

Grace Lee Mims, A Librarian for the Arts and History



Born on July 17, 1930 in Snow Hill, Alabama, Alberta Grace Lee Mims (1930-2019) was a librarian, trailblazer, history maker, an accomplished musician/singer, radio host/producer, community volunteer, and a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. Her reverence for her rich cultural heritage, shared by her six siblings, dated to her childhood in Snow Hill, Alabama. The children grew up at the Snow Hill Institute, the technical agricultural school founded by their grandfather, William James Edwards, a student/protégé of Booker T. Washington. Arnold W. Lee, their father, was a talented musician and one of the earliest band leaders at Florida A&M in Tallahassee, FL. Alberta Grace Edwards Lee, their mother, was a gifted pianist who studied music at Snow Hill and later went on to teach.

Notably, Mims hails from a talented family of educators, and a childhood filled with learning, history, and music. Her brother Bill Lee was a bassist and had a music group. Mims and the other siblings would often travel with him to sing as an ensemble. He is an accomplished jazz musician whose work has been featured in the movies of son and acclaimed director, Spike

Lee. Her sister Consuela Lee Moorehead was a widely respected American jazz pianist, composer, arranger, and music theory professor and served as the assistant music director for Lee's second film "School Daze." [1] [2] [3]

Mims and her siblings attended Snow Hill Institute. She graduated valedictorian and attended Hampton Institute (Hampton University) in Hampton, Virginia, where she majored in English and minored in music (her first love). At Hampton, she met her future husband, Howard A. Mims, Ph.D. They married after she finished library school at Cleveland's Western Reserve University (now Case Western Reserve University) in 1953. They then returned to Hampton, where Mims became circulation librarian and her husband joined the Hampton faculty. After living briefly in Detroit, they settled permanently in Cleveland in the late 1950s, and she began work at the Cleveland Public Library as a young adult librarian. Her husband went on to be the director/head of the Black Studies Department at Cleveland State University. In 1999, Cleveland State University conferred her the degree of Doctor of Music, Honoris Causa. This honor recognizes her outstanding accomplishments as an educator and musician; Mims also served as Head Librarian at Cleveland's Glenville High School in the early 1960s. [4] [5]

"Grace Lee Mims served as head librarian at my Glenville High School and Empire Junior High in Cleveland, Ohio" - Gladys Smiley Bell

Bell remembers Mims mostly from Empire Junior High where she had students do scavenger hunts during Black History Month on Black History and notable historical African American figures. As well, Bell recalls that during Mims tenure as a librarian at Glenville High School, Mims shared with the students the huge need for African American representation and identity in the schools and community. Inspired by her own upbringing filled with education and musical inspiration, Mims wanted the children at the school to learn about their rich history in

literature, music, and the arts. She often expressed in interviews her desire for the students to learn about legends such as Paul Laurence Dunbar. [6]

Mims was the coordinator of The Negro in Arts program at Glenville High School in 1966. The program continued to grow, and in 1967, the program was presented entirely by Glenville High School students featuring the Glenville Players, the Choral club, the Modern Dance Club, and the Stage Band Ensemble. [7] This program is a testament to Mims's ability and desire to inspire students and bring the community together. She started the Glenville High School's Black Arts Festival in 1969. This event highlighted black voices in all aspects of Black history. Mims would include music, speakers, arts, and literature. The Black Arts Festival grew so large that it ignited the community. [8]

Mims also amassed one of the most extensive school library collections of books and materials on African American history and culture in the state and assisted students in finding their identity. As a student, Bell remembers Mims writing scripts for student performances for Black history and compiling "Quiz 100," a Black History and Culture quiz (scavenger hunt for answers) that served as an important learning and research tool for students. She helped design Glenville's fourteen-lecture elective course, "Negro History and Culture," the first Afrocentric course in Cleveland schools. [9] This course was significant and considered innovative for a librarian at the time. Mims continued to push the institutions around her to amplify Black voices and history in the arts. She took her love and passion for African American history and culture and incorporated it into the very life of the school. It was important to her that the students learned about their history so she even incorporated aspects of the Black Diaspora into the festivities such as including things in Swahili. [10]

As an integral part of Cleveland's arts community, Mims was well known to the Northeast Ohio radio audience as the hostess and producer of WCLV-FM's distinguished "The Black Arts," an hour-long Sunday program she created in 1976, devoted to Black music and musicians and other aspects of Black involvement in the arts. [11] She also taught voice at the Cleveland Music School Settlement, gave recitals, and led symposiums on the spiritual. A gifted soprano, Mims was committed to the preservation and performance of the Negro spiritual and produced her own recording titled "Spirituals." She was also considered an authority on the performance of the spiritual by the solo voice. [12]

