

# Finding Florence Mills: The Voice of the Harlem Jazz Queen in the Compositions of William Grant Still and Edmund Thornton Jenkins

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## Abstract

After her performances in *Shuffle Along* (1921) on Broadway and in *Dover Street to Dixie* (1923) in London, Florence Mills became one of the most famous jazz and vaudeville singers. Known as the Harlem Jazz Queen, Mills was revered by Black Americans for her international breakthrough and because she used her commercial success as a platform to speak out against racial inequality. Extensive descriptions of her performance style and voice exist in writing, but there are no recordings of her singing. I respond to this archival loss by considering the sound of Mills's voice in two compositions written for her: William Grant Still's *Levee Land* (1925) and Edmund Thornton Jenkins's *Afram* (1924). In my analysis, I show that Still and Jenkins imagined a much more musically complicated and politically powerful voice than that found in the racialized and gendered stereotypes permeating both her vaudeville and Broadway repertory and the language of her reception. While scholars have written about how Mills's outspokenness regarding issues of race and omission of sexually explicit roles made her central to 1920s Black political and artistic life, I consider how the sonic properties of her voice positioned her as a leading figure in the New Negro Renaissance.

When Florence Mills died in 1927, her funeral drew the largest crowd Harlem had ever seen.<sup>1</sup> Over one hundred thousand people lined the streets to honor the first Black entertainer to achieve international success. She was known as the “Queen of Jazz,” and her music represented what the *Baltimore Afro-American* described as “the spirit of youth struggling against oppression.”<sup>2</sup> Her legacy inspired elegies such as Fats Waller’s “Bye, Bye Florence” (1927) and Duke Ellington’s “Black Beauty” (1928). Mills was an icon of the New Negro Renaissance, and she shaped the movement’s political and international scope. Her career started at the age of five, when she won a cakewalk contest at a Black Patti Troubadours performance in Washington, DC in 1900. She was then added to Bert Williams’s and George Walker’s *Sons of Ham* singing “Hannah From Savannah,” a song Aida Overton Walker made famous. By 1916, she was performing regularly with Ada “Bricktop” Smith and Cora Green at the Panama Café in Chicago and joined the Tennessee Ten, an early jazz band, one year later. She debuted on Broadway in 1921, performing the lead female character in Noble Sissle’s and Eubie Blake’s *Shuffle Along*—the first all-Black musical since Bert Williams’s and George Walker’s *Bandanna Land* (1908). Mills then acquired international fame with her

<sup>1</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York: Knopf, 1930; repr., New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 200–1.

<sup>2</sup> “Florence Mills Seeks Her Bluebird,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, October 10, 1924.



**Figure 1.** Publicity photograph of Florence Mills in costume for the stage production *Blackbirds* of 1926. Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library. "Florence Mills." New York Public Library Digital Collections.

overseas performances in the musicals *Dover Street to Dixie* (1923), *Dixie to Broadway* (1924), and *Blackbirds* (1926–27) (Figure 1).<sup>3</sup>

She used her fame as a political platform to articulate the ambitions of Black Americans.<sup>4</sup> Beginning in 1924, Mills became increasingly vocal about racial inequality after spending time in London, where, like many Black artists, she laid claim to greater freedom and less discrimination.<sup>5</sup> Stories circulated in the Black press about her courageous challenges to Jim Crow segregation in the music theater industry. For example, she declined to take the lead in a play that reportedly "degraded the race."<sup>6</sup> At an after party celebrating *Blackbirds*, she also refused to leave her Black cast members at dinner to join the white guests, saying "I am coal Black and proud of it."<sup>7</sup> Just before her death, she wrote an article, "The Soul of the Negro," addressing the effects of white supremacy on the day-to-day realities of Black lives. Echoing W. E. B. Du Bois's "double consciousness" theorized in his similarly titled book, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Mills wrote: "It is the eternal

<sup>3</sup> For all of the biographical information in this paragraph, see Bill Egan, *Florence Mills: Harlem Jazz Queen*, Studies in Jazz No. 48 (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 113.

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this article, I use the term "Black American" instead of "African American" both to signal the importance of the Black diaspora to the communities that occupy the subject of this project and to articulate the political potency and urgency of Black Studies which inform my research.

<sup>5</sup> Hannen Swaffer, "Florence Mills on Race Problems," *The Daily Express*, June 1927.

<sup>6</sup> Florence Mills Scrapbook, 1922–1929, box 2, Florence Mills Collection, 1896–1974, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library (hereafter cited as FMC).

<sup>7</sup> Egan, *Florence Mills*, 179.

burden of the coloured people—the penalisation for an accident of birth—to be made to feel out of focus with the rest of humanity. . . . How absurd it all is—how utterly unfair!”<sup>8</sup> Ten years prior, Aida Overton Walker extolled the virtues of Black American performance to the Black press. Likewise, Mills made racial equality integral to her star persona, but her writing directly confronted white supremacy, reflecting the political tenor of the New Negro movement.

So, too, did her music. As Zakiya Adair and Jayna Brown have argued, Mills used her songs as well as her costumes and choreographies to radically negotiate and resist vaudeville’s slave culture constructions of race and gender stereotypes.<sup>9</sup> Her most famous song, “I’m a Little Blackbird” (1924) by Grant Clark and Roy Turk, parodied racist misconceptions about Black entertainers (Appendix). In it, Mills mocks stereotypes of Black musicians with a direct confrontation of one of the most pejorative terms associated with her profession: jazzbo, a racial slur used to mark Black musicians, in particular, and Black Americans, in general, as vulgar and less human. Verse two challenges reigning concepts of racial difference: “Tho’ I’m of a darker hue, I’ve a heart the same as you.” Biographer Bill Egan incisively described this song as a “powerful protest against racial intolerance.”<sup>10</sup> Mills agreed. In “The Soul of the Negro,” she said the song represented “the inner feeling of the colored people” and likened these feelings to the experience of “a small boy flattening his nose against a pastry-cook’s window and longing for all the good things on the side of the pane.” She linked this imagery to the first verse in “I’m a Little Blackbird.” “Never had no happiness. Never felt no one’s caress. I’m just a lonesome bit of humanity. Born on Friday, I guess. . . . If the sun forgets no one, why don’t it shine on me. I’m a little blackbird looking for a bluebird, too.” “[The boy],” she says, “wants so badly to ‘belong’—and as yet there is no place for him.”<sup>11</sup> Mills incisively writing about Black life in the Jim Crow United States extends a tradition of Black women intellectuals such as Ida B. Wells, Gwendolyn B. Bennett, and Zora Neal Hurston. Mills used both her singing and writing voices to express “the higher and more modern ambitions of Negro Youth.”<sup>12</sup>

Despite her fame, there are no extant recordings of her voice. Following the international success of *Dixie to Broadway*, Mills was invited to Victor Recording Studios. On December 12, 1924, she recorded “Blackbird” and “Dixie Dreams,” but, according to blues singer Edith Wilson, “her tiny voice didn’t register well on the primitive recording equipment and sounded nasal [*sic*] and tinny.”<sup>13</sup> Wilson’s comment says less about Mills’s voice and more about 1920s acoustic recording technology, which was less favorable toward soprano voices or anyone

<sup>8</sup> Florence Mills, “The Soul of the Negro,” *Sunday Chronicle* (London), January 2, 1927.

<sup>9</sup> Zakiya R. Adair, “Respectable Vamp: A Black Feminist Analysis of Florence Mills’ Career in Early Vaudeville Theater,” *Journal of African American Studies* (March 2013): 7–21; Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Egan, *Florence Mills*, 113.

<sup>11</sup> Mills, “The Soul of the Negro.”

<sup>12</sup> “Florence Mills Seeks Her Bluebird,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, October 10, 1924.

<sup>13</sup> Jazz musician Frank Powers communicated this to Bill Egan in a telephone interview many years later. See Egan, *Florence Mills*, 126.

not willing to place their head very close to, if not inside, the phonograph horn.<sup>14</sup> As a result of the poor sound quality, no pressings were made. There are no other known instances of Mills recording, and she died in 1927 at the early age of thirty-one from complications following a surgery to treat her pelvic tuberculosis.

