



# Stepin Fetchit: The Life and Times of Lincoln Perry

*Mel Watkins*

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The first African American movie star, Lincoln Perry, a.k.a. Stepin Fetchit, is an iconic figure in the history of American popular culture. In the late 1920s and '30s he was both renowned and reviled for his surrealistic portrayals of the era's most popular comic stereotype—the lazy, shiftless Negro. After his breakthrough role in the 1929 film *Hearts in Dixie*, Perry was hailed as “the best actor that the talking pictures have produced” by the critic Robert Benchley.

Having run away from his Key West home in his early teens, Perry found success as a vaudevillian before making his way to California. The tall, lanky actor became the first millionaire black movie star when he appeared in a string of hit movies as the whiny, ever-perplexed, slow-talking comic sidekick. Perry was the highest paid and most popular black comedian in America during Hollywood's Golden Age, but his ongoing battles with movie executives, his rowdy offscreen behavior, and his extravagant spending kept him in gossip-column headlines. Perry's spendthrift ways and exorbitant lifestyle hastened his decline and, in 1947, having squandered or given away his fortune, he was forced to declare bankruptcy.

In 1964 Perry was discovered in the charity ward of Chicago's Cook County Hospital; he later turned up in Muhammad Ali's entourage. In 1972 he unsuccessfully sued CBS for defamation because of a television program that ridiculed the type of characters he had portrayed. But his achievements were eventually acknowledged: in 1976 the Hollywood chapter of the NAACP gave him its Special Image Award for having opened the door for many a succeeding African American film star, and in 1978 he was inducted into the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame. In *Stepin Fetchit*, Mel Watkins has given us the first definitive, full-scale biography of an entertainment legend.

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