

African American Performers on Early Sound Recordings, 1892-1916

Finding music by African Americans on early phonograph records is more difficult than one might surmise. African American artists rarely performed on early recordings. Racial prejudice may only be a contributing factor.

Although African American singers and musicians were well known, in its early years, the recording industry was not looking for known artists. At its inception, beginning in the 1890s, it was the song that sold a record, and not (with some exceptions), the artist.

Talent scouts from the record companies were on the lookout to recruit anybody with a good clear voice, and good diction. Recruits were trained to utilize the various techniques of making a successful recording--such as backing away from the recording horn at loud passages to avoid "blasting."

There was no need to seek out famous stage artists. The Berliner, Edison, and Columbia companies of the 1890s had established a cadre of professional white "recorders" able to render both up to the minute hits as well as old favorites--and for a lower fee than a famous performer required. These white recorders could also reproduce the works of African-American performers with "authentic" language usage. So why hire Ernest Hogan, Cole and Johnson, Williams and Walker, and others when the in-house talent could do the job? Besides, many artists famous for their strong stage voices did not record as clearly as the professional record makers.

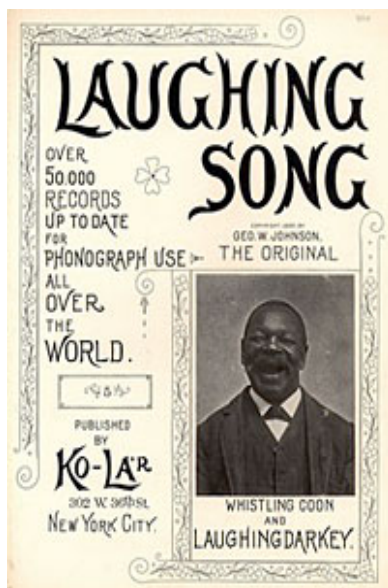
Earliest African American Recording Artists

[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/dukesm:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(ncdhasm.b0814\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/dukesm:@field(DOCID+@lit(ncdhasm.b0814)))In 1890 George W. Johnson (1846-1914) became the first African American to record commercially. A common story is that Johnson, a former enslaved person, was discovered singing on the streets of Washington, D.C., by Berliner recording agent Fred Gaisberg who perpetrated this myth along with the falsehood that Johnson was later hanged for murdering his wife. In contrast, according to historian Tim Brooks, Johnson was a familiar figure in New York City's Hell's Kitchen and made his first commercial recordings in the spring of 1890 for the Metropolitan and New Jersey Phonograph companies.

Previously, Johnson had also made tin foil exhibition recordings. Later in 1890, a group called The Unique Quartette followed Johnson into the recording studio. The Unique Quartette recorded again in 1893, and one of their titles, "Mama's Black Baby Boy" survives in stunning fidelity.

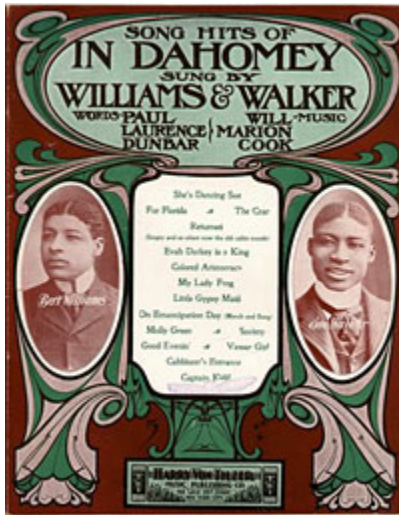
In 1891 banjoist and raconteur Louis "Bebe" Vasnier recorded several titles for The Louisiana Phonograph Company. At least one of his "Brudder Rasmus" sermons survives, albeit barely audible.

George W. Johnson continued recording throughout the 1890s and eventually was recorded by Berliner, Edison, and Columbia. Johnson's specialty was "laughing songs" done in a then popular stereotypical (uncle tom) manner. It is not surprising that Johnson's jocular performances seem restrained in dialect and stereotype compared to white singers of the songs, such as Billy Golden. Golden's broad black caricature, while polished, it was basically undignified.



