

**ZELIA NINA
PAGE
BREAUX
1880-1956**



**MUSIC
VISIONARY
FOR
THE AGES**

Zelia Breaux spent fifty years teaching music at Langston University and Oklahoma City's Frederick A. Douglass High School. She built her reputation as supervisor of music for Oklahoma City's segregated black schools, placing a music teacher in every elementary school.

Zelia Nina Page was born in February 1880 in Jefferson City, Missouri. She earned a bachelor's degree in music from Lincoln Institute in 1898, where her father Inman was principal. He had been one of the first two African-American graduates of Brown University, an Ivy League school. In May, the Colored Agricultural and Normal University (now Langston) named the trailblazing scholar as its first president. He offered his daughter a job as a music teacher so she relocated to Oklahoma Territory.

She established Langston's music department, teaching piano and instrumental music. In 1902 she organized the first orchestra and soon established the choral society, glee club and the school band. She married Armogen Breaux on December 6, 1905 as Langston grew under Dr. Page's dynamic leadership. After vicious political infighting drove him from the presidency, Page was hired as Oklahoma City's Colored Schools superintendent in 1916. Two years later, Zeila accepted the position of Supervisor of Music.

As the Director of Music at Douglass High School, near today's Bricktown area, she nurtured the musical careers of jazz guitarist great Charlie Christian, blues singer extraordinaire Jimmy Rushing, National Book Award winner Ralph Ellison, who considered Breaux as his "second mother", and Evelyn LaRue Pittman, who eventually had her own choir that traveled throughout Europe for a number of years.

She organized the high school band in 1923, and developed it into one of the best in America, influencing musicians like Duke Ellington and Eubie Blake. When the Douglass High School students were invited in 1924 for the first time to march in a downtown Boys Day parade, the band surprised white people, who was starting to leave, with their military precision while the Central High School boys were just waving at people and talking.

In 1915, Breaux bought a controlling interest in the Aldridge Theater, the city's only black theater. It hosted music and theater productions, vaudeville shows, touring companies and movies. She allowed her students to play piano during silent movie showings. Blues and jazz musicians like Count Basie, Gonzelle White, and King Oliver's bands all performed there, as well as Ida Cox, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith and Mamie Smith. The Aldridge Theater was razed in 1975.

At Douglass High School, Breaux also organized a chorus, symphony orchestra, and several glee clubs, teaching music appreciation, and insisted her students read music. At this time, it was unusual for black schools to offer music training beyond vocal instruction, but she believed that discipline and classical music instruction were critical for future success.

The Douglass band led the Century of Progress Parade at Chicago World's Fair in 1933, and performed for a national radio broadcast while there. They captured the attention of people like Duke Ellington, who began visiting Oklahoma City to perform and discover new talent for his band. In 1936, Breaux took the band to the Texas Centennial Celebration in Dallas. The next year, she started the Black State Band Festival.

Breaux earned a master's degree in music from Northwestern University near Chicago in 1939 before retiring from Douglass in 1948. She died in October 1956 at age 76 in Guthrie. The enormous audience at her funeral included Duke Ellington and Count Basie. She received many accolades posthumously –YMCA Hall of Fame in 1977, Women's Hall of Fame in 1983 and the Bandmasters Association Hall of Fame in 1991.

If the walls, streets, sidewalks and pathways of downtown Oklahoma City could speak, what tales would they tell of Breaux's influence on students remembered and forgotten. Perhaps no one in Oklahoma history has more greatly epitomized and embodied the role of pioneer than Zelia Breaux.