Sissle and Blake

Sing Shuffle Along

Miller & Lyles, Sissle & Blake and their All-Around the World Company in their Musical Knock-Out, "Shuffle Along" Now Playing at the Selwyn Theatre, Boston.
As a vaudeville duo, Sissle and Blake shared a common goal: To make it to Broadway. For Sissle, it would be a chance to prove his skills as an actor and vocalist; for Blake, it would mean graduating to the highest tier of popular songwriters and orchestra leaders. Success on Broadway meant entering the world of the entertainment elite. Beyond these personal goals, they shared a common belief that if they could prove that black songwriters and performers could produce music that equaled (if not bettered) the work of their white peers, they would open the doors to not only other composer/performers but also promote the broader idea that blacks were just as capable of artistic expression as anyone else.

Sissle and Blake’s personal struggle was wrapped in a belief in racial progress and equality, showing the influence of black social philosophers such as W.E.B. DuBois and other prominent black intellectuals of the day. These individuals promoted what was known as the “New Negro.” Highly educated and interested in the arts, the younger generations celebrated their race and even whites became infatuated with these young black writers, artists, and performers and their works. In the words of theater historian Peter Woods, the time was ripe for blacks to present their music, dance, and song to a mainstream audience.

The factors for a significant cultural development in the American popular theatre were all present: a white audience fascinated by the Negro, though in many ways obviously misinformed, critics and writers interested in the possibilities of seeing Negro themes and actors on the stage; and a great pool of Negro talent, trained in cabarets, vaudeville houses, and Negro theatres.

Black performers had to overcome a legacy of theatrical stereotypes that dated back to the early 19th century. This was the era of blackface minstrelsy, when the common characters of “Old Black Joe” (the rural bumptkin) and “Zip Coon” (the urban hipster/conman) were developed. A repertoire of dance music and song also developed, mostly written by white composers like Stephen Foster, but with
This recording is compiled from recordings Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle made for Blake’s EBM record label as well as a newly discovered set of extremely rare acetates of demo recordings by Sissle and Blake for a proposed Shuffle Along of 1950 Broadway show. While the show was never realized a series of circumstances led us to the owner of the acetates. Steve Ramm, who writes the wonderful “Anything Phonographic” on Amazon.com, first alerted us to the existence of the acetates which are owned by collector Peter Shambarger. Peter was kind enough to trust us with the discs, which we immediately sent to remastering genius Doug Pomeroy.

We’ve filled out the 1950 demos with historic recordings, a piano roll medley, and excerpts from Blake’s own record label, Eubie Blake Music, which was formed in the 1970s.

The songs are listed in performance order as listed on opening night. Following those recordings, original cast member Gertrude Saunders sings “Daddy Won’t You Please Come Home,” which was interpolated into the show after opening. And it is followed by another routine by original cast members and authors of the libretto, Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles.

So here we have original cast recordings by the creators, Sissle, Blake, Miller and Lyles, Gertrude Saunders, and Ivan Harold Browning who appeared in the original company as part of The Harmony Kings.

Harbinger plans to release all of the Eubie Blake Music recordings as well as the complete demo of Shuffle Along of 1950.
In the original minstrel companies, white performers appeared in blackface. However, a thirst to see the “real thing” led to black companies being formed, most of which picked up the same stereotypes of the white shows, with black performers appearing in blackface. Soon after the turn of the 20th century, a new genre emerged in the black population and began to strive for equality, both in society and in the theatre. Many of these blacks were educated in the new African American universities, and yearned for the same opportunities as whites. For them, the minstrel stereotypes were degrading. They hoped to forge a new role for blacks in popular entertainment.

The best-known performers to emerge from blackface minstrelsy were the comic duo Bert Williams and George Walker. They formed a touring company that featured Walker’s wife, dancer/ingenue Ada Overton Walker. The group presented The Gold Bug (1896) at New York’s Casino Theatre, which helped popularize the cakewalk. But while the first all-black Broadway musical, written by and starring African Americans was A Trip to Coontown (1898), with songs by Bob Cole, Cole originally performed with the vaudeville troupe the Black Pat Toubadours. Out of this group he formed his own ensemble that presented the show. A few years later, he partnered with lyricists James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson, who wrote more naturalistic lyrics that broke away from the minstrel dialect tradition.

The second black show on Broadway was Clorindy, also in 1898, with music by Will Marion Cook and starring comedian Ernest Hogan. When it arrived, Cook exclaimed, “Negroes are at last on Broadway and here to stay!” Cook believed that the African Americans should make their own style of theatre and not emulate “what the white artist could always do as well, generally better.” One of the first black musicals was London’s West End, In Dahomey (1903), and the first interracial musical to play Broadway, The Southerners (1904).

The Southerners’ interracial cast was for cause of alarm and nervousness. The critic for The New York Times wrote about the opening night: “When the chorus of real live coons walked in for the cake… mingling with the white members of the cast, there were those in the audience who trembled in their seats, as if expecting an... explosion. It was only a year ago that the entire cast of a farce at Madison Square struck because a single gentleman of color was engaged to play a part of the Negro porter, and held out until the gentleman was entirely cast out. And here were scores of blacks and whites mingling. But it presently became evident that the spirit of harmony reigned. Marion Cook succeeded in leading to black vaudeville as a popular provider of music. The time was ripe for a new generation of black songwriters to try their hand at writing for the musical theatre. The first [person] who wrote about the genre was the composer (1878), who composed the songs for the hit show, Fats Waller and Johnson, their show would eventually evolve into Shuffle Along.

Meanwhile, black Broadway shows continued to emerge sporadically, including Mr. Lode of Coal and The Red Moon, both produced in 1908. The last all-black Broadway show of this period was 1911’s Iris Honor, the Barber with music by J.T. Brymn. By 1909, the number of black shows had diminished due to the deaths of Edward Hegan, Bob Cole, and George Walker. In addition to their skills as performers or songwriters, these men also managed their own companies—which were on consistently shaky financial ground. Still, troupes like Williams and Walker (without Walker), the Black Pat Toubadours, the Smart Set, and the Negro Players all produced shows throughout the United States, some surviving into the 1920s.

Although there were black vaudeville as well as black musicals touring the country, between 1910 and the opening of Shuffle Along in 1921 there was no black musical on Broadway save for the failed Darktown Follies in 1913. And there were no black stars of any consequence except Bert Williams, who was a featured performer in the Ziegfeld’s Follies through 1919. In December 1921, Cole and Johnson’s Under the Bamboo Tree opened but was not a success—although its title song became a hit. The following year, Williams, the first great black star on Broadway, died. Broadway audiences had grown tired of the black stereotypes and lightweight plots of black musicals. For almost a decade, there was little or no interest in black musical theatre although black vaudeville continued to be successful, although mainly for black audiences.

Following the limited integration of World War I, the country was gripped with race riots. Black soldiers returning from Europe received a hostile reception from the white majority. Lynchings and rioting followed. Jazz was becoming more popular but, just as with the birth of rock and roll 30 years later, it was denounced as the “devil’s music.” As the main proponents of jazz, blacks were seen as corruptors of good taste. Returning from the wars, black fighters expected to be hailed as heroes. The backlash of whites against them and their music made producing black shows, even touring black shows meant for black audiences, problematic. Productions were discouraged for reasons of racism and the safety of the casts.

