

FOLKWAYS RECORDS RBF 602

NOBODY and other songs by **BERT WILLIAMS**

COMPILED BY SAM CHARTERS WITH NOTES FROM "NOBODY - THE STORY OF BERT WILLIAMS" BY ANN CHARTERS



DRAWING BY ALFRED FRUEH

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

SIDE ONE

- Band 1. Nobody
(Recorded January 7, 1913)
- Band 2. Somebody
(Recorded December 2, 1919)
- Band 3. Ten Little Bottles
(Recorded April 18, 1920)
- Band 4. O Death Where Is Thy Sting?
(Recorded August 26, 1918)
- Band 5. I'm Neutral
(Recorded August 2, 1915)
- Band 6. I'm Gonna Quit Saturday
(Recorded December 20, 1920)
- Band 7. Bring Back Those Wonderful Days
(Recorded February 13, 1919)

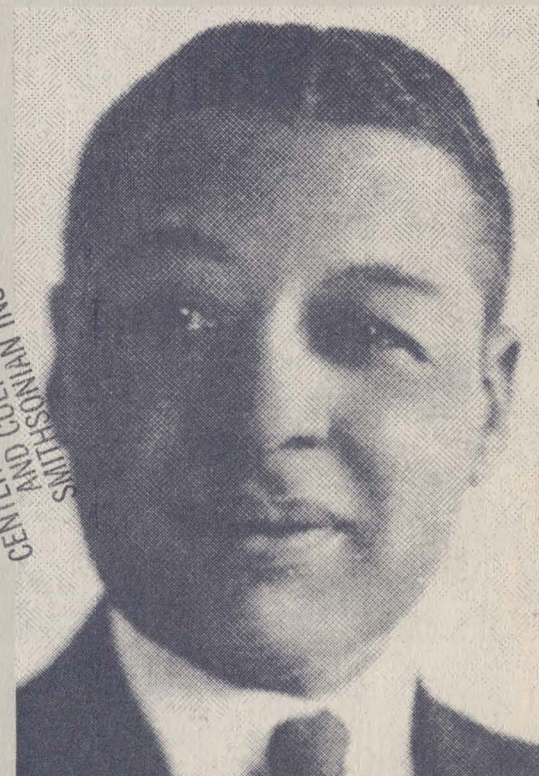
SIDE TWO

- Band 1. You Can't Get Away From It
(Recorded February 4, 1914)
- Band 2. I Want To Know Where Tosti Went
(Recorded September 7, 1920)
- Band 3. Twenty Years
(Recorded between 1906 and 1911)
- Band 4. He's A Cousin Of Mine
(Recorded September 14, 1917)
- Band 5. The Moon Shines On The Moonshine
(Recorded December 1, 1919)
- Band 6. My Last Dollar
(Recorded December 10, 1920)
- Band 7. Unlucky Blues
(Recorded April 18, 1920)

This recording is produced in association with and under license from Columbia Special Products. CBS Records Division. CBS Inc.

© © 1981 FOLKWAYS RECORDS & SERVICE CORP.
43 W. 61st ST., N.Y.C., 10023 N.Y., U.S.A.

RETURN TO ARCHIVE
CENTER FOR FOLK LIFE PROGRAMS
AND CULTURAL STUDIES
SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION



PROPERTY OF
FOLK LIFE PROGRAM
SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

NOBODY and other songs by **BERT WILLIAMS**

COMPILED BY SAM CHARTERS

WITH NOTES FROM

"NOBODY - THE STORY OF BERT WILLIAMS"

BY ANN CHARTERS

FOLKWAYS RECORDS RBF 602

NOBODY

**An introduction to Bert Williams
from Ann Charter's book *NOBODY*,
the Story of Bert Williams. (The Macmillan Co., 1970)**

