

SWING ALONG

THE SONGS OF WILL MARION COOK



WILLIAM BROWN, TENOR

ANN SEARS, PIANO

Albany

WILL MARION COOK

(1869-1944) was one of the earliest African-American composers to achieve significant commercial success in musical theater. However, even though his talents were admired at the turn of the twentieth century, he and his work have since been largely forgotten. With interest in African-American culture sparked by the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, and revived interest in *all* American music

during the Bicentennial celebrations of the 1970s, Cook has been rediscovered by such music historians as Thomas L. Riis and Marva Griffin Carter. Riis published the *MUSIC and Scripts of In Dahomey* (A-R Editions, 1996) his most outstanding musical; as well as *Just Before Jazz: Black Musical Theater in New York 1890-1915* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989). Carter is completing the biography 'Swing Along' — *The Musical Life of Will Marion Cook* for Oxford University Press. In addition, Cook's music has been commercially recorded by tenor William A. Brown (*Fi-ye! A Hundred Years of African American Song* (Albany Records, 1999) and aired in such public forums as NPR's Fresh Air program. The Black Music Repertory Ensemble of the Center for Black Music Research performed and recorded Cook's songs on *Black Music: The Written Tradition* (Columbia College: Chicago, 1990). Furthermore, the historic Clef Club Concert of 1912 featuring Cook's works was recreated at Carnegie Hall in 1989 with Maurice Peress, Jester Hairston, Wynton Marsalis and the Morgan State University Choir. Peress has recounted this momentous occasion in *Dvorák to Duke Ellington* (Oxford University Press, 2004). The works that have publicly reappeared confirm to the modern listener that Will Marion Cook's music deserves to be a permanent part of the American song repertory.

Born in Washington, D.C. to parents who were Oberlin College graduates, Cook was from the post-Civil War generation of African Americans who were born free and became well educated. He was a gifted violinist who attended the Oberlin Conservatory in Ohio from 1884 to 1888. The next year he studied at the Hochschule für Musik in Berlin with Joseph Joachim, the great violinist for whom Brahms wrote his only violin concerto. In 1895 Cook studied composition briefly with Antonín Dvořák at the National Conservatory of Music in New York. He also honed his theatrical skills in black musical comedy with the multi-talented Bob Cole at Worth's Museum (a downtown theater in Manhattan).

"Negroes were at last on Broadway..." proclaimed Will Marion Cook in 1898, after *Clorindy's, The Origin of the Cakewalk* opened at the Casino Roof Garden.² Collaborating with poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, he adopted the pseudonym Will Marion as composer of this musical-comedy sketch. In light of its coon song clichés, he may have served to forestall additional criticism from his mother, who upon hearing one of his most Negroid songs—"Who Dat Say Chicken in Dis Crowd?"—exclaimed with tears of dismay: "Oh, Will! Will! I've sent you all over the world to study and become a great musician, and you return such a nigger!"³ (Of course, many white men were also writing hundreds of coon songs at this time.) But this dismissive comment belied the more significant aspects of Cook's achievement: the landmark arrival of African American talent on Broadway by a composer who was endeavoring to elevate the level of stereotypic minstrelsy to a New Negro musical. The *New York Dramatic Mirror* of July 6, 1898 reported that even though *Clorindy* was of the coon song order, the musical as a whole was of a much higher class than the average ragtime ditty, and the orchestration was full of effects seldom heard outside of grand opera.

Cook's mother was probably further displeased to see her son's continued

venue, this venture was indeed the pinnacle of Cook's career. It was performed more than a thousand times, including a command performance at Buckingham Palace for Prince Edward's ninth birthday.

"On Emancipation Day," the cakewalking finale of *In Dabomey*, is one of Cook's most successful "ragtime" compositions. After Abraham Lincoln's signing of the Proclamation liberating the slaves in 1863, Washingtonians marked this momentous occasion with an Emancipation Day celebration, continuously commemorated during Cook's childhood. This event was distinguished by brass band parades and speeches by such notables as Frederick Douglass and John Mercer Langston. **"On Emancipation Day"** was no doubt inspired by the actual circumstances of that historic day. Cook's development of small musical ideas, particularly syncopated rhythmic figures, his artfully crafted climactic structure, and his use of harmonies just beyond the ordinary make this one of his most effective pieces. Moreover, Dunbar's lyrics speak to the profound irony of whites embracing Black music and culture while denying African-Americans social and economic equality:

On Emancipation day,
All you white folks clear de way . . .
When dey hear dem ragtime tunes
White fo'ks try to pass fo' coons
On Emancipation day.

