

BRIEF STUDIES and REPORTS

The Perry George Lowery / Scott Joplin Connection: New Information on an Important African American Cornetist

Richard I. Schwartz

The author of this article has previously discussed the life and career of Perry George Lowery (1869-1942) in the *Historic Brass Society Journal* (vol. 12 [2002]: 61-88). The present article is designed to provide supplementary information about his circus career and his surprising professional association with Scott Joplin (1868-1919). It has become apparent to this author that a relationship of strong mutual respect and friendship developed between Perry George Lowery and Scott Joplin during the early twentieth century. P.G. Lowery was renowned for his abilities not only as a cornetist, but also as a conductor of many brass bands, consisting of the best African American band musicians in the entertainment world.¹ Scott Joplin's achievements are many and have been researched extensively by several authors.² One of the few articles in *The Indianapolis Freeman*³ documenting a friendship between Lowery and Joplin states that "P.G. Lowery, assistant manager of Swain's Nashville Students was the special guest of Scott Joplin, the ragtime king and author of the following hits: 'Maple Leaf Rag,' 'Easy Winner,' 'Peacherine Rag,' 'Sun-flower Slowdrag,' and 'A Blizzard'." Much has been written about all of these compositions with the exception of the last one: no piece entitled *A Blizzard* has survived and according to Edward A. Berlin⁴ this reference is the only known mention of it.

Lowery extolled the praises of Joplin's works in *The Indianapolis Freeman* (16 November 1901, p. 5, cols 1-2). "I consider Scott Joplin one [*sic*] our leading rag-time writers. All first class bands will do well to get all of his compositions. When I desired a decided hit with the 4 Paw & Sells concert, I at once got the Scott Joplin's rag time bunch." Lowery then asked that the reader write to John Stark and Son, Publishers, St. Louis, to secure a copy of the "bunch." Earlier that year⁵ P.G. Lowery featured the *Sunflower Slow Drag* with his band for the Forepaugh and Sells Circus. He recommends that band directors purchase the piece, "if you want the finest slow drag published." The friendship between these two men is further revealed by greetings Joplin sent to Lowery in *The Freeman* on at least one occasion.

This friendship was indeed well established by 1901, for a year later John Stark and Sons of St. Louis published Joplin's *A Breeze from Alabama*. Originally dedicated to P.G. Lowery, the composition has a large engraving of Lowery on the cover (see Figure 1). The piece also has an alternate cover with likenesses of two unidentified white performers. Perhaps Stark felt that the original engraving would not sell as many copies as the one with Lowery on the cover, but Stark's motivation can only be a matter of speculation.

A BREEZE FROM ALABAMA

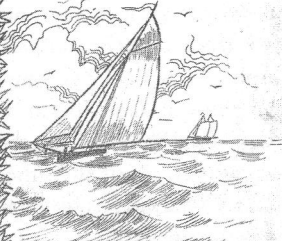


DEDICATED TO
P.G. LOWERY
WORLD'S CHALLENGING COLORED
CORNETIST AND BAND MASTER

JOHN STARK & SON
SHEET MUSIC PUBLISHERS
ST. LOUIS

A RAGTIME TWO STEP
BY
SCOTT JOPLIN

50¢



COMPOSER OF
MAPLE LEAF RAG
SUNFLOWER SLOW DRAG
PEACHERINE RAG
SWIPSEY CAKE WALK
THE ENTERTAINER
THE RAG TIME DANCE
AUGUSTAN CLUB WALTZ

Figure 1

Cover of *A Breeze from Alabama* (1902). Courtesy of Trebor Tichenor.

