

BOOK REVIEW

Ink: The Indelible J. Mayo Williams. By Clifford R. Murphy. University of Illinois Press, 2024. 336 pp. \$125 Cloth / \$24.95 Paper.

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Clifford R. Murphy's recent biography, *Ink: The Indelible J. Mayo Williams*, opens with two complementary scenes in quick succession. The first is a true story recounted forty years after the fact by boogie-woogie pianist Little Brother Montgomery in which he recalls his disbelief when introduced to Decca Records executive J. Mayo Williams in 1930. Excited to meet with the famed record producer whom he knew only by reputation, Montgomery was perplexed by the "cigar-chomping man in a three-piece suit" who greeted him. He was Black. Surely, this could not be the same Mayo Williams, industry power broker, pioneering producer, Montgomery had heard about.

The second scene comes from the opening of August Wilson 1982 play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. This episode depicts an impatient white producer, frustrated by blues singer Rainey's tardiness to a 1927 recording session, and establishes the dynamics of power and race that animate the ensuing action. While Wilson gestures toward a truth transcending factual accuracy, it is notable that he elides a significant historical detail: Rainey's producer at this session, and throughout her recording career, was the same Mayo Williams who confronted an incredulous Montgomery.

The juxtaposition of these two scenes highlights the complexity of Williams's life and legacy that Murphy admirably endeavors to disentangle. In his own time, Williams was an outlier in the racially homogenous upper strata of the burgeoning "race record" business. While his awareness of Black music and connections to Black communities and media outlets gave him advantages in the business, his Ivy league education and elitist-leaning tastes kept him at a social remove from the musicians he recorded. And he did not hesitate to borrow the exploitative business tactics of his white counterparts, even engineering a few novel strategies of his own. Forty years later, in Wilson's play—and perpetuated another forty years after that in its film adaptation—Williams is left out entirely of the story he helped write, instead portrayed as a caricatured white producer, neatly conforming to expectations of the industry.

The "indelible" of Murphy's subtitle not only puns on Williams's nickname, Ink, but alludes to the pervasive theme of the book. Williams may have been

largely erased from our understanding of the early record business in America, but his imprint is no less etched into its history. He was one of the only Black record producers in the 1920s, and the roster of artists he recruited and recorded during his tenure at Paramount, and later Decca, testifies to his impact on American popular music: Ma Rainey, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Memphis Minnie, Count Basie, among many others. Though he was guided by self-interest and survival instincts in a racist industry, he was also motivated by a mission of finding, recording, and dignifying Black vernacular music on its own terms. His knack for locating the right people to help him and his remarkable ability to do it all profitably inscribed his undeniable, if invisible, imprint on the course of Black American music. And he managed all this while also playing in the early National Football League, a legacy that has been subject to its own parallel erasure.

Though not explicitly bracketed, *Ink* divides into roughly three sections. The first, comprising chapters one through seven, opens with Williams's middle-class upbringing in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, followed by his family's relocation to Monmouth, Illinois, after the murder of his father in a bizarre revenge plot gone awry. In Monmouth, Williams found himself straddling two worlds. His high school, where he distinguished himself on the football and track teams, was mostly white. But Monmouth was also home to a robust Black middle class, and it was here that Williams discovered the blues, informing his sense of danceable accessibility he would later chase as a talent scout. Williams's college life similarly reflected a racially bifurcated experience. In 1915, he enrolled at Howard University, seeking to immerse himself in a racially conscious academic environment, but his primary focus was football, and he soon jumped at an invitation to play for the more prestigious Brown. When he arrived in Providence, he was one of only three Black students enrolled there.

Chapters eight through fifteen span only seven years, from 1921 to 1928, but it is during this time that Williams went from an ambitious, if rudderless, fresh college graduate with no real music experience, to a record executive at Paramount whose marketing acumen, networking skills, and eye for talent, would make him one of the most consequential actors in American popular music. He had a keen ear for what consumers desired but also knew when to delegate to more plugged-in associates like gospel innovator Thomas A. Dorsey, or his assistant Aletha Dickerson. He also pioneered blunt marketing tactics like asking directly, "What Does the Public Want?" on the cover of a 1924 Paramount catalog. Informed by the blues of his youth, the Afrocentric consciousness fostered at Howard, and his experience navigating mostly white spaces, he was able to consistently produce hits that made stars and uplifted Black vernacular music.

