

Never the Same Step Twice

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Where the previous generation of dancers arranged their steps into tidy, regular phrases, John Bubbles enjambed over the bar lines, multiplying, twisting, tilting, turning.



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John Bubbles and Buck Washington performing in Brooklyn, New York, 1930

Reviewed:

Sportin' Life: John W. Bubbles, an American Classic

by Brian Harker

Oxford University Press, 314 pp., \$34.95

In a scene from the otherwise unremarkable 1937 Warner Brothers musical *Varsity Show*, the star, Dick Powell, finds some fraternity boys shirking their studies by watching the school's Black janitor dance in the boiler room. Powell shoos them off, then tells the janitor, whom he calls "Bubbles," to show him "that step you were teaching the kids." Bubbles obliges—not with one step, but a slew of them. His swiveling, crossing feet scrape coal dust on the floor with the rhythmic phrasing of a great jazz drummer playing brushes. Here, and in the minute of

dance brilliance before Powell's entrance, Bubbles's taps have the sound of surprise—hesitating, then pouncing in dense, crunchy clusters—without losing an easy swing. Through all this intricacy, he ambles, winds, and unwinds with a tossed-off nonchalance that's echoed in his chuckling and snatches of song. This man in the cap labeled “janitor” is clearly one of the great dancers of his time or any other.

In 1937 that was not exactly a secret. Two years earlier, John Bubbles had made a big splash originating the role of Sportin' Life in George Gershwin's opera *Porgy and Bess*. For almost twenty years, he and his piano-playing partner, Buck Washington, had been stars of vaudeville, beloved for their singing, dancing, and comedy—an act no other act wanted to follow. They were two of the rare Black performers to achieve the status of headliners in white theaters. Among tap dancers, Bubbles was known as an innovator on the level of Louis Armstrong in jazz. His influence was inescapable.

But in the segregated Hollywood of the time, that wasn't enough to get Bubbles out of the boiler room. Later in *Varsity Show*, Buck and Bubbles, as their act was known, are appended to the college show that Powell's character directs. Dressed fancy now, sliding on top of Buck's grand piano, Bubbles throws down more of his effortless intricacy, but though his talent and skill easily outclass everything else in the film, he and his partner are accessories to it, excisable. Stuck in roles with no space for advancement, Bubbles was never going to get the opportunities of a Dick Powell, let alone a Fred Astaire (who was always cagey about Bubbles's influence on him).

Why is Bubbles, one of the most innovative Black entertainers of the twentieth century, not better known today? The short answer that Brian Harker gives in his introduction to *Sportin' Life*, the first-ever published biography of Bubbles, is that “he failed to appear in enough films, in strong enough roles, to ensure his immortality.” Because Bubbles was a Black man, especially one with what Pauline Kael called a “slinky sexy” quality, he wasn't given the chance to show what he could do on film. Could he have produced a legacy of movie performances on the order of Astaire? “We will never know,” Harker writes. But presenting what we *can* know is a biographer's work, and Harker has done a first-rate job, shrewdly and thoroughly filling out the life of a complicated man whose career illuminates the possibilities and obstacles faced by a brilliant Black artist during that time.

The book is partly the result of a windfall. In 2012 the personal papers of Bubbles, who died in 1986, were donated to Brigham Young University, where Harker is a professor of music. This cache of photographs, letters, contracts, and more included an unpublished 1969 biography by a writer named Jerry McGuire: Bubbles's story told largely in his own words. Harker makes the most of the sources that

fell in his lap, but he also supplements Bubbles's version—and, wherever possible, checks and corrects it—with newspaper accounts, census documents, court filings, and the like.

According to Harker's research, Bubbles was born John William Sublett Jr. in Nashville, Tennessee, likely in 1903—not, as he often later claimed, in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1902. That might seem like a small correction, but Harker goes further, tracing the performer's lineage back to slavery and revealing that his father, who as a teenager in 1891 was falsely convicted of the attempted rape of a white girl, spent five years in prison. That same father beat Bubbles's mother, whom the boy adored. Though Bubbles told his life story to the press in great detail—"I remember everything," he boasted to a reporter for *The New Yorker* in 1967—he never spoke of any of this.

