

The Filson Historical Society

**Humes, Helen, 1909-1981
Papers, 1927-2006**

For information regarding literary and copyright interest for these papers, see the Curator of Special Collections, James J. Holmburg

Size of Collection:

0.66 cubic feet and 1 oversized folder

Locator number:

Mss. A H922

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Biographical Note

Helen Humes was a jazz and blues singer and native Louisvillian whose career took her across the country and around the world.

Personal Life

Helen Elizabeth Humes was born on 23 June 1909 in Louisville, Kentucky to Emma Johnson Humes (1881-1967) and John Henry Humes (1878-1975). Her father was a real estate agent and lawyer. She grew up on West Iowa Avenue, a few blocks from Churchill Downs, and graduated from Central High School in 1927.

Humes's birth year is often reported as 1913, but it is more likely 1909. It is listed as 1909 on many documents, including a vaccination certificate (found in folder 6) and her tombstone at Inglewood Park Cemetery in Los Angeles. Even more evidence of the year is the U.S. census, which lists her as an infant in the Humes household in 1910.

Another wrinkle in published records about Humes is whether she had siblings. Most biographical information claims she was an only child. However, her mother's will (found in folder 5) lists beneficiaries as "my two children Helen Humes Smith and Robert Humes." No other child is listed as living in the Humes household in early U.S. census records, but in the 1910 census under "Number of Children Living" for Emma Humes, the number recorded is "2." No further information so far has been found about Robert Humes.

There is also little known about Humes's marriage to Harland Smith. Smith is never mentioned in published writing about Humes, but he does pop up in documents found in folder 5 of the collection. The first record we have of Humes using the name "Helen Humes Smith" occurs on an April 1963 receipt. In August 1963, she and Harland together took out a loan for property at 603 West Iowa Avenue. On a furniture receipt from October 1963, her name is written as "Mrs. Helen Humes Smith." However, by February 1968, she signed a financial document without adding "Smith," and Smith is not mentioned in the collection again.

Career

Humes learned to play the piano as a girl at Bessie Allen's Sunday School on Ninth and Magazine Streets. She was anywhere from 11 to 15 years old (various publications report different ages) when Louisville-area blues guitarist Sylvester Weaver heard her sing in her Sunday school band and introduced her to a recording executive. Soon after, she recorded her

first record in St. Louis. She returned to Louisville to finish high school, then lived in New York for a time and traveled as a professional singer. Her occupation on the 1930 census, when she was 21 years old, is listed as "Artist."

In 1937, while singing at the Cotton Club in Cincinnati, Humes was first noticed by jazz band leader Count Basie. The following year Humes joined Basie's band, replacing Billie Holiday, who had recently left. While traveling with the band, she sang pop songs, ballads, and occasionally the blues, earning \$35 a week. She broke away from the band in 1942 and toured around the country with pianist Connie Berry until 1944. She then moved to California, where she worked with various rhythm and blues bands and recorded her biggest commercial hit, *Be-Baba-Leba*.

Between projects, Humes often returned to Louisville for months at a time. In 1957, Humes toured Australia with Red Norvo's Trio. She was nominated as one of the country's outstanding jazz artists for the Playboy All-Star Jazz Poll in 1961, 1962, and 1963.

Humes spent much of the early 1960s living and touring in Europe, but she returned home in 1967 to care for her gravely ill mother. When her mother died, Humes gave up singing and reportedly sold her records and piano. She stayed in Louisville with her father, doing odd jobs that included working at an ammunitions plant in Indiana, shuttling women to bingo, and taking care of an elderly woman at night.

In 1973, after Humes had stayed out of the music industry for six years, music critic Stanley Dance persuaded her to appear in a tribute to Count Basie at the Newport Jazz Festival in New York. This began a resurgence in her career, and for the next two years she split her time between performing and recording in New York and Europe and her home life in Louisville. She was working out of town when her father died in 1975.

During the late 1970s, Humes enjoyed some of the most successful years of her career. She continued to tour Europe and made frequent appearances at famed New York restaurant and music room The Cookery. In the final years of her life, Humes was nominated for three Grammy awards. She died of cancer in Santa Monica, California in September 1981.

Sources (can be found in finding aid folder):

U.S. census records: 1910, 1920, 1930

Courier Journal articles: 30 June 1973, 23 Feb. 1975, 23 July 1978, 14 Sept. 1981

<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/6842416/helen-humes>

<https://www.grammy.com/grammys/artists/helen-humes/10878>

<https://www.nytimes.com/1981/09/14/obituaries/helen-humes-singer-of-ballads-and-blues-68.html>

Personal financial and legal documents (Folders 5-6)

Typescript of Victoria Norman Brown's entry in the book *Kentucky Women* (Folder 13)

Press release from Century Associates, 26 February 1948 (Folder 13)

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Scope and Content Note

This collection consists of material related to the career and personal life of Louisville jazz and blues singer Helen Humes. Professional material includes correspondence and contracts, as well as material related to Humes's gigs and tours throughout the U.S., Europe, and Australia. Personal material includes postcards to her family, legal and financial material for properties and family life in Louisville, and newspaper clippings about her life and legacy.

Related collections:

- Helen Humes photograph and print collection [021PC51]
- Museum item: Helen Humes's traveling suitcase [2021.39]

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Folder List

Box 1

- Folder 1: Personal correspondence (postcards), 1955-1962 and n.d.
- Folder 2: Professional correspondence, 1959-1974
- Folder 3: Travel brochures, 1965-1974 and n.d.
- Folder 4: Sheet music, lyrics, and song lists, n.d.
- Folder 5: Personal and family legal, property, and financial material, 1929-1968 and n.d.

Box 2

- Folder 6: Professional financial and travel material, 1947-1964 and n.d.
- Folder 7: Professional contracts, 1950-1963
- Folder 8: Programs and ads for gigs and festivals in which Humes appeared, 1964-1975 and n.d.
- Folder 9: Miscellaneous event invitations and programs, 1955-1974
- Folder 10: Playboy Jazz Poll material, 1960-1963
- Folder 11: Recording career material, 1947-1958
- Folder 12: Newspaper clippings, local and international, 1959-1980 and n.d.
- Folder 13: Death and legacy/biographical material, 1948-2006

Oversized

- Folder 14: High school diploma for Helen Humes from Central Colored High School, 1927

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Subject Headings

African American musicians.
African Americans – Music.
Australia – Description and travel.
Central High School (Louisville, Ky.)
Concert tours.
Davis, Jackie, 1920-1999.
Ellington, Duke, 1899-1974.
Gospel music – Kentucky.
Humes, Emma, 1881-1967.
Humes, John Henry, 1878-1975.
Jazz festivals.
Jazz musicians.
Jazz.
Jones, Quincy, 1933-
Man-woman relationships – Songs and music.
Music – Awards.
Music and race.
Musicians – Salaries, etc.
Musicians – Travel.
Musicians, Black.
Musicians' contracts.
Sound recording industry.