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Review: The Memoirs of Alton Augustus Adams, Sr.: First Black Bandmaster of the United States Navy

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The Memoirs of Alton Augustus Adams, Sr.: First Black Bandmaster of the United States Navy. Edited by Mark Clague. Forward by Samuel Floyd, Jr. Music of the African Diaspora 12. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008. 388 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0520251311 (hc).

Reviewed by Marva Carter, Georgia State University

These memoirs reveal the story of Alton Augustus Adams, Sr., the first black bandmaster in the United States Navy. Born in the Virgin Islands in 1889, he joined the United States military in 1917 when America acquired the islands from Denmark. Although racial policies confined blacks to being mess attendants and stewards, Adams and his all-black band were inducted to provide a bridge between the largely black local population and their new, all-white naval administrators. "During the almost fourteen years of its existence (1917-31), the United States Navy Band of the Virgin Islands achieved one of the highest records in the navy for discipline, appearance, behavior, and musical performance." (101) The band engaged in a successful tour in 1924 along the eastern seaboard of the United States.

Largely self-taught, Adams took correspondence courses in harmony, counterpoint, and composition with Hugh A. Clarke at the University of Pennsylvania, among others, since there were few instructors and no music schools on the island of St. Thomas. He became an accomplished flutist and featured himself in virtuosic solos with the band. Adams's best known compositions, "Virgin Islands March" (1919), "The Governor's Own" (1921), and "Spirit of the U.S.N." (1924) were composed in the style of his idol, John Philip Sousa, and were performed throughout the United States and Europe.

Alton Adams began writing his memoirs in 1973, when he was 84 years of age. He worked on the project for approximately fourteen years. It was unfinished when he died in 1987. Samuel Floyd, Jr., founder of the Center for Black Music Research at Columbia College in Chicago, acquired Adams's papers through his son, Alton Augustus Adams, Jr. Moreover, Floyd was able to interest Mark Clague in completing the writing of the memoirs. The editorial methods section outlines how Adams's writings were transformed into this book (288-9). Parts of the book are based on contemporary newspaper clippings which were preserved in scrapbooks. A number of articles were written by Adams himself, who was a journalist and wrote for many newspapers and journals. These encompass interviews with numerous friends, acquaintances, and tourists, including Irving Berlin. Clague incorporated a scholarly realization informed by various sources and archival research. He wrote an impressive introduction describing the historical and cultural context and notes which offer his editorial and scholarly commentary. For example, the editor's introductory essay details Adams's extensive friendship with W.E.B. DuBois, who once stayed at his home in St. Thomas. These recollections are among the most profound in the book. Unlike Adams, DuBois is portrayed as seeing "everything and everyone in purely racial terms." (269)

Not much would be known about the life and legacy of Alton Adams, were it not for this account. In commemoration of the American bicentennial in 1976, New World Records

recorded his march, "The Governor's Own." The following year, Samuel Floyd, Jr. wrote a comprehensive article in *Black Perspective in Music* on Alton Augustus Adams based on interviews with him. Mark Clague's encyclopedic article in the *International Dictionary of Black Composers* published by the Center for Black Music Research in 1999 contains the first interpretive analysis of its kind on the subject.

Alton Adams's unique memoirs address the dynamics of race, social class, identity, art, and society among other issues. He appealed to a history of racial tolerance rooted in the Virgin Islands' cosmopolitan past. It was his desire to help fill gaps missing from existing accounts. It would be his hope that this book will encourage others to write similar works.