



KANSAS LEGEND BIOGRAPHY

Eva Jessye (1895-1992)

Eva Jessye was a multi-talented, strong African-American woman who contributed to a number of humanitarian efforts during her lifetime. Though an educator, choral director, actress and singer, her work with spiritual music and her ability to share her Kansas roots to the world through this music may be her greatest achievement.

Jessye was born in Coffeyville, Kan., and it was in Coffeyville and Lola that she grew up attending public schools. She organized her first female quartet as a pre-teen, and appreciated the spiritual music unique to her heritage. At just 13 years old, Jessye began school at Western University in Quindaro (now Kansas City, Kan.), graduating in 1914. After graduation, she continued her education at Langston University in Oklahoma and received her lifetime teaching certificate.

Jessye spent time teaching in segregated classrooms in Taft, Haskell and Muskogee, Okla., before moving to Baltimore in 1925 to work for a newspaper, *The Afro-American*. Music continued to impact Jessye's life, and in 1926, she joined a choral group in New York called the Original Dixie Jubilee Singers. Jessye embraced all types of music, and the group performed everything from spirituals to jazz to light opera. They became a regular on two popular radio shows, the "Major Bowes Family Radio Hour" and the "General Motors Hour."

In 1927, the group's popularity soared as they worked on the film "Uncle Tom's Cabin," and Jessye published her first collection of songs, "My Spirituals." The group's film work continued with an appearance in the all-black film "Hallelujahs" in 1929, in which Jessye was the choral director. The group's name began being used by other groups, so they were renamed the Eva Jessye Choir.

With growing recognition, Jessye began getting chosen to direct choirs for a variety of productions. In 1935, Jessye was selected by George Gershwin to direct the choir for his opera "Porgy and Bess." For nearly three decades Jessye was associated with almost every production of the opera worldwide.

The Eva Jessye Choir also toured worldwide, performing for a variety of humanitarian causes. They gave concerts in war-torn Europe and were selected to perform during Martin Luther King, Jr.'s March on Washington. Jessye's recordings were also used during Kenya's struggle for independence.

Jessye returned to academia after many years traveling and performing. She established the Eva Jessye Afro-American Music Collection at the University of Michigan in 1974 and the Eva Jessye Collection at Pittsburg State University in Pittsburg, Kan., in 1977. She has received enormous praise for her work and a number of honorary degrees, including a doctorate. In 1981, Jessye was selected as Kansas Ambassador for the Arts.

Jessye continued to produce music and poetry well into her nineties. She passed away in 1992 but will always be remembered as the "grand dame of Black music in America."