Mills left traces of her voice in other places, however. Beyond the countless vaudeville numbers written for her voice, she drew the attention of music critics, fans, socialite columnists, and New Negro intellectuals that wrote extensive descriptions of her vocal capacities. These descriptions, as I demonstrate below, serve as a cartography of her voice. Many, written by white listeners especially, were shaped by gendered and racialized biases, making it hard to hear her voice otherwise. I consider the sound of Florence Mills's voice in other primary texts: Edmund Thornton Jenkins's *Afram* (1924), an unfinished operetta with a lead part written "for the likes of Florence Mills" and never performed, and William Grant Still's *Levee Land* (1925), written for and performed by Mills for an International Composers' Guild concert. *Afram* narrates an African diasporic love story. *Levee Land* is a four-song suite featuring vaudeville numbers backed by a jazz chamber ensemble. Both are vocal, jazz-based compositions, which merge Black popular music and high art compositional techniques. Both challenge the boundaries between music coded "white" and music coded "Black." Acutely aware of the limitations placed on Black musicians and performers, Jenkins and Still actively debunked stereotypes of Black musicality and self-expression through their approaches to style, genre, and representation of the Black characters in their works.<sup>15</sup> For this reason, their works offer insight into the sonic properties of Mills's voice. I argue that Jenkins and Still sought to depict a voice that could betray the reductive stereotypes of her reception in print and strengthen her position as a New Negro leader.

The absence of recordings has not inhibited scholars from speculating about what performers sounded like. To the contrary, it has inspired quite imaginative scholarship. Curiosity about male originality and virtuosity has recently driven countless articles and monographs seeking to resuscitate the lost sounds of men—Nicolo Paganini and Farinelli among them. Historians of early jazz portray Buddy Bolden, who made no sound recordings, as "the father of jazz."<sup>16</sup> Bolden is regularly mythologized from Jelly Roll Morton's song "Buddy Bolden Blues" (1939) to Daniel Pritzker's 2019 film *Bolden*. Wynton Marsalis claims he "could play so loud, he

<sup>14</sup> Prior to electric recording and the electric microphone, it was difficult to record sopranos. For more information on early recording technology, see Mark Katz, "Aesthetics Out of Exigency: Violin Vibrato and the Phonograph," in *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 94–108.

<sup>15</sup> Carol J. Oja, "'New Music' and the 'New Negro': The Background of William Grant Still's 'Afro-American Symphony,'" *Black Music Research Journal* 12, no. 2 (Autumn 1992): 145–69; Gayle Murchison, "Nationalism in William Grant Still and Aaron Copland Between the Wars: Style and Ideology" (PhD diss., Yale University, 1991); and Jeffrey Green, *Edmund Thornton Jenkins: The Life and Times of an American Black Composer, 1894–1926* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), 136–57.

<sup>16</sup> Ted Gioia refers to Bolden as "the elusive father of jazz," and Scott DeVeaux and Gary Giddins title their section on the trumpeter "Buddy Bolden (1877–1931) and the Birth of Jazz." Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 33–37; Scott DeVeaux and Gary Giddins, *Jazz*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2015), 64–66.

could make the rain stay up in the sky.”<sup>17</sup> Donald Marquis spent a decade researching *In Search of Buddy Bolden*, which provides meticulous accounts on where and when Bolden might have played in order to hypothesize about how he sounded.<sup>18</sup> Though these speculations about Bolden work to reconstruct a history lost to white supremacy, as records of Black lives were not often preserved, they also serve mythological narratives about great men by fetishizing reconstructions of sound through lore.

Recent scholarship by Daphne Brooks, Paige McGinley, and Saidiya Hartman challenges this myopic perspective by making legible the ephemeral performances of Black women in the early twentieth century. Hartman, in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, sutures together unfathomable narratives about Ida B. Wells and Billie Holiday, among others, from her deep knowledge of Black culture in spite of the dearth of archives. Hartman “elaborates, augments, transposes, and breaks open archival documents so they yield a richer picture of the social upheaval that transformed black social life.”<sup>19</sup> McGinley, in *Staging the Blues*, centers women in blues history by tracking choreographies, costumes, and scenic design of live theatrical performances, a tradition dominated by women, instead of analyzing fixed musical and lyrical texts, which often center around men.<sup>20</sup> In *Bodies in Dissent*, Brooks analyzes the dissonance between white audience expectations and the brilliant self-fashioning of Black performers such as Aida Overton Walker.<sup>21</sup>

Like Brooks, McGinley, and Hartman, I read against the gendered limits of the archive, locating the alternative ways Black women made their voices audible. I am not pursuing an authoritative recovery of Mills’s voice. Instead, I want to draw attention to its significance just as Daphne Brooks and Bonnie Gordon shift focus to the *sounds* of Zora Neale Hurston’s archive—her recordings and her “stunningly sonorous” writing, as Gordon puts it.<sup>22</sup> I do this by examining how other members of the New Negro movement, in this particular instance, two men, heard and responded to Mills’s voice. To pursue her voice in the compositions of men may seem to risk reinforcing the very androcentric project I critiqued above. However, as much of the research on the New Negro Renaissance demonstrates, Black men and women worked jointly toward achieving the movement’s goals through expressive culture.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, as bell hooks trenchantly states,

<sup>17</sup> Wynton Marsalis, *Sweet Swing Blues on the Road* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), 17.

<sup>18</sup> Donald Marquis, *In Search of Buddy Bolden First Man of Jazz*, rev. ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 99–111.

<sup>19</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019), xiv.

<sup>20</sup> Paige A. McGinley, *Staging the Blues: From Tent Shows to Tourism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1919* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 281–342.

<sup>22</sup> Daphne Brooks, “Sister, Can You Line It Out?: Zora Neale Hurston and the Sound of Angular Black Womanhood,” *American Studies* 55, no. 4 (2010): 617–27; Bonnie Gordon, “Feminist Noise,” Paper Presented for the Committee on Women and Gender Endowed Lecture at the National Meeting for the American Musicological Society, San Antonio, Texas, November 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Some New Negro Renaissance research has focused almost exclusively on the intellectual, artistic, and political work of men, negating the work of women and the significance of collaboration between the sexes within the movement. Notable exceptions include Cheryl A. Wall, *Women of the*

“Despite sexism, black women have continually contributed equally to anti-racist struggle, and frequently, before contemporary black liberation effort, black men recognized this contribution.”<sup>24</sup> Just as Hartman creates an imaginary Oscar Micheaux film to explore Gladys Bentley’s queer masculinity, and as Brooks turns to George Walker’s and Bert Williams’s *Bandana Land* to argue that Aida Overton Walker refashions the Black female sexual body in her Salome dance, I too demonstrate that these compositions, though certainly part of a racialized, classed, and gendered matrix, have much to offer in the way of hearing Mills’s voice. In Jenkins’s and Still’s political and musical interactions with Mills, I suggest they heard in her a capacity to “disturb” (following Brooks) racist Black female stereotypes.

Jenkins and Still composed for Mills according to how they regarded her—as a Black feminist leader, whose voice reverberated the ethos of the New Negro Renaissance and the movement’s capacity to bridge Black culture and politics. However, Still and Jenkins do this in different ways, requiring different methodological approaches. Because *Levee Land* was written for Mills and performed by her for an International Composers’ Guild concert, I treat Still’s score as a vocal recording, gleaning information about Mills’s vocal range, weight, timbre, and passaggi. I compare this “recording” to contemporary reception of Mills’s voice. My music analysis shows a difference between the ways 1920s audiences wrote about her voice and how Still imagined her voice in his piece. *Afram* was incomplete and never performed, and only the vaudeville section of the operetta was written “for the likes of Mills,” as Jenkins wrote in his manuscript. Unlike *Levee Land*, this composition does not serve as an avenue for exploring the technical capacities of her voice. It only features a few stock vaudeville musical numbers she might have sung had it been performed and had she been hired to perform it. Instead the composition reveals more about her as a political icon of the New Negro movement because the character, as leader of the Charleston troupe, carries great narratological weight when she guides and unites Black migrating subjects across the Atlantic Ocean. I argue, however, that Jenkins’s decision to position Mills as a Black diasporic leader is not divorced from the sonic properties of her voice but rather intrinsically linked to them. By putting these two works in dialogue with one another, I examine how *the sound of her voice* helped further the goals of the New Negro movement. While scholars have written about how Mills’s interviews and repertoire made her central to 1920s Black political life, I suggest the sonic properties of her voice also facilitated her unique political position.<sup>25</sup> Before turning

*Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); Cherene Sherrard-Johnson, *Portraits of the New Negro Woman: Visual and Literary Culture in the Harlem Renaissance* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007); Davarian Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, & Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); and Davarian Baldwin and Minkah Makalani, eds., *Escape from New York: The New Negro Renaissance beyond Harlem* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

<sup>24</sup> bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 70.

