

# Maya Angelou



## Record Information

Source: Dave Allocca. Getty Images. DMI, Time Life Pictures.

Record Type: Photograph or Illustration

Date: b. 1928–d. 2014

Also Known As: Marguerite Johnson;

## Description:

Born in 1928 in St. Louis, Missouri, Maya Angelou overcame a difficult childhood to become one of the most well known American writers of the 20th century. Angelou published her six-volume autobiography between 1971 and 2002. The first volume, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, was nominated for a National Book Award. She went on to publish several volumes of poetry, including the Pulitzer Prize–nominated *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie*. Angelou also produced, directed, and starred in numerous film, television, and theater productions. In 1993 President Bill Clinton invited her to read a poem at his inauguration, and in 2002 he awarded her the National Medal of Arts. President Barack Obama awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Angelou in 2010. Maya Angelou died on May 28, 2014, at her home in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

Born Marguerite Johnson in St. Louis, Missouri, **Maya Angelou** was the first African-American streetcar conductor in San Francisco, taught drama and music in Ghana, edited a newspaper in Egypt, and studied cinematography in Sweden. She is especially noted for her series of autobiographies: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* (1976), *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), and *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986). She wrote the screenplay and score for the movie *Georgia, Georgia* and in the 1960s was asked by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to become the Northern coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. In 1972, **Angelou** won a Pulitzer Prize for her book of poems, *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie*. **Maya Angelou** was the first Reynolds Professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University. In 1993, she read her poem *On the Pulse of Morning* at President Bill Clinton's inauguration. She made her directing debut in 1998 with *Down in the Delta*. President Barack Obama awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom to **Angelou** in 2010. At the age of 85 she wrote *Mom & Me & Mom* (2013), an account of her relationship with her mother. **MayaAngelou** died on May 28, 2014, at her home in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

Maya Angelou had a long, rich career as a performer, writer, and director. She is best known for the first volume of her autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (New York: Random House), which was nominated for a National Book Award in 1970. In 1972, she received a Pulitzer Prize nomination for her collection of poetry, *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diie* (New York: Random House). In 1973, she won a Tony Award nomination for her performance in *Look Away*, a play in which she made her Broadway debut.

Maya Angelou was born Marguerite Johnson in St. Louis, Missouri. Her father, Bailey Johnson, was a naval dietician. Her mother, Vivian Baxter Johnson, left her father when the young Marguerite was only three years old. Marguerite and her brother Bailey were put on a train by themselves and sent from Long Beach, California, to Stamps, Arkansas, a segregated southern town with a strong Ku Klux Klan presence. In Stamps, she was raised by her father's mother, Annie Henderson. There were times, too, that she spent with her mother in San Francisco.

As Angelou describes her childhood, it was one of both great richness and great bitterness. She describes her early love of black culture—and of Shakespeare, whom she says she believed was black because of the richness of his speech. She also describes being raped by her mother's boyfriend at the age of eight, and the experience of having a child whose father she barely knew at the age of 16.

As recounted in her book, Angelou's story is ultimately one of triumph. She decides to raise her son, and she becomes the first black attendant on the San Francisco streetcars. Later volumes of Angelou's autobiography are *Gather Together in My Name* (New York: Random House, 1974); *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* (New York: Random House, 1976); *The Heart of a Woman* (New York: Random House, 1981); and *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986). In these books, Angelou describes her early work experience as cook, waitress, dancer, and madam, as well as her first attempts to become a performer.

In 1954 and 1955, Angelou went on a round-the-world tour with the black opera *Porgy and Bess*. When she returned to the United States, she appeared in various plays, including the 1960 Off-Broadway production of Jean Genet's *The Blacks*. With famed black comedian Godfrey Cambridge, she produced and performed in *Cabaret for Freedom* in 1960.

In 1961, Angelou went to Egypt, where she was the associate editor of the *Arab Observer*, an English-language news weekly in Cairo. She worked there for two years. From 1963 to 1966, Angelou lived in Ghana, which had just gained its independence from Britain. There she worked at the University of Ghana's School of Music and Drama, and acted in the university's production of *Mother Courage*. From 1964 to 1966, Angelou was also a feature editor of *African Review*.

When Angelou returned to the United States, she began to teach at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), and in 1966, she appeared on stage in Hollywood, in the Greek tragedy *Medea*.

Angelou's other writings include four more volumes of poetry, *Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well* (New York: Random House, 1975); *And Still I Rise* (New York:

Random House, 1978); *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?* (New York: Random House, 1983), and *I Shall Not Be Moved* (New York: Random House, 1990).

Angelou also wrote several television plays, screenplays, and theatrical plays, which were produced during the 1960s and 1970s. Her screenplay, *Georgia, Georgia* (1972), was the first original screenplay by a black woman to be made into a film. She directed her own screenplay, *All Day Long*, in 1974, and she directed her own play, *And Still I Rise*, in 1976.

Angelou continued to write, direct, teach, and perform. Her message in all media is the need for self-awareness and self-acceptance, which are won through a connection to one's people, one's family, one's heritage, and the experiences of one's past.

In January 1993, Angelou became the first woman and the first African American to read her works at a presidential inauguration. Her poem "On the Pulse of Morning" celebrates the diversity of the American and world communities, and urges them to work together to create a better future. After the inauguration, Angelou became quite a popular figure. She appeared in a number of films, including *How To Make An American Quilt* (1995), and in 1998 directed her first film feature, *Down in the Delta*. In 2002, Angelou published her sixth autobiography, *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*. She campaigned for Hillary Clinton in the 2008 presidential primaries, and later put her support behind Barack Obama. In 2010, President Barack Obama awarded the nation's highest civilian honor to Angelou, the Presidential Medal of Freedom. At the age of 85 she wrote *Mom & Me & Mom* (2013), an account of her relationship with her mother. Maya Angelou died on May 28, 2014, at her home in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

## References and Further Information

Angelou, Maya. *On the Pulse of Morning*. New York: Random House, 1993.

———. *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*. New York: Random House, 1994.