Nonetheless, around 1910 in New York City there was a growing interest in black artists by white society folk and the intelligentsia. As we have seen, James Reese Europe and his orchestra were able to establish themselves among the white elite as a popular provider of music. The time was ripe for a new generation of black songwriters to try their hand on Broadway. Whereas their black predecessors leaned toward operetta forms for their musicals, Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, the Paul Whiteman band which included the popular English composer, and black performers, like the versatile white composer, were all influenced by the popular English composers of the day as well as by the popular American composers of the day, including the great songwriter, Leslie Stuart who composed the songs for the hit show, Fats Waller (1921). While many black musicians would find it hard to relate to the refined sentiments of Stuart’s music, Blake heard an echo of his own musical personality in it. It inspired him to believe that he could write for the musical theatre: “The first [person] that gave me the idea that I could write for Broadway was a fella named Leslie Stuart... I heard his music and said I could write like that.”

The genesis of Shuffle Along began in Philadelphia. Eubie Blake explained how the idea for the show came about:

“I was a songwriter in Philadelphia and I had a hit song, and then I wanted to write another one. And I was working with a fella named Millie Stewart who was the star of the show. And Millie was the inspiration for all the songs in the show. And she was black. And I was very much influenced by her and her music. And I was very much influenced by her and her music. And I was very much influenced by her and her music. And I was very much influenced by her and her music.”

The show was a huge success and ran for over 300 performances. It was a turning point in the history of black musical theatre, as it was the first all-black musical to play Broadway.

Struggling to keep up with the cost of production and the high demand for tickets, the show closed after a few months. However, the impact of Shuffle Along was felt for years to come. It helped to break down racial barriers in the theatre and paved the way for future black musicals to come.

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a few blacks in the mix as well. (African American songwriter James Bland wrote the popular “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny,” among other hits.)

In the original minstrel companies, white performers appeared in blackface. However, a thirst to see the “real thing” led to black companies being formed, most of which picked up the same stereotypes of the white shows, with blackface actors mimicking black people. After the Cotton Club started emerging in the black population and began to strive for equality, both in society and in the theatre. Many of these blacks were educated in the new African American universities, and yearned for the same opportunities as whites. For them, the minstrel stereotypes were degrading. They hoped to forge a new role for blacks in popular entertainment.

The best-known performers to emerge from blackface minstrelsy were the comic duo Bert Williams and George Walker. They formed a touring company that featured Walker’s wife, dancer/ingenue Ada Overton Walker. The group presented The Gold Bug (1896) at New York’s Casino Theatre, which helped popularize the cakewalk. But the first all-black Broadway musical, written by and starring African Americans was A Trip to Coontown (1898), with songs by Bob Cole. Cole originally performed with the vaudeville troupe the Black Patti Troubadours. Out of this group he formed his own ensemble that presented the show. A few years later, he partnered with lyricists James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson, who wrote more naturalistic lyrics that broke away from the minstrel dialect tradition.

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The Southerners’ interacial cast was cause for alarm and nervousness. The critic for The New York Times wrote about the opening night: “When the chorus of real live coons walked in for the cake... mingling with the white members of the cast, there were those in the audience who trembled in their seats, as if expecting an... explosion. It was only a year ago that the entire cast of a farce at Madison Square struck because a single gentleman of color was engaged to play the part of a Negro portrayer, and held out until the gentleman was entirely cast out. And here were scores of blacks and whites mingling. But it presently became evident that the spirit of harmony reigned. Marion Cook succeeded in passing the casting of colored people for white actors. But Cook’s dream of a respected black theatre was echoed beyond the borders of Broadway. Chicago’s Pekin Stock Company was founded by producer Robert T. Motts. The Pekin theatre, built on the ashes of a previous theatre, would be according to Motts “a playhouse worthy of the name and a credit to the Negro race.” One of the notable shows to be presented at the Pekin Theatre was 1906’s The Mayor of Dixie, written by Flournoy E. Miller and Aubrey Lyles, two of the most successful and highly regarded black musical writers (and one who, themselves, appeared in blackface). Their show would eventually evolve into Shuffle Along.

Meanwhile, black Broadway shows continued to emerge sporadically, including Mr. Lode of Coal and The Red Moon, both produced in 1908. The last all-black Broadway show of this period was 1911’s Iris Honor, the Barber with music by J.T. Brynm. By 1909, the number of black shows had diminished due to the deaths of Edward Hegan, Bob Cole, and George Walker. In addition to their skills as performers or songwriters, these men also managed their own companies—which were on consistently shaky financial ground. Still, troupes like Williams and Walker (without Walker), the Black Patti Troubadours, the Smart Set, and the Negro Players all produced shows throughout the United States, some surviving into the 1920s.

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Following the limited integration of World War I, the country was gripped with race riots. Black soldiers returning from Europe received a hostile reception from the white majority. Lynchings and rioting followed. Jazz was becoming more popular but, just as with the birth of rock and roll 30 years later, it was denounced as the “devil’s music.” As the main proponents of jazz, blacks were seen as corruptors of good taste. Returning from the war, black fighters exposed themselves as heroes. The backlash of whites against them and their music made producing black shows, even touring black shows meant for black audiences, problematic. Productions were discouraged for reasons of racism and the safety of the casts.

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The genesis of Shuffle Along began in Philadelphia. Eubie Blake explained how the idea for the show came about:

“[Sissle and I] played a benefit for the NAACP in Philadelphia at the colored theatre, the Dunbar... Miller and I spent a good part of the day participated in the NAACP’s demonstration. We sat there on the curbside and composed songs. We just sat there and composed songs. We just wrote and didn’t see them anymore and they don’t see us. One day, we were coming up Broadway and they were coming down Broadway [at the same time]. Now they were all educated college boys, Miller, Lyles, and Sissle. I was the only dummy of the four. Miller says, “Hello there. You birds are the guys we’ve been looking for. [Will Marion] Cook and all those fellas wrote beautiful music but it wasn’t Broadway. You fellas write what Broadway would want and we’d like to write a show with you. We’ll write the book and you birds write the music and lyrics.” Sissle did the business for us, and that’s how we met.”
In an interview conducted by the black press after the show's success, Sissle recalled, "Blake and I always wanted to take out a show, but needed a book. Miller and Lyles had taken out several, but had little success because they lacked original music." They made an ideal match.

Shuffle Along's creators were all from the black middle-class, and all shared an interest in projecting a positive image of black life beyond minstrel stereotypes. Miller and Lyles had met at the all-black Fisk University in Tennessee. They discovered each other's love of theatre and decided to join together as a comedy and dancing act. The act was so successful that the team earned a long-standing gig in Chicago. They also toured England and then had a long run on the Keith vaudeville circuit, which also employed Sissle and Blake. The two teams decided that joining together might result in a new kind of black musical comedy: one that might restore black theatre to the Great White Way.

Like many other show creators, the team behind Shuffle Along were not afraid to recycle their earlier efforts to create the new show. The show's book was based on Miller and Lyles' earlier success, The Mayor of Dixie. The book was chock full of racial stereotypes as befitted most of the black musicals produced during the first decade of the century. However, it was a big success in Chicago and the comic duo were well suited to the lead parts. As we shall see, Sissle and Blake would recycle many of the songs they had performed in their vaudeville act in order to create the show's score.

To succeed on Broadway, they realized they needed the help of a white producer. They approached Al Mayer, a white booker for the Keith vaudeville circuit and friend of Miller and Lyles. Mayer was impressed by what he saw; he told a contemporary interviewer: "I had always believed there was room for a good Negro show, but I had never found the show. I had taken out seven Negro productions and all were flops. But I saw the possibilities as outlined by Miller and Lyle, and Sissle and Blake, and got busy."

