

The Legacy of Coretta Scott King: A Gracious Voice & Divine Spirit

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Coretta Scott King was born the granddaughter of former slaves on April 27, 1927. She was the third of four children born to Bernice and Obadiah Scott in Perry County, Alabama. Even before the Great Depression, the Scott family was far from well-to-do, living in a two-room farm house with limited furnishings. Coretta spent much of her childhood working on the family farm. From age ten and into her teens, she picked cotton to help support her family.

Coretta was exposed to music from an early age. Her maternal grandfather regularly led hymns during church services, and her mother served as church pianist. Her mother also owned one of the few family treasures: a Victrola with a small collection of recordings. Music was also included in the curriculum of the one-room elementary school where the three surviving Scott children began their public education.

Neither of her parents had gone beyond elementary school, but they both believed that the key to seeing their children progress beyond the limitations imposed on Blacks by the Jim Crow system lay in securing a complete education. They managed to send Coretta and her older sister, Edythe, to Lincoln High School, a private school for African Americans. Since the school was ten miles away from the Scott home, they arranged for the two girls to board with a family until their community could afford to buy a bus to transport area children to the school.

In addition to the intensive college-preparatory courses offered at the school, Coretta received her first classical musical instruction in voice and piano. She graduated from Lincoln High as class valedictorian in 1945 and was admitted to Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. The college had only recently opened its doors to African Americans and had offered a partial scholarship to Coretta and a full scholarship to her sister. While she got along with the White students and faculty at the school, she also discovered that discrimination was not restricted to the South.

Coretta found the curriculum at Antioch especially challenging because she was not as academically prepared as her fellow students. Determined, however, to meet the challenge, she studied even harder. She majored in elementary education and included music classes in her studies. She studied voice with the chairman of the college's music department (he was also the only African American on the faculty), and she gave her first vocal recital in 1948. She also had the opportunity to sing for baritone Paul Robeson, who was visiting the campus, and worked a variety of jobs. In one, she was a counselor at an arts and music camp for underprivileged children, and she worked at the college's music library.

During her senior year, Coretta learned that she would not be allowed to perform her



New England Conservatory Application
Picture

required practicum at any of the local public schools because the Yellow Springs school system did not allow Black teachers. When the college administration would not intervene—and she refused to teach at a nearby segregated school, she was forced to complete the practice teaching requirement at the college’s laboratory school.



Coretta Scott King Performance Portrait

took a housekeeping job in exchange for a room and subsisted on a meager diet that relied heavily on peanut butter sandwiches.

Coretta started as a vocal performance major at the conservatory. Her goal was to develop a professional vocal career, which was still an extremely difficult field for African Americans to find success. She took music courses in diction, history, theory, conducting and piano. Her difficulties with her piano studies caused her to be placed on academic probation;

Coretta graduated from Antioch College in 1951. Her music teachers encouraged her to continue her vocal studies and to pursue a master’s degree. She applied to a number of schools, including Juilliard, but decided to attend The New England Conservatory in Boston. This time, school was not only a challenge academically, but financially as well. She had received a scholarship that covered her tuition, but she had to find other means to support herself. She

however, as she had done in the past, she redoubled her efforts and successfully completed the requirements.

In 1952, during her second semester at the conservatory, she met a young preacher named Martin Luther King, Jr. At the time, Martin was a doctoral student at Boston University, and he was instantly smitten by Coretta. On their first date, he suggested that she had all of the qualities he sought in a wife. However, while she found herself impressed with Martin's intellect and commitment to social justice, she did

not wish to be a preacher's wife, especially since she understood it would mean giving up her ambition to sing professionally. Martin eventually won Coretta over, and he convinced his father to accept her despite the economic differences between their two families. Coretta and Martin married on June 18,



1953, on the porch of the three-bedroom home her father had built in Alabama.

Coretta changed her major to music education with voice as her major instrument. She took a heavier course load in order to finish her graduate studies more quickly. Unlike her experience at Antioch College, she was allowed to perform her practicum within the Boston public school system, becoming the first African American to do so. Both she and Martin finished their studies and returned to the South at his request. Coretta had not wanted to

return to the openly discriminatory existence of her early life, but as she had always done, she made a full commitment to whatever decision she made.



