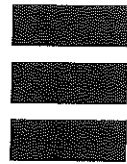


cast Hollywood films of the early sound days—one is torn between appreciating the fine performances of the actors and cringing at the harsh and unwarranted ethnic stereotyping which comes, wave after wave, upon us. By contrast, the black-audience films have a certain palpable “family feeling” because they were never meant to be seen by white eyes and could be almost as expressive of the black realities of the times as they wanted to be without fear that some projectionist was going to cut an offending scene from the reel or that the film would be picketed by the Klan—or worse.

If the black-audience films have any benefit and relevance to contemporary audiences, it lies rather obviously not in their esthetic values but in the fact that they may help fill a glaring gap in the history of American independent filmmaking, and in the fact that they give us one of the richest and most revealing commentaries on how black people saw themselves and their world during the years in which they were made.



Some Pioneer Black Filmmakers

Since 1965, history books about motion pictures have proliferated. There are now hundreds of books about the rise and development of cinema. In most of these books, certain names such as Griffith, Eisenstein, Von Stroheim, Wyler, Walsh, Murnau, Bergman, Fellini, and Renoir appear again and again as their contributions to the twentieth century's most characteristic art are chronicled. There are even books about the great “B” movies and their directors, as well as one or two about the famous “turkeys” of all times.

But a reader will look far and wide for even one word in these books about the black filmmakers of the 1910s through the early 1950s who labored against gigantic odds to make independent films for black audiences. Although they produced vibrant moving images of their own people and times and explored new reaches of low-budget financing, filming, and distribution that Hollywood filmmakers of their times would have sworn were impossible, these black filmmakers have remained largely anonymous in the decades since we have been paying attention to the only new artform mankind has been able to come up with since pre-historic times. (For the few fine books which do pay well-deserved attention to these neglected artists, see Appendix Two.)

Here, then, are brief biographies and filmographies of some of these pioneers. The ones celebrated in these pages are by no means the only black filmmakers of those times, but only the ones whose work is represented in the Tyler, Texas, Black Film Collection.

OSCAR MICHEAUX

The Dean of Black Filmmakers (1884-1951)

Oscar Micheaux was a man who fought the odds all of his life. Even if he was not always a winner, he was always a contender. He simply saw no good reason why he could not do something anyone else was able to do, as long as he wanted to do it badly enough. It did not particularly matter to him whether those others were black or white—if they could do it, so could he.

It all seems to have started when he became, at the age of twenty-five, one of the rare black homesteaders out in South Dakota. He had already had a turn at being a bootblack and then a Pullman porter, but he had bigger dreams to fulfill. In South Dakota, he did not have many neighbors, and all he had were white. He learned to get along with them and with the land so well that, by the time he had been on his land only five years, he had expanded his holdings to 500 acres under plow. Another itch had taken hold of him during his fourth year as a homesteader—probably during the winter, when there was little to do on the windswept, snow-covered prairie but read books. He decided that he wanted to write a book.

No matter that there were very few black authors getting published at the time. And, when he had finished his manuscript, no matter that he could not find a publisher who would print it into a book and then distribute it as widely as possible. With his own money, he published the book himself and then he got into his car and covered every backroad and every navigable wagon track, selling his book door-to-door to the white farmers and small businessmen in the tiny towns. The book was named *The Homesteader*, and it was about what those farmers knew: being a homesteader in a hard land. Oscar talked their language well enough to sell them the book, and he wrote it well enough for them to like the book and to assure himself that he could be a successful writer.

So, in 1915, when he lost his homestead (later, he claimed it was due to financial malfeasance of his father-in-law, a minister), Micheaux moved to Sioux City, Iowa, where he established the Western Book and Supply Company. He continued writing his novels, publishing them himself and touring the countryside to sell them, one at a time.

Not far away, in Lincoln, Nebraska, George P. Johnson got hold of a



Oscar Micheaux (right) playing a detective in his film *Murder in Harlem*.

second-hand copy of *The Homesteader*. George was the general booking manager for the western states of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company of Los Angeles, and in the book he saw the possibilities of a good film for his company.