Mayer took his friend Harry Cort to lunch (with $2.50 lent by Sissle and Blake). Harry, the son of theatre owner and producer John Cort, liked the idea of a black show, and an audition was set up with his father. As Blake told Robert Kimball and William Bolcom: "We ran down a few songs and Old Man Cort—well, he just sat there with a glum look on his face. When we did our theme song, "Love Will Find a Way," the old man didn’t say anything. Nothing. He just got up and walked out, saying, "Thank you, boys. Thank you very much. " I thought we were dead for sure, but it turned out the old man liked the song so much he said he’d help us and give us a theatre, sets, [and] some old costumes, if we would just give his son Harry an interest in the show."

John Cort agreed to provide the company with a place to stage the show. Located a half-mile from the northernmost point of Times Square, Daly’s 63rd Street Music Hall stood on the corner of Broadway. It was hardly a well-known space; a critic for the New York Age described it as being "sandwiched between garages and other establishments representative of the automobile industry, [which] was little known to the average Broadway theatregoer." The space had a small stage and hardly a backstage at all. It didn’t even have an orchestra pit, so the first three rows were removed and the boxes demolished to accommodate the musicians. Being used primarily as a lecture hall, there was very little depth to the stage. Even though the stage was extended a few feet, most of the dance numbers were limited to being choreographed horizontally across the width of the stage. A makeshift curtain was added and soon the space was a passable theatre. Blake commented that the theatre, "violated every city ordinance in the book," adding ironically, "It wasn’t Broadway but we made it Broadway."

Although it was a white producer whose name was most important in obtaining a booking on Broadway, the show was financed by The Nikko Producing Company, a mostly black enterprise. All four of the show’s creators were both members of Nikko as were other important black theatre personages of the time. Al Mayer and Jack Scholl, both white, were also investors and Mayer became the show’s manager. Blake added that, “Lawrence Deas staged the show but he was a Negro. And another man, Walter Brooks, came in to polish it up for Broadway. He was a white man;” the show was produced on the cheap. After all, no one except the authors were convinced that it would be a success. Savings were realized by stripping down the staging to only the most necessary pieces of scenery. One anonymous critic wrote that the show had “no more scenery than you could pack into a taxicab.”

Variety’s correspondent wrote that the show’s scenery was terrible and opined that the costumes looked like they came from another show of Cort’s—which they did. He then wished that, “some day Sissle and Blake would be tendered a real production.”
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Indeed, Harry Cort came up with the costumes from other shows that he had produced. Most originally appeared on stage in the Eddie Leonard show *Roly Boly Eyes* that premiered in 1919. Added to those were costumes from Frank Fay’s *Fables*. Dusty and mildewed, with sweat stains under the arms, out from storage they came. The chorus girls would cry every time they had to put them on.

Although the style of the clothes from *Roly Boly Eyes* didn’t exactly complement the backwater locale of *Shuffle Along*, they were free. And the authors were not above writing material as needed to fit the costumes. A bunch of cotton picker costumes from the earlier play inspired Sissle and Blake to write a song that gave a nostalgic look at the rural South entitled “Bandana Days.” As Blake later recalled, it was the rhythm of the title that influenced its jaunty melody: “*Sissle* is in Boston and I’m in New York [talking by telephone] and Sissle said, ‘I have a title for the song, “Bandana Days.”’ I said, ‘Say Bandana’ and I wrote down the rhythm of it. You write the rhythm on the melody: ‘Bum-dum-dum.’ So, I did that and got the rhythm. Now the title has to come in two or three times. Then he talked the rhythm of it to me.”

Blake’s rhythmic sensitivity to language was one of the hallmarks of the duo’s songs, and one way that ragtime’s vitality and syncopation was worked into their hits. The “vaguely Oriental” costumes from *Fables* were used for the song “Oriental Blues” (which Blake said was “neither Oriental nor a blues”). The song came from the duo’s trunk. Its origin was especially interesting and illustrated the close relationship of Sissle and Blake. As he recalled:

> “*W.W. Watson’s father bought him a seat on Wall Street, [for] $250,000. And each time we’d go to his home to entertain. Sissle’s over here and you know I don’t write melodies at the piano. And Watson said, ‘Write me an Oriental number: I’m writing down the rhythm and I don’t know what Sissle is writing over there. When [Watson] came out and asked us, ‘You got my song ready?’ Sissle says, ‘Yes, we do.’ Sissle writes under pressure and he’s over there writing the lyric. Sissle don’t hear no melody. And the thing fit together. I don’t know what he’s got over there and he don’t know what I’ve got. We were tuned into each other. I had to change about five notes from the verse and chorus. That actually happened. Twice it happened.”

Blake explained to *The New Yorker* in 1978, “I had been writing songs all along. I sent them out, but the people on Broadway said they were no good. [So] I put them in *Shuffle Along*. Many of the songs came from Sissle and Blake’s vaudeville act. In fact, the second act stopped to allow for a brief showcase of their act with Blake leaving the conductor’s stand to join Sissle on stage to perform a medley of their earlier songs.

Another old song from their catalogue, the 1916 song, “*My Loving Baby*” had a new melody written by Blake to Sissle’s original lyric for the chorus. The result, “I’m Just Wild about Harry,” was set to a lovely waltz tempo. Lead actress Lottie Gee, who was going to sing the song in the show, asked, “How can you have a waltz in a colored show?”

Blake responded: “I reminded her of a waltz ‘When the Pale Moon Shines’, which had been in a colored show. Lottie answered, yes, she had been in that show, and the song wasn’t a hit. Well, she had me there. ‘Make it a one-step,’ said Lottie. A one-step! That cut me to the quick—she was going to destroy my beautiful melody! I loved that waltz! Then Sissle went along with her. He was always more commercial than I was. All right, I said, I’ll make it a one-step.”

Despite the new up-tempo arrangement, the song just wasn’t working. Sissle explained:

> “Something seemed to just miss in its presentation, and we were about to throw the song out of the show in Philadelphia, where we were playing prior to taking it into New York.

> “One night one of the chorus boys was sick, and Bob Lee, a member of the singing ensemble, was drafted to replace him in the number. Bob couldn’t dance very well, so we sent him on stage leading the [chorus] line so that he would be the last off and not in the way of the others when they made their exit.”

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Blake made a similar point in an interview reported in the *Lebanon* (Pennsylvania) *Daily News*. To be a hit, a song had to combine both a danceable rhythm and a memorable tune: “A modern song, to make any kind of a hit at all, must have ‘pep’ to it, and also must have a ‘catchy’ tune that unconsciously sticks to the mind of the listener.”

The balancing of “hot” rhythm with a singable melody was one of the great achievements that Blake brought to the Broadway musical. Blake’s analysis of the contemporary song scene reflected America’s fascination with black music and its danceable syncopations, at the same time it revealed the audience’s hesitancy to fully embrace it. A successful song should be “jazzy” but “not too jazzy,” as Blake stated. The trick was to give the audience a taste of the “exotic” new sounds without alienating them.

