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INTRODUCTION

Papers and collected materials of Dr. Eva Jessye, world-renowned choral director, writer, composer, actress, and celebrated authority on Afro-American music, speech, literature, and art. Associated with this collection are books and recorded music donated by Eva Jessye. These additional materials are kept in the Axe Library Special Collections and can be identified in the library online catalog.

DONOR INFORMATION

Materials in the Eva Jessye Collection were donated to the Leonard H. Axe Library by Dr. Eva Jessye in 1977. Additions were made from 1978 to 1991.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Born in Coffeyville, Kansas, on January 20, 1895, Eva Alberta Jessye started her academic career in the public schools of Coffeyville and Iola, Kansas. At age 13 she attended Western University in Quindaro, Kansas. She graduated from Western University in 1914 and went on to Langston University in Oklahoma where she received a lifetime certificate in teaching.

Jessye taught in elementary schools in Taft, Haskell, and Muskogee, Oklahoma before she became a reporter and columnist for the Baltimore (Maryland) Afro-American in 1925. In 1926 she joined a choral group in New York called the Dixie Jubilee Singers. This group would eventually become the world-renowned Eva Jessye Choir. The choir performed spirituals, work songs, ballads, ragtime, jazz, and light opera in a variety of mediums, such as radio, film, and stage. They were regulars on the “Major Bowes Family Radio Hour” and the “General Motors Hour.” In 1927 the Dixie Jubilee Singers worked in Harry A. Pollard’s film, Uncle Tom’s Cabin. The same year, Dr. Jessye compiled and published a critically acclaimed collection of songs titled My Spirituals. In 1929 King Vidor directed “Hallelujah”, the first musical motion picture with an all-Black cast. The film featured the Dixie Jubilee Singers with Jessye as choral director.

Dr. Jessye was appointed choral director for the New York production of the Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein opera, “Four Saints in Three Acts” in 1934. In 1935 Jessye was selected by George Gershwin to be choral director for the original production of his 1935 folk-opera, “Porgy and Bess.” For the next three decades, Jessye was associated with almost every Porgy & Bess production worldwide, earning the unofficial title of ‘curator and guardian of the score’.

Eva Jessye was also involved in humanitarian efforts. Her experiences as a black woman during the Jim Crow era influenced her involvement in the later Civil Rights movement. She collaborated with African-American notables Marian Anderson, Mary McLeod Bethune, Julia Davis, Eubie Blake, Langston Hughes, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Paul Robeson. In August 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. selected the Eva Jessye Choir as the official chorus of the historic March on Washington. The choir performed “We Shall Overcome” and “Freedom Is the Thing We’re Talking About.” Tom Mboya, founder of Kenya’s Independence Movement Council and president of the People’s Convention Party, later used the recordings of these songs during Kenya’s struggle for independence. During the 1960s Eva Jessye also appeared in the motion pictures Black Like Me and Slaves.
Dr. Jessye returned to academia in her later years. She established the Eva Jessye Afro-American Music Collection at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor in 1974. She established the Eva Jessye Collection at Pittsburg State University in Pittsburg, Kansas in 1977 and served as that University’s Artist-In-Residence from 1978 to 1981.

During her lifetime Jessye received honorary degrees from Wilberforce University, Allen University, and Southern University, including an honorary doctorate. She also received numerous citations from government, educational, and musical organizations. In 1981, Governor John Carlin of Kansas declared Dr. Eva Jessye to be Kansas Ambassador for the Arts.

In a 1984 interview by Jacob U. Gordon, Jessye was asked what she considered some of the drawbacks of being black and elderly in Kansas. Her reply was, “I often think if I had been white, where would I have been? Perhaps not anywhere. Because I think I had it made, you know. Who’s that who said he took the path less traveled by? Robert Frost? I took the color less desirable and it made all the difference.”

