

Why Is It Offensive?

History of Blackface, Modern-Day Cultural Appropriation

Handout Five: Famous Blackface Performer Bert Williams



- African American blackface performer Bert Williams was one of the most famous Black performers in the 1900s.
- Williams had a nuanced way of performing. He was able to avoid making fun of other African Americans or Black culture even though he wore blackface.
- He wrote his own material, which was top-notch. Many White performers refused to appear on the stage with him because of his race, and also because they complained this material was better than theirs.
- He faced discrimination from hotels and restaurants in which he often performed.
- He famously said, “It [the discrimination] wouldn’t be so bad ... if I didn’t hear the applause still ringing in my ears.”

Source: “Bert Williams,” PBS Broadway The American Musical: Episode One (1893-1927)

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