While *Shuffle Along* would eventually prove to be a transformational and hugely successful show, the producers faced a rocky road getting it to Broadway. The out-of-town tryouts were not uniformly successful, while the company struggled to keep going with its limited backing. The first stop on the tryout tour was Trenton, New Jersey, but the company couldn’t afford the train fare for the short voyage across the Hudson River. Blake recalled: “We got down to Penn Station and I was ready to turn around and go straight home but Sissle wouldn’t let me. He said we’d get there somehow, and we did. I think Sissle still felt Jim Europe’s hand guiding us...”
Indeed, Harry Cott came up with the costumes from other shows that he had produced. Most originally appeared on stage in the Eddie Leonard show Roly Boly Eyes that premiered in 1919. Added to those were costumes from Frank Fay's Fabies. Dusty and mildewed, with sweat stains under the arms, out from storage they came. The chorus girls would cry every time they had to put them on.

Although the style of the clothes from Roly Boly Eyes didn't exactly complement the backwater locale of Shuffle Along, they were free. And the authors were not above writing material as needed to fit the costumes. A bunch of cotton picker costumes from the earlier play inspired Sissle and Blake to write a song that gave a nostalgic look at the rural South entitled "Bandana Days." As Blake later recalled, it was the rhythm of the title that influenced its jaunty melody: "Sissle is in Boston and I'm in New York [talking by telephone] and Sissle said, 'I have a title for the song, 'Bandana Days.' I said, 'Say Bandana' and I wrote down the rhythm of it. You write the rhythm on the melody: 'Bum-dum-dum.' So, I did that and got the rhythm. Now the title has to come in two or three times. Then he talked the rhythm of it to me."

Blake's rhythmic sensitivity to language was one of the hallmarks of the duo's songs, and one way that ragtime's vitality and syncopation was worked into their hits. The "vaguely Oriental" costumes from Fabies were used for the song "Oriental Blues" (which Blake said was "neither Oriental nor a blues"). The song came from the duo's trunk. Its origin was especially interesting and illustrated the close relationship of Sissle and Blake. As he recalled: "W.W. Watson's father bought him a seat on Wall Street, [for] $250,000. And each time we'd go to his home to entertain. Sissle's over here and you know I don't write melodies at the piano. And Watson said, 'Write me an Oriental number: I'm writing down the rhythm and I don't know what Sissle is writing over there. When [Watson] came out and asked us, 'You got my song ready?' Sissle says, 'Yes, we do.' Sissle writes under pressure and he's over there writing the lyric. Sissle don't hear no melody. And the thing fit together. I don't know what he's got over there and he don't know what I've got. We were turned into each other. I had to change about five notes from the verse and chorus. That actually happened. Twice it happened."

Blake explained to The New Yorker in 1978, "I had been writing songs all along. I sent them out, but the people on Broadway said they were good. So [I put them in Shuffle Along]." Many of the songs came from Sissle and Blake's vaudeville act. In fact, the second act stopped to allow for a brief showcase of their act with Blake leading the conductor's stand to join Sissle on stage to perform a medley of their earlier songs.

Another old song from their catalogue, the 1916 song, "My Loving Baby," had a new melody written by Blake to Sissle's original lyric for the chorus. The result, "I'm Just Wild about Harry," was set to a lovely waltz tempo. Lead actress Lottie Gee, who was going to sing the song in the show, asked, "How can you have a waltz in a colored show?"

Blake responded: "I reminded her of a waltz 'When the Pale Moon Shines,' which had been in a colored show. Lottie answered, yes, she had been in that show, and the song wasn't a hit. Well, she had me there. 'Make it a one-step,' said Lottie. A one-step! That cut me to the quick—she was going to destroy my beautiful melody! I loved that waltz! Then Sissle went along with her. He was always more commercial than I was. All right, I said, 'I'll make it a one-step.'"

Despite the new up-tempo arrangement, the song just wasn't working. Sissle explained:

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"One night one of the chorus boys was sick, and Bob Lee, a member of the singing ensemble, was drafted to replace him in the number. Bob couldn't dance very well, so we sent him on stage leading the [chorus] line so that he would be the last off and not in the way of the others when they made their exit."

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Earlier the team had noticed an unshaven, poorly dressed man hanging around rehearsals. They assumed he was there to leer at the showgirls. Blake continued the story, “But Al Mayer knew him and said we should get him to stay with us on tour. When we were at the station, Al went to him and sold him one-half of his share in the show to get us on the way to Trenton.”

The show opened in Trenton with a cast of 78 and it was well received if not profitable. Mayer reported that after all the receipts were in, he was $20 short of enough cash to take the troop to its next stop, Washington, DC. He had to borrow the money from “an usher who was saving for a new suit... upon my promise to send him $30 from Washington” when they arrived. Mayer noted that the company was able to “breathe easy” once they reached the nation’s capital, because they had a guaranteed income there for two weeks, before moving on to Philadelphia. Although the cast often didn’t get paid, they stuck with the show, hoping that if and when they finally opened in New York it would give them an important credit to add to their resumes.

Sissle recalled that all of the cast members viewed the venture as somewhat of a gamble, but they were willing to make it based on the possibility of making it to a real Broadway stage: “The players knew they had little future in vaudeville because of their race and when we told them we had no money but would not take them farther than walking distance from New York, they agreed to gamble with us.”

Blake explained how the company managed during its pre-Broadway days: “We’d play one-night—if we were lucky, two-night—stands. No one knew us, so they’d only book us for a short time. We’d get good reviews in one town, but before they could do us any good we’d be on to another town—that is, if we had the money. One night Sissle and I were sitting on the steps of a building, and Sissle was writing out checks. They weren’t any good until we could wire the box office receipts into the New York bank—we were always one day behind at the very least. I looked up. ‘Sissle’ I say, ‘Do you know where you’re sitting?’ ‘No’ he said, and looked around. We were sitting on the steps of the jailhouse, writing bum checks! We broke up in a fit of laughing and couldn’t stop.”

Life on the road was hard and not only because they had no money. There was the problem of only being allowed to stay in black hotels and most of them were not too nice. Instead, they booked rooms in boarding houses and private homes in exchange for tickets for the show. On one occasion they had no money so Lyles talked a cab driver into lending them some cash to pay for their lodging with the promise that the New York office would repay him later. As Blake told it, “There were five of us. Miller and Lyles slept in one bed, Sissle in another; Paul Floyd, who was in the show, was in the bed with me. All night long the chinches [bedbugs] had a picnic, and Paul kept waking me up, slapping the chinches.”

The next morning, they tried to sneak out of the rooming house but the large proprietor blocked the steps demanding his money. They couldn’t get past him no matter what. He berated them, “I didn’t trust you minstrel niggers! You’re all no good!” Lyles replied, “Sir, the boy will be here with the money very soon.” Astoundingly, the cabbie actually came and paid the bill.

But the show’s creators did not starve. As Flournoy Miller said, “You learn a lot of tricks on the road. Sissle and I would visit people who were boarding some members of the cast—always at mealtime—and I would take a bite of everything on the table and insist that Sissle taste it too, because it was so delicious. Then we’d go to another house and do the same thing—we usually had plenty to eat.”

After appearing in Burlington, New Jersey, they were again broke. They lacked the cash to get to their booking at the Howard Theatre in Washington, D.C. Blake recalled: “[We had] no money for train fare. Al Mayer is down at the station, walking up and down the platform wondering what to do. Up walks this man and says:

‘Say, did you see that nigger show here in town last night?’
‘Yeah,’ said Al.
‘That was the best thing I ever saw, that nigger show. Yes, sir!’
‘Yeah,’ said Al. ‘It’s my show. I’m the manager.’
‘Well, you’ve got a gold mine there.’
‘Yeah,’ said Al. ‘Well, sir, that’s nice to hear, but we don’t even have enough money to get to the next town.’ So the man said he’d be right back, walked into the ticket office, and talked to the stationmaster. It turns out that man was one of the owners of the railroad, for when he came back he had tickets for the whole company.”

