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Letter, n.d., from Jester J. Hairston to Eva Jessye

Jester J. Hairston

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3959 La Salle Ave.
Los Angeles 62, Calif.
Monday


My darling Friend:

Thanks for your letter today. And please forgive me for not answering your last letter before now. I sincerely thought I had written you, and wondered why I had not heard from you. Because I love you so and enjoy hearing from you. We are well and busy. I am busier than I have ever been and I love it. Now that I am as old as the hills, the colleges and schools all over the country are calling upon my educational background; which I had no chance to use when I was young and in the theatre. I say was, because it has been so long since I have done anything in either pictures or the theatre that I consider myself retired from show business, except for the radio show with Amos 'N' Andy. And that's OK with me.

My trip to Hawaii was so gratifying, Sis Jessye. I learned so much about people of other cultures. I have been invited to come back next year, at Easter time. I certainly hope I shall be able to make the trip. But I have so many irons in the fire I don't know where I'll be next year. In the meantime I am busy arranging folk songs as fast as I can. Enclosed is a copy of a couple of my latest arrangements. They are going well I hope. Also enclosed is a program I conducted last Sat. night. Two weeks ago my choir gave a concert and, as usual, Your Simon was the hit of the program. You should see me do it on stage. We do not program it, Miss Jessye. I always use it as an encore. That's where it is strongest, at least for our type of program. But I have recommended it for so many schools that I am sure you must have seen the increase in your publisher's report.

Regarding a statement on the blues, I'd like to tell you I know very little about them as such. But I'll tell you where you can get all the I would tell you and more too, if you'd like. I have this book and I use his material all the time, in my lectures. You go to the library and get, "Negro Workaday Songs" by Howard W. Odum and Guy B. Johnson. They have a complete chapter on the blues and it is the most accurate account I have ever seen. I agree with its every word. You'll get more out of that chapter than you could out of what I would say. And if you want to quote me, then pick anything out of the chapter, rephrase it and say I said it.

As to the future of the Negro singer in our country, I have never been so hopeful of the future, or his success in the future. More and more impresarios are using our outstanding singers in operas, not as freaks to fill the houses, but as competent singers, on the same basis they employ great white artists. No longer do teatrogoers go to the opera to hear and see Leontine Price and Warfield and Winters, because they are Negroes. They go because these artists are great singers and actors. They have (Negro singers) always had better opportunities in the pop field. In my mind there are many contributing factors to the tremendous strides our young singers are making in the concert and operatic field.



Wherever you find young white singers studying, whether it be in our great cities or in Europe, they find Negro singers studying with the same teachers. They get to know each other. They attend concerts together and study the same opera roles. When the white singers get auditions with great opera companies and hear that other singers are needed they invariably recommend some Negro friend with whom they have associated when they were students. This is done in many instances before they have had time to realize the singer they are recommending is a Negro. They do it because the friend is a great artist and true art knows no color. That statement may sound strange coming from one who has been kicked around as much as I have, but I firmly believe it.

If you will notice the name of the accompanist on the college program enclosed, Beverly Martin, I'd like to say she was a colored girl. Not half white, but dark brown. There were 125 singers in that choir. The young conductor is one of the most brilliant choral men on the coast, 32. This little Negro girl played everything on that program and played it well. The conductor recognized her after every number. Pasadena has always had a reputation of being a very prejudiced town and justifiably so. And I am sure many girls tried out for the position of accompanist for that excellent choir. But there she was, standing out like a sore thumb. She was there because she was an artist and not just a colored artist. And I am going to Lewis & Clark College this summer, not because I am a Negro, but because I have something to contribute toward the intellectual development of those students who will be in my classes.

I did not mean to get wound up like this, Miss Jessye, but, as bad as things are, I can see such an improvement over our day. I received a letter the other day, from a student at the University of Tenn. He saw me in a T V film where I was singing a song; "There's a Man Goin' Roun' Takin' Names". He is studying music there and asked if I would help him with ballads of that sort and whatever else I could send him. Now you know he didn't think I was white after seeing me on T V. I am helping him by mail and I'm sure I am making a friend out of that young boy that will bear seed long after I am dead.

Bye and good luck. New York is the place for you, girl. *Jane.*

Beverly Martin