Williams and Walker

[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/dukesm:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(ncdhasm.b0686\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/dukesm:@field(DOCID+@lit(ncdhasm.b0686))) George Walker ("Her Name's Miss Dinah Fair"), along with his partner Bert Williams were perhaps the most famous (to both black and white audiences) African American entertainers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. By the summer of 1897 they played at many of the first class vaudeville houses in New York City.



In October 1901 Williams and Walker made the first of their 15 recordings (both as soloists and as a duo) for the Victor Talking Machine Company. Along with comic George W. Johnson, The Dinwiddie Colored Quartette, and a few other people, they were the only African American recording artists to be advertised by a national company until the Fisk University Jubilee Singers recorded for Victor in 1909.

The Victor sessions yielded only three Walker solos compared to the two duets with Williams and Williams' of eight solo recordings. These recordings are extremely rare today. The early samplers for the making the discs wore out quickly and often necessitated the artists returning to re-record the selections.

Because of Williams and Walker's extremely busy schedule and also perhaps because of George Walker's reluctance to record (it is said that he detested the way his voice sounded on recordings), Victor did not record Williams and Walker after their November 1901 session. Another factor likely contributing to the limited number of recordings was the expense involved in bringing in big stars such as Williams and Walker.

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.award/rpbaasm.1261>In 1906 with the advent of their show *Abyssinia*, Williams and Walker were engaged by the Columbia Record Company, thus, Bert Williams performs solo on most of these recordings. There is only a single title recorded by the pair, "Pretty Desdemone"; issued in two separate performances, one each on cylinder and disc, hence, there were no solos by Walker. His biggest stage hit, "Bon Bon Buddy," later recorded for Victor by the white tenor, Billy Murray.

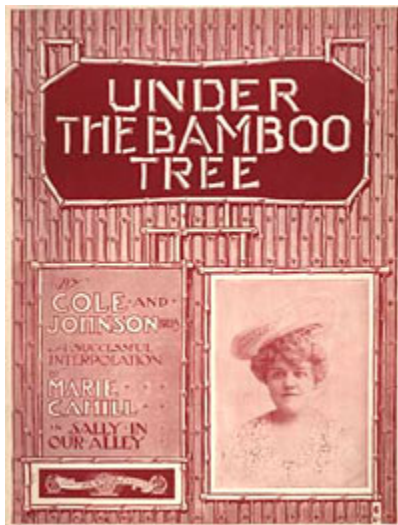


Around 1911, the artist became a bigger draw than the song. After the illness and death of George Walker, Bert Williams appeared in one book musical, *Mr. Load of Koal*. He then joined the Ziegfeld Follies and became a regular. Once he was a part of Ziegfeld's company, his popularity soared and he became one of Columbia Records' biggest sellers. Williams' repertoire had grown greatly and still mainly consisted of works by African Americans such as Will Vodery, Alex Rogers, and himself. But after 1911, the public bought Bert Williams' records to hear Bert Williams, the star.

Black Composers, White Performers

There were other African American performers whose fame rivaled Williams and Walker, such as Ernest Hogan (1865-1905), the first African-American entertainer to produce and star in a Broadway show (he also helped create the musical genre of ragtime); and the team of Cole and Johnson. However, as far as is known, the latter did not make records. Their compositions, however, were represented on recordings by white vocalists and instrumental ensembles. For example Hogan's outrageous and misunderstood "All Coons Look Alike to Me" was recorded for the Edison Company by baritone Arthur Collins.

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.award/rpbaasm.0289> Arthur Collins (1864-1933) was one of the most prolific recordings artists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His specialty was "coon songs" sung in dialect and frequently in partnership with Byron G. Harlan (1861-1936). Collins recorded many selections associated with Bert Williams including Williams' famous "Nobody." He also recorded several Williams' specialties that Williams never recorded such as "That's a Plenty" (not the jazz standard), a song that Williams introduced in the 1909 production *Mr. Load of Koal*.



