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Dr. Matthew W. Kennedy (1921-2014)

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Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



Dr. Matthew W. Kennedy (1921 - 2014)

The gifted and talented Dr. Matthew W. Kennedy was born in Americus, Georgia on March 10, 1921, the grandchild of slaves in the segregated South. Nevertheless, his phenomenal musical talent enabled him to excel and overcome these hardships. During his life Kennedy would perform at Carnegie Hall and around the world, directing the Fisk Jubilee Singers for decades.

Royal Clement Kennedy, Matthew's father, marveled at his son's natural musical ability and realized that "there is something special in that baby" and encouraged the child's mother to develop his talent. Matthew's mother, Mary Dowdell Kennedy, a teacher and a soprano in the church choir, would inspire her son singing spirituals and hymns.

At the age of four, Kennedy followed the sound of music and played his first piano composition, "It's Me, O Lord, Standin' in the Need of Prayer" by ear. It did not take long for others to realize his talent as a child prodigy. He took piano lessons once a week from a white teacher, Kate Land, paying for his lessons by cleaning her studio. Land arranged for the young boy to be featured in a fifteen minute WENC radio show playing classical compositions on the piano. By 1932, the young Matthew had been greatly inspired after hearing Sergei Rachmaninoff performance in Macon, Georgia.

Matthew and his parents had to sit in the segregated balcony of the concert hall. Soon he began to imitate the Russian pianist's playing style. Another white music teacher, Mrs. Irene Drake, heard Matthew play and arranged for him to live in her home while he attended Ballard Normal, a private Christian school. The Drakes used their influence to help Matthew get another radio show, "Music with Matthew Kennedy Show" sponsored by Banker's Life Insurance.

In 1934 after moving to New York with his mother, Matthew enrolled in DeWitt Clinton High School. Another music teacher, Lois Adler, helped him enter the prestigious Julliard Institute of Music. It was during this period that he was able to meet the great Duke Ellington. Matthew had an audition with "The Duke" in his New York apartment. Ellington was impressed with the promising protégée, but advised Kennedy's mother not to expose the sixteen year old to the nightclub circuit of smoking and alcohol, and that he should continue his studies at Julliard. Matthew Kennedy earned his diploma in piano in 1940.

Kennedy went on to attend Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. He became the piano accompanist to the historic Fisk Jubilee Singers, under the direction of Jane A. Myers, and toured Europe, North Africa, and Israel. Drafted

into the army in 1943, he served his country during World War II in France and North Africa. He formed a small military band to entertain the troops. After the military he returned to Fisk and graduated cum laude with a B.A. degree from Fisk in 1947, then went on to earn his M.A degree from Julliard in 1950 and a Ph.D. from George Peabody College in Nashville. He became a faculty member of his alma mater, Fisk University, where he taught and directed the Fisk Jubilee Singers. He married another Julliard pianist on the Fisk faculty, Anne Gamble in 1956, and they had one child, a daughter, Nina. In 1958 Kennedy made his New York solo piano debut at Carnegie Recital Hall. He also played at the Apollo Theatre and performed extensively in duo appearances with his wife Anne Gamble. In 1973, he was a member of the piano faculty at the Interlochen Arts Academy in Interlochen Michigan. After 24 years directing the Jubilee Singers, and 33 years on the Fisk faculty, Kennedy retired in 1986.

During his lengthy career in music Dr. Kennedy served on resource panels for the Tennessee Arts Commission, boards of the Nashville Symphony Association and the John W. Work III Memorial Foundation. He received several distinguished service awards throughout his career and is listed in "Who's

Who Among Black Musicians," "Who's Who in America," "American Keyboard Artists," "Who's Who in Entertainment and "Who's Who of World Musicians." He received the Achievement Award from the National Black Music Caucus of the Music Educators National Conference.

Active in the local community, Dr. Kennedy was past President of the Fine Arts Club and played piano at First Baptist Church Capitol Hill well into his 90's. Fisk University conferred him the honorary degree, Doctor of Humane Letters. He was inducted into the Georgia Music Hall of Fame and is the subject of the 2007 award winning documentary: "Matthew Kennedy: One Man's Journey," a film produced and directed by his daughter Nina.

The Anne Gamble and Matthew W. Kennedy Scholarship Endowment was established in support of Fisk music students' education. To honor the legacy of Dr. Kennedy, Nina Kennedy established the Kennedy Music Fund to spark global participation and awareness of his beloved cause. Dr. Matthew W. Kennedy died June 5, 2014.

- Gloria Haugabook McKissack