THE FUNNIEST MAN I EVER SAW

THE LIFE of the Negro comedian Bert Williams is the story of a man neatly trapped by the prejudice and intolerance of his times. Racial prejudice has left its bitter stain over many aspects of the Negro's history in the United States, but it is perhaps nowhere so vividly illustrated as in its role in the development of the American popular theater. To some extent every immigrant group found its backgrounds ridiculed on the music hall stage, but for the Negro special conditions of prejudice, hostility, and ignorance insured a unique longevity to the stereotyped portrait. For over one hundred years the impression of the Negro as racially and socially inferior was fostered by legions of comedians in blackface. Originating in the white man's "imitations" of Negroes in nineteenth century minstrel shows, the caricature took such firm hold on the American imagination that audiences expected any man with dark skin, no matter what his background or inclinations, to be a "real coon." Even today a Negro actor is not free to appear on stage in whatever role he chooses, but when Bert Williams began his career in 1892, he found he had to conform to a theatrical convention that in many ways crippled his talent and limited his achievement. As a pioneer he was forced into a blackface role he detested, but in the theater the warmth of his comic genius was visible behind the make-up.

Audiences who saw Bert Williams in vaudeville or the Ziegfeld Follies before his death in 1922 still vividly remember him. Usually his appearance on-stage was announced by a spotlight that caught the tentative wiggling of gloved fingers against the closed plush curtains. Hesitantly the hand followed the fingers, then an arm, a shoulder, and finally, with awkward reluctance, a tall man in a shabby dress suit pushed through the curtains and walked slowly to the front of the stage. The applause started before he reached the footlights, but the face behind the mask of blackface remained downcast. As if resigned to some inevitable and unending stroke of bad fortune, he shrugged his shoulders. With exaggerated care he searched his ragged coat pocket, pulled out a

small leather notebook, and slowly turned the pages of the book until he found what he was looking for. Audiences settled into their seats expectantly when nodding in satisfaction, he began to half-sing, half-recite:

*When life seems full of clouds and rain,
And I am full of nothin' but pain,
Who soothes my thumpin', bumpin' brain?*

He paused and shrugged with a sigh,

Nobody!

*When winter comes with snow and sleet,
And me with hunger and cold feet,
Who says "Here's twenty-five cents, go ahead and get something
to eat"?"*

He shook his head sadly,

Nobody!

Then he sang with a noisy wail,

*I ain't never done nothin' to nobody,
I ain't never got nothin' from nobody, no time,
Until I get somethin' from somebody, some time,
I'll never do nothin' for nobody, no time.*

*When summer comes all cool and clear,
And my friends see me drawin' near,
Who says "Come in and have some beer"?"*

A note of surprise in his voice,

Hum—Nobody!

*When I was in that railroad wreck
And thought I'd cashed in my last check,
Who took that engine off my neck?*

Suddenly resentful,

Not a soul!

And again he lamented,

*I ain't never done nothin' to nobody,
I ain't never got nothin' from nobody, no time,
Until I get somethin' from somebody, some time,
I'll never do nothin' for nobody, no time.*



Williams first sang "Nobody" in 1905, and audiences responded so enthusiastically that he was forced to include it for the next seventeen years in nearly every stage appearance. It became his trademark, the statement of a hard-luck character who had done "nothin' for nobody, no time." Bert Williams was the first Negro entertainer in America to win the wholehearted admiration of white audiences, and in a *Variety* poll of 1953 which selected the names of the ten most important comedians in the history of the American popular theater, he was high on the list.

