



# The Georgia Minstrels: the Early Years

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IN HIS LANDMARK PUBLICATION, *Music and Some Highly Musical People*, James Monroe Trotter devoted his attention to black composers and concert artists, bypassing entertainers who catered to the common man, except in one instance—that of the Georgia Minstrels, a troupe acclaimed the world over for its excellent showmanship and the high quality of the musical performance.<sup>1</sup> Despite his aversion to Ethiopian minstrelsy, Trotter felt it his responsibility to “trace the footsteps of the remarkable colored musician wherever they might lead,” and consequently he “forced himself . . . to witness the performances of the Georgia Minstrels.” To his surprise, he found that the minstrels had “not only fine natural talent, but much of high musical culture,” and he gave over several pages to discussing the troupe and quoting from the favorable press notices they received.

Despite the popularity of the Georgia Minstrels in he last quarter of the nineteenth century, and the important contributions they made to black-American culture, they have attracted little attention in modern times.<sup>2</sup> To be sure, primary materials for

<sup>1</sup>Trotter, *Music and Some Highly Musical People . . . Sketches of the Lives of Remarkable Musicians of the Colored Race, with Portraits and an Appendix Containing Copies of Music Composed by Colored Men* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1878; reprint, New York: Johnson Reprint Company, 1969). All quotations from Trotter are drawn from pp. 274–277, 281. See further about Trotter in Robert Stevenson, “America’s First Black Music Historian,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 26 (Fall 1973), 383–404.

<sup>2</sup>The definitive discussion of black Ethiopian minstrelsy is found in Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up. The Minstrel Show in*

the troupe are limited, particularly for its early years: the New York *Clipper* is perhaps the only source that contains more than scattered data—at least until the 1880’s when black newspapers and periodicals began to appear.

Although Trotter has earned the gratitude and respect of American music historians for his efforts to document the history of black-American music, his account of the Georgia Minstrels is less than impressive, despite his having been on the scene. Obviously, he took little time to research the subject and, for one reason or another, neglected to interview the minstrels or their associates; his discussion seems to be based solely on the one performance he attended and the “many press notices, regarding their performances, in [his] possession.”

Trotter nevertheless provides somewhat of a basis for discussion of these “educated musicians and performers of high merit”: he is correct, for example, in stating that a minstrel troupe called the Georgia Minstrels was “organized about twelve years ago, [was] composed of men some of whom had been slaves, [and] began their career under the leadership of Mr. George B. Hicks”—except that the leader’s first name was Charles, not George, and he was better known as “Barney” Hicks. But there

*Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974). In the present author’s recent publications, discussion of black minstrelsy has been updated, based upon new research: Eileen Southern, *Biographical Dictionary of Afro-American and African Musicians* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1982); *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983).



is much more to the story than Trotter reveals. With a view to fleshing out Trotter's account, the present paper offers an overview of the activities of "Hicks's" Georgia Minstrels during its early years—from 1865, the year of the troupe's origin, to 1878, the year Trotter's book was published.<sup>1</sup>

As is well known, Ethiopian minstrelsy as a full-evening entertainment show originated in New York City in 1843 with the "blackface" Virginia Minstrels, and within a short period had become America's favorite form of stage entertainment. Black minstrel troupes appeared on the scene as early as the 1850's, but, understandably, it was not until after the Civil War that minstrel managers made serious attempts to exploit the talents of black entertainers by putting them on the commercial stage.

Among the first of the black troupes to excite public interest was a group of fifteen ex-slaves, originally of Macon, Georgia, called the Georgia Slave Troupe Minstrels.<sup>2</sup> Organized in April, 1865, by a white man, W. H. Lee, they toured widely during the 1865–1866 season, eventually coming under the management and proprietorship of Sam Hague, a white minstrel, who changed the troupe's name to Sam Hague's Slave Troupe of Georgia Minstrels. In June, 1866, Hague took his troupe to England, where he settled permanently. At first, Hague used both black and white minstrels, but over the next two years, he gradually replaced his ex-slaves with whites in blackface.

