



Josh White: Society Blues

Elijah Wald

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A gifted and charismatic entertainer, Josh White (1914-1969) was a blues star of the 1930s, a cabaret star of the 1940s, and a folk star of the 1950s and the 1960s. In 1963, a *Billboard* magazine poll ranked him America's third most popular male folksinger, surpassed only by Pete Seeger and Harry Belafonte, and ahead of Bob Dylan. White brought American folk and blues to audiences around the world and released several dozen albums, all featuring his distinctive guitar style, supple voice, and unique showmanship.

In this compelling biography, Elijah Wald traces White's journey from a childhood leading blind singers on the streets of Greenville, South Carolina, to the heights of Manhattan cafe society. He explores the complexities of White's music, his struggles with discrimination and stereotypes, his political involvements, and his sometimes raucous personal life.

White was always drawn to music and made his first recordings at age fourteen. By the 1930s he had become a recording star, with equally strong careers in blues and gospel. In the 1940s he was discovered by white audiences and regularly appeared in New York cabarets alongside such artists as Billie Holiday. He also became an outspoken proponent of civil rights and frequently appeared at rallies and benefits, as well as at the Roosevelt White House, becoming known as "the Presidential Minstrel." He was one of the few black figures to star on Broadway and appear in Hollywood films, the only black solo performer to have his own national tour, and a daring sex symbol with adoring fans on both sides of the color line.

In the 1950s, White won acclaim in Europe, then saw his achievements collapse in the polarized political ferment of the McCarthy era. Attempting to strike a balance that would keep his career afloat, he instead ended up alienating both political camps. Although still a star in England, he became the forgotten man at home until his resurrection during the folk revival.

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