

# 1928-2014: Maya Angelou, writer, performer and participant in the civil rights movement

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Writer, singer, dancer and actor Maya Angelou died on the morning of May 28 at the age of 86 in her home in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. While the exact cause of her death has not been announced, Angelou had been in poor health for some time.

If nothing else, Angelou had an astonishingly varied and eventful life, residing in different parts of the world, taking up numerous professions and art forms, throwing herself into personal and intellectual relationships of all sorts. She was obviously possessed of great energy and an enormous curiosity about life.

Angelou is best known for her poetry and her series of memoirs, beginning with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), but she was also a Tony-nominated actor, and worked as a dancer, calypso singer and, in later years, college professor. She was active in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, becoming a friend of Malcolm X and other significant figures in that movement.

To a certain extent, Angelou's life and career mirror the trajectory followed by a considerable section of black intellectuals and artists who became politicized during the era of the mass civil rights movement and Vietnam War protests. She shared the fate of many in this once radical milieu, passing from an often bitter opposition to the status quo into mainstream politics around the Democratic Party, inevitably associated with gender and racial identity. However, Angelou was not a politician and she seems to have retained more personal honesty than most.

The future writer was born Marguerite Annie Johnson, on April 4, 1928 in St. Louis, and her parents divorced when she was young. Along with her older brother, Bailey, she was sent to Stamps, a small town in southern Arkansas, to be raised by their father's mother, Annie Henderson. Henderson, despite the harsh conditions of the Great Depression, was able to support her grandchildren through a fairly successful general store.

At the outset of the Second World War, Marguerite moved to Oakland, California to live with her mother and stepfather. At 14 she won a dance scholarship to the California Labor School in San Francisco, an institution supported by various unions said to have ties to the Communist Party.

She soon left the school and worked as a waitress and barkeep, and also as San Francisco's first black streetcar conductor. During this period, she was homeless for a time as well, worked in a brothel and gave birth to a son. By the age of 20, Angelou had married a Greek sailor at a time when interracial marriages were largely taboo and begun her career as a dancer and calypso singer in San Francisco clubs. She adopted the stage name Maya

Angelou, a combination of her childhood nickname and a version of Angelos, her first husband's surname. At this time, she also formed a short-lived dance act with future famed choreographer Alvin Ailey.

Angelou toured Europe in 1954 and 1955 in a production of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. In 1957 she put out her first album, *Miss Calypso*, and performed in an off-Broadway musical.

By the late 1950s, Angelou had become activated by the civil rights and black nationalist movements. She moved to New York in hopes of pursuing a career as a writer and joined the Harlem Writers Guild. Angelou also co-organized *Cabaret for Freedom*, a revue that raised money and awareness for Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). She would also become the SCLC's Northern Coordinator for a brief time.

Angelou would later voice support for the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, as well as Cuba's Fidel Castro. In the early 1960s she worked as a journalist and lived in Egypt and Ghana, both then under "anti-imperialist" nationalist governments. Returning to the US in 1965, she continued her political relationship with Malcolm X (with whom she had become friends in Ghana), supporting his newly formed Organization of Afro-American Unity. She was deeply affected by his assassination a short time later.

Angelou achieved literary success and prominence with her first memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and a collection of poems, *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Die* (1971).

Her success also opened up other possibilities. In 1972 she wrote the screenplay for the movie *Georgia, Georgia*, making her the first black woman to write a successful screenplay. She also taught at several different universities, before settling at Wake Forest in Winston-Salem, where she was a fixture from 1981 to 2011.

Although an independent and lively figure, Angelou was hardly immune to the general social processes influencing the African American upper middle class from the mid-1970s onward. In the aftermath of the inner-city rebellions that shook US capitalism in the 1960s, Richard Nixon's program of "black capitalism" and the introduction of affirmative action and similar policies were aimed at creating a black petty bourgeois layer that would be loyal to the profit system and help suppress political opposition in the broader African American population.