<sup>1</sup>The present discussion, drawing solely upon primary materials and focusing on the early years of the troupe, differs in some details from Toll's excellent and provocative survey of black minstrelsy in general.

<sup>2</sup>My chief source of information was the New York *Clipper* (hereafter, NYClip), the most important theatrical publication of the nineteenth century. News items about Ethiopian minstrelsy generally were published in a column headed "Minstrelsy," but also occasionally under "Musical and Dramatic." Also especially useful were several black newspapers: *The Freeman*, of Indianapolis, often called the "Black Clipper" because of its coverage of the black show world; the *New York Globe*, *New York Freeman*, and *New York Age*. Useful Boston publications include *Folio*, a *Journal of Music, Art and Literature* (hereafter Folio). No attempt has been made to list every periodical citation used for this study; the most important ones are given at the end of paragraphs where necessary.

See further about Hague's Georgia Slave Troupe Minstrels in NYClip, 14 April–3 November 1866 passim; 21 May–10 December 1879 passim.

At the same time that Hague's group was attracting public attention, other groups calling themselves Georgia Minstrels were touring in the East, one of them under the management of black-American Charles B. Hicks (c. 1840–1902). In distinguishing this troupe from others of the same name, the *Clipper* commonly referred to it as "Hicks' party" or the Famous Original Georgia Minstrels, with Hicks as director—this undoubtedly under Hicks's instructions. In later years Hicks reported to the *Freeman*, a black newspaper, that he had organized his group in 1865 at Indianapolis, Indiana.<sup>3</sup> By the time the general public had become aware of the fact that there were more than one Georgia Minstrels, Hicks's Georgia Minstrels already had achieved considerable celebrity. It was this group that was the genesis of the world-renowned Georgia Minstrels, the troupe that was to make history.

The *Clipper* regularly carried news about the activities of Hicks's minstrels: they toured continuously, on tight schedules, in New England, the middle-Atlantic states, and lower Canada, generally playing to "good business." On November 7, 1868, a *Clipper* advertisement, which gave notice that the "original and only" Georgia Minstrels was on its Fourth Annual Tour, included some informative details about troupe personnel. The stars of the troupe were identified as Lou Johnson, comedian and bones player; George Danworth (= Danforth), bones soloist; George Skillings, leader of the orchestra; John Wilson, leader of the fifteen-piece brass band; and Hicks, himself, as interlocutor and director.

In other press notices of the 1868–1869 season, acts singled out for praise included the dancing of Alfred Smith, the double trapeze act of the Torres brothers, the banjo solos of Dick Little, and the ballad singing of Henry B. Johnson. During that season the troupe also included comedians Bob Height and Charles Sticks. The press continuously praised the troupe's ensemble singing, and liked the burlesque skits, particularly "Mr. Jinks," starring Barney Hicks, and "The Grand Duchesse."<sup>4</sup>

Again and again the press commented on the "crowded" and "overflowing" houses for perform-

<sup>3</sup>Re Hicks: NYClip, 1 September–1 December 1866 passim; *Freeman*, 7 September 1889, 6 September 1902, 13 September 1902.

<sup>4</sup>NYClip, 3 October–5 December 1868 passim.





ances of Hicks's Georgia Minstrels. Such was the power of the troupe that when playing in Washington, D.C., in July, 1869, the managers were able to demand that "colored persons [be] admitted to all parts of the house," which, the press observed, was "something of a novelty for Washington."<sup>7</sup>

By the beginning of the 1869-1870 season, Hicks, perhaps emboldened by his success in the United States, was ready to try his wings in Europe, and in January, 1870, he left with a small group of his minstrels to tour abroad, among them Bob Height and possibly Aaron Banks. It is not clear how he made the necessary contacts; we know, however, from the press that he toured first in Germany, then in England, concluding his tour in Swansea, South Wales. At Hamburg, Hicks introduced the Germans to a plantation song then wildly popular in the States, "Shoo Fly!" In June, 1870, he joined forces with Sam Hague's Great American Slave Troupe to perform in Ireland, and later in other parts of Great Britain.<sup>8</sup>

Hicks was in Europe for more than a year, performing some of the time with Sam Hague's troupe and, at other times, apparently only with his own small group. When he closed an engagement on May 6, 1871, in Liverpool, such had been his success that the management presented him with a medal and gifts. After a short tour of the provinces, Hicks left for the States on July 4, 1871.