The Lincoln Company had been producing films strictly for black audiences for the past three years, with some success. Johnson's brother, Noble, had been acting in motion pictures for several years at Universal Studios and had been running the Lincoln studio in Los Angeles while George did the booking business from Nebraska, while also working full-time as a mailman.

Whether Micheaux had already been dreaming of being a film producer before Johnson summoned him to a conference in Lincoln is not known, but by the time Micheaux had spent two days living at Johnson's house and discussing terms for the sale of his book, it was obvious that this was the author's next dream. He said to the Johnson brothers, "You can make a motion picture of my book, but only on the condition that I direct it."

Thinking that Micheaux was an upstart, and knowing that he had no prior experience with any aspect of filmmaking, the Johnsons turned him down and dropped the project. But Oscar did not drop

the project. Instead, he returned to Sioux City, re-organized his business into the Micheaux Film and Book Company, and began to raise money for his own film of his own book.

He went to those he knew best—the farmers and small businessmen in and around Sioux City, offering them stock in his new venture for from \$75 to \$100 per share. The people believed in him, and before the end of that year he had raised enough to begin production on his first film, *The Homesteader*, which was not a timid one- or two-reeler, but a full eight-reel feature. When, in early 1919, the film was finished, he took a leaf from the Johnson brothers' book and distributed the film the same way they did, but with his own personal flair for public relations. With a print of the film and advertising material under his arm, he would travel from city to city, in ever-widening circles, to hit up each theater owner with a proposition for showing his film. At the same time, he would tell them the story and show them a few photos of stars for his next film, encouraging them to pay a little something up-front for exclusive rights to show the completed feature the next year. In between times, he would continue to sell his growing backlog of novels, still door-to-door.

In this manner, Micheaux managed to produce thirty films over the next ten years. The decade of the 1920s was when films made for predominately black audiences in theaters across the country which catered primarily to black patrons had their highest levels of success until the "Blaxploitation" era of the 1970s. It was in that decade Oscar Micheaux went from being an unknown upstart who had the crazy idea he could make movies to being the head of the most respected (and often disrespected), most successful, and most enduring black-owned film production company during the entire 1910-1956 era of black-independent filmmaking.

If Oscar Micheaux had wanted general acclaim, honor, and peace of mind, he would never have made more than one motion picture. From the beginning, he stood at the center of a vortex of controversy, censorship, and financial problems. Although some of his black critics, both then and now, accused him of producing films designed only to make a profit but not to elevate his ethnic group in their own or others' eyes, he usually disdained to make films which were purely and simply escapism. Had he chosen to emulate some of the later black filmmakers of the forties (and most of the white filmmakers who

made films for black audiences at that time) and produced only frothy musicals, comedies, Westerns, and gangster films which were merely black copies of then-current Hollywood fare, Micheaux could probably have made much more money, could have saved a lot of time spent in re-working his films to suit various censorship boards, and might have actually been given more respect from film critics on both black and white newspapers. But Micheaux obviously believed in choosing uniquely black themes for his uniquely black audiences, thinking that these themes would be infinitely more interesting to them. Thus, he was to make film after film on the themes of black persons "passing" for white, intermarriage between blacks and whites, the ubiquitous plagues of the numbers and prostitution rackets, injustice of the white courts against blacks, and even the potentially dangerous issues of lynching and the vigilante depredations of the Ku Klux Klan.

Few viewers of his work, then or now, would say that Oscar Micheaux made the most artistic of the black-produced independent films. Micheaux productions suffered under the same financial and personnel restrictions faced by other black production companies of his time: Lincoln, Ebony, Reel, Arista, etc. Few of the companies were able to muster more than \$15,000 for a feature film, and all of them had to use white union cameramen and editors, who were paid the same union wages they would have gotten if they had been working in a Hollywood studio. (One big reason why there were no black camera operators or editors in those years is because the unions would not yet accept black applicants for membership.) But whereas other black producers might hone their scripts to a finer point before going into the studio to shoot them, do a few re-takes in order to get a particular shot just right or hire a really good editor to "save in the editing room" some mistakes made in shooting, Oscar Micheaux was like a racehorse who—once the starting-bell rings—is intent only upon reaching the finishing-line. Once a production began, he had neither the time nor the interest for re-shooting a scene in which the light was too low or the actors fluffed their lines slightly. ("Print it!" must have been used instead of "Cut!" at the end of each shot.) Similarly, he had little use for the expensive and time-consuming work of creating just the right, original "mood" music or for the painstaking and meticulous jobs of fine-tuning the editing so that scenes flowed together with a pacing and tempo that underscored the acting.

In defense of Micheaux's style of filmmaking, it should be said that very few black independent filmmakers had the time or money to do better, and that Micheaux never gave himself the luxury of doing one thing at a time. Although he might be on the set for the day's shooting, he was—at the same time—working on the script or on financial arrangements for his next film, getting ready to go on the road to distribute the film now shooting when it was completed, and going over receipts of past Micheaux Corporation films with his brother and chief accountant, Swan. Other companies tended to let some other entity handle their financing and distribution, to make only one film per year and to go out of business after their first or second film.

In the early 1930s, the Micheaux Corporation was the only independent black filmmaking company to survive not only the influenza epidemic but also the earliest and harshest years of the Great Depression and the coming of sound to film. The company did not come through unscathed, however. Micheaux's old company went bankrupt and he had to re-form it and—for the first time—fall back upon white financiers rather than raising the money himself. But the films of Oscar Micheaux were to continue in much the same style, and with much of the same difficulties and controversy, until his last production in 1948.

Three years later, Oscar Micheaux died. Like many other motion picture pioneers before him—Georges Melies in France and David Wark Griffith in the United States, to name only a couple—he died unnoticed and uncelebrated. None of his silent films except *Body and Soul* survive today, and not all of his sound films.

It has only been since the 1970s that much attention, black or white, has been paid to the phenomenon of the black-audience films and their makers, 1910 through 1956, and only since that time has Oscar Micheaux been tardily celebrated with his rightful title of "The Father of Independent Black Filmmaking." In 1987, the "Avenue of the Stars" in Hollywood finally dedicated a star on its sidewalk to Oscar Micheaux.

The Films of Oscar Micheaux

- 1919: *The Homesteader*
 1920: *Phantom of Kenwood, Swing, Dark Princess, A Fool's Errand, Within Our Gates*

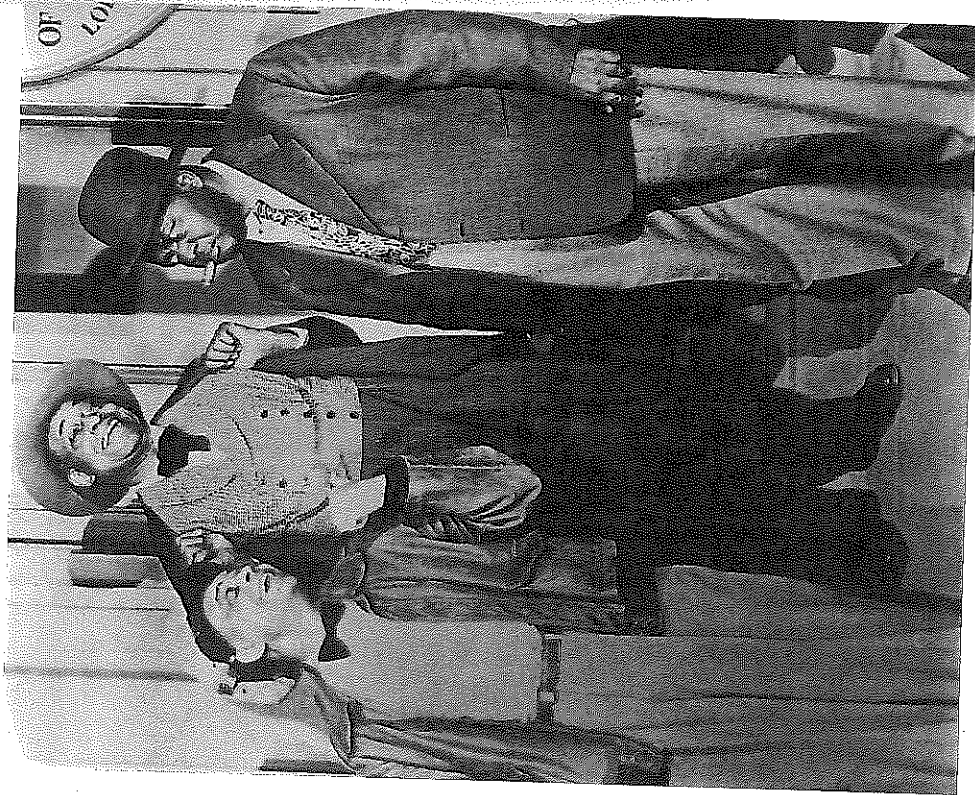
- 1921: *The Hypocrite, The Shadow, The Symbol of the Unconquered, The Gunsaulus Mystery*
 1922: *The Dungeon, Uncle Jasper's Will*
 1923: *Ghost of Tolston's Manor, Deceit, Virgin of the Seminole*
 1924: *Son of Satan, Birthright*
 1925: *Body and Soul, Marcus Garland, The Brute*
 1926: *The Devil's Disciple, The Conjure Woman*
 1927: *The Spider's Web, The Millionaire, The Broken Violin, The House Behind the Cedars*
 1928: *Thirty Years Later, When Men Betray*
 1929: *Wages of Sin*
 1930: *Easy Street, Daughter of the Congo*
 1931: *The Exile, Darktown Review*
 1932: *Veiled Aristocrats, Ten Minutes to Live, Black Magic*
 1933: *The Girl From Chicago, Ten Minutes to Kill*
 1934: *Harlem After Midnight*
 1935: *Lem Hawkins' Confession*
 1936: *Underworld, Temptation*
 1937: *God's Stepchildren*
 1939: *Lying Lips*
 1940: *The Notorious Elinor Lee*
 1948: *Betrayed*

SPENCER WILLIAMS

(1893-1969)

Although he was best known to the general American public in his role as "Andy Brown," which he played in the early (and short-lived) television adaptation of "Amos n' Andy," the talents and accomplishments of Spencer Williams went far beyond that role. In the 1930s, his was the only voice inside the Hollywood studios which spoke out—and wrote—for any view of black life other than the current white stereotyped interpretation. In the 1940s, Williams became one of the most prolific and respected writer-director-actors in black-audience films, with nine feature films to his directorial credit.

Born on July 14, 1893, in Vidalia, Louisiana, he managed to get himself to New York City around 1910, where he landed a job as a "call boy" for the great Oscar Hammerstein and later studied acting and



Spencer Williams, far right, was probably best known for his role as Andy in the television series "Amos n' Andy."

the art of comedy from none other than Bert Williams, with whom he had become friends.

After several years of service in the U. S. Army during World War I, Spencer Williams next entered the public eye—or, rather, the public ear—in his one-and-only venture as a recording artist. Williams and Lonnie Jackson recorded a vocal duet of "It Feels So Good," which was released on the Okeh Race Records label.

When Hollywood went crazy over talking pictures soon after *The Jazz Singer*, the studios began to scour the New York talent and technical pool for anybody who knew anything about sound. In a manner which was to become characteristic with Williams but uncharacteristic of other black artists of the time, Williams signed on with the old Christie Studios in Hollywood not as on-camera talent but as a behind-the-camera sound technician. The first equipment for making "talkies" at the Christie Studios was installed with the help of Williams.

Always looking for an opportunity to improve his status, he was soon noticed by the studio head, Al Christie, who realized that Williams could add a note of authenticity to a series of black-cast comedies which were to be adaptations of some of the stories of Jewish writer Octavus Roy Cohen. When Cohen and the Christie troupe went South to film "authentic" location shots for the comedy series, Spencer Williams went along as co-writer with Cohen. Although he was employed mainly to write dialogue that would sound appropriate in the mouths of the black actors, it is known that Williams was soon having an influence upon Cohen and his story-lines, resulting in the production of several comedies in the series which were much more true to black self-concepts than they would have been had Cohen been the sole writer. Before long, Williams was not only writing the scripts, but also acting in some of them, such as *The Melancholy Dame*, *Off in the Silly Night*, *The Lady Fare*, *Music Hath Harms*, and *The Framing of the Shrew*. Various sources give Williams credit for also having directed some of the films in the series, such as *Tenderfeet* and *The Melancholy Dame*, and it is possible that he did perform such services, but the Library of Congress copyright files record that white director Archie Mayo was given credit for directing *Tender Feet* while Arvid E. Gillstrom was listed as director for *The Melancholy Dame*. Although the Christie series was designed primarily for white audiences and contained ethnic stereotyping that would be repugnant to many viewers both white and black of today, the films are significant in that they did present much authentic black lore of the times (most of it probably from Williams' pen) and in that a good part of the series films which were released in 1928 were actually the first black talkies, rather than Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's *Hallelujah!* and Fox's *Hearts in Dixie*, which some records mistakenly identify as the first all-black-cast talking pictures. Regardless of any such confusions, it is clear that Spencer Williams played a large and important

