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Guide to the

Bert Williams jokebooks

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Summary

Creator: Williams, Bert, 1874-1922

Title: Bert Williams jokebooks

Date: n.d

Source: Gift of Thelma I. Goode, 1970. SCM85-30.

Abstract: Volume containing lyrics to twenty songs, two of which, "Nevermo" and "The Lee Family" were recorded by Williams on Columbia Records in 1915 and 1916 respectively. Second volume, entitled "Anecdotes, Jokes, Axioms, Proverbs, Funs and Puns..." contains over two hundred jokes or "lies" told by Williams and written down by Alex Rogers, a member of Williams' company. These dialectic stories, all of which contain a flavor of fable and black folklore, are primarily about rural or unsophisticated characters. They were first used by Williams in 1909 when he experimented in vaudeville as a solo performer, and later while Williams was a member of the Ziegfeld Follies.

Access: Advance notice required.

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Creator History

Egbert Austin "Bert" Williams was once described by comedian W. C. Fields as the funniest man he had ever seen and the saddest he had ever known. Born in Antigua, West Indies on November 12, 1874, his family moved to the United States when he was a child, settling first in Riverside, California in 1885. After completing his secondary education, he is said to have attended Stanford University for two semesters with the intention of studying engineering but quit due to a lack of finances. He was forced to earn his livelihood by turning to his natural inclination for mimicry and entertaining in the cafes along San Francisco's Barbary Coast, to the accompaniment of his banjo. In the summer of 1893 he joined

Martin and Seig's Mastodon Minstrels and it was during this time that he met George Walker. The two paired in a duet with Bert strumming the banjo and George singing a "coon" song. Years later the two men would become the famous comedy team of Williams and Walker, billing themselves as "The Two Real Coons," a means of distinguishing themselves from the large number of blackface acts performed by white actors in burnt cork.

During the early years of their partnership Walker and Williams appeared as a separate act as well as with different minstrel groups in some of San Francisco's cheapest variety houses. Despite steady employment, their ambition was to go east, thus they worked their way across the country appearing in medicine shows and other productions. While appearing in Indiana they were contacted by Thomas Canary, a well-known theatrical producer. Canary was so impressed by their act that he cast them in "The Gold Bug" (1896) a new show he had scheduled to open in New York City in the fall of that year. Although the show itself was a failure it nevertheless served to expose the duo to larger audiences and better variety houses, and within six months of their arrival in New York they were considered to be the leading stars in vaudeville. They would go on to headline a number of musical comedies, the most successful of which were: "Sons of Ham" (1900), "In Dahomey" (1902), "In Abyssinia" (1908) and "In Bandanna Land" (1919), the last three being Broadway shows.

With the production of "In Dahomey" Bert Williams was established as one of the leading comedians in the country, and he and Walker became the first internationally famous team of black stars in American entertainment. Their theatrical company, which was formed in 1897 and which included their wives Lottie Thompson Williams and Ada Overton Walker, was comprised of some of the most talented black actors, dancers, singers and vaudeville acts to be found. "In Dahomey," a satire on the American Colonization Society's "Back to Africa" movement, made black theatrical history by opening at the New York Theatre in Times Square. With the book by Jesse A. Shipp, the lyrics by Paul Laurence Dunbar and the music by Will Marion Cook, this landmark piece was written, produced and performed entirely by blacks. The show ran from 1902 until 1905, including cross-country tours and a seven-month tour of England, where it served to introduce the old slave dance, the Cakewalk, to European audiences. A special feature of the British tour was a command performance at Buckingham Palace on the occasion of the ninth birthday of the Prince of Wales.