He did like to recount how precocious he was, how he talked his way into his first professional performances when he was seven. As his family moved to Louisville and then Indianapolis, he won amateur contests as a singer, dancer, and comedian, and an impressed theater manager converted the bubbly boy's nickname, Bubber, into a stage name. A Black reporter praised the thirteen-year-old Bubbles as "a human sponge" who had absorbed the best of the Black entertainers before him, the kind who mixed blackface with the blues. Self-confidence and boldness were never in short supply, onstage or off.

One day in July 1917, when Bubbles was fourteen, a group of white boys ganged up on him at a public park, where he was using a swing reserved for white children. Although a policeman and other adults were watching, no one intervened on his behalf, and the boys chased him. Cornered, he pulled a knife and cut one of them in the arm. He was charged with assault and battery and sent to juvenile detention. "As he sat in his cell," Harker writes, "the door opened and his mother came in, followed by a man whom he later took to be a judge." The judge discussed their options with them and advised them to move as far from Indianapolis as possible. According to Harker, Bubbles was "forever grateful" to the judge for this.

The family quickly moved back to Louisville. That's where, just a few months later, Bubbles met Ford "Buck" Washington in a bowling alley where the two boys had the job of resetting pins. Washington was a piano prodigy who didn't read music but could play anything he heard—even a different song with each hand—and was adept in the contemporary practice of "ragging the classics," syncopating classical favorites and show tunes. This was the start of a partnership that lasted thirty-five years, with Bubbles looking after Buck as if he were his younger brother, holding on even when they fought over women or money, and always refusing any offers to go solo.

At sixteen, now working as ushers in a white theater, the boys got the chance to replace an act that was out sick. Wearing “cork and gloves so that the white people didn’t know we were colored,” Bubbles said, they were enough of a hit to earn an offer to go to New York. While roller-skating in Times Square, they met Nat Nazarro. A Russian Jewish immigrant then in his early thirties, Nazarro had his own strongman act, which he let Buck and Bubbles interrupt with their talents. Bubbles sang “Mammy O’Mine,” a sentimental ballad about missing his mother, and the crowd went wild. Before the show, Bubbles remembered,

the house manager told our manager that he didn’t want any niggers on his stage.... After our first performance that same manager of the theater came running backstage asking, “Where are those two colored boys?”

Nazarro bound the boys to a contract with himself as their manager. The decades-long relationship between Buck and Bubbles and Nazarro—both paternal and exploitative—is one of the most fascinating threads of *Sportin’ Life*. Time and again, Bubbles, incensed at how Nazarro was cheating him, tried to extricate himself and Buck, sometimes in court. Time and again, Nazarro drew them back in, partly because he was the necessary white bridge into white showbiz.

For Buck and Bubbles, white showbiz principally meant vaudeville. In the 1920s that variety format—home to acrobats, animal acts, dancers, comedians, and much more—was still dominant, though it was dying a slow death in competition with radio, the movies, and eventually television. There were Black vaudeville circuits, on which Black artists performed for Black audiences, but Buck and Bubbles spent little time there. Instead, they immediately established a pattern: booked in a theater where few Black acts had performed before and the management was skeptical, they would “stop the show,” inspiring so much applause that the next act could not go on. That audience response forced managers to give Buck and Bubbles more prestigious spots in the running order and put their names on the marquee. In 1931 they broke into the Ziegfeld Follies, the most deluxe of revues and a realm to which only one other Black artist, Bert Williams, had been allowed entry. Buck and Bubbles had to dress in the boiler room, but again none of the other acts, not even the stars, wanted to follow them. The Black press celebrated the achievement, and Bubbles remembered it as “the greatest show we ever had”; the white press ignored it.

What was this act that nobody wanted to follow? Buck was an amazing jazz pianist, and Bubbles had a beautiful voice, a husky, breathy, bluesy tenor. But the glue was comedy. Buck was short, five foot four to Bubbles’s six feet. He wore clothes that were too small and shoes that were too big, and Bubbles mocked all of that. The two did a lot of bickering, in the Black tradition of insult comedy known as “the dozens.” They acted lazy and told jokes about their cowardice.

