

UTTERLY UNIQUE

Who was Maya Angelou?

A civil-rights activist? A poet?

An author? A composer? An actor?

A director? A professor? A cable-car conductor? Unbelievably, Angelou was *all* of these things – and more besides.

Her life was anything but easy, but that didn't stop her excelling at one thing after another. So perhaps the best way of describing her is as an all-singing, all-dancing superstar. (And, yes, she was a singer and a dancer too.)

NAME: **Marguerite Annie Johnson Angelou**

BORN: 4 April 1928 DIED: 28 May 2014

NATIONALITY: American

PROFESSION: You name it, Maya Angelou probably did it!

Maya Angelou's childhood was tough. Her parents divorced when she was three and she and her brother were brought up by her grandmother in Arkansas, USA. She was abused by her mother's boyfriend, who was then murdered. Blaming herself for his death, Angelou stopped speaking – for five years. While she was silent, Angelou read and read and developed a love of words. At last, a kind teacher named Bertha Flowers helped her to speak again.

Angelou went to high school in San Francisco, where she won a scholarship to study dance and drama. Then at 17, she had a baby. As a single mother, she now had to support herself and her son, so she worked as a cable-car conductor, a dancer and a cook to make ends meet. She married. She separated. Then, she was spotted by a talent scout and joined the cast of *Porgy and Bess*. The Gershwin opera – which starred African-American singers and was set in South Carolina – toured Europe. Next, she wrote and recorded her first album.

Meanwhile, black and white people still weren't being treated equally. Angelou was very, very angry about this... until she heard Martin Luther King Jr speak about the black civil-rights movement. At last! Here was something that she could become involved with. So she joined King's movement, organising a fundraising event named *Cabaret For Freedom* to support his work. When she later met Malcolm X – another famous civil-rights activist – she worked with him too. When

Malcom X and then King were assassinated, she was devastated. Angelou's friends rallied round. They'd heard the stories of her life and thought they needed to be told. So with their encouragement, she wrote the first of her seven autobiographies.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings tells the story of Angelou's troubled childhood and how she was affected by prejudice, racism, sexism and segregation. It tells how Angelou's employer changed her name from Marguerite to Mary, because it was easier to say. It tells how the Ku Klux Klan – a racist movement – terrorised her neighbourhood and how a white dentist refused to treat her because she was black. But the book also tells how she fought back, striking a chord with readers – both those who'd suffered from the same issues as Angelou and those who had no idea such unacceptable things happened. It was an instant hit, nominated for the National Book Award.

Success followed success. Angelou excelled at poetry, screenwriting, acting, composing and essays. She worked on two presidential committees. She was given honorary degrees and awards by the dozen, including the prestigious Literarian Award, the Presidential Medal of Arts and the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

But despite the many accolades, perhaps she is most famous for making people understand what it was really like for a black girl to grow up in the deep south – and urging them to do something about it.

“ If you don’t like something,
change it. If you can’t change it,
change your attitude. ”

MAYA ANGELOU

STAND UP, LIKE MAYA ANGELOU!

You’ve quizzed the oldest members of your family and it turns out that there are some seriously cool stories just waiting to be told. But how? How do you stand out, like Maya Angelou?

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Angelou was never trapped by a single medium – she used *all* of them. So while she’d be totally on board with a riveting biography, she’d also consider transforming a family history into poetry, a school play, a song or modern dance. Or maybe she’d use a whizzy app to make a movie about it – and then star in it too. And whatever you choose, just go for it. Angelou would.



MARTIN LUTHER KING JR

DREAMER

Martin Luther King Jr had a dream.

He dreamed that all people would be equal. The problem was, while he was growing up in Georgia, USA, black and white people were treated differently because of the colour of their skin. They were segregated, or kept apart. And marriage between people of different races was strictly against the law. Martin Luther King Jr wanted to change all that. But how would he make his dream come true?

NAME: **Michael King Jr**

BORN: 15 January 1929 DIED: 4 April 1968

NATIONALITY: American

PROFESSION: Baptist minister and civil-rights activist

Martin Luther King Jr's name was originally Michael King Jr after his father, Michael King Sr. But, when Mr King Sr took a trip to Germany, he was so impressed by Martin Luther (1483-1546) that he changed both his and his son's names in honour of the Protestant reformer. So Michael King Jr became Martin Luther King Jr (If you understood that the first time you read it, give yourself a pat on the back.)

Both his grandfather and his father were Baptist ministers, so it's no surprise that King Jr decided this was his vocation too. He whizzed through school, skipping two grades, studied and became a doctor by the age of 25. He was soon the pastor of a Baptist church in Montgomery, Alabama. Meanwhile, he also became a member of the executive committee of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

In 1955, segregation meant that in Alabama black people had to sit at the back of buses in seats labelled "for colored". If there weren't enough seats for white people, then black people had to stand, so whites could sit down. On 1 December that year, when the bus driver asked a woman called Rosa Parks to give up her seat for a white man, she refused. In court, she was fined for breaking the law that allowed the bus driver to assign seats. She refused to pay. The fine was illegal, she said.

Step forward, Martin Luther King Jr.

He led a boycott of Montgomery's buses to force a change in the law. It was a peaceful protest, but even so, King Jr was arrested and his home was bombed. Still, the protestors kept going and

at last - after 381 days - the US Supreme Court ruled against Montgomery's segregation law. The civil-rights protestors had won! But now they had to keep the ball rolling and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was formed to carry on the fight for African-American civil rights. King Jr was elected as the SCLC's president. He would be the man to lead them.

It wouldn't be a violent fight - that wasn't King Jr's style. Like Gandhi (see page 40), he was a dedicated follower of non-violence. Civil rights needed a healthy dose of public awareness. Because the problem was that not enough people knew about the struggle for black equality. If they did, they too would help to bring about change.

So King Jr made speech after speech - thousands of them. He organised peaceful marches to highlight the injustices that black people faced daily. When police attacked protestors in Birmingham, Alabama, it was shown on the news, shocking people across the USA.

In 1963, one hundred years after President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation (see page 32), 250,000 black and white people marched on Washington, DC, to call for more black civil rights. At the Lincoln Memorial, King Jr gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech and inspired a nation.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 banned discrimination against people based on their race, colour, religion or national origin. The same year, Martin Luther King Jr was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Tragically, four years later, he was assassinated by white supremacist James Earl Ray.

● *It's just not fair. There are loads of pupils at school that speak English as a second language and yet none of them has been given a speaking part in the school play. The teachers say that they've simply chosen the best actors, but you don't believe them. How do you stand up, like Martin Luther King Jr?*

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● He'd confront the teachers, of course. He'd explain that they may have chosen the most fluent speakers, but it doesn't mean they're the best actors. They might be missing out on a future film star, just because their English isn't great (yet). And besides, how are those that speak English as a second language going to get any better if they don't have a chance to perform? Finally, he'd ask them to look at all the pupils again, because everyone deserves to be treated equally.

“Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.”

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR

