

"VOICES FROM THE DARKNESS"

African-America & Sherlock Holmes

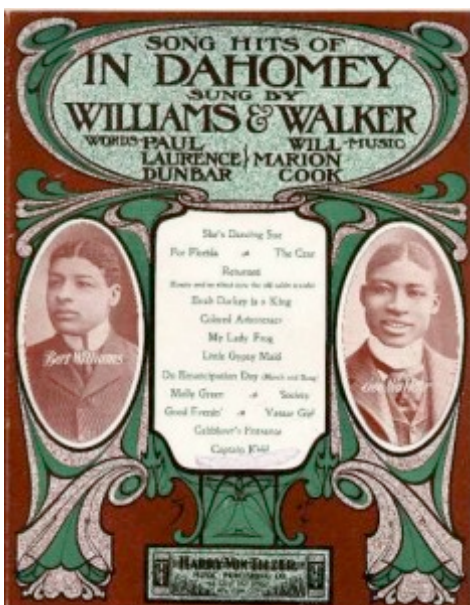
by

Howard Ostrom & Ray Wilcockson

Part Three - The 'Black Peter Addendum'

Part of the fun of writing Parts One and Two of this article was in knowing additions were likely to be forthcoming. The only question was whether a Third Part would record new creations of Sherlock Holmes by African-Americans or swell the impressive archive of past performers. It transpired, as we had hoped, that comments from readers of "Voices From The Darkness" have enlightened us with further knowledge. One of the foremost Sherlockians of our times, Mr. Peter Blau, 'Black Peter' B.S.I., supplied us with some new names that merit mention. Bert A. Williams, the "Spirits of Rhythm", Alex Simmons, and Philip R. Brogdon.

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."¹ Williams had a partner named George W. Walker (1872 -1911). In "In Dahomey", Walker portrayed slippery Rareback Pinkerton, opposite



JULY, N.Y. MISS BATTIE BOSTON MISS W. WALKER ADA OVERTON WALKER BERT A. WILLIAMS MISS LOTTIE WILLIAMS PRINCIPALS IN THE NEW YORK PRODUCTION OF "IN DAHOMEY" AT THE NEW YORK THEATRE

THE NEW YORK THEATRE
 Occupying the entire block on Broadway, between 44th and 45th Sts.
 KLAUF & BERLANGER, Feb 28 - 1903. Proprietors and Managers
 \$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
 Me Sing, keeps a chop suey factory.....Geo. Collin
 Hustling Charley, promoter of Got-the-Coin syndicate.....J. A. Shipp
 Leather, a bootblack.....Richard Connors
 Officer Sill,.....Geo. Pickett
 Messenger Rush, but not of them.....Theodore Pankey
 Bill Palmrose.....James Hill
 Cecelia Lightfoot, Cicero's wife.....Mrs. Hattie McIntosh
 Mrs. Stringer, dealer in forsaken gaiters, also editor of fashionnotes in
 "Beauville 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 Cabover (Governor 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 chest, which, to his surprise, 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 heroes) are engaged to be married at Gatorville, Fla., "Lightfoot's" home, and they accompany the chest to Dahomey. Evidently leaving Boston on their perilous mission, the detectives join a syndicate. In Dahomey, rum of sea brand which gives sea a green, is a sign of approach. Shylock and Rareback, having free access to the syndicate's stock of whiskey, present the King of Dabo with the rum. The King and his officers are made Colonists (Governors of a Province). In their own country, they own a certain liberal consent to use them to deal.

MUSICAL NUMBERS.
 ACT I.
 Melicize Fakin Quartette, "Dat Gal of Mine", Vaughn Hill, Pickett, Henderson's Organ Quartette.....Bikins, Sulzbary, Connor and Topley
 "Waltz Green".....Henry Try and Company
 "When Susan Comes to Gatorville" (interpolated), by Alex. Rogers and Vaughan.
 "Broadway in Dahomey" (interpolated), by Alex. Rogers and J. H. Williams, Walker and Company
 ACT II.
 "Letter of Colored Aristocracy".....Mrs. Hattie McIntosh and Company
 "Society".....Hattie Bostons, Aida Overton Walker, Mrs. McIntosh, Lewis Gibbs, Richard Connors, Alex. Rogers, Fred Douglas, and Williams
 "The Innah Man" (interpolated).....by Bert Williams
 "I Want to be a Real Lady" (interpolated), by Rogers, Lemond, Aida Overton Walker.
 "The Czar".....George Walker, assisted by Misses Ellis, Wallace, Davis, Bowman and Company
 "Emancipation Day".....Williams, Walker and Company
 ACT III.
 "Cabover's Choral".....Company
 "Final".....Company

Williams' Shylock "Shy" Homestead. Jas Obrecht adds, "Among my papers, I have an original program that was handed out during the opening week of In Dahomey. Beneath the cast listing, it describes 'The Story of 'In Dahomey'"

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

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, Fla., 'Lightfoot's' home, accompany the colonists to Dahomey."² 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/>

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."³



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

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

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

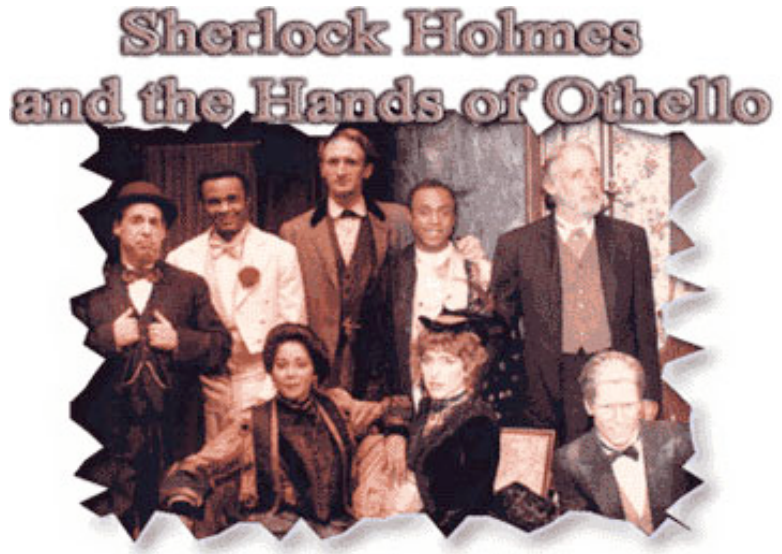
³ <http://www.30sjazz.com/videos/spirits-of-rhythm/dr-watson-and-mr-holmes.html>

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

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 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."⁴ Time Winters played the role of Sherlock Holmes.

Philip R. Brogdon, 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

⁴ Gussow, Mel, N.Y. Times, October 08, 1987

'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!"⁵ 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).

Finally, a sincere 'Thank you!' to Peter Blau for such valuable information. Please get in touch if you notice any other omissions!

⁵ <http://www.batteredbox.com/SherlockianScholarshipConventional/InBlack.htm>