The final third covers Williams's post-Paramount career, including stints at other labels like Vocalion and Decca and coaching football at Morehouse College. In this era, we find Williams lost in the woods, past the height of his powers. He lost his job at Decca after incurring legal scrutiny for his questionable appropriation of royalties. He struck out with his own independent labels, Black Patti and Ebony. And he was technically the first to record one of the biggest stars of post-war blues, Muddy Waters, but after technical issues and delays in release, Waters moved on to his soon-famed association with Chess Records. He had similar misses with Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Mahalia Jackson, and the Coles Brothers (as in Nat King), in all instances recognizing their potentials but failing to capitalize on them in a landscape of rapidly changing consumer tastes.

Murphy takes ample opportunities along the way to branch off from Williams's life to explore other histories similarly erased in conventional retellings. Readers are treated to capsule biographies of not only the musical luminaries with whom Williams directly interacted, but people like 19th century African American operatic star Sissieretta Jones, whose nickname, "Black Patti," Williams borrowed for his own short-lived record label. Murphy also corrects the popular conflation of segregation in professional football and baseball. While the color line in baseball was firm and preceded the 20th century, the NFL was integrated at its inception, with Black players like Williams, Fritz Pollard, and Paul Robeson playing an essential role in its infancy. Only later was the league de facto segregated, from 1934 to 1946. Murphy also emphasizes place throughout as a locus of erasure. He elaborates the histories of cities, neighborhoods, and institutions Williams encountered, and punctuates the biography throughout with persistent land acknowledgements, resisting the passive erasure of Indigenous peoples' relationship to the spaces in which much of this story transpires.

Murphy has undertaken a difficult task in tackling the life of J. Mayo Williams. Williams's professional life proceeded along two parallel tracks: football and record production. He earned acclaim and prestige in both fields, but they rarely coincide in meaningful ways. Were this not a historical retelling of an actual life, one might feel the narrative lacked believable cohesion. Chapters veer between his activities at Paramount records, operating in the milieu of Ma Rainey and Blind Lemon Jefferson, and his moonlighting on professional football teams in the nascent NFL. Often, however, the level of detail afforded retellings of football matches can border on tedious, as in this typical account of an inconsequential college game: "The players took the field for a crisp set of warmup drills, and the crowd... began to cheer as the team captains met at midfield with the referees for a coin toss. Howard won the toss, opted to defend, and absorbed relentless hits from the Hampton running backs."

While Williams's two sides certainly add up to a fascinating, multifarious life, readers interested enough to get into the weeds of one, may strain their patience delving just as deeply into the other. Williams himself considered penning two separate autobiographies to cover his disparate pursuits independently. Murphy could have done more—by including less—to streamline an otherwise unwieldy wealth of detail.

Murphy trained as an ethnomusicologist, and his previous book, *Yankee Twang*, draws heavily on contemporary ethnographic research. The historical nature of *Ink*, however, demanded extensive archival work and reckoning with a dire paucity of interviews with his subject. Much of the narrative seems to lean on minutiae of football games and team travel because such information likely was more readily available in contemporaneous periodicals rather than because of its importance to the story.

In Williams's last decade before his death in 1980, blues researchers began knocking on his door. Though they only produced five interviews of substance—several still unpublished—they began the work to correct the historical record. Williams had either been omitted entirely, or, since most fieldwork was conducted with musicians who may have harbored a grudge or two, portrayed in a harshly unflattering light. In *Ink*, Murphy picks up this revisionist mission, following the indelible traces Williams etched into popular music, though their source had largely been obscured. Murphy succeeds in reorienting our perception of American music by attuning our ears to the sounds lost to the cacophony of history. If by the end, Williams as a person remains somewhat opaque, it is because this is a biography that asks less, “who was this person?” than “what has been erased, and how might we restore it?”