

# Mapping Bristol's Musical Histories: black music and black musicians in 18th- and 19th-century Bristol



①

1752

'We are assured that the AFRICAN PRINCE, or Surprizing NEGRO ... will be exhibited ... at our ensuing ST JAMES Fair at the Three Tons on St James Back. The said NEGRO in a most accountable manner brings his hands flat clasp'd over his head, back and under his legs and this he does backwards as well as forwards with ever disengaging them. He likewise does several new and astonishing performances on the slack-wire and has had the honour to be seen by the Royal Society at their General Meeting in December last in Crane Court, Fleet Street, LONDON with universal admiration.' The performance cost half a crown (2 shillings and 6 pence), a substantial sum in 1752.

*Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 4 July 1752: 3

②

1757

'Run Away, some time since A NEGRO LAD about 18 years of age near five feet two inches high answers to the name of Starling and blows the French horn very well ...' Almost certainly, Starling was provided with music lessons by his master.

*Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 19 March 1757: 3

③

1789



George Polgreen Bridgetower (1778–1860) was born in Biala, Poland to a Polish mother and West Indian father. Both parents were probably servants, his father reportedly in the famous musical household of Prince Nikolai Esterházy where Joseph Haydn was Kappelmeister. Bridgetower learnt to play the violin and made his performing début on 11 April 1789, age ten, at the Concert Spirituel in Paris. Later the same year, and promoted as the 'son of the African Prince', Bridgetower played at the Assembly Rooms in Prince's Street, Bristol on 18 December 1789 and again on 1 January 1790.

*Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 12 Dec 1789: 3, and 26 Dec 1789: 3



PUBLIC BUILDINGS &c			
1 Equestrian Theatre	10 Excise Office	18 Welch Market	26 G
2 Grammar School	11 Custom House	19 Leather Hall	27 C
3 Oldward School	12 Mansion House	20 Exchange Market	28 S
4 Nildridge School	13 Merchants Hall	21 Exchange	29 B
5 Citizens Arms House	14 Merchants Arms H.	22 Post Office	30 A
6 Paters Arms House	15 City Highway	23 Council House	31 D
7 City School	16 Theatre Royal	24 Guild Hall	32 A
8 Great Crane	17 Chapter Hall	25 Physicians Hall	33 B

④

1773

1773: an un-named black musician lived in Wilder Street, in the St Paul's area of Bristol. Little is known about the man, but he is recorded as teaching a local 10-year-old boy, Benjamin George, to play the fife (a flute) at the Full Moon tavern in Stokes Croft (the Full Moon is still open today). Ford gave evidence to a court case in which he stated that: 'I went up to the Full Moon Yard every night that week to see the Black to learn to play the Fife'.  
BRO: JQS/P/49

⑤

1839

**THEATRE-ROYAL, BRISTOL.**  
The Public is respectfully informed that an Engagement, for Five Nights only, has been concluded with  
**MR. T. D. RICE,**  
the Celebrated and Original **JIM CROW**, who will have the honour of making his First Appearance in Bristol, on MONDAY, April 8th, in TWO NEW PIECES, never acted here, and written expressly for the display of his unique and unrivalled Talents.  
Second Week of Mr. WRIGHT's Engagement.  
ON MONDAY Evening, April 8th, will be presented (first time here) a new and highly popular piece, entitled,  
**JUMBO JUM.**  
Jumbo Jum ... .. Mr. T. D. Rice.  
In the Course of the Evening, Mr. T. D. RICE will sing his popular Negro Melodies of  
'Jump Jim Crow,' and 'Such a Gitting up Stairs.'  
A Pas Senl. by Miss G. LE BARR.

