

Mary Navis collection

Ms. Coll. 1241

Finding aid prepared by Kelin Baldrige.

Last updated on February 01, 2018.

University of Pennsylvania, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts

2016 November 30

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Summary Information

Repository	University of Pennsylvania: Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts
Creator	Navis, Mary
Title	Mary Navis collection
Call number	Ms. Coll. 1241
Date [inclusive]	1933-1949
Extent	0.2 linear feet (1 box)
Language	English
Abstract	Mary Navis, known as "the duchess of swing," was a female big band leader and trumpeter. She once performed in Ina Ray Hutton's all-female group, but left to head her own group with an all-male backing. This collection consists of correspondence, memorabilia, newspaper clippings, and photographs, spanning from 1933 to 1942 and all related to Navis's career.

Cite as:

Mary Navis collection, 1933-1949, Ms. Coll. 1241, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts, University of Pennsylvania

Biography/History

Mary Navis was a female big band leader and trumpeter. She once performed as first trumpet player in Ina Ray Hutton's all-female group the Melodears, active from 1933 to 1939, but left to head her own all-male swing band. She was known as the "duchess of swing" and often played at The Yacht Club in West Philly, Lexington Casino on Roosevelt Boulevard, and Benny the Bum's at 311 South Broad Street in Philadelphia.

Despite her renown as a musician during her lifetime, there is remarkably little information on Mary Navis's personal life. Records within the collection indicate that she was known as both Mary Navis and Mary Novis. While she appears to have been married (one newspaper clipping indicates that her husband was a trumpeter in her band), all her professional activities were conducted under her maiden name. She was probably born around 1920. According to a newspaper clipping in the collection, Navis was "the only girl who play[ed] an instrument in front of a man's band. Her father [was] a celloist, and she began giving concerts at the age of five, playing her violin. Although she never took a trumpet lesson in her life, she [wa]s considered one of the foremost woman trumpeters in the country. She ... also play[ed] the violin, guitar and drums as well as several other musical instruments," (box 1, folder 3).

The name of her group seems to have changed over the years, with documents indicating that her group was billed as: Mary Navis's Troubadour Band, Mary Navis and Her Man-Band, Mary Navis and Her Men of Rhythm, and Mary Navis and her Orchestra. She was active from the late 1930s through the 1950s.

Scope and Contents

This collection consists of correspondence, memorabilia, newspaper clippings, and photographs, all related to Mary Navis's musical career. The correspondence contains letters about publicity work for Selmer instruments, now known as Conn-Selmer, as well as other correspondence concerning her management. The memorabilia include several publicity fliers for her performances, including two for "Retail Clerks" in which her name was spelled "Novis." The newspaper clippings primarily concern her performance announcements which were mostly at The Yacht Club, Benny the Bum's, and the Lexington Casino, all in Philadelphia. These clippings also include reviews and praise for her performances. In addition to this, there is a clipping of a photograph in a newspaper that shows Navis with Hal Le Roy, an American singer, dancer and actor, and Ina Ray Hutton. The photographs are a mix of formal and candid and mostly solo-shots of Navis, but also include photographs of her and other women playing their instruments (possibly the Melodears).

Administrative Information

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2016 November 30

Finding aid prepared by Kelin Baldrige.

Access Restrictions

This collection is open for research use.

Use Restrictions

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Source of Acquisition

Sold by Between the Covers, 2016.

Controlled Access Headings

FORM/GENRE(S)

- Clippings (information artifacts)
- Correspondence
- Photographs
- Printed ephemera

PERSONAL NAME(S)

- Navis, Mary

SUBJECT(S)

- Music
- Musicians
- Performing arts
- Swing (Music)
- Women musicians
- Women musicians--United States

Collection Inventory

	Box	Folder
Correspondence, 1938-1941.	1	1
Memorabilia, 1933-1942, undated.	1	2
Newspaper clippings, 1937-1939, undated.	1	3
Photographs, 1947-1949, undated .	1	4