

# "VOICES FROM THE DARKNESS"

African-America & Sherlock Holmes

by

Howard Ostrom & Ray Wilcockson

## Prelude 1909.

In the latter half of 1909, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle devoted considerable time and energy to writing, lecturing and lobbying on behalf of the victims of what he called "The Crime of the Congo". Chapter VI of his October pamphlet of that name was movingly entitled "Voices From the Darkness" indicating his prime motive – to articulate the silent suffering of the Congolese people at the hands of King Leopold of Belgium. In so doing Doyle revealed enlightened attitudes to Black Africans years ahead of their time. "The Crime of the Congo" may be read here: [http://www.kongo-kinshasa.de/dokumente/lekture/crime\\_of\\_congo.pdf](http://www.kongo-kinshasa.de/dokumente/lekture/crime_of_congo.pdf)



Perhaps it was some sense of this, of Doyle as a unifying "Citizen of the World" that informed the invitation from America, in December of that same year, to referee the forthcoming World Heavyweight Contest between Jim Jeffries, the old, undefeated, retired, white champion and the new, negro title-holder, Jack Johnson. As it transpired, Doyle, reluctantly, refused.

**Bert A. Williams (1875 - 1922)**, born in Nassau, Bahamas, played a character named Shylock Homestead, called "Shy" by his friends, in the African-American stage musical "In Dahomey" (1903). Bert A. Williams was a key figure in the development of African-American entertainment, and the first black superstar. In an age when racial inequality and stereotyping were commonplace, he became the first black American to take a lead role on the Broadway stage, and did much to push back racial barriers during his career. Fellow vaudevillian W. C. Fields, who appeared in productions with Williams, described him as "the funniest man I ever saw – and the saddest man I ever knew."<sup>1</sup> Williams had a partner named **George W. Walker (1872 -1911)**. In "In Dahomey", Walker portrayed slippery Rareback Pinkerton, opposite Williams' Shylock "Shy" Homestead. Jas Obrecht adds, "Among my papers, I have an original program that was handed out during

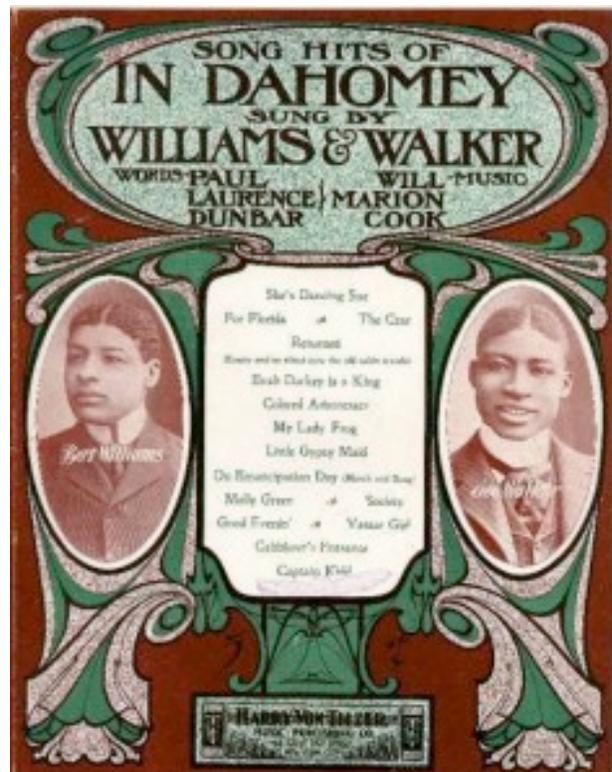
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<sup>1</sup> Wintz, Cary D. *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance*, Routledge (2004), page 1210



### "In Dahomey" (1903)

the opening week of In Dahomey. Beneath the cast listing, it describes 'The Story of 'In Dahomey'' as follows: 'An old Southern negro, 'Lightfoot' by name, president of the Dahomey Colonization Society, loses a silver casket,



which, to use his language, has a cat scratched on the back. He sends to Boston for detectives to search for the missing treasure. Shylock Homestead and Rareback Pinkerton (Williams and Walker), the detectives on the case, failing to find the casket in Gatorville, Florida, 'Lightfoot's' home, accompany the colonists to Dahomey."<sup>2</sup>



**Shylock Homestead & Rareback Pinkerton  
Bert A. Williams & George W. Walker**

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<sup>2</sup> <http://jasobrecht.com/bert-williams-george-walker-african-american-superstars/>

**THE NEW YORK THEATRE**  
 Occupying the entire block on Broadway, between 44th and 45th Sts.  
 KILMARTIN & BELANGER, Proprietors and Managers  
 1041  
 Feb 28 1903  
 8.15. Matinees Wednesday and Saturday at 2.15  
**PRICES, 25c., 50c., 75c., and \$1.00.**

COMMENCING MONDAY MATINEE, FEB. 23, 1903.  
 HURTIG & SEAMON present  
**WILLIAMS and WALKER**  
 IN THEIR NEWEST SUCCESS,  
**IN DAHOMEY**  
 A Musical Farce, in Three Acts.  
 Music by Will Marion Cook. Lyrics by Paul Lawrence Dunbar. Book by J. A. Shipp  
 GEO. H. HARRIS, Manager. CHAS. F. WIEGAND, Business Manager.

**Cast of Characters**

Shylock Homestead, called "Shy" by his friends.....BERT A. WILLIAMS  
 Rareback Pinkerton, "Shy's" personal friend and adviser.....GEO. W. WALKER  
 Cicero Lightfoot, president of a colonization society.....Pete Hampton  
 Dr. Straight (in name only), street fakir.....Fred Douglas  
 Mose Lightfoot, brother of Cicero, thinks Dahomey a land of great promise. Wm. Barker  
 George Reeder, keeps an intelligence office.....Alex Rogers  
 Henry Stampfield, letter carrier, with an argument against immigration.....Walter Richardson  
 Ma Sing, keeps a chop suey factory.....Geo. Cutlin  
 Hustling Charley, promoter of Get-the-Coin syndicate.....J. A. Shipp  
 Leather, a bootblack.....Richard Connors  
 Officer Still.....Geo. Pickett  
 Messenger Rush, but not often.....Theodore Pankey  
 Bill Palmrose.....James Hill  
 Cecelia Lightfoot, Cicero's wife.....Mrs. Hattie McIntosh  
 Mrs. Stringer, dealer in forlorn patterns, also editor of fashionnotes in  
 "Beanville Agitator".....Mrs. Lottie Williams  
 Rosetta Lightfoot, a troublesome young thing.....Aida Overton Walker  
 Colonists, Natives, etc.

