

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RDAK4YwNh50>

Bye Bye Florence by Bert Howell (tenor) featuring Thomas "Fats" Waller, Pipe Organ on Victor 21062-B
BERT HOWELL (Tenor) Grand Organ Accompanied by Thomas "Fats" Waller
Church studio, Camden, NJ, November 14, 1927. 40080-2 **Bye Bye Florence**
(Memorial) Victor 21062-B Tribute to **Florence** Mills, beloved star of 1920s black theatre who died unexpectedly on November 1, 1927.

Duke Ellington's "Black Beauty" could serve to epitomize the New Negro Renaissance for students of any age. On a purely evocative musical level, this piece summons images of the period. It would be a fitting accompaniment to a slideshow of images of the period: the old cars, the tenements, the fur coats, the night clubs. On a more technical level, the piece clearly belongs to the jazz idiom, yet it has echoes of ragtime and stride piano as well. It exemplifies a distinctly African American style of music, one that emerged roughly concurrently with the New Negro Movement. The piece has a sophistication to it that is part of the redefinition of the Negro at this time. There's an insouciance to the melody, a kind of easy virtuosity and delight in surprise. In the second half of the song, Ellington's right hand constantly travels higher up the keyboard before falling back down again, a pattern that one might imagine as expressive of the history of the Negro in America—constantly striving against the oppressive bass line of white supremacy, ascending toward justice and prosperity while inevitably encountering the gravitational pull of prejudice and oppression. Despite all, the piece maintains its composure and self-assurance—as Ellington himself did in his public persona. Finally, the piece evokes the Harlem Renaissance because Ellington identified it as a tribute to Florence Mills (1896-1927) the daughter of former slaves (and, like Ellington, a native of Washington, D.C.) who became an internationally renowned singer, dancer, and comedian and starred in *Shuffle Along*, an

important show in the black musical theater of the Renaissance. Mills was a beauty, Ellington asserts with the title of this lovely piece. Indeed, black is beautiful, the song proclaims. The piece is an elegant statement of racial pride, one of a series of musical portraits that Ellington composed to honor African American cultural icons. Thus it fits in well with the larger effort on the part of the New Negro Movement to create and promote a black artistic culture.

Note: This blog post refers to the October 1, 1928 version of the song, available on Disc One of the collection *Ken Burns Jazz: The Story of America's Music* (Columbia/Legacy C5K 61432).

Ellington recorded several other versions of this song, but to me this version best evokes the New Negro Renaissance.

—Frank Kovarik

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fh_73l0iogM&t=195s

Black Beauty, 2nd Recording - Duke Ellington

Composed by **Duke Ellington**. Performed by **Duke Ellington** and His Cotton Club Orchestra. Recorded 3/26/28. Composed in honor of entertainer **Florence Mills** (1896-1927) Record label: HMV, England (originally Victor, USA) Phonograph: Victor Victrola VV 4-7 (1927)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wU9dkd8wkyU>

Constant Lambert was greatly influenced by the music of the great Duke Ellington, and in particular by Florence Mills, star of the interracial revue *From Dover Street to Dixie* and of her own all-black revue *Blackbird*. Upon her untimely early death in 1927, Lambert was moved to write this *Elegiac Blues For Piano* in her memory. Constant Lambert, composer and conductor, was a child prodigy who began composing *Orchestral* works at a tender age and established himself quickly as a major talent of British music just after the First World War. Over time, he became involved in the world of ballet, conducting at

Sadler's Wells, becoming Music Director of the Vic-Wells Ballet and as a popular Orchestral conductor on BBC Third Programme.

Lambert's best-known composition followed. *The Rio Grande* (1927), for piano and alto soloists, chorus, and orchestra of brass, strings and percussion, sets a poem by Sacheverell Sitwell. It achieved considerable success, and Lambert made two recordings of the piece as conductor (1930 and 1949). He had a great interest in African-American music, and once said that he would have ideally liked *The Rio Grande* to feature a black choir.^[7] He held a very positive view of jazz rhythms and their incorporation in classical music saying once that:

