Dr. Eva Alberta Jessye

Dr. Jessye was born in Coffeyville, Kansas on January 20, 1895. In 1977 she established the Eva Jessye Collection at PSU, and she served as the University Artist-in-Residence from 1978-1981.

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Eva Jessye Biography

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 where she graduated in 1914. She then went on to Langston University in Oklahoma where she received a lifetime certificate in teaching.

Jessye taught elementary school in 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 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 the 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.

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." 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 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.

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

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