<sup>25</sup> See Adair, “Respectable Vamp”; Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 245–65; and James F. Wilson, “‘Hottentot Potentates’: The Potent and Hot Performances of Florence Mills and Ethel Waters,” in *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2011), 112–53.



to *Levee Land* and *Afram*, I discuss written commentary on Mills to establish the ways her voice might have sounded and might have been misheard by Jim Crow audiences.

### “Throbbing Like a Bird”: Writing Mills’s Voice

Descriptions of Florence Mills appeared frequently between 1921 and 1927 in the Black and white press, in US and European publications, and in personal accounts and works of literature. Writers most often compared her voice to birds and sometimes flutes—highlighting both her high range and pure timbre. American critic Paul Rosenfeld said her voice was so pure “it was not a human voice at all.”<sup>26</sup> Mills was a soprano, and many listeners commented on her “sweet,” “pure,” and “delicate” voice, indicating that she did not have noticeable passaggi and relied mostly on her “head voice” register—or what is now more commonly referred to, among vocal pedagogues, as CT dominance.<sup>27</sup> Critics wrote about Mills’s wide range and the ease with which she navigated it.<sup>28</sup> Like the flute to which she was compared, her attack was gentle, her vocal weight was light, suggesting her pitch was precise, and florid vocal lines came easily. Her voice stood in contrast to other singers such as Bessie Smith and Josephine Baker, to whom she was compared. For Alberta Hunter, Mills “was a hummingbird and dainty and lovely. Her little voice was as sweet as [Bessie Smith’s] was rough.”<sup>29</sup>

Some listeners describe a “bubbling” sound in her voice—a “little pulse in her throat, throbbing like a bird,” which I interpret as referring to her vibrato.<sup>30</sup> One critic claimed she had “heart-taking bubbles of sound thronging out of her throat like champagne from a bottle.”<sup>31</sup> These descriptions imply that her vibrato was fast and narrow. Since Mills’s voice was quiet, she would naturally have a smaller vibrato. Hers did not disturb the pitch but rather enhanced it, giving her flute-like voice depth and warmth.<sup>32</sup> British author Beverly Nichols said her voice was “distinctly silvery” and described her singing as “high silver notes like beams of light, floating into the dark auditorium.”<sup>33</sup> Such a description elucidates the way in which her vibrato created a luscious tone.

These descriptions do not come without bias; the racial logic of Jim Crow structured how audiences listened to and consumed music. Jennifer Stoeber, in *The Sonic*

<sup>26</sup> Paul Rosenfeld, *By Way of Art: Criticisms of Music, Literature, Painting, Sculpture, and the Dance* (New York, NY: Coward-McCann, 1928), 95; quoted in Egan, *Florence Mills*, 245.

<sup>27</sup> Kenneth Bozeman, *Practical Vocal Acoustics: Pedagogic Application* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2013), 6 and 107; and James Stark, *Bel Canto: A History of Vocal Pedagogy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 57–90.

<sup>28</sup> Egan, *Florence Mills*, 243–46 and 207. Bill Egan has compiled much of this commentary in his thorough biography. In addition to archival research, I draw extensively on his account.

<sup>29</sup> Egan, *Florence Mills*, 246.

<sup>30</sup> Egan, *Florence Mills*, 63–64.

<sup>31</sup> “Sing a Song of Sixpence,” box 1, folder 9, FMC.

<sup>32</sup> Stark, *Bel Canto*, 139–42.

<sup>33</sup> Beverly Nichols, “Celebrities in Undress, XLVII: Florence Mills,” February 16, 1927, *Sketch*, 304.

*Color Line*, calls this “willful white mishearings and auditory imaginings of blackness” designed to keep the racial status quo intact.<sup>34</sup> She argues that listening operated “as an organ of racial discernment.”<sup>35</sup> This prejudice ran deep within the music industry, too. According to Karl Hagstrom Miller, in *Segregating Sound*, Northern recording industry men believed Black and white musicians sounded demonstrably different from each other, so much so that they recorded and marketed “race” and “hillbilly” records separately, despite commonalities between Black and white musicians.<sup>36</sup> This imposed musical color line was successful, in part, because consumers believed they could hear race.

Mills’s reception, rife with gendered and racialized stereotypes, reflects these biases. As Daphne Brooks has argued, Black women’s bodies are “systematically overdetermined and mythically configured.” Drawing on Hortense Spillers, Brooks continues: “Hegemonic hermeneutics consistently render black women’s bodies as ‘infinitely deconstructable “othered” matter’.”<sup>37</sup> Oversignified, Black women are interpreted through one-dimensional tropes. Mills was considered “boyish,” making her cross-dressing more convincing. She played a plantation boy with a hobo’s bundle in *Dover Street to Dixie’s* “Down Among the Sleepy Hills of Ten-Ten-Tennessee” and a groom, wearing a tuxedo, in *Dixie to Broadway’s* “Mandy, Make Up Your Mind” (Figure 2). About her androgyny, the *New Statesmen* wrote: “She is a fascinating creature to look at with those skinny legs and the body of some athletic boys of thirteen or fourteen, black smoothed bobbed hair and a large, very large, Negro mouth. Perhaps her chief charm is that she is neither man nor woman nor boy nor girl but adolescent.”<sup>38</sup> Audiences interpreted Mills’s androgyny through the lens of sexuality. Pitted against other Black performers such as Josephine Baker and Mamie Smith, whose sexuality was a key feature of their personas, Mills toggled between childlike sexuality and sophisticated virtue. According to Andy Fry’s study of her reception, Mills was a “chaste and modest” “black fairy” — “most civil and most civilized” — while Baker was a “demon” — “wild and impromptu,” “barbaric and hot.”<sup>39</sup> Literary scholar Jayna Brown astutely points out that Mills’s petite, angular body, brown skin, and lack of overtly sexual songs in her performances led some white critics to interpret her within the lens of primitivist modernism.<sup>40</sup> The *Evening Mail* writes about her as if she is a pre-modern figure in one of Pablo Picasso’s paintings or an Umberto Boccioni sculpture. She is “strung on fine and tremulous wires” with a “grace of grotesque.” “She is an exotic done in brass.”<sup>41</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Jennifer Lynn Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016): 1.

<sup>35</sup> Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line*, 4.

<sup>36</sup> Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 187–240.

<sup>37</sup> Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 7.

<sup>38</sup> “Dixie and the Astaires,” November 8, 1923, *New Statesman*, box 1, folder 9, FMC.

<sup>39</sup> Fry, *Paris Blues: African American Music and French Popular Culture, 1920–1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 41.

<sup>40</sup> Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 245.

<sup>41</sup> Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 246.





**Figure 2.** Florence Mills in various costumes. Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library. "Florence Mills." New York Public Library Digital Collections.

Mills's brown skin and petite frame had nothing to do with the physiological properties of her vocal folds. Or, to put it in the words of musicologist Nina Sun Eidsheim: "the sound of the voice is not the emission of an a priori essence."<sup>42</sup> But many believed a singer's timbre was related to the melanin levels of their skin—a holdover from nineteenth century pseudo-science, in which intellectuals such as Manuel García and François-Joseph Fétis devised race-based hierarchies to determine what they perceived to be essential aural differences between cultures.<sup>43</sup> Originally designed to justify colonialism, pseudo-scientific hierarchies were revised to reinforce segregation in the United States during Mills's lifetime.<sup>44</sup> These ideologies shaped responses to Mills's voice. The focus on purity in her reception might

<sup>42</sup> Nina Sun Eidsheim, "Race and the Aesthetics of Vocal Timbre," in *Rethinking Difference in Music Scholarship*, ed. Olivia Bloechl, Melanie Lowe, and Jeffrey Kallberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 357, 365.