**Synopsis.**

ACT I.—Scene 1—Public Square, Boston.  
 ACT II.—Scene 1—Exterior of Lightfoot's home, Gatorville, Florida. Scene 2—  
 Road, one-and-a-half miles from Gatorville. Scene 3—Interior of the Lightfoot home.  
 ACT III.—Scene 1—Swamp in Dahomey. (Here is introduced Marvelous Craig  
 Scene 2—Garden of the Cabocers (Governors of a Province). Execution tower in the  
 distance.

**THE STORY OF "IN DAHOMEY."**

An old Southern negro, "Lightfoot" by name, president of the Dahomey Colonization Society, loses a silver casket, which, to use his language, has a cat scratched on the back. He sends to Boston for detectives to search for the missing treasure. Shylock Homestead and Rareback Pinkerton (Williams and Walker), the detectives in the case, failing to find the casket at Gatorville, Fla., "Lightfoot's" home, accompany the colonists to Dahomey, to receive the casket. In Dahomey, upon leaving Boston on their perilous mission, the detectives find a syndicate, in Dahomey, run of any kind, when given as a present, is a sign of appreciation. Shylock and Rareback having free access to the syndicate's stock of whisky, treat the King of Dahomey, with the proceeds of their speculation and interest are made Cabocers (governors of a Province). In the new Cabocers' consent to own a casket.

**MUSICAL NUMBERS.**

ACT I.  
 "Medicine Fakir Quartette," "Dot Gal of Mine".....Vaughan, Hill, Pickett, Henderson  
 "Organ Quartette".....Elkins, Salsbury, Connor and Topley  
 "No. 10 Green".....Henry Troy and Company  
 "When Susan Comes to Courtown" (interpolated), (by Alex. Rogers and Vaudean),  
 Geo. W. Walker and Company  
 "Broadway in Dahomey" (interpolated), by Alex. Rogers and J. Bus.  
 Williams, Walker and Company

ACT II.  
 "Letter of Colored Aristocracy".....Mrs. Hattie McIntosh and Company  
 "Society".....Hattie Hopkins, Aida Overton Walker, Mrs. McIntosh, Lloyd  
 Gibbs, Richard Connors, Alex. Rogers, Fred Douglas, and Williams  
 "The Jonah Man" (interpolated).....by Bert Williams  
 "I Want to be a Real Lady" (interpolated), by Rogers, Lennor,  
 Aida Overton Walker  
 "The Case"  
 George Walker, assisted by Misses Ellis, Wallace, Davis, Bowman and Company  
 "Emancipation Day".....Williams, Walker and Company

ACT III.  
 "Cabocers' Choral".....Company  
 Final.....Company

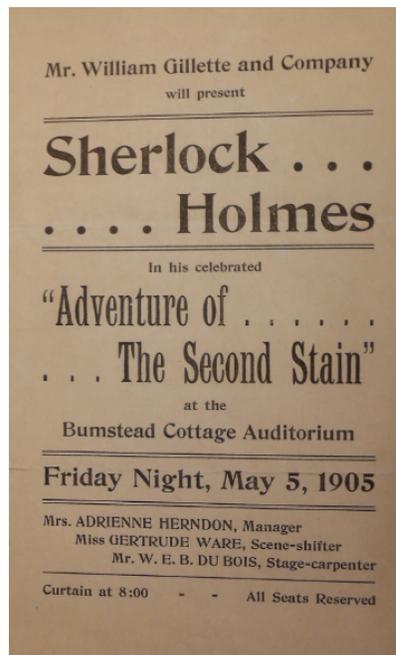
**Program - New York Theatre  
 February 28th, 1903**

For more information about Williams and Walker I recommend the excellent article "Bert A. Williams & George W. Walker: The First African-American Superstars" on the Jas Obrecht Music Archive (where these great photos of Williams and Walker also came from). It can be viewed at:  
<http://jasobrecht.com/bert-williams-george-walker-african-american-superstars/>



**Adrienne Herndon** (1869 -1910), although not a Holmes performer, she did serve a major part in bringing a serious Holmes production to the Afro-American community at the turn of the century. Adrienne was an important African American woman in Atlanta, Georgia. She married Alonzo Herndon, who was born a slave, and became the first black millionaire in Atlanta. Denied being the actress she wanted to be by racism, “she brought Shakespeare to the South, presenting the University's first Shakespearean production; Herndon directed the Atlanta University's theater offerings and gave Atlanta's black community access to serious drama with professional stage sets and costumes. Moreover,

she opened the university community to the American theater world, hosting the William Gillette Theater Company of New York in a performance of Sherlock Holmes in the “Adventure of the Second Stain” in 1905. She engaged others at the University in her work. The legendary W. E. B. Du Bois, sociologist, historian, civil rights activist, Pan-Africanist, author and editor, her colleague on the faculty, served as the stage manager for the Gillette production.”<sup>3</sup>



**Original Program Page William Gillette Theater Company of New York in a performance of Sherlock Holmes in "The Adventure of the Second Stain"( The Herndon Home Musuem, Atlanta, Ga.)**

<sup>3</sup> [www.aaregistry.org/historic\\_events/view/adrienne-herndon-actress-and-designer](http://www.aaregistry.org/historic_events/view/adrienne-herndon-actress-and-designer)