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A n engagement at Philadelphia’s Dunbar Theatre, a black venue, was a hit. However, to hedge his bets, producer Harry Cort—unsure that whites would come out to see the show—booked the show into a series of one-night stands in white theatres around Philadelphia, including two nights in late April 1921 in Reading, Pennsylvania, at the Rajah Theater. The show garnered positive reviews in the local paper, which raved that “Shuffle Along” is “the best colored musical comedy since the days of Williams and Walker.” [It] contain[s] many catchy tunes and many cleverly written comedy scenes. The show’s success even at white theatres convinced Cort that the show might just succeed on Broadway. However, by the time the show landed on Broadway, it was $18,000 in the hole.

Sissle and Blake were nervous about the chances for the show. Would white audiences accept two black characters falling in love and singing a serious, non-stereotypical love song, “Love Will Find a Way”—just like white characters? Flournoy Miller learned that “a newspaper man told Mr. Cort that the public would not stand for Negroes acting romantic on a stage and suggested that the entire love plot be excised.” The idea of blacks being capable of having romantic feelings—as opposed to the “animal” sexuality associated with jazz music—was controversial for white audiences. It implied an equality of the races that few were ready to accept.

An African American critic writing for the New York Age commented on this prejudice among white audiences: “White audiences… do not want colored people to indulge in too much love-making. They will applaud if a colored man serenades his girl at the window, but if, while telling of his great love in song he becomes somewhat demonstrative… then exceptions are taken. It may be the general impression prevails that Negroes are only slightly acquainted with white audiences: “White audiences… do not want colored people to indulge in too much love-making. They will applaud if a colored man serenades his girl at the window, but if, while telling of his great love in song he becomes somewhat demonstrative… then exceptions are taken. It may be the general impression prevails that Negroes are only slightly acquainted with

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And it wasn’t just the producers and writers who were nervous about the show’s prospects. Noble Sissle wrote that, “very few of the people of the Broadway theatrical managerial staffs believed in us and there were few among our own group who felt we had a chance. However, we felt we had a message—we felt that the gloom and depression as an aftermath of the war had left the country hungry for laughter… that was so expressed in our music and rhythms.”

Blake agreed with Sissle’s assessment: “We were afraid people would think it was a freak show and it wouldn’t appeal to white people. Others thought that if it was a colored show it might be dirty. One man bought a front row seat for himself every night for a week. I’d notice him—down in the pit you notice things in the audience—and finally, after the whole week was past, he came and told me that now he could bring his wife and children because there was no foul language and not one double-entendre.”

Finally, after months of hard work, on Monday, May 23, 1921, Shuffle Along opened. However, Sissle and the company were still concerned about the depiction of the love affair and especially the love song “Love Will Find a Way.” Sissle recalled: “On opening night in New York, this song had us more worried than anything else in the show. We were afraid that when Lottie Gee and Roger Matthews sang it, we’d be run out of town. Miller, Lyles, and I were standing near the exit door with one foot inside the theatre and the other pointed north toward Harlem. We thought Blake stuck out there in front, leading the orchestra—his baldhead would get the brunt of the tomatoes and rotten eggs. Imagine our amazement when the song was not only beautifully received, but encored.”

Much of the song’s success was due to its performance by singer Lottie Gee. Gee made one of her first appearances as a chorine in the 1909 touring cast of Cole and Johnson’s The Red Moon. Her light complexion allowed her to appear as a “Gibson girl” in the show’s chorus, a role not usually associated with black actresses. In 1911, she partnered with singer/dancer Effie King, first touring with Ford Dabney’s company and then as a vaudeville duo. A reviewer writing in the African American press praised them for weathering the difficult conditions faced by black performers and succeeding on the stage: “In no other field have colored Americans with artistic aspirations found the road to success so hard as that leading to prominence upon the stage. As a rule, those who have selected the stage for their professional career have been given very little consideration by our writers and critics. … [While] the profession has in the past merited severe criticism... it has improved with time. “Conspicuous on the roll of those who are endeavoring daily to raise the standard... [are] Misses Effie King and Lottie Gee... as a refined singing and dancing act. “These talented young women... have excellent voices and know how to use them. The act is beautifully costumed and staged with artistic taste.”

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their church choirs in their younger years. The review concludes with the solidly middle class endorsement that “both [performers] own property, thus showing that their efforts have not been in vain.”

After the duo broke up, Gee continued to appear as a solo act, even travelling to London to perform in 1920 and then headlining at Harlem’s prestigious Lafayette Theater. Her widespread acceptance as a woman of refinement and taste made the fact that she was singing a romantic love song more palatable to a white audience.

While the show’s producers’ fears of a backlash against their love story proved unfounded, it was the more upbeat singing and dancing—flavored with just the right amount of jazz rhythms—that made it a big success. As Sissle recalled of its opening night: “The biggest moment of all came near the end of the show, with a number called, ‘The Baltimore Buz’. I sang it while Blake and the orchestra played like fury and the girls danced up a storm. People cheered. I almost fell of the stage when I looked out into the auditorium—there was old John Cort dancing in the aisles! His faith in us had been borne out. That night it looked like we were home.”

While its music and dance was new and exciting, Shuffle Along’s plot, such as it was, was a creaky combination of age-old stereotypes. It was primarily contrived to allow Miller and Lyles show off their well-beloved characters that they had been playing for years on vaudeville. They portrayed a pair of comic grifters who shared a mutual distrust that occasionally flared into comic dustups. (One of their favorite bits, a mock boxing match, was recycled in the show, moving one critic to note that the routine “invariably goes big” with audiences.) Meanwhile, the young leads—Lottie Gee playing the soubrette and Roger Matthews her lover—have to overcome the objections of Gee’s stage father to finally find true bliss together. The backdrop was a three-way race for mayor in the backwater burg, Jimtown, with Matthews playing the true-blue candidate and Lyles the conniving blackguards. The plot would occasionally come to a halt for set pieces by the two comedians and—in the second act—it was entirely dropped so Sissle and Blake could give a taste of their popular numbers.

The most surprising thing to the creators and critics was the show’s great success from the get go. Where most shows opened and closed quickly, ShuffleAlong just kept on going. The African American press was quick to notice; at the time of its opening, all those white people kept saying: ‘I would like to touch him, I wish I could have a real Negro in my house’… I would like to buy them and have them perform at my house.” As Sissle recalled of its opening night: “The biggest moment of all came near the end of the show, with a number called, ‘The Baltimore Buz’. I sang it while Blake and the orchestra played like fury and the girls danced up a storm. People cheered. I almost fell of the stage when I looked out into the auditorium—there was old John Cort dancing in the aisles! His faith in us had been borne out. That night it looked like we were home.”

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Walton was most concerned that the white preference for stereotype images would prevail. White audiences, he believed, were accepting of either the rural “Uncle Joe” or strutting “dandy darkey” characters, but not open to representations of the Negro as nice-looking young men and women, well dressed and using plain United States language!”

The American critics were no less surprised by the show’s success with white audiences than the show’s producers. Lester A. Walton, a critic writing for the New York Age, reported his own pleasure that the show was such a success: “Some weeks ago I had the pleasure of seeing Shuffle Along at the Dunbar Theater, Philadelphia, where it broke all previous records held by the house for attendance. I attended a performance last week [in New York] for the express purpose of paying particular attention to the manner in which the white patrons received the show… Knowing the strange workings of the Caucasian mind at times on matters in which the Negro is directly involved, I was curious to learn if Shuffle Along would find its way into the category of what is known in the language of the performer as “a white folk’s show.”

