

Stormy Weather

Lena Horne, Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, Cab Calloway, “Fats” Waller, Ada Brown, Dooley Wilson, The Nicholas Brothers, Babe Wallace, Mae Johnson, Katherine Dunham and her beautiful dance troupe. All these great performers and more are on view in Twentieth Century Fox’s classic musical, *Stormy Weather*. Released in July of 1943, critics and audiences alike were stunned and delighted by the sheer parade of non-stop musical excellence. In fact, the film’s brief running time of less than eighty minutes contains over seventy minutes of music. Lena Horne’s ethereal, gorgeous voice lends an unforgettable purity to her renditions of “There’s No Two Ways About Love” and the title song, “Stormy Weather.” The inimitable “Fats” Waller delivers the definitive “Ain’t Misbehavin’” and a superb duet with Ada Brown called “That Ain’t Right.” Cab Calloway sashays and cavorts through “Geechy Joe” and “Jumpin’ Jive.” Bill Robinson bends the mind with his agility at age 65, and Mae Johnson breaks the heart with her soulful performance of “I Lost My Sugar in Salt Lake City.”

Stormy Weather was really a groundbreaking, courageous production. With its all-black cast, and scintillating vaudeville style, the film eschewed plot for song-and-dance extravagance. The film also ran the risk of being banned in those areas of America that practiced segregation. Wendell Wilkie, a spokesman for the Black movement, visited Fox in 1942, and extracted from the studio a promise to “Regard the Negro as an integral part of American life.” The studio saw *Stormy Weather* as a fulfillment of that promise. The production advisor on the picture was Irving Mills, who earned his title by being manager of many of the stars on screen. A close associate of Ellington and Calloway, Mills was also the president

of Mills Music, a leading publisher of black songs. Co-screenwriter Ted Koehler, a Fox contract writer, had a long relationship with Lena Horne. He and his songwriting partner Harold Arlen wrote for the Cotton Club. It was they who wrote the title tune “Stormy Weather” for the *Cotton Club Parade of 1933*, for singer Ethel Waters. Horne made her debut as a chorus girl in that edition of the revue series. After the opening of the movie, the Waters version was forgotten and the song was forever after inextricably linked to Horne. Thomas “Fats” Waller interpolated his line, “One never knows, do one,” into the script. Waller was an irrepressible performer, but sadly *Stormy Weather* would mark his last film appearance. He died of pneumonia in December, 1943. Also making his last appearance in a movie was Bill “Bojangles” Robinson. This great dancer was the creator of the “stair tape dance” of which his dance on the drums in the film is an impressive variation. He also coined the term “copacetic” and used it to describe a laid-back style of tap exemplified by the riverboat number, “Linda Brown.” Robinson’s biggest Broadway success was *Blackbirds of 1928*. From that show came two of *Stormy Weather*’s best numbers – “I Can’t Give You Anything but Love” and “Diga Diga Doo.” *Stormy Weather* is a dynamically entertaining document of a bygone era.

— Nick Redman

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Stormy Weather was originally released on CD back in November 1993 and has been out-of-print for many years. This new soundtrack release was prepared in conjunction with the Twilight Time release of the film on Blu-Ray. With no surviving documentation, Neil S. Bulk first assembled the isolated score track for the Blu-Ray (entirely by ear as there is no surviving documentation) while also notating tracks that had been shortened for or went unused in the finished picture. The source elements were spread over various 1/4” tapes archived by Fox in the 1980’s from the original optical recordings. Mike Matessino restored and remixed all the tracks afresh, assembling and mastering a presentation of the score as originally recorded and intended before the picture was shortened by the studio. Additional songs recorded for the movie are presented among a second disc of bonus material. While we have identified the vocalists on the new bonus material, there was no paperwork about “Nobody.” But we’re fairly certain the vocalist is Shelton Brooks, who wrote the music for two of *Stormy Weather*’s numbers, and who was a well known Bert Williams impersonator (Bert Williams co-wrote and sang “Nobody” – it was his signature song and a huge hit, and the clear inspiration for “Mr. Cellophane” from Chicago). It’s a monumental release of a truly important film musical, filled with some of the most glorious music and performances ever committed to celluloid.

—Bruce Kimmel