## Years Later: (Silent) Voices from the Darkness of A Cinema.

While doing research on Sherlock Holmes in silent films I came across an interesting film titled “The Tale of a Chicken” (1914). This film was released as a split reel along with an animated cartoon titled “Another Tale”. What made this one reeler so interesting was that it had an all- black cast, and Sherlock Holmes was a prominent character in the storyline. Yet, my large Sherlock Holmes in the media reference library had no mention of this silent film. “Deerstalker! Holmes and Watson on Screen”, by Ron Haydock, states “... ‘A Black Sherlock Holmes’, featured an all-black cast of players, and the film is believed to be one of the earliest, if not the very first of ALL all-black films of any kind ever made.” Wait a minute now, “A Black Sherlock Holmes” was made in 1918, that’s four years after “The Tale of a Chicken”! “Sherlock Holmes Screen and Sound Guide”, by Gordon E. Kelley, states, about “A Black Sherlock Holmes”, “...was possibly the first of all black Sherlock Holmes film made.” Steinbrunner and Michaels, “The Films of Sherlock Holmes”, Barnes, “Sherlock Holmes on Screen; The Complete Film and TV History”, Pohle & Hart, “Sherlock Holmes on the Screen”, Pointer, “The Sherlock Holmes File; The Many Personae of Sherlock Holmes, on Stage, in Film and in Advertising”, and the list goes on, but never a mention of Afro- American Sherlock Holmes performances. The time has come to make amends to this situation and discuss Afro-American Sherlock Holmes performers and performances. I’m not claiming to be all inclusive in this discussion, but I will, as a film collector and Sherlockian, share some of the unusual but entertaining facts I have with you.

I’ll start my discussion with the aforementioned split one reeler which contained “Another Tale” and “The Tale of a Chicken”. The comedy film, “The Tale of a Chicken”, released by Lubin Manufacturing Company, on April 28th, 1914, is probably the true first all-black Sherlock Holmes film. Not only does it hold that distinction, but the cartoon sharing the reel with it, “Another Tale” is probably the first animated appearance of a Holmes character on film. “Another Tale” precedes the animated “The Adventures of Mr. Nobody Holmes” (1916), the earliest animated Holmes on record by two years. “The Tale of a Chicken” precedes Ebony Film’s “A Black Sherlock Holmes”, previously regarded as possibly the first all-black Sherlock Holmes film by four years.

The cast for "A Tale of a Chicken" was: **Maha Raja** as Sherlock Jackson Holmes, John Edwards as Sam Johnson, Luke Scott as Raskus Hudson, and Mattie Edwards as Mandy Jones.

Part of Sherlock Jackson Holmes is credited to Maja Raja (probably a name used by actors who didn't want their real name associated with the particular production).

Here are the plot summaries and reviews for the films. Be warned the plot description and reviews sound quite racist from today's perspective.

“**Another Tale**” - (Lubin) - April 28 - Sam Bug & Raskus Bug are suitors for Mandy Bug. Her intentions are strong for Sam, so she gives Raskus the 'cold shoulder'. Raskus Bug's blood is aroused and he loses no time in telling his troubles to his gang, the leader being no other than "Gyp the Bug." They cook up a scheme whereby they kill a silkworm which is very much against the law in Bugland. They put the silkworm in the rain barrel near Sam Bug's sweetheart's home, then they get a Bug cop and Sam Bug is arrested. Mandy knows it is the work of the gang and gets **Sherlock Bug**, the great detective, who gets on the trail, traps the gang by blowing up the gang's den, puts them all in jail and Sam Bug is released.

“**The Tale of a Chicken**” - (Lubin) - April 28 - Sam Johnson & Raskus Hudson are suitors for the hand of Mandy Jones, but Mandy's intentions are strong towards Sam. When Mandy gives Raskus the 'cold shoulder' his negro blood is aroused. Raskus loses no time in telling his troubles to his gang. They decide to cook up a scheme whereby they steal a chicken and hide it in Sam's house. They also put some feathers in Sam's pocket. They then inform the owner of the chicken. He gets a policeman and has Sam arrested. The chicken is produced in the courtroom and the feathers are found in Sam's pocket. Sam is thrown into jail, much to the delight of Raskus and his gang. But Mandy, knowing Sam's innocence, presses into service the great detective of international fame, **Sherlock Jackson Holmes**. Sherlock finds a trail of chicken feathers and in the course of a couple of hours he traps the gang in their den. He marches them to the court, where they are thrown into a dungeon and Sam is then released. Sherlock receives his reward a smile from Mandy.”<sup>4</sup>

The reviews of these two films are not very nice, a sign of the times perhaps? Here they are: "Another Tale” - On the same reel with ‘A Tale of a Chicken’. An animated cartoon of ‘Bugdom’. Senseless.

‘A Tale of a Chicken’ - A photoplay that should be captioned ‘A Tail of a Chicken’. This is a burlesque of "Sherlock Holmes", and intended to be "cute," evidently. If the cruel abuse of a speckled hen can be construed as a comedy then this misnomer is funny. The actors are colored individuals.”

Therefore, the first Afro-American Sherlock Holmes film performer was the mystery actor who billed himself as Maja Raja, and the first animated Holmes

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<sup>4</sup> The Moving Picture World magazine Vol. 20 Apr. - Jun. 1914, pages 568/570 - Licensed Film Stories

was none other than Sherlock Bug. Unfortunately we have no photos from the film and there is no known copy.

The next Afro-American Holmes performer we know of is **Sam Robinson**, the brother of Bill " Mr. Bojangles" Robinson. The film was "**A Black Sherlock Holmes**", the first production of the newly reorganized Ebony Film Corporation, released in April, 1918, and distributed by the General Film Corporation of New York City.



**Sam Robinson**

(Sam Robinson photo from silent film  
"Spying the Spy")

May 4, 1918 THE MOVING PICTURE WORLD 665

**GENERAL FILM COMPANY**

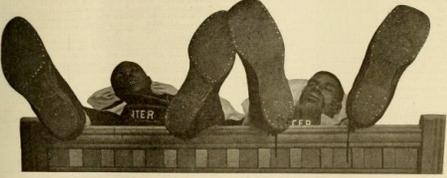
**EBONY COMEDIES**

Honest-to-John Laugh Producers that Appeal to Fans of All Tastes and Ages

Showmanship means suiting the majority. EBONY COMEDIES—with their novel presentation of real negro players beaming with quaint racial happiness—please every audience.