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hus, Walton was pleasantly surprised not only by the show’s warm reception but the quality of the music: “The musical numbers in Shuffle Along are original, tuneful and worthy of a place in a Broadway musical show. If ‘Love Will Find A Way’ were featured in a white production it would be proclaimed one of the season’s hits. “ He also praised Lottie Gee—who appeared “to better advantage than at any time during her career”— Roger Matthews, and Gertrude Saunders. His review concluded, “Speaking as a colored American, I think Shuffle Along should continue to shuffle along… for a long time.”
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Business was so good that three weeks into the run the company cancelled the Wednesday matinees and added Wednesday midnight performances that were heavily attended by theatrical folk. A few weeks later, all the matinees were cancelled. Shuffle Along soon grew into the most successful show playing on Broadway with a weekly gross averaging $13,000 a week against $7,500 in weekly expenses (once the show was a verified smash the top ticket price was raised to $3.00). Shuffle Along finally closed after playing 504 performances, an astounding run at the time.

By the time Shuffle Along reached its half-year anniversary, the African American press was celebrating its success. The New York Age noted that it was a “record run for a colored attraction” drawing “capacity audiences at every performance with present business pointing to a long and prosperous run.” By this time, the show’s producers could add “new costumes” (presumably made for the show), including the “latest fashions” for the chorus girls.

By the time Shuffle Along finally closed after playing 504 performances, an astounding run at the time. A few weeks later, all the matinees were added to the schedule, which was conducted from the pit by Blake. The big chorus number came in the opening number of the second act. A policeman is shown directing traffic, urging both automobiles and pedestrians to keep moving—to “shuffle along.” The title song is then performed by the chorines who perform the cakewalk-like shuffle.

Several young performers got their first taste of any stage by dancing in the chorus line, among them blues singer Adelaide Hall. (A reviewer gave Hall special note for “her work [that] is unusual enough to be singled out” on the song “Bandana Days.”) Most notable was a 16-year-old dancer who couldn’t help but draw attention to herself. To make up for the lack of lighting, the hue of her shoes distracted attention to them.

Still, the love story was a giant step ahead for black theatre. In its tours and subsequent productions, the producers insisted that the theatres become fully integrated with seating reserved for blacks on all levels. And the plot itself had one foot in the minstrel era and another in a more enlightened view of black life. The character of Jim Walton was new to black theatre, a thoroughly upright (if a little boring) citizen always attempting to do the right thing for everyone without a care for reward for himself.

T he highlight of the show was the chorus numbers, featuring light-skinned dancers hoofing to the jazzy score, which was conducted from the pit by Blake. The big chorus number came in the opening number of the second act. A policeman is shown directing traffic, urging both automobiles and pedestrians to keep moving—to “shuffle along.” The title song is then performed by the chorines who perform the cakewalk-like shuffle.

L ester A. Walton wrote a longer article celebrating the show’s 6-month run, noting the importance of the milestone, which he found to be “pregnant with historical significance”: “It’s been more than a decade since a colored musical attraction figured in a long run in New York...” To parallel this record was the burning ambition of many a colored performer... [However] it has been a herculean task to secure a suitable downtown theatre for a colored musical show. Archaic ideas, predicated on the futility of such a step, have invariably prevailed.

“Now comes ‘Shuffle Along’ faithfully functioning as a stream-roller. It has knocked over and crushed to earth many of the barriers that have stood in the path of the colored show’s progress. Precedents have been established.”

Blake noted that one reviewer really put the show over the top: “It was Alan Dale’s review that really made people want to see the show.” Dale, writing in the New York American, thought the cast’s energy and enjoyment of the material was one of the highlights of the show: “How they enjoyed themselves! How they jigged and pranced and cavorted, and wriggled, and laughed. It was an infection of amusement. It was impossible to resist a jollity that the company itself appeared to experience down to the very marrow. Talk of pep! These people made pep seem something different to the tame thing we know further downtown. Every sinew in their frames responded to their extreme energy.”

Shuffle Along’s great success was a watershed event for black performers and the black theater. Not only did it mark the highpoint for blacks on stage, it broke the color barrier in the audience for the audience as well. Variety noted that blacks were seated in the orchestra section of the house and not forced to sit in the balcony as in many of the theatres. True, the paper noted that, “the two races rarely intermingled”—which made its white readers less nervous at the possibility of being seated next to a black patron. In fact, the orchestra section had a line of demarcation between the three-quarters of the downstairs reserved for whites and the rest offered to blacks. But even that small step proved to be historic. Shuffle Along’s desegregation policy, as tentative as it might have been, was the first step in an eventual true opening of theatre seats to all races. By 1930, critic, social activist, and songwriter James Weldon Johnson proudly wrote, “At the present time the sight of colored people in the orchestras of Broadway theatres is not regarded a cause for immediate action or utter astonishment.”

But not all of the black population were as amused with the proceedings. Leaders of the black community decried the show for its blackface musical comedy tropes. They felt that black theatre should be refinements of the black experience and not exploit the usual black clichés. Miller and Lyles’ blackface, exaggerated black dialect, and old-fashioned stereotyping did disservice to the black cause. And the light-skinned black chorus also riled the critics.
Lester A. Walton wrote a longer article celebrating the show’s 6-month run, noting the importance of the costumes (presumably made for the show), including the “latest fashions” for the chorus girls. "By this time, the show’s producers could add "new New York Age noted that it was a "record run for a colored attraction" drawing "capacity audiences at every performance reached its half-year anniversary, the African American press was celebrating its success. The Shuffle Along raised to $3.00). Shuffle Along finally closed after playing 504 performances, an astounding run at the time. Business was so good that three weeks into the run the company cancelled the Wednesday matinees and added three-quarters of the downstairs reserved for whites and the rest offered to blacks. But even that small step proved to be historic. Shuffle Along’s desegregation policy, as tentative as it might have been, was the first step in an eventual true opening of theatre seats to all races. As it seems is often the case, the creators were initially reluctant to hire Baker. Sissle remembered: "We had turned herself stand out in the line, young Josephine Baker began doing some "crazy things" in the words of Blake: "Just mugging, crossing her eyes, tripping, getting out of step and catching up, doing all the steps the rest were doing, but funnier." She proceeded to steal the show and became one of the favorite and best-paid members of the company. As it seems is often the case, the creators were initially reluctant to hire Baker. Sisley remembered: "We had turned her down when she tried out for us in Philadelphia because she was not yet sixteen. We had wanted to hire her but Still, the love story was a giant step ahead for black theatre. In its tours and subsequent productions, the producers insisted that the theatres become fully integrated with seating reserved for blacks on all levels. And the plot itself had one foot in the minstrel era and another in a more enlightened view of black life. The character of Jim Walton was new to black theatre, a thoroughly upright (if a little boring) citizen always attempting to do the right thing for everyone without a care for reward for himself. T he highlight of the show was the chorus numbers, featuring light-skinned dancers hoofing to the jazzy score, which was conducted from the pit by Blake. The big chorus number came in the opening number of the second act. A policeman is shown directing traffic, urging both automobiles and pedestrians tell them to keep moving—to "shuffle along." The title song is then performed by the chorusines who perform the cakewalk-like shuffle. Several young performers got their first taste of any stage by dancing in the chorus line, among them blues singer Adelaide Hall. (A reviewer gave Hall special note for “her work [that] is unusual enough to be singled out” on the song “Bandana Days.”) Most notable was a 16-year-old dancer who couldn’t help but draw attention to herself. To make herself stand out in the line, young Josephine Baker began doing some “crazy things” in the words of Blake: “Just mugging, crossing her eyes, tripping, getting out of step and catching up, doing all the steps the rest were doing, but funnier.” She proceeded to steal the show and became one of the favorite and best-paid members of the company. As it seems is often the case, the creators were initially reluctant to hire Baker. Sisley remembered: “We had turned her down when she tried out for us in Philadelphia because she was not yet sixteen. We had wanted to hire her but
by law we couldn't. She was heartbroken. We produced a number-two company to play one-nighters throughout New England while we were still in New York. Word got back to us that a comedy chorus girl had joined the company after we had rehearsed it and sent it out on the road—it was Josephine. She had slipped out on the road to join that company because she thought we didn't like her or want to hire her. How glad we were to get her back."