Lowery discussed *A Breeze from Alabama* in *The Freeman* (6 September 1902, p. 5, col. 2): "It is a great pleasure for me to state that the late composition by Scott Joplin, 'A Breeze from Alabama,' is a hit everywhere. It is fast growing popular. Get it while it is fresh from the press. Anyone that has played his Maple Leaf Rag, knows that the name of Scott Joplin is a guarantee of the merits of 'A Breeze from Alabama.' Mr. Joplin is justly termed the king of rag-time writers." This issue of *The Freeman* further encourages all pianists to write John Stark and Sons to secure a copy of this "ragtime two-step."⁶ Joplin's friendship with Lowery may well have been the result not only of Joplin's deep respect for Lowery, but also of his fondness for the cornet. Although little is known of Joplin's connection with the instrument, he apparently played the cornet to provide income during his student days in Sedalia, Missouri. Shortly after Joplin's arrival in Sedalia but before his matriculation in 1897 at George R. Smith College in the same town, Joplin joined the Queen City Concert Band, also known as the Queen City Cornet Band. Emmett Cook, drummer with the organization, recommended Joplin for the band. Figure 2 is a photograph taken prior to Joplin's tenure with the group, but it shows a characteristic instrumentation for small bands of the time. The band had some serious financial difficulties throughout its history, even though it was supported by many social organizations, such as the Maple Leaf Club, the Black 400 Club, and the Ladies' Club of the Morgan Street Baptist Church. It was a highly respected organization that regularly won local competitions. Joplin played cornet in the group until September 1896, when he formed his own six-piece group, consisting of members of the Queen City Concert Band. The instrumentation was cornet, clarinet (Tom Ireland), E♭ tuba (A. H. Hickman), baritone, drums (Emmett Cook), and piano (Scott Joplin).⁷ Of all the pieces Joplin wrote, only two could have been performed by the band while Joplin was with them, as only two predate his departure from the Queen City Concert Band: *Please Say You Will* and *A Picture of Her Face*.⁸

Figure 3 is of special interest to this author, for it shows P.G. Lowery and his Annex Band for the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus. Lowery played cornet in the band and also served as its conductor from 1919 to 1931.⁹ Most of Lowery's career was centered on the circus. According to *A Sketch of Lowery's Life*,¹⁰ his career began on 13 May 1893 with the B.E. Wallace Circus, and from 27 February 1894 to 1 July 1898 he directed the Nashville Student Theatrical Show. On 2 July 1898 he was cornet soloist at the Trans-Mississippi Exposition and on 28 April 1899 he joined the Sells Brothers Circus in New York. He remained with that show until it was robbed in Tabor, North Carolina on 19 November 1904. He joined the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus on 19 April 1905 and remained with them until 23 April 1917, performing as cornet soloist for a short time during that tenure. His career with the Annex Band for the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus began on 16 April 1919 and lasted until 12 September 1931, his longest appointment as circus band director. He directed a concert band at the Chicago World's Fair in 1933, and on 25 April 1934 he joined the Gorman Circus, remaining with them only until 4 April 1935, when he joined the Cole Brothers Circus. Lowery stayed with them until the end of the 1937 season. On 30 April 1938 he joined the Robbins Brothers Circus, but left after only one season. He spent the 1939 season with the Downie Brothers, but returned to Cole



Figure 2

Queen City Cornet Band. Courtesy of University Archives, Fisk University.

Brothers for the 1940 and 1941 seasons. According to *A Sketch* he had planned to conduct the Cole Brothers Circus Band again during the 1942 season (from spring until the beginning of winter). During the off-seasons Lowery was busy conducting his own band, P.G. Lowery's Musical Enterprise.