Every picture theatre now can have a "colored act" on its bill, just as every vaudeville house carries one as an indispensable feature. It is a reliable box-office help. Book the series—beginning with:

A BLACK SHERLOCK HOLMES	A MILK FED HERO
SPYING THE SPY	A BUSTED ROMANCE
THE PORTERS	SPOORS



Produced by **EBONY FILM CORPORATION** Chicago

Distributed by General Film Company, New York  
Thirty Exchanges

In Answering Advertisements, Please Mention the MOVING PICTURE WORLD.

The plot focuses on Knick Carter (your black Sherlock Holmes), portrayed by Sam Robinson, who believes he is a great detective. He and his assistant Reuma Tism (your Dr. Watson), portrayed by **Rudolph Tatum**, attempt to save a kidnapped young woman, Sheeza Sneeze, portrayed by Yvonne Junior, and the daughter of inventor, I Wanta Sneeze, played by George Lewis . Knick eventually saves Sheeza, who is able to marry her true love. The film was directed by R. G. Phillips and runs for twelve minutes.<sup>5</sup> The film exists, and is a part of the Sherlock Holmes Collection at the University of Minnesota's Anderson Library.

The review I've found for "A Black Sherlock Holmes" (1918) is:

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.lib.umn.edu/pdf/holmes/v7n1SixOh.pdf>

**"A Black Sherlock Holmes"** - (Ebony) - The main feature of this reel, the first Ebony comedy, also a new brand on The General Film program, is the fact that the cast is composed entirely of colored players. It is a burlesque on the Sherlock Holmes stories, and while there are some amusing scenes, there is a tendency among all the players to over act. Its strongest point is the novelty of the players."<sup>6</sup> According to Julie McKuras, A.S.H, B.S.I., the film's failure to overcome Black stereotypes received criticism from Black audiences.

It is my belief that a well known Afro-American performer named **Lawrence Chenault** (1877 - 19??) portrayed the Sherlock Holmes type character in Reol's two-reel comedy **"The Jazz Hounds"** (1921). "Lawrence Chenault was an American vaudeville performer and silent film actor. He married film actress Evelyn Preer in 1924. He appeared in 24 films between years 1920 and 1934. His brother Jack Chenault was also a film actor."<sup>7</sup> "Both censorship records and lobby



### Lawrence Chenault

cards for the film suggest that Reol's two-reel comedy 'The Jazz Hounds' (1921) borrowed liberally from the Ebony Film Corporation's popular Black Sherlock Holmes character. The Chicago Board of Censors' synopsis describes the plot of 'The Jazz Hounds' as 'Fake detective's episodes'. One lobby card depicts a lighter-skinned Black man in a deerstalker cap and matching cape interrogating two 'zip coon' characters, who consume fried chicken with gusto in another still."<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, as is often the case with silent films, no known copy exists.

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<sup>6</sup> The Moving Picture World magazine, page 745, Critical Reviews and Comments May 4, 1918

<sup>7</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lawrence\\_Chenault](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lawrence_Chenault)

<sup>8</sup> Petersen, Christina -Film History | July 1, 2008 | "The 'Reol' story: race authorship and consciousness in Robert Levy's Reol Productions, 1921-1926"

## Holmes is Hip with the Cats that Swing

In 1934, a group of jazz musicians known as the ‘**Spirits of Rhythm**’ created a record titled “**Dr. Watson and Mr. Holmes**”. The ‘Spirits of Rhythm’ consisted of **Leo Watson** (1898 -1950) vocals and tipple; **Wilbur Daniels** vocals, and tipple; **Douglas Daniels** vocals, and tipple; **Virgil Scoggins** vocals, and drums; and **Teddy Bunn** (1909 - 1978) vocals, and guitar. The term ‘tipple’ was used in reference to any small homemade instrument, in this case they are small guitars and shoe brushes.”<sup>9</sup>You can listen to the Spirits of Rhythm singing “Dr. Watson and Mr. Holmes” at: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=hX1CJAeyupQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=hX1CJAeyupQ)

or a bit longer version at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2u04g7RuMz4>



### Spirits of Rhythm

“Dr. Watson and Mr. Holmes” Lyrics by Spirits of Rhythm

Now gangway for that famous sleuth must be Sherlock that’s the truth  
Elementary Dr. Watson  
you are amazing Mr. Holmes

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.30sjazz.com/videos/spirits-of-rhythm/dr-watson-and-mr-holmes.html>

say no detective stands a chance well how about the Philo Vance yes he's a good  
man Dr. Watson amateurish Mr. Holmes

when they have a crime wave  
and the papers all rave  
and they are hollering for a showdown the Inspector can see he's got to have me  
get with Sherlock the lowdown  
the cops can't even solve a crime  
bound to miss it every time  
now ain't that awful Dr. Watson  
simply lousy Mr. Holmes

Now when policeman have a case where they raid some gambling place how they  
muff it Dr. Watson  
what's the reason Mr. Holmes  
well by the times the cops catch on all the evidence is gone  
must be dumb as Dr. Watson  
well they are morons Mr. Holmes while they are looking around  
not a thing to be found  
all the gambling rooms are lobbies and the rattle of dice  
is the tickle of ice  
look at Sherlock the bobbies  
well Inspector howdy do  
Sherlock I'll be seeing you  
where you going Dr. Watson?  
to China Mr. Holmes

**Thomas Wright "Fats" Waller** (1904 – 1943) “was an influential jazz pianist, organist, composer, singer, and comedic entertainer, whose innovations to the Harlem stride style laid the groundwork for modern jazz piano, and whose best-known compositions, ‘Ain’t Misbehavin’ and ‘Honeysuckle Rose’ were inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame, posthumously, in 1984 and 1999.”<sup>10</sup>

Peter Blau, B.S.I., remembered these Lyrics from:

**“Somebody Stole my Gal”** (1935)  
by Fats Waller:

Sherlock Holmes, is you round here?  
Go off and find that woman now.  
You know I can't take it,

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<sup>10</sup> Tenenholtz, David. "[Waller, Fats \(Thomas Wright\)](#)". JAZZ.COM. 7/10/2013.