In addition to Williams' great popular appeal, the *Dictionary of American Biography* credits his "tact and character, as well as comic artistry," in helping the Negro achieve better conditions in the theater. His career ranged from the minstrel shows of the 1890's to the jazz revues of the 1920's, years in which Negro entertainers contributed a major share of the vitality of American popular culture. Occasionally Williams managed to transcend the racial stereotype his audiences expected of him, but for the most part he was trapped in a degrading role all his life. Off-stage a tall, light skinned man with marked poise and dignity, on-stage Williams became a shuffling, inept "nigger." He pulled a wig of kinky hair over his head, applied blackface make-up, and concealed his hands in gloves. Usually he wore a shabby dress suit and a pair of oversized, battered shoes, but sometimes for comic sketches in the Follies or for costume numbers in his own productions, he used other outfits: a redcap's clothes, a hotel clerk's uniform, once even a magnificent rooster costume. But usually he was in the old dress suit, working in front of the curtain while the sets were being changed behind him. The white collar that he wore was obviously false and unconnected to a shirt—no cuffs protruded at the wrists, just his gloves meeting the sleeves of a short black jacket. The jacket had once been a frock coat with long tails, but these had been cut off, and the jacket dipped strangely low in the back over trousers that exposed knobby ankles in wrinkled black socks disappearing into long, broad scuffed shoes. Williams' movements were slow and deliberate, his gestures clumsy and ineffectual, and with his bizarre costume they helped create a memorable stage character.

Bert Williams succeeded as a singer, dancer and comedian despite the fact that he had little natural singing ability and such poor co-ordination that he seemed to struggle with two left feet. After straining his voice through overuse in his early years he had to nurse it, as he said, "like a prize cat." What voice he had was a soft baritone with considerable roughness at the edges. In one of his later songs he even burlesqued his own singing. The song "Addio" by the Italian composer Tosti had swept the country, and its piercing chorus of

"Goodbye Forever! Goodbye Forever!"

was being sung by everyone from Caruso to school vocal recitalists. Williams began his version with a lilting patter listing all the things he knew about, from Ancient History to "Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden"; ending with the plaintive question,

*The thing I want to know
Is where did Tosti go
When he said—*

Then in his best quavering baritone he went into the chorus of Tosti's song,

*Goodbye Forever, Goodbye Forever,
I want to know where Tosti went
When he said Goodbye!*