In short, like many other Black acts, they traded in the kind of ethnic humor, derived from blackface minstrelsy, that's hard to read today in multiple senses: it makes us uncomfortable, and it's difficult to decipher, coded to register differently for different audiences. "Am I blue?" Bubbles might sing. "You ain't blue, you Black," Buck might answer. If Bubbles wiped his face with a handkerchief and Buck asked him why he was taking off his makeup, Bubbles might reply, "I'm not taking it off, I'm rubbing it in." White critics praising the pair's "naturalness" could mean that Buck and Bubbles were confirming stereotypes or twisting them in a way that was exciting without being too threatening. There's no question, though, about the modern innovation in yet another element of the act: the tap dancing of Bubbles.

A hybrid of African and Irish strands of dance, tap is older than the United States of America, the country where it developed. But the 1920s were a time of great invention in the form, alongside jazz—and also when the name *tap* stuck (and the mass manufacture of metal shoe plates began). The epicenter of creativity was Harlem—in particular, a place called the Hoofers Club, a gambling den with a room where Black dancers practiced, competed, and traded steps. Bubbles liked to tell the story that when he first went there in 1921, he had just picked up some dancing as a hedge because his voice had cracked, and the elders laughed him out of the place. So he went away and practiced hard for a year, and when he returned, he came prepared with an unbeatable step—"fortified," as Bubbles put it, "like a fellow with a double-barreled shotgun." This time, *he* was the one laughing.

Harker is skeptical about this story, since, as reviews from that same year show, Bubbles was already known for his dancing. In Harker's view, it's more likely that he was kicked out of the club for his arrogance. I'm more skeptical about the date, because the Hoofers Club seems not to have existed until 1924 (called the Colored Vaudeville Comedy Club first, with articles announcing the name change a year later). In any case, Bubbles's innovations far exceeded a single step and likely evolved over many years.

"I never did the same step the same way," Bubbles said. This was so no one could copy him. But he copied everyone—borrowing heel and toe clicks from the Lancashire clog, sliding and scooting motions from white comic dancers, strutting postures from Black dancers. As he put it, "I took the white boys' steps and the colored boys' steps and mixed 'em all together so you couldn't tell 'em, white or colored. I made it *me*."

Most of his innovations had to do with rhythm. Tap had been getting faster and faster, but he cut the baseline tempo in half. This gave him options: he could amble at an easy pace or subdivide the beat and shoot a burst of double or triple time. The variable speed allowed him to be nonchalant and unpredictable, cool and hot. Where the previous

generation of dancers, such as Bill Robinson, arranged their dancing into tidy, regular phrases, Bubbles enjambed over the bar lines, connecting step after step, multiplying, twisting, tilting, turning. And where Robinson stayed mainly up on his toes, Bubbles dropped his heels. That wasn't new in itself, but when and how he dropped them was: the thud and crunch spiked more complex syncopations.

These rhythmic developments paralleled similar ones being made at the time by jazz musicians, Louis Armstrong above all. Some of Bubbles's followers later claimed that he led the way; the tap dancer Honi Coles said that "Bubbles added syncopation, changed the whole beat," and that when other musicians listened, "a new style of jazz was born." Harker considers this idea, zeroing in on a crucial period in 1926 when Armstrong had a rhythmic breakthrough, caught on record—a period when he was performing at the Sunset Café in Chicago in a revue with acts that included Buck and Bubbles.

But Harker focuses on another dance act there, the husband-and-wife team Brown and McGraw, because it was their rhythms that Armstrong said he matched and copied: "Every step they made, I put the notes to it." Brown and McGraw had his solos put into an arrangement that spread to other bands, seeding the swing era.* In this story, Bubbles's effect is indirect, his unavoidable influence on tap in the 1920s assumed as a source of Brown and McGraw's rhythmic freedom.