<sup>43</sup> Eidsheim, "Race and the Aesthetics of Vocal Timbre," 347–49.

<sup>44</sup> For more on pseudo-scientific race-based hierarchies and Jim Crow segregation, see Cornel West, *Prophecy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 47–68; Elazar Barkan, *Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Conceptions of Race in Britain and the United States Between the World Wars* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and Lee D. Baker, *From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race, 1896–1954* (Berkeley: University of California, 1998), 11–53.

very well be a response to her androgyny, petite stature, and omission of overtly erotic songs instead of a feature of her voice. The compositions of Jenkins and Still offer a more nuanced avenue for listening to the sound and syntax as well as the symbolic meanings of Florence Mills's voice.

### Modernist Mills

When William Grant Still (1895–1978) asked Mills if he could compose a concert music piece for her, he was deeply seated in the Black entertainment industry but also gaining acceptance in white ultra-modernist circles. In the 1920s, Still arranged and orchestrated for Will Vodery, Eubie Blake, Sophie Tucker, James P. Johnson, Donald Voorhees, and Paul Whiteman.<sup>45</sup> He played in and helped orchestrate and direct *Shuffle Along* (1921), *The Plantation Revue* (1922), *Runnin' Wild* (1923), *Dixie to Broadway* (1924), *Earl Carroll's Vanities of 1926*, and *Rain or Shine* (1928).<sup>46</sup> The multi-instrumentalist taught himself how to play the saxophone, oboe, and clarinet, among other instruments and played in the Clef Club Orchestra, Fletcher Henderson's dance orchestra, Will Vodery's Plantation Orchestra, and the Harlem Symphony Orchestra. He worked for W. C. Handy's Pace & Handy Publishing Company from 1919 to 1920 and the Black Swan Phonograph Company from 1922 to 1925. At the same time, he had a budding composition career. After studying with George Whitefield Chadwick in the 1910s, he began studying with Edgard Varèse in 1922. Two years later, he had composed three experimental compositions: *From the Land of Dreams* (1924), *Darker America* (1924), and *From the Journal of a Wanderer* (1924). The first of these was a three-movement work for chamber orchestra and three voices, "used instrumentally," and it premiered in 1925 at a concert for the International Composers' Guild (ICG), an organization Varèse and Carlos Salzedo created in 1921 to foster "vital and progressive" music.<sup>47</sup> The premiere's audience featured many prominent white men in the world of classical music, including Carl Van Vechten, George Gershwin, and Arturo Toscanini.<sup>48</sup>

After this performance, he wrote *Levee Land*—a four-song suite for soprano and "jazz orchestra" (two violins, two clarinets, bass clarinet, alto saxophone, bassoon,

<sup>45</sup> Catherine Parsons Smith, *William Grant Still: A Study in Contradictions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 15.

<sup>46</sup> Smith, *William Grant Still*, 4, 43, and 220; Carolyn L. Quin, "Biographical Sketch of William Grant Still," in *William Grant Still: A Bio-Bibliography*, ed. Judith Anne Still, Michael J. Dabrishus, and Carolyn L. Quin, 21 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996).

<sup>47</sup> R. Allen Lott, "'New Music for New Ears': The International Composers' Guild," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 36, no. 2 (Summer 1983): 268.

<sup>48</sup> Oja, "'New Music' and the 'New Negro,'" 116. I use the term "white" here loosely given that Gershwin was Jewish and Toscanini, Italian. Informed by the works of David Roediger and Matthew Frye Jacobson, I acknowledge that "whiteness" as a racial category which included these ethnicities was still in formation. David Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs*, updated ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2018); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

I	IV	I	[0,1]	[0,2]	[0,1]
Oh, Baby, Baby, Baby, Baby.			Oh, Baby, Baby, Baby, Baby.		
I	IV	I	[0,1]	[0,2]	[0,1]
Oh, Baby, I loves you true.			Oh, Baby, I loves you true.		
V			[2,3]		
Can't see what make you			Can't see what make you		
		I			[0,1]
Treat me de way you do.			Treat me de way you do.		

**Figure 3.** Octatonic Collections Representing a Blues Harmonic Progression, “Levee Song,” *Levee Land* (1925), William Grant Still.<sup>49</sup>

horn, trumpet, trombone, tenor banjo, piano, and an onslaught of percussion).<sup>50</sup> It was modernist to its core; the piece featured octatonicism, experimental forms, and an avant-garde approach to scoring the voice. The first song, “Levee Song,” is a blues number about a woman being mistreated by her lover. It is chalk full of jazz band riffs common in 1920s arrangements, and Still uses the three octatonic scales as if they are the I, IV, and V7 chords of a blues number (Figure 3). “Hey-Hey” is a very short song—under a minute long—with three iterations of the same spoken text “HEY-HEY” dividing the through-composed piece into three phrases. Much like the percussion in Varèse’s *Amérique* (1921) and *Hyperprism* (1924), rapid changes in articulation and instrumentation pack the measures full of directives: the woodblock in one measure, the tom-tom and bass drum (struck with a snare drum stick) in the next, then the gong immediately after with only a measure rest before the wind whistle enters.<sup>51</sup> These minute gestures create a mercurial landscape redolent of Alban Berg’s *Seven Early Songs* (1905–1908). Still continues to use the voice as an instrument in the ensemble in “Croon,” where the soprano hums a mostly monophonic texture with the violin for nearly four minutes. The final number, “The Backslider,” draws on a host of vaudeville norms, as it tells the story of the sinful proclivities of a young Christian woman, who blames jazz for her fall from grace (Appendix). Its parody of white misconceptions about Black music reveals a striking connection to Mills’s signature song “I’m a Little Blackbird.” Here, again, Mills plays a Black entertainer poking fun at her white audience. Mills’s performance of this last

<sup>49</sup> This notation comes from Stefan Kostka, *Materials and Techniques of Post Tonal Music*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2016), 25. OCT [0,1] = C, C#, D#, E, F#, G, A, Bb, C; OCT [1,2] begins on C#; and OCT [2,3] begins on D. The numerals in the brackets denote the first two pitch classes.

<sup>50</sup> *Levee Land* received its first recording in 1995. It was performed by Northern Arizona University Wind Symphony and conducted by Patricia J. Hoy. Notably, it featured soprano Celeste Headlee, the granddaughter of William Grant Still.

<sup>51</sup> Although *Amérique* did not premiere until 1926 by Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra, it is possible Still encountered and studied the piece.

song was so successful at its premiere in 1926 at Aeolian Hall for the ICG that the audience asked her to sing it again.<sup>52</sup>

Mills's commitment to racial equality, and her sophisticated appropriation of vaudeville stereotypes made her a logical choice for Still's vocal composition, which emphasized the artistic merit of jazz and blues. Yet the role of entertainment in the fight for equality was a contested issue in Black communities, because its roots were woven deeply into the soil of slavery. "The union of theatrical display and constructions of blackness is deeply related to the philosophical enterprise of slavery," writes performance studies scholar Soyica Diggs Colbert.<sup>53</sup> Black elites might have been tempted to write Mills off as a cheap entertainer performing for racist white audiences, especially as she moved from Black-produced US entertainment (*Shuffle Along*) to white-produced entertainment overseas (*From Dover Street to Dixie*). This was not the case. As Jayna Brown observes: "[Mills's] outspoken race loyalty seemed to quiet black anxieties about the deleterious effects of cosmopolitanism and commercialism."<sup>54</sup> *New Negro* editor Alain Locke, who was especially critical of commercial culture, hailed the dramatic gifts of Mills for "gleaming through" the "slag and dross" of the vaudeville stage.<sup>55</sup> Locke, among others, especially praised Mills for developing a more respectable approach to sexually elicit and primitivist stock characters. James Weldon Johnson writes: "She could be whimsical, she could be almost grotesque; but she had the good taste that never allowed her to be coarse. She could be *risqué*, she could be seductive; but it was impossible for her to be vulgar, for she possessed a naiveté that was alchemic."<sup>56</sup>

By the time Still composed *Levee Land*, Mills's performances occupied the interstitial spaces of the high-low cultural divide, and she had created a star persona centered on equal rights. To articulate connections between Black popular and modernist concert music, Still scored Mills in ways that were both consistent with and a challenge to stage theater norms. *Levee Land* elucidates characteristics of Mills's voice that betray the limited focus in written commentary on her pure timbre and high range. Instead he emphasizes her intonation, wide range (on both ends of the spectrum), improvisational skills, and timbral diversity. Still's scoring was informed by working with Mills in *Shuffle Along* and *Dixie to Broadway*, and the positive press she received after the performance suggests that he knew Mills's voice well and that she can hold court in a high modernist context.<sup>57</sup>

*Levee Land* relied more heavily on blues and jazz idioms than did the previous pieces Still wrote while studying with Varèse. This shift might have been a response to the less-than-favorable reviews he received from his first concert with the ICG.