The success of the Williams and Walker partnership came to an abrupt end in 1907 when George Walker contracted syphilis, succumbing to paralysis in 1911. Bert Williams, now working alone, appeared first in an unsuccessful show entitled "Mr. Lode of Koal" (1909) and then on the vaudeville circuit where he was very well received. In 1910 Florenz Ziegfeld, the most important theatrical producer of the time, signed him to star in the 1910 production of the famous "Ziegfeld Follies." For almost a decade, Williams, the only black performer in the cast, appeared in several editions of the "Follies." He received featured billing the early years of the show and appeared opposite such stars as Fannie Brice and Eddie Cantor. Eventually, however, he found that he was no longer the mainstay of the show's humor, and with the addition of such names as Ed Wynn and W.C. Fields, less time was allotted to Williams' skits and songs. Although his ability to amuse audiences did not diminish, his material was frequently of poor quality and he found it difficult to secure good writers.

After nine years with the Zeigfeld Company, including appearances in "Midnight Follies," another Zeigfeld production, Williams left the company. He starred in two productions created exclusively for and financed by him, "Broadway Brevities" (1920) and "Under the Bamboo Tree" (1922). It was during a performance of the latter show that he collapsed on stage. He died of pneumonia on March 4, 1922.

Williams did not confine his interests and talents to the stage. He had intended to film all of his best stories and comedy scenes, but was discouraged when told that film distributors in the southern states would not show films starring a black performer. Nevertheless some of the shows were filmed although

only three of the films are known to be in existence, "Dark Town Jubilee" (1914), "Fish" (1916) and "A Natural Born Gambler" (1919). His phonograph records were more numerous than his films and provided a more extensive view of his talents and abilities. Considered by some to be one of the finest recording stars of the time, he cut seventeen titles during his four-year contract with Columbia Records. While most of his recordings are said to have been "simple parodies of conventional stage humor of the period," others were more serious songs which provided considerable insight into his vocal techniques.

Despite their celebrity status and busy schedules, both Bert Williams and George Walker gave generously of their time to benefit performances, as well as towards the advancement of professional standards for blacks in entertainment. Their most important contribution was the formation, in 1908, of the Frogs, a charitable organization patterned after the American Actors Beneficial Association from which blacks had always been excluded. Co-founded with such fellow celebrities as Lester A. Walton, Alex Rogers, J. Rosamond Johnson and Jesse Shipp, among others, the organization was named after the characters in Aristophane's play of the same name. The name was chosen by the club members to symbolize their feelings and responsibilities. The avowed purpose of the organization was to raise money for charitable purposes as well as to create an archival collection of theatrical material. Williams was the head of the art committee and Walker, in whose house the group originally met before purchasing its own clubhouse, was president of the organization. The Frogs was highly respected within the Harlem community and it eventually extended its membership to include non-theatrical professionals such as doctors and lawyers.

Scope and Content Note

The Bert Williams Jokebooks consists of two volumes of material prepared for Williams by Alex Rogers, a popular songwriter of the day and a member of the Williams and Walker Company. He and Williams collaborated on such hit songs as "*I'm a Jonah Man*" (1900), "*I May Be Crazy, But I Ain't No Fool*" (1904) and "*Nobody*" (1905). Rogers was also the lyricist for "*Mr. Lode of Koal*" (1901) and he worked with such black theatrical composers as Will Marion Cook and J. Leubrie Hill.

The first volume contains the lyrics to twenty songs, two of which "*Nevermo*" and "*The Lee Family*" were recorded by Williams on Columbia Records in 1915 and 1916, respectively.

The second volume entitled "Anecdotes, Jokes, Axioms, Proverbs, and Puns..." contains over two hundred jokes or "lies" told by Williams and written down by Rogers. These dialect stories, all of which contain a flavor of fable and black folklore, are primarily about rural or unsophisticated characters. They were first used by Williams in the summer of 1909 when he experimented in vaudeville as a solo performer. Later, while he was with the "Zeigfeld Follies" he used these stories as a sort of monologue between songs. His favorite "lie" was said to have been that of the circus lion.

Key Terms

Subjects

African American entertainers
African American wit and humor
African Americans -- Folklore
African Americans -- Music
Comedians

Musicals -- History and criticism -- New York (State) -- New York
Revues -- History and criticism -- New York (State) -- New York
Vaudeville -- United States

Names

Rogers, Alex, 1876-1930
Williams, Bert, 1874-1922