Baker was then promoted to the number one company in Boston. Audiences adored her. As Sissle related, "Every place we went, people buying tickets asked: 'Is the little chorus girl here who crosses her eyes?' In time she became the highest paid chorus girl of her day...."

The two female leads, Lottie Gee and Gertrude Sanders, also saw their careers boosted thanks to the show. They were given different types of tunes to perform to suit their different characters. Good-girl Gee performed "Love Will Find a Way" and "I'm Just Wild about Harry." "Modern woman" Sanders' songs were the jazziest ones, "Simply Full of Jazz," "I'm Craving for that Kind of Love," and "Daddy." The New York Age praised Sanders' lusty vocals saying, "For the first time white theatregoers...are hearing such numbers...as they really should be sung." Sanders was so well regarded that she recorded her Shuffle Along songs for Okeh Records before the show had even opened. She was soon lured away by vaudeville promoters Hurtig and Seamon promising her a $50 raise from her $125 weekly salary if she would open at Reisenweber's Cabaret.

In August of 1921, Saunders left the show and the hunt was on for a suitable replacement, a job that no one thought could ever be achieved satisfactorily. Eventually, Florence Mills was hired although the creators were initially unsure that she could take over from the great Saunders. Mills was best known for her work in vaudeville partnering with her husband, U.S. (S. Low) Thompson, a comic dancer. Sissle recalled: "They were both in the Keith circuit in act called 'The Tennessee Ten.' I only knew her slightly as the singer in a little gingham dress who made a sensation in Swanee River with her birdlike voice. The four of us ate together...at our boarding house, and when Florence and Kid left the dining room, my wife Harriett said, 'Why don't you give Florence a chance to replace Gertrude?' I smiled and said, 'Why, she's a ballad singer. Gertrude's part calls for dancing and singing blues.' Harriett told me Florence was singing 'I'm Craving for that Kind of Love' as she walked out upon the stage and her superb, shameless swing, is an aesthetic pleasure; she is a school and exemplar of carriage and deportment."

It wasn't only the professional critics who came under the spell of Mills' talents. Future poet Langston Hughes had the choice of studying at Columbia University or following his father's wishes to escape the prejudice of America life and study in Switzerland. It was a very tough decision for a young man whose future might hang on his choice. This is how he made his mind up. "Shuffle Along had just burst into being, and I wanted to hear Florence Mills sing. So I told my father I'd rather go to Columbia than to Switzerland. " And so he "sat up in the gallery night after night at Shuffle Along, adoring Florence Mills."

Noel Coward was equally smitten by Mills' talents. "There startled the swift vivid genius of Florence Mills, at one moment moving like a streak of quicksilver, the next still against some gaudily painted backdrop. Nothing animated about her at all, except her wide smile and the little pulse in her throat, throbbing like a bird...."

Mills' success was so great that she was quickly lured away by producer Lew Leslie. During the last few months of Shuffle Along's run, she also appeared in Leslie's Plantation Revue on Times Square. Leslie had come to see Shuffle Along and was immediately smitten with Mills' performance. The Plantation Revue was a cabaret show that played late shows in the rooftop theatre above the Winter Garden Theatre at 51st Street and Broadway. After shows at the Winter Garden, audiences could retire to the rooftop theatre for a Southern-inspired dinner and a 45-minute show.

Seeing the success of his show, Leslie decided to expand it into a full-fledged revue, albeit still in a cabaret space. More importantly, to Mills at least, was the salary of $500 per week he offered to her to appear in the revised show. So, in March of 1922, Mills gave her notice to the producers of Shuffle Along. They tried to stop her leaving their show, accusing her of breach of contract. But she had a two-weeks notice clause in her agreement and so they could not stop her. O

n Mills’s opening night, Thompson did his part to make sure she would have a successful opening; he recalled:

"The first night I had about 20 fellows in the theatre what they call a clique. I had three or four fellows on this side, three or four fellows on that. I bought tickets for them, put them in, see. So when she came on by herself, that's when I had the clique all rehearsed. So Florence was singing 'Kiss me, kiss me, kiss me with your tempting lips,' and she could flaut, you know, a lot of things, and make her eyes look so good. When she got through and finished, I gave the signal."

But Mills's success in the show was assured well before Thompson's clique did their job. By the middle of the song, as she inched her way downward to the very edge of the footlights, the audience was spellbound. Bricktop, the noted cabaret owner, claimed Mills had seventeen curtain calls. Eubie Blake echoed the approbations for Mills's version of "I'm Craving for that Kind of Love:" As he put it so succinctly, "She killed the song!" Sheet music sales took off with people asking for the so-called "kiss me" song. Mills soon erased the memories of Gertrude Saunders. Part of her success was exactly based on the audience's surprise that such a delicate-seeming gamin could belt out the jazziest, sexiest numbers.

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She was Dresden china, and she turned into a stick of dynamite.

Mills signed a contract on August 4, 1921. Originally the contract stated she was to receive $100 a week but Sissle wrote in an amendment giving her $125. Another part of the deal was that Kid Thompson would also have a role in the show. Thompson’s dancing drew praise from contemporary reviewers, showing that the producers were wise to add him to the cast.

The cast had the same misgivings about Mills as did Sissle. They couldn’t believe that such a small, demure girl could fill Saunders’s role. Cast member Bee Freeman remembered, “The first time I saw Florence Mills she was walking onstage... wearing a black, rusty looking dress. It seemed like she had no glamour at all. She looked like one of those little girls you would see working in a store...We thought, ‘How dare they inflict this thing on us.’”

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Another future star joined the company at about the same time as Mills did. In the summer of 1921, a close-harmony group, the Harmony Kings, were added to the production. I. Harold Browning, Exodus Drayton, Horace Berry, and W.H. Hann had their own spot in the show. They had the favorites like Scott Joplin's "Old Black Joe," "Ain't It a Shame," and "Snowball." But they also undertook sophisticated works for voice including William Horace Berry's poem "Invictus" as arranged for orchestra by Bruno Hahn. Blake was elected by the impact of the quartet, again emphasizing their education and the class they brought to the show: "They were sensations. All college men, not only could they sing, but they were very polished and stylish. They came out on the stage dressed in gray evening clothes. The suits were cutaway, and the tails and ties, and there were also matching gray. After their performance, Flo Mills had to be behind to top them. No one else could follow—that's how great they were."

