



Dawn Hampton moved to New York and became a cabaret star in the '50s.

## In 'Hampton,' family makes the big plays

THIS UNPRETENTIOUS new documentary on the Hampton family, the branch that didn't even need Lionel to carve its name into musical history, kicks off Black History Month with a tone of genuine exuberance.

"The Unforgettable Hampton Family," tomorrow night at 10:30 on Ch. 13 (and Feb. 14 at 10:30 p.m. on Ch. 21), traces the 12 children of Deacon Clark Hampton, who was born the son of slaves in 1877 and never received a formal education.

What Deacon Hampton did have from birth was determination. He taught himself to read, he taught himself to play musical instruments, and he taught his children never to give up.

The nine children who survived to adulthood picked up all those traits. They became musicians, forming a family jazz band that made a good living for every-

one until they split up to follow their own muses.

"Slide" Hampton, the youngest brother, became a revered jazz trombonist. Virtue and Aleta eventually became a duo, with piano, string bass and vocals. Somewhere in the middle, they married and raised families.

Dawn Hampton moved to New York and became a cabaret star from the 1950s well into the '80s, helping younger performers like Bette Midler.

In recent years, Dawn moved into swing dance, becoming a beloved member of New York's dance circle as well.

And yes, these Hamptons did spend some time with Lionel, a distant cousin, touring with both bands.

What's most uplifting about this 30-minute documentary, though, isn't the music, pleasur-

able as it is. The soul here is the spirit of the Hampton family, who got nothing handed to them and yet made a full plate of it.

Deacon Hampton, who seems to have been a stern man, was almost lynched at one point when some Southern white folks discovered he was teaching black youngsters in the South to read.

At the same time, he first named the family band "The Hampton Family Pickaninnies," because that was popular folk vernacular at the time for blacks who had worked in the fields.

Sadly, most of the original Hampton family band is now gone. Dawn is still kicking up her heels, but Aleta and Virtue both died in 2007, soon after the interviews here were filmed.

Considering these Hamptons were only two generations removed from slavery, the whole film also becomes a fine testimonial to overcoming the odds that remained even when slavery ended.

That is to say, it's the kind of programming Black History Month needs, though it's a shame it's so often limited to Black History Month.

It's too easy to forget a group like the Hamptons, splendid as they were. This documentary puts their memory on record.

dhinckley@nydailynews.com

### The Unforgettable Hampton Family

★★★★

Tomorrow at 10:30 p.m., Ch. 13