

**EVA
A.
JESSYE
1895-1992**



**HARLEM
RENAISSANCE
CHORAL
DIRECTOR**

Eva Jessye was the first black woman to receive international distinction as a professional choral conductor. During the Harlem Renaissance, she created her own choral group which was featured widely on radio and stage. Her accomplishments were historic for any woman.

Jessye was born in 1895 in Coffeyville, Kansas, the daughter of former slaves who separated when she was three. She lived with her Great Aunt Harriet who sang beautiful spirituals with an amazing voice that fostered Eva's deep appreciation for music.

She graduated from Western University in Quindaro, Kansas in 1914 and received a teaching certificate from Langston University in 1917. Between 1917 and 1920, she taught public school in Taft, Haskell, and Muskogee. In August 1918, she began teaching at Manual Training High School. "She truly enjoyed teaching and was considered by her students to a creative teacher."

In 1920, she moved to Baltimore, where she was the music director of the first choir at Morgan College. Jessye rebelled against the idea that black choirs should produce only "black music". She resigned in protest when its white president insisted that her singers perform only "their own music". She returned to Oklahoma and taught at Tullahassee from 1920 to 1925 before she moved back to Baltimore to work as a reporter for The Afro-American newspaper.

In 1926 she moved to Harlem and joined a choral group called the Dixie Jubilee Singers. In 1927 the Dixie Jubilee Singers worked in Harry A. Pollard's film *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. That same year, Jessye published "My Spirituals". The book contained songs that Jessye arranged, with her poems and stories of the people she knew and loved. This group would eventually become the world-renowned Eva Jessye Choir. They performed spirituals that Jessye herself arranged. In 1929 her choir appeared in King Vidor's "Hallelujah", Hollywood's first all-black talkie, for which she wrote some original music as well.

Jessye signed a contract in 1935 to provide a singing troupe to George Gershwin's stage performance of "Porky and Bess". She convinced Gershwin to list her on the playbill as the Choral Director. By the mid-1930's, Jessye's choir was one of the country's preeminent black choral groups. Over the next 30 years, she was involved in almost every worldwide production of "Porky and Bess". She has been dubbed its unofficial curator and guardian.

During the Civil Rights movement, she collaborated with African-American notables Marian Anderson, Mary McLeod Bethune, Eubie Blake, Langston Hughes, and Paul Robeson. In 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."

Jessye returned to academia in her later years. She established the Eva Jessye Afro-American Music Collections at the University of Michigan and Pittsburg State University. Eva Jessye died at age 97 in 1992, leaving behind the legacy of her literary wisdom and her sensitivity toward humanity.