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Will Marion Cook

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The Grove Dictionary of
**American
Music**

Second Edition

Volume Two

Brown, Earle – Dolceola

Edited by

Charles Hiroshi Garrett

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Cook has made key scholarly contributions in feminist musicology, American music, and dance. Beginning with *Opera for a New Republic* (1988), a central theme in her research has been the influence of American vernacular musics on 1920s European modernity. *Cecilia Reclaimed* (1994), co-edited with Judy Tsou, is a significant anthology in feminist music history. Cook's ongoing attention to gendered, raced, and embodied musical identities is best exemplified by "Watching Our Step: Embodying Research, Telling Stories" in *Audible Traces* (1999), a study of the ragtime exhibition dancers Irene and Vernon Castle that established critical connections between musicology and social dance research.

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CHRISTINA BAADE

Cook, Will Marion (b Washington, DC, 27 Jan 1869; d New York, NY, 19 July 1944). Composer and conductor. Christened William Mercer Cook, he later changed his name to Will Marion in honor of his mother. Cook came from the first generation of well-educated post-Civil War African Americans who were born free. With this new-found liberty, he became an advocate for racial uplift in the transition from the minstrel show to the black musical. A gifted violinist, he attended Oberlin Preparatory and then Oberlin College between 1884 and 1888, the alma mater of both his parents, John Hartwell and Isabel Marion Cook. The following year he studied violin at the Hochschule für Musik in Berlin with Joseph Joachim. In 1893 he studied composition with ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK at the National Conservatory in New York and accepted his teacher's challenge to forge a new path using America's indigenous music.

Cook honed his theatrical skills in black musical comedy with the multi-talented Bob Cole at Worth's Museum, a downtown theater in Manhattan. He produced *Clorindy, or The Origin of the Cakewalk*, Broadway's

first black musical-comedy sketch, in 1898. For nearly two decades, Cook directed and composed a record number of black musical comedies including *The Policy Players* (1899), *Jes Lak White Fo'ks* (1900), *In Dahomey* (1902), *The Southerners: A Musical Study in Black and White* (1904), *In Abyssinia* (1906), *Bandanna Land* (1908), and *Darkeydom* (1915). More often than not, the musicals featured the vaudeville team of Bert Williams and George Walker and played on Broadway. *In Dahomey* was the first full-length musical written and performed by blacks to be presented at a major Broadway venue. It enjoyed more than a thousand performances in various theaters, including a command performance at Buckingham Palace for Prince Edward's ninth birthday.

Cook intermittently conducted the Afro-American Folk Song Singers, The Memphis Students, and the Clef Club. Following the historic Clef Club Carnegie Hall concert on 2 May 1912 Cook received increased notoriety for his songs. "Swing Along," "Rain Song," and "Exhortation" were performed on that occasion and subsequently published by Schirmer. In 1918 he organized the Southern Syncopated Orchestra that toured nationally and internationally, and which gave a command performance for King George V in 1919. Soprano saxophonist Sidney Bechet was a prominent soloist in the group who introduced authentic blues to European audiences.

Respected for his pioneering achievements in popular songwriting, black musical comedies, and syncopated orchestral music, Cook dramatically transformed these genres during his musical career. His extant songs (which number about 60) range from ethnic coon songs to sophisticated art songs. Their themes encompass love, nostalgia, home, motherhood, and emancipation. He collaborated with such African Americans as Paul Laurence Dunbar and James Weldon Johnson to create lyrics for his songs, and also wrote lyrics himself. Songs with his original words include "Sweetie Dear," "Lovie Joe," and "I'm Coming Virginia." Will Marion Cook's legacy as a songwriter steeped in the German Romantic tradition sets him apart from his contemporaries through his use of highly syncopated, chromatic melodies and extended song forms. His ingenious melodic lines may have resulted from his training as a classical violinist. Cook's personality portrayed a man whose uncompromising assertion of black pride and consciousness of the New Negro took precedence over his career, a factor that may account for his relative neglect. Perhaps his greatest gift was as mentor to such artists as Eubie Blake, Duke Ellington, Eva Jessye, and Hall Johnson. He revealed in his memoirs that his ultimate challenge was to try to destroy wrongs, and at the same time to write beautiful music.

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