includes a letter from Morrison, a program, and reviews of the play. The file for *The Effects of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds* (1977) written by Paul Zindel, contains a program and reviews. A small file labeled “Public Radio” (1974-1978) containing a memorandum and related materials about a black history program featuring Odetta and John Lee Hooker, produced by National Public Radio in 1978, can be found here.

Odetta’s forays into teaching are represented in three sets of files, Arts for Transit (undated), Evergreen State College (1982) and Middlebury College (1988-1990). Files contain letters from the school and students, student files, programs, notes, and related school information. There is also a file of student letters (1968), but no school is identified.

The Correspondence section of the Professional series includes letters focusing on Odetta’s professional life, information primarily about scheduling performances, legal matters, letters, thank you cards from event hosts, and fan mail, as well as a few copies of letters sent by Odetta, 1950s-1990s, n.d.

The subseries, **Financial Records** subseries, **1950s-1980s (.5 lin. ft.)** offers a limited look at the Odetta’s financial profile over the years, scattered from 1950s to the 1980s. Alphabetically arranged by subject, files for various expenses and tax information comprise the larger themes. There are also files with scant documentation for specific entities including Felious Management; Pookie Tree Publishing, 1971, 1987, 1978, 1983, and Hominy Inc, 1965, as well as files for the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (1960s-1980s), and the Universal Music Association (1960-1961.)

The final subseries, **Memorabilia, 1960s-1980s (1 lin. ft.)** appears to be a mix of materials Odetta collected on various subjects including black memorabilia, folk life and music research, as well as chapbooks by other authors and newsletters sent to her over the course of her career.

Source: Odetta

SCM 98-47

Processed by Steven G Fullwood, Magda Larancuent, and Ariel Barrow.

Container List**Box Folder**

1		PERSONAL PAPERS
		Biographical Information
	1-2	General
	3	Last Will and Testament, 1958
	4	Passport, Identification Cards
	5	Minter, Iverson "Louisiana Red" (restricted)
		Calendars, Journals, Itineraries, and Date Books
	6-7	1960s
	8-9	1970s
	10	1980-1983
	11	1984-1985
	12	1986
	13	1987
	14	1989
	15	1989-1991
	16	Undated
2	1	Loose pages, n.d.
	2	Notes, n.d.
	3	Writings
		Interviews
	4	Page, Ben, October 16 (?)
	5	Various
	6	Awards
		Correspondence
		Family
	7	Felious, Flora
	8	Gordon, Daniel (restricted)
	9	Shead, Garry (restricted)
		Friends and Associates
	10	Adkin, Linn (nee Phillips)
	11-12	Nicks, Beverley, 1960s-1970s
	13	Oshiro, Kenichi
	14-15	Starks, Michael
	16	Werner, T.G.
	17	1950s
	18-19	1960s
	20	1970s
	21-22	1980s
3	1-2	1990s
	3-5	n.d.

Container List**Box Folder**

3	6	Letters Sent
	7	Writings Sent to Odetta
	8	Astrology
4		PROFESSIONAL PAPERS
		Music
	1	Lyrics and Music Notebooks, 1979
	2	Lyrics - Various Writers, n.d.
	3	Concert Play Lists, n.d.
	4	Written or Arranged by Odetta
		Manuscript Music
	5	Boyd, Peter
	6	Brubeck, Dave
	7	Delaplain, Mary Kathryn
	8	James, Bob
	9	Lewis, 'Max'
	10	Reynolds, Malvina
		Sheet Music
	11	Baron, Steve
	12	Brand, Oscar
	13	Chapin, Harry
	14	Hughes, Langston
	15	Johnson, Hall
	16	Lennon, John and Paul McCartney
	17	Lightfoot, Gordon
	18	Monschein, R. Cameron
	19	Robinson, Earl and Millard Lampell
	20	Robinson, Earl and John Latouche
	21	Rodgers, Richard
	22	Thomas, Gordon
	23	Thall, Peter Morgan
		Various Artists
	24	The Folk Music Scene, 1968
	25	The Folk Singers Song Bag, Vol 2, 1963
	26	Folk Music Yearbook of Artists, 1964
		Photocopied Sheet Music
		Writers Unknown (Annotated)
	27	A-M
	28	N-Z
	29	Various Annotated
	30	Composers Unknown
	30	Score - Gershwin
	31	Duplicates