Not all vocal recordings of compositions by African Americans were stereotyped dialect. J. Leubrie Hill's "At the Ball That's All" was charmingly sung by white vaudevillians Harry Mayo and Harry Tally for the Edison Company. "Under the Bamboo Tree," a smash hit by Bob Cole and J. Rosamond Johnson, was treated rather artistically for Victor Records by stage star Marie Cahill. Other exceptions include the melodramatic ballads of Gussie L. Davis (1863-1899), composer of "My Creole Sue" and "In the Baggage Coach Ahead" (1896), who at the time of his death had published more than two hundred songs and left more in manuscript.

Bob Cole (1868-1911) and J. Rosamond Johnson (1873-1954) were extraordinarily successful songwriters and performers. Their vaudeville act was performed in elegant evening clothes and was devoid of caricature. A frequent third member of their team was Rosamond's older brother, James Weldon (1871-1938), an author, educator (the first African-American professor at New York University), lawyer, diplomat, songwriter, and civil rights activist. His notable works include the song "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," and books titled "The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man", "Gods's Trombones", and *Along This Way*.

One of the popular songs by Cole and Johnson was a comic Irish caricature entitled "Oh Didn't He Ramble." Committed to wax several times during the early 1900s by both Arthur Collins and Dan W. Quinn, the song has had a rather long and interesting life. Composed by an African-American duo, it told of the "black sheep" of a New York Irish immigrant family. The wayward son, Buster, had "rough and rowdy ways" and "rambled all around, in and out the town... 'till the butcher cut him down."

"Oh Didn't He Ramble" became popular among the African American brass bands in New Orleans via the published band stock arrangement. The piece became standard repertoire for New Orleans jazz funerals, played in both the original 6/8 and 4/4 time, as an upbeat tribute to the deceased as the band and mourners leave the cemetery exclaiming that "he rambled 'till the butcher cut him down."



The Roots of Jazz and Stock Arrangements

Another popular number with New Orleans brass bands was William H. Tyers' (1876-1924) Carribean-flavored song, "Panama" that appears in a 1922 record by the New Orleans Rhythm Kings (NORK), some 11 years after its initial publication. In their recording, the NORK take liberties with the harmonies and rhythms as originally intended by Tyers. Luis Russell's romping 1930 version took the piece further away from its source, and thus began a journey of reinterpretation for "Panama" to the point of faint resemblance.

Traditional jazz bands still play "Panama" regularly without much idea of the beauty that was intended. However, the 1923 version by blues composer and musician W. C. Handy (1873-1958), widely known as the "Father of the Blues" via his Memphis Blues Band made for the Okeh Company is fairly faithful to Tyers' originally-published stock arrangement.

<http://memory.loc.gov/cocoon/ihas/loc.natlib.ihas.100009479/default.html>Tyers composed other Carribean-flavored works that found great success, including "Maori" and "Admiration." Both works appeared on various phonograph records at the time of their publication. "Maori" was recorded as a piano solo by Mike Bernard in 1913. A vanity recording of "Admiration" by St. Louis pianist Gus Haenschen and his "Banjo Orchestra" was recorded and sold locally in 1916. Both pieces were recorded in 1930 by composer, pianist and jazz bandleader Duke Ellington (1899-1974).

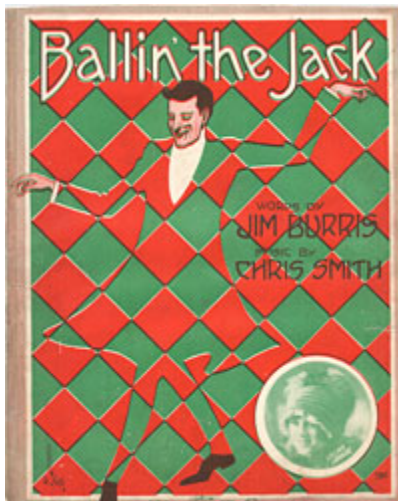
While African-American composers may not have dominated the world of published music, their music was certainly well-represented. This situation was reflected strongly in the recording industry.