Harker is aware of the historian's main problem here: the dearth of evidence. Armstrong made records, and there are now books twice the size of *Sportin' Life* that analyze his development in these years measure by measure. But almost no tap dancers were recorded before sound film took off in the late 1920s. Trying to study contemporaneous rhythmic developments in tap is, in Harker's words, like "trying to see the dark side of the moon." We're left with implications, and with later testimonials from jazz musicians (especially drummers) about how much they learned from dancers. There seems to be no way to trace the extent of Bubbles's inventiveness and influence on musicians like Armstrong if, as Harker says, no extended footage of his dancing before 1937 exists.

That's not quite true, however. As Harker notes, in 1929 Buck and Bubbles starred in a series of six short talkies, made for Black audiences, based on the racist short stories of Hugh Wiley. Some of these films still exist (in the private collection of Mark Cantor). In one, *In and Out*, after asserting in song that "true happiness" is "a little town where there ain't no jails around," Bubbles taps for four minutes, longer than most Armstrong tracks. Curiously, he spends most of that time up on his toes in the style of Bill Robinson, transferring Robinson's signature dancing-on-stairs idea to a stack of crates. Near the end, though, he shifts into a different gear, kicking and dropping his heels into crunchier, more complex phrases. It's as if he was saying,

“That was Bill, this is me.” How new was this rhythmic approach? Is it significant that this was the same year critics started noticing his “syncopated rhythmic taps” and “double and triple taps?”

That one scene from *In and Out* isn't a lot to work with, though it might suggest how Bubbles's innovations were still developing in 1929. In any event, the footage it provides of Bubbles is much more than we have of Brown and McGraw and dozens of other forgotten Black tap acts—some once considered rivals to Bubbles—who didn't make it onto film at all. Film, Harker argues, is where the indelible memories of American dancers are kept.

Another story Bubbles liked to tell was about charging a dancer \$400 for an hour-long lesson in 1930. This was Fred Astaire, soon to become the king of dance on film, the tap dancer everyone knows. That fame is why Bubbles told the story and why Harker starts his book with it. But that single lesson, whether it happened or not, is less significant than the wider influence that's clear to anyone who studies both dancers. There are aspects of syncopation and style that Astaire appears to have picked up from Bubbles and made his, in the way Bubbles did with other dancers, Black and white. “I made it me,” Astaire might have also said; the difference was Astaire's whiteness and the opportunities it afforded.

Decades later, Astaire recalled obliquely that he had traded steps with Bubbles. This was part of a cross-racial exchange that happened backstage and in alleys behind theaters, rarely with money changing hands. Eleanor Powell remembered trading steps with Bubbles in a theater basement around the same time and lying on her stomach in the wings as he performed, watching him do steps just for her. Equipped with what she later called her “Black sound,” she became a Hollywood star in the 1930s. Bubbles did not.

If many people still know Robinson, that's largely because he appeared in films with Shirley Temple, the biggest box-office star of the mid-1930s. As a Black man in his fifties with an ingratiating manner, Robinson could somewhat safely play slave or servant to the precocious white girl. That wasn't going to work for Bubbles. In his one major film role, in *Cabin in the Sky*, a rare all-Black musical made in 1943, he plays a murderous card shark. His cane-twirling strut to the song “Shine” is slinky sexy indeed, a villain's dance, though his acting elsewhere is a little blank.

That *Cabin in the Sky* performance might be a glimpse of what was probably his best role, the drug-dealing gambler Sportin' Life in *Porgy and Bess*. (Though for Bubbles, this was just another gig, and he insisted on a part for Buck so as not to break up the act.) Gershwin created the part for Bubbles, taught it to him by ear, and defended him when others complained about his improvisations or misbehavior or claimed he didn't belong in an opera. The stage production wasn't

filmed, but silent home-movie snippets of rehearsal capture some of what Gershwin treasured, how Bubbles *danced* the role and how, as Harker aptly puts it, his dancing and his acting were indistinguishable.

