

Pianist Mabel Robinson Simms, 91; Starred at Pioneer Club, Moulin Rouge

BOSTON --- Mabel Robinson Simms, a top pianist on the Boston jazz scene for 30 years, died in Boston on January 27, 2005. She had been in failing health for some time.

Ms. Simms was born in Cape Charles, Virginia on March 29, 1914, and raised in Norfolk, Virginia. Her family moved to Boston in 1931, and it is in Boston where she took up playing the piano seriously. In the late 1930s, while still holding down a day job as a waitress at Slade's, she started working as a single at the Monterrey Cafe on Columbus Avenue. In 1940 she joined the group at Johnny Wilson's Swanee Grill. In 1944 she went to New York; Sammy Davis Sr. helped her get her first job there, and she began a lasting friendship with entertainer Pearl Bailey.

She returned to Boston, where her career thrived in clubs like Little Dixie where she accompanied singers including Hazel Diaz and Novella Taylor, the Hi-Hat, and the Monte Cristo. In 1950 she began her run at Boston's celebrated after-hours spot, the Pioneer Club, where she both led the house trio and played intermission piano when the likes of Art Tatum stopped by. She stayed at the Pioneer until 1955.

In 1956 and 1957 her trio, with her sister Frances Brown and Bill Tanner, worked regularly at the Baby Grand and the Big M. In 1958 she began her ten-year association with the Moulin Rouge in the Hotel Vendome in the Back Bay. She retired from active performing in 1968.

Ms. Simms was active in benefit work after retirement, and was one of the original performers in Steppin' Out, the annual benefit for the Dimock Community Health Center in Boston.

Ms. Simms was active in Local 535 of the American Federation of Musicians, which she joined in the early 1940s, serving as Secretary later in that decade. In recent years she was a member of the New England Jazz Alliance and participated as a voter in both Hall of Fame election cycles—a Hall of Fame to which her own nomination is all but assured.

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