Angelou was brought into mainstream political life, albeit peripherally, during this period, primarily through the medium of

the Democratic Party. In 1975 she became a member of the Ford administration's American Revolution Bicentennial Council, and in 1977 she served on Jimmy Carter's Presidential Commission for International Women's Year. In the late 1970s she also began a lifelong friendship with future media mogul and billionaire, Oprah Winfrey, who at the time was an up-and-coming talk show host.

Most conspicuously, of course, by January 1993 Angelou had become enough of an official public figure to be featured reading her poem, "On the Pulse of Morning," at Bill Clinton's first inauguration. The poem speaks of unity across barriers of race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation, as well as the longing for peace, with the implication that the new administration represents this unity.

Despite the Clinton administration's barbaric intervention in Yugoslavia and sanctions against Iraq and its right-wing welfare "reform," Angelou would endorse Hillary Clinton in the 2008 Democratic Party presidential primaries. She later supported Barack Obama in the general election that year. Obama awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2011.

Angelou made her greatest contribution as a writer, particularly in her early autobiographies. She was able to provide a vivid and poignant portrait of life and social conditions, especially those of her childhood and youth. Her depiction of economic hardship and Jim Crow racism in Stamps during the Depression, the "barrenness" of life there, as she called it, in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, is arresting:

In Stamps the segregation was so complete that most Black children didn't really, absolutely, know what whites looked like. Other than that they were different, to be dreaded, and in that dread was included the hostility of the powerless against the powerful, the poor against the rich, the worker against the worked-for and the ragged against the well dressed.

The memoir also conveys literature's almost life-saving impact on her as a child, in the midst of general social degradation and of great personal hardship—she had been raped as a child and was unable to speak for years. One feels the intellectual and moral electricity that coursed through her as a 12-year-old when a literary-minded neighbor first read to her from Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, a book shot through and through with sympathy for the abused and oppressed.

While her relatives, who owned a general store, were better off than the black agricultural laborers and small farmers in the town, they too, like the other black residents of Stamps, lived in fear of violence and even lynching. The Depression compounded the already dire poverty and social tensions, which the young Marguerite witnessed first-hand as she worked in the store. One marvels that this talented and intelligent girl was not crushed under such conditions. Angelou describes the soul-scarring violence as well in St. Louis, where she lived for a time.

The next two segments of her autobiography, *Gather Together in*

*My Name* (1974) and *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* (1976), cover the years 1944-1948 and 1949-1955, respectively.

*The Heart of a Woman* (1981), the fourth volume of her memoirs, treating the years 1957 to 1962, sheds light on a dramatically different portion of her life. She was in New York City by 1959, with a teenage son, and deeply involved in the civil rights struggle and the radical middle-class politics of the time.

The book contains striking pictures of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, prominent figures in the African National Congress and jazz musicians such as Max Roach, who meets with singer Billie Holiday shortly before her death in 1959.

Angelou refers to the political intensity of the time ("The world was on fire"), and makes much of the mood of "self-empowerment" felt by many African Americans who participated in the civil rights and, later, Black Power movements. She deals in particular with the thoughts and concerns of a relatively narrow circle of often talented black artists, writers and intellectuals. It was beyond Angelou, however, to make an objective assessment of this social layer and its ultimate fate, a layer, of course, to which she essentially belonged.

The working class does not figure here as centrally as it did in her childhood in Stamps, although she describes various encounters with ordinary working people in Harlem and Brooklyn.

Her poetry, at its best, reminds one of the rhythm and simplicity of Langston Hughes (whom she also knew) when he was writing about the people of Harlem. However, she never achieves Hughes's sharpness and focused anger. Sometimes her poems have a universal and humanistic cast to them, but just as often they tend toward sentimentality or a clichéd and banal Afro-centrism. Most have not aged well.

One cringes at lines such as, "Get down, Jesse Jackson," who she includes along with Stevie Wonder, Leontyne Price, Arthur Ashe, Mohammed Ali, Andre Watts and other genuinely talented figures, as African Americans "Living our lives with flash and style," in her poem "Ain't that bad."

It seems fair to suggest that Maya Angelou was swept up by the wealth and privilege that benefited the layer of upper middle-class blacks that emerged in the wake of the civil rights struggles, but without ever entirely losing a sense of artistic generosity and integrity.



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