An extremely talented cornetist and band director, Lowery set the stage for thousands of circus musicians and was largely responsible for making the circus band a highly respected performing vehicle. Lowery was a unique master musician who encouraged his players to produce the very best through kindness and compliments rather than insults and derision.¹¹ His stature as cornetist and circus band conductor is acknowledged even today, as he has received posthumous honors from the Windjammers, a national organization of retired circus musicians located in Sarasota, Florida, who in 1996 he was inducted him into their

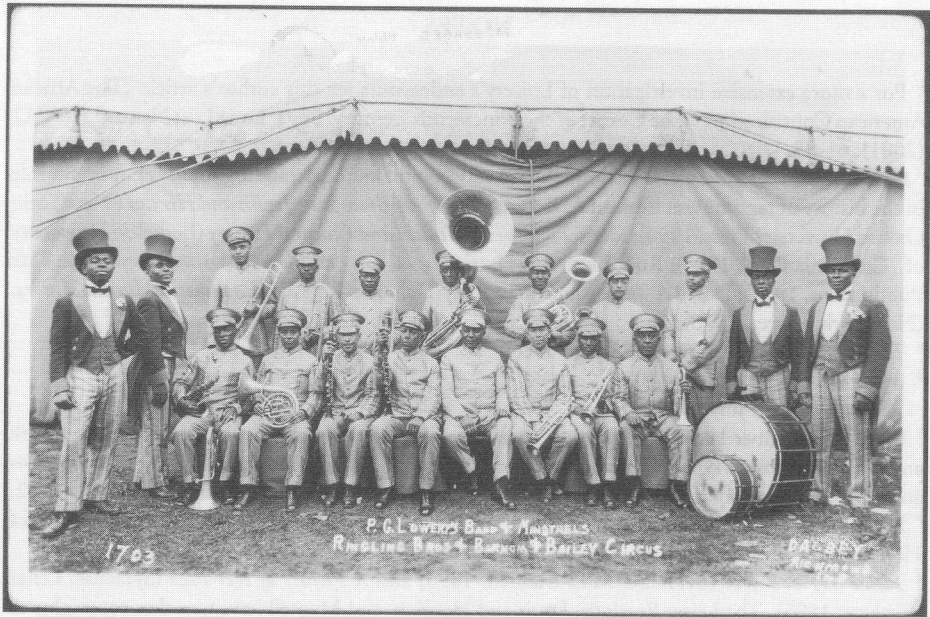


Figure 3

The Annex Band for the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus, P.G. Lowery, Conductor. Reproduced by permission of The New York Public Library, Schomburg Collection.

Circus Hall of Fame. Furthermore, between 4 and 6 July 1997, he and many other influential African Americans were honored in Eureka, Kansas, his birthplace, with a festival sponsored by the Greenwood County Historical Society.¹²

Both Lowery and Joplin were extremely influential musicians and their friendship attests to their mutual respect. Lowery was perhaps as influential in the area of circus bands as Joplin was in ragtime music. Both did in fact legitimize the music of their own respective fields and forged the way for countless musicians to follow. This author hopes that this article and his preceding one in *The Historic Brass Society Journal* (vol. 12 [2002]: 61-88) may stimulate interest among other researchers and provide a resource for further study.

Richard Schwartz is currently Associate Professor of Music at Virginia State University in Petersburg, Virginia. This article is the result of continued research for his book The Cornet Compendium: The History and Development of the Nineteenth-Century Cornet, available on-line at <http://www.angelfire.com/music2/thecornetcompendium>

NOTES

¹ For a more extensive investigation of Lowery's endeavours see this author's article "The African American Contribution to the Cornet of the Nineteenth Century: Some Long Lost Names" *HBSJ* 12 (2001): 61-88.

² Four works which the author recommends as very helpful in understanding Joplin's important role in the history of ragtime are: Edward A. Berlin, *King of Ragtime: Scott Joplin and His Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); idem, *Ragtime: A Musical and Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis, *They all Played Ragtime* (New York: Oak Publications, 1971); David A. Jansen and Trebor Jay Tichenor, *Rags and Ragtime: A Musical History*, (New York: Dover, 1978).

³ *The Freeman*, 16 November 1901, p. 5, cols. 1-2.

⁴ Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, p. 102.

⁵ *The Freeman*, 20 July 1901, p. 5, col. 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6 September 1902, p. 5, col. 1. The name of the publisher appears incorrectly as John Stirk and Sons—obviously a typographical error. The entry in *The Freeman* also mentions that the piece has an image of Lowery on the cover. The piece was not registered for copyright until 29 December 1902.