<sup>52</sup> Olin Downes, "Music," *New York Times*, February 9, 1925.

<sup>53</sup> Soyica Diggs Colbert, *Black Movements: Performance and Cultural Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 51.

<sup>54</sup> Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 240.

<sup>55</sup> Alain Locke, "The Negro and the American Stage," *Theatre Arts Monthly* 10, no. 2 (February 1926); quoted in Adair, "Respectable Vamp," 10.

<sup>56</sup> Johnson, *Black Manhattan*, 199.

<sup>57</sup> Gayle Murchison, "'Dean of Afro-American Composers' or 'Harlem Renaissance Man': The New Negro and the Musical Poetics of William Grant Still," in Smith, *William Grant Still: A Study in Contradictions*, 43 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

Olin Downes had “hoped for better things from [Still]” since he was so familiar with “the rollicking often original and entertaining music performed at negro revues.” Sardonicly, he asked: “Is Mr. Still unaware that the cheapest melody in the revues he has orchestrated has more reality and inspiration in it than the curious noises he has manufactured?”<sup>58</sup> However, Still does not simply quote more revue melodies in *Levee Land*; instead, he eradicates the distinction between Black music and modernist composition altogether. Though Still exploited the dual stereotypes of both Black music and modernist compositions being noisy, his methodical approach to *Levee Land* suggests he felt a genuine kinship between the two musics that prods at the notion they were ever antithetical: the instrumentation extends traditions of the Second Viennese School as well as 1920s jazz orchestras; the distinction between the octatonic and blues scales is elided and chromaticism can just as easily be heard as the flexible intonation of Black folk music; instrumental approaches to the voice reflect the influences of both jazz and Schoenberg (this is Still’s *Pierrot Lunaire*, according to Gayle Murchison); and rapid shifts in texture, articulation, and dynamics were integral to both ultra-modernism and Black entertainment.<sup>59</sup> Still’s composition definitively asserts: *Jazz is modernist*.

*Levee Land* attests to the Broadway singer’s faultless intonation. Still uses her precise pitch to communicate the similarities between blues harmonies and a modernist pitch collection. Mills sang either a pentatonic or blues-based melody while the jazz band drew on the octatonic scale and other atonal pitch collections. In “Levee Song,” the melody uses a blues scale while the ensemble travels through all three octatonic scales in a mere eleven measures (Figure 4). Though her relatively pentatonic melody shares pitches with the octatonic scale, Mills was not accustomed to singing with this particular harmonic backdrop.

The range and tessitura of *Levee Land* are markedly different than any song Mills sang in her revues. “Down Among the Sleepy Hills of Ten-Ten-Tennessee,” “Mandy, Make Up Your Mind,” and “I’m a Little Blackbird Looking for a Bluebird” very rarely exceed an octave. Though it is not certain in what key they were performed live, all three pieces have a range of roughly D4 to D5 with a tessitura that hovers around G4, according to the published sheet music. Still wrote a voice part demanding a much wider range as well as continuity between and agility throughout the singer’s registers. For example, the first verse of “Levee Song” begins on a G5 and is sustained for the full measure. The difficulty of sustaining this pitch is assuaged by the text; the word “oh” makes it easier to sustain air flow. It is a diphthong, but a closed one where air can be pushed to the front of the mouth for

<sup>58</sup> Downes, “Music.”

<sup>59</sup> In her analysis of *Levee Land*, Carol Oja argues that the “blues” and “modernist” elements exist on “two distinct planes,” because, in the case of “Levee Song,” for example, the former is isolated to the piano and voice and the remaining instruments play chromatic third relationships. Gayle Murchison, in her dissertation, agrees but also draws attention to other parts of the composition where the blues and modernist elements are more integrated. I interpret this piece through the lens of integration and inseparability. One reason Still might have kept the musical languages distinct is for practical reasons—namely, for Mills, a vaudeville singer, to be able to execute the piece on short notice. See Oja, “New Music’ and the ‘New Negro,’” 118; Murchison, “Nationalism in William Grant Still and Aaron Copland Between the Wars,” 180–83.



**“Levee Song”**  
William Grant Still  
*Levee Land* (1925)

♩ = 76 Slow and mournful

Clarinet in Bb  
Clarinet in A  
Alto Sax  
Bassoon  
Horn  
Trumpet in Bb  
Trombone  
Perc.  
Banjo  
Voice  
Violin I  
Violin II  
Piano

**Figure 4.** A section, “Levee Song,” mm. 26–29. Transcribed by author. *Levee Land* (1925), William Grant Still.

maximum volume and control. At the same time, large intervallic leaps of octaves and sevenths confirm what some critics wrote about her ability to seamlessly shift between registers. The melody of “Croon,” which Mills simply hums, lies primarily between D5 to F5. Humming makes this high and demanding tessitura easier, though emitting sound with closed lips requires consistent air flow and strong breath support. As if the range of “Croon” was not difficult enough, Mills ends the song on an A5, held for two measures and sung at pianissimo. *Levee Land* significantly extended the set of skills Mills mastered for the popular stage. A review by a critic, who attended the premiere, attests to her vocal strength, agility, and weight, writing, “Her coloratura is as wide in range, as flexible in movement, as clean and sure in flight and descent as that of any ascetic prima donna.”<sup>60</sup>

Mills was a skilled improviser, and Still highlights this in *Levee Land*. Her reputation for making all sorts of noises predates Louis Armstrong’s “Heebie Jeebies” (1926), misattributed as the first example of scatting. Critic Gilbert Seldes asserted that it was Paul Whiteman, in his popular jazz arrangements, who imitated Mills, because her “voice could equally imitate the saxophone” with its “shakes, thrills, vibratos, smears, and slides.”<sup>61</sup> About her “power of improvisation,” Irish composer Herbert Hughes revealed that “she never sings two verses alike, and frequently

<sup>60</sup> Egan, *Florence Mills*, 245.

<sup>61</sup> Gilbert Seldes, *The Seven Lively Arts* (New York: Dover Publications, 2001), 99.



interpolates embellishments that would make many a prima donna green with envy—belong to genius, and that she has in her very eyelids.”<sup>62</sup> One critic wrote she “plays with half tones and quarter tones” and another described her notes as “molten” with “jazz slides and minors.”<sup>63</sup> Still composed melodies that highlighted this skillset—melodies that demanded glissandos, scoops, and rhythmic playfulness. In the beginning of “Levee Song,” for example, Mills hums a repeated minor third so much it seems to necessitate variation to avoid monotony. Sixteenth-note ornaments prompt scoops, large leaps require glissandos, and the third and fifth are used so repeatedly so as to encourage a more complicated approach to pitch.

Finally, *Levee Land* speaks to Mills’s versatile timbre, calling into question critics’ myopic focus on her vocal sweetness and purity. In the final song, “The Backslider,” Still shows a different side of Mills—a singer with a gritty and gutsy timbre. Recall the vaudeville-esque tune tells the story of a woman who falls from grace because she loves jazz. The character playfully narrates her own dissent. She leads the listener through a sermon, in which she imitates the deep and resonant voice of her male pastor; then her friend’s invitation to a nightclub, a temptation by the devil, according to the protagonist; and finally, a re-enactment of her increasing pleasure as she lets the jazz band penetrate her ears in a nightclub. In this final section, what sometimes sounds like a chamber ensemble in *Levee Land* becomes an all-out jazz band, and Mills sings a repeated strain, mimicking caricatures of each instrument in the band—her voice personifying the very sounds that caused her to stray from her god. She sings about the “sob and cry” of the fiddles, the “plunk plunk and brunk” of the banjo, and the “sob and moan” of the trombone as the instruments solo. Given what critics say about her uncanny ability to entertain, it is likely she played this instrument imitation to the hilt, manipulating her timbre in divergent ways to sound like a saxophone or banjo or male preacher. By the third repetition of the stanza, Mills sings forte over the full ensemble and the rhythm section’s dense texture. In the middle-to-lower part of her range, this melody might have been belted by Mills to sing over the loud dance band. Such an approach would have given her voice a timbral quality rarely mentioned in reviews—a strong and robust tone belying stereotypes her audiences held about petite, light-skinned Black women.