All had not been sweetness and light, however, between Hicks and Sam Hague. The latter resented Hicks's "illegally assuming the title" of Georgia Minstrels and misrepresenting his group as the "original" Georgia Slave Troupe. Moreover, Hague asserted through his manager, W. H. Lee, that Hicks's touring in Europe had been a failure. Hicks's response was to deny that his performances had met with ill success and to publish press notices from English newspapers that supported his claim. All this bickering between Hague and Hicks took the form of an exchange of letters published in the *Clipper*. Significantly, when Hicks left England, he took

with him back to the States at least one of Hague's minstrels, Japanese Tommy, if not more.<sup>9</sup>

Ignoring Hague's accusations, Barney Hicks began the 1871-1872 season advertising that the Original and Only Georgia Minstrels Slave Troupe, under the supervision of Charles B. Hicks, had returned from "Their Great European Tour" and was available for engagements. The season began well for the Georgia Minstrels, and business consistently was "reported excellent."<sup>10</sup>

In September, 1871, the company consisted of twelve artists, supported by the orchestra under the direction of George Skillings and the brass band directed by John Wilson. During the course of the 1871-1872 season, changes in personnel brought in several talented new members, whose presence in the group greatly increased the attractiveness of its offerings. Foremost among them were comedian Billy Kersands; endmen James Grace and Pete Devonear; and female impersonator T. Drewette (or Drewitte), called the "prima donna" and singled out for his performances in the skit "Princess of Trebizonde."<sup>11</sup>

Other members included Sam Jones, who joined with Louis Pierson to take over most of the singing, with Billy Wilson doing the character songs; Charles Anderson, who, along with Billy Wilson, functioned as chief dancer; Abe Cox, who joined the ranks of banjoists; Dick Weaver and Jake Zabriskie. As for the minstrels who had been with Hicks in Europe, Japanese Tommy apparently left Hicks soon after reaching home; his name does not appear on any Georgia Minstrels list, and within a year he was playing as "the African Dwarf Tommy" with Josh Hart and His Theatre Comique. On the other hand, Aaron Banks and Bob Height both were listed as members for the 1871-1872 season.

Hicks was acutely aware of the importance of maintaining high standards in order to keep the troupe's deservedly excellent reputation. Personnel might come and go, but he did not allow important positions to remain unfilled. On September 16, 1871, for example, he advertised in the *Clipper* for "a tuba player, who plays other brasses," and a "tenor balladist."

Despite the "good business" and the acclaim of the press, however, it seems obvious that Hicks and

<sup>7</sup> NYClip, 26 June-2 October 1869 passim. In view of the rigid segregation practices of the time, this feat was impressive; 17 July 1869.

<sup>8</sup> Documentation for Hicks's performances in Europe: NY Clip, 21 May-30 July 1870 passim; *Folio*, April 1870 (p. 84); NYClip, 28 January 1871, 10 June-5 August 1871 passim.

<sup>9</sup> Re Japanese Tommy, see the *Brooklyn Eagle*, 3 February 1873.

<sup>10</sup> NYClip, 9 September-30 December 1871 passim.

his minstrels were having problems. Sometime early in the 1871–1872 season, Barney Hicks lost control of his Georgia Minstrels, the troupe he had organized in 1865 and successfully steered through the shoals and quicksands of the white show-business world for seven years. The wonder is not that Hicks lost his minstrel troupe, but that he managed to hold on to it for seven years in the racist climate of the United States after the emancipation of the slaves.

Black members of the show world were aware of the problems Hicks met in trying to compete with white business managers and advance men; indeed, it appears that Hicks himself sometimes used whites in management roles. Some black showmen felt that the fact of Hicks's looking like a white man was in his favor, and undoubtedly he did pass for white when necessary. But even more important was the fact that Hicks was very aggressive and innovative throughout his career.

