



Swing Along: The Musical Life of Will Marion Cook

Marva Carter

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Renowned today as a prominent African-American in Music Theater and the Arts community, composer, conductor, and violinist Will Marion Cook was a key figure in the development of American music from the 1890s to the 1920s. In this insightful biography, Marva Griffin Carter offers the first definitive look at this pivotal life's story, drawing on both Cook's unfinished autobiography and his wife Abbie's memoir.

A violin virtuoso, Cook studied at Oberlin College (his parents' alma mater), Berlin's Hochschule für Musik with Joseph Joachim, and New York's national Conservatory of Music with Antonin Dvorak. Cook wrote music for a now-lost production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, and then devoted the majority of his career to black musical comedies due to limited opportunities available to him as a black composer. He was instrumental in showcasing his Southern Syncopated Orchestra in the prominent concert halls of the United States and Europe, even featuring New Orleans clarinetist Sidney Bechet, who later introduced European audiences to authentic blues. Once mentored by Frederick Douglass, Will Marion Cook went on to mentor Duke Ellington, paving the path for orchestral concert jazz.

Through interpretive and musical analyses, Carter traces Cook's successful evolution from minstrelsy to musical theater. Written with his collaborator, the distinguished poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Cook's musicals infused American Musical Theater with African-American music, consequently altering the direction of American popular music. Cook's *In Dahomey*, hailed by Gerald Bordman as "one of the most important events in American Musical Theater history," was the first full-length Broadway musical to be written and performed by blacks.

Alongside his accomplishments, Carter reveals Cook's contentious side- a man known for his aggressiveness, pride, and constant quarrels, who became his own worst enemy in regards to his career. Carter further sets Cook's life against the backdrop of the changing cultural and social milieu: the black theatrical tradition, white audiences' reaction to black performers, and the growing consciousness and sophistication of blacks in the arts, especially music.

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