

**Guide to the Philip Sterling Research Materials on Bert Williams,  
1899-1981 (Bulk dates, 1959-1962)**

**\*T-Mss 1991-026**

**Billy Rose Theatre Division**

**The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts  
New York, New York**

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## Descriptive Summary

<b>Title:</b>	<b>Philip Sterling Research Materials on Bert Williams</b>
<b>Collection ID:</b>	<b>*T-Mss 1991-026</b>
<b>Creator:</b>	<b>Sterling, Philip.</b>
<b>Extent:</b>	<b>0.84 linear feet (3 boxes)</b>
<b>Repository:</b>	<b>Billy Rose Theatre Collection. The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts</b>

**Abstract:** The Philip Sterling Research Materials on Bert Williams primarily contain clippings, correspondence, notes, and other research materials compiled by Philip Sterling, a writer and public relations executive for CBS, mainly between the years, 1959-1962. Sterling began conducting research on Williams during the late 1950s in the hope of writing a biography, which, apparently never was completed. He performed extensive research at a number of libraries and interviewed some of Williams's surviving relatives, as well as other individuals with firsthand memories of Williams, including Andy Razaf and Carl Van Vechten.

## Administrative Information

### Access

Collection is open to the public. Library policy on photocopying will apply. Advance notice may be required.

### Publication Rights

For permission to publish, contact the Curator, Billy Rose Theatre Division.

### Preferred Citation

Philip Sterling Research Materials on Bert Williams, \*T-Mss 1991-026, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

### Custodial History

The Philip Sterling Research Materials on Bert Williams were donated to the Billy Rose Theatre Division in 1991 by Dorothy Sterling.

### Processing Information

The collection was processed and cataloged in 2007.

## Related Materials

The Philip Sterling Papers (Ax 751) are held by the Special Collections & University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

## Biographical Note

Philip Sterling (1907-1989) was a writer and a public relations executive who worked for the Columbia Broadcasting System for many years. Born Philip Shatz in New Rochelle, New York, he worked as a copy editor and journalist for several newspapers in the Midwest and suburban New York from 1926 through 1931. During the 1930s, he found employment with government agencies, including serving as an associate editor for three years on the Film Index, a unit of the Federal Writers Project. Sterling, who legally changed his surname in 1936, began as a writer for CBS Radio in 1945. In 1959, he became the assistant director of press information. He later worked for CBS Television until his 1965 retirement. After 1960, Sterling published several books, primarily biographies and children's literature. Among his most well-known works was *Sea and Earth* (1970), a biography of environmentalist Rachel Carson for young adults, which won a Christopher Award. Sterling, like his wife Dorothy (the former Dorothy Dannenberg, who also was a prolific writer of children's books), was particularly interested in researching and writing about prominent figures in African American history and the civil rights movement. His works for children on these topics include *Four Took Freedom* (1967) and *The Question of Color* (1973). Sterling also was interested in African American humor and vaudeville, editing the anthology, *Laughing On the Outside: The Intelligent White Reader's Guide to Negro Tales and Humor* (1965) and conducting extensive research on Bert Williams and his associates during the early 1960s.

Bert Williams (1873-1922) was one of the most influential African American entertainers of the early years of the twentieth century. Born Egbert Austin Williams in Nassau, Bahamas, Williams spent much of his childhood in Riverside, California. He developed a comedy act with George Walker, whom he had met in San Francisco in 1893. By 1895, the two had made their way to the East Coast, eventually breaking into vaudeville in New York City. In keeping with the conventions of minstrelsy, Williams, as the comedian of the act, performed in blackface makeup. By appropriating demeaning stereotypes, however, the pair was able to break new ground and to exert greater creative control over their own material in such Broadway hits as *In Dahomey* (1902), *Abyssinia* (1906), and *Bandanna Land* (1906). Following Walker's retirement in 1909, Williams began appearing as a solo artist. He became the first African American performer to be featured in the *Ziegfeld Follies* (1911), playing in editions of the *Follies* regularly throughout the decade. Williams also became a successful recording artist. Having signed with the Shubert Brothers in 1920, Williams was touring with an all-black show, *Under the Bamboo Tree* (1921), at the time of his death.