In this instance, however, whatever Hicks had been doing was not good enough. Perhaps his sojourn in Europe had weakened his hold on the Georgia Minstrels troupe he had left behind, and when he returned he was not able to regain control. At any rate, a terse press announcement on April 6, 1872, stated that Charles Callender had bought out the interest of his former partner, William Temple, and was now the sole proprietor of the Georgia Minstrels. Barney Hicks remained with the troupe as business manager for a time, then was replaced by a white manager, George W. Siddons.<sup>11</sup>

There were few, if any, immediate changes in the activities of the troupe after Callender's takeover—at least as revealed in the press. True, the new owner paid for bigger ads in the *Clipper*, but the Georgia Minstrels had always advertised extensively. They continued to maintain a tight and profitable schedule, as in the past; they had long ago extended their touring from primarily on the Eastern Seaboard to the Mid-West, South, and even Far West—and that continued as before.

The season of 1872–1873, however, did bring changes. As early as August 1872 it became apparent that Callender was recruiting new personnel, partially because of the loss of some of the old-timers.

<sup>11</sup>The details of the transaction have eluded my research. As early as January, 1872, the *Clipper* began referring to the troupe as Callender's Georgia Minstrels, but it is not clear whether Callender was manager or owner. NYClip, 6 April–24 August 1872 passim.

One ad, for example, stated, "A balladist and alto singer are advertised for." By the beginning of the season of 1873–1874, one change had become obvious: the great increase in size of the troupe. A list of Georgia Minstrels personnel published on September 13, 1873, in the *Clipper* contained twenty names, whereas formerly the count of the troupe had been twelve or thirteen. Of the enlarged troupe, twelve men were old-timers, dating back to the Barney Hicks period.<sup>12</sup>

During the next two or three years the Georgia Minstrels began to evolve as the troupe that would earn laurels as one of the best in the nation. Callender was credited by both white and black contemporaries, including Trotter, for recruiting the most talented black artists he could find to perform with the Minstrels. By the time Trotter began to write his account in May, 1877, the troupe included men of wide versatility and enormous gifts as vocalists, instrumentalists, and comedians. Trotter singles out some of their special talents:

At least four of their number have been in the past accomplished teachers of music; one has played in some of the best orchestras of England; one is a superior performer upon at least four instruments, while he is a fair player of twelve; several are excellent performers on two or three instruments; and three of the troupe arrange and write music.

In another place Trotter refers to "several members of this troupe [who] possess musical and histrionic abilities of an order so high as to fit them to grace stages of a more elevated character than the one upon which they now perform."<sup>13</sup> He notes in particular a singer/actor who left the troupe to join the "Hyers Opera Company," a point to which I shall return. Actually, it was not an opera company in our sense, but a musical comedy company known variously as the Hyers Sisters Combination, Hyers Sisters Opera Buffa Company, Hyers Sisters Comic Opera Troupe, Hyers Sisters Dramatic Company, or Hyers Sisters Concert Company.

Trotter's discussion is tantalizing; although he offers a list of the troupe's personnel as of May,

<sup>12</sup>NYClip, 7–28 September 1872 passim. More than once Callender was forced to "reorganize" his troupe when dissatisfied members broke away to form competing troupes, but eventually most returned to the "original" Georgia Minstrels. See further, NYClip, 14–28 September 1872; 6, 13 September 1873.

<sup>13</sup>Trotter, 276, 281.





1877, he does not distinguish among them. The reader is left to wonder which ones are the music teachers; which ones, the multi-instrumentalists, the composer-arrangers, the possessors of "histrionic abilities." Were they really ex-slaves? How did they obtain the musical training necessary to produce shows that could compete successfully with those of the nation's leading white minstrel troupes?

