

Georgia State University

ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University

Music Faculty Publications

School of Music

2008

Eva Alberta Jessye

Marva Carter

Georgia State University, mgcarter@gsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/music_facpub



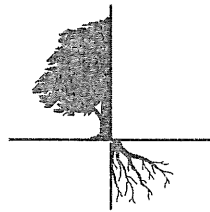
Part of the [Music Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Carter, Marva. "Eva Alberta Jessye." *African-American National Biography*, vol. 4. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008: 535–536.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Music at ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Music Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gsu.edu.

AFRICAN AMERICAN NATIONAL BIOGRAPHY



Editors in Chief

Henry Louis Gates Jr.

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham

VOLUME 4
Hacker-Jones, Sarah

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS
2008

Inc. Jernigan al-
tive board of th
influence not only in the United States but also inter-
nationally. Jernigan attended the international Pan-
African Congress of 1919 in Paris and again in 1921,
which united people of African descent across the
world to discuss issues related to European coloniza-
tion on the continent of Africa. Jernigan represented
the National Race Congress at the Pan-African Con-
gress, but traveled as a correspondent for the *Wash-
ington Bee* newspaper because of difficulties obtaining
a passport. Jernigan ministered widely to soldiers
during the two world wars. He ministered to black
soldiers serving in World War I on the battlefields in
France. During World War II, Jernigan served as an
official U.S. Army chaplain.

The year 1934 heralded the formation of the Fra-
ternal Council of Negro Churches (FCNC). Before
the founding of this council, Jernigan worked with the
Federation of Christian Churches, which organized
both black and white Christian churches into an insti-
tution. However, black participants often found the
interests of the black community excluded from the
agenda of the predominantly white Federation. There-
fore, African Methodist Episcopal Bishop REVERDY
CASSIUS RANSOM and Baptist Jernigan led the founda-
tion of the FCNC to serve the interests of black
churches and unite black denominations. The FCNC
held its first annual meeting at Jernigan's Mt. Carmel
Baptist Church.

Jernigan and Ransom's vision was not to unite
churches around unanimous doctrine or religious
practice, but rather to do so around social issues af-
fecting blacks in the 1930s. The FCNC offered a
middle ground between the leading ideologies of
African Americans at that time. On the one hand
many African Americans leaned toward the strong
Pan-African nationalism of the day offered by leaders
such as MARCUS GARVEY. On the other hand, inte-
grationists advocated a move toward an integrated so-
ciety with equal rights and privileges. The FCNC
provided an ideological middle ground that vehem-
ently advocated for African Americans without
moving to complete separation from the predomi-
nantly white society. Ransom served as the first pres-
ident of the FCNC, followed shortly by Jernigan from
1938 to 1939.

After serving as president, Jernigan assumed the
role of executive committee chairman of the FCNC
from 1940 to 1945. In 1943 Jernigan commenced the
second stage of the FCNC and one of his most no-
table accomplishments—the formation of the Wash-
ington Bureau of the FCNC. The Washington Bureau
functioned as a lobbying institution to fight segrega-
tion in the nation's capitol. The Washington Bureau
inaugurated the FCNC's shift from an organization
of words and opinions to one of action. Under Jerni-
gan's leadership, the bureau served as the voice of the
black church in Washington, D.C. The activism and
lobbying of Jernigan organized clergymen across the
United States into "Committees of One Hundred,"

obby their local governmental repre-
bureau advised presidents, appeared
before Congress, and provided a voice for the rights
of the African American community until the civil
rights movement. Jernigan continued to play a signif-
icant role in the workings of the FCNC until his
death.

In 1950 the widow Mrs. William Jernigan formed a
Women's Auxiliary Branch of the FCNC, partnering
with her husband's efforts. Throughout the rest of the
1950s, Jernigan cooperated with the movements of
MARY ELIZA CHURCH TERRELL, cofounder in 1896 of
the National Association of Colored Women. Terrell
formed the Coordinating Committee for the Enforce-
ment of the D.C. Anti-Discrimination Laws
(CCEAD), of which Jernigan served as vice presi-
dent. In that role, Jernigan secured a promise and
commitment from President Dwight D. Eisenhower
to end segregation in Washington, D.C. Jernigan and
Terrell worked to bring the *District of Columbia v.
Thompson* case before the Supreme Court, regarding
the enforcement of the Anti-Discrimination Acts of
1872 and 1873. The Court found in favor of Thomp-
son and enforced desegregation in the District of Co-
lumbia in 1953.

