

A Special Editorial Section On Black History

Black Music And Entertainers

1600 - 1920

By Lois Yvonne Whaley

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Harry Thacker Burleigh (1866-1949) was the grandson of a runaway slave who was blinded in slavery but fled north with his wife and family. Their destination was Canada, but the imminent birth of a daughter (Harry's mother) caused them to settle in Erie, Pennsylvania.

As a child, Harry led his grandfathers on the latter's rounds as lamplighter, all the while listening to his

grandparents' plantation stories and songs. In school, he exhibited a good voice and ear, but it was not until his mother's employer noticed his avid interest in music that his abilities were encouraged.

He sang in church choirs, and it was at the age of 26 that his formal music education began with a scholarship to the National Conservatory of Music in New York. He came to the attention of

Antonin Dvorak, a Czech composer, who taught at the Conservatory, and it was through Burleigh that Dvorak composed his *New World Symphony*, for Harry sang and played spirituals for the Czech composer.

In 1894, his career as a singer began in earnest when he applied for and received the position of baritone soloist at St. George's Episcopal Church in New York. He became the soloist at Temple Emanu-El in New York in 1900. He also taught voice at the Conservatory in his senior year.

After completing his studies, he began concertizing in the States and Europe. The tour included a command performance before King Edward VII. The last two years of the century found Burleigh beginning to compose ballads and a position as music editor for G. Ricordi and Company in New York allowed him the freedom to write.

Burleigh is perhaps best known for his arrangements of spirituals for concert singers. *Deep River* was arranged and published in 1917, and has been performed by artists for decades. He wrote about his arrangements of spirituals:

"My desire was to preserve them in harmonies that belong to modern methods of tonal progression without robbing the melodies of their racial flavor."

His compositions total more than 250. Among the ballads are: *The Prayer, Little Mother of Mine, Dear Old Pal of Mine, Just You, Under A Blazing Star, and The Great Somewhere*. He set poems to music: Robert Burns' *I Love My Jean*, Langston Hughes' *Lovely, Dark and Lonely One*, James N. Johnson's *The Young Warrior*, and Walt Whitman's *Ethiopia Saluting The Colors*. He wrote for solo, quartets and choruses and composed for minstrel troupes.

Honors such as the Spingarn Achievement Medal (1917), a Master's degree from Atlanta University and a Doctor of Music degree from Howard, were awarded Burleigh. He was a charter member of ASCAP.

Burleigh's legacy was to provide accompaniment in the modern form which would detract nothing from the emotional appeal and impact of the spirit of the music.

Hazel Harrison (1881-1969) began her studies in her hometown of Laporte, Indiana and continued under European masters. She performed with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra while in Germany in 1903-06. She did not begin concertizing in the States until 1920.

Carl Diton (1886-?) was born in Philadelphia. After his graduation from the University of Pennsylvania in 1909 he pursued further study in Germany under the patronage of Madame E. Azalia Hackley. Upon his return, he became the first black pianist to tour the States.

Diton left the concert stage after a brief career to teach and compose, and enjoy another first: Lovelle points out that "He was the first composer to employ a spiritual as thematic material for organ composition and... to employ spirituals in art-song form a la Schumann and Brahms." His works include *Four Spirituals (1914)*, and he was one of the organizers of the National Association of Negro Musicians whose focus was to resist "the desecration of spirituals into ragtime."



Clarence Cameron White (1879-1960) was born in Clarksville, Tennessee and received his undergraduate degree from Howard. In addition to a degree in music (violin) from Oberlin in 1901, he studied composition with Coleridge-Taylor in London, and violin with the Russian violinist Zacharewitsch. Prior to going to England, he taught at the (Negro) Washington Conservatory of Music and in Washington's public schools. While in London (1900-11), White was first violinist with the String Players Club.

Upon his return to the States, he went on tours occasionally accompanied by his wife at the piano. He opened a music studio and became the director of the Victorian Concert Orchestra in Boston. White began composing in earnest after his return to

the States, but it was not until 1918 that he began using spirituals as thematic material. *Bandana Sketches*, published in 1918, was a compilation of four spirituals for piano and violin. Lovelle states that, "The first was a chant, *Nobody Knows de Trouble I've Seen*; the second a lament, *I'm Troubled in Mind*; the third was a slave song, *Many Thousand Gone*; and the fourth, a Negro dance, *Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child*."