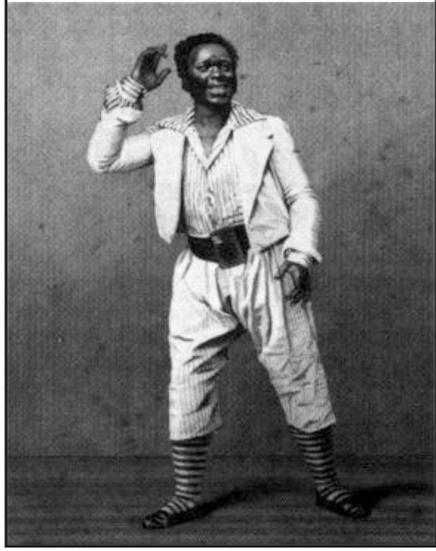
*Bristol Mercury*, 6 April 1839: 3

Thomas Dartmouth Rice (1808–1860) was a white American itinerant performer. Rice is important to the history of black music and black musicians because of his famous creation: Jim Crow. About 1828 Rice 'blacked up' by using burnt cork to colour and blacken his face – and sang the song 'Jump Jim Crow'. The act of the southern American plantation field hand was naive and fun-loving, but also a showoff, was a success; the song became an international hit. Rice brought his act to London in 1836, but his first performance in Bristol was not until 7 April 1839. These performances were badly reviewed and poorly attended. Rice's act, blackface minstrelsy, remained popular with all classes of society well into the twentieth century.



**7 1846**

Ira Aldridge (1807–1867) was an African American actor and singer and the first black 'star' of the theatrical stage. But persistent discrimination against black actors in America forced Aldridge to emigrate to Britain in 1824 where he billed himself as the 'African Roscius'. Aldridge first appeared at Bristol's Theatre Royal on 16 March 1846 where he performed the challenging singer's part of Mungo in Dibdin's comic opera, *The Padlock*. The newspaper advertisements highlighted Aldridge's colour: 'The unprecedented novelty of a Native African, personating Dramatic Characters, has excited a degree of interest unparalleled in the annals of the Drama ...' *Bristol Mercury*, 14 Mar 1846: 5



**8 1878**

Jarrett and Palmer's 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' Company performed at the Prince's Theatre, Bristol in October 1878. The virtuoso banjoist Horace Weston was a member of the troupe that visited Bristol although the newspapers were not correct in stating that all the black players in the performance were either emancipated slaves who were either born on or worked on a slave plantation. *Bristol Mercury & Daily Post*, 5 Oct 1878: 8

**9 1888**

'The Bohee Brothers performed various selections on banjos, which they manipulated with remarkable skill, producing some exceedingly fine music from those instruments.' *Bristol Mercury*, 20 Nov 1888: 8

Brothers James Douglass Bohee (1844–1897) and George Bohee (1856–1929) were Canadian banjoists who first toured Britain in July 1880. About 1890, it is believed that the brothers recorded a banjo duet on an Edison wax cylinder. The recordings have never been found—the report only exists in an Australian newspaper—but if the story is true, they would be earliest sounds ever recorded of African-American music.

- 54 Taylor's Alley Ho
- 55 St Peter's Hospital
- 56 Newgate
- 57 St Stephen's Hosp
- 58 Trinity Hosp
- 59 Friars' Church Ho
- 60 Trinity Bridge
- 61 Philip's Black Ho
- 62 St Paul's Church

Map: Mathews's, 1794 (courtesy of Bristol Record Office)

**10 1877**

COLSTON HALL, TO-NIGHT, AT EIGHT.— The [Wilmington] JUBILEE SINGERS from North Carolina, America, in their QUAIN and MELODIUS SONGS, as Sung in their Days of Slavery. The Singers were all born in slavery, and thier Songs are a faithful rendering of the Music peculiar to Slave Life.

**THE JUBILEE SINGERS will give their Unrivalled ENTERTAINMENT THIS EVENING (SATURDAY) and MONDAY, March 17th and 18th. Chairman on Saturday, Rev. E. G. GANGE; Chairman on Monday, Rev. JOSEPH MORRIS. Doors open 7.30; commence at 8. Stalls, 8s.; Second, 2s.; Third, 1s.; Back, 6d.—Tickets to be had at Mr. BRUNN's Music Saloon.**

*Bristol Mercury*, 17 Mar 1877: 5

**6 1869**

White American history of his most backed up— and hands t, that of a ho is both an instant l hit. Rice first perfor- The perfor- ended, but ly popular th century.

