

Black Music & Entertainment



Scott Joplin (1868-1917) was the king. Born in Texarkana, Texas, he had a strong background in music. For each member of his family was an accomplished musician. He taught himself to play the piano with enough expertise that he began to study with a German instructor in the area. There, he gained an appreciation for and a knowledge of the traditional style of music. While a teenager, he followed the well-developed route that drifters had forged along "The River." He settled in the St. Louis area in 1895 for a year; organizing and touring with a vocal group, continuing to play rag and compose pieces with traditional notation that did not sell. In 1896, he settled in Sedalia, Missouri and took advanced courses in music while seriously composing. At the close of the century ragtime was being acclaimed so that Joplin was

able to get his *Original Rag* published in 1899. While he was performing at the Maple Leaf Club, he came to the attention of John Stark, a white music publisher who bought Joplin's piece *Maple Leaf Rag* for fifty dollars plus royalties. Scott was under the illusion that he was on his way. However, the song did not immediately sell, but when it did, hundreds of thousands of copies were purchased. Joplin then began composing his first serious (i.e. traditional) music: *A Guest of Honor*, *A Ragtime Opera*, and *The Ragtime Dance* — the latter a ballet with the cakewalk and slow drag featured. These were completed in 1903. Scott continued to write music and aid young ragtime composers whenever he could. He often allowed his name to be used along with the name of the budding composer's in order to lend some credence to the manuscript.

Louis Chauvin (1883-1908) however, was a true protege of Joplin's and they collaborated on *Helicopter Bouquet - a Slow Drag Two-Step* which was well-received. Chauvin's deteriorating physical condition, caused by opium and syphilis, created the need for Scott to complete the composition that Chauvin began. Of all of Joplin's "students," he indicated the most promise, but living the fast life - his early demise eliminated a possible real competitor to Joplin.

Most of Joplin's life, after he settled in New York in 1910, was spent in decline after he published *Treemonisha* in 1911. His obsession with the opera culminated in a one night performance in Harlem. It would not be until decades after his death in 1917 that the work would be given proper treatment. Its survival would be due to the popularity that *The Entertainer* received in a first-run movie, *The Sing*.

Ragtime never did gain the respectability that other forms of "black" music had; it would basically remain in the urban areas with its coterie of admirers forming a select fraternity well-known to each other.

POST BELLUM

The end to slavery brought immediate jubilation that quickly settled into bewilderment and fear, for thousands were refugees as have been the many witnesses to any great war. The immediate issue was resettlement: to develop roots, security and a positive self-image. The federal government set the Freedmen's Bureau, and various church and religious groups were instrumental in forging bases for the hapless ex-slaves. Several academic and manual institutions were formed: Atlanta University, Fisk, Hampton, Johnson C. Smith (known then as Bidle), and Saint Augustine's.

He Hears With A Heart

(Continued from Front)

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One might have thought that the heed for spirituals and protest songs was over, but this uneasy era of Jim Crow laws, vigilante groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan, and sharecropping, created conditions where, in some cases, the ex-slaves were worse off than ever.

Once more, blacks turned to that mitigable force, music. The black bards increased the repertory of music, and a new form was born from men who were put into prison for any pretext: the prison song. Lumber camps, mines, factories, cattle ranges, steamboats, and the ubiquitous railroad, all contributed to the melodies and chants that became familiar. Perhaps the most popular railroad song was written about the legendary black track liner *John Henry*.

The increased need for new railroad spurs developed a group of men called track liners or *gandy dancers*. Track lining required a specific rhythm in order to accomplish the job. As the leader of a group of field workers was expected to do, so too was the caller or leader of the gandy dancers. He had to know hundreds of lines for the song couplets in order to keep his crew interested and busy. Thus, they too were responsible for keeping the elements of songs from many sources — work songs, spirituals, etc. — alive.

The purposes of the spiritual have been discussed earlier in this discourse, but it was not until post-bellum times that it became an art form, and it was due to eleven young singers, seven who were born slaves. They were the *Fisk Jubilee Singers*.