From the early days of the recording industry, many African-American composers had their works recorded. In the case of instrumental selections, the house orchestra or band almost always used the published stock arrangement. Occasionally, this is also true for vocal selections. Fred S. Stone, noted Detroit musician, had his hit instrumental "Ma Ragtime Baby" recorded for Edison prior to 1900. Composer, conductor, violinist, and generally larger-than-life character Will Marion Cook was well represented on disc and cylinder. By 1901 his hits such as "On Emancipation Day," "Darktown is Out Tonight," and "Who Dat Say Chicken in Dis Crowd?" were recorded many times over, both in instrumental and vocal versions. In 1914 Cook himself conducted a group, the Afro-American Folk Song Singers, in a Columbia recording of Cook's African American folk-anthem entitled "Swing Along."

They render an enthusiastic reading of Cook's majestic music that had been used in the opening chorus of Williams and Walker's "In Dahomey." "Swing Along" is heard on this site, sung by the Orpheus Male Chorus on Edison.

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/ih/loc.natlib.ih/100008982/default.html> Chris Smith (1879-1949) was another prolific African American composer. He is best remembered as the composer of "Ballin' the Jack"--recorded countless times from the teens up to the present day. Smith also was responsible for the music to "Good Morning Carrie" (lyric by R. C. McPherson aka Cecil Mack).



Williams and Walker used this song in vaudeville and also recorded it for Victor in 1901. Smith's compositions, such as "Ballin' the Jack" and "Down in Honky-Tonky Town," retained their original shapes and sounds when adopted into the jazz repertoire--unlike William Tyers' "Panama." Smith collaborated frequently during the early 1920s with pianist and comedian Jimmy Durante. Their "I Got My Habits On" was a big hit and was recorded many times.

James Reese Europe

The year 1913 saw the first recordings by a keystone member of the African-American composers' elite--James Reese Europe. Composer, conductor, and organizer, Europe controlled several dance orchestras in New York during the 1910s and had become the president of the Clef Club, a union for African-American musicians. Europe's recording contract with Victor Records came with his appointment as conductor for the sensational dance team Vernon and Irene Castle.

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.award/rpbaasm.1148>The Europe recordings pre-date the first recordings of a jazz band by four years and are fascinating glimpses of African-American dance music. Europe's recording of his own composition "Castle House Rag" is an exciting, vigorous performance driven by aggressive drumming from legendary "Buddy" Gilmore. Supposedly this recording features several banjos, mandolins, violins, two pianos, and a small complement of brass and winds. Lead violin and percussion are the most audible-- the other instruments sound off in the distance and are indistinct. Europe uses a special arrangement on the recording and the published stock is quite different.



Other prominent members of the Clef Club found their way onto phonograph records and into well-paying, high-profile engagements. Ford Dabney's band made many recordings for the Aeolian-Vocalion Company. He also led his orchestra for Ziegfeld's *Midnight Frolic* at the New Amsterdam Roof.

By the time James Reese Europe's Victor contract ran out (seemingly concurrent with the end of his association with the Castles) there seemed to be an increase in recordings by African American instrumental groups. White dancer Joan Sawyer's accompanying musicians, the African-American "Persian Garden Orchestra" made several sides for Columbia. In 1916 pioneering "stride" pianist C. Luckeyth Roberts made two masters for Columbia that were never released. The first commercial recordings of clarinetist Wilbur Sweatman also

appeared in 1916.

The New Era of "Race Records"

It wasn't until 1920 that the concept of the "race record" was born. At the insistence of African American composer, pianist, and talent promoter Perry Bradford, Okeh Records recorded a young African-American woman named Mamie Smith. Her initial releases were greeted with great enthusiasm. Suddenly it was realized that a large profit could be made by marketing special recordings to African-American buyers. Coincident with the success of Mamie Smith, recordings by white rural artists similarly came into being, as did more selective recordings of immigrant musicians performing their native music.

Finally, African-American music of all types was recorded in earnest. By 1926 both major and minor companies were focusing extraordinary attention to their "race" catalogs, often making trips "into the field" to record the itinerant as well as the famous.

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