WILLIAMS AND WALKERS

CROWNING SUCCESS

I'M A JONAH MAN

SUNG AT EVERY PERFORMANCE OF THEIR LATEST MUSICAL PRODUCTION IN DAHOMEY

WORDS AND MUSIC BY ALEX. ROSS

M.V. MARK & SONS

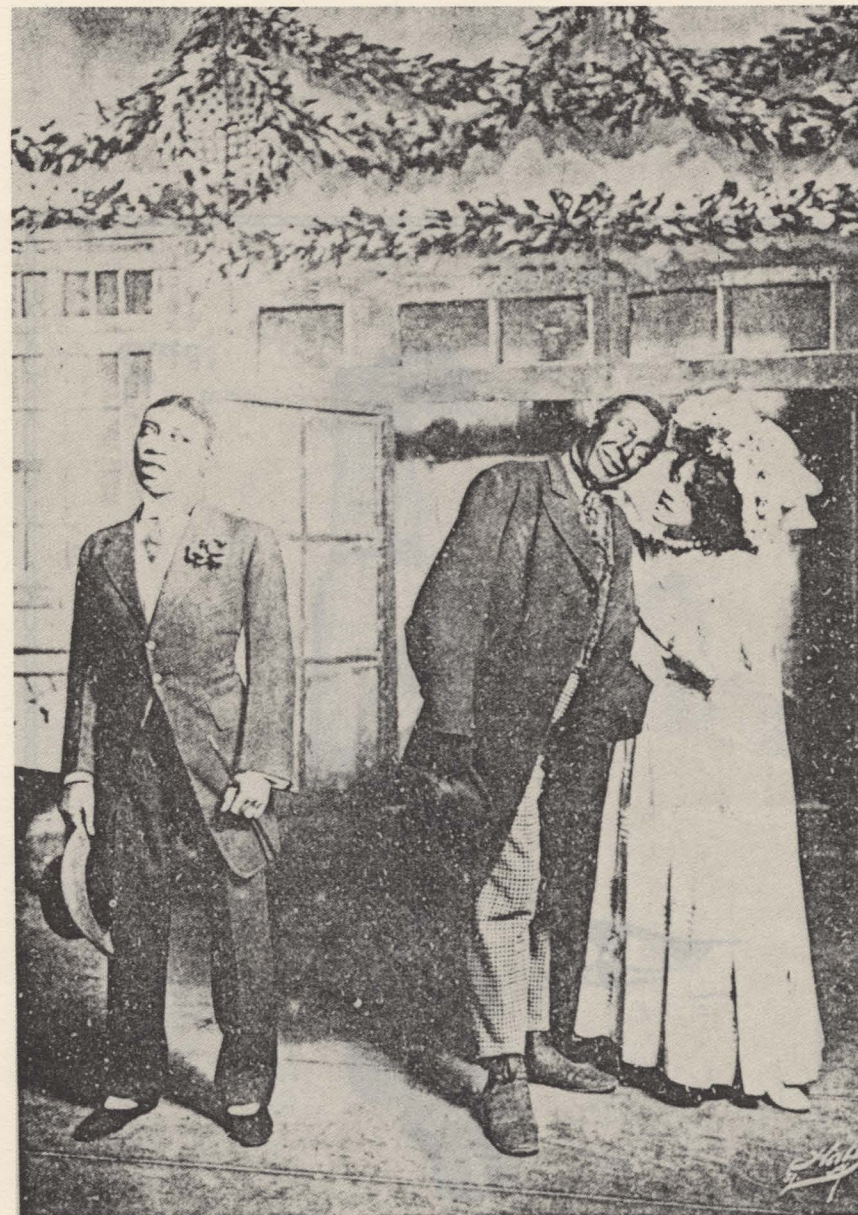
Williams' problem was to develop a singing style which wouldn't make his vocal limitations too obvious. What he evolved was a half-sung, half-recited approach to his material, presenting it as a comic sketch instead of a vocal performance. With subtle shifts of emphasis and an infallible sense of timing, he would momentarily create a real character. By his emphasis on important phrases, long pauses to suggest any ironic subtlety, and wry spoken "asides," he was usually able to get the audiences laughing so hard that they didn't pay close attention to the song. The pathetic figure he created with a tone of voice, a hesitant delivery, and a sorrowing manner was so distinctive that although his style has been imitated and his songs performed by other comedians, no one has ever approached his success with them.

As a dancer Williams had even less natural talent than he had as a singer, but despite this he became known for his dancing and usually included it in his stage appearances. He was tall, with long arms and legs, and rather than make an effort to learn some of the grace and style of an expert dancer like George Walker, his partner for many years, he emphasized his ungainliness. When Williams and Walker did a cakewalk, George would strut onto the stage with high step and arching toe, whirling through the dance. Bert would stumble after him, waving the sole of his shoe and flicking away a cigaret. For his exit after his solo numbers he worked out a step combining the worst features of the stage shuffle and the buck and wing. There are photographs of him getting off the stage with a harassed expression, looking something like a man who has just stumbled over a tree root while running sideways from a bee. Using his limitations as a singer to give his performances a wider comic range, he was also able to use his awkwardness as a dancer to give to his basic character, the black-face stereotype, a more individual identity.

The last difficulty Bert Williams faced working in the popular theater was the color of his skin. But unlike the limitations of his voice or his dancing abilities, this was the one difficulty he was never able to overcome. He was never, in his long years as a genuinely talented, highly paid comedian, able to leave off the burnt cork mask, the make-up he hated. W. C. Fields, who worked with him in the Follies and became his close friend, once remarked:

Bert Williams is the funniest man I ever saw, and the saddest man I ever knew.