In *Levee Land*, Mills and Still make a distinctly New Negro statement about jazz and racial equality. During and after Reconstruction, many educated Black men and women felt it was their responsibility to “uplift the race” through a “politics of respectability,” or a set of class-based behaviors and values.<sup>64</sup> Many Black intellectual leaders believed composers were the “best of this race,” or what DuBois called The Talented Tenth, and charged them with transforming Black folk materials such as the spirituals into elaborate works of art to be beacons of race progress.<sup>65</sup> Jazz

<sup>62</sup> Egan, *Florence Mills*, 254–55.

<sup>63</sup> Egan, *Florence Mills*, 255; “Sing a Song of Sixpence,” box 1, folder 9, FMC.

<sup>64</sup> Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 1; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 185–230.

<sup>65</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Talented Tenth,” in Booker T. Washington, *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative American Negroes of Today* (New York: James Pott, 1903), 33. For more on

complicated this racial uplift strategy because of its commercial and working-class associations (not to mention its tie to nightclub culture and sexual connotations). After the First World War and the race riots of 1919, some New Negroes embraced jazz as a point of racial pride and to challenge what they perceived as the cultural elitism of older generations and the servility of the “Old Negro.”<sup>66</sup> Archibald Motley’s paintings of dance clubs and Claude McKay’s novel *Banjo* (about a drifter musician) combated racist representations by forging radically new depictions of blackness through jazz that directly opposed minstrelsy stereotypes. They used jazz to experiment with and create new formal rules of modernism, too. At the forefront of a musical statement challenging racially segregated music, Mills illustrated that her musical competency exceeded audience expectations of Black women vaudeville singers while also communicating some of the central political tenets of the New Negro Renaissance.

### “The Likes of Mills”: The Sound of the New Negro Movement

When composer and jazz clarinetist Edmund Thornton Jenkins (1894–1926) imagined Mills as one of the leads in his operetta *Afram*, he had an established career as a jazz recording artist, dance-band leader, and concert music composer. He grew up in Charleston, South Carolina, playing clarinet in his father’s jazz band. The Jenkins Orphanage Band was a bastion of early jazz which launched the careers of many jazz legends including Jabbo Smith and Freddie Green. He studied composition with Kemper Herrald at Morehouse College and then went to London in 1914 to play in his father’s orphanage band, billed as The Famous Piccaninny Band, at the Anglo-American Exhibition of the World’s Fair. He stayed in London to study composition at the Royal Academy of Music, receiving numerous scholarships for teaching. The year 1925 marked the precipice of his career; he won a Holstein prize for his *African War Dance* and his Sonata in A minor for violincello, and he premiered *Charlestonia: A Folk Rhapsody* in Belgium. He died one year later, due to complications following an appendectomy.<sup>67</sup>

Jenkins was equally committed to his popular music career, and, like Still, Jenkins shifted between these two racially coded worlds with ease. In 1920 and 1921, he led and recorded with one of the earliest integrated jazz bands, The Queen’s Dance Orchestra. By 1923, he directed an Art Hickman orchestra called the

music and racial uplift, see Lawrence Schenbeck, *Racial Uplift and American Music, 1878–1943* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 71–107; and Paul Allen Anderson, *Deep River: Music and Memory in Harlem Renaissance Thought* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 113–66. For more on this interpretation of the spirituals, see Jon Cruz, *Culture on the Margins: The Spiritual and the Rise of American Cultural Interpretation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Anderson, *Deep River*, 13–112; Ronald Radano, *Lying up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 164–229; and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gene Andrew Jarrett, eds., *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892–1938* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 447–75.

<sup>66</sup> Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 3–18.

<sup>67</sup> All biographical information comes from Jeffrey Green’s meticulously researched biography on Jenkins. See Green, *Edmund Thornton Jenkins*.

International Seven which performed in an elite Parisian nightclub. He left Paris to conduct Will Marion Cook's *Negro Nuances* and lived with Will Vodery in Harlem, where he might have bumped elbows with Mills in Vodery's Plantation Club.<sup>68</sup> Here, he began to conceive of *Afram*, seeing the potential for Black American entertainment to advance the political causes of the Black diaspora. For his composition, he turned to blues, jazz, and Florence Mills.

Jenkins never performed with Mills, but they were both cosmopolitan New Negroes connected to the same international foot traffic of Black musicians and political leaders. Though the movement is often associated with a bevy of artists, intellectuals, and socialites centered in Harlem, scholars such as Davarian Baldwin have drawn attention to Black Americans, who traipsed the globe, mapping topographies of racial solidarity within new cultural contexts.<sup>69</sup> Jenkins served as a committee member of the African Progress Union, a London-based association dedicated to the "welfare of African and Afro-peoples," and he helped Du Bois arrange musical programming for Pan-African Congresses.<sup>70</sup> He also formed a fraternity for elite Black Europeans, The Coterie of Friends, which educated its members about the achievements of people of color. Mills was a featured guest at one of his concerts celebrating Black composers.<sup>71</sup> Mills uplifted Black communities in a different way—through donations and benefit concerts, mostly for Black children.<sup>72</sup> This work became a part of her star persona. One newspaper called her "foolishly generous" because she reportedly gave away fifty pounds a week.<sup>73</sup> Both Jenkins and Mills helped create a Black international movement of racial awakening committed to equality.

*Afram* is a theatrical materialization of the political work they did, sometimes together, and it was an aspiration, on the part of Jenkins, to collaborate once more. The work is a three-act operetta featuring two distinct subjects: African nobility, who use traditional operatic forms and sing in French, and Black American entertainers, who perform syncopated Broadway tunes and sing blues songs in English. Housed at the Center for Black Music Research, the piano and vocal manuscript, albeit incomplete, tells a love story about an African prince and princess.<sup>74</sup> In the first act, the (unnamed) Prince has won a war for the King of Dahomey and confesses his love for the King's daughter, Princess Bella Twita. Traditional operatic

<sup>68</sup> Letter from Will Marion Cook to Rev. Jenkins, box 1, folder 2, Edmund Thornton Jenkins Scores and Other Material, Center for Black Music Research Library and Archives, Columbia College Chicago.

<sup>69</sup> Davarian L. Baldwin, "Introduction: New Negroes Forging a New World," in *Escape from New York: The New Negro Renaissance Beyond Harlem*, ed. Minkah Makalani and Davarian L. Baldwin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 1–27.

<sup>70</sup> Green, *Edmund Thornton Jenkins*, 64–66.

<sup>71</sup> Program for The Coterie of Friends Concert at Wigmore Hall, December 7, 1923, box 1, folder 6, Edmund T. Jenkins Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

<sup>72</sup> Several examples exist in folders 1, 2, 3, 6, and 11 of box 1 in the Florence Mills Collection.

<sup>73</sup> "'Star' Who Gives Away 50 Pounds A Week," box 1, folder 9, FMC.

<sup>74</sup> The manuscript is housed at the Center for Black Music Research, whose collection and support facilitated this research. Edmund T. Jenkins, *Afram ou La Belle Swita*, manuscript, box 1, folder 1–3, Edmund Thornton Jenkins Scores and Other Material, Center for Black Music Research Library and Archives, Columbia College Chicago.

forms—arias, recitatives, duets, and choruses—feature distinct character themes. For unspecified reasons, the two lovers become separated by the Atlantic Ocean as the Prince travels to the United States in act 2 and asks the Princess to come to him in a reprise of his aria: “Do not let yourself be discouraged, put off by the seas and the mountains.” While waiting for her in a nightclub, he watches a variety stage show, functioning here as the opera’s interlude with plantation scenes, spirituals, and slave dances. The Princess finally arrives at the club in act 3, comprised almost entirely of “The Charleston Revue”—an eight-number variety show of jazz and blues songs performed by a Charleston vaudeville troupe featuring “the likes of Florence Mills” (Appendix). Mills likely would have been featured in many of the numbers, but “Kentucky Kate” stands as a fitting example. The strong, itinerant character proclaims her “identity is [her] invention,” and that if someone messes with her, she “gives the bird” (Appendix). When the revue concludes, the African prince grows frustrated with the “empty spectacle” and storms out only to run into Bella Twita in the nightclub.<sup>75</sup> They express their immense love for one another in a reprise of their duet, then everyone comes together for a foxtrot and final chorus.