⁷ Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, pp. 22-25; Katherine Preston, *Scott Joplin: Composer* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988), Black Americans of Achievement Series, pp. 46-47.

⁸ *Please Say You Will* (Syracuse: M.L. Mantell, 1895) and *A Picture of Her Face* (Syracuse: Leiter Brothers, 1895). The Leiter Brothers, Louis and Herman, and Mantell have no other copyrights to their name, so it is highly possible that it was the quality of the music that inspired both firms to publish these pieces. The title page of *Please Say You Will* indicates that Joplin also sang in the Texas Medley Quartette, a double quartet of eight male voices. Members of the organization were Joplin, conductor and leader; Will Joplin, his brother, lead voice; Robert Joplin, another brother, baritone; John Williams, lead or baritone; Leonard Williams, tenor; Emmett Cook, tenor; Richard Smith, bass; and Frank Bledsoe, bass. According to Trebor Tichenor, The Queen City Concert Band also had *The Sunflower Slow Drag* in its repertoire and played it into the 1920s, after Joplin had died. See Trebor Tichenor, "Missouri Ragtime Revival," *Rag Times* 4/5 (January 1971), p. 3; cited in Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, p. 299 n. 40.

⁹ His Annex band was a very busy organization, for it was responsible for providing music for all sideshows at the circus. Lowery's career might have taken a different path, however, had he been able to play with the larger white band. He was such an exceptional cornetist that Fred Jewell and Merle Evans, the conductor of the larger white band, did indeed want Lowery to join that organization. Unfortunately however, pressure from the management prevented this from happening. Although a specific date for the Annex photograph above was not found, rosters of P.G. Lowery's band for both the 1921 and 1931 seasons were located at the P.G. Lowery Vertical File in the Archives at the Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin (Erin Foley, Archivist). The File has both rosters, extracted from *The Billboard* (16 April 1921, p. 63) and *The Billboard* (23 May 1931, p. 72) respectively. Neither publication contained a photograph, however, and it is unlikely that either roster corresponds to the Annex photograph above. The 1921 roster has the same number of performers, but only one entertainer. Instruments are also not listed. The roster is as follows: P.G. Lowery (Leader), Thos. May, Doc. Wanzer, Rich Jasper, Fred A. Williams, Calvin A Ivory, Walt. Coleman, Chas. Evans, Redus H. Horton, Sim Miller, Roy Carter, Winston Walker, Wm. May, Jas. H. Faulkner, Jas. L. Holmes, Mrs. Carrie Lowery (Entertainer). The author of this article can match three of these performers accurately with an instrument, as their names appear in rosters of other organizations directed by Lowery over

many years: Thomas May, cornet; William May, bass; and James L. Holmes, percussion. The 1931 roster in the Vertical File also does not correspond to the above photograph. Although the number of performers and comedians is correct, the distribution of instruments is not. The roster is as follows: P. G. Lowery, director and cornetist; Albert Kemp, assistant director and cornetist; Willard Thompson, cornet; William Crabble, Jr. and Thomas Cook, trumpets; Howard Duffy and George E. Glenn, trombones; William Crab[b]le, mellophone; M. O. Russell, mellophone, saxophone, and orchestra leader; Walter Williams and C. A. Ivory, clarinets and saxophones; James L. Holmes and Edw. W. Warren, percussion; Ben M. Goodall, euphonium; William May, bass; Charles Beechum, Refus Dizson, Strawberry Russell and Roland Canada, comedians. It may be impossible to reconstruct an exact roster for the Annex photograph, as band personnel may well have changed even within a given season.

¹⁰ *A Sketch of Lowery's life (in his own words)* can be found in P.G. Lowery's Papers, Kachel's Collection at the Circus World Museum Archives, Baraboo, Wisconsin. This one-page document is unique, for it summarizes not only the highlights of his professional career, but also various events in his personal life (see note 14).