By drawing upon a variety of sources, I have collected enough bits of information to make possible a composite picture of the Georgia Minstrels as they were in the late 1870's at the beginning of their climb to stardom.<sup>14</sup>

John Thomas Douglass (1847-1886) can easily be identified as one of Trotter's "four accomplished teachers of music." Concert violinist, director of a string orchestra, and composer, as well as studio teacher, in later years he received wide public attention as an early benefactor of David Mannes, a violinist with the New York Philharmonic and founder of the Mannes School of Music in New York City. Douglass had encountered Mannes as a child under unusual circumstances, and had given the young white boy his first violin lessons. Mannes never forgot his black violin teacher, and in 1912, long after Douglass's death, helped to establish the Music School Settlement for Colored in New York City in memory of Douglass.

There is some confusion about how much musical training Douglass had: Mannes said that he had been sent abroad to study by wealthy white patrons, but the obituary published in the black press stated that he was self-taught. In all likelihood Mannes should be regarded as the more reliable informant, for it is improbable that Douglass could have taught himself to play classical violin as well as the press reported had he not been professionally trained. The white press called Douglass "the only Negro solo violinist," and his black contemporaries regarded him as "one of the greatest musicians of the race." Certainly he was the first black violinist to tour as a concert artist born in the United States.

Douglass wrote a number of compositions and large-form works, including a three-act opera, *Vir-*

*ginia's Ball*, when he was only 21 years old.<sup>15</sup> It was produced in 1868 at the Stuyvesant Institute in New York, with four of the nation's top black artists in the leading roles. In the 1872-1873 season, Douglass appeared a number of times with the Hyers Sisters Concert Company, winning plaudits for his performances.

A second person on Trotter's list who conducted a music studio was the multi-instrumentalist Frederick Elliot Lewis (1846-1877), one of the two black musicians who performed in Patrick S. Gilmore's orchestra for the World Peace Jubilee at Boston in 1872 after successfully passing the auditions for violinists. (The other was Henry F. Williams, whose career also is discussed by Trotter.) Lewis was active as an accompanist, orchestral conductor, composer, and arranger. He belonged to a veritable dynasty of New England black musicians, dating back to the patriarch Primus Lew, an army musician in the French and Indian Wars of the eighteenth century, and his celebrated son Barzillai Lew, fifer in the Revolutionary War and, after the war, leader of a dance orchestra great in demand among the elite.

It is probable that Trotter was counting George A. Skillings, the troupe's Musical Director, among those who had conducted music studios before joining the Georgia Minstrels. Skillings, the leader of the Georgia Minstrels orchestra as early as 1871, if not earlier, was a violinist and undoubtedly a strings teacher.

There is yet one other music teacher on Trotter's list: the multi-instrumentalist James Emidy. Little is known about the Emidy brothers, both of whom played with the Georgia Minstrels, except that James was a band conductor, and they were black Englishmen. In September, 1872, James advertised from England, in the *Clipper*, that he would be available after October 25th "with or without his band." There is no further mention of Emidy in the press; presumably, he settled in the States soon thereafter. The Emidys joined the Georgia Minstrels about 1877.

It is entirely possible that these were the sons—or more likely grandsons—of the ex-slave Emidee (*fl.* late 1800's), violinist, conductor, and composer. As a slave Emidee had been given the opportunity

<sup>14</sup>For further biographical details see Southern, *Biographical Dictionary*. See also Southern, "An Early Black Concert Company: The Hyers Sisters Combination" in *A Celebration of American Music: Words and Music in Honor of H. Wiley Hitchcock*, in press (University of Michigan Press).

<sup>15</sup>Trotter includes examples of compositions by Douglass and Lewis in his Music Supplement.

to study violin in Lisbon, Portugal, and after gaining his freedom he settled in Falmouth, England. He attracted wide attention when his story was related in the *Autobiography of James Silk Buckingham* (1855): the English author, in his youth, studied violin with Emidee in Falmouth and played in Emidee's musical groups. Buckingham tried to promote Emidee's career by showing some of his musical manuscripts to members of the London music establishment, but although the music was well received, London was not ready to accept the black composer of the music.

