

sions to restaurant policies—a result of having a panel split along party lines. Other legislative measures DePriest proposed and supported included a reduction in the number of seats allotted to states that did not allow African Americans to vote; a provision for monthly pensions for former slaves older than seventy-five; a resolution to authorize the change of venue for a trial if the original venue could compromise the fair treatment of defendants because of their race, color, or creed; and a measure that would have made local authorities liable for fines or imprisonment if prisoners under their watch were lynched.

While clearly a champion for African American interests, DePriest, as a member of the House Committee on Indian Affairs, seems to have championed Native American rights as well. On May 10, 1934, DePriest submitted a report recommending passage of a bill (H.R. 6009) allowing “enrolled” Indians to claim a refund of taxes they paid on income received from their lands.

DePriest’s final political position was as a Chicago city councilman/alderman, an office he held from 1943 to 1947. In 1951, DePriest died as a result of injuries he sustained in a bus accident.

#### SIGNIFICANCE

A series of firsts exemplifies DePriest’s importance in American political history: He was the first African American alderman in the city of Chicago, the first African American elected to the U.S. Congress in the twentieth century, and the first African American congressman from a northern state. While in Congress, DePriest

worked to bring attention to inequalities both in that institution and in American society. Even though his efforts were not always successful, the significance of those efforts cannot be denied.

—Stephanie Ganic Braunstein

#### FURTHER READING

Day, David S. “Herbert Hoover and Racial Politics: The DePriest Incident.” *The Journal of Negro History* 65, no. 1 (Winter, 1980): 6-17. Attempts to clear up some inconsistencies in the story of the First Lady’s controversial tea party.

Rudwick, Elliott M. “Oscar DePriest and the Jim Crow Restaurant in the U.S. House of Representatives.” *Journal of Negro Education* 35 (Winter, 1966): 77-82. Discusses DePriest’s attempt to desegregate the House restaurant in terms of the incident’s broader historical implications for segregated facilities in the nation’s capital.

U.S. Congress. House. Office of History and Preservation. *Black Americans in Congress, 1870-2007*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2008. Supplies written and graphical data on DePriest, as well as similar data on 137 years’ worth of African American members of Congress.

**SEE ALSO:** Carol E. Moseley Braun; Edward W. Brooke; Blanche Kelso Bruce; Roland Burris; Shirley Chisholm; James E. Clyburn; John Conyers, Jr.; Ron Dellums; Hiram Rhoades Revels; J. C. Watts.

## R. NATHANIEL DETT

### Musician and educator

*Best known for his arrangements of folk songs and spirituals for piano, voice, and chorale, Dett was one of the most successful African American composers who strived to preserve black folk music in the twentieth century.*

**BORN:** October 11, 1882; Drummondville, Ontario, Canada

**DIED:** October 2, 1943; Battle Creek, Michigan

**ALSO KNOWN AS:** Robert Nathaniel Dett

**AREAS OF ACHIEVEMENT:** Education; Music: composition; Music: folk and country; Music: spirituals

#### EARLY LIFE

Robert Nathaniel Dett was born in Drummondville, Ontario, Canada, to Robert Tue Dett and Charlotte Johnson Dett. His parents were educated and both musical. His mother played the piano, sang soprano, and organized concerts that featured local talent. She also was active in the community, serving as vice president of the Empire State Federation of Women’s Clubs, president of the Phillis Wheatley Club, and a member of the Eastern Star. She encouraged her children to aim for perfection in all their pursuits. Dett’s father was an amateur pianist and guitarist and sang baritone. He managed a hotel in Niagara Falls, Ontario.

Dett first learned to play the piano by ear: He listened

to his mother play and imitated her. His first piano teacher was an Englishwoman named Mrs. Marshall, who taught in Niagara Falls. She recognized Dett's talent and offered to teach him for free. Because Dett could play by ear, he often improvised during his piano lessons. His teacher became aware of his improvisation and sent a note home to his mother insisting that he learn to read the notes. Thereafter, whenever Dett made a mistake, his mother swatted his fingers with a switch from the peach tree in their yard. He soon learned to read the notes fluently.

Dett's piano studies continued with Oliver Willis Halstead at the Halstead Conservatory in 1901. Halstead encouraged Dett to pursue a career in music. While at the conservatory, Dett presented piano concerts, playing Ludwig von Beethoven's Sonata in F Major and a few of his own compositions, which included Etude in A Flat, "Inspiration Waltzes," and "Churning Song."

Between 1903 and 1908, Dett attended the Oberlin Conservatory. During his first year of study, he received financial support from Frederic H. Goff, who realized that Dett had special talent. Dett presented recitals in Oberlin's Warner Concert Hall, where his performances and compositions were well received. He also directed the choir at Oberlin's Mt. Zion Baptist Church and did custodial work, which assisted him with his expenses at the conservatory.

While attending Oberlin, Dett was exposed to Antonín Dvořák's music, which featured traditional folk tunes in serious music. Dvořák's neoromantic music reminded Dett of the songs his grandmother used to sing. He recognized the beauty of the spirituals and was inspired to base his own compositions on the spirituals he had learned as a child. The year he graduated from Oberlin, he presented a senior recital that included four original compositions: "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" for violin and piano, and "To the Sea," "Twilight," and "Oh, Whisp'ring Tree" for voice.

Dett graduated from the Oberlin Conservatory in 1908 with a bachelor's degree in music, majoring in composition and piano. He was the first African American student to complete Oberlin's first five-year program. Oberlin authorities were so impressed with Dett's abilities that they considered sending him to Europe to further his career. However, he decided to stay in America in order to perform and spread appreciation for music.