"The chief interest of jazz rhythms lies in their application to the setting of words, and although jazz settings have by no means the flexibility or subtlety of the early seventeenth-century airs, for example, there is no denying their lightness and ingenuity ... English words demand for their successful musical treatment an infinitely more varied and syncopated rhythm than is to be found in the nineteenth-century romantics, and the best jazz songs of today are, in fact, nearer in their methods to the late fifteenth-century composers than any music since."^[8]

Lambert was to take his interest in jazz much further in works such as the Piano Sonata (1929) and the *Concerto for piano and nine Instruments* (1931), where the style moves away from the "symphonic jazz" of Gershwin and Paul Whiteman to something much more tense and urban, with popular and formal elements of composition closely integrated, rhythms jagged and extreme, and harmony sometimes approaching atonalism.^[9] The second movement of the Sonata features a blues in rondo form.^[10] The Concerto's unusual chamber scoring becomes something of a hybrid between a jazz band and the ensemble used in Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lu*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WAx7oAsqSd4>

She's Gone To Join The Song-Birds In Heaven · Eva Taylor

Eva Taylor Vol. 2 (1923-1927)

Born **Irene Joy Gibbons** in [St. Louis, Missouri](#), as one of twelve children.^[1] On stage from the age of three, Taylor toured [New Zealand](#), [Australia](#) and [Europe](#) before she was in her teens.^[2] She also toured extensively with [Josephine Gassman and Her Pickaninnies](#), a [vaudeville](#) act. She settled in [New York City](#) by 1920. There she established herself as a performer in [Harlem](#) nightspots. Within a year she wed [Clarence Williams](#), a producer (hired by [Okeh Records](#)), publisher, and piano player. The newlyweds worked together on radio and recordings. They recorded together through 1930s. Their legacy includes numbers made as the group Blue Five in the mid-1920s, which included the jazz clarinetist and saxophonist [Sidney Bechet](#), trumpet virtuoso [Louis Armstrong](#), and such singers as [Sippie Wallace](#) and [Bessie Smith](#).^[3]

In 1922 Taylor made her first record for the African-American-owned [Black Swan Records](#), which billed her as "The Dixie Nightingale."^[4] She recorded dozens of blues, jazz and popular sides for Okeh and Columbia throughout the 1920s and 1930s. She adopted the [stage name](#) Eva Taylor, but she also worked under her birth name in Irene Gibbons and her Jazz Band. She was part of the [Charleston Chasers](#), the name given to a few all-star studio ensembles who recorded between 1925 and 1930. In 1927, Taylor appeared on [Broadway](#) in *Bottomland*, a musical written and produced by her husband, which lasted for twenty-one performances.^[5] In 1929 she had her own radio show on [NBC's](#) *Cavalcade*.^[6] She then worked for many years on radio station [WOR](#), in New York (guesting on Paul Whiteman's radio show in 1932).^[7] Taylor stopped performing during the 1940s. She returned to performing in the mid-1960s, after her husband's death, and toured in Europe.

Death^[edit]

Taylor died from cancer in 1977 in [Mineola, New York](#). She was interred next to her husband, [Clarence Williams](#), under the name Irene Joy Williams in [Saint Charles Cemetery, in Farmingdale, New York](#).^[8]

Their son, Clarence Williams, Jr. (1923–1976) was the father of the actor [Clarence Williams III](#).

Their daughter Joy Williams (1931–1970) was a singer and actress, performing under the stage name Irene Williams.



Florence Mills Blues

By Harold Hersey, Editor, American Autopsy

A high yaller baby on the golden stairs,
She'll take Lord Jesus unawares,
Jesus, Jesus unawares,
A Blackbird singin' the latest airs,
The St Louis Blues on the golden stairs,
Jazz baby
Steppin' high,
Every jazz baby's got to die,
And there ain't no use askin' Jesus why.

Harlem, Harlem's all in white
With whimperin' mourners in a yaller night,
Ev'ry little Harlem honkatonk,
Ev'ry little Harlem honkatonk,
Silent 'cept for the hummin' flight
Of a lonely little Blackbird wingin' outa sight.

Down at the bottom of the cellar stairs
Jazzbo's comin' on God unawares,
Muted horn and saxophone,
Berlin dreamin' over ivory keys:
"All alone at the telephone."
Thompson prayin' on bended knees.
Harlem, Harlem's all in white . . .
"You gotta see mama every night

Or you can't see mama at all."
Sheiks and shebas movin' slow;
Black and tans a-talkin' low:
"Yo po' fays don't hand around
They done put Florence underground
In a coffin lined with silk.
She's struttin' now where her yaller skin
Ain't no reason not to let her in,
Ain't no reason,
Ain't no reason,
And it ain't no sin."

