

# Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Mattiwilda Dobbs Janzon

PERSON

## Dobbs, Mattiwilda

**Alternative Names:** Mattiwilda Dobbs Janzon; Mattiwilda Dobbs

**Life Dates:** July 11, 1925-December 8, 2015

**Place of Birth:** Atlanta, Georgia, USA

**Residence:** Arlington, VA

**Occupations:** Opera Singer

### Biographical Note

Opera singer Mattiwilda Dobbs was born on July 11, 1925 in Atlanta, Georgia. The fifth of six daughters, she sang her first solo at age six and began her musical studies in piano during Dobbs' childhood. A member of the last graduating class from Atlanta University Lab School, Dobbs earned her high school diploma in 1942.

Receiving her B.A. degree in music from Spelman College in 1946, Dobbs began her formal voice training under the direction of Naomi Maise and Willis Laurence James. After graduating, she studied with Lotte Leonard and Pierre Bernac and attended the Mannes College of Music and the Berkshire Music Center's Opera Workshop.

Dobbs gained notoriety after winning a 1951 international music competition in Geneva, Switzerland. In 1953, Dobbs performed at the La Scala Opera House in Milan, making her the first African American woman to appear in a principal role there. After becoming the first African American to play a major role for the San Francisco Opera in 1955, she debuted at New York's Metropolitan Opera in 1956. Refusing to appear before segregated crowds, Dobbs did not perform in her hometown of Atlanta until 1962, where she appeared in front of an integrated audience at the Municipal Auditorium. In 1973, Dobbs started teaching at the University of Texas at Austin. She also worked as a professor at Spelman College, the University of Illinois, the University of Georgia and Howard University. She ended her teaching career when she retired from Howard in 1991 and she retired from singing two years later.

In 1999, Testament Records released Mattiwilda Dobbs: Songs and Lieder, a CD of her early recordings.

The aunt of former Atlanta Mayor Maynard Jackson, Dobbs has been married twice.

Her first husband, Spanish playwright and journalist, Luis Rodriguez, died a year into their marriage. She then married Swedish newspaper journalist Bengt Janzon for nearly forty years until his death in 1997.

Dobbs passed away on December 8, 2015 in Atlanta, Georgia.

## Related Entries

**Atlanta University Lab School** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Oglethorpe Elementary School** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Spelman College** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Columbia University** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Master's**

**University of Texas at Austin** [EMPLOYEEOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Professor**

**University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign** [EMPLOYEEOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Professor**

**University of Georgia** [EMPLOYEEOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Professor**

**Spelman College** [EMPLOYEEOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Artist in Residence**

**Howard University** [EMPLOYEEOF]  
[from 1977 to 1991]

**Professor**