

Troubled soul's 1910 song listed with greats

By GEORGE ZEPP

My mother lived in Nashville until she married in 1919. She often referred to a Nashville friend whose name, as I recall, was Beth Slater Whitson.

Miss Whitson was a writer of stories, but mostly poems and songs. What can you tell me about her, especially her songs? — Betty Derryberry, Columbia, Tenn.

Years before Nashville became known for its worldwide brand of country music lyricists, Beth Slater Whitson was modestly churning out hits. The Hickman County native penned her two most recognized tunes there in the Goodrich community before moving to Nashville in 1913.

Until her death at age 52, her output increased and extended into countless pieces of magazine fiction. She wrote lyrics for up to 400 songs, by one estimate. On top of that were her short stories, poems and even a screenplay used by Hollywood's Universal Corp. in the silent movie era. Beneath it all, she was a troubled soul. Depression and elation marked her moods, although bipolar disorder was not yet labeled in Whitson's day.

"Her works were distinctively her own. She was quite versatile, turning easily from airy, whimsical lines destined to bring joy to the young, to ballads of sentiment that had universal appeal," wrote her primary biographer, Grace Baxter Thompson.

Best known today are her songs Let Me Call You Sweetheart (1910), with music by New Yorker Leo Friedman, and Meet Me Tonight in Dreamland (1909). Neither has been forgotten. Sweetheart was used in the 1998 Steven Soderbergh film Out of Sight starring George Clooney and Jennifer Lopez. Earlier, it was recorded by performers as wildly diverse as Neil Young and Fats Domino, Patti Page and Doris Day, Bing Crosby and Gene Autry, Tiny Tim and Lawrence Welk.

Dreamland, also a Friedman collaboration, attracted latter-day versions by Pat Boone, Frank Sinatra, The Mills Brothers and even jazz great Thelonius Monk. It was featured in the 1949 Judy Garland film In the Good Old Summertime.

Beth and her six-years-younger sister, Alice Norton, credited their creative abilities to a family steeped in the written word. Their father was John H. Whitson, co-editor of the Hickman Pioneer newspaper.

"Beth and Alice started writing poetry as soon as they learned to spell . . .," John Lipscomb wrote in a Nashville Tennessean Magazine article in 1949. "One of their favorite games was to make up verse with each supplying alternate lines."

Norton told Lipscomb that was how the unforgettable chorus Sweetheart came to be written: "Let me call you Sweetheart, I'm in love with you/ Let me hear you whisper that you love me too...." The tune has been acclaimed as a "Towering Song" by the Songwriters Hall of Fame and placed No. 125 in a 21st-century ranking of the greatest songs of the 20th century.

The Whitson sisters remained close in their years in Nashville. Beth married George M. Whitson in 1916. His name was the same but his family "was very little, if any, kin" to hers, Thompson noted. As a wedding present, he presented her with an old one-floor brick house named "Lookaway" on a hilltop at 909 Manila St. in east Nashville; it is still standing, behind magnolias, on the little dead-end off Sharpe Avenue.

Sister Alice Norton, who died in 1961 at age 76, lived nearby at 1001 McFerrin Ave. Norton found her niche in children's verses and stories. Neither sister had children, but their nonwriting sister Laurie had eight.

"The woman songwriter was almost unknown when I broke into the game," Whitson wrote in a True Confessions magazine autobiography article published in 1925, when she was 46. By then she lamented being "undoubtedly a has-been, and that, too, at the age when I should be doing my best work."

A Tennessean article the same year observed she had "worked industriously, saved up money, took her literary products to Chicago (in 1909), persistently dogged the footsteps of materially-minded publishers, finally got their ear, sold them a song, two songs, a dozen songs."

Whitson had cited her "broken nerves" for part of her later problems: "Now and then there may be one that will find only downgrade trail; there seem to be some that are like that." By that year "the worst depression was beginning to be felt," Thompson wrote.

On April 26, 1930, Whitson died in her sleep at her beloved hilltop home, with its roses, lilacs and magnolias. The cause of death, listed in cemetery records, was "chronic mania," a diagnosis that in earlier years had sent others so labeled to the "lunatic asylum."

Whitson's funeral was in the same house where she lived. A violinist's solo rendition of Dreamland echoed through the high ceilings as her body was taken out to its final resting place in Nashville's Spring Hill Cemetery.

From: The Nashville Tennessean
March 20, 2006