Sam Hague's Great American Slave Troupe and Brass Band first appeared at the Broadmead Rooms on 3, 4 and 28 May 1867, moving up to the Theatre Royal on their return visit in 1869. For their first performance, Hague advertised them as 'sixteen natural talented artistes, who, prior to June, 1865, were slaves in America', then on a tour of England 'giving their own and the only true representation of Negro life on the plantations of America'. *Bristol Mercury*, 27 Apr 1867: 8; 25 May 1867: 8; 6 Mar 1869: 5

**11 1888**

JUBILEE SINGERS. — To-morrow American coloured jubilee singers (descendents of freed slaves) will sing slave melodies and give short evangelist addresses at Arley Chapel, Cheltenham Road ...' *Bristol Mercury*, 21 Jul 1888: 6

**12 1898**

'Y.M.C.A. HALL ... FISK UNIVERSITY JUBILEE SINGERS', 3 January 1898. The choir were a fund-raising group from the African-American college founded in 1866 by the American Missionary Association. *Bristol Mercury*, 3 Jan 1898: 4

# A brief introduction to black music and black musicians in 18th- and 19th-century Bristol

Bristol's earliest account of a person of African origin dates from about 1560 when it is recorded that a 'blacked moore' was employed as a gardener to Sir John Young (1 on the map). ('Blacked moore' was a term used to describe black people at the time.) But it was almost 200 years before the city's first black entertainer was noted performing at the circus at St James's Fair in 1752. Although the performer was referred to as an 'African Prince', he was unlikely to have been nobility and may have been a transported slave who had become the property of the ship's captain: slave ship captains were allowed to keep a single slave at the end of a trip. The runaway black servant, Starling (2), who could play the French Horn may have been brought to Bristol this way, too. Equally, both men may have been freed slaves from America who, like many others in Britain's eighteenth-century black population, had worked their way to Britain as sailors. Just possibly, they had been brought to Britain by the army as a musician drummers or trumpeters.

The account of a black musician in Britain shows that an African drummer was employed at the court of James IV in Edinburgh by 1504. Bristol's early military records, though, do not show any black drummers, trumpeters or other members. The closest reference that exists shows that two black bandsmen from the Somerset Militia were involved in a fight with white soldiers from another regiment. Perhaps the city's ties to the slave trade meant that Bristol's military chose not to recruit black musicians. Their presence throughout the rest of the country, however, suggests that they may have existed, but that their presence was either never recorded, or that any records have failed to survive.

Only slightly more visible were Bristol's black street musicians. One, described in 1807 in the *Bristol Mirror* as having a model ship built into his hat, sounds much like the famous Joseph Johnson, a disabled black sailor who sang songs on London's streets in the early nineteenth century.

Bristol's first and only professional black musician resident in the eighteenth century was the man who taught the young Benjamin George to play the fife at the Full Moon tavern (3). Nothing else is known of this man and, as the century came to an end, Britain's black population as a whole decreased. The decline in the black population was a country-wide phenomenon, but the end of the century did see the arrival of the first touring professional black musician

in the city, the child violinist George Polgreen Bridgetower (4). Despite his age, and under the guidance of his father, Bridgetower toured Europe in the 1790s and performed in Bristol within days of debuting on the British concert stage.

Although Britain's black population as a whole continued to decline in the nineteenth century, black music became more and more common as an increasing number of African American professional musicians began to travel to Britain and Bristol for a public – most of whom were middle class and almost certainly exclusively white – ever-willing to explore new musical sounds. One infamous character stands out: the minstrel character Jim Crow, as performed by Thomas Dartmouth Rice (5). As a form of entertainment, the minstrel show is extremely problematic, especially in its native America where it originated from. Performances of minstrelsy in Britain could arguably have received a different reception given the smaller black population and other factors. Nevertheless, Rice was a financially successful global export that had a lasting influence on the perception of black music worldwide (for better or worse).

Rice was followed across the Atlantic by genuine African American acts who appeared in increasing numbers on Bristol's stages, at the Broadmead Rooms in Prince's Street (6), the Theatre Royal (5, 7 and 9), and at the Prince's Theatre that once stood in Park Row (8). Most were popular music acts, but as the century headed towards 1900, a new phenomenon, black American Gospel became the dominant African American musical form on Bristol stages (10, 11 and 12) and throughout the country. Importantly, black American Gospel was to lay many of the musical foundations on which jazz and its many spin-off genres has been based ever since.

*Map and text by Dr Nicholas Nourse, University of Bristol*

Further reading:

Madge Dresser and Peter Flemming, *Bristol: Ethnic Minorities at the city 1000–2001* (Phillimore, 2007)

D P Lindegaard, *Black Bristolians of the 18th and 19th Centuries* (BRO: Pamphlet 1525)

Norma Myers, *Reconstructing the Black Past: Blacks in Britain, c. 1780–1830* (Routledge, 1996)