Here was a clear, perhaps even prophetic statement about the appropriation of African-American culture that would characterize the emergent popular music industry in subsequent decades.

lyrics in a melodic style reminiscent of the "Merry Widow Waltz" by Franz Lehar. The waltzing chorus makes an unexpected appearance after a verse in 6/8 meter. Love and romance are likewise evident in "**As The Sunflower Turns to the Sun**" and in "**The Little Gypsy Maid**," a white version of "Brown-Skin Baby Mine." The two different texts for "The Little Gypsy Maid" are a poignant reminder that it was often necessary to change words and plots to facilitate performances in both black and white theatrical productions.

In the exquisite art song "**Red, Red Rose**," Alex Rogers's lyrics poetically search for the red rose that holds the secret of his love. The instrumental accompaniment partners with the voice, sharing equally in supporting the textual meaning. As the drama builds to the unusual meter changes in the chorus, the poem passionately asks: "Are you my love? O! red rose speak to me." "**Red, Red Rose**," "**Wid de Moon, Moon, Moon**," and other Cook songs were favored in stage performances and recitals by Will Marion Cook's wife, soprano Abbie Mitchell, a celebrated singer/actress who starred as the original Clara in George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, among other productions.

Will Marion Cook shows quite a different mood in his only Negro spiritual publication, "**Troubled in Mind**" (1929), published the same year as the stock market crash. Its middle section is an original composition in a slow drag manner, creating a captivating integration of the sacred and secular idioms. This work may also have autobiographical significance when considering Cook's bouts with depression and other infirmities. Unique for its synthesis of the traditional spiritual genre and Cook's composed segment, it also illustrates the musical attributes that made him such an important influence on both his contemporaries and later generations of African-American composers. The adventurous chromatic harmony and melodic gift evident in this piece are extraordinary, and later composers such as Duke Ellington drew much inspiration from Cook's musical works.

A much earlier song "There's A Place In the Old Vacant Chair," was dedicated to Will Marion Cook's mother, and is one of the first examples of the brilliant Cook adding his individual stamp to the formulaic genre of parlor song. Other examples of sentimental longing for hearth and home are John Payne and Henry Bishop's immensely popular "Home! Sweet Home!" (1823) and Henry Russell's nostalgic "The Old Arm Chair" (1840). These songs exploit the common fondness for music that calls up cherished memories of the past, for example, the Stephen Foster plantation songs "Old Folks At Home," "My Old Kentucky Home," and "Old Black Joe." Cook's compositional voice embellishes the usual parlor song with a few phrases in a minor key, a chorus characteristically built on short melodic and rhythmic figures, and an unusual number of chromatic tones in the melody. The frequent use of chromaticism combined with a three-note rising melody give this little song an unusual pathos.

Cook later produced another lovely example of the parlor song, "Returned." He embraces "plantation nostalgia" wholeheartedly in this piece, to the point of including a quote from the much-loved Stephen Foster's "Old Folks at Home." Some implications in the Paul Laurence Dunbar text are considered offensive today, and we cannot tolerate the "rose-colored glasses" view of slavery: loyalty to the master, affection for the old home place, a general golden glow over plantation life, and of course, slaves singing contentedly, a tragically misinformed view held by many slave owners in the pre-Civil War era and even later. However, these "plantation nostalgia" songs grew out of genuinely affectionate memories of the past: loved ones who lived, died, and were buried on the plantations, celebrations in the rural communities of slaves and later, sharecroppers or freedmen owning small farms; the southern Black church and its often ecstatic services; and the well-known familiar landscape of the South. To truly understand these songs, the listener must comprehend the context in which Cook wrote them and must be able to step back in time.

his operatic training the vocal techniques more typically associated with African-American culture and musics such as sermons, spirituals, hollers, hymns, blues, jazz, and gospel. These traditions were all a part of his early musical experiences in Mississippi. He also incorporated theatrical nuances, such as the use of different voices to delineate various characters in a narrative text. These techniques would have been familiar and available to Cook.

As he worked with long-established African-American traditions and American musical theatre, Will Marion Cook developed a distinctive style and made an enormous contribution to American music. Tragically, tenor William Brown died unexpectedly just after the recording phase of this project was completed; so this disc is a tribute to two great American musicians. It is our hope that this recording will make the contributions of both of them clear to new generations of American musicians and music lovers.

—Marva Griffin Carter

¹ James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson* (1933; reprint, New York: Viking Press, 1968), 173.

