



Mr. Bojangles: The Biography of Bill Robinson

Jim Haskins, N.R. Mitgang

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Over sixty years after his death, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson is still the most famous tap dancer who ever lived. Robinson was the first black single dancer to star in white vaudeville circuits and he was a headliner for nearly thirty years. He got top billing at the Palace in New York, and he played command performances for kings and presidents. This first full-length biography reveals the charmer, gambler, brawler, athlete, and consummate entertainer behind the crusade for actors' rights, who pushed past the color barrier in the first half of the twentieth century. Haskins and Mitgang, with access to many of the people who knew Bojangles best, and to his scrapbooks and personal papers, have created a vivid portrait of the man behind the myth, from his birth in Richmond, Virginia, to his death and the star-studded funeral where he was eulogized by Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and Ed Sullivan. When people talk about famous American freedom fighters they talk about Rosa Parks, a brave woman who took a seat in the front of a bus and broke it down. They talk about Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. They talk about Jackie Robinson. They talk about many others who sacrificed to achieve equality and justice. The person they don't talk about is the man who helped to break down vaudeville, Broadway, the recording industry, radio, television, and Hollywood. They don't talk about the man who broke down Miami and was responsible for its first integrated audience. They don't talk about the man who was responsible for the hiring of the first African-American on the Dallas police force. They don't talk about the man who went to F.D.R. during World War II for changes for African-American soldiers who were risking their lives for their country. They don't talk about the freedom fighter, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, who happened to be the world's greatest tap dancer of his day. Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., one of Harlem's greatest leaders and freedom fighters, and Pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, helped to answer that question when he eulogized "Bojangles" in 1949. Rev. Powell said: Born within the shadow of slavery and dying at the middle of the twentieth century, the most glorious century of mankind, Bill Robinson was a legend. He was a legend because he was ageless and raceless. Bill wasn't a credit to his race, meaning the Negro race. Bill was a credit to the human race. No Protestant ever appeared at more benefits for Catholics than Bill Robinson. No gentile ever appeared at more benefits for Jews than Bill Robinson. He was raceless. He was not a great Negro dancer. He was the world's greatest dancer. In some way the legend got around that Bill Robinson was an 'Uncle Tom.' Oh, no! You didn't know Bill if you heard of that story! So, let's ask the question again. Why don't people think of Bill Robinson as an American hero and front-line freedom fighter? The one word answer is simple – racism. Not the racism of white against black, but the racism of black against black. The people he fought for the most turned their backs on Bill Robinson and let the cancer of racism enter his legacy. "Bojangles" was the Mayor of Harlem and a founding member of the Rainbow Coalition long before the term was coined. Bill Robinson fought for respect with every weapon he had – his charming smile, his humor, his dancing feet, his fists, or his gold plated pearl handled gun given to him by the New York City Police Department. During a time when too few African-American voices shouted for justice, Bill Robinson's whispers were heard by presidents, governors, kings, queens, and countless others. Bill "Bojangles" Robinson was a man who fought dignity for himself, and others. Bill "Bojangles" Robinson stood up to fight for what was right from the onset of his sixty-year career. He demanded justice and equality as a performer, and as a man. He stood up then, and never sat down.

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