

# Hey! This Is Walkin' & Talkin' Bill Hawkins



Bill Hawkins with The Dominoes in his record store studio booth.

*Opal Louis Nations tells the story of Cleveland's First Black R & B Jock and a son in search of his father's voice.....*

**W**alkin' & Talkin' Bill Hawkins was Cleveland's first black jock to play Blues, Gospel, and Rhythm & Blues on Ohio's airwaves, yet writers like John A. Jackson and Prof. William Barlow and Wes Smith seem to have skirted around this pioneer in their research on the popular post-war culture.

Why? Is it because the Alan Freed phenomenon overshadowed all others? Both Hawkins and Freed shared airtime on WJW 850 on the A.M. dial. Or was it that Hawkins was not primarily a significant disc jockey but a record store owner, jingle

announcer and independent producer. All of these occupations could just as well be tagged to others of his profession.

A good deal of Bill Hawkins' early history is shrouded in mystery. We know, as public records state, that he was born in Birmingham, Alabama on April 26th, 1908. Other sources say Hawkins was born on that date a year later. Little is known about his mother. His father was a prominent Baptist minister in Birmingham. Bill Hawkins relocated to Indianapolis where he attended grade school, moved on to Broadcast school in Chicago, then settled for good in Cleveland around 1935. After a series of short-lived jobs, Bill Hawkins wound up as a Pullman porter.

His job was to make railroad passengers comfortable. Bill Hawkins worked the Mercury Express, as it zipped daily between Cleveland and Chicago. He would often tune his portable radio in to Chicago's pioneer broadcaster, Jack L. Cooper, who was the first black newscaster on radio, and Atlanta's Jack Gibson who broadcast over WERD, the country's first black-owned radio station. But Bill Hawkins' major influence was Chicago's Al Benson, whose unintelligible Southern drawl and undisciplined personality created much controversy.

According to Prof.

William Barlow, Pullman porters were very much into the African oral traditions of their heritage, such as the hambone games of adolescent children. The hambone involved rhythmic dancing, leg slapping and rhyming slang, and it was this rhyming slang which carried over into black radio via disc jockeys like Bill Hawkins.

Sometime around 1945 the tall, handsome Bill Hawkins, looking suave and neat in his Pullman-car uniform, caught the eye of a young lady by the name of Sarah Taylor. Sarah was travelling to Cleveland with her husband, a man of the cloth. One look at Bill and Sarah was smitten. She never met Bill again until after her divorce in 1951.

By now, Bill Hawkins had married a woman by the name of Blanche. Bill and Sarah had a brief tryst after which Sarah became pregnant. A son, William Allen Taylor, was born in New York City in



Left and above: Bill Hawkins at Radio WSRS, circa early 1950s.





At Radio WHK.



Bill gets ready to play a new disc.

March 1953. As this illicit liaison would have caused a scandal among the members of Sarah's church to which her ex-husband was still affiliated, and because of the adverse effect this might have on Bill's career, Bill and Sarah swore to keep the birth of their illegitimate child a secret from everyone. Sarah had him raised by friends in Cleveland.

William Allen Taylor stayed connected with his mother, but she never told him who his birth father was. All through his childhood he would implore his mother to tell him. At the age of fourteen, he threw a tantrum and swore never to ask again, but during his twenty-second birthday party William confronted his mother in the kitchen. It was then he learned of his illegitimacy. In 1999 William Allen Taylor went on a search for his father, in particular the sound of his voice. More on that later.

In the late 1940s Bill Hawkins opened a record store in Cleveland at 105th and Cedar Streets. When black artists came to town to perform it became a custom for them to visit Bill's store to autograph records and hold in-store promotions. In 1947 Ebony Magazine featured a radio article which bemoaned the fact that there were no black disc jockeys in Cleveland. This article inspired Bill Hawkins to do something about it. Like John Dolphin of Dolphin's of Hollywood and Ernie Young of Ernie's Record Mart in Nashville, Bill Hawkins set up a remote broadcast studio in the window of his store. He then built up enough sponsors to be able to broker time on WJS, WHK and WSRS.