Yeah, Sherlock Holmes, find her now.  
Quick, Watson, the needle! Ha, ha.

She's up the back, at Joe's;  
You go on up there and get her.  
Her ol' man liable be there.  
I don't wanna get hurt--no.

You ain't heard nothin' yet?  
Ah--my goodness, call up; and do something--yeah!

Quick, Sherlock, bring her right . . .  
Bring her right back on roller skates, will ya?  
Bring her!



### **"Fats" Waller**

Hear Fats Waller sing "Somebody Stole my Gal" at:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xFy\\_bBzP9tY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xFy_bBzP9tY)

### **Movie Break**

The next Afro-American Holmes I will discuss is **Richard Bates** as Junior Lingley, in "**Midnight Shadow**" (1939). The long-lost black-cast whodunit "Midnight Shadow", was discovered in a vault in Tyler, TX, and preserved by the Southwest Film & Video Archive of Dallas. A showman known as Prince Alihabad the Great (John Criner) suddenly shows up in a quiet, all-black Oklahoma



### **Lightfoot (Buck Woods) & Junior Langley (Richard Bates)**

community and is welcomed by Dan Wilson (Clinton Rosemond), who readily accepts that the obvious charlatan begins courting his pretty daughter, Margaret (Frances Redd). But when Dan is found murdered after brandishing the deed to an oil field, Margaret takes matters into her own hands and hires aspiring private eye **Junior Langley (Richard Bates)** and his jive-talking sidekick, **Lightfoot (Buck Woods)**, to solve the case. The trail leads to Shreveport, LA, where the murderer is caught despite the bungling of the case by "Sherlock" Langley and his inefficient "Dr." Lightfoot. "Midnight Shadow" is available on DVD, and as seen in the color lobby card card, Bates appears at a desk in deerstalker cap, matching



cape and with magnifying glass. A slow paced short feature fascinating more for its historical significance than its story, "Midnight Shadow" is more competently done than a lot of independent black productions of the era. The producer and director was George Randol. To learn more about him and the film check out the website: [/www.weirdwildrealm.com/f-midnightshadow.html](http://www.weirdwildrealm.com/f-midnightshadow.html)

## Now Back to the Sherlock Musicians Daddy-O

“Charles "Charlie" Parker, Jr. (1920 - 1955) also known as ‘Yardbird’ and ‘Bird’, was an American jazz saxophonist and composer. Miles Davis once said, "You can tell the history of jazz in four words: Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker."<sup>11</sup>



I don't think Charlie ever performed in a deerstalker, and may never have written any lyrics about Holmes, but he sure did like sitting around with friends and other musicians talking about the great detective. It sure does seem Holmes was a popular subject among black jazzmen. From Brenda comes this tidbit of information; If you listen to this NPR feature on Charlie Parker, and listen to an interview with him in the 40s, he says that he just didn't just always play his alto sax, but also had discussions with friends about....Sherlock Holmes:

[www.npr.org/2013/10/19/237040499/the-birth-of-bird-young-charlie-parker-found-focus-faith-in-music](http://www.npr.org/2013/10/19/237040499/the-birth-of-bird-young-charlie-parker-found-focus-faith-in-music)

**The Jubalaires, Orville Brooks, Ted Brooks, Caleb Ginyard and George McFadden**, an American gospel group of the forties and fifties from Florida, all donned deerstalkers in the soundie “**Brother Bill**”.

“*Brother Bill*” (1945) is an unusual soundie which begins with a skit featuring Eddie Rochester Anderson in turban, seated by his crystal ball. Mable Lee walks up to him in a skimpy showgirl outfit...Mabel asks Eddie of the mystic hat if she can see the Jubalaires singing *Brother Bill*. ‘Quicker said than done!’ replies Eddie, who adjusts his turban & rubs his crystal ball. The Jubalaires then appear, dressed in deerstalker caps & ridiculous hunting jackets, holding shotguns. These four guys stand harmonizing in a hunting cabin, with some gals & a guitarist

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<sup>11</sup> Griffin, Farah Jasmine; Washington, Salim (2008). *Clawing at the Limits of Cool: Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and the Greatest Jazz Collaboration Ever*. New York: Thomas Dunne Books.



**The Jubalaires**  
**Orville Brooks, Ted Brooks, Caleb Ginyard, George McFadden**

seated round about the room. It's a song about going to hunt game in eastern Maine, & is pretty much a revisit of *The Preacher & the Bear*, but without a preacher. According to the lyrics, when they encountered a grizzly bear: "I drop that gun/ And away I run/ Brother Bill said boy what's the matter wid you/ Had he knowed like me he'd a run some too/ I run so fast they say/ They couldn't catch me all day/ The way I run across that field/ They couldn't catch me with an automobile." The joke is he ran all the way home to Alabama. It's not jazzy enough to be a good song, nor funny enough to be a comical novelty number, but it's not as horrible as their jackets."<sup>12</sup> View the Jubalaires in "Brother Bill" at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BiGU7mJAaeM>

Next we have some TV song, dance, and comedy with Sherlock **William Henry "Bill" Cosby Jr.** (1937 - ). Yes that's right, Bill Cosby, the famed Cosby Show star and veteran comedian threw on an invernness cape, deerstalker and pipe for a little Sherlockian Skit with the **Gold Digger Dancers**, also wearing the Holmes garb, before his main act on the "**Dean Martin Variety Show**" (1966).