Fisk, founded in 1866, was first intended to be a high school, but the need for an institution of higher learning was recognized, so the Fisk college classes began in 1871.

When a young white instructor named George White was asked by the president of Fisk to give music instruction to his students, he was overwhelmed by the emotion produced in him by their singing.

The President of Senegal, Leopold Senghor, has since said, "Negro voices, because they have not been



The Fisk Jubilee Chorus toured America and Europe in the 1870s, singing traditional spirituals and songs. Their performances helped introduce black American music to the world. (The Bettman Archive)

domesticated by training, follow every shade of feeling or imagination; drawing freely from the infinite dictionary of nature, they borrow its tonal expressions, from the light songs of the birds to the solemn roll of the thunder."

Recognizing that these natural qualities would enhance the singers' performance, White's training enabled them to read music and develop stage presence without eliminating those qualities.

Their first selections were popular ballads of the day, such as *Annie Laurie* and *Home, Sweet, Home*. In unstructured moments, they would sing some of their spirituals and plantation melodies for their own entertainment. Hearing these songs, their simplicity and beauty so evident, White wanted to include the songs in the first concert that he planned for Nashville in 1867, but there was strong resistance by the singers for fear of ridicule.

Finally, he encouraged them to sing several of "their" songs at the program. The success and accolades with which the selections were met created a more ambitious local scheduling of concerts.

In 1871, White decided to take the group on tour to raise funds. This was a difficult decision, for there were several obstacles; none had the proper clothing for a northern tour and no money to purchase any, their program was not in the form of minstrelsy with which the American (i.e. white) public was familiar and, in fact, the genre (spirituals) was quite unfamiliar to the general public.

Nevertheless, with borrowed clothing and funds, White and his singers left, with hearts in their mouths, to begin a fundraising tour on October 6, 1871, in Cincinnati, Ohio. Receiving less than critical acclaim, they continued on their tour. At Oberlin a turning point of sorts was reached. White being kept waiting in the audience for their turn to perform, at a lull in proceedings, they softly began to sing, *Steal Away to Jesus*. As a hush settled over the audience, their confidence grew. The purity and beauty of their singing and the song moved the white audience in a way that nothing else had.

White then decided to include more spirituals on succeeding programs, and a new name was needed. Remembering that slaves had talked about the

"year of jubilee" that would be celebrated when bondage was ended, he elected to call the group the *Fisk Jubilee Singers*.

Fame came to them in Boston at the World Peace Jubilee in 1872, where their strong voices carried the strain of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* throughout the Coliseum. From then on, they became internationally known through tours throughout the States and Europe.

For the next seven years they travelled, constantly increasing the coffers of the university's treasury by over \$150,000. As a result of their tour, one contribution was the construction of Jubilee Hall which is still on Fisk University's campus.

The singers' success, both artistically and financially, created a tradition in Black colleges that exists today-for Hampton Institute was the second college to form a singing group; and others followed suit.

The end of the war created difficulties for individual performers, both white and black, with a few exceptions that have already been mentioned, and whose careers began during ante-bellum times. Now that peace had returned, American au-

diences turned to European performers for solo entertainment.

Consequently vocal ensembles, opera companies, music societies (chiefly classical), brass bands and reviews abounded after the war. Minstrel troupes continued in their popularity and became the training ground for future stars.

Unless a performer was a member of a large minstrel troupe, difficulties were experienced. Small, unknown groups had to "rough it". Often doubling as stage hands, janitors, ticket sellers; find their own accommodations in oftentimes unfriendly towns, advertise their show with previews in the town square, provide their own costumes, and so on. Nevertheless, as is legion with aspiring performers, they were willing to endure in hopes of making it.

Only the exceptional made the "Big Time." One year before Milburn's song was first published, a son was born to free parents in Flushing, New York. He would write music that would be familiar, one hundred years later, to millions of people who were unknowingly listening to the composition of a black man.



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