*Afram*’s plot and music articulate racial awakening through a diasporic lens. Act 3, for example, not only moves away from operatic forms but also from older representations of Black music rooted in slave culture and adopts more modern representations of Black culture—namely, jazz and blues. The act concludes, however, by hybridizing popular and classical music, which has thus far been separate, when all the Black characters sing the final song, symbolizing global Black solidarity. After “The Charleston Revue” ends, a “Foxtrot for Jazz Orchestra” is performed. It is unwritten in the incomplete manuscript, but a note indicates it is based on the rhythm of the Prince’s aria. Here, the music of African royalty (opera) serves as a rhythmic foundation for the music of Black entertainers (jazz). After the foxtrot, a final chorus concludes the work. Everyone—the performance troupe, the cabaret audience, and the African couple—come together and sing the final chorus: “Long live the African country from which the lovers have come to this American land where they found each other.” National fault lines erode, and a vision of Black solidarity materializes, as reverence for Africa becomes the foundation on which to fasten new modern, diasporic subjectivities in the United States.

In *Afram*, Mills represents a musical and political leader of the African diaspora. She leads the vaudeville troupe, which serves as the musical backdrop uniting the lovers and, in the end, uniting all of the operetta’s diverse Black subjects. But what makes her roll so powerful is the work’s depictions of Africa, which worked against primitivist tropes in popular media. For Jenkins, Africa was not a playground for white audiences to act out their racial fantasies but rather rich symbolic territory on which to construct modern Black identities rooted in histories that were

<sup>75</sup> The Prince’s frustration here raises important intersectional questions about class differences among Black Americans and their respective opinions on Black entertainment. New Negroes such as Jenkins and Mills engaged in these questions in their art and political life. There are many other moments like this in *Afram*. See Stephanie Doktor, “Edmund T. Jenkins, *Afram* (1924), and the New Negro Renaissance in and Beyond Harlem,” *American Music Review* XLV, no. 1 (Fall 2015): 7–12. <http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/web/academics/centers/hitchcock/publications/amr/v45-1/doktor.php>.

lost to what Stephanie Smallwood calls “saltwater slavery.”<sup>76</sup> To make this political statement, he used the very musical that facilitated Mill’s international acclaim—*Dover Street to Dixie* (1923). *Afram* has a striking resemblance to it, and through its intertextual relationship, it offers a radical revisioning of African imaginary within the New Negro Renaissance as well as Mills’s position as a cultural leader of the Black diaspora.

Like *Afram*, *Dover Street to Dixie* is bifurcated into two distinct parts with different casts, scenery, and plot lines. The first half is set in London and features white fashionable aristocrats who live on Dover street and know all the hip jazz clubs. The second half is set on a US southern plantation, and Black entertainers perform Will Vodery’s revue for The Plantation Club. The dénouement circles around the white protagonist, John Gay, author of *The Beggar’s Opera* (1728), who has traveled in time. Though, in the first act, he is averse to the sights and sounds of modern London and complains about jazz lacking “dignity” and “grace,” he draws the musical to a close by mastering the foxtrot.<sup>77</sup> Like *Dover Street to Dixie*, *Afram* concludes with a revue of Black southern American music (“The Charleston Revue”), but Jenkins supplants white Londoners singing Broadway tunes with African royalty singing arias and recitatives in the first half. Black American entertainment in *Afram* is a modern cosmopolitan product, unifying Black citizens of the world not fodder for ostentatious displays of white men “mastering” Black culture. And where Mills would perform a stock “African number” called “Jungle Nights,” rife with primitivist stereotypes, in *Dixie to Broadway* one year later, Jenkins wrote a composition, titled after a Ghanaian river and based entirely on the lives of wealthy, autonomous African subjects.

This desire to portray Africans in a more honorable light is particularly palpable in *Afram*’s first act featuring a Zulu war song, “Danse de Guerre,” to celebrate the King of Dahomey’s victory (Figure 5). Sung by the Prince’s soldiers, it features plodding bass lines, clamorous dynamics, and harmonic dissonance. The melody and text appear in a popular collection of African songs entitled *Songs and Tales from the Dark Continent*, compiled by folklorist Natalie Curtis. She collected the song from Madikane Čele, who belonged to the Zulu of South Africa. She not only transcribed the melody but also provided its anticolonialist context: “The white man is apt to think of the black man as a yoked and subjected being. But when first encountered by the British, the Zulus were a strong and proudly militant people whose highly trained armies were the pride and glory of their kings. . . . It cannot be forgotten how, with only the [short javelin and shield], the naked hosts kept at bay the firearms of the English.”<sup>78</sup> The legacy of songs such as these was a point of racial

<sup>76</sup> Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 1–8.

<sup>77</sup> For a detailed account of *Dover Street to Dixie* and its cultural resonance in Britain, see David Linton David and Len Platt, “*Dover Street to Dixie* and the Politics of Cultural Transfer and Exchange,” in *Popular Musical Theatre in London and Berlin*, ed. Len Platt, Tobias Becker, and David Linton, 170–86 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>78</sup> Natalie Curtis, *Songs and Tales from the Dark Continent: Recorded from the Singing and the Sayings of C. Kamba Simango (Ndaou Tribe, Portuguese East Africa) and Madikane Čele (Zulu Tribe, Natal, Zululand, South Africa)* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1921), 63.

**Figure 5.** Piano reduction of “Danse de Guerre.” Transcribed by author. *Afram* (1924), Edmund Jenkins.

pride for New Negroes. Afro-Puerto Rican Arthur Schomburg, in “The Negro Digs Up His Past,” published in Alain Locke’s *The New Negro* (1925), celebrated the recent deluge of African histories: “Already the Negro sees himself against a reclaimed background, in a perspective that will give pride and self-respect ample scope and make history yield for him the same values that the treasured past of many people affords.”<sup>79</sup> The song, according to Čele, energized soldiers *before* battle, but Jenkins used it as a celebration of a war won. Within the pan-Africanist framework of *Afram*, depictions of Black Africans with warlike fortitude symbolized resistance to white supremacy’s violent formations.

Jenkins forms a “reclaimed background” through African folklore and depictions of royalty, romance, and military victories to serve as a foundation for modern diasporic communities to mobilize and flourish. *Afram* is fundamentally about migration and what rich cultural changes occur in the process. As African royalty migrate to the United States in act 3, to the sound of Mills’s voice, the music of Black US modernity replaces the minstrelsy skits of act 2’s interlude. Yet, the classical idioms defining the expression and movement of African royalty do not disappear but rather provide the rhythmic foundation of *Afram*’s concluding number—a foxtrot featuring a jazz orchestra. Taken as a whole, however, the operetta stands as an example of what Paul Gilroy calls The Black Atlantic. Africa, the Atlantic Ocean, and the United States become a transnational habitus traversed by Black subjects

<sup>79</sup> Arthur A. Schomburg, “The Negro Digs Up His Past,” *Survey*, March 1, 1925, 670; reprinted in Locke, *The New Negro*, 231–37.



to “form a compound culture from disparate sources.”<sup>80</sup> The Black Atlantic defined the musical and political careers of both Jenkins and Still.

Jenkins used Mills’s voice in ways that challenged the stock jungle numbers of *Dover Street to Dixie*. Her voice resounded across the globe to strengthen ties among Black citizens of the world, as her leadership in “The Charleston Revue” enabled movement among and unity within the Black diaspora. In a sense, Jenkins used Mills’s *voice* to call Black migrants to America. “The likes of Mills” written into the manuscript of *Afram*, therefore, referenced more than just her political and performance persona; it referenced the stunning and powerful voice—her timbre, register, weight, and range—that had to match her character’s essential role. Though her tasteful approach to vaudeville tropes, her public critiques of white supremacy, and her distinct approach to jazz inspired Jenkins’s music—especially since he formulated the idea for this piece after visiting Harlem—it was also *the sound of her voice* that inspired *Afram*, reaffirming her as a vocal icon of the New Negro Renaissance.

