Beulah Encyclopedia Article

Beulah

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The first television network series to star an African American, *Beulah* ran on ABC from October 3, 1950 until September 22, 1953. The comic black maid had her beginnings on the 1940s radio series *Fibber McGee and Molly* where she was originally played by a white male actor. The African American Oscar winner, Hattie McDaniel, took over the role when Beulah was spun off onto her own radio show. The popular series then moved to the fledgling television medium with a new black actress playing Beulah, the noted singer, stage, and screen performer Ethel Waters. Waters left the series after two years and was briefly replaced by McDaniel. Illness forced her to leave the series, and another black actress famous for playing maids, Louise Beavers, took the role in the show's last season. The series followed the gently comic adventures of Beulah, her marriage-resistant male friend, Bill, the Henderson family whom Beulah served, and Beulah's feather-brained friend, also a black maid, Oriole (played first by Butterfly McQueen, then Ruby Dandridge). Debuting a year before the more famous black comedy *Amos 'n' Andy, Beulah* did not generate the other series' enormous controversy, despite the stereotyped representations of black servants whose lives revolve around their white superiors. In 1951, however, when the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) launched a highly publicized protest against the *Amos 'n' Andy* television show, the civil rights lobby group included *Beulah* in its condemnation. The series left the air the same time as *Amos 'n' Andy*.