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Jessye, Eva, collection, 1885-1994

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Jessye, Eva, Collection, MS 009

Eva Jessye Collection

Title	The Eva Jessye Collection
Collection Number	MS 009
Creator	Dr. Eva Jessye
Dates	1885-1994
Collection Size	10 linear feet
Scope and Content	Letters, photographs, music, programs, audio recordings, and newspapers primarily relating to the life and musical career of Eva Jessye.
Name and Location of Repository	Pittsburg State University, Leonard Axe Library, Special Collections & University Archives 1701 S. Broadway Pittsburg, Kansas 66762 (620) 235-4883 speccol@pittstate.edu
Languages	English
Access Restrictions	There are no restrictions and the collection is open for research. Researchers must use the collection in accordance with the policies of the Special Collections & University Archives, Leonard H. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University

Biographical Note 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, graduating in 1914. She went on to Langston University in Langston, 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 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.

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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 and 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.

Collection Overview

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 and Certificates, Audio Recordings, Scripts, Sheet Music and Scores, Black History, Contracts, and Miscellaneous.**

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

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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 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. 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 by Jessye, Eva (1895-1992) Collection, 1885-1994 by other artists. Unpublished manuscripts include "Eva Jessye: The Musical Poet" compiled by Ora Williams, and "Rice and Roses: The Story of Celia Cox" by Jessye.

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.

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.

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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.

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 Jessye, Eva (1895-1992) Collection, 1885-1994 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, some music (songs and score fragments), 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, *Paradise Lost and Regained*, 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 **Scripts** series consists of original religious and patriotic dramas, speeches, and narratives written by Jessye. The series is arranged alphabetically with the unidentified fragments at the

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end. The series includes incomplete programs titled “Let Your Light Shine,” “The People, Yes!,” “Report on the State of the Union,” “The Story of Baltazar - The Black Magus,” and “Time of Harvest,” Complete scripts include “Audition,” “Chronicle of Job,” “Follow the Star,” “He Walks Across the Sky,” “The Incredible Diversity of Afro-American Vocal Music,” “Minstrelsy, USA,” “National Survey,” “Palms of Victory,” “The Story of the Black Wise Man,” “Sweet Country,” and “Western Star.”

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 and Oversized** 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.

Folder List

Series 1: Biographical

Box 1:

- 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

Series 2: Correspondence

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- f. 19 1974, oversized
- f. 20 1975
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- f. 29 Undated, M-Z
- f. 30 Hairston, Jester, 1954-1968
- f. 31 Hairston, Jester, 1969-1971
- f. 32 Hairston, Jester, 1972-1974
- f. 33 Hairston, Jester, 1975-1978
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- f. 35 Cox, Celia, 1953-1968
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- f. 37 Cox, Celia, 1971-1972
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- f. 40 Cox, Celia, undated
- f. 41 Pittsburg State University, Eva Jessye Day, 1978

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- f. 43 Poems, 1927-1977
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- f. 47 Selected Poems by Eva Jessye, 1978
- f. 48 "Rice and Roses: The Story of Celia Cox" by Eva Jessye
- f. 49 "Eva Jessye: The Musical Poet" by Ora Williams
- f. 50 Lyrics, undated
- f. 51 Essays, other writers, undated
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Series 4: Clippings

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- f. 60 September, 1978
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- f. 66 *Porgy and Bess*, 1930s-1960s
- f. 67 *Porgy and Bess*, 1970s and undated
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- f. 70 Proofs and Negatives
- f. 71 Proofs and Negatives
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- 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
- f. 81 Artists and Celebrities, A
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- f. 93 Travel and art
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- f. 113 1974
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- f. 164 Telephone conversation with Eubie Blake, November 15, 1979

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- 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. 172 "Follow the Star" Jessye
- f. 173 "He Walks Across the Sky" Jessye
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- 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
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- f. 194 "Chronicle of Job"-Jessye
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- f. 199 *Cool and Warm* - Guitar Series, Volume I-Lucie
- f. 200 "De Screech Owl's Wahnin'"-Shibley
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- f. 224 "The Most Popular Modern Piano Pieces" (1911) Gallico
- f. 225 "Twenty Modern Songs" (Incomplete) compiled by William Arms Fisher
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- f. 234 "Merry Christmas" H.T. Burleigh
- f. 235 "Mother's First Lullaby" Bock
- f. 236 "My Ain Folk" Lemon
- f. 237 "My Soul Is A Witness" Cheatham (signed)
- f. 238 "Negro Spirituals"-Burleigh, H.T. (signed) (fragment)
- f. 239 "The New Moon" Romberg
- f. 240 "Oh! Mr. Lincoln" Millet
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- f. 242 *Porgy and Bess*, score, Gershwin - oversized
- f. 243 *Porgy and Bess*, choral conductor's score, Gershwin - oversized
- f. 244 "Recit and Ballad" from *H.M.S. Pinafore* Gilbert and Sullivan
- f. 245 "Recuerdos de mi Tierra" Brandt
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- f. 250 "Shake the Heavens"
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- f. 253 "The Sons of Light" Vaughan Williams
- f. 254 "Southern Rhapsody" Hosmer
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- f. 260 "Swanee River" (Horn Part) Foster
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- f. 262 "Sylvia"-Arr. Harmann
- f. 263 "There's A Goldmine in the Sky" (incomplete) Kenny
- f. 264 "They Call the Wind Maria" from *Paint Your Wagon* Lowe
- f. 265 "This Is God's War" Bergersen
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- f. 268 "Waiting at the End of the Road" (Orchestra Parts) Berlin
- f. 269 "Wanting You" from *The New Moon* Romberg
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- f. 271 "Why Be Afraid to Dance" Rome
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- f. 273 *Mörike-Lieder* (incomplete) Wolf
- f. 274 *The Virtuoso Pianist in 60 Exercises* (incomplete) Hanon
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- f. 276 *Red Foley's Cowboy Songs and Mountain Ballads* (incomplete) Foley

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- f. 277 *L'Ascension* for organ (incomplete) Messiaen
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- f. 296 Shapiro, Bernstein, and Company, Inc. - Music Catalog
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Box 7: Plaques and Awards

Box 8: Plaques and Awards; Reel-to-Reel recording of *Paradise Lost and Regained*

Box 9: Oversized- Photographs; posters; etc.