Dr. Eva Jessye died on February 21, 1992 at the age of 97 in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

The materials in the Eva Jessye Collection provide a good overview of her personal and musical career. The Papers are arranged into 18 series: Biographical, Correspondence, Writings, Clippings, Photographs, Programs, Publicity, Eva Jessye Choir, Show announcements and invitations, Paradise Lost and Regained, Eva Jessye Committee, Awards, Audio Recordings, Scripts, Sheet Music and Scores, Black History, Contracts, and Miscellaneous. The Correspondence, Photographs, Programs, Music Sheets, Writings and Scripts series are the most comprehensive and provide the best overview of Eva Jessye’s life and career.

The Biographical series consists of Eva Jessye’s resume, a marriage certificate (1936), a copy of her will (1962), and a copy of her death certificate and memorial program (1992). The series also has a copy of an 1885 census form listing the Jesse [sic] family, and a transcript of a 1984 interview of Dr. Jessye by Jacob U. Gordon. The series also has Eva Jessye’s notes for a proposed autobiography to be titled Red Carpet and Cold Linoleum.

The Correspondence series contains personal and professional correspondence from 1926 to 1992. The bulk of this series is arranged chronologically with undated letters at the end. Arranged separately within this series is correspondence with Jester Hairston from 1954 to 1978 and correspondence with Celia Cox from 1953 to 1980. The last folder in the series contains correspondence pertaining to Pittsburg State University’s 1978 Eva Jessye Day. The correspondence with Jester Hairston provides an extensive look at Afro-American music and entertainment from the 1950s to the 1970s and provides information on the life-long friendship between the two musicians.

Correspondence with Celia Cox, Eva Jessye’s aunt, offers a glimpse into Jessye’s family life. Other notable correspondents in this series include Mary McCleod Bethune, Eubie Blake, Nannie Burroughs, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, George Gershwin, Ira Gershwin, Lorraine Hansberry, Langston Hughes, Coretta Scott King, William Grant Still, Leopold Stokowski, and King Vidor.

The Writings series consists of published and unpublished poems by Dr. Jessye dated from 1916 to 1984, including, Selected Poems by Dr. Eva Jessye published in 1978 by The Little Balkans Press. The series also includes collected essays, poems, quotations, and prayers written

The Clippings series consists of newspaper articles, magazine articles, and book mentions containing biographical information about Dr. Jessye; information and reviews of performances by the Eva Jessye Choir; and information and reviews of Porgy and Bess productions from the 1930s to the 1970s. Undated materials are filed at the end.

The Photographs series is arranged in sub-series as follows: Proofs and Negatives, Slides, Publicity and Portraits, Informal Solo Shots, Groups, Family, Eva Jessye’s Funeral, Eva Jessye’s Pittsburg Home, Artists and Celebrities, Miscellaneous Collages, Performance Photos (Film and Stage), Travel and Art Photos, and Miscellaneous. The Artists and Celebrities folders are arranged alphabetically with unidentified photos at the end. Included are Marian Anderson, Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Ira Gershwin, Jester Hairston, Langston Hughes, Lyndon B. Johnson, John Herndon Mercer, Paul Robeson, and Ned Rorem. Performance photos include still shots from “Hallelujah”, “Four Saints in Three Acts”, “Paradise: Lost and Regained”, and “Porgy and Bess”. Other photographs include Dr. Jessye’s family photos, Dr. Jessye’s Pittsburg home featuring a ‘yellow brick road’ walkway, a Pace & Handy Company photo, and two original photos by noted Harlem Renaissance photographer, James Van Der Zee.

The Programs series consists of printed programs relating to Jessye and the Eva Jessye Choir's musical performances. Programs collected by Dr. Jessye for other musical performers and productions are also incorporated into the series. The series dates from 1914 to 1992 with undated materials at the end. It includes performances by the Dixie Jubilee Singers, a 1932 Major Edward Bowes radio program signed by Jean Hersholt, and a program from the 1963 Civil Rights March on Washington with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The Publicity series consists of drafts of news releases containing biographical and performance information relating to Jessye during her term as Pittsburg State University's Artist-in-Residence. It includes information on Pittsburg productions by Dr. Jessye such as “Chronicle of Job”, “Paradise Lost and Regained”, “Tribute To The Clergy”, and “Western Star”. The series also includes earlier promotional brochures, pamphlets, and flyers about Jessye.

