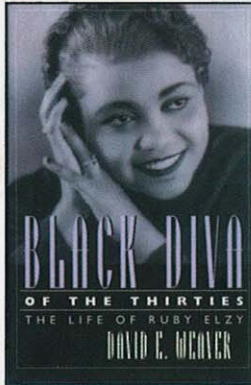


## The book might never have been written.

If, in 1998, then 88-year-old Madge Cooper Guthery had mentioned the name of her former Ohio State University classmate, singer Ruby Elzy, to anyone other than David Weaver — an opera singer and musical theater buff who has appeared professionally in more than two dozen productions — it probably wouldn't have been written.



But the story of Elzy, a famed performer who was in the original 1935 production of "Porgy and Bess," found an eager audience in Weaver. He would spend four years, countless hours and plenty of frequent-flyer miles researching her past after Guthery's mere mention of her.

"Of course, I'd heard of 'Porgy and Bess,' and I'd attended Ohio State — so I couldn't believe that I didn't know who Ruby was," says Weaver, development director of the Ohioana Library in Columbus, and author of the 2004 biography, *Black Diva of the Thirties: The Life of Ruby Elzy*, published by University Press of Mississippi.

Looking back, the discovery seems serendipitous.

Eleven years ago, Weaver was working as a fundraiser when Guthery — one of his volunteers — asked if he knew of Elzy. She was a Mississippi native with a hardscrabble upbringing who, while studying to be a teacher at a college near her hometown in 1927, caught the attention of visiting OSU professor Charles McCracken. He arranged for Elzy to come to Ohio and join the school's music program. It was a move that changed her career path and ultimately led to her playing the role of Serena in "Porgy and Bess" (the opera's second female lead, who sings the memorable "My Man's Gone Now"). She also appeared in the film "Birth of the Blues" with Bing Crosby, and entertained First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt at the White House.

"I was fascinated," says Weaver. "I felt that her story really needed to be told, and her talent rediscovered."

He threw himself into the details of Elzy's life, making trips to Mississippi to interview her surviving sisters, and even tracking down Josephine Love, the friend who accompanied the songstress to George Gershwin's New York City penthouse so she could audition for "Porgy and Bess."

"She described the expression on Gershwin's face when Ruby sang: how he closed his eyes, and how you could just tell he was really taken with her," says Weaver.

He also learned of the ever-present prejudice she faced while on the road to fame.

"When Ruby joined the choral ensemble at Ohio State, three white students from Texas protested having to sit next to her," says Weaver, noting that Elzy compliantly moved to the back of the chorus — until, after hearing her sing over the following weeks, the shamed students asked that she take her original place.

Elzy became a radio star and played the role of Serena more than 800 times between 1935 and 1943. She died at age 35 following surgery to remove a benign tumor. Her achievements were largely unknown until Guthery mentioned her name to Weaver.

"Hopefully," says Weaver, "this book will inspire someone else out there to find these other great contributors who have fallen through the cracks."

— Jennifer Haliburton



To hear an excerpt from the CD, "Ruby Elzy in Song," produced by David Weaver, log on to [ohiomagazine.com](http://ohiomagazine.com).