

EDITORIAL DIGEST & MANUSCRIPT FILE

PROJECT Negroes of N.Y.  
 EDITOR: \_\_\_\_\_ FILE TITLE & NO.: Biographies  
 REPORTER: Young ART. NO.: 19  
 DATE: - COPY TITLE: Florence Mills  
 WORDAGE 1200  
 REWRITE: \_\_\_\_\_ INDEXED BY: *Cannon* DATE: *7-6-42*

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Wilbur Young

"Negroes of New York

Florence Mills

Florence Mills was born in Washington, D.C. on January 25th, 1895. She made her stage debut at the age of six with her sister in a singing act. Later she appeared in Chicago as a caberet entertainer in a place called the "Panama" at 35th and State Streets. It was here that she teamed up with Ada "Bricktop" Smith, now in Paris; Cora Green, still in show business in New York city; and Mattie Hight. This act disbanded in 1919 when Miss Mills joined the "Tennessee Ten" where she met her future husband, U.S. Thompson, comic dancer.

Florence Mills' first big stage success came in the show "shuffle Along" following which she was engaged by Lew Leslie to entertain at the "Plantation" on Broadway. Later under his management she headed her own company in a production called, "From Dixie to Broadway" which toured the country with great success. One of the songs featured in the show led to the naming of another hit show called "Blackbirds". It was in this show that her performance rocketed her to world wide fame. She became the highest ranking colored performer in America and Europe.

When the show was in London, the Prince of Wales was counted in the audience eleven times that is he was seen at eleven different performances.

When interviewed as to the reason for her great success, Miss Mills gave credit to her ability as a dancer to none other than Bill "Bojangles" Robinson" who gave her dancing lessons when she was in Chicago. Her husband,

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U.S. Thompson also taught her many dance steps

Few people knew that in addition to being a singer of popular songs, Florence Mills appeared at Carnegie Hall as a concert artist on Sundays and while abroad, she studied under famous European masters. In London she sang at the studios of Mr. Drysdale for the entertainment of the social elite of London.

While on the continent with Blackbirds, Miss Mills was offered large sums ## by a West End firm in London to model at a fashion parade. Her answer was,

"I don't think actresses should do that sort of thing. Not only that but it is depriving legitimate mannequins of work". 1

When Florence Mills made her debut at Aeolian Hall, the following was said by one of the local newspapers;

"What probably stirred up most preliminary interest was the appearance of Florence Mills, the personable young woman who made a name for herself in the Negro revues and has been keeping it up in the night clubs. This was the first # time she ever came East of Broadway among the highbrows but that didn't disturb her in the least. She had some extremely difficult things to sing- the sort that takes brains and vocal ability to even memorize but she seemed just as much at ease as though they had been honest to goodness jazz melodies. What they really were was jazz gone a hunting in the devil's garden of self-conscious artificiality. There were four songs called "Levee Land" by William Grant Still, but don't let the name mislead you, this Levee Land was much nearer Schoenbergian, Vienna than the Mississippi.

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Mr. Still is a Negro who began life with unquestionable talent but had been studying composition for the last three years with Edgar Varese. Mr. Varese thinks he can express the fourth dimension and also the Einstein theory in music. Imagine those two things and you have approximately "Levee Land" and we bow to Miss Mills for what she did with it.

The audience went wild over her for there was a strong hint of what she could really do in the singing of these distortions. We believe that she should give a program of real Negro jazz songs and a handful of spirituals, she would create a vogue that would outdo that of Roland Hays and Paul Robeson put together." 2

In another news article the following was said about Miss Mills;

"If in all the country there is a woman black or white who is the combined expert in pantomime, song, dance, and magnetic vitality that Miss Mills is, I must have been attending a meeting of the Slate and Tile Roofers Union when she exhibited herself.

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"There is not one of them who can sing a song so effectively as she can though a hundred of them have voices far superior. There is not one of them who can dance as she does, try as they will to imitate her in the rhymes of her race. And surely there is not <sup>^</sup>who as with Jolson in the instance of his own audiences, can so quickly, so surly and so electrically get an audience in her grip and keep it there."

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"In her way she is an unusual creature. Our music show theater has never within the present memory known one like her"

"We have <sup>had</sup> any number of colored women performers since the day of Black Patti who was little more than a portly mezzotint homirically endeavoring to prove to all comers that black was white. Like Black Patti, all the colored women have appeared before us in terms of either larynx or foot or both have simply striven to be as near white as possible and have succeeded as a consequence in being neither white nor black. Even Ada Overton Walker aped the manner and method of her white musical comedy sisters as the Black Patti before her aped the concert platform palefaces."

"But La Mills goes in for no such monkey-shines. She is a colored woman and her performances not only announce the fact but insist upon it. The song, the dance and the eyerolling and the abandon and the speech and the gesture of all Ethiopia are in that body of hers. She uses every last ounce of nervous ~~energy~~ power to merchant them nightly to her customers.

"Never for an instant does she try to do anything that is more natural to a white woman; never for a second is she in any department of her work other than the colored woman she is."

"When Florence Mills sings, the voice of her Negro people are in that singing, even when the lyrics of that song out of the Yiddo-American Broadway music publisher's shop. When she dances <sup>the</sup> ~~her~~ feet all the pickaninies since

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since the Civil War are in her shoes. And when in the larget of her own people, she struts her stuff, you get in her, the spirit of our own colored Americans off on a gala holiday. She is surly worth seeing." 3

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Key to index Florence Mills

1. Chicago Defender ,November 4th,1927
2. Amsterdam News, January 27th, 1926

(This article was a reprint from the Evening Journal)

3. The New York Telegram, April 16th,1927

Article written by George Jean Nathan

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