## **Scope and Content Note**

The Philip Sterling Research Materials on Bert Williams primarily contain clippings, correspondence, notes, and other research materials compiled by Sterling, mainly between the years, 1959-1962, a period in which he was preparing to write a biography of the African American entertainer. Sterling began conducting research on Williams during the late 1950s in the hope of writing a biography, which, apparently never was completed. He performed extensive research at a number of libraries and also traveled to Riverside, California to speak with individuals who may have known Williams as a teenager, as well as to Chicago, Illinois to interview Lottie Tyler, one of his surviving nieces. He also corresponded frequently with another one of Williams's nieces, Eunice Shreeves, who agreed to authorize Sterling's project and assisted him with research advice. Sterling was in contact with several other individuals with firsthand memories of Williams as well, including Andy Razaf and Carl Van Vechten. In addition to making audiotapes of rare Williams's recordings, Sterling appears to have taped many of the interviews he conducted. While no complete transcripts exist for any of the extant tapes, notes from a few of these sessions or conversations (including one with W. E. B. Du Bois) can be found among the correspondence and research notes in the collection. Audiotapes have been separated from the collection and will be cataloged separately. Also included with the collection is a small set of photographs and printed ephemera relating to Williams and other contemporary African American performers, including the wives of Williams and his professional partner, George Walker, Lottie Williams and Aida Overton Walker.

## **Organization**

The collection is organized into 2 series. They are:

Series I: Research Materials, 1941-1981 and undated

Series II: Photographs and Printed Ephemera, 1899-1921 and undated

## Series Descriptions

### **Series I: Research Materials, 1941-1981 and undated**

**2 boxes**

Arranged: Alphabetical

The Research Materials series is comprised of clippings, correspondence, notes (handwritten and typescript), and subject files relating to Philip Sterling's research on Bert Williams and other African American entertainers. Of special interest is correspondence between Sterling and some of Williams's surviving contemporaries and relatives, including his niece, Eunice Shreeves. Sterling's letters to Shreeves most fully document his progress on the project. Other correspondents of note include Carl Van Vechten. In addition to these items, the collection also includes notes that Sterling made from his conversations with Van Vechten and other individuals who had seen performances by Williams, including Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois.

### **Series II: Photographs and Printed Ephemera, 1899-1921 and undated**

**1 box**

Arranged: Alphabetical

The Photographs and Printed Ephemera series contains several original photographs of Bert Williams and other prominent African American performers, including his wife, Lottie Williams, as well as Bob Cole, S. H. Dudley, Ernest Hogan, and Aida Overton Walker. Also included are a few promotional materials relating to Williams's appearances with the *Ziegfeld Follies* and his recording career. Some of these items were included in the *Vaudeville Nation* exhibition that opened at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts in 2005 (display labels and a set of photocopies indicate which materials were shown). It is not clear whether or not any of these materials ever belonged to Philip Sterling.



## Philip Sterling Research Materials on Bert Williams

<b>Box/Folder</b>	<b>Description</b>
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**Series II: Photographs and Printed Ephemera, 1899-1921 and undated**

**Box 3**

	Photographs, 1907-1912 and undated
F. 1	Cole, Bob, 1909 (With J. Rosamond Johnson.)
F. 2	Dudley, S. H., 1912 (Includes one with Lottie Grady.)
F. 3	Fetchit, Stepin, undated
F. 4	Hogan, Ernest, 1907
F. 5	Walker, Aida Overton, undated Williams
F. 6	Bert, undated
F. 7	Lottie, undated
	Printed ephemera, 1899-1921 and undated
F. 8	Promotional materials for Bert Williams, 1918-1921
F. 9	<i>Railroad Porters and Waiters Magazine</i> article, 1902
F. 10	<i>Rufus Rastus</i> program, 1906
F. 11	<i>The Standard</i> , 1899 (Leaves from 1913 issue)
F. 12	Williams and Walker caricature, undated

### Audio-Visual Separated Materials List

Audio-Visual items separated from the paper materials in this collection are comprised of the following. Items may not be available for immediate consultation. See the Rodgers and Hammerstein Archives of Recorded Sound for further details.

#### 5 inch open reels

1. Notebooks of Bert Williams Side 2  
June 5, 1957

2. Bill Scott  
Not dated

#### 7 inch open reels

1. The Journey, etc. from Yale  
November 27, 1959

2. Lottie Tyler--F.L. Miller  
Not dated

3. Saunders Tape  
Not dated

## Philip Sterling Research Materials on Bert Williams

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4. Bert Williams Songs

Not dated

5. Lester Walton--Lee Whipper--Abbie Mitchell

July 7-9, 1959

6. Sons of Ham/ Mabel Rowland Part 1 and 2"

Not dated

7. Rosenbaum

Not dated

8. Saunders Reynolds Song

Not dated

9. Saunders Reynolds Songs

Not dated

10. Nora Holt

Not dated

11. Lee Whipper--Abbie Mitchell

Not dated

12. Van Vechten Re Bt. Wms

September 10, 1959

13. Sam Battle

July 20, 1960

14. Ed. Rosenbaum

May 6, 1960

15. Bert Wms Yale

Not dated