Regardless of his triumph in the theater, Williams was never exempt from the experience of racial prejudice. He might be a top ranking star when he clowned with Eddie Cantor in the Follies or held the vaudeville spotlight at the Palace, but once off the stage and out of the theater he was a fair target for the full battery of jim-crow slights and humiliations. The ignominious hostility he encountered as a Negro first limited his professional achievement and ultimately also destroyed his chances for personal happiness. All his life he struggled to adjust to intolerable situations; his triumph is that despite little encouragement he developed his unique comic gifts into an expression of considerable artistry. Possessing imperturbable personal dignity, he tried to rise above his situation, as when he said to an interviewer:



George Walker, Bert Williams and Ada Overton Walker

People ask me if I would not give anything to be white. I answer . . . most emphatically, "No!" How do I know what I might be if I were a white man. I might be a sand-hog, burrowing away and losing my health for \$8 a day. I might be a street-car conductor at \$12 or \$15 a week. There is many a white man less fortunate and less well

equipped than I am. In truth, I have never been able to discover that there was anything disgraceful in being a colored man. But I have often found it inconvenient—in America.

Introduced and Featured by the Two Real Coons, Williams & Walker.

Good Morning Carrie!

THE STARS KNOW THIS IS A GOOD SONG.

WILLIAMS & WALKER.

Words by
R. C. McPHERSON
Music by
SMITH & BOWMAN

50c

Published by
Windward Music Co.
265-218 WABASH AVE., CHICAGO.
41 W. 26th ST., NEW YORK.
CANADA MUSIC CO. WILKINS & CO.

opportunity in the American theater, as the star of Eugene O'Neill's play *The Emperor Jones*, and as the highly acclaimed cast in the Broadway musical *Shuffle Along*. But as a pioneer in hostile and intolerant times, Williams had many moments of discouragement. Once when he doubted that he was reaching his audience, he wrote a sketch satirizing their smug condescension:

First student of the Drama — *Now, you'll enjoy this fellow, he is very funny. I remember the last time I saw him just before I left to join the Lafayette Zouaves in 1869. He is always good. Perhaps you don't fancy blackfaced comedians?*

Second student of the Drama — *My dear old chap, I am not so particular as all that. I can still laugh, I hope, without prejudice. These sort of fellows can be very funny if they don't overstep the line of probability. You know what I mean, if they are true to life.*

First student — *As I remember him (of course this is a long time ago, when I was more susceptible to the theater perhaps and less exacting in my standards), he had an unction, a je ne sais quoi, a mimicry that was truly African.*

Second student — *African humor as I recall it in my college days was chiefly delightful because it had that inimitable banjo flavor. Does he play the banjo?*

First student — *Oh yes. Plays it with masterly humor. In fact, he makes the banjo, a very inarticulate instrument, speak, actually speak!*

Second student — *Ah, that interests me. He must have a true spark, then, in spite of being funny.*

First student — *I understand he is a very serious chap outside of his profession. Reads by himself, don't you know, and all that.*

The truth is that Bert Williams really had the "true spark, then, in spite of being funny." He is remembered today not only for his comic gifts, but also as a man whose life is a drama of the struggle against the virulence of racial prejudice. Unable to realize his highest ambitions, yet able to illuminate a degrading caricature with rare humanity, Bert Williams earned a place as one of the most significant figures on the American popular stage.

After Williams' success the door was to be opened for other Negro actors, singers, dancers, and musicians. In his last years he saw Negro actors get more

Side A

1. Nobody

Recorded January 7, 1913.

An earlier version of "Nobody" was recorded several years before, but Williams re-recorded it for this new release after he had joined the Ziegfield Follies.

2. Somebody

Recorded December 2, 1919.

This later song was an obvious answer to his earlier "Nobody;" although the theme was a more ordinary comedy situation.

3. Ten Little Bottles

Recorded April 18, 1920.

