

Taylor Gordon

Taylor Gordon was born in and grew up in the mining camps of early Montana, actually ran away with the circus, and became a noted entertainer during the Harlem Renaissance. Gordon popularized traditional spirituals as an art form, performing across the country and to great acclaim in Europe.

Emmanuel Taylor Gordon was born in 1893 in White Sulphur Springs, the fifth child in the town's only Black family. His father John was a noted cook, who had worked in various mining camps. Heading for the Alaskan gold fields when Taylor, then known as Manny, was only a toddler, he was killed in a train wreck, leaving his wife Anna to raise their children by working as a cook and laundress.



As a boy, Gordon earned his pocket money in the rowdy mining town by running messages between various ladies of the evening. As a teen, he grew crazy about cars, learning everything he could from anyone who would teach him, and becoming a competent driver and mechanic. It was this skill that convinced circus impresario John Ringling, whose Montana property was near White Sulphur Springs, to hire Gordon as a chauffeur for his company, and later as a cook/porter for his private rail car. Gordon traveled with Ringling across the country by train, and also worked on his yacht.

It was Ringling's secretary who turned Gordon's ambitions in another direction, when he remarked that Gordon might make more money as a singer. Gordon left Ringling's employ in New York City, struggling to make a living and get some vocal training. He finally met J. Rosamond Johnson, the younger brother of poet James Weldon Johnson. Johnson was a talented musician and composer, who was already noted for his hymn, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," and would later collaborate with his brother on a two-volume collection of American spirituals. Johnson took Gordon in hand to become a singer as the Harlem Renaissance flourished.

In 1919, Gordon's first success came at a performance where he sang "Just to Be Alone with the Girl You Love" and was brought back for three encores. Gordon began to build a reputation as the leading interpreter of traditional spirituals. He toured with Johnson around the country, at first as part of a group called the Inimitable Five, and then as a dual act. They even stopped in Montana during a national tour for special performances in Gordon's home town, and in Bozeman, where his brother lived. Then they moved on to London and Paris, winning rave reviews. In 1927, their Carnegie Hall concert drew great acclaim.

Two years later, Gordon released his autobiography, *Born to Be*. The book depicts his youth in Montana and his experiences before and after landing in New York. The book drew many good reviews, but was criticized by W.E.B. DuBois' *Crisis*, as pandering to white audiences.

His singing career had reached its pinnacle, and his partnership with Rosamond Johnson dissolved. Gordon went on to perform on stages, and in film, where he had a small part in Paul Robeson's *Emperor Jones*.

His career then waned. Spending the winter of 1935 in Montana, he wrote a novel called *Daonda*, that did not get published. Gordon struggled to revive his musical career, but was unsuccessful. He worked in an aircraft factory during World War II. Gordon suffered a mental breakdown after the war, and remained hospitalized for many years. He had grown quite paranoid, and held the delusion that he had been robbed of literary success by John Steinbeck's plagiarism of *Daonda* for *The Grapes of Wrath*. After his release from the hospital, he quietly returned home to White Sulphur Springs in 1959, where he shared a home with his sister, Rose. Gordon occasionally performed for local groups and gave some talks, but made his living through rental properties and antiques. Taylor Gordon died at 78 in 1971.

Sources:

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Photo:

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