Trotter know of only four music teachers among the Georgia Minstrels, but there were others in the troupe during the 1870's. A. Hamilton Moore (1834-19-?), for example, a native of Philadelphia and a gifted trumpeter, studied in England with John Thompson Norton, trumpeter to George IV, and also studied music theory. During his stay abroad (1859-1874), he played trumpet in the Royal Lancaster Artillery, and in various Liverpool theater orchestras. Moore taught music for three years in Philadelphia after returning to the United States, then in 1877 joined the Georgia Minstrels. In addition to functioning as the troupe's star cornet soloist, Moore also directed the brass band.

Another music teacher active with the Georgia Minstrels during the 1870's was Alexander Luca (c. 1830-1883), concert tenor and teacher of vocal music, whose special responsibility with the Minstrels was to coach the singing groups. Luca brought a wealth of experience as well as talent to the Georgia Minstrels: a child member of the Luca Family Singers, he was still in his teens when the family troupe began a professional career after a successful debut in 1857 at New York City.

In 1873 Alex and his brother John, a baritone, were engaged by the Hyers Sisters Celebrated Concert Company, and they toured widely and extensively during the 1873-1874 season, a special feature of their concerts being the quartette singing of the Luca brothers and Hyers sisters, Emma and Anna. Alex, however, remained only a short while with the company; by the summer of 1874 he had left, and before the end of that year was touring with the Georgia Minstrels.

The most celebrated of all the Georgia Minstrels in the early years was Sam Lucas (1840-1916), comedian, ballad singer, guitarist, and gifted songwriter. Joining the Minstrels in July, 1873, as an endman,

he toured with the troupe, off and on, for the next ten or twelve years. Lucas was advertised as the "King of All Colored Comedians" and was immensely popular with both the critics and the public, especially in singing "character songs," most of which he wrote himself. Unlike the minstrels discussed so far, Lucas, the son of poor ex-slaves, was self-taught, but he had had experience performing with, first, a quadrille band, then with minstrel groups before joining the Georgia Minstrels, and he came to the Minstrels a celebrity.

In the spring of 1876 Lucas left the Georgia Minstrels to join the Hyers Sisters Combination as the star of that company's first musical, *Out of Bondage* (originally entitled *Out of the Wilderness*), and toured with them, off and on, for many years. When Lucas was not with the Hyers troupe, he was touring with the Georgia Minstrels, various dramatic companies, or with his own concert company.<sup>16</sup>

"Silver-voiced" Wallace King (c. 1840-1903), advertised as "the greatest colored tenor in the world," joined Callender's Georgia Minstrels in 1879, having previously toured with the Hyers Sisters Combination during the years 1873-1879. King had musical training in addition to a fine voice and was a great asset to the Georgia Minstrels, as well as to the Hyers Sisters. King remained with the concert company through its transformation in 1876 into a musical comedy company, and although he left the Hyers company in 1879, he returned to tour with the troupe intermittently during the next decade.

During its first dozen or so years, the Georgia Minstrels established itself as a national institution. Crisscrossing the nation in its annual tours, playing in hamlets and small towns, in large towns and the great urban centers, it successfully met the post-war public's insatiable hunger for entertainment and developed loyal followings among both black and white. For black entertainers—or "members of the profession," as they called themselves—the troupe functioned in a unique way: it was at once a haven for the established entertainer temporarily "at large" and a training ground for the neophyte, who could serve his apprenticeship with some of the most eminent black artists of the times.

Like the Original Georgia Minstrels, the Hyers Sisters Combination was a national institution for

<sup>16</sup> See Southern, "Two Early Black Musicals: *Out of Bondage* and *The Underground Railroad*." In progress.





the almost three decades of its existence and, as such, played an essential role in establishing the groundwork for a black musical theater. If black showmen found the Georgia Minstrels to be a sure source of employment with relatively good financial rewards, at the same time they were required to conform to often demeaning stereotypes and frequently were unable to find full outlet for their talents. The Hyers Sisters company may not have been able to compete with the minstrel troupe in the salaries it offered, but it did provide opportunity for the gifted artist to perform materials that affirmed his human dignity and reflected his professional training. It is not surprising, therefore, that several of the Georgia Minstrels' brightest stars toured with the Hyers Sisters Combination at one time or another in their careers—including, in addition to those named above, Billy Kersands, Willie Lyle, Fred Lyons, and Tom McIntosh.