Many of Williams' songs were topical in their reference to current happenings, and he did a number of songs referring to Prohibition. This is one of his skillful portrayals of the down and out figure, who has suddenly something more to be disconsolate about. In songs of this kind there is little of the black stereotype. Williams in these years was subtly changing his portrayal to one of a figure who is poor and unlucky, and not necessarily black.

4. O Death Where Is Thy Sting?

Recorded August 26, 1918.

5. I'm Neutral

August 2, 1915

Since Williams carefully followed a middle of the road political stance it is doubtful whether he would have recorded a song with this title a year or so later, when American attitudes toward intervention in the first World War began to change. There is a bit of self-irony in the songs' hints that it is as a black man he is "neutral," which faintly echo more specific protests on the part of other black leaders. The closest Williams comes directly is the suggestion in the line,

"A Russian saw my color and he hollered "Kill The Turks!"

Then he goes on,

"Then the Allies all got my range and started in to work,
But I'm Neutral! I am and is and shall remain
just Neutral! . . ."

6. I'm Gonna Quit Saturday

Recorded December 20, 1920.

7. Bring Back Those Wonderful Days

Recorded February 13, 1919.

Side B

1. You Can't Get Away From It

Recorded February 4, 1914.

This is one Williams' most charming performances. It is free from any overtones of racial stereotype, and it is one of the earliest recordings that anyone did with a real feeling of "swing" to it. The reference, of course, was to the new dance craze which had been introduced to New York by the team of Vernon and Irene Castle.

2. I Want To Know Where Tosti Went

Recorded September 7, 1920.

Ann Charters has described this song in her introduction to these recordings.

3. Twenty Years

Recorded September 14, 1917.

4. He's A Cousin Of Mine

Recorded between 1906 and 1911.

This is one of the earlier recordings Williams made and the sound is acoustically a little primitive. He brings great freshness and humor to the song, however, and the recording was very popular. A number of contemporary dixieland groups have done the song, among them San Francisco's Turk Murphy.

5. The Moon Shines On The Moonshine

Recorded December 1, 1919.

Another song about Prohibition, and there has been an obvious improvement in recording techniques in the years that passed between the previous recording and this one.