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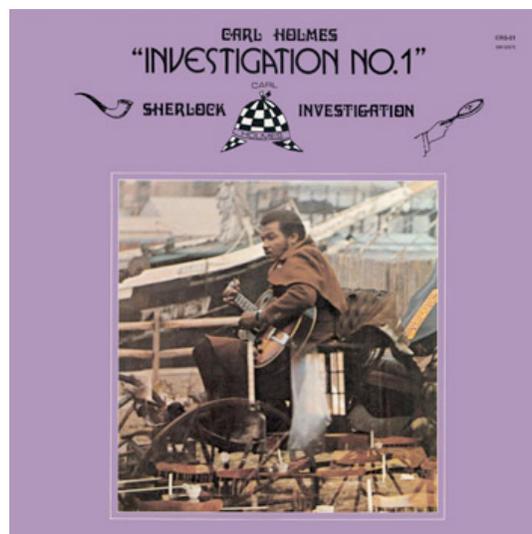
<sup>12</sup> [http://www.weirdwildrealm.com/f-delta\\_rhythm\\_boys.html](http://www.weirdwildrealm.com/f-delta_rhythm_boys.html)



### **Bill Cosby and the Gold Digger Dancers**

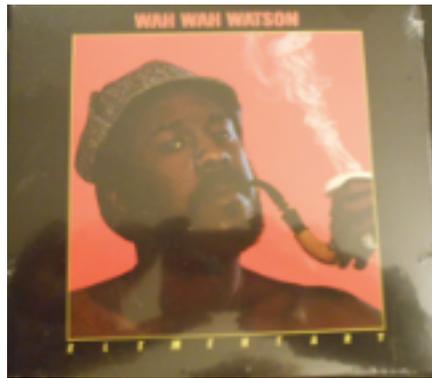
Bill was a famous spy at the time, as Alexander Scott on the hit show “I Spy”, so we might guess that’s where Dean’s writers came up with the idea.

“**Carl ‘Sherlock’ Holmes** started gigging in the early sixties forming Carl Holmes & the Commanders with whom he recorded a full length album for Atlantic in 1962 entitled ‘Twist Party At The Roundtable’. Later on he recorded a couple of 45’s for the Parkway and Verve labels. In May of 1966 a pre-Experience Jimi Hendrix gigged with the group but never recorded with them. After a final 45 for the local Philly label, Black Jack, the group disbanded and Carl formed “**The Sherlock Holmes Investigation**”. The Sherlock Holmes Investigation...only released one album, ‘**Investigation #1**’, in 1974...The band included **Chico Green** on bass, **John Hammond** on keys, **John Daves** on



flute, **Jimmy Towns** on bass, **Chubby Brown** on guitar, **Art Grant** on sax and vibes, congas and organ by guys called **Dickie, Peachie** and **Sly**.”<sup>13</sup>  
‘Investigation #1’ can be heard at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FqHgZhzGaIA>

**Melvin ‘Wah Wah Watson’ Ragin** (1951 - ), a Mowtown session guitarist, released his first solo album entitled “Elementary” in 1977.



**Melvin ‘Wah Wah Watson’ Ragin**  
**“Elementary”**

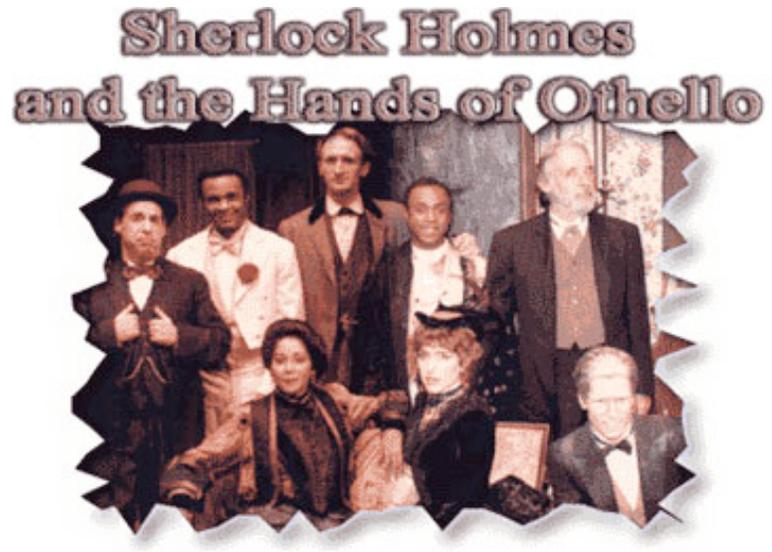
Gaining the nickname ‘Wah Wah Watson’, for his prowess with a wah- wah pedal, Melvin showed up on the album cover with pipe and deerstalker, looking more like a Sherlock Holmes than a Watson.

Melvin Wah Wah Watson Ragin - Bubbles: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B3I-8KTVIkk>

**Alexander Simmons**, from the Bronx, New York, wrote the play "**Sherlock Holmes and the Hands of Othello**" (1987), which has been published in "Black Thunder: An Anthology of Contemporary African American Drama" (1992). Reviewer Mel Gussow, of the New York Times, made these comments about the stage show “Holmes and Hands of Othello”; “HAVING matched wits with Moriarty and other Napoleons of crime, Sherlock Holmes now attacks racism in the performing arts. At least that is one of the themes of Alexander Simmons's "Sherlock Holmes and the Hands of Othello," a new

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.parisdjs.com/index.php/post/Carl-Sherlock-Holmes-Investigation-No.1>



### Alexander Simmons

melodrama at the Westbeth Theater Center. .... Mr. Simmons at least seems to have a genuine affection for our favorite detective. The play takes place during the absence of Dr. Watson, recently married and no longer a time sharer at 221- B Baker Street. This leaves Holmes without a sounding board and it leads him to address Watson's empty chair: "The game is afoot." In this case, the game is a hand -as represented by Othello strangling a victim. The plot involves the daughter of the famed black Shakespearean actor Ira Aldridge and a supposed curse that has been placed on his family. Repeatedly the daughter is visited by the ghost of her father, quoting Shakespeare."<sup>14</sup> Time Winters played the role of Sherlock Holmes.

