

Bert Williams and George Walker--Victor Releases (1901)

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At the turn of the twentieth century, Bert Williams and George Walker were two of the most sought after comedians on the American stage, renowned for their storytelling, singing, dancing, and pantomime. Making them even more exceptional was the fact that they were black, at a time when black performers had few professional opportunities open to them. Indeed, the pair helped inaugurate a new kind of comedy, creating characters that delighted audiences both black and white.

And they were pioneering recordings artists as well.

In 1901, on three separate occasions, they entered the recording studios of the fledgling Victor Talking Machine Company (later to become the giant RCA Victor) and committed fourteen titles to disc, eleven of which survive. These recordings offer a unique window on the world of Williams and Walker and insight into the ways that the pair negotiated the hazards of entrenched racism.

Egbert Austin Williams was born in Nassau, the Bahamas, in 1874. When he was around ten years old, his family moved to Riverside, California, where he attended high school. After that, Williams moved to San Francisco, where he joined a West Coast traveling minstrel show, Martin and Selig's Mastodon Minstrels, telling jokes and playing songs on the banjo. In 1893, he met George William Walker, born in Lawrence, Kansas, 20 years earlier. An avid entertainer since boyhood, Walker had come out west with an itinerant medicine show, and soon the two were working side by side for Martin and Selig's for seven dollars a week each.

The act they developed grew out of two of the stock characters of antebellum minstrel theater: Jim Crow and Zip Coon. The former was a shuffling, slow-moving dim-witted oaf. The latter was an arrogant urban dandy, prone to speaking in malapropisms. On the minstrel stage, these characters were played by performers who blackened their faces with burnt cork in order to look authentic to (generally all-white) audiences. Williams

and Walker believed they could portray Negroes better than any white imitators, and to enhance the effect of their performances they took to using burnt cork to blacken up as well. This imitation of white comedians in blackface caricatured the idea of blackface itself: what could better symbolize the artifice of the minstrel characters than a black man blacking up to play himself? Indeed, Williams, who was naturally light skinned, claimed blackface was an aid to his comedic sensibility. As he wrote later, "It was not until I was able to see myself as another person that my sense of humor developed."

In Williams and Walker's adaptation, Williams played a character who was down at the heels and perpetually on the receiving end of bad luck. Walker played the "swell," a slick dandy always quick to take advantage of his friend. In a short time, they created an act they called "Two Real Coons," which launched their careers in earnest. By 1896, they had relocated to New York, where they landed a spot for their act in Koster and Bial's vaudeville show, one of the biggest names in show business.

Meanwhile, Williams and Walker sought to use commercial popular entertainment as a means to improve conditions for African Americans. On one level, they created employment opportunities by hiring as many black performers and songwriters as they could, and they prided themselves on their large payroll. On another level, they aimed to tweak the popular music idiom of the day—which was dominated by a derogatory genre known as "coon songs"—to render such songs either benign or ironic. They wanted to show it was possible to sing songs about black characters without resorting to the most violent and vicious stereotypes (e.g., fighting with razors, stealing chickens, etc.). In this way, they saw themselves not just as entertainers but also as part of a vanguard fighting to bring about positive social change.

In 1900, they had their first big hit show of their own, "Sons of Ham," at the Star Theatre on Broadway, which ran for two years, followed by a national tour. The show provided many of the songs the duo sang when they went into the recording studio in 1901.

Today, these records are exceedingly rare. In some cases, there is known to be only one surviving copy. In a few other cases, no copies are known to exist. Each of the recordings consisted of a vocal (solo or duet) with piano accompaniment (generally credited to Williams but probably Victor's house pianist C. H. H. Booth). When Victor began to release these recordings in the spring of 1902, it boasted in its catalogue that it paid more to Williams and Walker to record than any other artist (black or white) had been paid to make records to date.

This commitment by Victor signaled the start of the company's marketing strategy to invest in big-name talent in order to interest people in buying records and, by extension, the phonographs on which to play them. (By contrast, Victor's biggest rival, Thomas Edison's company, emphasized sound quality and eschewed big-name stars.) Victor would expand this strategy when it began to issue records by the great tenor Enrico Caruso two years later.

As for the Williams and Walker recordings, they comprise a mix of humorous numbers and love songs. “(When It’s) All Going Out and Nothing Coming In,” sung by Williams, recounts the problems of having money and of not having it. The song became one of Williams’s best-known numbers. “The Phrenologist Coon” offers an ironic take on the pseudo-science of assessing people’s character by the shape of their skulls. Although it makes reference to some of the stock figures of the coon song—e.g., razors, chickens, and (water)melons—it presents these elements satirically, through the character of a charlatan. In “She’s Getting More Like the White Folks Every Day,” Williams sings of the pretensions of his girlfriend after she gets a job at a white hotel. (“Once she was stuck on calico patterns/Now all she wants is silks and satins.”)

Among the love songs is “Junie,” sung by Walker, an airy Tin Pan Alley serenade with simple moon-June type rhymes. The tuneful “Good Morning, Carrie” is one of the catchiest songs Williams and Walker recorded and is one of the few numbers they did that was also recorded by other artists. The song was one of the big hits of 1901. “Good Afternoon, Mr. Jenkins” tells the story of a spurned suitor.

Some of the discs feature what are among the earliest examples of ragtime piano on record. These include “She’s Getting More Like the White Folks Every Day,” “The Phrenologist Coon,” and “Good Afternoon, Mr. Jenkins.” The records are notable too for showcasing some path-breaking African American songwriters besides Williams and Walker—“I Don’t Like That Face You Wear” was written by Ernest Hogan, “The Phrenologist Coon” by Hogan and Will Accooe, “In My Castle on the Nile” by James Weldon Johnson, Rosamond Johnson, and Bob Cole, “My Little Zulu Babe” by James T. Brymn and W. S. Estren, and “Junie” and “Good Afternoon, Mr. Jenkins” by Tom Lemonier and R. C. McPherson—all of whom were active in the black musical theater scene at the time.

For all their historic importance, not everyone was impressed with the records. George Walker, for one, was disappointed with how he sounded and was reluctant to return to the studio after the 1901 sessions. In fact, he made only one other record before his premature death in 1911 at the age of 38. Williams shared no such misgivings. He returned to the studio numerous times and became the biggest-selling black performer of the pre-1920 era. His later recorded work included his signature song, “Nobody,” which he recorded twice, in 1906 and 1913. Williams died in 1922 at the age of 47.

In addition to their sound recordings, Williams and Walker left a legacy as race leaders. Both Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois praised them as avatars of uplift. Washington saw their work as embodying a “more modern” and “more worthy kind of Negro comedy.” Du Bois applauded their move away from deleterious minstrel stereotypes and toward what he saw as “a new light comedy” of a new era. Years later, upon Williams’s death, Du Bois remembered him thus (in words that might well encompass Walker as well):

When in the calm after day of thought and struggle to racial peace we look back to pay tribute to those who helped the most, we shall single out for highest praise

those who made the world laugh; Bob Cole, Ernest Hogan, George Walker, and above all, Bert Williams.

For this was not mere laughing; it was the smile that hovered above blood and tragedy; the light mask of happiness that hid breaking hearts and bitter souls.

This is the top of bravery; the finest thing in service.

May the world long honor the undying fame of Bert Williams as a great comedian, a great negro, a great man.

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