

MARGARET ALLISON BONDS

Musician, composer, and educator

Bonds was a composer, pianist, and educator best known for her arrangements of spirituals and jazz-infused style. She believed that, through music, black children could understand their heritage and develop an appreciation for the arts.

BORN: March 3, 1913; Chicago, Illinois

DIED: April 26, 1972; Los Angeles, California

ALSO KNOWN AS: Margaret Allison Majors (birth name)

AREAS OF ACHIEVEMENT: Music: composition;
Music: jazz; Music: spirituals

EARLY LIFE

Margaret Allison Bonds was born Margaret Allison Majors to Estella C. Bonds and Monroe Majors. At the age of four, Margaret's parents divorced, and Estella decided both she and her daughter should resume her maiden name. Margaret was known as Margaret Allison Bonds for the remainder of her life.

Both of Bonds's parents were talented and well respected. Her mother was an accomplished musician who taught at the Coleridge-Taylor Music School and served as the organist and choir director at the Berean Baptist Church in Chicago. She supported the fine arts by hosting Sunday musicales in her home. The musicales allowed aspiring young black musicians to gather and meet leading artists and singers such as Abbie Mitchell and Lillian Evanti, composers such as Will Marion Cook and William Dawson, and poets such as Countée Cullen.

Bonds's father was a physician and political activist. He practiced medicine in Texas, California, and Illinois. He also was a poet, journalist, and publisher who published a book for black children titled *First Steps and Nursery Rhymes* (1920). He also wrote *Noted Negro Women: Their Triumphs and Activities* (1893), which profiles African American women composers of the nineteenth century.

Bonds's musical talent was evident while she was a toddler. Her mother taught her to play the piano before Bonds was five. When she was five years old, Bonds started taking lessons from a local piano teacher named Martha Anderson. Bonds's mother wanted her to pursue a career as a concert pianist, but Bonds became extremely interested in composition. She composed her first piece, *The Marquette Road Blues*, at the age of five.

Bonds later received piano instruction from Florence Price, the first black woman to be recognized as a symphonic composer in the United States, and composition instruction from William Dawson, an accomplished composer, conductor, trombonist, and educator. Bonds had the opportunity to copy parts for Price, Dawson, and other composers who worked and performed in Chicago. She also served as a piano accompanist during rehearsals for singers and dancers at the Empire Room of the Palmer House in Chicago. The inspiration and knowledge that she gained through these experiences were early influences on her work.

During her high school years, Bonds was involved in organizations that promoted the cause of African American music and musicians. She was a member of the National Association of Negro Musicians and the Junior Music Association.

At the age of sixteen, Bonds enrolled in Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. She was one of few African American students at the university. Before completing her bachelor of music degree, she won several awards and honors. She received honorable mention in 1931 for her piano piece *Dance in Brown*. In 1932, she won first prize in the song category for her piece "Sea Ghost." Bonds was awarded the Rosenwald Fellowship in 1933, which allowed her to complete her master of music degree at Northwestern.

LIFE'S WORK

Bonds's first prolonged experience with discrimination at Northwestern University allowed her to realize how important it was to preserve and celebrate her African American heritage. The university did not allow African Americans in swimming pools, and minimal accommodations were available for black students. In spite of the prejudice and discrimination Bonds faced, she found comfort in Langston Hughes's poetry. Later, she supported black musicians and composers by organizing concerts and exhibits in churches, schools, and museums whenever she could.

Bonds is especially noted for her arrangements of spirituals. She often utilized jazz harmonies, syncopated rhythms, and modal ambiguity within her arrangements. Many prominent singers such as Betty Allen, Leontyne Price, Kathleen Battle, and Jessye Norman have performed and recorded her arrangements for solo voice. Some of Bonds's most popular pieces include "Ezek'el

Saw the Wheel" (1959), for solo voice; "Every Time I Feel the Spirit" (1970), for solo voice; "Troubled Water" (1950's), for solo piano; "The Ballad of the Brown King" (1954), for solo voice and chorus; "Shakespeare in Harlem" (1958), incidental music for the stage play; *Three Dream Portraits* (1959), for solo voice and piano; and *Credo* (1966), for orchestra, solo voice, and chorus. Bonds died in Los Angeles in 1972.

SIGNIFICANCE

Bonds composed more than two hundred pieces, including art songs, choral works, orchestral works, piano pieces, and popular songs. Many of Bonds's original scores, which have been listed in reference books, can be found in the personal libraries of recipients for whom she wrote them. Several of her scores and manuscripts were found in the basement of the Los Angeles Inner City Cultural Center, where she taught during the last few years of her life.

Bonds received several honors throughout her life. She was awarded the National Association of Negro Musicians Scholarship, named to the Honor Roll of Most Distinguished Negro Women of the Century by Illinois Centennial Authority, and received several

ASCAP Awards and the Alumni Merit Award from Northwestern University.

—Monica T. Tripp-Roberson

FURTHER READING

Brown, Rae Linda. "Florence B. Price and Margaret Bonds: The Chicago Years." *Black Music Research Journal* 12, no. 2 (1990): 11-13. Describes Price's and Bonds's music careers in Chicago.

Green, Mildred. *Black Women Composers: A Genesis*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983. Provides biographical sketches and musical analysis of the lives and compositions of selected African American women composers.

Walker-Hill, Helen. *From Spirituals to Symphonies: African American Women Composers and Their Music*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007. Provides a detailed examination of the lives and musical compositions of African American women composers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

SEE ALSO: Blind Tom Bethune; James Bland; Anthony Braxton; Harry T. Burleigh; R. Nathaniel Dett; Langston Hughes; Scott Joplin; Ulysses Kay; George Russell.

MARITA BONNER

Writer

Bonner is known for her essay "On Being Young—a Woman—and Colored," as well as short stories, sketches, and plays written from 1925 to 1941. She strikingly exposed the strictures American society imposed on women in general and African American women specifically. Her work depicted the racial divide in the country and the effects of that divide on black life.

BORN: June 16, 1899; Boston, Massachusetts

DIED: December 6, 1971; Chicago, Illinois

ALSO KNOWN AS: Marita Odette Bonner Occomy; Marita Odette Bonner (birth name); Joseph Maree Andrew

AREAS OF ACHIEVEMENT: Literature; Theater; Women's rights

EARLY LIFE

Marita Odette Bonner (mah-REE-tah oh-DEHT BAH-nuhr) was the second of four children of Joseph Andrew and Mary Anne (Noel) Bonner, born on June 16, 1899, in

Boston, Massachusetts. She attended Brookline High School and received a fine education, learning music and foreign languages. After graduation, she entered Radcliffe College in 1918, where she majored in English and comparative literature and immersed herself in developing her writing skills. She participated in a writing seminar with a prominent writing professor of that day, Charles T. Copeland.

After college, Bonner began teaching in West Virginia, then moved to Washington, D.C., where she continued teaching at Armstrong High School. At this time she was able to interact with an ever-widening circle of black writers.

LIFE'S WORK

Bonner was a versatile and productive writer who published literary pieces between 1925 and 1941. In 1925, W. E. B. Du Bois published her essay "On Being Young—a Woman—and Colored," in which Bonner discusses the strictures imposed on American women in