

THE REMARKABLE UNTOLD STORY OF CHEMIST PERCY JULIAN UNFOLDS IN A TWO-HOUR PBS SPECIAL

NOVA PRESENTS *FORGOTTEN GENIUS*
NARRATED BY COURTNEY B. VANCE
STARRING RUBEN SANTIAGO-HUDSON AS PERCY JULIAN

PREMIERING TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 6, 2007
AT 8PM ET/PT ON PBS

www.pbs.org/nova/julian



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Boston, MA—A fascinating and largely unknown story of scientific triumph and racial inequality comes to television with NOVA's *Forgotten Genius*, the extraordinary life journey of Percy Julian—one of the great chemists of the 20th century.

The grandson of Alabama slaves, Julian met with every possible barrier in a deeply segregated America. He was a man of genius, devotion, and determination. As a black man he was also an outsider, fighting to make a place for himself in a profession and country divided by bigotry—a man who would eventually find freedom in the laboratory. By the time of his death, Julian had risen to the highest levels of scientific and personal achievement, overcoming countless obstacles to become a world-class scientist, a self-made millionaire, and a civil-rights pioneer.

NOVA reveals Julian's remarkable story in a special two-hour presentation of *Forgotten Genius*, premiering Tuesday, February 6, 2007 at 8pm ET/PT on PBS. Tony Award-winner Ruben Santiago-Hudson stars as Julian; actor Courtney B. Vance narrates. Through dramatic period re-enactments, archival footage, and interviews with those who knew him best, Julian's science and gripping biography come to life onscreen.

Percy Julian won worldwide acclaim for his work in organic chemistry, and as the first black director of an industrial chemistry research lab. He broke the color barrier in American science more than a decade before Jackie Robinson did so in Major League Baseball. A brilliant chemist, his career was marked by many scientific breakthroughs that improved lives. He converted soybeans into synthetic steroids on an industrial scale, and his innovative approach helped make drugs like cortisone affordable and available to millions.

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For all his tremendous achievements, Percy Julian's legacy is largely unknown. Scholars have neither studied him nor written his biography. To tell his story, NOVA filmmakers launched one of the most ambitious research projects in the series' 34-year history, poring over thousands of pages of documents from dozens of sources, and traveling around the nation to interview more than 60 of Julian's friends, coworkers, family members, and former students. The resulting documentary chronicles Julian's life from childhood to his death in 1975, at age 76.

His professional and personal journey was a tumultuous ride of highs and lows. Julian was born into a world ruled by Jim Crow segregation. His parents, both trained as teachers, believed education offered the path to a better life. But academia did not welcome Julian with open arms. As a sophomore at DePauw University he already dreamed of a graduate education, though only one African-American at the time had ever earned a doctorate in chemistry. He went on to earn his Masters at Harvard, even while black students were banned from the dorms in Harvard Yard and white researchers argued that blacks did not have the intellectual capacity to master the sciences. Julian received his PhD from the University of Vienna, where he studied under one of Vienna's leading chemists, Ernst Späth.

As a scholar, Julian taught at Howard University, Fisk University, and back at DePauw. Early in his career he put himself on the map with a high-stakes research project that pitted him against the premier organic chemist of the time. It was one of many races he would win on his way to publishing scores of papers and pursuing groundbreaking science. But even national acclaim in his field could not sweep aside prejudice.

Finding too many doors closed to black men in academia, Julian leapt into the private sector as Director of Research, Soya Products Division, for Glidden Paints. In 1936 it was a rare opportunity for a black man in America, and one that Julian made the most of, filing more than 100 patents during his tenure. Julian and his team of chemists turned the soybean inside out, isolating parts of the bean that would serve as key ingredients in a vast and varied range of new household and industrial products, including food oils, latex paint, plastics, linoleum, plywood glue, high-protein livestock feed, and fire-fighting foam. This was chemistry that changed the way we live.

It was also chemistry that healed. Just a few years before Julian arrived at Glidden, scientists in Europe and America had discovered that chemicals called steroids played a number of roles in the human body. But steroids drawn from animal sources were scarce and expensive; if these compounds were ever to have a significant role in the treatment of human disease, someone would have to find a way to make them from plants. Julian realized that in the soybean he had a perfect starting material for making steroids on a commercial scale. He seized on that opportunity, making Glidden the first American company to make progesterone, a female sex hormone, available in large quantities at reasonable prices. His inventiveness helped lay the groundwork for the entire field of steroid medicine, whose products would include not only artificial sex hormones like progesterone and testosterone but also cortisone, so critical to alleviating the crippling pain of rheumatoid arthritis, and later the birth control pill.

His own business, Julian Laboratories, would eventually make Julian one of the wealthiest black businessmen in America and allow him to open doors for other African American scientists. He hired scores of talented black chemists who could not find employment elsewhere, and by showing that African Americans could do chemistry at the highest level, he inspired many more students to enter a career field that had previously seemed closed to them.

Still, neither wealth nor fame could insulate Julian from bigotry. His son, Percy Julian Jr., tells NOVA how in the upscale suburb of Oak Park, Illinois, his family faced racist arson and bomb threats. But with success came the chance to do something about it, and in his later years, Julian embraced the fight for racial equality that was commanding the attention of the nation.

Julian's crowning honor came when he was elected to the National Academy of Sciences. The year was 1973, and Julian was only the second African American member. Even in the shadow of society's prejudice, his drive, intelligence, and mastery of chemistry often prevailed. In a more enlightened era, his colleagues argue, he could have been a Nobel laureate.

About NOVA

Now in its 34th year of broadcasting, NOVA is produced for PBS by the WGBH Science Unit at WGBH Boston. The director of the WGBH Science Unit and senior executive producer of NOVA is Paula S. Apsell.

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Accessibility

NOVA is closed captioned for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers and described for people who are blind or visually impaired by the Media Access Group at WGBH. The descriptive narration is available on the SAP channel or stereo TVs and VCRs. **Forgotten Genius** will be available on DVD wherever videos are sold. To order direct from WGBH Boston Video, visit shop.wgbh.org or call 800.949.8670.

Production credits

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