

Black Music & Entertainment

Alexander Luca, the father of a troupe, was a shoemaker by trade. At the age of twenty-one he was encouraged to join a singing school by some of his co-workers, and there he developed his natural musical ability to a high degree. Leaving his home town of Milford, Connecticut for New Haven, he married and was chosen to lead a choir of a local Congregational Church. There, he developed a quartet consisting of himself, his two elder sons, and his sister-in-law. They sang throughout the Northeast and Ohio during the 1850's.

Emma Louise (1853-?) and Anna Madah Hyers (1854-?), two sisters from California, achieved some success in concert performances. Each was commended for her clarity of enunciation, purity of tone, and accuracy of pitch. Singly, neither was able to achieve what they could together, so they toured the States with their father as manager, beginning in 1871, with considerable success.

They combined their talents with a tenor, Wallace King, and bass-baritone, John Luca, to continue touring in the late 1870's.

There were other musical classicists during the last few decades of the nineteenth century: Rachel Washington, a pianist-organist who was the first black to graduate from the New England Conservatory in Boston; Samuel Jamieson, a graduate of the Boston Conservatory in 1876 with a diploma in piano; Walter Craig, violinist who was labeled the "Prince of Negro Violinists" by a New York paper in 1886, and the grandson of Frederick Douglass.



Robert Cole (1863-1911) was born in Athens, Georgia and graduated from Atlanta University. Although not a trained musician, he was a serious dramatist and stage manager of the first black stock company, The All-Star Company. After a short season as a writer for Black Patti and her Troubadours, he produced America's first full-length all-black musical comedy, *A Trip to Coon-Town*. It had a full plot with real character development, songs, dances and that important ingredient — pretty girls. His collaborators were Jesse Shipp, Sam Lucas and Billy Johnson (no relation to the Johnson Brothers).

Eventually, he joined the Johnson brothers to write two musical comedies, *The Shoo-Fly Regiment* (1906) and *The Red Moon* (1908). They also collaborated on a musical suite *The Evolution of Ragtime* (1903).

Joseph Douglass (1869-1935) was the first black violinist to tour the United States.

He began his studies in Washington as a youth, and continued on at the New England Conservatory and in Europe. Douglass performed before two Presidents, McKinley and Taft, and was featured at the Chicago World's Fair on Colored American Day in 1893.

To inspire young black violinists, he often performed in black communities. He was the first black violinist to record for the *Victor Talking Machine Company*, now known as a subsidiary to Radio Corporation of America. Upon his retirement from the concert stage, he taught at Howard University in Washington and the Music School Settlement in New York.



James Bland (1854-1911), one of eight children, was destined to become the darling of the Continent, and writer of songs that would become standards not only in the country of his birth, but in Europe as well.

His father, Allen Bland, attended Wilberforce and Oberlin College in Ohio, and received a law degree from Howard University. When James was twelve, his father became the first black appointed as an examiner in the United States Patent Office, so the family moved to Washington, D.C., where James attended local schools.

To the consternation of his parents, as a youth, he demonstrated a greater propensity toward the banjo than books. He composed his own tunes and could often be found downtown on street corners singing and playing for change. An elderly music teacher taught him how to transcribe his music. He composed a tune that would become a state song: *Carry Me Back To Old Virginia* while a teenager, and sang and played it for a white minstrel named George Primrose, who was then appearing in Washington. This, and other tunes that he composed, Primrose played and sang in his show.

Upon graduating from high school, Bland attended Howard University for his parents had aspirations for a professional career for their son.

While at Howard, James became familiar with antebellum stories from some of the students who had been slaves, and he acquired an appreciation for black folk music, including spirituals.

He developed a style of playing the banjo and singing that created requests for his appearance at various social events. Eventually, his reputation grew to the point where he was asked to entertain dinner guests at the Canvassback Club where President Cleveland was a member. This led to further success as an entertainer and the decision that law held no appeal for him. He withdrew from Howard, and joined Haverly's Colored Minstrels after a successful audition in Baltimore.

He, like other black minstrels, adopted the broad humor common to those shows. With cork-blackened face, James talked in dialect and wore the standard dress — high hat and swallow-tail coat.

The first summer was spent in the New York area, then the show went on cross-country tour to California. In 1881, the troupe went to England with James Kersand as the star.

Bland was well received in Great Britain, and his music enjoyed wide currency in all of the British music halls.

He retired from minstrelsy when the troupe returned to the States, and became a solo performer earning as much as \$1000 a month. The Prince of Wales, later crowned King Edward, acknowledged Bland as his favorite entertainer. German critics declared that he, Stephen Foster and John Phillip Sousa were the three Americans who had done much for America's foreign relations.

This extraordinary performer was the inventor of the the Bland banjo; he added a fifth string to give the banjo more versatility.

It is ironic that the son of a Patent Office examiner neglected to publish under his name all but about forty pieces of the hundreds he composed. However, as was common the days before copyrights, composers often sold their songs for whatever the going rate was, or balladeers or other composers appropriated the music as was the case with Milburn. Another example may be found in a song that Picayune Butler created. He wrote a tune he named *Old Zip Coon*.

According to Langston Hughes, a young white performer, George Nichols, who was with the Purdy Brown's Circus, introduced the same tune as *Turkey In The Straw* with the result that the song has been ascribed to white authorship.