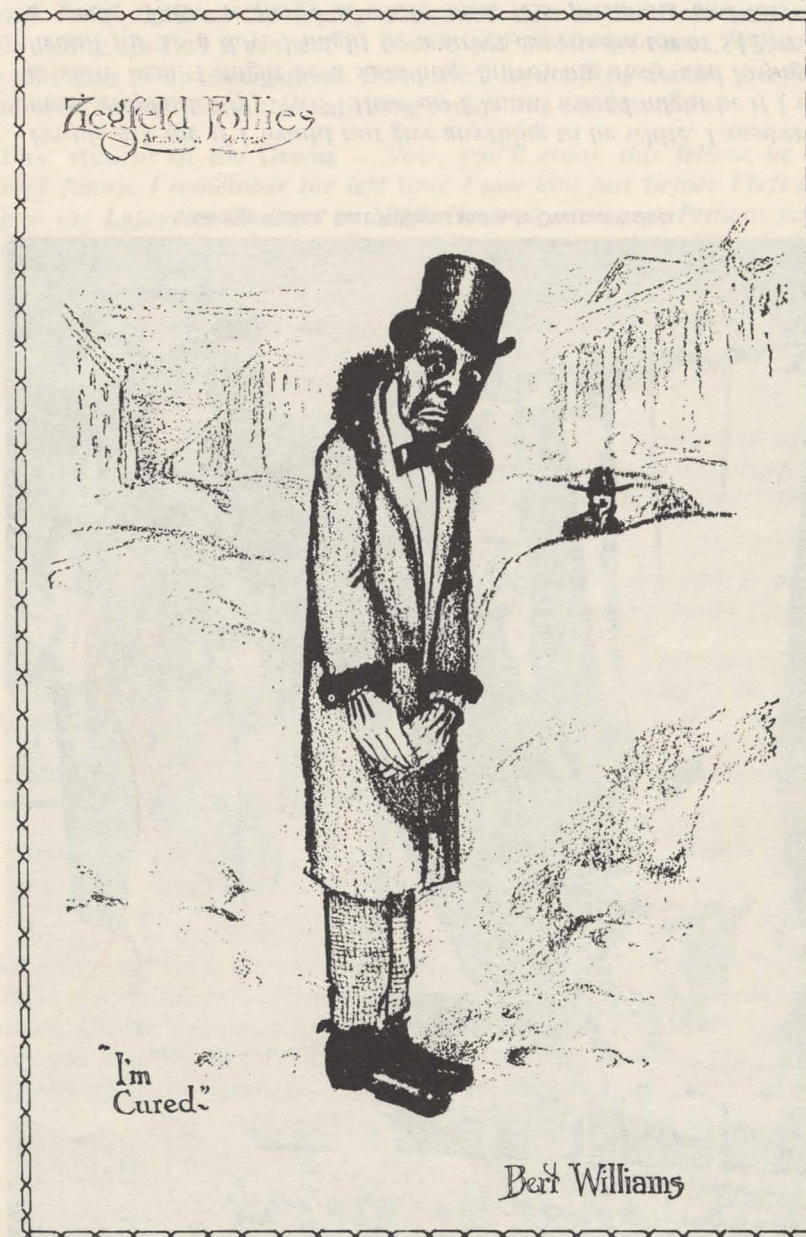
6. My Last Dollar

Recorded December 10, 1920.

7. Unlucky Blues

Recorded April 18, 1920.

Discographical information is from the book Nobody.



LITHO IN U.S.A.

FOLKWAYS Records

AND SERVICE CORP., 43 W. 61st ST., N.Y.C. 10023
Long Playing Non-Breakable Micro Groove 33 1/3 RPM

© 1981 Folkways Records and Service Corp.
© 1981 CBS Inc.

**NOBODY & OTHER SONGS
THE STORY OF BERT WILLIAMS**

Compiled and annotated by SAMUEL B. CHARTERS

RF 602 A
P 15940

SIDE 1
AM 15940

1. Nobody 2:46 (Recorded January 7, 1913)
2. Somebody 2:56 (Recorded December 2, 1919)
3. Ten Little Bottles 2:13
(Recorded April 18, 1920)
4. O Death Where Is Thy Sting? 2:58
(Recorded August 26, 1918)
5. I'm Neutral 3:02 (Recorded August 2, 1915)
6. I'm Gonna Quit Saturday 2:43
(Recorded December 20, 1920)
7. Bring Back Those Wonderful Days 3:03
(Recorded February 13, 1919)

This recording is produced in association with and
under license from Columbia Special Products,
CBS Records Division, CBS Inc.

FOLKWAYS Records

AND SERVICE CORP., 43 W. 61st ST., N.Y.C. 10023

Long Playing Non-Breakable Micro Groove 33 1/3 RPM

© 1981 Folkways Records and Service Corp.

© 1981 CBS Inc.

**NOBODY & OTHER SONGS
THE STORY OF BERT WILLIAMS**

Compiled and annotated by SAMUEL B. CHARTERS

RF 602 B
P 15940

SIDE 2
BM 15940

1. You Can't Get Away From It 2:48
(Recorded February 4, 1914)
2. I Want To Know Where Tosti Went 3:07
(Recorded September 7, 1920)
3. Twenty Years 2:29 (Recorded September 14, 1917)
4. He's A Cousin Of Mine 2:19
(Recorded between 1906 and 1911)
5. The Moon Shines On The Moonshine 3:03
(Recorded December 1, 1919)
6. My Last Dollar 2:50 (Recorded December 10, 1920)
7. Unlucky Blues 2:48 (Recorded April 18, 1920)

This recording is produced in association with and
under license from Columbia Special Products,
CBS Records Division, CBS Inc.