The first was recorded and performed by Fritz Kreisler, the renowned violinist.

White composed for violin, voice, piano, chorus, band, orchestra, chamber ensemble and organ. He was the recipient of many honors during his lifetime, and achieved his highest recognition after 1920.



Sissieretta Jones (1886-1933) was one of the few solo vocalists after the war. She was born in Virginia, raised in Rhode Island, and completed studies at the New England Conservatory. Touring for several years, it was not until she appeared at a Jubilee held at the Madison Square Garden in New York in 1893 that the critics acknowledged her existence with any real enthusiasm. Dubbed "Black Patti," after an Italian operatic diva Adelina Patti, she was approached by the manager of the Metropolitan Opera Company to sing the part of the African in Verdi's *Aida*, and Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine*. However, a black was not to appear with The Met until Marian Anderson did so in 1955.

Jones sang before President Harrison in 1902 and completed a successful European tour in 1903. Upon her return, she formed Black Patti's Troubadours with whom she sang operatic arias and enjoyed continuous acclaim until her retirement from the concert stage in 1910.

During the almost four decades that eclipsed the period from the end of the Civil War to the Twentieth Century, we have seen that the black musician's talents encompassed the broad spectrum of musicianship from the har-

monies of simple folk music to the complexities of classical scores.

During the latter third of the century were born composers who have come to be called Black Nationalists, chiefly because black folk music became their *raison d'etre*. Although most were well-

trained at various schools of music or conservatories and knew well how to write or perform in the traditional (i.e. classical) style, (and often did so in order to support themselves) they consciously drew upon their heritage in their compositions.

Sam Lucas (1840-1916) was born of free parents in Ohio. Often, then as now, musical careers were subsidized by paying occupations, and Lucas was no stranger to this duality. A barber by trade, he fought on the side of the Union during the Civil War. After the war, he played with several minstrel troupes until minstrelsy gave way to vaudeville and musical comedy. He composed various tunes: *Grandfather Clock, Turnip Greens and Carve Dat Possum* were the most famous. Lucas looked and acted the part of a big star. Always well dressed, he constantly wore a large diamond ring that had been presented to him by Queen Victoria, and carried a gold-headed cane that he received from a member of the English nobility. In addition, he wore a large gold watch on a gold fob. These articles were often pawned by the soft-hearted Lucas to rescue a stranded troupe.

William Henry Lane (c. 1825-53) was known professionally as Master Juba. One of the few blacks to appear with white minstrel troupes, he was known as the greatest of all dancers. Juba was immortalized by the English author, Charles Dickens, who saw him perform at a place in New York called Almack's which was owned by a black named Pete Williams. During his visit, Juba performed the single shuffle, double shuffle, cut and cross cut while accompanied by a tambourine. His dance was reminiscent of the steps done at Congo-Square and the music performed at this tavern was the harbinger of jazz and ragtime.

Most of the performers in this brief history have been skilled as instrumentalists or vocalists.

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Robert Nathaniel Dett (1882-1943) is chiefly recognized (during the period represented in this discourse) for his leadership of the Hampton Institute Choir beginning in 1913. While director there, Hampton enjoyed recognition for its high level of performances; and the group appeared at a festival held at the Library of Congress, at Carnegie Hall in New York, and Symphony Hall in Boston.

Dett was born in the slave-founded community of Drummondville, Canada, and received his degree in music from Oberlin. He won the Bowdoin Prize at Harvard for an essay "The Emancipation of Negro Music,"

and the Francis Boot Prize for music. He received honorary degrees from the Eastman-School of Music, Oberlin, and Harvard.

The classical form was not the only genre in which the black nationalists worked.

The much maligned minstrel evolved into the more sophisticated form of musical comedy, and the first real departure from minstrelsy was a play with a thin story line that used pretty black women; *The Octoroon*, presented by a white manager named John Isham in 1895. His success encouraged him to produce, one year later, *Oriental America*. It was the first all black cast to play on Broadway.

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