"I mentioned to Paul that our bass singer was leaving the show for a short time and that we had to find a bass to replace him. Paul looked at me and said, 'You're looking at a bass singer!' Paul was quite emphatic about it, and when I told him to stop kidding, he said, 'I am not kidding; I am your bass.' So I told him to come to the show and see Eubie and me..." After Paul sang about seven or eight bars, Eubie jumped up and exclaimed, 'That's the man!'" Blake told interviewer Jim Standifer how Jim Europe taught his band how to pretend they were just playing by ear even though they couldn't read music. He said, "You have to write parts out, don't you, you're a musician. I'd pick up the part and play it over and over, a whole score, with the words and everything, [there was] no advantage to cater to the audience's misconceptions.

The white audiences—they were all white then—liked him. Paul sang some of Hann's solos, including "Invictus," as arranged for orchestra by Bruno Hahn. Blake was elected by the impact of the quartet, again emphasizing their education and the class they brought to the show: "They were sensations. All college men, not only could they sing, but they were very polished and stylish. They came out on the stage dressed in gray evening clothes. The suits were cutaway, and the tails and ties, and there were also matching gray. After their performance, Flo Mills had to be behind to top them. No one else could follow—that's how great they were."

At one point, Hann took a brief leave-of-absence from the show. The search was on for a replacement who could, if not exactly equal Hann, at least be close to his talents. The leader of the Harmony Kings, I. Harold Browning, described how he found the perfect substitute. He and his wife were out walking with another young couple. His friend was a recent graduate of Rutgers University, an athlete named Paul Robeson: "When I mentioned to Paul that our bass singer was leaving the show for a short time and that we had to find a bass to replace him, Paul looked at me and said, 'You're looking at a bass singer!' Paul was quite emphatic about it, and when I told him to stop kidding, he said, 'I am not kidding; I am your bass.' So I told him to come to the show and see Eubie and me..."

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In 1921, Shuffle Along was the first great step away from the minstrel and vaudeville traditions into the jazz age with a show that was the equal of any white show of the period. A widely held belief of the white theatricalgoes was that black musicians could play music without the use of scores. Blake told interviewer Jim Standifer how Jim Europe taught his band how to pretend they were just playing by ear. When in fact they were able to create and read complicated charts: "Jim would send for all the operettas from abroad. I'd pick up the part and play it over and over, a whole score, with the words and everything, [there was] no orchestra, and [the members of the band would] play it right off there. [Jim would say,] 'Play it again Eubie.' I play[ed] it again, three or four times, [then he'd say] 'You got it, fellows.' Now they got it, they play the whole book. [Jim said,] 'You have to write parts out, don’t you, you’re a musician: Now we play the Waldorf, that’s off Broadway and their top orchestra. Somebody would walk up to [Europe] and say, ‘Hey, Eubie! We got the books two weeks ahead. Do you know the ‘Merry Widow Waltz?’ So one guy says, ‘Wait a minute,’ [He] asks the lady how it goes, and he said, ‘Oh, yeah, we play that, and we’d play it. You know what they would say? ‘Isn’t that wonderful. It isn’t marvelous, the colored boy don’t read a note.’ We had to do that. They didn’t want to think that Negroes read music. Jim... told us that trick. Different fellows, top musicians, they got their numbers there and they couldn’t read, but the rest of us could read, all of us could read;"

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Blake told interviewer Jim Standifer how Jim Europe taught his band how to pretend they were just playing by ear even though they couldn't read music. He said, "You have to write parts out, don't you, you're a musician. I'd pick up the part and play it over and over, a whole score, with the words and everything, [there was] no advantage to cater to the audience's misconceptions."

Some of the musicians went on to gain great fame. Hall Johnson played viola in the orchestra. He would go on to create the Hall Johnson Choir. And William Grant Still played oboe in the ensemble. His work was highlighted in an arrangement of Tchaikovsky's "Song Without Words" during the break between the acts. Later Still would become the preeminent African American classical composer. The arrangements for the show were by Will Vodery, who arranged for Bert Williams during his vaudeville days and would later work with George Gershwin, Jerome Kern, and Duke Ellington. The critic of the New York Age wrote of Will Vodery "one of the most talented and efficient musicians of the race." Sissie gave Vodery much of the credit for the show's success. He wrote that Vodery, "solved the problem of getting theatre orchestras to play with African American rhythmic inflections." Sissie went on to call Vodery, "the rhythm life of legitimate Broadway." Course, Blake himself was a great talent. His own piano playing helped propel the 16-piece orchestra. As a composer, Blake combined the best of jazz rhythms with a true appreciation for lyric melody. Blake's keyboard virtuosity was a highlight of each performance. The New York Age's critic noted that "one of the highlights [of the show is] 'A Few Minutes with Sissie and Blake.' Mr. Blake as a piano virtuoso uses the theme [of 'Love Will Find A Way'] as a basis for a series of pianistic... variations, which being unstinted applause."

With expert musicians as these along with a heartfelt storyline, a hugely entertaining cast, and a jazzy sound new to Broadway, "Shuffle Along" was the first great step away from the minstrel and vaudeville traditions into the jazz age with a show that was the equal of any white show of the period. And the white audiences came in droves. In fact, the traffic was so congested, the city made 63rd Street one-way. White audiences might have thought themselves to be slumming by attending the show but they came out of the theatre with a newfound respect for the show itself as well as black artists.
The young singer had never graduated from college before. “Both Browning and I agreed about Paul’s voice,” Blake explained. “He was able to read, but the rest of us could read, all of us could read. “Do you know the ‘Merry Widow Waltz’? So one guy says, ‘Wait a minute,’ [He] asks and 44th Street. Somebody would walk up to [Europe] and he’d say, ‘Now the show just opened that night, but we got the books two weeks ahead. “Do you know the ‘Merry Widow Waltz?’ “So one guy says, ‘Wait a minute,’ [He] asks the lady how it goes, and he said, ‘Oh, yeah, we play that; and we’d play it. You know what they would say? “Isn’t that wonderful. It isn’t marvelous, the colored boy don’t read a note.” We had to do that. They didn’t want to think that Negroes read music. Jim... told us that trick. Different fellows, top musicians, they got their numbers there and they couldn’t read, but the rest of us could read, all of us could read.”

Of course, the members of the Shuffle Along orchestra were well trained and were expert in reading the charts. But they did so secretly during rehearsals. They never appeared in the pit with music on their stands, as it was sometimes more advantageous to cater to the audience’s misconceptions.

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A widely held belief of the white theatergoers was that black musicians could play music without the use of scores. Blake told interviewer Jim Standifer how Jim Europe taught his band how to pretend they were just playing by ear when in fact they were able to create and read cleverly time: “Jim would send for all the operettas from abroad. I’d pick up the part and play it over and over, a whole score, with the words and everything, [there was] no orchestration, and [the members of the band] would play it right off there. [Jim would say,] ‘Play it again Eubie.’ I play[ed] it again, three or four times, [then he’d say] ‘You got it, fellows.’ Now they got it, they play the whole book. [Jim said,] ‘You have to write parts out, don’t you, you’re a musician: Now we play the Waldorf, that’s off Broadway and their top people walk up to [Europe and] say it’s the show just opened that night, but we got the books two weeks ahead.”

Early in 1922, Robeson left the company to join the cast of Mary Hoyt Willberg’s play, Taboo, and Hann resumed his role with the quartet. However, Blake and his partners were concerned about Robeson’s ability to perform. The young singer had never been on the stage before. “Both Browning and I agreed about Paul’s voice.” Blake explained, “He was able to write parts out, all of us could read, all of us could read.”

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