

PORTIA WHITE: STEPPING OUTSIDE OF THE “BOX”

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Determined, educated, amazing. All words to describe Portia May White, a black Canadian musician born in the early twentieth century who inspired all, but, helped to pave the way for Canada’s future black musicians. By fighting adversity and learning to find her own voice in a world where her odds weren’t favoured, she cultivated her own legacy and left her imprint on Canadian heritage.

Portia was born in 1911 in Truro Nova Scotia, and came from an accomplished family. Her mother was a descendant of the Black Loyalists and her father, a former slave from Virginia, was Acadia University’s first black graduate. Portia’s parents went on to become involved in their community church, Cornwallis Street Baptist Church as her father was the minister and her mother the musical director. This sparked Portia’s interest in music, and she began to sing in the choir at the age of six. By the age of eight, Portia was singing soprano parts from Lucia de Lammermoor, an opera composed of three acts, and walking over ten miles per week just to attend voice lessons. She later went on to attend Dalhousie University, and became a teacher, and taught in many different neighbourhoods, including Africville, a neighbourhood in Halifax largely populated by black Nova Scotians.

However, a career in education didn’t stop Portia’s passion for music. She continued voice lessons at the Halifax Conservatory of Music, and sang on her father’s radio devotionals. She went on to win a scholarship from the Halifax Ladies’ Musical Club to continue her musical training at the Conservatory, under the training of Italian baritone, Ernesto Vinci. So, she resigned as a teacher and began her national debut as a singer in Toronto at the Eaton Auditorium in 1941, singing classical European music as well as Negro spirituals. Not only was she conquering musical feats, she was breaking racial barriers by intertwining awareness of her culture into her performances. She was not only recognized and encouraged by the black community, but praised on a national scale. *The Toronto Globe and Mail* raved about her performances by saying “she [sang] Negro spirituals with pungent expression and beauty of utterance”, and the *Evening Telegram* said, “[her voice] is a natural voice, a gift from heaven”. Due to her race, Portia experienced booking issues and faced a lull in her career for about three years. However, that changed when Portia was given the opportunity to sing at a prestigious recital the New York City Hall in 1944. She was also the first Canadian to perform at the venue. Her singing career came to a sudden stop in 1952, when she experienced vocal problems causing her to retire.

So, she began to take her experience to help and inspire others, by teaching privately as well as conducting voice lessons at Branksome Hall, a private school for girls in Toronto. Some of her most known students are historical Canadian singers, Anne Marie Moss and Robert Goulet.

Portia White remains a Canadian hero to all - regardless of colour. Her legacy carries on, even today. She is known as the first black Canadian concert singer to reach international renown. This inspired the Portia White Prize, which is awarded to a singer who rose through adversity to achieve international acclaim as a classical singer. The Canadian Government recognizes her achievements and contributions to the country as well. Ms. White has been featured in an issue of postage stamps celebrating Canadian achievement, and has been declared a “a person of national historical significance” by the Government of Canada.

As a black Canadian woman with Caribbean heritage, I have experienced many situations where others have instantly put me in a “box”, just because of the colour of my skin. Portia’s story of perseverance and ability to take risk in a world that was full of prejudice, makes me believe that I can do anything, if I believe I can. This is especially inspiring, as I am reaching the season in my life of deciding who I am going to become, and how to obtain my goals for my future. It makes me realize that no goal is unachievable or unreachable, and through hard work, I can do anything that I put my mind to. I believe this mindset isn’t just for me, as a black Canadian, but a perspective that is available to all Canadians, and a reason why our country thrives today.



...although the colour of our skin is different,
we all have the same intentions of making
Canada a better place to coexist.