

## PREFACE

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Although there are biographical dictionaries and encyclopedias that include entries on Afro-American and African professional musicians, there is no single comprehensive volume that attempts to correlate materials related to these musical figures from a historical perspective. I have long felt the need for such a reference work and have attempted to attain that objective in the present volume. It brings together representatives of the various and diverse fields of musical activity who have played a significant role in the history of black music, and of Western music in general. Thus, it documents this history and assesses its achievements and its impact upon world music of contemporary times. It is my hope that the present work will throw into focus the “oneness” of black music—the refusal of its practitioners to fit neatly into traditional categories of folk, popular, jazz, religious, or classical music. Conventional music encyclopedias tend to ignore the “crossover,” say, the jazzman who moves into the field of classical music or vice versa. And there is general neglect of men and women who, although not necessarily professional musicians, have made important contributions to black music history—the concert promoters, patrons, and critics, to name a few. But perhaps my most compelling reason for writing this dictionary was a concern for bringing back to memory the legendary figures of the past and for calling attention to significant figures of the present who have overcome the almost insurmountable obstacles erected by slavery and race discrimination to lay the foundation for contemporary black musical activities. Young people today—and, as well, the not-so-young—seem not to realize that there had to be a Sam Lucas before there could be a Sammy Davis, Jr.; that there had to be an Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield before a Leontyne Price; a Sallie Martin, before an Aretha Franklin.

This dictionary draws together widely dispersed and, in many instances, heretofore unpublished information on more than 1500 musicians of African descent, includ-

ing living persons as well as figures of the past. With regard to chronological coverage, the earliest person for whom I could find career data, Sebastian Rodriguez (c1642-c1726), was used as starting point. To establish a measure of historical perspective, I chose the year 1945 as a cut-off for date of birth, although a few exceptional individuals born after 1945 are included. That year marks the end of an era, as well as the end of World War II, and simultaneously the beginning of a new era that brought profound changes into the life-styles and culture of Afro-Americans and Africans. Granted, it may seem risky to attempt to assess the achievement and appraise the contributions of those who are still living, those whom history has not had time to evaluate, but my reservations on that issue were overridden by my desire to make the dictionary as comprehensive and as representative as possible.

With regard to the criteria for coverage, I relied upon several guiding principles: mainly, the individual should be distinguished, having exerted influence upon others and contributed to the culture of his times; the individual should have made significant achievements during his career; and he should have earned recognition beyond the boundaries of his local community. In some cases, I was unable to apply all the criteria. As early black musicians, for example, have been generally neglected or slighted in existing reference sources, all those born before the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 were included if even a minimal amount of information could be unearthed about their careers. A similar approach was taken towards women of those years and even later; in contemporary times, women have held their own and needed no such allowances to be made. On the other hand, some areas of activity—such as minstrelsy, vaudeville, blues, jazz, and popular music—have been so dominated by black performers that it was necessary to limit the number of biographees in order to maintain the desired comprehensiveness and, consequently, I applied higher standards for their inclusion than for others.

The first task was to compile a list of names. I began by consulting general biographical dictionaries, such as the *Who's Who in Colored America* series, and such reference works as *Men of Mark* or *Historical Negro Biographies* (see Selected Bibliography on p. 447 for publication details). As I searched for entries on musicians, it became obvious that much is owed the early black editors who compiled directories of eminent black Americans during the long years when American reference literature neglected them. I also acknowledge my indebtedness to the publishers and editors of black newspapers and periodicals, who kept open lines of communication among black communities and reported on the achievements of black Americans during the long years when the white press ignored their existence. By reading through full runs of certain newspapers and magazines, I was able to understand the role played by the various figures in the communities as well as identify their accomplishments. Recently, such standard sources as the Marquis *Who's Who* series, the *Dictionary of American Biography*, and *Current Biography* have begun to include more entries on Afro-Americans, and these sources were used with profit, as were also works pertaining to special fields, such as jazz and blues encyclopedias. In the selection of names for inclusion in the dictionary, I was guided by the choices made in all these sources. Also, I solicited names of noteworthy individuals from musicians and critics of my acquaintance. I believe that the final list is highly representative of the many different kinds of individuals who have contributed to the history of black music, although not all who merit attention could be included. Some pioneered in establishing traditions, some concentrated on preserving traditions, and some devoted their energies to passing on knowledge to the young. All affected the course of history in meaningful ways.

Despite the usefulness of these sources, my investigation posed special problems of research. Very little is available in print about individuals who were active before the 1920s except in outstanding cases, and some areas of activity have been almost totally passed over even up to the present, such as gospel music. I made recourse to a wide variety of archival sources, collected concert and funeral programs for the scraps of biographical data they contain, read every conceivable book and pamphlet that was relevant, examined record-liner notes, and interviewed subjects (either in person or by proxy) and friends and relatives of deceased subjects where possible. To stay *au courant* with the activities of contemporary musicians, I subscribed to a black-press clipping service and persuaded friends to clip from the white press for me, in addition to my own clipping.

All this effort notwithstanding, I am aware that inevitably the dictionary will contain inaccuracies. A surprising number will come from the subjects themselves or their relatives and friends who, in their published interviews and autobiographies, tend to forget important career details (such as, for example, date of birth) and to magnify achievements. Other errors undoubtedly have crept in from my being forced to depend upon unreliable secondary sources. Finally, I was able to uncover only skeletal information for many persons despite extended research. But this is a pioneering venture, and I hope the positive results will outweigh the negative aspects. I also hope that those who possess additional information will send it to me so that biographical sketches can be expanded and inaccuracies minimized in the next edition of the dictionary.