Jernigan's noteworthy work with the FCNC and
CCEAD paved the way for the subsequent civil rights
movement. In 1956 Jernigan partnered with others to
lead a movement to institute a nationwide day of
prayer in support of the Montgomery Bus Boycott.
This work came to fruition on 28 March 1956 as the
National Deliverance Day of Prayer. The day of
prayer also led to an outpouring of financial assis-
tance for African Americans in Montgomery and
other cities seeking to end segregation in public trans-
port. This was one of Jernigan's final acts before his
death at the age of eighty-nine in Miami due to a gall-
bladder obstruction.

Further Reading

Jernigan, William H. *Christ at the Battlefield: Servicemen
Accept the Challenge* (1946).

Jones, Beverly. "Before Montgomery and Greensboro:
The Desegregation Movement in the District of Co-
lumbia, 1950-1953," *Phylon* (1960-) 43.2 (1982).

Sawyer, Mark R. "The Fraternal Council of Negro
Churches, 1934-1964," *Church History* 59.1 (1990).

Obituary: *Miami Herald*, 22 Feb. 1958.

SARA BAGBY

JESSYE, Eva Alberta (20 Jan. 1895-21 Feb.
1992), choral conductor, composer, and actress, was
born in Coffeyville, Kansas, to Albert Jesey, a chicken
picker, and Julia (Buckner) Jesey. Eva changed the
spelling of her surname to Jessye in the 1920s. Jessye
later said that she received her life's directive in a
speech she heard delivered by BOOKER T. WASHING-
TON, wherein he declared: "I hope the time will never
come when we neglect and scorn the songs of our fa-
thers" (*Atlanta Constitution*, 6 Feb. 1978). That time
never came for Eva Jessye, who dedicated herself to

preserving the folk repertoire and performance practices of African Americans. Having ancestors born into slavery, she was uniquely exposed to their songs, with their inherent drama, during her youth.

Eva's mother struggled to purchase for her daughter the first black-owned piano in Coffeyville, which she learned to play by ear. A piano teacher was acquired when she demonstrated talent for composing, singing, and playing. Eva organized a girls' quartet and performed with it at the large Odd Fellows Hall. This was not a small feat for a twelve-year-old.

The next year Eva enrolled in Quindaro State School for the Colored (now Western University) in Quindaro, Kansas, for her high school years. While there she was inspired to become a musician by the touring conductor and composer WILL MARION COOK, for whom she copied orchestral scores. In 1914 she graduated with honors, and received her BA and teaching certification from Oklahoma's Langston University four years later. An elementary-school teaching career ensued in the Oklahoma towns of Muskogee, Haskell, and Taft; thereafter she formed the first choir at Morgan College in Baltimore, Maryland, and subsequently taught at Claflin College in Orangeburg, South Carolina. She also became a music critic for the *Baltimore Afro-American* newspaper and was invited to direct the local Dixie Jubilee Singers. In time this group would become the Eva Jessye Choir.

This ensemble relocated to New York during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, and Eva Jessye came of age as a choral conductor who promoted the Negro spiritual and folksong tradition. Further study was encouraged and directed by Will Marion Cook and the theorist Percy Goetschius. Her reputation advanced through the medium of radio on the Major Bowes Capitol Family Radio Hour, and both the CBS and NBC Artist Series. Later, in May 1942, Jessye worked with the famed conductor Leopold Stokowski for a performance of WILLIAM GRANT STILL's "And They Lynched Him on a Tree."

In 1929 she became the choral director of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's *Hallelujah*, the first talking motion picture with an all-black cast. Five years later she was the choral director for Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein's opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*. This production pioneered in showcasing blacks in an opera unrelated to black life.

Jessye's most noteworthy legacy resulted from George Gershwin's invitation to be the choral director of his folk opera *Porgy and Bess* in 1935. Her skills in choral and vocal solo training brought more authenticity to the production. She was the keeper of that flame for countless national and international performances for the next thirty-five years. In 1963 the Eva Jessye Choir became the official choral group for the March on Washington.