Every little Harlem boardin' house,
Every little Harlem boardin' house,
Is silent, 'cept for the creakin' stairs
When the boarders gets Jesus unawares,
Jesus, Jesus, on the stairs.
The Blackbird'll meet Him on golden stairs
When blacks and tans step up in pairs
And kisses Lord Jesus,
The great Lord Jesus
In a blaze of blues on the golden stairs.

A jazzbo taps his lacquered cane
For a fay is hummin' "Charmaine, Charmaine,"
While another's mumblin'
"A little green cottage,
A little green cottage,

At the end of Honeymoon Lane.”
‘Cause Harlem, Harlem’s all in white
With mourners shufflin’ in a yaller night
Apartment houses where the fay goes in
Is silent ‘cept for the scrapin’ feet
Of white folk sneakin’ back to the street
Meetin’ Jesus unawares
Good Lord Jesus,
Good Lord Jesus,
Forgivin’ ‘em all on the golden stairs.

They’s a mighty good reason now to pray.
Black and tan and sneakin’ fay
Her slender feet won’t twinkle for yo’
Never no mo’ like they used to do,
Never no mo’
Never no mo’
‘Cept in the sky
Where a lonely little Blackbird’s
Lookin’ for a bluebird flyin’ high.

They laid her in a hammered copper coffin,
(Harlem, Harlem’s all in white)
In a hammered copper coffin under shinin’ glass.
And the mourners pass,
And the mourners pass,
By a withered Blackbird sleepin’ under glass.

Each mourner sees
Her dress of white satin
Endin' just above her knees.
And as they goes by in their shufflin' shoes
The angels is a prayin' and a passin' on the news
The St. Louis Blues,
The St. Louis Blues,
The angels all is hummin' the St. Louis Blues.

And goin' by her coffin in the soft candlelight
Is Harlem, Harlem dressed in snowy white.
The heavens they is weepin',
The streets a-runnin' tears,
And a lonely Blackbirds hummin'
Is a buzzin' in our ears
Harlem, Harlem all in white
A grave that'll hide her outta sight,
And Jesus singin' in the night.



Recent poem by [Colleen J. McElroy](#), Professor of Literature and the author of "A Charleston for Florence Mills," a beautiful tribute poem to Florence's memory. It's in her collection "[Travelling Music](#)", StoryLine Press (Ashland, OR).

A Charleston for Florence Mills

Josephine
might have been

the toast of Paris, but Florence
just shimmied out of the blasé slouch
held by Broadway queens from cabarets
on Dover St. and straight down to Dixie

Sissle and Blake
Put and Take

hoi-polloi running wild with only six years
of limelight and Florence dancing knock-
knees and flying legs as if nickel
subways would end that day - and they did

Bye Bye Blackbird
sing high 'n strut

unlike sister, hardfoot Maude, just Florence
stepping feather light, crooning: *I'm just
a little Blackbird waiting for a Bluebird too*

and satin garters popped for the hardluck '20s
oh buckdance
and cakewalk

and kicks that mimicked slaves, Florence out
dancing for the Prince of Wales, 20 times some
said in that certain age when darktown shuffle
was de rigueur for matrons of the dark tower

comedy streaks
jocose tricks

yes, all the vogue was jazz for Baby Florence
with her circles and shakes and feet skipping
like polished stones while ribbons of arms
danced with a flame too brightly held but some

said Panama
took the cake

to see Florence dance the shimmy shake
with a smile so wide it hurts still

Musical tributes

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Thomas "Fats" Waller, Pipe Organ on Victor 21062-B](#)

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Lambert Elegiac Blues Sheet Music

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WAx7oAsqSd4>

She's Gone To Join The Song-Birds In Heaven · Eva Taylor

actress Ethel Barrymore said, “I like to remember, too, one evening at Aeolian Hall when a little colored girl named Florence Mills wearing a short white dress, came out on the stage alone to sing a concert. She sang so beautifully. It was a great and thrilling experience.”