

## Nova Scotia Legends

# Portia White

## A Nova Scotia phenomenon

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Before Hank Snow, before Anne Murray, or Rita MacNeil, the name Portia White was known far and wide as the voice from Nova Scotia.

In the 1940s, she sang for the Governor-General in Ottawa, at wartime Victory Loan rallies in Toronto, and in churches and auditoriums from Ecuador to British Columbia. In 1944-45 Portia White gave no less than three recitals in New York City.

Critics hailed her as "Canada's Marian Anderson," although Portia herself never liked the comparison. Nevertheless, leading lights of the Harlem Renaissance called her "a phenomenon."

Haligonians created a special fund to boost her career; the City of Halifax bought her a mink stole. In 1964 she performed for Queen Elizabeth II in Charlottetown.

Now, after forty years of relative obscurity, Portia White is gaining a national audience. Last year Canada Post issued a commemorative stamp in her honour.

Anyone who knew Portia White noticed that there was something regal in her bearing. But she was not aloof or arrogant. There was nothing diva-like about her personality. Born into a large family and reaching adult-

hood during the Great Depression, she didn't expect fame and fortune to be handed to her on a platter.

After a few years of college (she never graduated from Dalhousie University), she began teaching elementary school in rural Halifax County. Meanwhile, she took voice lessons at the Halifax Conservatory.

She won her category at the provincial music festival so many times that they awarded her the trophy. (It is now on display at the Black Cultural centre in Dartmouth).

The reviews were so good after her Toronto debut in 1941 that she wired home her resignation from teaching at Africville School. Her mentor, an Italian baritone who came to Halifax in 1938, had misgivings about Portia pursuing a performing career. She was in her thirties when she made the fateful decision. Years later she admitted: "Everything happened too fast to me. In Europe, singers study 10 or 12 years. I came up like a mushroom."

Vocal problems and a bout with cancer affected her health and her singing career. Eventually she settled in Toronto, opening her own studio and giving private lessons to aspiring singers and actors like Dinah Christie and Don Francks. That is perhaps her greatest legacy. Former pupils remember her with genuine fondness.

Portia never entirely abandoned performing. In 1955 she sang in the ballroom of the Lord Nelson Hotel

but was reportedly refused a room because she was black. Two years later she returned to Halifax, this time singing at Queen Elizabeth High School. Her last public appearance was in Ottawa in July 1967. After a long battle with cancer, Portia May White died in Toronto on February 13, 1968 at the age of 57.

There were striking similarities between Portia White and the great American contralto Marian Anderson. Portia's father, the Rev. William Andrew White, was from Virginia. So was Marian's mother.

Like Portia, Anderson began singing in a Baptist church at the age of six. The Philadelphia neighbourhood where Marian grew up banded together to help finance her training with an Italian teacher, just like citizens of Halifax did for Portia. Anderson's New York solo debut in 1935 took place in the same venue where Portia made hers in 1944.

There were differences, too. Marian Anderson studied in Europe for five years before launching her career. She also performed all over the world. Portia White's international exposure was confined to a three-month tour of Latin America in 1946 and a few impromptu performances in Europe while on holiday.

Both artists had the capability to sing operatic roles, but were probably denied the opportunity for racial reasons. For Marian Anderson, the colour



Portia White c.1944

barrier to the operatic stage was finally broken in 1955 - 20 years after her career began.

For Portia, the big break never came. Although the renowned Harlem composer William Grant Still considered her for a role in his opera *Troubled Island*, plans for the 1945 production fell through. The nearest she came to professional theatre was a non-singing role as Tituba in a 1959 CBC-TV broadcast of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*.

At a time when American classical singers from Mario Lanza to Marian Anderson were landing lucrative recording contracts, Portia had none.

Even before the First World War, Canadian operatic superstar Dame Emma Albani was making records. So were popular Quebec singers like Madame Bolduc and Alys Robi in the 30s and 40s.

Fortunately, a live recording survives in the National Library of Canada of Portia White's first New York City performance in 1944. Her family produced an LP of selections from that concert just after her death; it has recently resurfaced on CD. Sylvia Hamilton's filmography *Think On Me* documents Portia's life and career. A new generation of Nova Scotians is hearing her voice for the first time.