Jessye's extensive conducting career sometimes featured larger forms of her spiritual arrangements and original works, including *The Life of Christ in Negro Spirituals* (1931) and *The Chronicle of Job* (written

in 1936 and premiered at Clark College in 1978). Her folk oratorio *Paradise Lost and Regained*, from Milton's epic, was written in 1934 and premiered on NBC Radio late in 1936; a staged version was first performed at the Washington Cathedral to critical acclaim in 1972. Her dramatic flair as an actress can also be seen in such films as *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970) in which she appeared briefly, *Black Like Me* (1964), and *The Slaves* (1969).

Eva Jessye received numerous awards and honors during her almost century-long life, including honorary doctorates from the University of Michigan, Eastern Michigan University, and Wilberforce University. She was also named among the six most outstanding women in the history of Kansas in 1980 by the local Wichita, Kansas, chapter of Women in Communications, Inc. Her photograph was included in Brian Lanker's historic collection *I Dream a World: Portraits of Black Women Who Changed America* (1989). Eva Jessye was one of the first black women in America to earn an international reputation as a choral director and blazed the trail for many men and women to follow.

Further Reading

Information on Jessye can be found in the Eva Jessye Collection at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and in the Eva Jessye Collection at Pittsburg State University, Kansas.

Black, Donald Fisher. "The Life and Work of Eva Jessye and Her Contributions to American Music," PhD diss., University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (1986).

Smith, Helen C. "Eva Jessye: Earth Mother Incarnate," *Atlanta Constitution*, 6 Feb. 1978.

Southern, Eileen. *Biographical Dictionary of Afro-American and African Musicians* (1982).

Wilson, Doris Louis Jones. "Eva Jessye: Afro-American Choral Director," EdD diss., Washington University, St. Louis (1989).

MARVA GRIFFIN CARTER

JOANS, Ted (4 July 1928–7 May 2003), poet, visual artist, performer, and bohemian citizen of the world, was born Theodore Jones in Cairo, Illinois, to parents who worked on Mississippi riverboats. While little is known about Joans's childhood, two stories circulate widely. The first is that he was born on a riverboat; the second is that his father, a riverboat entertainer, gave the twelve-year-old Joans a trumpet and dropped him off in Memphis, Tennessee, to make his own way in the world. It has been documented that Joans's father was murdered in the 1943 Detroit race riots, and various autobiographical writings indicate that Joans spent some of his childhood in Indiana and Kentucky.

After earning his BFA in painting from Indiana University in 1951, Joans moved to New York's Greenwich Village and became a central figure in the Beat scene. He associated with Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, who would first encourage Joans to perform his poems, as well as abstract expressionist painters and jazz musicians. Joans quickly developed

his trademark jazz recitation style, which he noted in a 2001 interview on NPR. Joans also made his mark on the jazz great CHARLIE PARKER, who was Joans who met him by writing "Bird Livin' on the Edge of the World" came known for his saxophone obsession, and Fred McDarrah's Rhythm and Blues that he wear a black turtleneck sweater for upper-middle-class 1950s Joans was also a friend of Langston Hughes, and their four chapbooks *Beat It* (1959).

Joans is often quoted as a surrealist and developed close friendships with Langston Hughes and André Breton. While his connection to earlier African American New York literary figures like Breton and the surrealism movement is often noted, Joans published *All Souls* in 1950, a collection of jazz-influenced poetry accompanied by his own illustrations, and left his family behind in the cold weather and moved to New York in 1951, and let the rest of his life be lived in the summer months of Africa, settling in Ibadan, Nigeria, primarily Timbuktu, and would include the surrealism in his work after his divorce from Breton's romantic relationship.

Breton famously noted that African American Joans attended many meetings, like Aimé Césaire's on psychological liberation. In his work "Surrealist," Joans

without surrealism, and the white man in Africa. Surrealism became a part of it and has been analyzed (Fabre, 313).

In addition to his work in Paris served as a major artist and intellectual, many major events and MALCOLM X the Society of Africa stage at a similar time. Julia Wright He