part in the creation of these relatively early depictions of black life-style, flawed though they might appear to us today when we are able to see them.

Through the 1930s, Spencer Williams continued to write and act for films, mostly for those with all-black casts which were designed for all-black audiences. He had roles in *Georgia Rose*, *Virginia Judge*, and *Bad Boy* as well as appearing—usually as a villain—in almost every one of the “black Westerns,” including *Bronze Buckaroo*, *Harlem Rides the Range*, *Two-gun Man from Harlem*, and *Harlem on the Prairie*. In 1937, he acted in and wrote the script for the first all-black-cast talking horror film, *Son of Ingagi*.

It was the 1940s, however, that were to be Williams' real heyday behind the camera. Teaming up with a Jewish film entrepreneur named Alfred Sack who operated Sack Amusement Enterprises out of Dallas, Williams was able to find in Sack a hands-off backer who enabled him to do what few other black artists other than Oscar Micheaux had been able to do—to direct a large number of his own screenplays as he saw fit. If Sack had any doubts at first about letting Williams have his own way on the set, the success that greeted *The Blood of Jesus*, Spencer Williams' first true experiment as a writer-director-actor, must have convinced the Dallas producer-distributor that it was just plain good business for Williams to call the shots. Thus began a ten-year association that produced three religious features (*The Blood of Jesus*, *Brother Martin*, and *Go Down, Death!*), three comedies (*Dirty Gerlie from Harlem, U.S.A.*; *Beale Street Mama*; and *Juke Joint*), and three dramas (*Marchin' On*, *Of One Blood*, and *The Girl in Room 20*).

The Spencer Williams comedies still play well to audiences today, but especially those that feature the comedy team of Williams as “Bad News Johnson” and July Jones as his mugging sidekick. *Juke Joint* and *Beale Street Mama* exhibit a kind of black Laurel and Hardy team that leave viewers wishing the two had made more comic films together.

Although all of Williams' directorial efforts suffer from the usual technical problems characteristic of any extremely low-budget films (his entire budgets were usually around \$12,000 to \$15,000, amounts insufficient to produce even the trailers to most Hollywood studio features of the time), at least one modern black film critic, Thomas Cripps, calls *The Blood of Jesus* “an unrivalled example of black control of the medium, with untrammelled expression of black religious

sensitivity.” In his book, *Black Film As Genre* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1978), Cripps devotes the equivalent of an entire chapter to this film, so important does he think the film is as a prime example of how authentic a motion picture can be to black culture when it is made with as little as possible of white interference.

For Spencer Williams, the 1950s were to be a decade devoted to the new medium of television, but the time available for such devotion turned out to be all too short. In 1950, the Columbia Broadcasting System decided to experiment with turning the fantastically popular old radio series of “Amos n' Andy” into a television series—but with an important change. The radio series had been acted out by a team of white writer-actors who had created the roles, Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll. The team had also starred in one film version of the series in 1930 entitled *Check and Double Check*, playing their roles in burnt cork blackface. By 1950, CBS programmers were wise enough to know that blackface would no longer go down well with large numbers of American viewers, but why not shoot it with black actors and actresses in the roles? Spencer Williams was chosen to play the role of Andy Brown, which he did to the best of his considerable ability until the show was cancelled after the 1952–1953 season because of the vocal protests of, among others, the NAACP.

Although the early fifties established him as a familiar face in the homes of America, in terms of a black artist enabled to practice the fullest range of his talents, the forties were the Golden Age for Spencer Williams.

