

# Etta Moten Barnett

**Barnett, Etta Moten.** Singer, actress, activist, and philanthropist; b. November 5, 1901, Weimar, Texas; d. January 2, 2004, Chicago, Illinois. Moten was the only daughter of Methodist minister Freeman Moten and dressmaker Ida Mae Norman. Etta Moten became active at an early age in the congregation that her father pastored. At ten years old, she began teaching Sunday school and singing in the church choir. Following high school, Moten married Curtis Brooks, but after six years and three children, they divorced. She and her three daughters then relocated to Kansas, where they lived with her parents, so she could attend the University of Kansas while majoring in voice and drama. Moten was discovered at her senior recital and invited to join the Eva Jessye Choir in New York, which she did following graduation.



In New York, Moten starred in such productions as the *Fast and Furious* and *Zombie*. She then moved to Los Angeles, where she made her first onscreen appearance in Busby Berkeley's 1933 film *Gold Diggers of 1933*. Moten, who played a widowed housewife and sang "My Forgotten Man" in the film, is credited for having helped break the Hollywood stereotype of black women playing roles as domestic servants. In what would be her most famous screen appearance, she played a Brazilian singer in 1933 RKO's *Flying Down To Rio*, which starred Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Moten sang the Oscar-nominated song "The Carioca," wearing fruit in her hair (long before Carmen Miranda adopted a similar headdress).

On January 31, 1934, at the invitation of President and Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt, Moten made history when she became the first African-American woman to perform at the White House. Moten eventually relocated to New York City and would be featured in such popular Broadway shows as *Sugar Hill* and *Lysistrata*. From 1942 to 1945, she starred in the wildly popular Broadway production of *Porgy and Bess*. In fact, George Gershwin is believed to have written the character of "Bess" with Moten in mind. She followed Broadway with a number of performances at concerts and music festivals throughout the world, including her last performance at a Danish concert in 1952.

In 1934, Moten had married Claude Barnett, founder of the Negro Associated Press. Together they traveled during the late 1950s as members of a U.S. delegation to Ghana and other African nations. Barnett represented the U.S. Government on missions to more than ten African nations and was given honorary degrees from many universities and colleges, including Spelman College and the University of Illinois. Following her husband's death in 1967, Barnett became more involved in local affairs. She was a national trustee of the National Conference of Christians and Jews and of the African American Institute. She also was a member of the women's boards of the Lyric Opera, the Field Museum, the University of Chicago, and the Art Institute. In 1979, Barnett was inducted into the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame. She was named one of Texas's most influential women of the twentieth century by the state's Women's Chamber of Commerce. She died at the age of 102 of pancreatic cancer at Chicago Mercy Hospital.

*Candace Goodwin*