Container List

Box Folder

4		Record Companies
	32	ABC Records
	33	Aspen Records
	34	Broadcast Music
	35	CBS
	36	Clara Music, Inc
	37	Elektra Corporation
	38	Fantasy Records
	39	MGM Records
	40	Polydor
	41	RCA Records
	42	Riverside Records
	43	Rose Quartz Records
	44	Sanga Music, Inc
	45	Supreme Sound Music
	46	Universal Music
	47	Vanguard Music
	48	Warner Brothers Music
	49	Whap Enterprises, Inc
	50	Publishing - ASCAP - Statements
5		Performances
		Contracts
	1	Belafonte Enterprises
		Domestic
	2	1960
	3	1961
	4	1962
	5	1962-1969
	6	1970-1971 - Completed
	7	1972-1973 - Completed
	8	1974-1975 - Completed
	9	1976-1977 - Completed
	10	1979 - Completed, US and Canada
	11	1980 - Completed
	12	1982-1989
	13	Cancelled
	14	Miscellaneous
		Foreign
	15	1962-1978
	16	1977 - Completed
		Management
		Kazuko Hillyer International, Inc

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5	17	1978-1985
	18	1986-1989
	19	Leonard Rosenfield, 1980-1986
	20	Douglas A. Yeager, 1980-1984
	21	William Morris Agency, 1960-1961
	22	Commissions - 1979-1982
6		Programs
		National
	1-2	1950s
	3-6	1960s
	7-11	1970s
	12	<i>The Effects of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds</i> - Program and Reviews, 1977
	13-16	1980s
7	1-5	1980s
	6	<i>New Orleans</i> , by Toni Morrison - Letters, Brochure, Reviews, 1982
	7-8	1990s
	9-10	No date
		International
	11	Australia, 1989, n.d.
	12	Austria, 1976
	13	Canada, 1976-1978
	14	France
		Japan
	15	1965
	16	1978
	17	Malaysia
	18	Nova Scotia, 1977
	19	Poland, 1977
8	1	Russia/ Austria, 1974
	2	Spain, 1976
	3	Sweden, 1975-1977
	4	Switzerland, 1976
	5	Tel Aviv
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Box Folder

8		Reviews
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	21	1986
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	23	1988-1989
	24	1990s
	25	Undated
10		Other Works
		Scripts
	1	"The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman," 1974
	2	"Black Conversations," 1976
	3	"A Celebration With Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee and Friends," n.d.
	4	Channel 13
	5	"Feast of Freedom," n.d,

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10	6-7	"The Ford Show," 1960
	8	"The Hanging of Aaron Gibbs," n.d.
	9	"'Iola Leroy', or 'Shadows Uplifted,'" 1983
	10	"King Oedipus," n.d.
	11	"Taking My Turn," n.d.
	12	"Look! What a Wonder," 1976
	13	"Mahalia," n.d.
	14	"Manhattan: Home of Blacks for 3½ Centuries," 1977
	15	"Once Upon a Time," 1982
	16-17	"Sanctuary," 1960
	18	"Something Black," 1976
	19	"Songs of the Soul: America's Own Music," n.d.
	20	"Stage Coach Mary," 1974
	21	"Take This Hammer," n.d.
	22	"Tonight With Belafonte," 1959-1960
	23	"With Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee," 1980
	24	WGBH - Various, , 1983
	25	Unidentified excerpt, n.d.
	26	Miscellaneous
	27	Public Radio
		Teaching Experience
	28	Arts for Transit - Metropolitan Transportation Authority, n.d.
	29-56	Evergreen State College, 1982
	57	Middlebury College, 1988-1990
	58	Student Letters, 1968
	59	Research
		"The Archive of Folk Song: A 50 th Anniversary Celebration," 1978
	60	Bessie Smith, 1977
11		Correspondence
	1	Dandetta Productions - Daniel Gordon - Artist Management, 1960-1962, n.d.
	2	1950s
	3-5	1960s
	6-8	1970s
	9-11	1980s
	12-13	1990s
	14	Sent

Container List**Box Folder**

11	15	Undated
		Financial Records
	16	American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, 1960s-1980s
	17	Analysis of Receipts and Disbursements, 1978-1983
	18	Banking Information
		Expenses
	19	1979
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	28	Felious Management, 1977
	29	Household Employee Records, 1980-1984
	30	Hominy, Inc, 1965
	31	Merrick Vs. Gordon, 1961
	32	Lists
	33	Performance Payments
	34	Permissions, 1970s
	35	Pookie Tree Publishing, 1971, 1978, 1979, 1983
		Receipts and Disbursements
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	37	1980
	38	1981
	39	1982
	40	1983
	41	Royalties Information
		Tax Information
	42	1954
	43	1965-1975
	44	1976-1986
	45	Universal Music Association, 1960-1961
12		Memorabilia
	1	Black Folk
	2-3	Black Memorabilia
	4	Detroit Phoenix Singers
	5	Earl Hooks

Container List

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12	6-8	Folk Research
	9	John Jacob Miles
	10	Joseph Mitchell
	11-12	Manuscript Chapbooks - Various Authors
	13	Newsletters - Folknotes, Folkworks Bulletin, Sing Out Bulletin, Songsmith Journal
	14	Plays
	15-17	General
13		Oversized Materials