



UNLADYLIKE2020

Do-It-Yourself Screening Kit: Sissieretta Jones

*Bring the story of this trailblazing opera singer—
the first Black woman to headline a concert at Carnegie Hall—
to your community.*



ABOUT THE SERIES

UNLADYLIKE2020 is an innovative multimedia series featuring diverse and little-known American heroines from the early years of feminism, and the women who now follow in their footsteps. Presenting history in a bold new way, the rich biographies of 26 women who broke barriers in male-dominated fields 100 years ago, such as science, business, politics, journalism, sports, and the arts, are brought back to life through rare archival imagery, captivating original artwork and animation, and interviews with historians, descendants, and accomplished women of today who reflect on the influence of these pioneers.

Narrated by Julianna Margulies (*ER*, *The Good Wife*, *Billions*) and Lorraine Toussaint (*Selma*, *Orange is the New Black*, *The Glorias*), the series features 26 ten-to-twelve-minute animated documentary films released digitally on PBS's flagship biography series *American Masters*, along with a television hour on PBS showcasing the stories of trailblazers in politics and civil rights, plus a resource-rich interactive website, a grades 6 through 12 U.S. history curriculum on PBS LearningMedia, and a nationwide community engagement and screening initiative staged in partnership with public television stations and community organizations.

Although the series was timed to honor the 100th anniversary of the 1920 passage of the 19th Amendment giving women suffrage, this content is evergreen, and merits screening and discussion anytime! This kit aims to give you all the tools you need to bring Sissieretta Jones's accomplished career to your community.

"I woke up famous after singing at the [Madison Square] Garden and didn't know it...Singing is to me what sunshine is to flowers. I give out melody because God filled my soul with it."

—SISSIERETTA JONES



Julianna Margulies
Narrator



Lorraine Toussaint
Narrator

ABOUT SISSIERETTA JONES



Sissieretta Joyner Jones (1868-1933) began her music career in Providence, Rhode Island, where she started singing at an early age in the church, and went on to receive formal vocal training at the Providence Academy of Music. In 1892, at a time when access to most classical concert halls in the U.S. were closed to Black performers and patrons, she performed opera at the newly built Madison Square Garden Concert Hall, and became the first African American to headline a concert on the main stage of Carnegie Hall. She also performed at the White House, and became an international sensation, receiving medals and jewels from dignitaries and government leaders, which she would pin to her elegant gowns when performing. The rise of segregation and enforcement of Jim Crow laws following the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson ruling ended Jones' access to classical music venues catering primarily to white audiences. But she remained a star and, for almost two decades, traveled the country as the headliner for a troupe of up to 50 African American performers. Despite being called "one of the greatest singers of all time," and being the highest-paid African American performer of her generation, Jones had to sell her medals and properties to survive until her death in 1933.

WHO IS INTERVIEWED?



Maureen D. Lee, author of *Sissieretta Jones: "The Greatest Singer of Her Race,"* 1868-1933.



Harolyn Blackwell, soprano and Sissieretta Jones expert.



J'Nai Bridges, mezzo-soprano opera singer who has been heralded as "a rising star" with a repertoire ranging from traditional favorites to spirituals and standards.

EVENT/PROGRAMMING IDEAS



If your community has an opera house, take a visit and consider the racial dynamics and history of the show you see!



Learn about operas written by Black composers ([here is a great place to start](#)).



Explore the websites of various opera houses throughout the U.S. to survey the diversity of performers.



Invite a Black woman musician to perform at your event and to speak about her career.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS



Why is it important to know about, and celebrate Sissieretta Jones' accomplishments as an opera singer?



Interviewee Harolyn Blackwell describes opera as a “European art form.” How do you think this distinguishes opera from other forms of music? Why do you think this made it harder for Jones to achieve success?



What obstacles did Sissieretta Jones face throughout her career? Do you think these barriers have been removed for Black women performing in the operatic tradition in the modern era?



What legacies from Jim Crow and segregation can still be seen in our society today?

“We come through the furnaces of affliction and persecution and become as gold, tried in the fire. As the crushed rose emits the sweetest perfume, so the Negro, bruised and beaten, sings the sweetest songs.”

— SISSIERETTA JONES



RESOURCE/READING LIST

-  PBS LearningMedia UNLADYLIKE2020 Sissieretta Jones Teaching Resource
<https://ny.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/ull20-sissieretta-jones-video/unladylike2020/>
-  Cooper, Michael. "Overlooked no more: Sissieretta Jones." *New York Times*, Aug. 15, 2018.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/15/obituaries/sissieretta-jones-overlooked.html>
-  "History's Unsung Opera Star" National Public Radio, June 11, 2007.
<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=10948095?storyId=10948095>

"They tell me my color is against me. But I am proud of what I am."

—SISSIERETTA JONES

PROMOTIONAL RESOURCES FOR YOUR EVENT

Please visit <https://unladylike2020.com/host-an-event/> to view a full list of promotional resources for your event, such as a social media toolkit, press release, audience evaluation form, and more.

UNLADYLIKE2020 is a production of Unladylike Productions, LLC in association with THIRTEEN's *American Masters*. Executive Producers for UNLADYLIKE2020 are Charlotte Mangin and Sandra Rattley. Executive Producer for *American Masters* is Michael Kantor.

This screening kit was written by Josie Hirsch, UNLADYLIKE2020 Associate Producer, and Alice Quinlan, UNLADYLIKE2020 Impact Operations Producer.

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