A Musical Moment with the King Children

Hers was not destined, however, to be the typical life of a minister's wife. As Martin became more involved in the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 60s, she not only oversaw their household and the raising of their four

children, she also played a variety of roles in the Movement. One role that drew upon her musical skills was the presentation of a series of Freedom Concerts. She gave the first of these concerts in New York City's Town Hall on November 15, 1964, as a fund-raiser to benefit the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Goodman-Chaney-Schwerner Memorial fund. In a review of the concert, Newsweek stated that:

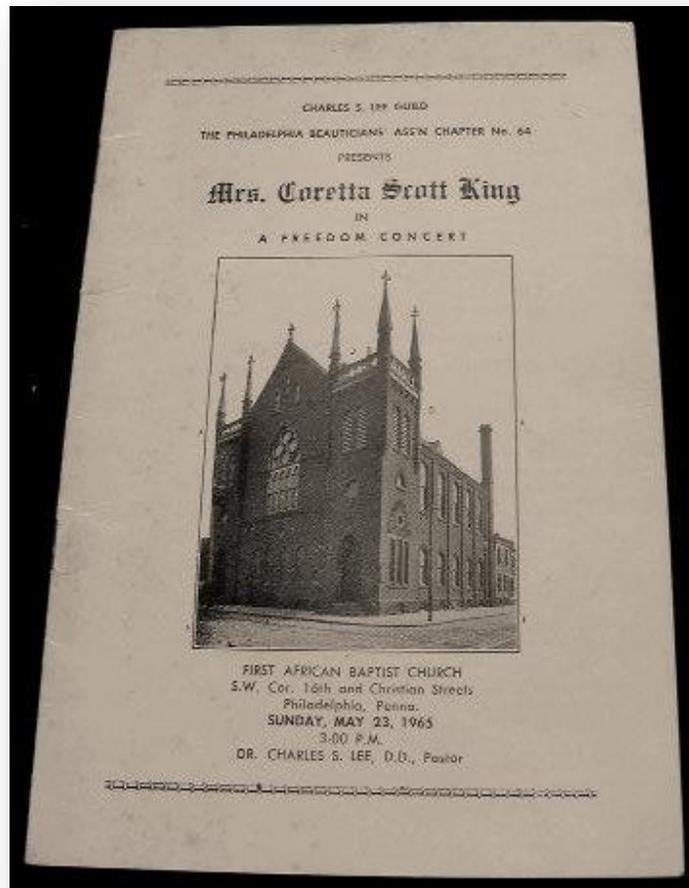
Mrs. King's soprano voice has great warmth and expressiveness. Especially clear and dramatic in delicate, whispered pianissimos, it is more compelling than a shout. But what informed her singing of songs like "Come by Here, My Lord" and "Hold On" was a singular sweetness and serenity, all the more forceful and persuasive for the bombings she has endured, for the dangers she and her

family constantly risk... The songs were almost all Negro spirituals, testaments of endurance and hope. Based as they are upon the Christian ethic of brotherhood and charity, they shed as much light on the struggle for civil rights now as they do on salvation later. ('Come by Here, My Lord' 1964)

For two years, Coretta gave Freedom Concerts in major cities across the United States and Canada. She raised over \$50,000, which was critical to the financial stability of the SCLC.

After Martin's assassination in 1968, Coretta returned to giving Freedom Concerts to help raise the funds needed to establish the King Center for Nonviolent Social

Change. She took on a much more active role in the Civil Rights movement in the remaining years of her life, but she never forgot her love of music. Even as illness struck in 2005 and stole her ability to speak, she was able to call upon the hymns and spirituals of her youth to communicate.



Freedom Concert Program Cover

Coretta Scott King died of respiratory failure due to ovarian cancer and cerebral vascular disease on January 30, 2006. Her body rests at her husband's side, but her legacy continues to live to this day. Evidence of this exists in the form of "The Be A King Scholarship" established at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, by her daughter, Rev. Bernice King, in 2007. The scholarship assists students studying education and music—a tribute to Coretta Scott King—or psychology—Bernice King's area of study. Bernice King told *Jet* magazine that although her mother had passed, "...her teachings are still present. Who she was in spirit is still present with me." (Rev. Bernice King Keeps Mother's Legacy Alive with Spelman Scholarship 2007)

The Newsweek review of her first Freedom Concert in 1964 seems to sum up this legacy. It stated, "Perhaps here Coretta King's quest had ended. She had at last found a way to bring together her devoutness, her dedication to the civil-rights struggle, her love of music, and her abiding need to serve." ('Come by Here, My Lord' 1964)



Singing with Martin Luther King, Sr., Rosalynn and Jimmy Carter, Andrew Young and other Civil Rights Leaders, 1979

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