¹¹ "P.G. Lowery," *The Freeman*, 27 July 1907, p. 2, col. 2; "P.G. Lowery, Great Cornet Virtuoso in Indianapolis," *The Freeman*, 12 September 1914, p. 6, col. 3.

¹² Information about P.G. Lowery's career in the circus was indeed sparse. Neither the Ringling Museum of the Circus at Florida State University's Center for Cultural Arts nor the Windjammers in Sarasota, Florida could not provide any additional information. The archives at the Circus World Museum in Baraboo, Wisconsin, however, were able to provide some interesting and useful information concerning Lowery's career and early years (personal communication, 20 December 2001). The one-page *A Sketch of P.G. Lowery's Life* offers some very useful, including specific dates relating to his professional career (see above), but the dates in the document pertaining to the early years of his life seem to be somewhat unreliable, judging from information derived from two separate United States Census records. In *A Sketch* Lowery indicates that he was born in 1871. This author believes however that Perry's birth year more likely was as early as 1869. The United States Census of 1870 already lists a Perry Lowery (see Schwartz, "The African American Contribution," p. 81, n. 24). Papers at the Circus World Museum donated by Clifford Watkins show that the 1870 United States Census lists Perry as eight months old at the time of the enumeration on 28 July 1870. This fact alone could be enough to place Perry's birth in 1869, but the 1875 Kansas State Census also lists Perry as five years old at the time of the enumeration on 1 March 1875. By calendar years, this fact also places Perry's birth year in 1869. It is the author's opinion that Lowery was born on 11 October 1869, not 11 October c.1870, the date given in Schwartz, "The African American Contribution," p. 64.

It was at first inconceivable to this author that Lowery could have been mistaken about his birth year. There are several possible reasons for the inaccuracy, however, the most likely being that his birth year was incorrectly reported to him when he was young. This hypothesis is supported by the apparent veracity of the *Sketch* as concerns Lowery's later life.

COMMUNICATION

In my article “François René Gebauer’s *50 Leçons pour les Trombonne Basse, Alto & Tenor: The Earliest Book of Études for the Trombone*” (*Historic Brass Society Journal* 11 [1999]: 107-12), I made reference to the six trios for three trombones that form the final six “lessons” of this étude book (pp. 108-09). After the appearance of my article, I also published an edition of these trios (see review in this issue). In spite of my intensive occupation with these pieces, I until recently failed to recognize the very obvious origins of two of the trios: Trio no. 5 is the “March of the Priests” that opens the second act of Mozart’s *Magic Flute*, and Trio no. 4 is the *Emperor’s Hymn*, i.e., “Gott erhalte Franz den Kaiser” (“God save Franz the Emperor”) by Joseph Haydn, which Haydn was also to use as the theme of the slow movement (theme and variations) of his Quartet op. 76, no. 3 (“Emperor”).

The presence of Haydn’s melody in Gebauer’s work makes it necessary to reconsider the date of publication of the lost original edition, which I had postulated as being between 1795-97 on the evidence of the note found at the end of André Braun’s *Gamme et Méthode pour les Trombones* (p. 107; see also my article “André Braun’s *Gamme et Méthode pour les Trombones* Revisited,” *HBSJ* 11 [1999]: 93-106. The note in Braun’s method must have been added sometime after the original engraving of the printing plates, but, as far as I can tell, by the same engraver.) Both the *Emperor’s Hymn* and the Quartet op. 76, no. 3 were written in 1797, the former being published that same year, the latter in 1799. Not only does this preclude the melody’s publication in Gebauer’s *Leçons* prior to 1797, but it also seems unlikely that a piece based on a hymn in honor of the Austrian emperor could have been published in France before the end of the French Revolution in 1799. Therefore, the earliest probable date of publication for the original Parisian edition of Gebauer’s *50 Leçons* would have to be ca. 1800.

Howard Weiner