Mims continued to develop her passion through sharing Black music and art with the community. "With an influx of Black migrants from the South during the Second Great Migration, the Cleveland Hough neighborhood transitioned from a White to a Black community by 1960. White residents left en masse, moving to Cleveland's west side and newly developed suburbs." [13] There were significant racial tensions at this time in Cleveland. Mims claimed in a Voicing & Action Project interview that "you could feel the racial tension in the city and the schools at the time." The neighborhoods had become predominantly African American the schools in Glenville and East Cleveland were made up of mostly African American students, and Mims tried to keep programming afloat during a time of great turmoil in Cleveland. [14]

Cleveland experienced several racial incidents, including what became known as the Hough Riots. Mims, being the trailblazer that she was, was still an invited motivational speaker to the schools during this time. In addition, legends such as Muhammad Ali and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. came to Glenville High School to speak to the students. King came to Glenville High School to speak on April 26, 1967. [15] Mims attested that "we worked really hard." [16]. She worked well with the public library librarians and administrators at the time to be vocal and

present in the community, also displaying her leadership and forward-thinking approach to building relationships to ultimately service the needs of the community.

After years of service as a school librarian, Mims took her experience and love for Black history and culture even further in the community. She went on to tour with her soprano voice and aimed to keep Negro spiritual music alive. She also noticed a lack of the amount of Black classical composers being shared with the community. WCLV classical music radio station had a Catholic Music hour, a jazz music hour, etc., but did not play many of the Black classical composers on the radio. Mims once again made a mark in history when she suggested that the classical radio station in Cleveland create a segment for Black classical music and musicians. She wanted to see more Black representation in this realm. Mims was met with a trial run and she started with highlighting Jessye Norman, a renowned African American opera singer. The program was so well received that this led to Mims hosting the radio show for over forty-three years, during which she continued to share classical music from folks like Ella Fitzgerald, Wynton Marsalis, Marian Anderson, and many more. [17] And “in 1979, Robert Conrad at WCLV was so pleased with *The Black Arts*, the weekly program created by Mims, that he asked her to create a second. A separate program called *Artslog*, a five- minute show featuring artists from a variety of disciplines would become a fixture on the airwaves until 2010.” [18]

The legacy that Mims left is continuing. Bill O’Connor, the current Program Director at WCLV, said “It was the first of its kind and so unusual. We relied on it so much.” Mims being the lover of African American culture, most of the music that was played on the air during this segment stemmed from her extensive personal collection. She was so inspiring that the station has since built its own collection of Black classical music and continues the same segment that Mims started on Wednesdays at 10 pm. [19]

Service is just one way that Mims was impactful in the Cleveland Community and beyond. Her love for sharing history and music and keeping African American history and culture alive morphed into her becoming one of the twenty-three founding members of the Black History Archives Project in 1971. [20] Now called the African American Archives Auxiliary of the Western Reserve Historical Society “Quad A.” In recent years, the Western Reserve Historical Society hosted a class called “Black Agency and Black Activism in Cleveland Ohio: 1820-2020” that featured readings by A. Grace Lee Mims. She is also the inspiration for the oral history internship project named in her honor, “The 2021 A. Grace Lee Mims Arts and Culture Oral History Project.” [21]

Mims has received numerous awards and honors for the tremendous mark that she has made in history, especially in Cleveland. In addition to the honorary doctorate from Cleveland State University, she was appointed honorary trustee of the Cleveland Museum of Arts and recognized at the 2007 Women of Vision Luncheon hosted by the Greater Cleveland chapter of the National Coalition of 100 Black Women. In 2011, she received the Martha Joseph Prize for Distinguished Service to the Arts. [22] [23] She worked with the Cleveland Foundation with her husband, Dr. Howard Mims, to chair the first Cleveland Hampton Alumni Benefit, which provided scholarships to Cleveland-area students attending Hampton University. They were able to provide over 100 scholarships during that time. They also established a scholarship in her name specially designed to preserve the Negro Spiritual. [24] [25]

Mims started her career as a school librarian and educated many students. Her tenacity and passion for sharing Black history, art and education through the schools permeated those walls and spilled into the greater Cleveland community. Her infectious affinity for information sharing continues to shape history and has tremendously impacted the world of librarianship. She

is a legend that is remembered especially by the Glenville city schools she served when Black was not particularly in vogue. She had the foresight and tenacity to take action to remember African American roots and work for the interest of the African American students. A source of inspiration and motivation for us, Tiffany Duck and Gladys Bell, Mims serves as a librarian of dedication and sacrifice for a righteous struggle. She sacrificed her time and dedicated her energies to prepare generations that passed through the doors of the Glenville school system for a future. We must not take these sacrifices for granted and we must not forget unsung shero librarians. Mims once said: “The arts are so important to a person’s rounded life. A world without the arts, especially music, would be horrible.” [26] Librarianship is an art that is included in this remembrance of a passionate, beautiful librarian.

