



THE CITY OF SAN DIEGO
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San Diego Public Library

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The San Diego Public Library Hosts an Author Talk by Camille F. Forbes *Introducing Bert Williams: Burnt Cork, Broadway, and Story of America's First Black Star*

SAN DIEGO – The San Diego Public Library will host an author talk by Camille F. Forbes on her new book *Introducing Bert Williams: Burnt Cork, Broadway, and the Story of America's First Black Star*. Camille F. Forbes, Ph.D. will present the lecture at 6:30p.m. on Monday, March 5 in the 3rd floor auditorium of the Central Library, located at 820 E Street in downtown San Diego. This event is free to the public.

Every black performer in show business, from Oprah to Jay-Z, to Dave Chapelle owes something to Bert Williams. Camille F. Forbes, a literary scholar and performer, chronicles his development as an artist and public figure in *Introducing Bert Williams: Burnt Cork, Broadway, and the Story of America's First Black Star*. From humble beginnings in the rough-and-tumble “medicine shows” that dotted the Wild West in the late 19th century, Williams would rise through the ranks of vaudeville in New York City, finally ascending to the previously lily-white exemplar of Broadway glamour: the fabled Ziegfeld *Follies*. Williams would bring the first all-black musical to Broadway, a show that would later give a command performance at Buckingham Palace.

A groundbreaking performer in many ways, Williams's life both on and off stage was marked by contradiction and opposition. Although his decision to perform in blackface permitted him access to a world that was dominated by racial and cultural stereotypes, he would ultimately find his fame and success integrally bound up with shame and regret. This inner turmoil was palpable to those who knew and respected him. As a fellow performer and friend, W.C. Fields once described Williams as “the funniest man I ever saw and the saddest man I ever knew.”

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Williams continuously struggled to balance the demands of white audiences with the political and social needs of his black supporters. Working both within and against the expected stereotypes, he managed to overturn many of the prejudices and limitations of his profession. Yet, Williams was never fully comfortable in his role as a public figure. Modest, private, and cautious in his personal life, he left political activism to others, preferring to let his trailblazing achievements speak for themselves. Still, the story of his long and varied career is a whirlwind of drama, glamour, and ambition—nothing less than the birth of American show business.

More than a simple narration of a remarkable life, however, *Introducing Bert Williams* initiates the reader into the vivid world of nineteenth and early twentieth century popular entertainment. Furthermore, it offers a fascinating window into the fraught issues surrounding race and artistic expression in American culture, from minstrelsy to vaudeville, Tin Pan Alley to *The Emperor Jones*. Though the terms of the conflict and the forms of culture have changed, these issues resonate to this day.

Learn about other events at the San Diego Public Library's Central Library and 35 branches, find links to numerous additional resources, or search for materials in the Library's catalog online at www.sandiegolibrary.org

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