Like other black minstrel troupes in the 1860's, the Georgia Minstrels inherited from Ethiopian burnt-cork minstrelsy the standard practices that had been established in the 1840's and, along with this, negative stereotypical images of the black man. But there was enough flexibility in the standard procedures to allow for innovation and improvisation; from the beginning the Georgia Minstrels undertook to produce shows which were novel and distinctively "genuine," plantation black-American, and, at the same time, enough in conformity with minstrel traditions to please their interracial audiences and keep them returning for more.<sup>17</sup>

Their shows followed the conventional three-part format, with the opening and closing parts presented by the full company, and the olio featuring specialty acts before the dropped curtain. The novelty came with what materials were used and how they were used. Programs typically opened with an overture, sometimes followed by a rousing choral number, then by a series of songs, and a walk-around to conclude Part I. In addition to solos (vocal and dance), the olio featured quartettes and other ensembles. The remainder of the program focused heavily on plantation sketches and skits, which allowed for solo singing with the full company joining on choruses.

The choral, ensemble, and solo singing always won laurels from the press, and the dances, special

laurels. Like the white troupes, the Georgia Minstrels had its romantic tenor balladeers, particularly in Wallace King; its "stump orators" in Barney Hicks and Hamilton Moore; its interpreters of "character songs" in Dick Little and Sam Lucas, whose performance of such numbers as "Grandfather's Clock" and "Shivering and Shaking" always brought down the house; and its female impersonators, or "prima donnas," in T. Drewitte and Willie Lyle.

Comedian Bob Height frequently was singled out for praise of his "comic shoe dance," and Billy Kersands was credited with having *invented* his specialty, the Old Essence of Virginia (soft-shoe dance). George Danforth's bones solos moved one critic to extravagant praise of him as "one of the best in his line I ever saw":

While playing his solo he places himself in every conceivable position on the stage, and also on a chair, and dropping a bone from each hand, he continues playing anything but easy music, with but one bone in each hand.<sup>18</sup>

Contrary to widespread belief, the Georgia Minstrels did not draw heavily upon Negro folksong—at least not in its early years, if we are to judge from extant programs. Sam Lucas, the major songwriter of the troupe, specialized in ballads, "character songs," and comic songs. The other songwriter of the troupe, Jim Grace and Pete Devonear, wrote conventional minstrel or "plantation" songs. All three, however, drew upon the slave songs as sources of refrain texts and melodies. Typically, the verse of the minstrel song was newly invented, the chorus drew upon or used a slave-song, and the piece concluded with an eight- or sixteen-measure dance chorus (that is, without text). Devonear's "Run Home, Levi" is representative; here, however, the borrowed material—from the slave song "I don't want to stay here no longer"—is used as a refrain rather than a chorus.

The Georgia Minstrels frequently broke with tradition in regard to the kind of music they performed. Trotter reports, for instance, that its soloists and vocal ensembles, particularly the quartets, were invited to perform in churches and on classical-music programs of professional organizations, and the contemporary press offers further documentation of

<sup>17</sup> A number of black-minstrel programs are extant in special theater collections around the nation. For a published program, see Southern, *Music of Black Americans*, 230.

<sup>18</sup> NYClip, 10 July 1869.



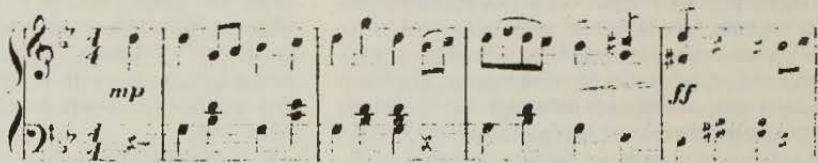
# RUN HOME LEVI.

SONG AND CHORUS.

SOURCE: *Plantation Songs and Jubilee Hymns* (Boston: White, Smith and Company, 1881), p. 81.

By PETE DEVONAR.

Allegro.

