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## “Research Report”. Review of The Music and Scripts of "in Dahomey," Music of the United States of America, Vol. 5.

Marva Carter

*Georgia State University*, [mgcarter@gsu.edu](mailto:mgcarter@gsu.edu)

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# RESEARCH REPORT

Christine D. de Catanzaro, editor

**Editor's Note:** This month's guest writer, Marva Griffin Carter, is Assistant Professor of Music History and Literature at Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia. She is currently writing a musical biography of Will Marion Cook for Oxford University Press.

**Thomas L. Riis, editor**

*The Music and Scripts of "In Dahomey," Music of the United States of America, Vol. 5* Madison, Wisconsin: A-R Editions, Inc., 1996. 245 pp., \$128. ISBN: 0-89579-342-3 (paperback only)

ONE of Broadway's landmark musical comedies, *In Dahomey* has been masterfully edited by Thomas L. Riis in the fifth volume of *Music in the United States of America*. The MUSA series of forty projected scholarly editions was established in 1988 by the American Musicological Society in order to represent notable achievements and to reflect the diverse character and shape of American music-making. Previous editions have included the compositions of Ruth Crawford, Irving Berlin, Amy Beach, and Daniel Read.

This latest edition features the first full-length black musical comedy presented at a major Broadway theatre. It opened at the New York Theatre on February 18, 1903, and ran for fifty-three performances. *In Dahomey* showcased the talents of composer-conductor Will Marion Cook, composer-lyricist Alex Rogers, scriptwriter and stage manager, Jesse Shipp, and comedians Bert Williams and George Walker. It was performed more than one thousand times to biracial national and international audiences between 1902 and 1905.

The plot of *In Dahomey* features two cunning detectives who attempt to recover a lost heirloom for profit. Their quest coincidentally involves a colonization society's desire to settle in Dahomey. The historical context for the music, scripts, versions, performance style, and recordings has been investigated exhaustively by Riis in an introductory essay.

This show has more extant music than

any other of its kind. The Keith, Prowse and Company piano-vocal score (published as a result of the work's London tour) serves as the centerpiece to which interpolated numbers are added. This edition presents the music and scripts used in various performances, from which a modern performance could be mounted.

There are choral numbers, solo songs, and instrumental dance numbers that are still interesting to modern ears, including "Caboccers Entrance," "Swing Along," "Society," "On Emancipation Day," and "Brown-Skin Baby Mine." They range from syncopated ragtime songs to choral operatic ensembles.

Most of the songs conform to turn-of-the-century Tin Pan Alley styles, although Cook exhibits novel expansions from these norms. Educated at conservatories in Oberlin, Berlin (with Joseph Joachim), and New York (with Antonín Dvořák), Cook brings his training to bear on these compositions.

In "Caboccers Entrance," with lyrics by Paul Laurence Dunbar, Cook begins with pseudo-African effects, shifts to ragtime style, and culminates with a chorale-like operatic finish. The opening chorus, "Swing Along," illustrates Cook's skills at compositional synthesis. Riis astutely notes:

Perhaps the song's chief merit is the way it deftly negotiates the dual

challenge of presenting a palatable image to white audiences while making an explicit appeal to black pride (p. xxxiv).

This song is Cook's most performed and recorded composition.

The value of this edition is enhanced by Riis's inclusion of such interpolated songs as "I May Be Crazy, But I Ain't No Fool" and the well-known "I'm a Jonah Man," both written by Alex Rogers and performed by Bert Williams, as well as "I Wants to Be a Actor Lady" by Harry Von Tilzer with lyrics by Vincent Bryan. Among the appendixes is a rare orchestration of the two-step "On Emancipation Day" by Cook, which was used as the cake-walking finale to the musical.

The songs and scripts of *In Dahomey* attempt to convey positive messages about blackness that are free of the degrading racial stereotypes of minstrelsy. Although the dialogue and lyrics are occasionally marked by turn-of-the-century ethnic humor, the music of *In Dahomey* transcends both time and race. This edition deserves to be included in every school's library.

Marva Griffin Carter  
Georgia State University  
Atlanta, Georgia

—CJ—

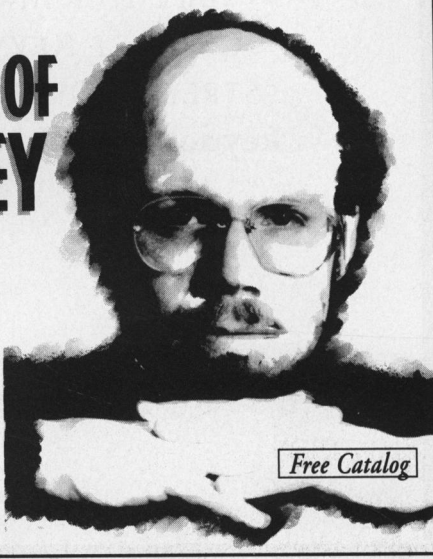
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