

ROLAND HAYES



Roland Hayes was born on June 3, 1887, in Curryville, Georgia to tenant farmers. After his father's death at age 11, Hayes' mother moved her family to Chattanooga, where Hayes first began taking singing lessons during a chance encounter with the church choir director. His musical talent eventually led him to enroll at Fisk University in 1905, where he joined an African-American acapella ensemble known as the Fisk Jubilee Singers.

In 1911, Hayes eventually settled in Boston after a tour stop with the group, working various jobs to support his singing lessons. Over the next few years, he released several recordings and toured with different groups, culminating in a sold-out solo concert at Symphony Hall in 1917 that he had organized himself.

Frustrated by the lack of opportunity in the United States, Hayes traveled to London in 1920. His performance at Wigmore Hall a year later was warmly received and led to several engagements with European royalty and other high profile performances. In 1922, Hayes returned to Boston and became the first African-American to perform with a major symphony orchestra. During this time, he maintained a residence in Brookline and bought the 600-acre farm in Curryville, where his mother formerly worked as a slave.

Hayes continued to tour the United States and Europe until the 1940s, earning praise for his interpretation of classical German and French songs and renditions of Negro folk songs and spirituals. These performances have been credited with breaking the color barrier on the classical music stage. He was awarded the Spingarn Medal for outstanding achievement by an African-American by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1924.

By the 1950s, Hayes performed sparingly, instead opting to mentor young professional singers such as Paul Robeson, Marian Anderson, and Leontyne Price and teach voice lessons at Boston College. In 1962, Hayes gave his farewell concert at Carnegie Hall to celebrate his seventy-fifth birthday and raise funds for the American Missionary Association College Centennials Fund. Following his death in 1977, Hayes was inducted posthumously into the Georgia Music Hall of Fame in 1991.

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