During the course of my research and writing, I observed the emergence of themes that are worthy of note when placed in historical context. The role of the black church in the development of religious music, for example, has been discussed in several places, but little attention has been given to the impact of the black church upon the career development of musicians in general, including even entertainers and bluesmen. It is certainly a subject that calls for further investigation. Another is the role of the black professional organizations in contributing to the development of musicians. But perhaps that is part of a larger topic—the special role taken by certain cities through the years in nurturing black musical activities, the cities where the organizations came into being, along with other institutions that aided the development of the musicians and the various genres. Philadelphia would head the list in the early nineteenth century, succeeded by New York, Washington, D.C., New Orleans, and later Chicago. It is of interest that when a city such as Chicago in the early twentieth century became an important center for jazz, blues, and gospel, it also encouraged classical music activities. The “oneness” of black music!

Another phenomenon to be remarked is that of the master teacher who established rigorous standards for excellence at particular high schools and colleges, which then produced the nation's musical leaders for ensuing decades. Surely one of the pioneers among the secondary-school educators was Major N. Clark Smith, who left his stamp upon Lincoln High School in Kansas City, Sumner High School in St. Louis, Wendell Phillips High School in Chicago, and Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. To compile a list of the musicians who came under the influence of Smith, either directly or indirectly, would be to compile a list of “who's who” among black musicians. Later there was Walter Henri

Dyett at Phillips and DuSable High in Chicago, Alonzo Lewis at Lincoln High, Eugene Mikell in the New York area, and John Whatley in Birmingham, Alabama—to name a few—to which list should be added the names of the legendary college music educators.

Then there is the theme of the musical family which turned out professional musicians from one generation to the next and sent them into various areas of musical activity. The Lew family dynasty, for example, was established by Primus Lew, a fifer in the French and Indian Wars of the 1750s; his descendants were still performing professionally in the mid-twentieth century. Or take the case of the Work family, long associated with Fisk University, which began with the patriarch John Wesley Work I (c1830-1923), a choir director and composer, and produced professional musicians for four generations. The son of Edward Boatner, composer of religious music, became a celebrated jazz saxophonist, Edward (“Sonny”) Stitt. A nephew of jazz cornetist Joseph (“King”) Oliver became the eminent composer Ulysses Kay. Similar examples of musical families occur frequently among the biographees.

A final phenomenon that comes to mind is that of the organization or production or musical group that served as a kind of career-launching finishing school for hundreds of musicians. Consider, for example, contemporary opera singers. The biographies suggest that, with few exceptions, most of those who succeeded in finding positions in the major companies—the Metropolitan Opera, New York City Opera, La Scala, and others—made their operatic debuts in Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* or in Virgil Thomson’s *Four Saints in Three Acts* or in Scott Joplin’s *Treemonisha*. These three operas might be regarded, therefore, as having served as finishing schools for contemporary opera singers. The first two productions have been long-lived, returning to the stage in numerous revivals since their premieres in the 1930s, and the relatively new Joplin opera has been revived since its world premiere in 1972. A parallel situation existed in regard to jazz groups. According to the biographies, most jazzmen of the mid-century years had played in the orchestras of Lionel Hampton, Cab Calloway, Earl Hines, Count Basie, or Duke Ellington or in bands whose leaders had played in those bands. In a similar way, most gospel figures trace their musical ancestry back to Thomas A. Dorsey, Sallie Martin, or Roberta Martin or to gospel figures who got their start with one of those three individuals.

These are but a few of the themes indicated by the biographies. I hope that among the students and scholars who come to this volume for specific information,

some will be tempted to browse through it and perhaps begin an investigation of a theme particularly attractive to them. Working on this project has brought me both enjoyment and excitement, notwithstanding the thousands of tedious hours spent in basic research. I have come to regard the biographees, living and dead, as my personal friends, despite the many years that separate some of them from me, and I trust that users of this dictionary will find pleasure in getting to know my friends.

The project also brought me an intense awareness of myself as a black musician. I realize how fortunate I was to spend my formative years in Chicago during the 1920s-30s, where gospel and blues were in the air I breathed, where 35th Street had to be “lined with asbestos to keep the bands from scorching passers-by with their red-hot jazz” (as aptly stated in the *Chicago Defender*), and where classical musicians treasured the music of both black and white composers in their unending concerts. I heard the legendary figures perform before they became legendary! If there was anything additional needed to complete my induction into the world of black music, it was to come into closer contact with my roots, which happened when I went south during the 1940s to teach in black colleges, particularly in Louisiana. All these experiences increased my appreciation of the black heritage and gave support to my work on the project, especially during those periods when I realized I had rushed in where angels would have feared to tread.

Many loyal friends and relatives have contributed to this project over the past ten years. Those who were with me from the beginning, who clipped newspapers and magazines, contributed information, interviewed subjects, photocopied library materials, and otherwise helped in numerous ways include my sisters, Stella Hall and Fanya Wiggins, and professional colleagues D. Antoinette Handy and Dominique-René de Lerma. Among other colleagues who contributed information, investigated special topics, and/or solicited information from others were William Duncan Allen, Barbara Baker, Clarence Boyer, Florence Cadrez Brantley, Tilford Brook, James Braithwaite, Reginald Buckner, Marva Griffin Carter, Earl Calloway, Marion Cumbo, Brazeal Dennard, Samuel Floyd, Andrew Frierson, William Garcia, Oland Gaston, Mary Southern Harper, Roy Hill, Pearl Williams Jones, Angela McLinn, Norman Merrifield, Addison Reed, Geneva Southall, Ralph Williams, and Josephine Wright. Dr. Wright also assumed major responsibility for compiling data about Afro-European musicians. My daughter, April

Reilly, offered helpful suggestions, particularly in regard to rhythm 'n' blues, soul, and the like; my husband, Joseph, assisted me with the enormous correspondence involved with the project and took total charge of preparing the computer-assisted appendices and index.

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