

Libby Holman and the Civil Rights Movement

As we celebrate the life of Martin Luther King it is interesting to look back at those who assisted him in his efforts to gain civil rights for all Americans.

Libby Holman was born Elizabeth Lloyd Holzman in Cincinnati, Ohio, on May 23, 1904, to middle-class parents of German Jewish descent. During the 20's and 30's she became a well known torch singer and Broadway actress.

From a deep sense of personal commitment, she later made significant contributions to the civil rights movement as both an artist and a wealthy benefactor. In 1939 she and Josh White, the black folk singer, became the first mixed-race male and female artists to ever perform together, record together and tour together in previously segregated venues across the United States. It was while on the road that **Holman** began to see firsthand the prejudice that blacks faced as White was denied permission to stay at the hotels at which they were booked or was told to use the service entrance.

They would continue performing off and on for the next six years, while also making an album and a film together. Josh and Libby frequently requested the War Department to send them overseas during World War II to give USO concert performances for the troops. However, despite a Letter of Recommendation from Eleanor Roosevelt, they were constantly rejected

as "too controversial", considering that the U.S. Armed Forces were still segregated throughout World War II. Instead, she and White performed at black servicemen's clubs throughout the United States. She and White eventually parted ways in early 1945. In 1947 she joined forces with pianist Gerald Cook with whom she worked for the rest of her career.





Packing presents for the GIs, Josh White with actress Hilda Simms, singer/actress Libby Holman, and friends, c.1944

Libby Holman had such a reputation for battling racism in America throughout the 1940s and 1950s that, when she went behind the scenes after a rally to tell Dr Martin Luther King how his non-violent Civil Rights campaign had inspired her, he responded: "You got that the wrong way round, Libby, it was you who inspired me with your campaigning against racism."

She was a fierce champion of social causes and was an early supporter of the Civil Rights movement through the Christopher Reynolds foundation established in memory of her son. It was due to her generosity that in 1959 the young preacher from Georgia, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his wife Coretta were able to travel to India to study firsthand the non-violent techniques espoused by Gandhi. King was always grateful to Libby for giving him this opportunity. Libby and her husband, artist Lou Schanker, held several fund raising events for civil rights at their East Hampton New York home during the 1960's. King, Coretta, Libby and Lou would remain lifelong friends.



Louis Schanker, Coretta King and Libby Holman greeting guests to a Dune House fundraising event. Photographer Dorothy Beskind is believed to be at right.