



# Introducing Bert Williams: Burnt Cork, Broadway, and the Story of America's First Black Star

*Camille F. Forbes*

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According to critics of his time, Bert Williams was “the Greatest Comedian on the American Stage.” A black Bahamian immigrant, Williams made his start as a barker advertising the rough-and-tumble “medicine shows” that dotted the Wild West at the end of the nineteenth century. Not long after joining a minstrel troupe and donning the burnt-cork makeup of blackface, he teamed up with African American George Walker in a sixteen-year partnership that would take them from rural western mining towns to the bright lights of Broadway.

In *Introducing Bert Williams*, historian Camille Forbes reveals a fascinating figure, initiating the reader into the vivid world of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century popular entertainment. Williams’s long and varied career is a whirlwind of drama, glamour, and ambition—nothing less than the birth of American show business.

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