<http://www.amazon.com/Black-Thunder-Anthology-African-American-Mentor/dp/0451628446>

Not Holmes, but on more than one occasion appearing Dr. Watson, was **Levar Burton** (1957 - ). Burton starred as Geordi La Forge, a lieutenant commander and the chief engineer for the USS Enterprise-D in "**Star Trek: The Next Generation**". As Geordi, Burton took on the role of Dr. Watson in season 2 episode 3, "**Elementary, Dear Data**" (1988), and then again in season 6 episode 12, "**Ship in a Bottle**" (1993). Brent Spiner, as android lieutenant commander Data, portrayed Sherlock Holmes. "Asked about his favorite scenes, Burton answered that he especially liked the holodeck adventures: 'The Holmes

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<sup>14</sup> Gussow, Mel, N.Y. Times, October 08, 1987



### Brent Spiner & Levar Burton

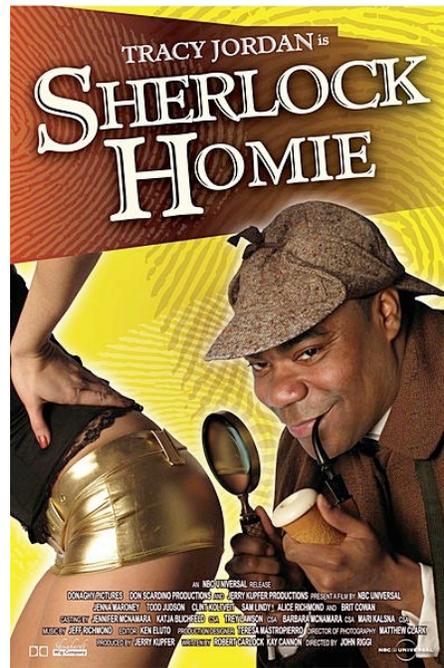
and Watson' episodes for Data and Geordi... were a lot of fun for us. I think the holodeck was a very cool concept, you know. You can create a three dimensional reality ... I mean, how cool is that?"<sup>15</sup> Well I'd say, that's almost as cool as Levar Burton was when he portrayed Dr. Watson.

**Philip R. Brogdon, B.S.I.**, is a native Washingtonian, and the first black member of BSI, who collects fiction starring black detectives. "Philip Brogdon has assembled the credentials of an impressive array of black Thespians who have contributed to the Sherlockian movement. This booklet is subtitled 'Being Profiles of Past and Present Real Life Black Sherlockians.' A wide range of Black subjects are profiled, each of whom has a strong (or a weak) connection with the continuation of the Canon. Included are Idi Amin, Bill Cosby, Chester Himes, Sidney Poitier, 'Fats' Waller, Flip Wilson, and Oprah Winfrey, etc. You will have to read this work to learn their Sherlockian connections!"<sup>16</sup> Brogdon's "Sherlocks in Black: Being Profiles of Past and Present Real Life Sherlockians" (1995) is a pamphlet, black-and-white card covers, thirty pages long, that's still available from George Vanderburg at: <http://www.batteredbox.com/>. Philip R. Brogdon also has authored "A Poetic Tribute to Baker Street" (1999).

<sup>15</sup> "Interviews | LeVar Burton | The Acting of Science". BBC Cult. 8/30/2013.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.batteredbox.com/SherlockianScholarshipConventional/InBlack.htm>

**Tracy Jamal Morgan** (1968 - ) is an American actor and comedian known for his eight seasons as a cast member on Saturday Night Live, and for his role of Tracy Jordan on the NBC TV series **'30 Rock'**.<sup>17</sup> James O'Leary left the comment, "On the TV show '30 Rock' Tracy Morgan's character Tracy Jordan starred as **'Sherlock Homie'**. The movie's poster was prominently displayed in the character's dressing room."



### Tracy Morgan

The above poster can be found at:

<http://www.nbc.com/30-rock/photos/tracys-movie-posters/656766>

New to the scene, is the up and coming comedian **Andrew 'King Bach' Bachelor**. In a 2012 episode of his **"King Bachelor's Pad"** TV series, Andrew wrote, directed and starred in a skit titled **"Sherlock Homeboy"**. In lampooning the BBC's "Sherlock", Bachelor was hilarious in the role of Sherlock Homeboy. Andrew describes the show as, "This modern take on the classic Sherlock Holmes involves a crime scene, a corpse and a mystery only Sherlock Homeboy can solve." You can see this episode on YouTube at:

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<sup>17</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tracy\\_Morgan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tracy_Morgan)



**Andrew ‘King Bach’ Bachelor**

**“Sherlock Homeboy”**

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=3kL5pyq05J4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3kL5pyq05J4)



**“Sherlock Homeboy (Part 2)”**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xlDoPi7tKno>

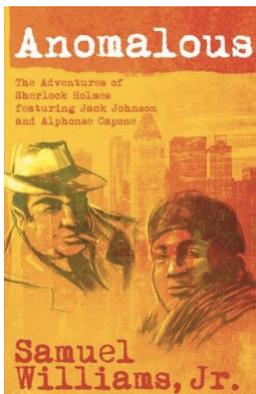
Be sure to check out all of Andrew Bachelor’s projects at:

[www.andrewbachelor.com/#!bio/c7tk](http://www.andrewbachelor.com/#!bio/c7tk)



And for added fun from Andrew Bachelor check out the Youtube ‘Day 15 w/ @KingBach -1st AUTOGRAPH’, a video that involves the autograph on the above Sherlock Homeboy photo. Watch it for a good laugh.