In Bubbles's other film appearances—a meager, precious handful that includes *Atlantic City* and the short *Beauty Shoppe*—more of the Buck and Bubbles act is preserved, but the numbers all seem to stop just at the point where Bubbles as a dancer is getting going. Maybe Hollywood musicals weren't the right vehicle for a jazz improviser who never did a step the same way, or maybe Bubbles in his prime just never got the right film. This is what we'll never know.

Throughout *Sportin' Life*, Harker doesn't shy away from his subject's dark side. We hear about the gambling, the debt, the affairs, the estranged children, the abuse of devoted women. We hear how, during rehearsals for *Porgy and Bess*, Bubbles showed up late on purpose, in a bid for respect from the conservatory-trained cast. Harker doesn't include the story, told in the unpublished biography, about how in 1934 Bubbles discovered an affair between his second wife and Buck, then convinced her that he had killed Buck and was going to kill her too, and then made the two of them get naked in front of him. Harker suggests a connection between these personality traits and Bubbles's father, but the strangest thing about these dark stories is that Bubbles told them about himself, as if to characterize himself in a role he was always trying to play. “I *am* Sportin' Life,” he once said.

The role that Bubbles played publicly, and how he was perceived, changed as he grew older and American racial politics shifted. In the mid-1940s, his career collapsed as vaudeville finally died and jazz became more of a listening music. After he and Buck had a falling out because Buck's marijuana habit had gotten them both arrested, he found work in Germany, performing for American troops and appearing in a few German films. While he was abroad, in 1955, Buck died. “I cried all night,” Bubbles said. According to Harker, “it was a rupture from which he would never fully recover.”

But Bubbles had a comeback. In Germany, he performed with a talented young white woman, Caterina Valente. And after he returned to the US, he performed with another talented young white woman, Anna Maria Alberghetti, doing old Buck and Bubbles material with shades of Robinson and Temple. Age must have made him less threatening onstage, though in Las Vegas, his third wife, who was of Mexican and Kashmiri descent and light-skinned, had to tell their landlady that Bubbles was her servant. He was in demand in the places where his kind of showbiz now lived: Vegas, supper clubs, TV variety shows. He was old-time, don't-make-'em-like-that-anymore, and to many younger Blacks, he and his tap dancing were antiquated, embarrassing, Uncle Tom. Harker is astute about the bind. “He was the sort of Black entertainer middle-aged white people remembered fondly

from their youth,” he writes. But “the dirty little secret is that this audience applauded Bubbles in part because, in an age of racial protest, he rang bells they associated with subservience.”

You can find some of those 1960s TV appearances on YouTube. Bubbles sings his old songs and does his old steps, but his manner has become more Robinson-like, borrowing some of Robinson’s self-deprecating catchphrases. Still, there’s an edge of danger, of not entirely hidden boldness. On a USO tour of Asia with Bob Hope in 1964, and later on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson (where he appeared frequently), he told a joke that started with him asking his white celebrity friend if he was in favor of integration. When the friend answered with the obligatory yes, Bubbles shot back: “Then kiss me.”

In 1967, just after Bubbles appeared on TV with Lucille Ball and onstage in one of Judy Garland’s comeback shows, he had a stroke, and his dancing days were over. But that wasn’t the end of his career, either. In the late 1970s, when a new generation of tap dancers brought some of his successors (Chuck Green, Honi Coles) out of retirement, they brought Bubbles back, too. Wheeled onstage for concerts, he sang and told stories. He appeared in documentaries and was feted. He watched as his line of tap was extended in Gregory Hines, who did become a movie star.

For most of his career, Bubbles kept quiet about the ways that racism had held him back. In his last years, he expressed his anger more openly. In the 1980 documentary *Tapdancin’*, he says, “You had to be everything else but what you were in order to get on the stage.” He calls himself one of the world’s great dancers and spits out the role that he and Buck had to play: “janitors!” He had cause to be bitter. Harker’s book does him justice.

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- * In Harker’s excellent 2008 article “Louis Armstrong, Eccentric Dance, and the Evolution of Jazz on the Eve of Swing,” he lays out the argument in much fuller and closer musicological detail, establishing as well how closely Armstrong and other pioneering jazz musicians were connected to dance and comedy. See the *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (Spring 2008). ↩