

Evelyn Dove: a biography

Evelyn Dove was a popular singer and performer in the 1920s. She was the first woman of African heritage to be broadcasted on BBC Radio in 1925, just three years after the BBC was founded. Historian Stephen Bourne calls her a 'pioneering figure' who challenged unfair rules about race in the entertainment industry.

Evelyn was born on 11 January 1902 in the Lying-in Hospital, Endell Street, London. Her father, Francis Dove, was a barrister and businessman from Sierra Leone and her mother, Augusta, was a white British woman. Evelyn's family appears in various records, including censuses which can be found at The National Archives.

Growing up in Battersea, Evelyn was provided with a good education. Her family also had a servant, which showed the Dove family's middle-class background – something which was not unusual among Britain's Black Edwardian population.

Evelyn, along with her mother and brother Frank, is listed in 1910 among the passengers on the ship Zungeru. It is likely they had returned from visiting her father, Francis, who worked in Ghana for much of his life.

She studied voice, piano and elocution at the Royal Academy of Music, graduating with a silver medal in 1919. Although she dreamed of becoming an opera singer, she found it difficult to break into the classical music scene as a woman of mixed heritage. Instead, she performed at jazz and cabaret shows as they were more welcoming.

In 1919, she married Milton Alphonso Luke.

By 1921, Evelyn was performing with The Southern Syncopated Orchestra, a band made up mostly of Caribbean, West African and African American musicians. They were invited to perform at Buckingham Palace and were a favourite of King George V and the future King Edward VII.

Evelyn's performances took her far and wide, including to America and India. Despite her incredible talent, Black entertainers at the time often faced pressure to perform stereotypical roles for white audiences. Instead of singing about her life as a British African woman from a middle-class family in Battersea, her song and dance troupe often focused on themes related to race.

After World War 2 broke out in 1939, Evelyn's travels were mostly within the United Kingdom. On BBC radio, she had her own music series called 'Sweet and Lovely.' Her collaborations with African American and Trinidadian singers were very popular and one of her performances even aired on television.

In 1972, Evelyn Dove was admitted to a nursing home in Epsom, Surrey, where she lived until her death in 1987.