

Cissie Loftus and Series Introduction
Sarah Whitfield - author's pre press copy
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Spotlights on Women Composers in Early Broadway History - Series Introduction

As [Shoshana Greenberg](#) has shown in her amazing [timeline of women composers](#) in musical theatre, created for Maestra: there are so many more women than we think there were in the history of musical theatre who wrote music.

That we all largely assumed, myself included, that there weren't many women composers is revealing. This may partly be a result of all the glossy coffee table books we read about the musicals, and the TV documentaries we may have seen, that brush over the complex history of this period. Many of those kinds of histories of the musical leave out the work of women composers, as well as the contributions of others with minoritised identities. Very few people have heard of the work of African American playwright and performer, [Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins](#), who, aged only 21, wrote *Slaves' Escape, or the Underground Railroad* for her musical troupe to perform in 1880. The names the timeline uncovers, names like Nora Bayes, Clare Kummer or Cissie Loftus mean very little to most of us. I'd certainly never heard of them before, and as a musical theatre historian, something had gone very wrong! So I began getting involved with some of the efforts to recover their work with the Clare Kummer Project group, but more on that later.

The missing names that Maestra timeline throws up are a serious problem for musical theatre as we understand it now. Their absence has had a consequence on our understanding of the musical's development, of who we think has already been a part of the musical's history. This is just as much a problem in seminar rooms and lecture halls as it is to those trying to figure out how they can be part of today's musical theatre industry. The stories of these incredible people make a difference today.

Part of my work as a researcher and academic is in trying to piece together the traces that these missing people have left behind in news reports and theatre magazines of the day, trying to understand the biographies of women who have rarely been written about much, if at all. I've spent quite a lot of time digging through these news reports, and perhaps the most surprising thing to my eyes was just how normal and *unextraordinary* coverage seems to be of women's participation in the music business in the early 20th century.

This series puts the spotlight on some of these women: and traces, sometimes for the first time, a clear overview of their professional contributions as composers. In drawing on international press coverage about their activities, we can start to see exactly the scale of what they achieved. To start off, I'll explore the work of three of the most prolific women composers in early 20th century musical theatre: Clare Kummer, Cecilia 'Cissie' Loftus and Nora Bayes. They all worked at the beginning of the 20th century and all took on multiple roles in their professional careers, including: acting, music hall performance, composition, lyricists and producing. The three women attracted extensive press coverage, not least

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because all three of them disobeyed expected social mores in their personal lives: Bayes had five husbands and Loftus's divorce made international headlines. Yet their composition practice has largely been forgotten: retracing their work is one way of changing that.

WEEK 1 - Cecilia Loftus: Spotlight on Women Composers in Early Broadway History 1

Cecilia 'Cissie' Marie Loftus (22/10/1876 - 1943)

Composer, lyricist, performer (vocalist, impressions, dancer)

We know quite a lot about 'Cissie' (she later preferred Cecilia) Loftus's work as an actor, and almost nothing about her work as a composer; and that part of her career has [rarely been](#) acknowledged.

Cecilia Loftus's remarkable dual career in the UK and on Broadway as an actor and music hall performer is reasonably well recorded: [particularly her Peter Pan](#), she performed in the second ever production of J.M. Barrie's play in London, December 1905. Barrie was delighted with the performance - and clearly the relationship was a special one, since she gave her child the middle name 'Barrie'.

She was born into a theatrical family, in Glasgow to two music hall performers. It can't have been much of a surprise that she turned to the stage, first as her mother's dresser, and then on stage herself at around 17 as Cissie Loftus. She performed impressionist acts (though one of her early billings lists her as a vocalist and dancer¹ so songs were involved from her start). Loftus mimicked the stage stars of the day like Ethel Barrymore and Sara Bernhardt, and performed extensively in West End variety theatres to great critical acclaim. She even appeared before George V and Queen Mary in the [1912 Royal Variety Performance](#).

