coupled with a remarkable ability to control dynamics, pitch, inflection, rhythm, and phrasing for expressive effect. Forthright and independent, Thornton spoke her mind, performed what she felt in the moment, and dressed as she pleased, often defying gender conventions with men’s suits and a Stetson hat.

See also: Blues and Blues Festivals

Further Reading

Maria V. Johnson

Till, Emmett Louis (1941–55), Civil Rights Movement Inspiration

The Lynching of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till in 1955 shocked the nation and became an instigating force propelling the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Not long after the Supreme Court’s Brown vs. Board of Education decision rendered the segregation of public schools unconstitutional, Till entered one of the most segregated states in the union, Mississippi, where white supremacists were still seething from the high court’s verdict. Though the school-age African American boy had come from Chicago, Illinois, to rural Mississippi to visit relatives on his summer vacation, his path soon intersected with disaffected segregationists. Till never made it back to his home state alive.

On August 24, 1955, Till and several of his cousins drove to Bryant’s, a grocery store in the small town of Money, Mississippi. Reports vary widely about the ill-fated events that took place at the store that evening. The most commonly cited account is that Till “wolf-whistled” at Carolyn Bryant, the store owner’s wife who was working the counter the day he and his cousins came in to buy candy. Roy Bryant, the storeowner, was out of town when the alleged offense took place, but upon his return Carolyn Bryant told him a story about the encounter that incited Bryant and his half-brother, J. W. Milam, to kidnap Till from his uncle’s house. Moses Wright, the uncle with whom Till was vacationing, went to the police after his nephew’s disappearance and, on August 29, Bryant and Milam were arrested. Originally charged with kidnapping, their indictment grew to include murder by August 31, when Till’s corpse was discovered by a fisherman in the Tallahatchie River.
Till’s mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, insisted that her son’s remains be sent back to Chicago. Once her son’s body arrived, she examined it carefully, discovering that he had been brutally beaten, shot through the skull, weighted down by a cotton-gin fan tied with barbed wire around his neck, and submerged in the river for several days. Till-Mobley decided that the bloated, bullet-hole ridden and battered corpse lying in front of her had to be exposed so that others could see the savage effects of white supremacy. She held an open casket public funeral, during which thousands of mourners filed passed her lynched child’s remains. Till-Mobley also allowed periodicals like Jet magazine and the Chicago Defender to publish a picture of Till lying in his casket.

Although Till-Mobley’s decision to publicize her son’s brutalized corpse garnered both national and international attention, Bryant and Milam were never brought to justice. On September 23, 1955, at the end of a week-long trial held at a segregated courthouse in Sumner, Mississippi, a jury composed of twelve white males deliberated for little over an hour before finding the defendants “not guilty.” Five months later, journalist William Bradford Huie paid Bryant and Milam $400,000 for their account of the murder, which was published in the January 24, 1956, edition of Look magazine.

The killers’ unapologetic confession, like the widely circulated image of Till’s remains, has kept the memory of his death alive and unsettling in America’s collective conscience. Nearly fifty years later, the Justice Department reopened the Emmett Till murder investigation—persuaded by recently released documents suggesting there were more people involved in the crime. Though both Bryant
and Milam are now dead, the search continues for additional people who might be implicated in the lynching of Emmett Till.

**See also:** Law Enforcement

**Further Reading**


Maegan Parker Brooks

**Toni Morrison Society. See Morrison, Toni**

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**Townsend, Robert (1957– ), Actor, Filmmaker, Director, Writer**

Robert Townsend gained fame for his 1987 movie satire on the experience of black actors in a Hollywood system that treated them with disdain, called *Hollywood Shuffle*. It was one of the first successful movies about the black experience in the movie business. Cowritten with Keenen Ivory Wayans, the movie shows Bobby Taylor (Townsend) go through a maze of cattle-call type auditions. Taylor’s fantasies of playing roles usually reserved for white actors provide some funny parodies: a black action hero, a black detective, black movie critics à la Siskel and Ebert (the most well-known movie critics of the time), and even a tale of the South and Reconstruction. The comedy is funny and incisive; it took the sting out of a bleak and depressing experience for black talent in Hollywood, trying to find work that was not stereotypical in nature and substance. It was a primer for aspiring black actors.

Robert Townsend was born in 1957 in Chicago. His ambitions led him to join a theater group of black actors in his hometown. At age sixteen he was the youngest member of a group called EXBAG (Experimental Black Actors Guild). Additional experience and training came in the Second City improvisation group. (Second City is most famous for providing many of the cast members of the original *Saturday Night Live* television program.) Townsend started college in Chicago at Illinois State University. His talent earned him work in two feature films being shot in the area. The first was *Cooley High* (1975), directed by Michael Schultz. Schultz saw Townsend performing in local theater, liked what he saw, and offered him a small role in the film. He transferred from Illinois State to William Patterson College in New Jersey. While in New Jersey he also commuted to New York to study and work with the Negro Ensemble Company. Later, he ended his academic career at Hunter College in New York City. Townsend’s talent landed him work within the first week of being in New York. He obtained a recurring role on a public television series, *Watch Your Mouth*, as an