

Eva Alberta Jessye: Her Life and Accomplishments

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New Life Fellowship

January 6th, 2018

Biographical Information

Actress, author, composer, and director, Eva Alberta Jessye is the first African American woman to receive international distinction as a choral director. She was born January 20, 1895 in Coffeyville, KS of Albert and Julia Jessye, former slaves. Due to the influence of her great grandmother and great aunt, Eva developed an early love of music and negro spirituals. At age 13, she attended Western University, in Quindaro, KS recognized at the time as the best black musical training center in the Midwest, studying poetry, oratory, choral music, and music theory. She also participated in, and coached male and female choral groups. In 1914, she graduated and went on to attend Langston University, in Langston, OK, earning a second bachelor's degree and a teaching certificate. She taught in Oklahoma public and private schools, wrote for an African American newspaper, was the head of the Music department at Morgan State University, Baltimore MD, served as an artist in residence at Pittsburg State and later taught at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI. She also studied privately under black classical composer Will Marion Cook in New York.

Achievements

Pursuing professional opportunities outside of the classroom, Ms. Jessye moved to New York in 1926, directing her choral group, the Original Dixie Jubilee Singers. The group, whose name was later changed to the Eva Jessye Choir, enjoyed a successful career of over 40 years, performing throughout the United States and Europe, with regular performances on the radio, at the Capitol Theatre, in Broadway shows and motion pictures. It performed a variety of music such as spirituals, jazz, work songs, mountain ballads, ragtime, and light opera.

The choral group also recorded on Brunswick, Columbia, and Cameo record labels in the 1920s. Jessye helped to raise awareness of how African Americans were treated in casting and filming in Hollywood. In 1929, she went to Hollywood to serve as the choral director for the MGM film *Hallelujah!*, which had an all-black cast directed by King Vidor. Members of the black press lauded her for speaking out against the discriminatory practices she endured while on the set for this film.

She also was instrumental in debunking the myth that African Americans voices were only suited to sing “African American” music. In 1933, Jessye garnered the opportunity to direct her choir in Virgil Thomson's and Gertrude Stein's opera, *Four Saints in Three Acts*, produced as a Broadway theatre work. Eva Jessye Choir's participation in *Four Saints*, though considered ‘something foreign to their nature’ showed that African Americans could, if given the opportunity, sing other genres of music. Combatting discriminatory practices in salaries, Ms. Jessye also insisted that her singers be paid for rehearsals, which represented a financial breakthrough for many African-American singers of that time.

In 1935, George Gershwin chose her to direct the chorus for the original Broadway production of "Porgy and Bess." During a 1936 tour of Porgy and Bess in Washington, she was a part of the cast protest against segregation at the National Theatre, which resulted in the first integrated audience in that venue. Her choral group was the official choir of the 1963 civil rights march on Washington participating on program with other musical greats such as Marian Anderson and Mahalia Jackson.

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Her acting roles include the Strawberry Woman in *Porgy and Bess* and Queenie in *Showboat*. She also performed in the films *Black Like Me* (1964) and *Slaves* (1969) and *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970). After the dissolution of her choir in the early 1970s, Jessye returned to writing, teaching, and composing, remaining active well into her 80's.

Awards

The recipient of many awards and honorary doctorates from several major universities, the University of Michigan's Department of African American Studies in 1976 also awarded Jessye with a Doctor of Determination Certificate. She donated collections of books, scores, artwork, and many other materials, to the university's African American Music Collection. Other materials she donated to the University of Pittsburg in Kansas. Kansas governor Robert Bennett designated October 1, 1978 as "Eva Jessye Day" and in 1982 Governor John Carlin named her the "Kansas Ambassador for the Arts".

Conclusion

Jessye was married twice but had no children. She died on February 21, 1992 at the age of ninety-seven in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

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