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## Ashley Street Blues: Racial Uplift and the Commodification of Vernacular Performance in Lavilla, Florida, 1896-1916

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

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ASHLEY STREET BLUES: RACIAL UPLIFT AND THE  
COMMODIFICATION OF VERNACULAR PERFORMANCE  
IN LAVILLA, FLORIDA, 1896-1916

By

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## ABSTRACT

This study is a cultural history. It traces the interconnected narratives of the entertainment communities that flourished during the early years of the twentieth century in LaVilla, one of Jacksonville, Florida's African-American neighborhoods. Vaudeville houses, theatrical stock companies, touring tent shows, and honky-tonk theaters comprised this dynamic local scene, providing important venues for the exchange of newly emergent performance practices and ideologies. Individuals and institutions with ties to LaVilla have made significant contributions to African-American vernacular culture. Composers and musicians like John Rosamond Johnson and Eugene Francis Mikell; touring companies such as Patrick Chappelle's Rabbit's Foot Minstrels and Eph Williams' Silas Greene from New Orleans Company; and vaudeville houses, such as Frank Crowd's Globe Theater, are included among them. Nationally recognized figures, including Billy Kersands, "Ma" Rainey, and "Jelly Roll" Morton worked for a significant amount of time on LaVilla's stages. Although this period is characterized by the implementation of legally enforced segregation and progressively encroaching "Jim Crow" laws, it also represents black entertainment's final chapter before innovations in communication technologies necessitated entirely new economic strategies. Performing for segregated black audiences on stages owned by black businessmen, entertainers began to explore new and distinctively African-American styles and themes, including new forms of music, such as jazz and the blues.

## FOREWORD

My personal sense of geographic location is visceral and deep. Experience of place has provided a locus for my autobiographical narratives, immanence to my dreams, and fixed points of reference for my peregrinations. Place offers immutable stability that persists well beyond the span of human life, yet it can be transfigured through individual memory. It can be quantitatively described through cardinal coordinates, yet surface mutability can render its qualities unrecognizable. What continues to fascinate me about places, though, is that they create circumscribed stages where shared cultural activities can be enacted and exchanged in the public sphere. In short, places host local performance communities.

As a performer and a scholar, I have long been captivated by the fluid nature of the regional performance scenes in which I have participated. For many years, I traced streams of repertoire as they flowed between members of ad hoc music ensembles. These bands represented creative and professional affiliations and evolved from one temporary grouping into a variety of entirely new ones with disorienting rapidity. Songs, riffs, arrangements, and jokes (particularly jokes) moved freely throughout the ephemeral communities in which I claimed membership and the fragments of these cultural practices illuminated trails that remained evident long after the performer who first introduced them had left for other engagements. These traces constituted a continuous pattern of sharing and appropriation that was central to the construction of our personal and professional identities. Choice of material was not only an aesthetic decision, but it also became an integral part of individual and collective professional success strategies for members of these communities.

Admittedly, there was a minimal “degree of separation” between individual residents of the sparsely populated region of northern New England where I grew to maturity, but separation between performers vying for paid engagements in a few available performance venues was even smaller. It wasn’t long before I realized that if I hadn’t shared the stage with a given musician from this scene, I had performed with someone else who had. As a result, the sum of our collective repertoires might be visually depicted as a series of interlocking Venn diagrams. Whether one were to describe these elements of performance practice as cultural texts, gestures, memes, or “flows of code,” it was starkly evident that a series of significant exchanges of

symbolic content had taken place. These connections, these networks intrigued me and there were particular places in my own experience that encouraged a unique sense of social intimacy, an essential part in this cultural exchange. Later, I realized that these same types of places might also provide discrete, definable units against which a scholarly observer might describe and analyze these relationships. These perspectives, formed by my background and experiences, provide me with the analytical lens through which I view this present study.