² Will Marion Cook, "Clorindy, the Origin of the Cakewalk," *Theatre Arts* (Sept. 1947): 61-65. Reprinted in *Readings in Black American Music*, ed. Eileen Southern, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), 223.

³ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁴ James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manbattan* (3rd ed., New York: Athenaeum, 1972), 171.

⁵ W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; reprint, New York: New American Library, 1969), 45.

⁶ Undated letter from Will Marion Cook to Mercer Cook in the Mercer Cook Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Library, Howard University.

ANN SEARS

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dissertation was about American art song in turn-of-the-century Boston. Concert appearances include the Amalfi Coast Music Festival in Italy, the Master Musicians Festival in Kentucky, the Sumner School Museum and St. Patrick's in the City in Washington, D.C., the Gardner Museum and the French Library in Boston, and various schools and universities in the United States. She appears as pianist on the compact discs: *Deep River: The Art Songs and Spirituals of Harry T. Burleigh*, with Oral Moses, bass, (Northeastern Records and Albany Records), and *Fi-ye-er! A Century of African-American Song*, with William Brown, tenor (Albany Records). Her research interests are American art song, the concert tradition in African-American music, and American opera and musical theater. She has presented papers and lecture recitals at national meetings of the Society for American Music, the College Music Society, the International Society for the Study of European Ideas, and the American Matthey Association. Her articles and reviews have appeared in the *Sonneck Society Bulletin*, *American Music*, the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, second edition, *International Dictionary of Black Composers*, *Reader's Guide to Music: History, Theory, Criticism*, *St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture*, *American Music Teacher*, *Black Music Research Journal*, *Music Library Association Notes*, and the recent *Cambridge Companion to the Musical*. She is currently president of the American Matthey Association for Piano, and she serves on the Committee for Cultural Inclusion in the College Music Society.



Jump Back (*A Negro Love Song*) (*Paul Laurence Dunbar*)

Seen my lady home las' night, Jump back, honey, jump back. Hel' huh han' an' sqe'z it tight, Jump back, honey, jump back. Hyeahd huh sigh a little sigh, Seen a light gleam f'om huh eye, An' a smile go flittin' by — Jump back, honey, jump back. ° Hyeadh de win' blow thoo' de pine, Jump back, honey, jump back. Mockin'-bird was singin' fine, Jump back, honey, jump back. An' my hea't was beatin' so, When I reached my lady's do', Dat I couldn't ba' to go — Jump back, honey, jump back. ° Put my ahm aroun' huh waist', Jump back, honey, jump back. Raised huh lips an' took a tase, Jump back, honey, jump back. Love, me, honey, love me true? Love me well ez I love you? An' she answe'd, "'Cose I do" — Jump back, honey, jump back.

My Lady's Lips (*James Weldon Johnson*)

Breeze a-sighin' and a-blowin', Southern summer night; Stars a'gleamin' and a'glowin', Moon jes' shinin' right. Strollin' like de lovers do 'Long de lane wid Lindy Lou. Honey on her lips to waste. "Speck I'm gwine to steal a taste. ° Bird a'whistlin' and a-swayin' In de live-oak tree; Seems to me he keeps a-sayin', "Kiss dat gal fo' me!" Look heah, Mister Mockin'bird, Gwine to take you at yo' word; If I meet a Waterloo, Gwine to blame it all on you. ° Honey in de rose, I s'pose is Put dere fo' de bee; Honey on her lips, I knows, is Put dere jes' fo' me. Seen a sparkle in her eye, Hyeahd her sorter heave a sigh, Felt her kinder squeeze my han'; "Nuff to make me understan'. ° Oh, my lady's lips am like de honey, My lady's lips am like de rose, An' I am jes' like de bee a-buzzin' Roun' de flower where de nectah grows; Little lady's lips dey smile so temptin', Li'l lady's teeth so white dey shine, Li'l lady's lips so tantalizin', Oh, my lady's lips so close to mine!

Returned (*Paul Laurence Dunbar*)

I heard him murmur'ing softly on an old plantation lone, the mansion house had crumbled
and the walls were overgrown, A negro aged and hoary sitting there a dreary sight, No
thought of his condition, not a murmur of his plight, His only dream the mem'ry of the days
that had gone by, When master lived and mistress had the sparkle in her eye, his only dream
the sorrow for the land so rent and gray, His only moan low mumbled for another better day.
° I rambled North a wand'rer when the old slave days were done, I worked from early
dawning till the setting of the sun, I toiled and prayed and struggled till my heart grew sick
and sore, And turned me sad weary from many cruel door, And then my heart turned fondly
to this dear old homestead here Tho' all my friends have left it and all the land is drear, But
now I come back gladly without a plaint or sigh, No other spot shall hold my dust or see me
bend or die. Empty and so silent now the old cabin stands, no spot on earth so dreary as
these bare wide lands, Here the pleasure of my youth I spent, Here thro' sorrows first dim
path I went, Here tho' deserted will I die content.

