

Sylvia Olden Lee Speaks

by Dennis Speed

July 4—Sylvia Lee’s family background, and her own work, including original research on the history of African-American music that spanned 375 years, is a focal point of the American national experience, at its best and worst. In February of 1994, she spoke extemporaneously to a Schiller Institute conference about “Who is Sylvia?” To fill out that picture, we have added more of her own words, taken from the book, *The Memoirs of Sylvia Olden Lee*.

You lovely, beleaguered people!... I was applauded so much for what I did yesterday, and I want you to just really think about it. I would be no good were it not for the fact that I am accompanying soloists who, whether their *accompaniment* was good or not, you’re not paying attention to it. You are listening to the message that does come from the singers. We had Bob McFerrin—he’s incomparable. And also, he’s a Fisk-ite [alumnus of Fisk University].

Mr. Roland Hayes... I got to know almost from birth. [I] had a meeting with him five or six months before his death [in 1977]. [I] did some work with him—he told me exactly how to do Angel Mo’s songs [Hayes’ mother, a former slave in Georgia]. And he and daddy stood as tenors elbow to elbow for five long years at Fisk University as half of the Fisk quartet. And Hayes’ daughter is here, and I

guess you’ve learned that already. Afrika is here....

The father is just indescribable... He was the soul of dignity, and ethics, and truth and reality—no nonsense—and was a dignified prince all the time. He, who reached the heights ’way back in the 20s and 30s, of the Carnegie Hall and higher level, and went abroad and was decorated by so many of the crowned heads. He sang with a dedication and a special message from several languages, at least five: and you never got the idea that “well, he has nice pronunciation.” No! He had a message with everything he sang. So he did Bach, and Schütz, and Debussy, and the French, Italian, and German for which he deserved every bit of the credit that he got. Then, most of the time, I don’t know about all of the time, but he certainly did include *his* songs, and did *them* with dignity. There was nothing patronizing about it—“And I have now risen higher and it’s so nice to remember my people’s songs”—none of that.

This was another message. And he said for all of us to recognize, along with the Classics, to never forget that the songs of people were real and to do them, no matter whether dialect—and you *know* that all Negro Spirituals are not in dialect. There are some that are very, very straightforward—to sing them with dignity, and



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Sylvia Olden Lee addressing the Feb. 18-21, 1994 Schiller Institute conference music panel, in Washington, D.C.

without making a travesty of them: to think deeply, and to do the very best you could.

Now, I am speaking from a Fisk family to which I never belonged, because I am the granddaughter of a slave. . . .

Sylvia's Background

Sylvia discussed this aspect of her background in great detail in her *Memoirs*, which we interpolate here:

Grandpa was born in 1845 and belonged to the Oldham plantation near Louisville. He was fifteen or sixteen years old when the war broke out, and he ran away from the plantation through the woods to the border of Kentucky and Ohio. You couldn't travel in the day, so he just hiked it by cover of darkness to the Ohio River, and swam over at the point where it's only a creek. Since he was too young and scrawny to fight as a soldier with the Union Army, they made him a water boy. But eventually things got really bad, and they gave him a gun. Then Mr. Lincoln came forth, and freed everybody in 1863. After the War, Grandpa went off back home. He needed a name and thought: "Oldham was a pretty decent master, so I'll take his name. But I'm not going to spell it that darn way. I'll be George *Olden*." . . .

My paternal great-grandfather, Nelson G. Merry, was also born a slave. When they said to his Cherokee mother: "You've got to get out of here and make your way to Oklahoma," she gathered her eleven or twelve kids together and was forced to march on that Trail of Tears in the winter of 1838-1839, from South Carolina westwards to the reservations. (I didn't know until recently that Indians were slaves. If you were a whole Indian, or half-Indian, or married to one, you could be enslaved.)

When great-great-grandmother got to Nashville, she declared: "I'm not going any farther, and they can't make me." She just squatted there, and the kids were sold to different people.

My great-grandfather, who was born in 1824, was bought by a kindly old couple who liked him from the beginning. When he was sixteen, his widowed mistress, Betsy Merry, died and willed him to the First Baptist Church, where he

served as sexton. The pastor went against the law, and taught him how to read and write. In 1845, he was freed, and eight years later, became Nashville's first ordained Negro Baptist Minister. Great-grandfather became official pastor of the First Colored Baptist Church, which eventually numbered over two thousand members. . . . and was the leader of the civil rights movement. . . .