Tallahassee, Florida, had already been my home for a number of years when my lifelong engagement with jazz and blues music (a repertoire that had flowed northward many decades earlier) inspired me to undertake a serious investigation of the early history of this region's local music scene. My first assumption was that it would be a relatively simple process. After all, I was deep in the Southland, where these styles were reputed to have first emerged. Surely there must have been some significant activity in this part of the country. I began spending more and more time in the archives of Florida State University, Florida Agriculture and Mechanical University, the Florida State Library, and the Leon County Public Library hunting for pertinent local information. I kept running into obstacles, though. A thorough search through the back issues of the local paper first demonstrated one of the major stumbling blocks to my enterprise. If one were to claim that the Tallahassee Democrat from the early 1900s revealed very little about the cultural activities of local African-Americans, it would be a crass understatement. Of course, there were numerous advertisements for entertainments at the local white opera house and elsewhere (including announcements celebrating the arrival of Thomas Dixon's latest theatrical extravaganza, the *Clansman*), but there was an almost total absence of information about Tallahassee's black residents, save in the paper's crime reports. At this early stage in my research, I understood that as an unresolved consequence of white racism, the historical record for black vernacular entertainment during the early part of the century and in this part of the country would be scant and at best, spotty.

I uncovered only two scholarly journal articles that specifically addressed topics related to African-American music history in Florida. In one article, Kent Kastner from the University of South Florida briefly traced the careers of blues performers from the 1930s through the 1950s. In the other, Kastner, with collaborators Ruth Barnes and David Bealmear, investigated the trope of "Florida" as an imaginative or nostalgic theme in blues songs. Information from the earliest

days continued to elude me. As I explored various general historical accounts related to the genesis of jazz and blues styles, prospecting for any information about the region that I could find, I discovered a chronological bias in their coverage that accompanied the geographical bias. The preponderance of available scholarship focused only on the historical period that followed the introduction of recording technology, leaving the earliest years of the twentieth century shrouded in relative silence. An example of this is Bruce Bastin's excellent work Red River Blues, which contains solid research on Florida from the mid-1920s onward, but still did not satisfy my desire to learn about the region's earliest involvement with these musical styles.

One of the sources I consulted, Robert Palmer's book Deep Blues, briefly mentions the regional styles of Virginia, Texas, and even Georgia, yet never refers to Florida specifically. However, Palmer describes the earliest origins of this musical style more thoroughly than any other sources I had previously consulted (at this point in my research, I had yet to discover Paul Oliver's later publications). One important observation addressed in Palmer's work concerns the dissemination of the new music. In his discussion of those early days, Palmer details the movement of the blues to the vaudeville stage. This insight afforded me a new perspective on my topic, which soon led me to Lyn Abbott and Doug Seroff's important study of southern black vaudeville. This article first alerted me to the fact that something exceptional had happened in the nearby city of Jacksonville. As soon as I read their claim that the first documented performance of the blues on a stage was at the Colored Airdome on Ashley Street, I knew I had discovered something important. The earliest documented professional performance of the blues was in, of all places, Jacksonville, Florida. I couldn't help but wonder how this might possibly have been the case. Ashley Street was miles away from Dockery's farm in Clarksdale, Mississippi (widely accepted as the birthplace of the earliest country blues) and it would still be years before W. C. Handy published his "Memphis Blues," initiating the nationwide popularity of the blues. I realized that I had finally found my place and its undiscovered performance scene. As I progressed with my research, the city of Jacksonville repeatedly, and in various ways, revealed itself as a pivotal, yet virtually forgotten center of African-American cultural activity during this significant period of transition. Not only were black entertainers drawn to this locality from throughout the South, as well as from some of the major cities of the North, but also there were gifted and influential locals who comprised a core of this scene's talent. An



historically unique exchange of southern rural and northern urban entertainment practices and ideologies of performance had occurred here.

Existing research documenting the history of only one specific musical style suffers from inherent limitations. Cultural examples that do not directly reflect the particular style under analysis are frequently ignored and the broader social contexts from which they emerge are often vaguely drawn. I realized that to truly understand the depth and breadth of the performance activity of this place and this period, my unit of study needed to be the individual venue or show within the context of its regional or local scene. This broadly circumscribed perspective can allow various musical styles and different performance modalities to reveal themselves as unique and dynamic practices in and of themselves and it also encourages them to be seen as elements within the broader structures of locally defined African-American cultural expression.

Music, dance, comedy, and even drama in these shows were constituent parts of an integrated form of entertainment. Extracting only one element out of a variety program might compromise the historical integrity of the show. It was this realization that encouraged me to cast the widest net possible to capture as many different perspectives on these performance communities as possible. I realized that I had to take great care not to impose contemporary concepts of what might constitute a particular vernacular style of entertainment on the material with which I was working, so I made the decision to include as much of the activities on these stages as I possibly could.