Down in Lover's Lane (*Plantation Croon*) (*Paul Laurence Dunbar*)

Summah night an' sighin' breeze, 'Long de Lover's Lane' Frien'ly, sadder-mekin' trees,
'Long de Lover's Lane. White folks' wu'k all done up gran'. Me an' Mandy han' in han',
Struttin' lak we owned de lan', 'Long de Lover's Lane. ° Coon a-setting' 'side de road,
'Long de Lover's Lane. Lookin' at us lak he knowed Dis uz Lover's Lane. Min' yo' biz'ness,
Mister Coon, You ain't nevah loved in June. An' come hidin' f'um de moon, Down in Lover's
Lane. ° Bush it bend an' bow an' sway, Down in Lover's Lane. Tryin' to hyeah me, what
I say, Down in Lover's Lane. But I whispahs low lak dis. An my Mandy smile huh bliss.
Mistah Bush he shek' his fis', Down in Lover's Lane. ° An dis' t'ought will allus rise, Down
in Lover's Lane, Wondah wedder in de skies, Dey's a Lover's Lane? Ef dey ain't I tells yo'
true. 'Ligion do look mighty blue. 'Case I doan' know what I'll do, 'Dout a Lover's Lane.

An Exhortation (*Alex Rogers*)

Remember, if a brudder smotes dee on de lef' cheek, Turn roun' an' han' him de odder!
Kase if you kaint 'turn good fu' evil, what's de good o' bein' a brudder? Sez' when de angry
passions rises widin dee, Say, "Satan, go! Git dee behin' me!" Den stop! An' count a hundert,
den go 'bout yo' bus'ness! Be keerful, Be cautious, always look befo' you leap, Be sho' you
do some prayin' befo' you goes-a to sleep. To fight is wrong, it's wrong to fight, An' no two
wrongs-a kaint make-a one right, So try an' be right unto do en'. Dat's right, all right! Amen!

Rain Song (*Alex Rogers*)

Any time you hear de cheers an' tables crack, An' de folks wid rheumatics dey jints is on
de rack, Look fu' rain, rain, rain! ° When de ducks quack loud an' de peacocks cry, An' de
far-off hills seem to be right night, Prepare fu' rain, rain, rain! ° When de ol' cat on de hearth
wid her velvet paws "Gins to wipin' over her whiskered jaws, Sho' sign o' rain, rain, rain. °
When yo' notice de air it stan's stock still, An' de blackbird's voice it gets so awful shrill,
Dat am de time fu' rain. ° When yo' dog quits bones an' begins to fas', An' when you see him
eatin', he is eatin' grass: Shoes', trues', cert'nes sign ob rain! ° No, Mister Simmons, we can
safely say, "Taint gwine ter be no rain to-day, Kase de su' ain' fallin' an' de dogs ain' sleep,
An' you ain' seen no spiders from dere cobwebs creep; ° Las' night de sun went bright to
bed, An' de moon ain' nevah once been seen to hang her head; If you'se watched all dis',
den you kin safely say, Dat dere ain' gwine ter be no rain to-day.

My Lady (Paul Laurence Dunbar; refrain by Will Marion Cook)

De breeze is blowin' cross-a de bay, My Lady, my Lady! De ship hit takes me far away,
My Lady, my Lady! Ol' mars' done sol' me down-a de stream, Dey tell me 'taint so bad as
hit seems, But day an' night ob you I'll dream, My Lady, my Lady! ° Ob co'se I knows dat
you'll be true, My Lady, my Lady! But den I doan' know what to do, My Lady, my Lady!
I knowed some day we'd have to part, But den it put' nigh breaks my heart, I jes' can't sing
'cause tears will start, My Lady, my Lady! De day is long, de night is black, My Lady, my
Lady! I know you'll wait t'well I come back, My Lady, my Lady! ° I'll stan' de ship, I'll stan'
de chain, I'll stan' de sunshine same as de rain, But I'll come back to you again, My Lady,
my Lady! Lady, lady wid de hair ob brown, Curlin' roun', fallin' down, Lips as red as ruby
lips kin be, Jes' seems to be a sayin', Come on, honey, tas'e ob me! Eyes as black as any
blue-black coal, Seem to draw my very heart an' soul; Will you miss me when I'm far away,
O my Lady, my Lady, my Lady?

