

## GEORGE WALKER

### Musician and educator

*Walker was the first African American composer to win the Pulitzer Prize in music. He was one of the most significant American composers of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.*

**BORN:** June 27, 1922; Washington, D.C.

**ALSO KNOWN AS:** George Theophilus Walker

**AREAS OF ACHIEVEMENT:** Education; Music: classical and operatic; Music: composition

#### EARLY LIFE

George Theophilus Walker was born in Washington, D.C., to Rosa King Walker and Artmelle George Theophilus Walker. Neither of Walker's parents had any musical training. His mother worked at the Government Printing Office in Washington, and his father was a respected physician who owned his own medical practice. His parents believed in the importance of education. During the summers, Walker's mother organized math and English lessons for the children in their neighborhood. On occasion, Walker's parents provided financial support for students at Howard University who were faced with financial difficulties.

Walker started his first music lessons at the age of five. He learned the piano from Mary L. Henry, who taught children in the neighborhood. When Henry organized piano recitals, they were held at the Walkers' home because the family had an upright piano in the parlor. Walker's piano skills were so advanced by the time he reached junior high school that Henry was unable to continue teaching him. His mother enrolled him into the Junior Department of Music at Howard University, where classical music was the focus. Walker was assigned to study classical piano with Lillian Mitchell, who so emphasized playing the correct notes and rhythms of a composition that Walker never had the opportunity to perform an entire piece from beginning to end.

While attending the segregated Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C., Walker had the opportunity to perform at school assemblies. He played piano pieces such as "Majesty of the Deep" by George Hamer and "Juba Dance" by Nathaniel Dett. His classmates responded to his energetic performances with enthusiasm.

Walker first realized he wanted to pursue a career in music when he began to consider colleges. His piano instructor, Mitchell, suggested that he apply to Oberlin College. He won a four-year scholarship to Oberlin, cov-

ering tuition, room, and board. He was the only African American in his conservatory class and the youngest student in the entire school. While attending Oberlin, Walker had to adjust to practicing four hours a day instead of the half hour he was accustomed to during high school. His minor concentration was organ, an instrument he had never studied before. During his junior year, he served as the organist for the Oberlin Theological Seminary. Walker also studied composition for one semester with Normand Lockwood. After discontinuing his composition lessons, he composed his first solo piano work, "Danse Exotique," which was retitled "Caprice" before its publication.

Upon graduating from Oberlin College in 1941 with the highest honors in his conservatory class, Walker sought a career as a concert pianist. He was sure that the Curtis Institute of Music would prepare him for such a career. In 1941, Walker was accepted into the Curtis Institute, where he studied piano with Rudolf Serkin and composition with Rosario Scalero. In 1944, Walker had enough credits to graduate but decided to remain at the Curtis Institute another year to continue studying repertoire with Serkin. In 1945, Walker made his concert debut in a recital at Town Hall in New York.

After graduating from the Curtis Institute, Walker traveled to Europe to study and perform. He studied in France with Robert Casadesus at the American School in Fontainebleau in the summer of 1947. Later that year, he returned to Washington, D.C., with hopes of performing in the United States. In 1953, Walker presented two poorly received recitals at Town Hall. Because black classical singers had more opportunities in Europe than they did in the United States, Walker desired to present a concert tour of Europe. His concerts in cities such as Stockholm, Amsterdam, Milan, and London were well received. However, he had to discontinue his concert tour when he developed an ulcer.

#### LIFE'S WORK

Walker began teaching piano and theory at Dillard University in New Orleans in 1953. He taught at Dillard for one year before leaving to pursue a doctoral degree from the Eastman School of Music. He completed his degree in December of 1956 and was the first black student to receive a doctorate of music arts and an arts diploma in piano. Shortly thereafter, he traveled to Paris to study composition with Nadia Boulanger. Over the subsequent

decades, Walker held faculty positions at Dalcroze School of Music, the New School for Social Research, Smith College in Massachusetts, the University of Colorado, Rutgers University (where he served as department chair), the Peabody Institute of Johns Hopkins University, and the University of Delaware, where he was awarded their first Minority Chair.

Walker composed several major pieces and released a number of albums. His best known work, however, was the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Lilacs* (1996). Commissioned by the Boston Symphony Orchestra to compose a piece in honor of the African American tenor Roland Hayes, Walker set to music Walt Whitman's poem *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*, about the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln. The piece, written for voice and orchestra, was Walker's seventieth published work.

#### SIGNIFICANCE

Walker received several awards, including a Fulbright Fellowship, two Rockefeller Fellowships, and a John Hay Whitney Fellowship. He also was awarded honorary doctoral degrees from universities such as the Curtis Institute of Music (1997), Oberlin College (1983), and Spelman College (2001). Walker was the first black composer to win the Pulitzer Prize. In 2000, he became the

first living composer to be inducted into the American Classical Music Hall of Fame.

—Monica T. Tripp-Roberson

#### FURTHER READING

Baker, David N., Linda M. Belt, and Herman C. Hundson, eds. *The Black Composer Speaks*. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1978. Contains an interview with Walker and information on his life, beliefs, inspirations, and thoughts on his work.

Floyd, Samuel A. *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its Music from Africa to the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. Examines the development of African American music and its contributions to American culture. Walker's work in the 1950's is discussed in detail.

Walker, George. *Reminiscences of an American Composer and Pianist*. Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2009. Provides a detailed account of Walker's life and accomplishments.

**SEE ALSO:** Blind Tom Bethune; James Bland; Margaret Allison Bonds; Anthony Braxton; Harry T. Burleigh; R. Nathaniel Dett; Father Divine; Ulysses Kay; George Russell.

## JIMMIE WALKER

### Actor and comedian

*As the central character in Good Times, the groundbreaking 1970's situation comedy, Walker shaped his generation's conception of the hip black teenager, at once cocky and assertive, becoming in the process one of the decade's most recognized African American entertainers.*

**BORN:** June 25, 1947; Bronx, New York

**ALSO KNOWN AS:** James Carter Walker

**AREAS OF ACHIEVEMENT:** Entertainment: comedy;  
Radio and television

#### EARLY LIFE

James Carter Walker was born in the impoverished housing projects of the south Bronx, New York, on June 25, 1947. Given his lanky frame and love of athletics, Walker dreamed of a professional basketball career and paid little attention at school. When it became clear that he was not destined for basketball stardom, Walker abandoned

high school a year before graduation. He worked delivery jobs in his neighborhood but soon realized that he needed to return to school. Under the aegis of a federally funded program, Search for Education, Evaluation, and Knowledge (SEEK), Walker completed his high school equivalency. In a writing class that involved reading aloud his own essay, Walker discovered that his writing (and his delivery) could make people laugh.

Walker studied radio engineering technology at the RCA Technical Institute. A year later, having earned his engineering license, he secured work at a small radio station as a part-time engineer. Walker still toyed with the idea of doing stand-up comedy on the side. With the help of a friend, he got the chance to open for the Last Poets, a group of street poets whose incendiary political verse, delivered with passion, had stirred black audiences in the theaters of Harlem. Walker agreed to warm up the audiences with five minutes of original material. He was a hit and stayed with the group for a year and a half.