The Eva Jessye Choir series consists of members rosters for the Dixie Jubilee Singers and the Eva Jessye Choir. The series also includes photos used for publicity and promotion purposes, and photos of performances during the 1940 World's Fair in New York. The series also includes newspaper articles containing choir information and performance reviews. Travel and appearances information contain Dr. Jessye's thoughts and insights on segregated accommodations and services for black singers in places such as San Francisco and Los Angeles during the 1930s and 1940s.

The Show Announcements and Invitations series is arranged chronologically from 1942 to 1994 with undated materials at the end. The series includes invitations to Dr. Eva Jessye tributes, a 1942 invitation to “Death in Harlem” signed by Langston Hughes, a 1974 invitation to the dedication of Dr. Eva Jessye’s Afro-American Music Collection at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, and a 1978 invitation to Dr. Jessye’s exhibit at Pittsburg State University.

The Paradise Lost and Regained series contains information on Jessye’s interpretation of Milton’s Paradise Lost and Regained. Most of the information in this series is from the 1978
production at Pittsburg State University. The series contains an audio recording of the production, correspondence, programs, notes, and several copies of the script with Dr. Jessye’s hand-written changes. The series also includes rehearsal notes, stage plans, production expenses, guest lists, multiple copies of the score, and one performance photograph.

The Eva Jessye Committee series contains information on the oversight committee in charge of Dr. Jessye’s term as Artist-In-Residence at Pittsburg State University from 1978 to 1981. The series includes a member roster, committee correspondence from 1977 to 1981, and expenditure records for Jessye.

The Awards and Certificates series consists of documents endorsing Jessye’s works by organizations and educational institutions; resolutions and proclamations from cities and other government agencies; and plaques celebrating Jessye’s contributions to art, education, film, music, theater, and other humanitarian and professional efforts. The series includes the 1981 recognition of Jessye as Kansas Ambassador for the Arts by Governor John Carlin.

The Audio Recordings series consists of recordings taped from 1926 to 1985. It includes a recording of the Hall Johnson Choir in 1926, an original recording of “Strawberry Woman” from Porgy and Bess in 1935, and a recording of a 1979 radio program by the Exodusters. The series also includes informal recordings of conversations between Jessye and Pittsburg archivist, Eugene DeGruson in 1985, and a one-way conversation between Dr. Jessye and Eubie Blake. Eubie Blake’s voice is inaudible.


The Sheet Music and Scores series consists of published and manuscript music authored or arranged by Jessye and copies of published and manuscript music by other composers and lyricists. This series is arranged alphabetically by title. It includes Jessye’s Musical Autogram composed by Robert Russell Bennett; “Crimson and Gold”, a Pittsburg State University alma mater composed by Jessye; and two scores for Porgy and Bess.

The Black History series consists of collected newspaper and magazine articles concerning black history; biographical and promotional information on black artists and historical figures; African-American publications; entry and order forms for African-American books and choral books, including an order form/pamphlet for the Negro Book Society signed by Langston Hughes; and a copy of an 1852 South Carolina advertisement for a slave auction.

The Contracts series consists of contractual agreements for the Eva Jessye Choir. It includes the 1935 contract for the original Broadway production of Porgy and Bess.

The Miscellaneous series consists of oil share certificates from 1914 to 1920; travel itineraries: expenses and invoices; collected posters and artworks by various artists, including an original Romare Bearden painting; plaques; and hats owned by Dr. Jessye.
Biographical Series

f. 1 Promotional
f. 2 Interview transcript by Jacob U. Gordon, 1984
f. 3 Marriage certificate, 1936
f. 4 Death certificate (copy), 1992
f. 5 Last Will and Testament, 1965
f. 5a Memorial Program, 1992
f. 6 Kansas State Census (copy), Volume 135, 1885
f. 7 Pittsburg State University blank letterheads, Artist-in-Residence
f. 8 Book plan and notes
f. 9 Miscellaneous and notes
f. 10 Little Balkans Press order form for Volume No. 4 featuring Eva Jessye, 1981

