



Pearl Bailey
1918-1990, Newport News

Pearl Bailey was born in Newport News, Virginia, on March 29, 1918, the youngest of four children of Joseph James and Ella Mae Bailey. Her parents divorced when she was young and her mother then married Walter Robinson. When Pearl was four years old, her family moved to Washington, D.C. Later, they settled in Philadelphia, where she attended public school and began her career as a singer. She credited her love of music and singing to growing up in an evangelical church where her father was minister. After winning first prize in an amateur entertainment contest at the age of fifteen, she dropped out of school to pursue a career in singing and acting. For several years, she traveled the vaudeville circuit, performing in Pennsylvania, Washington, and Baltimore. In the early 1940s, Bailey began to develop as a solo performer and to work with big band groups. In 1944, she sang at the Village Vanguard, a major New York nightclub, followed by successful engagements at the Blue Angel nightclub in Manhattan, and on Broadway at the Strand Theater and the Zanzibar nightclub. She became famous for her throaty drawl and the sassy ad-libs that punctuated her songs.

In 1946, she made her debut as an actress on Broadway in *St. Louis Woman* and in the motion picture *Variety Girl*. She proceeded to act on stage, in motion pictures, and on television, appearing in a variety of musical roles, including *Carmen Jones*, *That Certain Feeling*, *St. Louis Blues*, and *Porgy and Bess*. The high point of her career came in 1967, when she played the title role on Broadway in an all-black production of *Hello Dolly!* In 1968, she received a special Tony award for that performance.

Bailey used her fame to help those in need. She toured for years with the USO, entertaining soldiers throughout the world. She received the USO Woman of the Year Award in 1969. Suffering from heart disease, she became an ardent supporter of the American Heart Association, who presented her with an award in 1972. President Richard Nixon appointed her "Ambassador of Love" in 1970. She served as a special Goodwill ambassador to the United Nations under the Ford, Reagan, and Bush administrations. In 1988, she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Her commitment to helping others, especially children's causes and AIDS victims, was widely recognized. In 1989, the Women's International Center presented Bailey with the Living Legacy Award for her work in aiding the disadvantaged.

Late in her life she returned to school, and at age 67 she graduated from Georgetown University with a bachelor's degree in theology. She also published several books about her life and her cooking. On August 17, 1990, Pearl Bailey died in Philadelphia. Her funeral was attended by two thousand friends and fans.