#### LIFE'S WORK

Dett's first faculty position was at Lane College in Jackson, Tennessee, from 1908 to 1911. His duties included

teaching piano and vocal music and directing the Lane Choral Society. He later taught at Lincoln Institute (1911-1913); Hampton Institute (1913-1932), where he was the first black director of music; Samuel Huston College (1935-1936); and Bennett College (1937-1942).

Dett spent most of his career at the Hampton Institute. He established the Hampton Choral Union, Musical Arts Society, Hampton Institute Choir, and School of Music. During his tenure at Hampton, Dett furthered his interest in spiritual arrangements by incorporating spirituals in an extended form in his piece titled *The Chariot Jubilee* (1919) for tenor, chorus, and orchestra. He also arranged various spirituals in his *Religious Folk-songs of the Negro* (1927) and *The Dett Collection of Negro Spirituals* (1936), which were performed by the Hampton Choirs.

While teaching at Hampton, Dett also continued his own education. From 1920 to 1921, he studied at Harvard University during the summers. He won two prizes while at Harvard—the Francis Boott Award for his choral composition titled *Don't Be Weary, Traveler* and the Bowdoin Prize for his essay "The Emancipation of Negro Music." He studied with Nadia Boulanger during the summer of 1929 and received his master's degree from the Eastman School of Music in 1932. Dett also was presented with honorary doctorates in music from Howard University in 1924 and Oberlin Conservatory in 1926.

Upon his departure from the Hampton Institute, Dett relocated to Rochester, New York, where he set up a private teaching studio. In Rochester, he continued to compose and lecture on his definition of folk songs. He became the director of the American Choir, a group of sixteen well-paid white singers. In 1933, Dett organized the Negro Community Chorus in Rochester.

In 1943, Dett accepted a job as the director of the United Service Organizations (USO). He mainly worked with a touring Woman's Army Corps chorus and also organized the All-City Chorus in Battle Creek, Michigan. Dett's workload was strenuous, and he sometimes worked eighteen hours a day. While in Battle Creek, Dett had a heart attack and was hospitalized. He died shortly thereafter, on October 2, 1943.

#### SIGNIFICANCE

Dett's works combine the music of the European Romantics with American folk songs. He is mainly remembered for his choral works, which are based on African American spirituals. He also is the namesake for the Nathaniel Dett Chorale in Canada, which performs and

records his music. Dett was passionate about the unique musical heritage of African Americans and dedicated his talents to educating the world about the importance and significance of spirituals.

—Monica T. Tripp-Roberson

#### FURTHER READING

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McBrier, Vivian Flagg. *R. Nathaniel Dett, His Life and Works, 1882-1943*. Washington, D.C.: Associated

Publishers, 1977. Detailed biography of the life and music of Dett.

Simpson, Anne Key. *Follow Me: The Life and Music of R. Nathaniel Dett*. Composers of North America 10. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1993. Detailed biography examining Dett's wide-ranging influence.

Southern, Eileen. *The Music of Black Americans: A History*. 3d ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997. The section on Dett offers analysis of his compositions and his significance in preserving African American folk music.

**SEE ALSO:** Blind Tom Bethune; Eubie Blake; James Bland; Margaret Allison Bonds; Harry T. Burleigh; Scott Joplin; Ulysses Kay.

## GAIL DEVERS

### Track-and-field athlete

*Devers overcame Graves' disease to win gold medals in the 100-meter sprint at the 1992 and 1996 Olympic Games, and in the 4-by-100-meter relay at the 1996 Olympics.*

**BORN:** November 19, 1966; Seattle, Washington

**ALSO KNOWN AS:** Yolanda Gail Devers

**AREAS OF ACHIEVEMENT:** Sports: Olympics; Sports: track and field

#### EARLY LIFE

Yolanda Gail Devers (DEE-vuhrs) was born on November 19, 1966, in Seattle, Washington, the second of two children of Larry Devers, a Baptist minister, and Alabe Devers, an elementary school teacher's aide. She grew up near San Diego, California, and graduated in 1984 from Sweetwater High School in National City. Devers, who started racing as a child against her older brother, Parenthesis, competed in the 800 meters as a sophomore and switched to the sprints as a junior. She won the 100 meters and 100-meter hurdles at the 1984 California State High School championships and finished second in the 100 meters at the 1984 Track Athletic Congress (TAC) Junior Championships.

Devers entered the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) in 1984. Under track coach Bob Kersee, she blossomed into a world-class sprinter. Devers clocked 10.98 seconds in the 100 meters and 22.71 seconds in the 200 meters, taking the gold medal in the 100 meters at the

1987 Pan-American Games. She set the American record for the 100-meter hurdles at 12.61 seconds and captured the 100 meters at the 1988 NCAA championships. After marrying fellow UCLA track athlete Ron Roberts, she placed second in the 100-meter hurdles at the 1988 U.S. Olympic trials and last in the semifinals of that event at the 1988 Summer Olympic Games in Seoul, South Korea.

Devers began suffering insomnia, memory loss, migraine headaches, fainting spells, convulsions, fatigue, muscle injuries, and extreme weight loss. Doctors diagnosed advanced Graves' disease, a condition that affects the thyroid. Devers underwent radiation, causing hair loss and swollen, bleeding feet. Walking became very painful. Doctors even considered amputating her feet but halted her radiation treatments instead.

#### LIFE'S WORK

Devers resumed track training in March, 1991. After winning the 100-meter hurdles in the TAC Championships, she finished second at the World Championships and established an American record of 12.48 seconds. She and her husband divorced in 1991.

Devers won the 100-meter hurdles and placed second in the 100 meters at the 1992 Olympic trials. She earned a gold medal in the 100 meters at the 1992 Summer Olympic Games in Barcelona, Spain, edging Julie Cuthbert of Jamaica with a personal best time of 10.82 seconds. The finish was the closest in the history of the Olympic