

The Greatest Violinist

"The reviewer said that Will Marion Cook was definitely 'the world's greatest Negro violinist'.

Dad Cook took his violin and went to see the reviewer at the newspaper office.

'Thank you very much for the favorable review', he said. 'You wrote that I was the world's greatest Negro violinist.'

'Yes, Mr. Cook,' the man said, 'and I meant it. You are definitely the world's greatest Negro violinist.'

With that, Dad Cook took out his violin and smashed it across the reviewer's desk.

'I am not the world's greatest Negro violinist,' he exclaimed, 'I am the greatest violinist in the world!'"

Will Marion Cook was much more than a violinist. He was a composer, conductor, performer, teacher, and producer. He has contributed to nearly every aspect of black music during his time and worked with nearly every other important musician in his fields. Many would consider him a Renaissance Man of his time. Personally, I consider him a genius.

Cook was born in Washington, D.C., on January 27, 1869. His father, John Hartwell Cook, was dean of the Liberal Law School at Howard University. After his father died of tuberculosis, his mother had him sent away to live with his grandparents in Chattanooga, Tennessee. This was obviously an overwhelming and unexpected chain of events for a 10-year old black child to experience. But all of this turned out for the better. Chattanooga, is where he first experienced black folk music.

In Chattanooga, he learned the value of hard work. He worked as a farm hand on his grandfather's farm. He learned to shoe horses, chop wood, and repair wagons. One thing he never learned was discipline. When he caused trouble or fooled around with the girls in town(He was quite the ladies man), he was punished with an array of punishments that includes taking away pocket money, dessert, locking him in his room, lashing him, or

beating him. But he never learned his lesson. He would often get into fights with white boys when they called him 'nigger'. He was much too proud to stand by and accept the racial injustice. Eventually, his grandfather, not able to deal with this trouble, sent him back to D.C. After experiencing the vast plains of Tennessee and its unique music he made the decision of pursuing a career in music.

In 1883, he studied at the Oberlin Conservatory in Ohio to begin his foray into music, specifically the violin. What made young Cook choose to attend Oberlin at the age of fourteen? Oberlin was a pioneering school in a way. They were big supporters of the abolition of slavery, and they were one of the first schools to offer degrees to women. Both of Cook's parents also attended Oberlin. At Oberlin he was known for his stellar performances on the violin. He had a certain level of showmanship and expression that could only be seen in master violinists. Eventually his talent outgrew what his professors could teach him. He sought the to study abroad in Berlin. Since he didn't have the money at the time, he talked to Frederick Douglass for a source of funding. Douglass arranged a recital that raised Cook over \$2000, which was plenty of money at the time to attend school at Berlin and then some.

In Berlin, he studied violin at a leading music institution lead by Joseph Joachim, a friend of Johannes Brahms. He progressed rapidly and began to build a name for himself. He became fluent in German and really appreciated the liberal, more tolerant nature of of German culture at the time.

In 1889 he eventually returned to America because his funds had run dry. On his returned, he realized that the real money in the music industry came from conducting. He started an ensemble that saw a good deal of success. Eventually, when he was in his early twenties he decided to conduct and compose full time. He began to perform at different fairs across the country. He met many famous composers and experienced many different genres of music. It was at one of the fairs that he met the great composer Antonín Dvořák.

Will Marion Cook was introduced to Dvořák through a letter prompted by Harry T. Burleigh. Harry was another student of Dvořák's and played a significant role in the

development of African American Music. Dvořák's *New World Symphony* was heavily influenced by African American and Native American melodies. He had philosophy that a countries classical music should be derived from the folk music of that country. This composition took the world by storm. In a way, having a world renowned composer write music based on American folk songs legitimized American music and its composers.

How could Cook possibly impress such a famous composer? What did Cook have to offer this Czech musical genius? At the time, Cook was working on *Scenes from the Opera of Uncle Tom's Cabin*, so this is what he chose to present to Dvořák. His charm and fluency of German worked its magic and Cook was able to join Dvořák's composition class.

