The History of an Altogether Unknown Black Scandinavian Civil Rights Activist

Submitted by IHeartCelebs [1] on October 7, 2021 - 4:42pm

Humbly born in Hayneville, Alabama, Ruth Ann Reese was the daughter of Sarah (née Hunter) and William “Old Bill” Reese on 10 March 1921. In 1962 she married a Norweigan bookseller and today her name is synonymous in Norway and lower Europe with gospel singing, biographic literature, and political activism. She sacrificed her career and her life to eradicating the hostile experience of diasporic Africans in the US and the apartheid of South Africa. If you’ve never had the pleasure of discovering this American and Scandinavian national, this is the history of “The Black Rose”.

Origin in the Great Migration

The First Great Migration [2] (1919-1940) was a physical movement of some six million African Americans from the southern United States to the midwestern and northern regions. This move was precipitated by many factors, including social terror in the form of lynching and mob parties of black people at the hands of white, domestic terrorists, economic subterfuge in the spaces of housing, education, banking, et cetera, and political disenfranchisement in the form of poll taxes, literacy tests, and grandfather clauses. Mr. and Mrs. Reese were likely motivated by all three reasons to relocate from rural Alabama to urban Illinois during this timeframe.

Music Journey in Chicago

Reese was a talented student and graduated from secondary school with a teaching certification. Afterward, she attended the prestigious Northwestern University of Evanston, Illinois. Between 1940 and 1948, the Chicago Tribune *[3]* recorded performances by Ruth Reese on no less than six occasions. Journalist Claudia Cassidy tried to capture her essence in 1947, saying Miss Reese, “a tall ebony beauty” made “listening a pleasure” in the orchestra hall”. Of the multiple public records on the artist’s excellence in America, the *Tribune* noted Reese for being a:

- soloist for her traveling choir ministry
- choir director of an all-girls choral club
- first place contralto performer
- winner of a music festival competition

Black Gospel in Europe

Reese arrived in Norway in 1956 for the very first time, away from the gaiety of London and Paris. She sang spirituals of the African American tradition as well as classical operettas in concert halls. At the same time, she was singing rhythm and blues at the cabarets, while Norweigan onlookers dubbed Reese “The Black Rose”. Reese traveled back and forth from the US more frequently to do her show in Oslo [4], finally settling in as a resident in 1959. A predecessor and also contemporary of Mahalia Jackson, Reese took her shaking, English-spoken melismas to the Scandinavian public, elucidating the innovation of black gospel music through the traumatic lens of chattel slavery.

Ruth Reese led workshops to make an audible call for international sympathy and understanding for those removed from their roots in the world through colonization. For instance, in January of 1960, she led a lecture called “Racial Hatred and Democracy [5]” which subsequently traveled to 14 Nordic counties. Her unusual conversation encouraged debates in the Norweigan newspapers and, thus, among citizens. The locals questioned why “the white man’s burden” in America should be theirs or why the subject of slavery should define Reese’s career and life.

Black Norweigan Legacy

In her memoirs entitled *My Way* (1987) [6], Reese remarked, “I am fully aware that my political career has damaged my singing career.” Later she added, “I have tried and I will continue to speak and sing to contribute to change…I have always felt that I have had the Norwegian people with me, and that has helped me to hold on to my human love.” There are multiple works archived by Norway’s curators that Reese was responsible for penning:

- *Everything for the Ladies*, “Difficult to be a Negro - Also in Norway” (1958)
- *Dagbladet*, “Our Skin is Black” (1959)
- *Now*, “Ruth Reese Sings Out” (1959)
- *Long Black Road* (1972)

On 25 October 1990, a group called SOS Rasisme honored her for the work she carried out toward the advancement of racial equity in the world. On that exact day, just after coming onstage, Reese collapsed and eyewitnesses say she died instantly.

Ruth Ann Reese presented a different view of the western world, highlighting the cruel and horrific treatment of her race in her home country. Oftentimes, stepping outside of your comfort zone can help to send a special message that you were having trouble translating in your confinement.

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