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Roland Hayes (1887-1977)

Pamela Bobo

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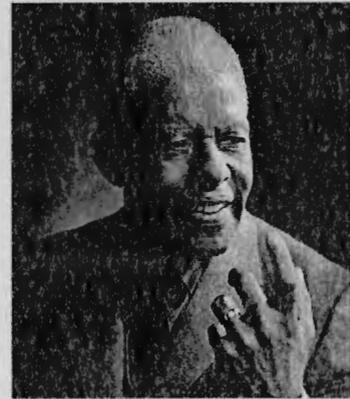
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Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee

Roland Hayes (1887 - 1977)



Roland Hayes was a composer, educator, world renowned lyric tenor, and considered to be the first African American man to gain international acclaim as a concert performer. Critics continue to applaud his abilities and linguistic skills with songs in French, German and Italian. He was born on June 3, 1887, in Curryville, Georgia, to Fanny and William Hayes, sharecroppers on the very plantation where his mother was once a slave. Hayes' father, said to be his first teacher in music, claimed Cherokee ancestry; his maternal grandfather had been a chieftain from Cote d'Ivoire, or present day Ivory Coast. His mother was born a slave, yet became the co-founder of Mt. Zion Baptist Church, Curryville. It was at this church where young Roland heard his first Negro spirituals. When Hayes' father died in 1898, his mother moved her remaining family to live on a ten-acre farm in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

As a youngster in Chattanooga, Hayes worked in a foundry as a means of contributing to the family income. In his free time, he trained with organist Arthur Calhoun, and later formed a singing group, the Silver-Toned Quartet, and decided to pursue a career in music. In the summer of 1905, Hayes quit his job at the foundry. He received \$50.00 from his apprehensive mother who still had hopes of his becoming a minister, although he was adamant about leaving Chattanooga in order to fulfill his dream of being a singer. He

planned to attend Oberlin College, but due to his limited finances and education, Hayes made the decision to enroll in the Fisk Preparatory School in Nashville.

After successfully completing preparatory classes at Fisk, Hayes enrolled there for college credits, paying his way via a variety of jobs, including furnace boy, waiter, butler, and soloist. In his fourth year, Hayes was ordered abruptly to turn in all his papers at the school, and was summarily expelled, perhaps for singing with an unauthorized group for money. Nevertheless, he was invited by the musical director of the Jubilee Singers at Fisk to sing at the commencement. Hayes left Nashville for Louisville after the commencement but returned as head tenor with the Jubilee Singers, and toured with them under the direction of John Wesley Work, II. It was also under the direction of Work that Hayes and two other members of the Jubilee Singers recorded nine spirituals for the Edison Phonograph Company.

Settling in Boston, Hayes studied music, worked at an insurance agency, and toured as a singer, eventually earning enough money to rent the Symphony Hall, where he performed to a sold-out hall and received critical acclaim. As his popularity grew, he was invited to perform concerts at Carnegie Hall, the Symphony Hall and other venues in America. In 1920, he performed his first European concert in London, at Wigmore

Hall, to rousing applause. After his concert, he was quickly summoned by King George V, to perform at Buckingham Palace where he found the same acceptance and praise. Hayes continued to perform concerts in Europe until his return to the states in 1923.

Though he was noted as a brilliant and accomplished singer and performer, Hayes' career did not come without its racial controversies and blatant prejudices, both at home and abroad. In Germany, he was criticized simply for being a black man, and thus soiling established traditions in performance. He was unjustly booed and ridiculed in several venues in Europe, but in continuing his performance, he sometimes found himself winning over his audience. No matter the location of his concerts, he attempted to integrate the seating arrangements whenever possible.

Ultimately, in 1924, he was awarded the Spingarn Medal, awarded annually by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, for outstanding achievement by an American of African descent.

Hayes married Helen Mann in 1932, and together they had one child, a daughter, Afrika. They maintained a residence in Massachusetts, and purchased 600 acres in Georgia where his mother had been a slave. In 1942, Hayes's wife and daughter were removed from a shoe store for violating the whites-only policy, and Hayes was beaten and jailed. They left Georgia soon after.

Roland Hayes continued to entertain and educate until 1972, when he gave his last concert at the age of 85. He died at the age of 89 on January 1, 1977, and is buried in Mount Hope Cemetery in Boston. Among his honors include eight honorary degrees, one of which was from Fisk University; a performance center named in his honor in 1982, at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga; part of State Route 156 in Georgia is named in his honor; a music school in Boston bears his name; and in 1991 he was posthumously inducted into the Georgia Music Hall of Fame.

- Pamela Bobo

For further reading:

Brooks, Christopher, and Robert Sims. *Roland Hayes: The Legacy of an American Tenor*. Indiana University Press, 2014.

MacKinley, Helm. *Angel Mo and her Son, Roland Hayes*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1942.

Owens, Joanne M. Roland Hayes (1887-1977). *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, 14 November 2013.

<http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/arts-culture/roland-hayes>

Afrocentric Voices: Roland Hayes
Biography: <http://www.afrovoices.com/rhayes>.