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=mWT78PZkTyM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mWT78PZkTyM)



**Samuel Williams, Jr.** ( 1960- ) is the first African American writer to ever author a major Sherlock Holmes novel, “**Anomalous: The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes featuring Jack Johnson and Alphonse Capone**”. Williams “is a journalist and grant writer based in San Bernardino, Ca. ‘When I was a high school student at Christchurch School, a private Episcopalian boarding school located on the banks of the Rappahannock River in Middlesex County, Virginia, I fell in love Dr. Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes adventures,’ Williams said. ‘In my readings, however, I noticed there were only two black characters ever mentioned in any of the adventures. I was also concerned the only black male character to appear, Steve Dixie, was depicted as a rogue and grifter. I decided I would write a Holmes adventure that would give Dixie’s character some positive, redeeming value and I believe I was successful in doing so in the book, “Anomalous: The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes featuring Jack Johnson and Alphonse Capone”<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/6454065.Samuel\\_Williams\\_Jr](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/6454065.Samuel_Williams_Jr)

One thing that all the above performers and performances have in common is that are parodies on the Sherlock Holmes character. So isn't it quite ironic that for the next Afro-American Holmes I'll discuss in this article, that will actually be a serious Holmes, but is in reality, a comic book Holmes.

Back in April of 2013, I came across a Kickstarter project by New Paradigm Studios, of South Orange, N.J. which was titled **“Watson and Holmes”**. This was a fundraising site for the creation and distribution of a new comic book with this story in mind; **“Watson and Holmes”**, by **Karl Bollers & Rick Leonardi**, is a re-envisioning of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and Dr John Watson as African Americans living in New York City's famous Harlem district. Watson, an Afghanistan war vet, works in an inner-city clinic; Holmes, a local P.I. who takes unusual cases. When one of them ends up in Watson's emergency room, the unlikely duo strike up a partnership to find a missing girl. Watson And Holmes bump heads along the way as they enter a labyrinth of drugs, guns, gangs and a conspiracy that goes higher and deeper than they could have imagined.”<sup>19</sup>



## **“Watson and Holmes”**

Liking the idea I donated to the ‘Watson and Holmes’ Kickstarter Project, and have been very happy with the product they created, and the success they have achieved.

<sup>19</sup> [www.kickstarter.com/projects/newparadigmstudios/watson-and-holmes-print-kickstarter](http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/newparadigmstudios/watson-and-holmes-print-kickstarter)

The only question now left for this discussion is will we ever see a serious Afro-American Holmes performance, other than in the comic books? Was that a smile of approbation, Sir Arthur?

One blogger I came across suggests, “**Ramsey Nouah** has possibly the best male voice in Nollywood, and could also do very well as a voice actor.



**Ramsey Nouah**



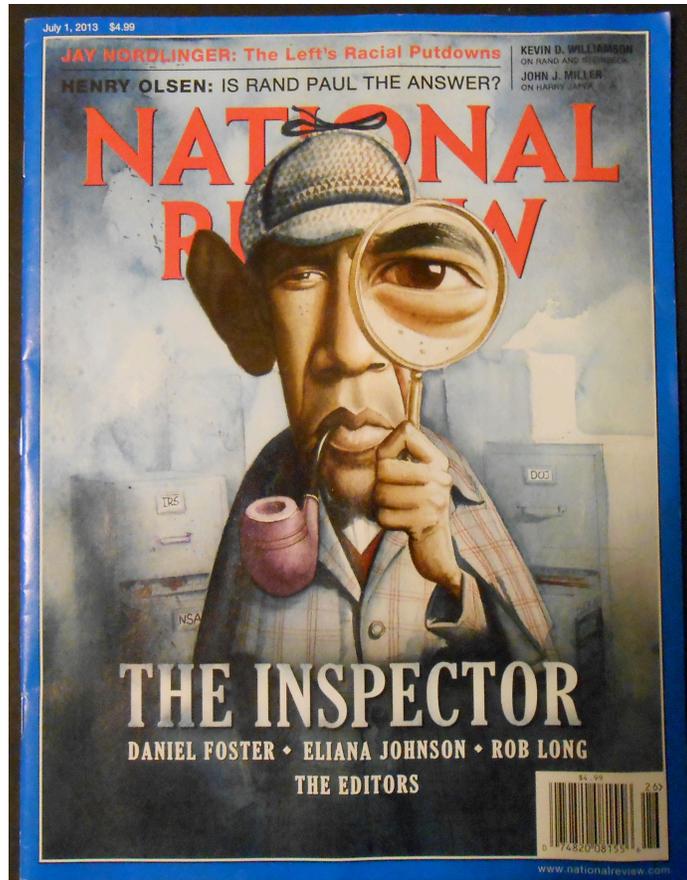
**Desmond Elliott**

His British-like accent is useful here, as the character of Holmes is English and is based in London. The role of John Watson can be portrayed by none other than **Desmond Elliott**, who would fair well here as Holmes' legendary sidekick.”<sup>20</sup> I'd be surprised if Nollywood doesn't have a Holmes project in the near future. So why not Ramsey Nouah, he has won the African Movie Academy Award for Best Actor in a Leading Role.

Who would be your selection? I do know someone who will be out of work soon and even looks the part. See below!

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<sup>20</sup> [www.naijarules.com/xf/index.php?threads/defining-roles-for-famous-african-actors.34900/](http://www.naijarules.com/xf/index.php?threads/defining-roles-for-famous-african-actors.34900/)



## Barack Obama How about this guy?

### A Serious Black Holmes at Last



**Vauxhall Jermaine**, a former professional soccer player, who lists himself as Afro-American, Caribbean, gets to play a serious Holmes in “**Disguise**” (2013), a short film by Lesley Elliott. The main two stars of “Disguise” are Vauxhall Jermaine as Sherlock Holmes and Martin Calcroft as De Voors. It is a, approximately nine minutes long, Sherlock Holmes film, with Victorian costuming, which involves a murder. The murderer, a Dutchman named De Voors, is tricked into a conversation on a park bench by the great detective. De Voors, who clearly doesn't want to be there, and is extremely uncomfortable by the questioning, shifts

uneasily in his seat as Holmes closes in on him, with Watson & Scotland Yard showing up for the arrest. “An interesting discovery . . . good production values . . . based on a story by Alan Bradley first published in the anthology *A Study in Sherlock* (2011).”<sup>21</sup>



### **Martin Calcroft & Vauxhall Jermaine**

You can view this short Holmes film at:

<http://vimeo.com/74725315>

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