Loftus wasn't satisfied with only working in comedy performance, and performed in 'legitimate' theatre throughout her career, playing roles like Ophelia in *Hamlet*, Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing*, and Viola in *Twelfth Night*, and in London she played against the great [Sir Henry Irving](#).² Her entry in the *Oxford Companion to American Theatre* notes she was: 'One of the most versatile of performers, who moved successfully back and forth between vaudeville and musical comedy on the one hand and romantic drama and Shakespeare on the other.'³ When she died her performances as Nora in Ibsen's *The Doll's House* were

¹ 'Bristol: Star Music Hall' *The Era* - Saturday 15 April 1893, 12.

² "Theatrical: DRAMATIC, VAUDEVILLE, MUSIC MINSTREL, BURLESQUE, OPERA.: DRAMATIC." *The Billboard* (Archive: 1894-1960) 15, no. 1 (Jan 03, 1902): 14-15. <http://ezproxy.nypl.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.i.ezproxy.nypl.org/docview/1401153997?accountid=35635>.

³ Bordman, G., & Hischak, T. (2004). Loftus, [Marie] Cecilia. In *The Oxford Companion to American Theatre*. : Oxford University Press.

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counted as among her strongest. She acted in three early silent films, and during the 1930s and 40s 11 subsequent Hollywood movies.⁴ But the *Companion* entry doesn't mention her compositions - and this is part of the bigger problem of locating her compositions.

Finding Loftus as a composer: difficult associations

Unpicking Loftus's career as a composer is far more difficult than her work as a performer, like many women who were working in theatre music in the period there is only fragmentary information remaining. And it often presents more questions than it answers!

Loftus seems to have started writing for Broadway musicals (although the term is somewhat looser than it may be today) after publishing a series of individual songs (her first song was published when she was 20). As yet nothing really survives to tell us *why* she started composing, though a reasonable guess would be she was writing for her own act and publishing the successful songs from it. From the beginning of her career she drew on the popularity of a style of song that's very difficult for us to revisit - the c--n song.⁵ The first song we know she published in 1896, 'Can't live widout ye any mo" was written in the broken English dialect which was a key feature of the style, and part of the racist stereotyping that those songs almost always enacted. As a performer, Loftus was indelibly associated with this kind of music - she even appears in Edna Furber's novel *Showboat* (which the musical would later be based on) as being on the same bill as the fictional Magnolia, singing c--n songs.

C--n songs were phenomenally popular in sheet music sales and in theatres; musicals readily interpolated hit songs into their program: they are part of the careers of the first three women in this series, Loftus, Nora Bayes and Clare Kummer. The genre promoted racial stereotypes of African Americans; often drawing on the 'plantation themes' that Stephen Foster's material had traded in so successfully. They were often a version of ragtime music, with racially motivated lyrics and racialized and usually explicitly racist stereotypes. While white composers wrote these songs, many black composers, such as Ernest Hogan, Bob Cole and Sam Lucas, also composed music and lyrics - often to challenge or resist the racism they contained. C--n songs became popular in musicals and variety performances in the UK and the US, as well as in touring performances more globally.

These kinds of songs featured heavily in Loftus's first and second musicals. She collaborated with Glen MacDonough in 1899 for the musical *Sister Mary* which starred variety star May Irvine (Irvine had built her own fame on the c---n song). Loftus's second show, *The Belle of Bridgeport* (1900) again featured and was produced by May Irvine with a book by Glen MacDonough. This would hardly be of note, but for fact that the music was mostly composed by [John Rosamund Johnson](#). Johnson was one of the most important

⁴ "'CISSIE" LOFTUS IN A BRITISH PRODUCTION." *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly* (Archive: 1907-1919) 25, no. 516 (Mar 15, 1917): 15.

<http://ezproxy.nypl.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.i.ezproxy.nypl.org/docview/2298669482?accountid=35635> see also https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0517480/?ref=fn_al_nm_1.

⁵ While the whole term was written out in the period and in many history books and context books, and there is information on Wikipedia on this [song type](#), I do not replicate the word since it was so often used as a racial slur.