Under Dvořák's influence, Cook learned to return to his African American roots. Instead of further pursuing a more classical European approach to composing, like he had been trained since he attended Oberlin at age 14, he began to compose music that relied more on classic African American folk songs and ragtime. His mother was often surprised as to the direction Will took in his path to success, "'Oh! Will! I send you all around the world so that you become a great musician, and you return such a Nigger!'"

After studying with Dvořák at the National Conservatory for Music in New York for a period of time(1894-1895), he started to make popular music. He realized that his classical career was not making him as much money and was not taking him as far as he thought it would. For this reason he entered the world of black musical theatre. His first big musical success was *Clorindy* or *The Origin of the Cakewalk*. Many consider cakewalk the predecessor to ragtime. The performance of *Clorindy* at the Casino Roof Garden was Broadway's first black musical-comedy sketch. It was the talk of New York at the time. In fact, it was so popular during its first performance that people left the original venue downstairs to see it.

It was during the production of *Clorindy* that Will Marion Cook met his wife, Abbie Mitchell. She was an untrained singer who was hired to join the "chorus girls". Eventually, under the careful instruction of Harry T. Burleigh and Cook, she blossomed to eventually take on a leading role. Cook and Mitchell eventually got married on October

12, 1900. Abbie was 20 years younger than Will and didn't even have a high school education. Will's class conscious family often frowned upon their relationship. Regardless, Will had his first child, a baby girl, Marion Abigail.

After *Clorindy*, Cook went on to compose a few more musicals and Broadway plays: *The Policy Players*, *Uncle Eph's Christmas*, *The Cannibal King*. One of the more famous works that he composed the music for was *In Dahomey*. This musical comedy is about a group of African Americans who, after finding a pot of gold, travel to Africa and eventually become rulers of Dahomey. Bert Williams, a leading black comedian at the time played a leading role. Eventually, *In Dahomey* gained such fame that it was requested to be played in England by King Edward VII in celebration Prince Edward of Wales ninth birthday celebration. This was monumental because a performance of this caliber had never before been performed before a royal audience.

All while Will was composing and concertizing famous works, he was also a contributing member of the Clef Club. The Clef Club was a popular music venue for African American Musicians in Harlem. James Reese Europe was the club's president. A notable name in music. He was a renowned ragtime and early jazz bandleader, arranger, and composer. The two shared similar views in the direction that African American music should be taking. They both believed that their Negro music should try to separate themselves from white classical style. They eventually worked on a musical comedy, *Darkydom* together.

Will Marion Cook was admired by many whose careers he jumpstarted. One of his most famous students was Duke Ellington. He would often tell Duke to 'Not be anyone but yourself'. This not only served as solid advice for Duke, but this also served as Cook's own personal mantra. Cook would often give Duke lessons while driving around Central Park in a taxicab.

His ambitions were too high. By the time he died on July 19, 1944, he largely thought that his life was unsuccessful and unfulfilling. Those who met him and have experienced his expertise and unique views would most definitely disagree.

Many notable musicians, whether black or white, can trace some influence back to Will

Marion Cook. He trailblazed a path for African Americans in Broadway. His belief (that he shared with Dvořák) that music you make should be deeply connected with your roots promoted a unique and unheard of style, which eventually lead onto great new genres of music like jazz, and rhythm and blues.

References

- [1] Marva Griffin Carter *Swing Along: The Musical Life of Will Marion Cook* 2008:Oxford University Press, USA.
- [2] *Will Marion Cook(1869-1944)[biography]* Last Updated 2011: Library of Congress.
- [3] Maurice Peress *Dvořák to Duke Ellington* 2004:Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- [4] Michael Beckerman *Dvořák and His World* 1993: Princeton University Press, New Jersey.
- [5] John C. Tibbetts *Dvořák in America* 1993: Amadeus Press, Oregon.
- [6] Michael B. Beckerman *New Worlds of Dvořák* 2003:W.W. Norton & Company, New York.