My daughter, Eve, got her doctorate in German from Vanderbilt, and before she returned her robe to the renters, I said, "You're going to go by our great great grandpa's church here, honey, and have your picture taken smiling up at him. If he'd shown up at Vanderbilt in those days, he would've had to have a mop and broom."

Sylvia's Schiller conference speech continued:

My grandfather lived long enough for me to get to know him, so you know that makes me absolutely Jurassic! But I got to know my grandfather. . . . He came up to Fisk and met my grandmother, who was fortunate, because her father was the founder of the Baptist Church still standing, 1853. She was the daughter of the minister, and a [Fisk] Jubilee singer, one of the first. She did not go abroad and get her portrait painted by Victoria's portraitist, because her father drew the line: "No daughter of mine is going traipsing all over foreign countries." So she couldn't go. She married George Olden, and then they had my father, who was a theologian—he was studying for the ministry. But he belonged to this quartet, the Fisk Quartet people. Roland Hayes was the only one [of them] that was a music major. The rest of them—Dr. Wesley, the later president of Wilberforce [College], was a Classics major, and Lem Foster was a sociologist. . . . Even though they had their pursuits, if you were a Fisk Quartet person, you couldn't just get up and throw a few Spirituals around—because it was quite easy for them to sing [them]. They're close to the atmosphere all around. Fisk is built on the spirit of the Spiritual. They had jobs every other Saturday to get up early and go [by] horse and buggy into the wilds—that's true—of Tennessee, bring-



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Sylvia Olden Lee, working with student vocalists at an April 2002 master class in Kulas Recital Hall at Oberlin University.

ing back new Spirituals. But every one of the members of that quartet also had to study lieder, chansons, canzoni. They had to study voice technique, they had to know piano, and they had to know how to read. So they had to add to what they had as a curriculum, and get up and perform Classical pieces.

First Accompanying

My father and Dr. Wesley, at many an NAACP meeting, in the teens and 20s, sang. [If] They needed a musical interlude, Daddy and Charlie got up and did the duet from *La Forza del destino*. . . . So my first accompaniment: I started very early, and by the time I was eight Daddy was doing a little of his leftover Classics. I remember my first accompanying was to accompany him in “Du bist die Ruh” of Schubert. And then, when I got ambitious, he said, “Do ‘Hark! Hark! The Lark’”! So I worked very hard at that. I was eight years old, and it was in the key of C, so all I had to do was put some time to it. I remember it very well. Later, in all these long years, we journeyed, my family, my husband and two children, we went to München—Munich—for only one year. But it ended up, it was seven. . . . Bonn had asked our consulate if

we knew of anybody who could do a whole program of Spirituals.

And I asked every Negro/Colored/African-American who was there if he would consent to do it, they had a tour ready. And nobody wanted to do this. So I thought of going to the head of USIA and saying, “You know you folks”—he was white—“you think that anything that isn’t Spirituals is jazz, or something, but we have a full ledger of offerings creatively for vocal singing. Why don’t you let me get an anthology [program] starting with the African chant, unaccompanied, and coming with the earliest Spirituals—1619-1630—and bring it on around to the work songs, play songs, the street cries, which you know are so wonderful, to creole songs, and then to our art songs. It has been found, lately, there are more than one thousand composers, Black composers of serious music. . . . So as soon as we would get this program together and go, they would always ask us, or quite frequently, “Could you possibly come back next week, because we’ve turned away a whole auditorium?” There were also published over a dozen editions of Negro Spirituals in Germany, with the German translation. And they would have us come and sing the original, and then teach them how to do the Spiritual in their language. And after we had gotten through with “There is a balm in Gilead,” one of the folks walked up and said, “Your know, this has no African sound to me. It seems quite like Schubert.” And I said, Well, that would naturally happen, if the masters loved music and had to have it—they had live music only—and they would find the most talented of the slaves and train them as well as they could, and have them to entertain, so that they would have them go around and hear other music, and hear the Classics. . . . Many a Spiritual has an Eighteenth-Nineteenth Century patina that goes through it. There are some of them that are still tribal, and I have a list of about 300, and they are different kinds. Some of them are quite martial, and you can hear the tom-toms in them, and others are very tuneful and sound about like “Danny Boy.” And it only shows that we are closer and closer, if we all will work very, very diligently.

I know from the fact that you are here—your

presence attests to the fact that you believe in justice and one world. I hope you keep persevering and going into the far corners of this globe selling it to people, because *we are one*

family. We belong to one God, no matter what you call Him. And as such, we should keep in touch with each other through Classical and folk music.