On October 3, 2019, A. Grace Lee Mims passed away, “at peace” in her home. [27]

[1] Moorehead, Monica. “Jazz, Pianist, Teacher, Activist. Consuela Lee was a liberator through education.” Workers World, 2010. https://www.workers.org/2010/us/consuela_lee_0114/

[2] Edwards, William J. Twenty-five -years in the Black Belt. Boston: The Cornhill Company, 1918.

[3] Neff, Nancy. "State of Grace." Renaissance Magazine: an Historical Black Viewpoint of Cleveland. 10-13, 1990: 10-13.

[4] Hill, Michele & Williams, Earl "Voicing & Action Project: Interview with A. Grace Lee Mims." September 30, 2012. YouTube video, 57:25.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NmEuTCzgiWg>

[5] Cleveland Arts Prize, "A Grace Lee Mims, Community Arts Leader," 2011.

http://clevelandartsprize.org/awardees/a_grace_lee_mims.html

[6] Hill, Michele & Williams, Earl "Voicing & Action Project: Interview with A. Grace Lee Mims." September 30, 2012. YouTube video, 57:25.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NmEuTCzgiWg>

[7] Patrice Hamiter interviewed by Tiffany Duck, May 19, 2021. Grace Lee Mims Collection. Cleveland History Center of the Case Western Reserve Historical Society.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Hill, Michele & Williams, Earl "Voicing & Action Project: Interview with A. Grace Lee Mims." September 30, 2012. YouTube video, 57:25.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NmEuTCzgiWg>

[10] Cleveland Arts Prize, "A Grace Lee Mims, Community Arts Leader," 2011.

http://clevelandartsprize.org/awardees/a_grace_lee_mims.html

[11] Hill, Michele & Williams, Earl “Voicing & Action Project: Interview with A. Grace Lee Mims.” September 30, 2012. YouTube video, 57:25.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NmEuTCzgiWg>

[12] Mills, John. “Obituary – A. Grace Lee Mims” WCLV, last modified October 4, 2019,

<https://www.ideastream.org/wclv/obituary-a-grace-lee-mims>

[13] Segall, Grant. A. “Grace Lee Mims dead at 89, pioneering host and producer of ‘The Black Arts’ on WCLV.” The Plain Dealer, October 7, 2019.

[14] “The Hough Uprisings of 1966,” Cleveland Historical, accessed May 27, 2021,

<https://clevelandhistorical.org/items/show/7>

[15] Hill, Michele & Williams, Earl “Voicing & Action Project: Interview with A. Grace Lee Mims.” September 30, 2012. YouTube video, 57:25.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NmEuTCzgiWg>

[16] Bernstein, Margaret, “Martin Luther King Jr. 's speech” at Glenville High School preserved on little-known recording (audio). The Plain Dealer, last modified January 12, 2019.

https://www.cleveland.com/metro/2012/01/martin_luther_king_jrs_speech.html

[17] Hill, Michele & Williams, Earl “Voicing & Action Project: Interview with A. Grace Lee Mims.” September 30, 2012. YouTube video, 57:25.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NmEuTCzgiWg>

[18] Mills, John. “Obituary – A. Grace Lee Mims” WCLV, last modified October 4, 2019.

<https://www.ideastream.org/wclv/obituary-a-grace-lee-mims>

[19] Cleveland Arts Prize, “A Grace Lee Mims, Community Arts Leader,” 2011.

http://clevelandartsprize.org/awardees/a_grace_lee_mims.html

[20] Bill O’Connor interviewed by Tiffany Duck. May 13, 2021

[21] Williams, Regennia N. “Honoring the African American Archives Auxiliary’s Founders Mrs. A. Grace Lee Mims.” African American Archives Auxiliary Blog, last modified April 16, 2020.

https://www.wrhs.org/blog/honoring-the-african-american-archives-auxiliarys-founders-mrs-a-grace-lee-mims/?doing_wp_cron=1624545766.0943520069122314453125

[22] Williams, Regennia N. “Arts, Culture, and a New Oral History Project at WRHS.” The Western Reserve Historical Society blog. <https://www.wrhs.org/blog/author/enoggle/>

[23] The National Coalition of 100 Black Women, Inc. Greater Cleveland Chapter. 16th Annual “Women of Vision” Luncheon honoring A. Grace Lee Mims. Cleveland, Ohio, Saturday, March 17, 2007.

[24] Cleveland Arts Prize, “A Grace Lee Mims, Community Arts Leader,” 2011.

http://clevelandartsprize.org/awardees/a_grace_lee_mims.html

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Mills, John. “Obituary – A. Grace Lee Mims” WCLV, last modified October 4, 2019.

<https://www.ideastream.org/wclv/obituary-a-grace-lee-mims>

[28] The Plain Dealer. A. Grace Lee Mims. Obituary

<https://obits.cleveland.com/us/obituaries/cleveland/name/a-grace-mims->

[obituary?pid=194108809](https://obits.cleveland.com/us/obituaries/cleveland/name/a-grace-mims-obituary?pid=194108809), A. Grace Lee Mims passed away “at peace” in her home. [27]