

TESSIE MOBLEY
“LUSHANYA”
VINAY
1906-1990



SONGBIRD
OF
THE
CHICKASAWS

Beautiful and talented, Tessie Mobley always told her audience that she was a Chickasaw from Oklahoma, whether she was speaking in German, French, Italian, Spanish or even Russian. Mobley rarely used the label “Indian Princess” herself during her operatic career preferring the name “Lushanya” meaning songbird.

She was born Aurelia Guy Mobley in December 1906 in Ardmore, later acquiring the nickname Tessie during childhood. Her sister Tennie is famous for filming President Kennedy’s assassination. Growing up on a farm, Tessie mastered archery, breaking horses and shooting rifles. She was especially close to her maternal grandmother, who only spoke in the Chickasaw language.

At the University of Oklahoma, Tessie studied music and led the women’s rifle team. She met Native American singer Tsianina Redfeather and composer Charles Wakefield Cadman after their OU performance. Cadman had discovered Tsianina back in the 1920s. Tsianina would later refer to Tessie as her pupil. Tessie studied opera and music at University of Georgia and Christian Female College in Columbia, Missouri.

Her marriage to Osage actor Louis Bidd Brave lasted from 1926 to 1931, while they pursued Hollywood careers. Tessie appeared in movies, concerts and on radio before being rediscovered by Cadman. She changed her stage name to Lushanya, and was soon known as “The Songbird of the Chickasaws.” Her first professional appearance was at the Hollywood Bowl during the 1929 Indian Ceremonials. Having herself studied in Italy, Tsianina persuaded Lushanya to vocally train in Europe.

Lushanya studied voice and opera in Berlin and toured with the USO entertaining American troops. She was presented to King George VI and sang at his coronation. She left Germany in March 1934, after concluding her two-year scholarship program, due to the Nazis’ persecution of renowned voice instructors at the academy.

After performing at London’s Royal Albert Hall in 1935, Lushanya accepted a scholarship to study in Rome. She returned to America to sing at the 1936 Democratic Convention in Philadelphia, Metropolitan Opera Guild Broadcast, and opera companies in Chicago and Los Angeles. She also sang for Governor “Alfalfa Bill” Murray twice, including once in Ardmore in a concert for her parents.

She became the first Native American woman to perform in Verdi’s Aida at Italy’s Trieste Opera House and first to sing at La Scala (Milan Opera House). The emotional Italian audience went wild, kissing her hand and feet in their enthusiasm. Hailed as beautiful as well as talented, paintings of her graced Boston’s Vose Art Galleries, London’s Royal Academy of Art and Rome’s Quirinal Palace.

At the height of her career, Lushanya retired when she married Chilean baritone Ramon Vinay and managed his career. They lived in France and Spain before retiring to Fort Worth. In 1964 she was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame. Lushanya died in December 1990 at age 84. She was posthumously inducted into the Chickasaw Nation Hall of Fame in 2009. The performance stage at OSU’s McKnight Center was named for her in 2019.

Lushanya Mobley was the most famous Native American soprano, according to some historians. Her courage, while studying in Berlin and Rome during the rise of Nazism, endures through her personal diary, but we have no recordings of her beautiful voice so acclaimed by so many throughout the world.