One of the few local performance histories, Greer Moffat Williams' doctoral dissertation "A History of Music in Jacksonville, Florida, from 1822-1922" provided me with little more than a paragraph or two on African-Americans of the region and other general histories offered not much more. I resumed my tour through the various archives around the state and began to focus on the collections of the University of North Florida and the Jacksonville Public Library, but continued to unearth valuable information from other archives, such as those in Tampa and Pensacola. I finally constructed a narrative framework that describes the character and qualities of this particular scene out of the many fragmentary, incomplete nuggets of information that I was able to collect.

I discovered that John Rosamond Johnson, a LaVilla native and brother of the famous civil rights leader, James Weldon Johnson, had been a featured player in the first performance by

an all-black cast on Broadway and was one of the most popular composers of his time, yet there is currently no comprehensive biography of him. Although my present effort doesn't completely remedy this egregious oversight, I've compiled more information about his career than is available elsewhere. I also learned that Patrick Chappelle, founder of the influential Rabbit's Foot Minstrel company was from LaVilla. Although he is cited in innumerable blues histories, his significant contributions are generally dismissed in only a sentence or two. His important story has never been fully told and the fullest account of his life and work is only available here. Eugene Francis Mikell's long and varied career influenced many members of the following generation of African-American musicians, yet his pioneering accomplishments have never been documented, before now. Henry Sampson acknowledges the significance of the Globe Theater as the "anchor to the southern road shows," and names its Russell-Owens stock company as one of the most influential of the pioneering African-American theatrical stock companies. However, they are barely mentioned anywhere else in the literature. Perry Bradford, Tim Owsley, Clarence Muse, and so many other members of this local performance community were also citizens of a larger, national network that was enriched by performance practices, styles, and ideologies that had been formed or transmitted on the stages of LaVilla. A few of them enjoyed careers that took them to other regions, where they were able to achieve more than just a modicum of success. As I expanded my research to encompass the broader subjects of African-American musical theater, concert performance, and dance, I kept discovering names that had been familiar to LaVilla's audiences appearing again and again along the fringes of the spotlight. Some performers left Jacksonville to make significant contributions to black vernacular entertainment, but there were also many who were not generally recognized. This latter group participated in the sharing of content, ideas, or strategies with other members of the ephemeral performance communities that revolved around the neighborhood of LaVilla and so their names must also be mentioned, if only here.

## INTRODUCTION

Historian Russ Rymer observed that much of Jacksonville's history "stays invisible because the prominence resides almost exclusively on the black side of town." This may explain why these important chapters of Jacksonville's past remain unwritten, until now.<sup>1</sup> This study is a cultural history of the African-American performance communities that emerged from or were affiliated with one particular neighborhood on "the black side of town." It is presented almost exclusively from the perspective of those who participated in these communities and, as such, it should be understood as a cultural counter-history. Whenever racial distinction is specified in this work, it is used to distinguish those individuals whose difference identifies them as outside of these communities.

The historical moment addressed in this study roughly corresponds to a period beginning with John Rosamond Johnson's first appearance on a Broadway stage and ending with the closing of Frank Crowd's Globe Theater on Ashley Street. The variety and intensity of cultural activity in the intervening years presents a rich and hitherto untapped subject for both description and analysis. Many of the African-American cultural institutions that flourished during these years in Florida and beyond, owed their existence to the small neighborhood of LaVilla, a part of the larger municipality of Jacksonville. The life narratives of some of LaVilla's most accomplished entertainment professionals, people such as Rosamond Johnson, Patrick Chappelle, and Eugene Mikell intersected with the personal stories of thousands of other creative individuals. Some stories may be familiar and some, totally unknown. Excavating particular lives and careers unearths essential raw material that can be forged into an understanding of the many important cultural developments that were emerging at this time. The contributions of these lesser known southern performers and impresarios to the formation of new ideologies of African-American performance is rarely recognized and until now, the work of most of these creative individuals has never been fully chronicled or even acknowledged.