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early figures in black music, and he composed the best known setting for '[Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing](#)'. He was not alone though, since as well as Johnson, *Belle of Bridgeport* had additional material from some of the other finest African American composers in the period, including Will J Accooe and Bob Cole. Cissie Loftus contributed the music and lyrics for two songs in the piece (perhaps at the instigation of Irvine, but this is uncertain). While this may seem like an anomaly, Clare Kummer (who we will cover in a few weeks time), also had a c--n song interpolated into the London production of *In Dahomey*, Will Marion Cook's musical, in 1903.

The songs Loftus had written for *Belle* were reissued in [Madge Smith. Attorney](#) (1900); again produced by [May Irwin](#) with music by J. Rosamund Johnson. Loftus also wrote the lyrics and music for at least two new songs for *The Lancers* 'Come Out in the Moonlight' and 'Our Bave Lancers'. Again - these later songs continue to use lyrics about the South and racially offensive stereotypes: with a man trying to lure a woman to leave her house to spend the night with him. The music uses gently syncopated rhythms - but it very much sits in the 1900s white version of ragtime.

Refrain.

Come out in the moon - light, you tan-ta - li - zin' maid, The

The image shows a musical score for a refrain. It consists of three staves. The top staff is a vocal line in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a common time signature (C). The lyrics are written below the notes: "Come out in the moon - light, you tan-ta - li - zin' maid, The". The middle and bottom staves are piano accompaniment, with the middle staff in treble clef and the bottom staff in bass clef. The piano part features a syncopated rhythm with chords and moving lines in both hands.

Celebrity and scandal: performing till the end

Loftus's personal life was every bit as glamorous as the press demanded, though the relentless coverage clearly took a toll on her wellbeing. She married [Justin Huntley McCarthy](#) at 17, and had divorced him by the age of 23.⁶ Her marriages and divorces were reported in UK and US newspaper coverage, and as her celebrity climbed, so did the press coverage. She continued to perform, and use her image for advertisements (potentially, unless they used it without paying her) even giving her endorsement to 'Orangeine' painkillers.⁷ Legal cases concerning her contracts were keenly reported in the British press⁸; and, much to her distress, when she slipped into water the press queried at length whether it had *really* been an accident.⁹

⁶ "CISSIE LOFTUS GETS A DIVORCE: FREED FROM MATRIMONIAL BONDS SHE HAD FORMED WITH JUSTIN HUNTLEY MCCARTHY, SON OF THE IRISH LEADER." Boston Daily Globe (1872-1922), Apr 28, 1899. (Proquest Historical Newspapers)

⁷ "'Headache [...] can be cured by Orangeine' August 18, 1899 (Page 5 of 14)." *Democrat and Chronicle* (1884-2011), Aug 18, 1899. (Proquest Historical Newspapers)

⁸ 'Miss Cissie Loftus and the Alhambra' *Derby Daily Telegraph*. Derby, UK. 30 September 1908, 3.

⁹ "CISSIE LOFTUS GETS WET.: MUSIC HALL SINGER OVERBOARD AT OLD POINT, VA." Boston Daily Globe (1872-1922), Apr 21, 1900. (Proquest Historical Newspapers)

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When she married her second husband, Dr Waterman in 1909, she was asked if she would leave the stage, she told the reporter 'oh, dear, no'¹⁰. They had a son together, Peter John Barrie Waterman, and she faced a series of difficult and painful operations afterwards. Perhaps as a result, in the 1920s, Loftus became addicted to drugs, and the press delighted in reporting the case and the news she had been convicted of possessing drugs with a year's parole in British courts. She returned to the US accompanied by Nora Bayes (another composer from this period), explaining 'the drugs came from sickness and suffering.'¹¹

She returned to the stage, and in 1924 she was still performing in variety acts, including performing as Bert Williams, singing his signature song 'Nobody'¹²; clearly she was successful as she went into Ziegfeld's *Follies* that same year.¹³ As yet, no mention of her actually discussing her own compositions can be found, and we know little more about them. She did publish 'A Serenade' and 'Requiem' in 1923, so composition remained part of her professional life. She performed extensively on Broadway and in Hollywood in the 1930s, her final performance was in *Little Dark Horse* in 1941.