He died on December 13, 1969, at his home in Los Angeles at the age of seventy-six.

The Films of Spencer Williams (as Director)

- 1941: *The Blood of Jesus*
- 1942: *Brother Martin*
- 1943: *Marchin' On* (aka *Where's My Man Tonight?*)
- 1944: *Of One Blood, Go Down, Death!*
- 1946: *Dirty Gerlie From Harlem, U.S.A., The Girl In Room 20, Beale Street Mama*
- 1947: *Juke Joint*

WILLIAM ALEXANDER

(1912(?)—)

In the 1940s, most producers of black-audience films were white: Ted Toddy, Al Sack, Jack and Bert Goldberg, Arthur Dreifuss and Richard Kahn, to name a few. The producer, of course, is usually responsible for initiating a film: finding a script or at least a good idea, finding the sources of financing, employing screenwriter and director, etc. Aside from the work of the very prolific Oscar Micheaux in the twenties and thirties, there were very few black persons connected with motion pictures who had the ability—or the inclination, apparently—to perform these exacting and difficult roles. In the 1940s and 1950s, William Alexander was the most accomplished exception.

Alexander received his college education at Colorado State University and the University of Chicago. His first recorded entry into the field of motion pictures came in 1945, right after World War II, when he organized the Associated Producers of Negro Motion Pictures, Inc., in New York City. The purpose of this organization was to provide the platform from which he was to produce his first films, beginning with the 1946 releases of two short films, *The Highest Tradition* (about black people in the U.S. Army) and *The Call of Duty* (about black people in the U.S. Navy). Both of these films were documentaries, foreshadowing his later interest in producing newsreels.

In April and May of 1946, Alexander received some very favorable publicity in the *Los Angeles Sentinel* about his high sense of purpose in becoming a film producer. In April, he was quoted as saying: "If Negro films are to survive and attract larger audiences, new ideas will have to replace the often repeated stereotyped subjects now used."

The next month, the same newspaper reported that Alexander and his Associated Producers of Negro Motion Pictures planned production of a full-length feature "presenting Negroes in an intelligent and dignified manner, thus setting the pace for Hollywood to follow."

In his first year of releasing pictures, William Alexander changed the name of his company to Alexander Productions and premiered two other new short films; *Flücker Up*, a musical starring Billy Eckstine and Mary Lou Harris, and *Vanities*, in which a talented young impressionist, Charles Keith, exceeded for musical numbers by Joesfred Portee and Audrey Armstrong.



William Alexander (right), interviewing J. Earnest Wilkins in one of his By-Line Newsreels.

Alexander's feature films began in 1947 with the release of the second film to star world champion prizefighter Joe Louis (the first had been *Spirit Of Youth* in 1937 by Grand National Films), entitled *The Fight Never Ends*. That year was Alexander's biggest, with three more features and a short following each other in rapid succession: *Jivin' in Bebob*, a feature-length record of the music of Dizzy Gillespie and his Band; *Love In Syncopation*, a fictionalized feature treatment of the story of Henri Woods and his Band and their rise to fame from beginnings in the Seabees; *That Man Of Mine*, another musical starring Ruby Dee, Powell Lindsay and Henri Woods and his Six Hepcats.

Although *The Fight Never Ends* (1946) still receives favorable comment as a sincere and authentic representation of black achievement, it was probably Alexander's 1949 release, *Souls of Sin*, which epitomized the ambitions he voiced to the *Los Angeles Sentinel* as he began his producing career. Actors William Greaves, Jimmy Wright, and Emery Richardson, under the direction of Powell Lindsay (who also played the villain of the film) presented a realistic panorama of black lifestyles in the Harlem of the 1940s, from a burned-out failure of a writer to an angry but determined con-man to a young innocent full of talent.

Although his work in production of features and musical shorts is

still impressive, the world may credit him most in years to come as the producer of the *By-Line Newsreel* series, from 1953 to 1956. Appearing himself in the role of the interviewer and serving also as the off-camera narrator, Alexander roved the country in the earliest years of the Civil Rights Amendment's implementation, recording the great strides which black people were making in the armed forces and in the federal government. At a time when black faces and accomplishments were still very rare in the major-studio newsreels, William Alexander was capturing on film an era of accomplishment and position for blacks which had not been seen since Reconstruction.