*Song.*

*p*

1. Hark ye lit-tle children did ye hear dat sound, Dars no re- pen- tence  
 2. Bless ye lit-tle children when I get in side the gate, Well have lots of lasses and  
 3. Now kind friends 'll bid you all good bye, For I hear the an-gels ev- lin and dis

*Chorus in unison.**Song.*

in de land, Den I dont want to stay here no long er, It is  
 lots of buckwheat cakes, Den I dont want to stay here no long er, While  
 darkie he must fly Den I dont want to stay here no long er,





on-ly un-cle Ga-briel blow in his horn Call in dis-able home  
 in-cle Ben-is-pas-sin round de-plate Well eat and be happy be  
 Bless ye lit-tle children when I get on de-od-er shore, I'll crawl in on my hand and knees and

*Chorus in unison.*

ear-ly in de morn, Den I dont want to stay here no long-er, Oh  
 fore it gets to late, Den I dont want to stay here no long-er, Oh  
 lay up-on de floor, Den I dont want to stay here no long-er, Oh

**CHORUS.**

*p 1<sup>st</sup> Time. 2<sup>nd</sup> Time f.*

Sop. Run home Le-vi run home for de sun's gone down and de  
 Alt. Run home Le-vi run home for de sun's gone down and de  
 Tenor Run home Le-vi run home for de sun's gone down and de  
 Bass. Run home Le-vi run home for de sun's gone down and de

*p 1<sup>st</sup> Time. 2<sup>nd</sup> Time f.*



moon dont shine, Den I dont want to stay here no long or,

moon dont shine, Den I dont want to stay here no long or,



this. One of the most spectacular of these "breaks" took place on a Sunday evening, March 12, 1876, at the Boston Theatre in Boston. The advertisement placed in local newspapers indicates the nature of the performance:

### Grand Sacred Jubilee Concert

All the Great Colored Singers  
in the World

Including the Favorite Hyers Sisters  
Concert Company Singers

Callender's Georgia Minstrels  
Grand Jubilee Singers

On such occasions as these, audiences were entertained with selections from the masters—Haydn, Verdi, Rossini—and with genuine Negro spirituals, such as had been popularized by the Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Hampton Singers.

On June 22, 1878, the *Clipper* announced that J. H. Haverly had become the proprietor of Callender's Georgia Minstrels, and Callender was being retained as manager. A big-time promoter, Haverly used his considerable promotional skills to advance his newly acquired black troupe in the same way as he did his white troupes. Periodically, beginning as early as 1879, he staged "monster" minstrel carnivals, where he gathered together one hundred or more black entertainers, men and women, to produce shows featuring the most celebrated black artists in the nation in such prestigious halls as the

Academy of Music in Philadelphia and Beethoven Hall in Boston.

During his tenure as proprietor (1878–1882), Haverly brought in black-minstrel's bigwigs: among others, the celebrated songwriter James Bland, later called "the idol of the music halls"; the virtuoso-banjoists James and George Bohee; famed comedian Tom McIntosh; Horace Weston, the "Von Bulow of the Banjo"; and violinist Joseph B. Brindis, the "Cuban musical wonder." In 1880 Haverly brought back into the fold some of the minstrel stars who had strayed, particularly to Sprague's Georgia Minstrels; included were Lucas, King, Kersands, and Alex Luca. He even persuaded the Hyers Sisters to appear as special guest artists for some of his "minstrel carnivals," which became more and more lavish through the years.

In June, 1880, for example, a mammoth outdoors production at Boston's Oakland Gardens was fitted with scenery to represent a southern plantation and, among other exotic acts, featured a steamboat race between the *Robert E. Lee* and the *Natchez*.<sup>19</sup> The next year Haverly took his Colored Minstrels to Europe, where his extensive promotion resulted in lavish productions similar to those staged in the United States.

With Haverly's ownership came the dissolution of the small, close-knit Georgia Minstrels troupe that Barney Hicks had organized in the 1860's, that Callender had developed into a world-class company during the 1870's, and about which Trotter had written in 1877. It was the end of an era.

<sup>19</sup> *Boston Morning Journal*, 5–7 July 1880.