## Conclusion

Jenkins and Mills both died prematurely from complications following surgery—Mills for her tuberculosis in 1927 while in the United States and Jenkins for appendicitis in 1926 while in France. Black people died every day because of the prejudices structuring healthcare in those countries often times through sheer denial of treatment based on segregationist practices.<sup>81</sup> Was this the case for these two artists? Certainly, Mills’s fans speculated so.<sup>82</sup> Up until his death, Jenkins had been working to make *Afram* a reality since he left Harlem and returned to Paris in 1924. According to one of his obituaries, it had been accepted for production in Paris in 1925.<sup>83</sup> Yet, in 1926, he wrote to his father, saying he struggled financially to “back [his] ideas properly.”<sup>84</sup> With their untimely deaths, Jenkins and Mills never had an opportunity to collaborate on *Afram*.

Their abbreviated lives require historians to dig deeper in the even smaller number of boxes that comprise their archival collections. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, in *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, writes: “Power begins at the source,” and that “any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences.”<sup>85</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 15.

<sup>81</sup> For more on the relationship between race and medicine in the United States, see Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Harlem Moon, 2006).

<sup>82</sup> Egan, *Florence Mills*, 225.

<sup>83</sup> Lucien H. White, “Brilliant Musician and Composers Lost to Race in Untimely Death in Paris of Edmund Thornton Jenkins, Sept. 12,” *New York Age*, October 23, 1926, box 1, folder 8, Edmund T. Jenkins Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

<sup>84</sup> Edmund Thornton Jenkins to Daniel Joseph Jenkins, April 20, 1926, box 1, folder 2, Edmund Thornton Jenkins Scores and Other Material, Center for Black Music Research Library and Archives, Columbia College Chicago.

<sup>85</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 26 and 27.

Yet he argues that archival absences and critical attention to silences in contemporary histories have the potential to tell new stories, something he does with his work on the Haitian Revolution. However, “the unearthing of silences . . . request not only extra labor at the archives—whether or not one uses primary sources—but also a project linked to an interpretation.”<sup>86</sup> The research of Saidiya Hartman and Daphne Brooks, among others mentioned, illustrates what this extra labor and interpretation must look like to listen to the aurality of Black women’s archives from the early twentieth century.

One silence this article’s narrative has yet to address concerns how Mills herself conceived of the *sound* of her voice as a tool for Black freedom. There are no documents directly addressing this question in the archives. However, a closer reading of her 1927 article, “The Soul of the Negro,” opens up one way to interpret her perspective. “There are some people I have met who find it difficult to credit a Negro with a soul,” she laments. Refuting this egregious idea, she states: “For, when it comes down to a matter of solid fact, divorced from prejudice, the Negro instincts, all his feelings are white to the core.” A contemporary reader might find her use of whiteness as a universal standard unsettling, but it was one framework for Black intellectuals to convince racist readers of the validity of Black equality. To provide evidence of this soul, Mills leads with her voice: “There is a song *I sing*.”<sup>87</sup> Of course, the content of the song matters, as she goes on to describe the lyrics of “I’m a Little Blackbird,” but the syntax of this sentence emphasizes the act of singing. Her voice stood as proof she deserved equal treatment, and that the color of her skin—“an accident of birth,” as she describes it—should not determine her value within society. Mills knew her voice was a valuable apparatus for racial equality. Jenkins and Still knew this too. By this point in her career, she started to see less distinction between her singing and writing voices in their capacious power to articulate the political ambitions of Black women.

## Appendix

Lyrics, “I’m a Little Blackbird Looking for a Bluebird” by Grant Clark & Roy Turk

Never had no happiness  
 Never felt no one’s caress  
 Just a lonesome bit of humanity  
 Born on a Friday I guess  
 Blue as anyone can be  
 Clouds are all I ever see  
 If the sun forgets no one  
 Why don’t it shine for me?

I’m a little blackbird looking for a bluebird too  
 You know little blackbirds get a little lonesome too and blue

<sup>86</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 58.

<sup>87</sup> Mills, “The Soul of the Negro” (my emphasis).

I've been all over from East to West  
 In search of someone to feather my nest  
 Why don't I find one the same as you do  
 The answer must be that I am a hoodoo  
 I'm a little jazzbo looking for a rainbow too

Tho' I'm of a darker hue  
 I've a heart the same as you  
 And I crave that real kind of happiness  
 Please tell me what I can do  
 I've been reading Materlinck  
 In my mind I've let it sink  
 There must be somewhere for me  
 A real soulmate I think

Lyrics, "The Backslider," *Levee Land* (1925), William Grant Still

	Instrumental Introduction
<p>Fo'kses, is you get erligion?                  An 'ef you is, do you wanna keep it?                  You ax me why?                  Well Ah had erligion onct                  But Ah done los' it.                  You ax me how?                  "JAZZ"</p>	Frame Narrative Intro
<p>Parson Simmons,                  He leads de Baptis' flock,                  Ulster say dese wo'ds each Sunday:                  (Ah don' mean fo' to mock.)                  "O bred'ren an' sistahs,                  Motha's gone to de Promus lan'."                  (Spoken) Co'se Ah was allus mongst de fus' to ansah                  up "Aman."                  "Does you wanna jine huh on de final jedgement day?                  Den you's got to trabbel de long an' narrer way."</p>	Church Service

(Continued)

Continued.

	Instrumental Introduction
So Ah done man lebel best to lib right ebry day. But de debbil he wan' satisfied An' song Mag Green to say Dat dar would be a big blowout Whar a gran' jazz ban'd play.	Devil's Temptation
Nachly Ah wanted to hyeah 'em An she say dat it wan' wrong So w'en de night fo' de doin's come Ah des went right 'long.	Resistance to Temptation
Sho' Ah was a little scairt Bout what de fo'ks mout say But, Laws, Ah des fo'got it all w'en de ban' sta't up to play.	Fall from Grace
Fo'kses, W'en dem fiddles so an' cry An' den go kinder fas' an' spry Ah felt erligion go'in'. [x5 "banjo," "co'net," "slide trombone," "saxtyphone," "all"]	Nightclub Jazz Band Strains
O, Ah know it's wrong to stray, But ef you'd hyeah dat jazz ban' play You'd feel erligion goin'. Goin'. Goin'.	Final Strain

Act 3 Selections, *Afram* (1924), Edmund Thornton Jenkins

"The Charleston Revue"

30. Choeur par tous les assistants
31. Underneath the Palmettos and Pines
32. The Carolina Strutt
33. The Levee Lounge Lizard (Blues-Comique)
34. The Charleston Crawl (Danse excentrique)
35. Kentucky Kate (a low down strutter)
36. Pretty Kids
37. Final de la Revue
38. Récit de la Princesse et chansons du Prince

39. Danse d'Amour
40. Foxtrot par l'orchestra de jazz
41. Choeur de la Revue (fin)

“Kentucky Kate,” in “The Charleston Revue,” *Afram* (1924)  
 Perhaps you'd like to know who I am That's quite natural enough  
 You think I'm from Caroline?  
 For goodness sakes hold that stuff!  
 I ain't no rice eating baby,  
 I'm a “genuine” highbrow lady  
 Now that ain't no reflection,  
 But my identity is my (in)vention  
 So don't you all get sore  
 When I just let you know  
 That I'm pure, demure, coy and unaffected,

Chorus:

Kentucky Kate, a low down strutter  
 Kentucky Kate, like a ship without a rudder  
 I go anywhere, anytime I please

And it's nobody business I don't eat cheese I just here in Caroline,  
 'Cause I think the climate is fine,  
 I'm all mind, nobody has to worry met Indeed all mine  
 Nobody bet not flurry me  
 Cause I ain't go tell in no high falutin' words In my powest language  
 I generally gives the bird  
 I've every cent to my (send)  
 So I don't have to see no gent  
 I'm independent Kate  
 A low down strutter I am

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