

Black Music And Entertainers

1600—1920

By Lois Yvonne Whaley

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Will Marion Cook (1869-1944) achieved distinction as a composer, conductor, violinist and director. Born in Washington, D.C., of graduates of Oberlin College, he demonstrated an early talent for music. He began with violin lessons at the age of thirteen at his parents' alma mater; and was enrolled at the Hochschule in Berlin at sixteen. Upon his return to the States, he continued his study at the National Conservatory of Music in New York under Dvorak and John White.

During this period in New York, he became the contemporary of Burleigh, Ted Drury, and impresario, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, the poet; Bob Cole and the Johnson Brothers — all declared him the "most original genius among all the Negro musicians."

He and Dunbar collaborated on *Clorindy, The Origin Of The Cakewalk* — a musical comedy sketch that employed 26 black performers. Over the admonitions of a white producer who stated that white Broadway audiences would not pay to listen to "Negroes singing Negro opera," he presented the show that he directed at the Casino Roof Garden on Broadway in 1898 — the first all black musical comedy to enjoy such distinction — to thunderous applause.

He followed *Clorindy* with *Jes Lak White Folks* (1899), *The Casino Girl*, and *The Policy Players* (1900). Their mediocre success was followed by three smash hits: *In Dahomey* (1902), which was a spoof on the Back-to-Africa movement, and enjoyed a successful European tour, *In Abyssinia* (1906) based on an African locale with a huge cast and live camels; and *In Bandana Land* (1907)

which spoofed southern life. *In Dahomey* on Times Square made theatrical history. These early shows made the cakewalk an international dance craze.

The most listenable tunes from these shows were *Who Dat Say Chicken In Dis Crowd?*, *That's How The Cakewalk's Done*, *Emanicipation Day*, *Darktown's Out Tonight*, *Swing Along* and *I May Be Crazy But U Ain't No Fool*. Cook published *A Collection of Negro Songs* in 1912. Included are *Rain Song*, *Wid de Moon*, *Moon*, *Moon and My Lady*. These and others in his collection have been certified for soloists and choral groups.

The early shows for which Cook composed served to create more than a dance craze (the cakewalk), for it propelled to international fame the comedy team of Williams and Walker, former minstrels/vaudevillians who met in San Francisco.

Originally, Williams' rich baritone made him the serious singer and Walker the comic, but Bert Williams' natural comic flair created a role reversal. George Walker was always well dressed — off stage or on — and he helped to hasten the demise of the burnt cork.

After moving East, the duo starred in several productions, but it was with Cook's *In Dahomey* that theatrical history was made. They continued a successful partnership until Walker's death in 1909. Williams continued as a solo act, and he perfected his pantomiming of a card game and dinner party, dressed in dark clothes, black-face and white gloves, all under one spotlight on a darkened stage. (Emmett Kelly, the white clown, would later adopt this technique).



Eubie Blake

Eubie Blake (1883) has certainly helped to keep the spirit of ragtime alive. He is the only ragtime artist extant, and his memoirs and memory have served this medium well.

The twentieth century saw the rise of the dance bands. The nation was gripped in a craze of dancing; the cakewalk, charleston, turkey trot, fox-trot, one-step and the castle walk became popular; and their popularity was due to the collaboration of Vernon and Irene Castle and

This act, plus the song *Nobody* became Williams' trademark.

Bert Williams' name went up in lights on Broadway when he became the first black to star in an otherwise all-white cast. This occurred after he signed a ten-year contract to star in the Ziegfeld Follies. In so doing, he became the highest salaried black since Bland. He made popular, *I Don't Care If You Never Come Back*, *You've Got The Right Church But The Wrong Pew*, and *I May Be Crazy But I Ain't No Fool*.

Williams deplored the double standard that racism produced. Upon leaving the theater he would be sought after for autographs, fawned over by white theater-goers, and refused permission to use the dining room or any but the freight elevator in his hotel. He once said "It's no disgrace to be a Negro, but it is very inconvenient." Williams died in 1922.

James Reese Europe.

Europe was born in Mobile, Alabama, in 1881 and grew up in Washington, D.C. He studied violin under Enrico Hurler, the assistant director for the Cole and Johnson and Williams and Walker companies, but his organization of the Clef Club, a black musicians' union, in 1910, ended those associations. Numbering about 150 of the best in the New York area, a band could be formed and syncopated dance music would never be the same.

Europe's association with the Castles, a white dance team, began in 1914.

He was their director, and the choreographer for the fox-trot and the turkey trot.

When World War I began, once more blacks were involved with their music and Jim Europe was called upon to form a group to take to the European Theater. They performed throughout France to tumultuous ovations, yet there was extreme puzzlement as to how their "new sounds" were formed. So convinced were the French that Europe's men used different instruments that the top bandmen in France, the French Garde Republicaine, insisted that Europe's group use French instruments. Of course, Europe's group continued to produce their sound! Jim explained: "With the brass instruments we put in mutes and make a whirling motion with the tongue" something that the Frenchmen had not learned to do.

Europe returned to the States after the war, but died when a crazed assassin knifed him in 1919 over an imagined slight.

Some musicologists claim that jazz is an outgrowth of the blues; and, as such, did not become a distinct form until the twenties. However, Jelly Roll Morton, according to some, is regarded as the first true jazz composer. Morton was the first to transcribe a jazz composition in musical notation.

Jelly Roll Blues (1915) was the first published jazz arrangement in history.

