

Nugent 9/13/39

On Juano Hernandez

The birth of Juano Hernandez is almost as legendary as ~~it~~ is that of the folk giant he so successfully brought to life. It is almost unimportant that no one knows whether he was born in Cuba, ~~xxxx~~ Puerto Rico, South America or New Orleans. It is enough that New York became the home of his adoption and much more a home than any other he had ever had. He brought to it all the wealth of experiences gathered on his way. There was practically no sort of work ~~or~~ ^{or} labor which he had not done. He had been a stevedore on the New Orleans waterfront, a rail-splitter, a laborer on the railway tracks, a worker on the slow Mississippi river boats, had been a strong man with a medicine show, a barker with a traveling carnival, periodic song and dance man for stranded vaudeville acts, and master of ceremonies for itinerant lodge shows. He came to New York to settle down. Settling down entailed marrying a dainty Spanish-speaking damsel whom, after the fashion of the Latin men, was destined to become ^{the} a/perennial mother of her husband's children.

One naturally gravitated toward the stage. There was nothing in or about the theatre, on or behind stage which he would not do and of which he was not capable. He finally organized an act with ^{Glady's} ~~Wanda~~ Ridley as partner. A song, a dance, and feats of strength. The grand finale of the act was achieved when he stood on his head and sang,

This always brought down the house. The act was seldom at loss for employment.

As his family necessity for employment did likewise. Money became an ever-growing and more important factor. It became more and more necessary that he find time and outlet for his many talents and great energies. He was an actor of no slight stature, although this had not formally been discovered. He sang, was, as has been said, a 'strong man,' and had fairly sound ideas about the composition of music. All of these various talents he put to use either singly or together. They all brought him money.

Finally the dramatic stage found him. In 1930-31 he was cast as the hero in John Golden's production of 'Savage Rhythm' along with such redoubtable stars ~~as~~ of greater experience as Georgette Harvey, Ernest Whitman, Inez Clough, Vivian Baber and Venezuela Jones. He more than held his own, breathing the rarified air from such Olympian heights with ease and lack of bravado. It was at this time that he was discovered by Rose McClendon. This first lady of the stage had been asked and importuned frequently to make her debut on the air. She had done so on a sustaining program written by Carlton Morse, and offering as co-star Frank Wilson. Georgette Harvey, Dorothy Paul, the Beale Street Boys and others had appeared on this

popular program. Through Rose McClendon's offices Juano received his first taste of broadcasting and liked it fine. She had used him as leading man in a tiresome and improbable piece of misinformation purporting to concern itself with miscegenation, a trivial little bit presented at the author's expense in Greenwich Village's little Provincetown Playhouse under the kindly and well-known auspices of Fitzie. She had been more than impressed by his deep voice, magnetic personality and personable person.

So when she was sought for another 'air-hour' and material was lacking, he and she spent days and weeks in getting together a program. It was to be about John Henry. They culled all the books they could find on that fabulous giant. More and more it became Juano who shaped the sketches. He wrote the scripts, he planned the sequence, wrote the incidental music, and played the part of John Henry. All Rose McClendon did was to cast, direct and sell the series. They were very successful. Juano became known as John Henry.

In fact he was John Henry. When the broadcasts were completed, the list of stories completely exhausted, John Henry took a group of the extras with whom he'd worked on the air, added a guitar here and a mandolin there, and played the vaudeville houses. He used an impressive voodoo sketch which had proved popular. Decked out in trick lighting effects and orchestral 'voodoo' drums it became even more startling. He and his group were ~~often~~ offered work at the Cotton Club on strength of this presentation.

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And again he was sensational and successful. Juano Hernandez had become a figure of note in Harlem history and the John Henry legend had become a reality.