Perhaps because of contacts he made as a newsreel producer in Washington, Alexander moved his base of operations in the late fifties to London, from whence he spent more than a decade making documentary films for some of the emerging nations of Africa.

In 1973, to cap (so far, because he is still very much alive and at work today) his producing career, Alexander was called to Hollywood to produce (with Bill Shiffin) a major film project for Paramount Pictures entitled *The Klansman*, which boasted of Samuel Fuller and Millard Kaufman as screenwriters, Terence Young as director and Richard Burton, Lee Marvin, Lola Falana, and O. J. Simpson as actors. The film, set in backwoods Alabama, was about a sheriff who contradicts red-necked accusations of blacks in the rape of a white woman and ends up confronting the Ku Klux Klan. As is often the case in the art/business of motion pictures, the fertile and expensive gathering of talents did not, finally, succeed in giving birth to a great example of cinematic art or of humanistic truth. *Variety's* review said, "There's not a shred of quality, dignity, relevance or impact in this yahoo-oriented bunk," and the film was a failure at the box office. Apparently, even though he was the project's producer, William Alexander was finally unable to give the 1974 production the kind of simple insight and tone of sincerity he had achieved with an apparently much less promising array of talent—and only a fraction of the budget—with *Souls of Sin* in 1949.

The Films of William Alexander (as Producer)

1946: *The Highest Tradition*, *The Call of Duty*, *Flicker Up* (aka *Rhythm in A Riff*), *Vanities*

1947: *The Fight Never Ends*, *Jivin' in Beboop*, *Love in Syncopation*, *That Man of Mine*, *Sweethearts of Rhythm*

1949: *Souls of Sin*

1953–1956: *By-Line Newsreels*

1974: *The Klansman*

GEORGE RANDOL

(1895–?)

Although George Randol was involved as producer on only three films during the heyday of black-audience films, his career is important in the history of black independent filmmaking, not only because he is one of the few black artists ever to succeed in the difficult tasks surrounding the job of producer in feature films, but also because of the importance of the film he co-directed with Ralph Cooper, *Dark Manhattan*.

Born in Virginia in 1895, Randol received his public school education in Rankin, Pennsylvania and in Cleveland, Ohio. He graduated from the Cleveland School of Music with a degree in Voice Culture, and became a private pupil of Professor Walter T. Gerak of St. Louis.

As a singer, his first public appearance was with the Thomas Male Quartet in Helena, Montana. His career was briefly interrupted by World War I, in which he served as a second lieutenant with the 349th Artillery in France. After the war, he returned to the States and soon was playing featured roles in such Broadway musicals as *How Come?* (in which Eddie Hunter was then starring) and Irvin C. Miller's *Models*, in which he played the male lead. He also played the role of the Pharoah in the stage version of *Green Pastures*.

In 1934, he toured the U. S. and Canada as a concert singer; but by 1936, George Randol was seeking his future within the movie colony of Hollywood, possibly inspired to do so by the example of Oscar Micheaux. Randol had gotten to know the great "Father of Black Filmmaking" through being hired to play a role in Micheaux's first talking film, *The Exile*, in 1931. He met Ralph Cooper, who was then a contract actor with Twentieth Century-Fox, playing a wide assortment of villainous roles. Of their meeting of minds, Randol was later to say, "We were tired of seeing our fine stars playing small, distasteful parts in the

many films released by the major film companies, so we insisted upon better scripts and parts for our players and we got pushed around, so that we decided to write and produce our own."

It was still in 1936 that Randol and Cooper—feeling that the major studios were not going to give black actors a chance at the better roles—teamed up to form the Cooper-Randol Production Company and began work on their first (and only) co-production. With a script in hand entitled *Dark Manhattan*, they rented space in the old Grand-National Studios near the intersection of Hollywood Boulevard and Fountain Avenue and began production. The story concerned the rise of "Curly" Thorpe (played by Cooper himself) to the position of kingpin of the Harlem numbers racket, and was pretty much a black version of the major studios' gangster films then in vogue.

