

The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



"Shuffle Along" (1921)

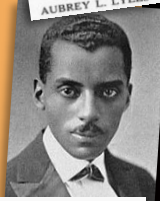
"All-Black Musical Hit on Broadway"



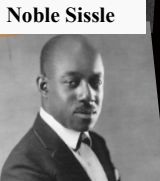
Flournoy Miller



AUBREY L. LYLES



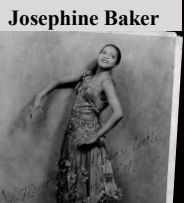
Noble Sissle



Eubie Blake



Josephine Baker



Florence Mills

Shuffle Along, a musical comedy, opened at the Howard Theatre in Washington, D.C. in late March of 1921 for two weeks. The musical review was written by Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyle with music and lyrics by Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake – all vaudeville veterans who met for the first time at an NAACP benefit in Philadelphia in 1920. In early 1921, Shuffle Along toured through New Jersey and Pennsylvania, with little money left over to pay the cast after covering travel and production expenses. But all that changed when the show hit Broadway.



Although promoters and theater managers were skeptical as to whether white audiences would accept the "all colored" musical, Shuffle Along premiered on Broadway on May 23, 1921 at the 63rd Street Music Hall (later renamed Daly's 63rd Street Theater). The show was a smash hit. With the colorful costumes, catchy musical numbers, energetic and vivacious dancers, audiences packed the theater. The show was so popular that it produced traffic jams, causing police to convert 63rd Street into a one-way street.



Shuffle Along, by today's standards, would be considered offensive with black actors in "blackface" - a theatrical makeup historically used by non-black people in theater portraying a caricature of a black person. Also, Shuffle Along's comedy was based on demeaning racial stereotypes, like speaking in an artificially grotesque "Negro dialect" and perpetrating minstrel stereotypes. However, the groundbreaking all black cast and crew show demanded that black audiences be able to sit in orchestra seating near the stage rather than being relegated to the balcony, as in the past. Shuffle Along also featured the first sophisticated on-stage black love story, a previous taboo for a predominantly white theatre crowd. The show also introduced several hit songs such as "Love Will Find a Way" and "I'm Just Wild about Harry."



Shuffle Along also laid the foundation for public acceptance of Black performers in roles other than "burlesques." Florence Mills, the female star, gained international fame due to the success of the show. Shuffle Along also had an innovative female chorus which included up-and-coming performer Josephine Baker. They combined jazz dance and jazz music, creating an improvisational style of dancing that encouraged individual expression. Producers of Broadway's Ziegfeld Follies were so impressed that they hired several Shuffle Along girls to teach their choruses. President Harry Truman even picked a Shuffle Along song for his campaign anthem, "I'm Just Wild about Harry."



Shuffle Along ran for 504 shows, an unqualified success by the standards of the day, winning over critics and audiences despite their prejudices. According to Poet Langston Hughes, Shuffle Along was the opening salvo of what would become the Harlem Renaissance.

The many talented Black artists during the Harlem Renaissance helped to establish a form that was not imported from Europe or the English stage but was indigenous to the United States.