Underwriters ranged from clothing stores to Williams's hot barbecue sauce (a product still in existence). Visiting entertainers such as the Orioles, Dominoes, Dinah Washington, the Penguins, Platters, Ray-O-Vacs and the Billy

Valentine Trio all guested on The Bill Hawkins Show. Bill Hawkins' on-air regularity was due in part to the way he put a product over. He was one of the few black disc jockeys able to broaden a black market for a predominantly white product. In fact, he was so good at it that white sponsors were afraid that their products would be identified as those targeted specifically for a black market. Bill Hawkins' broadcast window faced onto a sidewalk where pedestrians waited for buses. This

captive audience were thrilled by Walkin' & Talkin' Bill's singing and dancing and rhyming slang which ran something like this: 'Hey! This is Bill Hawkins walkin' that walk and talkin' that talk'. Bill Hawkins - not just a snappy dresser and a ladies' man - also took an interest in the black community by sponsoring events, endorsing political figures and devoting time to various fund-raisers. At first his programmes featured jump bands like Andy Kirk, his first cousin Erskine Hawkins and his hero, Louis Jordan. He lived at 546 East 109th Street in Cleveland and later, through the recommendation of Symphony Sid, ventured into Akron to appear on WDOK 1260 A.M. He built such a large following that a fan club was formed. Young female fans wore coloured sweaters with Bill Hawkins' signature emblazoned in white across their chests.

When Alan Freed started playing R&B, as opposed to classical music, over WJW in 1951, he developed a rap style based in part on Bill Hawkins' rhyming patter. Freed never at any time in his career acknowledged his debt to Hawkins, who, according to some of his surviving friends, was Cleveland's top dee-jay during the late 1940s - early '50s. By 1958 the age of 'free-rein' was coming to a close. Radio stations now hired programme directors to select programming. Bill Hawkins, who not only broadcast as an independent, working with his own format and earning big money, needed to be brought into line. Hawkins quit rather than comply and went to work for the Urban League. When William went to try for a job at the Urban League to help pay his way through school, he did not know that the person conducting the interview and asking peculiarly personal questions from behind horn-rimmed glasses was his father. His mother told him his father regretted not telling him. She looked forward to the day when they could all get together and let the truth be known. But that day never came.

During the ten years Bill Hawkins jive-talked his poetry over the airwaves, Billboard Magazine only wrote him up once, and this was in April 1955. Bill, in collaboration with other celebrated Cleveland jocks, was to adjudicate a mambo contest given by the Swing Club at the Cleveland Arena on Easter Sunday. Jimmy Ricks, the Drifters and Willie Mabon were all scheduled to appear. Bill Hawkins died at the age of sixty-five on Thursday March 6th, 1975 in his native Cleveland.

His son, William, was so angry with his father over the Urban League affair that he let twelve years pass before seeking out an obituary. Despite the trials and humiliations William has suffered during his life, he has triumphed over adversity to the point where he currently teaches theatre at the College of Marin in California. His accomplishments include a B.A. in communications from Ohio State, an M.F.A. from The American Conservatory in San Francisco plus a chairmanship at the theatre department of Laney College, Oakland, California. He has performed in many regional theatre groups, including The Negro Ensemble and La Mama Experimental Theatre Company in New York. He has also appeared on Broadway in August Wilson's 'Seven Guitars', on network T.V. and in feature films. He has



Dinah Washington holding forth at Bill's record store.

served as both teacher and director in New York, Chicago and at The University of California, Berkeley.

In late 1999 William was approached by radio producer Ellen Chang who helped him develop a radio documentary piece for National Public Radio's 'All Things Considered.' The programme's co-producers included The Kitchen Sisters at Lost and Found Sound in San Francisco. The twenty-minute segment centred on William's search for his father's voice. Financed by Lost and Found Sound, William flew to Cleveland to find oral records of his father. William spoke with family and friends but was unable then and still to this day to find a single air check of his father on radio. If anyone has any information as to where a record of Bill Hawkins' radio voice might be found, please contact Blues & Rhythm Magazine.

As an extension of the radio enactment, William Taylor and Ellen Chang developed a one-man play starring William, of course, as the expeditious Voltairian hero. The piece was recently performed in the East Bay Area. William's radio segment has since been bestowed a Peabody Award. He hopes to be able to somehow translate his play onto documentary film.

Walkin' & Talkin' Bill Hawkins, like Jack Cooper and Eddie Honesty, was one of a few significant black American radio pioneers whose groundbreaking accomplishments paved the way for jocks like Tom Joyner at ABC and Cathy Liggins Hughes of Radio One.


**With assistance from William Allen Taylor and Eric LeBlanc. With thanks to Lyuba Birenbaum.**

## LOST & FOUND SOUND

**Former Disc Jockey, Bill Hawkins, Buried**

William B. "Bill" Hawkins, aged 65, of 546 East 109th Street, died Thursday evening at 5:30 P.M. at Metropolitan Hospital after a prolonged illness.

the business value of the great black consumer market by expanding his show into a nightly broadcast at the 7:00 and 7:30 P.M. slots.



WALKIN' TALKIN' BILL HAWKINS  
NPR's ALL THINGS CONSIDERED®  
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WHK 1949. Courtesy of Western Reserve Historical Society.