Blues, of course, is exemplified in the works of

the legendary W.C. Handy. His memoirs, "Father of the Blues", recounts his early experiences along "The River" and throughout the western area of the States. *Memphis Blues*, was originally a campaign song for a Memphis politician, and has since become a standard along with *St. Louis Woman* (1914). Although blacks, particularly southern blacks, had been singing blues for years, Handy was the first to use them in serious musical form.

The music forms of the blues and jazz have so many schools, each with its own adherents, that the limitations of this discourse prohibit presenting them in a format that would do each justice.

An interesting outgrowth of the blacks' innovative approach to music may be seen in the evolution of the musical instruments. The folk performer has often been responsible for new heights in music because he was often unaware of the limitations of his instrument — he didn't "know" that he could not duplicate the sound in his mind on his instrument. Consequently, more demands were placed upon the instrument than it could handle with resultant damage. When repairs were indicated, changes sometimes were created to compensate. Thus, new designs were made to fulfill the need of black performers.

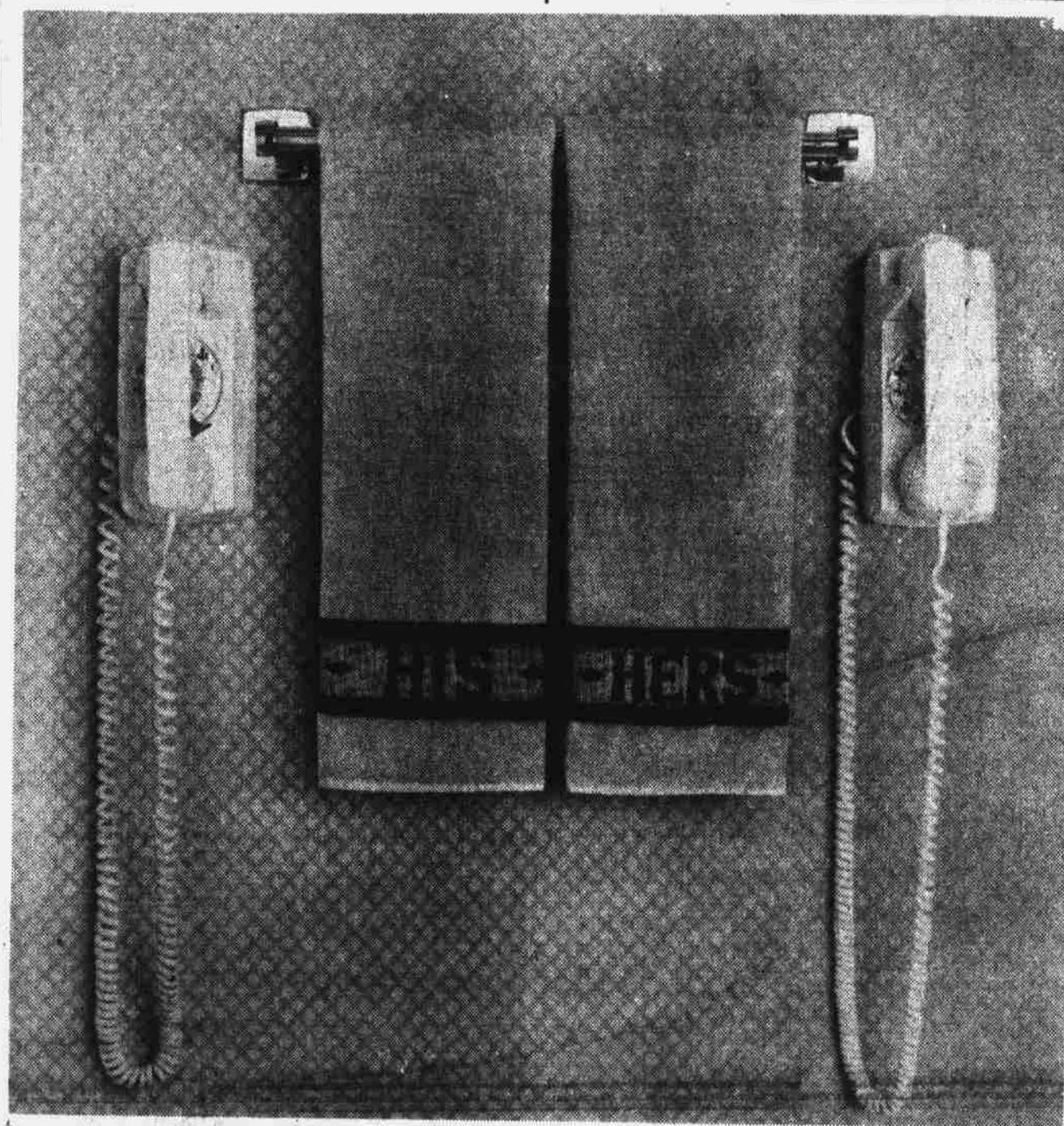
Black music has in-

fluenced life.

The styles, forms, content and spirit of blacks have influenced music throughout different eras. The projection of our music through television, cafes and musical shows has broadened and democratized the tastes in music of performers and audiences. It has had an impact on traditional (classical) music for it has become improvisational and less highly organized.

Music seems to be the major area in which blacks have been accepted as peers by the whites, and, in some cases as superior.

The acceptance of black music from the "lowest" (field hand) to the aristocracy has truly democratized the people.



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