Of the forty tunes that are registered or published in Bland's name, *Carry Me Back...* became Virginia's State song in 1940, and *Oh, Dem Golden Slippers* was the marching song for the annual Mummies' New Year's Day Parade in Philadelphia for over fifty years. In *The Evening By the Moonlight* and *In the Morning By the Bright Light* are two other well-known songs by Bland. In addition, *Missouri Hound Dog* has become a campaign song.

When the type of music that he played and sang became passe, Bland returned penniless to Philadelphia where he died.

After adopting his song, the State of Virginia wished to honor the composer. It was not until 1946 that they were able to locate his grave; the Lion's Club of Virginia had a headstone erected, the governor ceremoniously placed a wreath upon his grave, and perpetual care was undertaken by the grateful state.

Although Blacks enjoyed and employed the wide spectrum of music in post-bellum times, classical artists were not immune to being all but ignored as soloists and were, in but a few cases, required to combine their talents with others in order to perform widely.

We have noted the Lambert family. Two more such units require our attention: The Luca and Hyers families.

Harry Lawrence Freeman (1875-1953) was born in Cleveland, Ohio and settled permanently in New York. He worked as musical director for the Cole and Johnson Brothers Company of New York. Freeman was a prolific composer, and has fourteen operas to his credit between the years of 1893 and 1930. His first opera, *The Martyr*, was produced in Denver, Colorado in 1893, *Valdo* was produced in Cleveland in 1906, and *The Tryst* in New York in 1911. In addition to operas, he wrote a ballet, a symphonic poem, two cantatas and many songs. For excellence in composition, he received the Harmon Award.

Music takes many forms — each of which is related to the experiences, heritage and expertise of the individual who conceives, interprets and projects it for himself or an

audience. Three other music forms whose genesis is considered to be peculiarly black (along with the spirituals) are ragtime, blues and jazz.

Ragtime seems to have evolved out of the communal syncopated musical forms from the slavery period, and the strongly developed percussion bass (or left-hand on the piano) may be related to the foot-stamping and hand clapping that bystanders engaged in, while the right hand, on the piano, simulated the banjo or fiddle.

History does not record the earliest ragtime piano players, but they often were the only entertainment presented at dives, saloons and other such places along the Mississippi and in the tenderloin ("red-light") districts in urban areas. Itinerant musicians were the initial purveyors. They rarely played a recognizable tune, for the earliest ragtime or "jig piano" music was likely to be composed on the spot, and its composer rarely stayed long enough in a community or came in contact with a "legitimate" performer for his tune to gain currency.

It was not until Ernest Hogan wrote *All Coons Look Alike to Me* with its rag syncopation, did the form come to the attention of writers associated with the stage; but it was really the cakewalk that became ragtime's vehicle into Tin Pan Alley. All of the celebrated Black Nationalist composers for Broadway became the princes of ragtime by using the form in some of their compositions.

J. Rosamund Johnson (1873-1954) was born in Jacksonville, Florida and trained at the New England Conservatory. He toured the vaudeville circuit with *Oriental America* and was supervisor of music in his hometown. In 1901, he settled in New York. He and his brother James wrote a number of popular songs, two of which are *L'il Gal* and *Since You Went Away* and are regularly perform-

ed on concert tours. In addition to collaborating with Cole, he and his brother wrote the song that has been such-titled *The Negro National Anthem. Lift Every Voice and Sing*.

In 1912-13, he was musical director of Hammerstein's Opera Company in London and worked at the Musical School Settlement of New York on his return. In 1915, he composed the choral work *Walk Together Children*.

Richard Milburn was a whistler. A barber by trade in the city of Philadelphia, his knowledge of music was limited to accompanying himself on the guitar with rudimentary chording as he whistled. His skill in this medium of music pro-

vided him with the means that he was often asked to perform at the (Negro) Philadelphia Library Committee to enliven their meetings. Leisure time spent in listening to and imitating the songs of birds led him to composing, "by ear" a tune called *Listen to the Mockingbird*. A white composer/publisher, Septimus Winner, who wrote popular tunes under the pseudonym Alice Hawthorne, was asked to attend a meeting of the Committee to hear this exceptional folk artist.

The first edition of the music was published in 1855 with the credits: Music by Richard Milburn, words by Alice Hawthorne. The sheet music quickly became a best seller, and subsequent printings have omitted Milburn's name with full

ETHIOPIAN BALLAD

LISTEN TO THE

Mocking Bird

MELODY

RICHARD MILBURN

Written and arranged by

Alice Hawthorne

First Edition Published by SEPTIMUS WINNER, 20 North Eighth St. Philadelphia, Pa. 19106

Title page of Richard Milburn's *Listen to the Mocking Bird*, 1855 (Courtesy: New York Public Library, Schomburg Collection.)



James Weldon Johnson (1873-1964) was graduated from Atlanta and Columbia Universities. Although primarily known as a poet, statesman and civil rights leader, he collaborated with his brother and Bob Cole as lyricist for a number of songs. In 1901, the three were apparently the first blacks to sign a year contract for monthly stipends against

their royalties with a Tin Pan Alley publisher, Joseph W. Stern and Company. They wrote songs for such white stars as Lillian Russel, Anna Held and May Irwin, guaranteeing success. *Didn't He Ramble*, one of such songs, is popular with brass bands. The trio also wrote songs that were published in *The Ladies Home Journal* and *Etude*.

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