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f. 12 1942-1949
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f. 20 1975
f. 21 1976
f. 22 1977
f. 23 1978
f. 24 1979
f. 25 1980-1981
f. 26 1982-1983
f. 27 1984-1992
f. 28 Undated, A-L
f. 29 Undated, M-Z
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f. 31 Hairston, Jester, 1969-1971
f. 32 Hairston, Jester, 1972-1974
f. 33 Hairston, Jester, 1975-1978
f. 34 Hairston, Jester, undated
f. 35 Cox, Celia, 1953-1968
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f. 37 Cox, Celia, 1971-1972
f. 38 Cox, Celia, 1973-1974
f. 40 Cox, Celia, undated
f. 41 Pittsburg State University Eva Jessye Day, 1978

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f. 43 Poems, 1927-1977
f. 44 Poems, 1979-1980
f. 45 Poems, 1981-1984
f. 46 Poems, undated
f. 47 Selected Poems by Eva Jessye, 1978
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f. 50 Lyrics, undated
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f. 60 September, 1978
f. 61 October-December, 1978
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f. 63 1980-1985
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f. 73 Photo Slides, Pittsburg State University interviews
f. 74 Publicity and portrait photos, Jessye
f. 75 Informal photos, Jessye solo
f. 76 Group photos
f. 77 Group photos, unidentified
f. 78 Family photos
f. 79 Eva Jessye funeral, 1992
f. 80 Eva Jessye home, Pittsburg, Kansas
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f. 82 Artists and Celebrities, B
f. 83 Artists and Celebrities, C-D
f. 84 Artists and Celebrities, E-F
f. 85 Artists and Celebrities, G-H
f. 86 Artists and Celebrities, J-L
f. 87 Artists and Celebrities, M-N
f. 88 Artists and Celebrities, O-R
f. 89 Artists and Celebrities, S-T
f. 90 Artists and Celebrities, U-V
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f. 92 Performance, film and stage
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f. 96 Jessye, Eva, oversized
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f. 163  Exodusters- WREN radio featuring Dr. Eva Jessye, August 5, 1979  
f. 164  Telephone conversation with Eubie Blake, November 15, 1979  
f. 165  “Tribute to the Clergy”, 1980  
f. 166  Dr. Eva Jessye at the Langston Hughes Conference, Missouri Southern State College, March 13, 1981  
f. 167  “Western Star”, June 21,1981  
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f. 169  Side A - Highlights of CBS Broadcast, undated  
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- f. 171 “Chronicle of Job” Jessye
- f. 172 “Follow the Star” Jessye
- f. 173 “He Walks Across the Sky” Jessye
- f. 174 “The Incredible Diversity of Afro-American Vocal Music” Jessye
- f. 175 “Let Your Light Shine” Jessye
- f. 176 “Member of the Wedding” McCuller, Carson
- f. 177 “Minstrelsy, USA” Jessye
- f. 178 “National Survey” Jessye
- f. 179 “Palms of Victory” Jessye
- f. 180 “The People, Yes!” Jessye
- f. 181 “Report on the State of the Union” Jessye
- f. 182 “The Story of Baltazar - The Black Magus”, 1932, Jessye
- f. 183 “The Story of the Black Wise Man” Jessye
- f. 184 “Sweet Country” Jessye
- f. 185 “Time of Harvest” Jessye
- f. 186 “A Tribute to Our Mother - Mrs. Ida B. Wells - Mother Wells” Jessye
- f. 187 “Western Star” Jessye
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- f. 190 “A Woman Is A Sometime Thing” Gershwin
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- f. 195 “Bess, You Is My Woman” Gershwin
- f. 196 “Big Mama Blues” Murphy
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- f. 206 “De Screech Owl’s Wahnin’” Shibley
- f. 207 “Dance of Spain” (Pequena Danza Española) Iturbi
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f. 208 “Dear Mr. Santa Claus” Taylor
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f. 218 “Freedom Train” Jessye and Wolfe
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f. 222 “Grandma's Love Letters” Jessye
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f. 230 Hollandisches Volksleben Rontgen
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