Springtime (Phil. HY. Armstrong)

Sing a song ob springtime, all de worl' in bloom, Mister Bluebird singin' 'mid de flow'rs'
perfume, Mister Catfish bitin', Mister Bee a-hummin'; Sing a song ob spring days comin',
comin'! Springtime is a-comin'! ° Sing a song ob springtime, sunshine warm an' bright,
Turtledove a-cooin', worl' all full ob light! ° Hear de ol' woodpecker on de tree a-drummin',
sing a song ob springtime comin', comin'! Springtime is a-comin'!

There's a Place in the Old Vacant Chair (*Will Marion Cook*)

The room was heated and stifling. The scene a foreign café. A crowd of sailors were drinking, others were seated at play. One, by himself meditating, Sat in a corner alone. Unwatched the scene there before him, His thoughts were all of his home. He said, "Mates, I got a letter From my old mother today. I'm going to read you the message She sends her boy far away." The years passed; Jack growing older, Longs for the dear ones at home. Longs for a sight of the fields where he and his Nell used to roam. Wonder if Nell is yet faithful, Wonder if she loves me still? Wonder if mother is waiting, In the old home on the hill? He sees the house in the distance, He hesitates at the gate. Then hears his old sweetheart whisper, "Jack, dear, it's never too late," There's a spot by the old fireside waiting, There's a place in the old vacant chair. There's a heart of a fond mother aching, There's a face that is clouded with care. There's a sweetheart who still loves you dearly. Tho' the gray tints the gold in her hair. There's a spot by the old fireside waiting, There's a place in the old vacant chair.

Darktown Barbecue (*Will Marion Cook*)

Down at de barbecue las' Chuesday night Darktown was out. Oh! Lord 'twas a sight! Ev'ryone rode up in somethin' on wheels, Quite a few coons had automobiles. Mandy was dere in huh new gingham dress Wid Dan by huh side jes' prancin' a mess; Old Deacon Johnson an' Aunt Sallie too, Forgot about church at dat barbecue. Dat pig was sho' a treat', My, how dem coons did eat dem pigtails an' pig's feet, so sweet. ° Soon as de eatin' an' drinkin' was through De dance began at dat barbecue. Such scand'lous wingin' ain't nobody seen. Sho' 'twas a sight to watch Tildy Green. She pranced an' she danced till huh face was red. An' when she two-stepped los' dat wig off huh head. 'Cose Razor Mose tried to start up a fuss But Bill cut him down, dat ended de muss. Dem coons wore out dat flo', Dance all night den wanted mo'. 'Twas ragtime an' coon jine fo' sho'. ° You know dat Darktown was out at dat barbecue, Dey eat as ef 'twas deir las' time to; Day sang 'kase dey had no work to do, Darktown was out at dat barbecue.

Mammy (*Lester Walton*)

I've traveled here, I've traveled there and many folks I've met, But Mammy, dear Old Mammy, my thought are of you yet. I long to get back home again before your last goodbye and hear you croon some sad slave tune, 'bout chariots in the sky. Mammy, I shall always think of you. Folks like you these days are few. Mammy with your simple way of the olden golden days. Mammy with your fall of golden hair. I shall always long for you. I miss your smile, your tender way, I miss those prayers you used to say, and I know we'll meet again some day, Mammy.

As the Sunflower Turns to the Sun (*Richard Grant*)

When the Summer day is ending, Ev'ry bird its way is wending To its nest, To its cozy little nest. Then the early stars are winking, And the glowing sun is sinking in the West, In the rosy tinted West. Closed are all the morning-glories, Katydids begin their stories, and the roses know their day of joy is done; Lilies listen, bending lowly, To the white moon rising slowly, But the sunflow'r still is faithful to the sun. ° Fairer flow'rs of rarer beauty, Render homage, 'tis their duty all the day, All the golden Summer day; E'en the reddest of the roses, to the sun her heart discloses, in a way, In the flirt's familiar way. But she's famous for forgetting; Soon she smiles without regretting, On the moon as if he were the favored one; But the sunflow'r failing never, Still is waiting, watching ever, For the good night kiss that's sent her by the sun. ° As the sunflower turns to the sun, from its rising at the dawn, through its course forever on, till its glorious day is done. Turning e'er with pleading eye, to its lover in the sky, As the bird find its way to the nest, As the brooks to the rivers run, So to you I'm ever turning, So for you I'm ever yearning, As the sunflower turns to the sun.

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This recording honors the memory of
William Brown, whose music making
touched all who had the privilege of
hearing him.



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