The premiere of the picture, which was scheduled for Los Angeles' Tivoli Theatre on January 27, 1937, had to be delayed because Randol, Cooper, and their partners could not come up with \$13,000 in processing charges to get the film out of the lab. (This was almost the entire cost of the film.) But finally, six weeks after the film's completion, the money was found and *Dark Manhattan* premiered at the Tivoli on February 13, 1937.

Surely Randol and Cooper expected their film to be successful, but it is probable that neither of them could have known just how important it would be. Black-audience films, after experiencing their peak of popularity in the latter days of silent movies, were hard-hit by the greater expenses involved in making sound films. Then, the Depression came, and dealt a death blow to almost all the producers of these films. Few of the black independent filmmakers were to survive this double crisis. But the fresh and imaginative style of *Dark Manhattan*, coupled with the fact that it began an exciting new genre of black-cast gangster films, made the film such a surprising success that it started a resurgence in the production of films for black audiences. In the following six or seven years, more than a dozen gangster films were made, seeking to copy the format and the success of *Dark Manhattan*.

Soon after they had experienced success, however, Randol and Cooper parted ways—Cooper to join with white entrepreneurs Harry and Leo Popkin to create Million Dollar Films, and Randol to organize his own Premiere Productions, a name he soon changed to George Randol Productions.

Randol decided to begin his career as a solo producer by making a relatively inexpensive short film which must have been his attempt to combine two types of films then enjoying success with black audiences: musicals and Westerns. While preparing for the film, he worked for Associated Pictures as the Sheriff in *Harlem on the Prairie*, so he was familiar with the Western formula. Taking his cast of Troy Brown, the Jackson Brothers, Rosalie Lincoln, and Jim Davis on location to the old Lasky Ranch outside Los Angeles, Randol shot his film. It was released in 1938 as *Rhythm Rodeo*.

With one solo production under his belt, he was now ready to begin making films in earnest. With several scripts in mind, he formed an organization to sell shares in his company, sending his salesmen out with these words for potential backers:

"There are more than 600 theatres in this country which cater mainly to colored people for support. Statistics show that we can realize a profit of \$60,000 for a picture that costs \$15,000 to make. We think this money should be returned to the pockets of the people who spend it for their entertainment."

His salesmen were effective enough to raise the \$15,000 necessary for Randol to begin producing his first feature film on his own, *Midnight Shadow*, which was an unusual mixture of romance, murder mystery, and comedy starring Frances Webb, Buck Woods, Clinton Rosemond, and Ruby Dandridge. As he had with *Rhythm Rodeo*, Randol not only filled the role of the producer, but also the slots of screenwriter and director.

After the release of *Midnight Shadow*, Randol announced to the trade press that he was merging his George Randol Productions with the Argus Film Company and the Ernest Steiss Film Company. His future productions were to be distributed by Bert Goldberg's International Road Shows, Inc. Although it must have seemed like a mutually-beneficial alliance at the time, promising to put an end to many of Randol's fund raising problems, no more films were forthcoming. *Midnight Shadow* was George Randol's last film.

Leaving Hollywood and the burdens of a film producer behind him, Randol returned to Broadway, where he was to play numerous parts and to have the opportunity to use his fine singing voice once more. In

1945, he received good response from the critics for his role in *Anna Lucasta*.

The Films of George Randol (as Producer)

1937: *Dark Manhattan* (co-produced)

1938: *Rhythm Rodeo*

1939: *Midnight Shadow*

IV

The Tyler, Texas, Black Film Collection

The following synopses and photographs are from those films in the "Tyler, Texas, Black Film Collection" which have so far been saved to safety film from their deteriorating condition on nitrate film. Most of the photographs are "frame blow-ups" from the original nitrate prints.

Although some of these films have been mentioned in previous studies of the independent black-audience film phenomenon, in most cases the researchers were apparently unable actually to view the films, but relied on newspaper critiques or press exploitation materials printed at the time of the films' first release. Because of reliance upon such secondary sources, much of their information is either extremely abbreviated or, in some cases, incorrect. In an effort to give future researchers a firmer base for their studies and to inform the general reading public of the actual content of these films, extended and illustrated synopses of the films' story-lines or documentary coverage are included here.