She remains something of a mystery to us, in a career spanning over five decades she was composing music for at least 27 years. It is worth remembering that the uncomfortable connection between her and c--n songs is a history that can be found in many of the so-called great composers of American popular musicals: Irving Berlin wrote many of these songs along with a variety of other 'ethnic' humour based songs in the 1900s. Loftus's involvement in shows which featured the work of key black composers such as Rosamund Johnson is intriguing though - and next week's composer, Nora Bayes, also worked alongside composers like Bob Cole. Bayes - like Loftus - was hounded by newspapers and a huge celebrity, all while turning out an astonishing output of music.

Compositions - Musicals:

Sister Mary (1899)

['Midnight Serenade' \(A Cake Walk\)](#) (White-Smith Music Publishing Co. 1899)

The Belle of Bridgeport (1900)

'Bullfrog Ben' (music and lyrics)

'(I'm Gwine to Marry) Angeline' (music and lyrics)

Madge Smith, Attorney (1900)

'Bullfrog Ben' (music and lyrics)

'(I'm Gwine to Marry) Angeline' (music and lyrics)

¹⁰ 'Cissie Loftus Married' *Aberdeen Press and Journal*. Aberdeen, UK. Monday 05 July 1909, 2.

¹¹ "CISSIE LOFTUS BACK, CURED OF DRUG HABIT: ENGLISH MIMIC SAYS SHE HAS BEGUN LIFE ANEW." *Boston Daily Globe* (1923-1927), Oct 16, 1923 (Proquest Historical Newspapers)

¹² "CISSIE LOFTUS TOPS THE BILL AT KEITH'S: IMPERSONATIONS OF THE STAGE GREAT --DUFRANNE, FRECH TENOR, IN A SONG PROGRAM." *Boston Daily Globe* (1923-1927), May 06, 1924. (Proquest Historical Newspapers)

¹³ "MUSICAL COMEDY: CISSIE LOFTUS WITH "FOLLIES"." *The Billboard* (Archive: 1894-1960) 36, no. 5 (Feb 02, 1924): 32. (Proquest Historical Newspapers)

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[The Lancers](#) (1907) NB: libretto by Rida Johnson Young

'Our Brave Lancers' (music and lyrics)

'[Come Out in the Moonlight](#)' (music and lyrics), New York : Jos. W. Stern & Co

(Although ibdb.com lists no further songs - [sheet music from the period](#) suggests a further series of numbers.)

'[If Love Cometh Not](#)'

'[Then Go Out in the Moonlight](#)'

'[Mandy Anna Loo](#)' Words and music by C. Loftus. New York: J. W. Stern & Co, (1907).

Compositions - Single songs:

'Can't live widout ye any mo'. (music and lyrics) London: Chappell & Co, 1896.

'[My bed is like a little boat](#)' (music and lyrics) White-Smith Music Publishing Co. 1899

'[If I Were You](#)': (music and lyrics) Weber, Fields & Stromberg, 1899

'In Japan', (music and lyrics?) White-Smith Music Publishing, 1899

'[On My Lips there was a Sigh](#)' (music and lyrics) M. Witmark & Sons, 1900

'[My Little Airs and Graces](#)' (music and lyrics) [New York] : W. Witmark & Sons, 1900

'[Near Woodstock Town](#)' (music and lyrics) M. Witmark & Sons, 1900

'[Where the Boats Go](#)' (music and lyrics) M. Witmark & Sons, 1900

'[Shadow Song](#)' (music and lyrics) M. Witmark & Sons, 1900

'A Serenade' (music and lyrics) Chappell & Co., 1923

'Requiem' [Song.] Poem by R. L. Stevenson, London, etc : Chappell & Co, 1923.

Sources for further reading:

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<https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-cast-staff/cecilia-loftus-68121>

The Irving Society -

<https://www.theirvingsociety.org.uk/cissie-loftus-the-mimetic-marvel-by-michael-kilgariff/>

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