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# Swing Along: The Musical Life of Will Marion Cook

By Marva Carter



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## Swing Along: The Musical Life of Will Marion Cook By Marva Carter

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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## Swing Along: The Musical Life of Will Marion Cook By Marva Carter Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #1978570 in Books
- Published on: 2008-09-11
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.10" h x .90" w x 9.40" l, .0 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 208 pages

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Will Marion Cook's contribution to American music was profound; his role in creating the black musicals of the early twentieth century, his insistence that oral music traditions be honored and reinterpreted, and his seminal role in the creation of jazz have been too little recognized. Marva Carter, with help from Cook's son Mercer, presents us with a carefully documented account of this complicated but indispensable genius."--Jean E. Snyder, Assistant Professor of Music, Edinboro University of Pennsylvania

"This well-written and insight-filled book contains cover-to-cover revelations of aspects of the life and musical times of this aspiring violinist-turned-conductor and composer. The author gives significant attention to Cook's roles in "removing the minstrel mask," his relationships with many of the musicians of his time, including Harry T. Burleigh, Antonin Dvorak, Eubie, Will Tyers, James Reese Europe, Duke Ellington, Eva Jesse, and a host of others, and the basis for his personal and professional eccentricities and the controversies that were always a part of his life. This book will be *must* reading for teachers and professors of music, and certainly worthwhile reading for the public at-large, especially those who want to know more about the sources of the musical heritage of the United States of America."--Samuel Floyd, author of *The Power of Black Music* (Oxford 1995), Founder and former Director, Center for Black Music Research

"Our knowledge of African American music will remain incomplete so long as the life's work of Will Marion Cook is neglected. Marva Carter's biography--a book years in the making--significantly enhances our perspective on and understanding of Cook's extraordinary personality and unique accomplishments."--Thomas L. Riis, Joseph Negler Professor of Music and Director of the American Music Research Center, University of Colorado

#### About the Author

**Marva Griffin Carter** is an Associate Professor of Music History and Literature in the School of Music at Georgia State University

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**Kathleen Bosarge:**

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**Lynn Jones:**

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**Jose Coleman:**

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