This is also the historical period that begins with the *Plessy v. Ferguson* court ruling on "separate, but equal" segregation and ends with the migration of many African-Americans northward. During these years, the entertainment profession was not only one of the few avenues that led to economic mobility, but it also provided a forum where social and cultural

change might be both contested and constructed. As LaVilla's favorite son James Weldon Johnson put it, "in countless and diverse situations song and dance have been both a sword and a shield for the Negro."<sup>2</sup>

Success strategies adopted by some of these performers were based upon seeking the financial rewards of bringing black entertainment to a mixed race audience, some mastered white practices, adapting them to African-American material, and some achieved success by developing and exploring a distinctly African-American sub-cultural form of expression. Still others did not achieve success at all, but merely persevered. Scholarship on black performance during this period is weakened by attempts to construct broad generalizations and assumptions of universal trends. By providing the most detailed documentation possible and by concentrating on the specific times and locations where these performances occur, I hope to avoid these pitfalls. I have constructed parallel narratives that reflect the broad social divisions embodied in different performance venues and practices. Each performer appearing on these stages brought a long and "thick" body of experiences, both professional and personal. The networks created by their working relationships are revealed by tracing the activities of performers through these theaters and shows and across social categories. Acknowledging the impossibility of chronicling every performer's complete history, I have attempted to incorporate brief biographical information into descriptions of the various shows.

I am indebted to a large corpus of research that addresses the national profile of successful black performers of this period, artists whose careers progressed in socially ambiguous and frequently hostile white-owned venues.<sup>3</sup> These provide a benchmark for the status of African-American performers as white America perceived them. However, only in recent decades have investigations into black-for-black performance emerged as a robust dialogue within scholarly discourse.<sup>4</sup> Henry Sampson's invaluable and exhaustive chronicles consider the full depth and breadth of African-American entertainment activities and contribute essential continuity to an otherwise incomplete record.<sup>5</sup> Lyn Abbott and Doug Seroff's collaborative works also provide thoroughly researched and detailed examples of scholarship that acknowledges the need for an interdisciplinary perspective to address this broad range of creative endeavors.<sup>6</sup> Much of the information used to construct these interlocking histories comes from newspapers, primarily the Jacksonville *Evening Metropolis*, which ran its "Daily

Happenings Among the Colored People” section during these years and the Indianapolis *Freeman*, which was an African-American paper with national distribution. Its “Stage” section continues to provide a wealth of raw material for scholars. Tiny, isolated threads culled from court documents, archival ephemera, city directories, memoirs, and many other fragmentary resources are woven into the cloth of these narratives. My intent is to allow the voices from the past to speak of their experiences, so I have integrated quotations wherever possible. In order to preserve their original tone, I’ve chosen not to “correct” their use of spelling and grammar.

New York, Chicago, and New Orleans are geographic regions where many of these themes have been subjected to such scholarly attention that their perceived prominence threatens to eclipse the significance of other localities.<sup>7</sup> However influential these important communities were, it is also important to compare and contrast them with other regions and venues that hosted their own shows for local black audiences. There have been some excellent in-depth studies of other localities that document how cultural developments can enter into and emerge from a specific region or place.<sup>8</sup> To establish the social environment that reciprocally informed cultural practices, local histories have proven an invaluable resource. By focusing my attention on LaVilla, I hope to contribute to a greater understanding of an historical period that was of singular importance to the development of American culture. Through this and similar efforts, specific flesh can be fixed to the particular bones of a subject that is frequently rife with inaccurate details. However, despite all of my efforts to capture a rich and comprehensive abundance of detail, there are many corners of this regional scene that remain uninvestigated. This is a close analysis of just one neighborhood, designed to provide a clear and accurate road map along which subsequent scholarship might proceed further.<sup>9</sup>

The 1904 opening of Robert Mott’s Pekin Theater in Chicago is frequently cited as a signal event in the history of black performance. This venue became known as the first “legitimate” African-American owned theater in the county. However, as Thomas L. Riis, director of the University of Colorado’s American Music Research Center has pointed out, the subjective process used in defining important terms like legitimate can often undermine construction of hard and fast objective categories for analysis.<sup>10</sup> What remains is only the self-reporting of participants and perceived attitudes of witnesses. Henry Sampson’s simple description of the Pekin may help to clarify this issue since this theater provides us with the best-

known example of “a well managed theatre located in a black community and presenting clean, first-class entertainment to predominantly black audiences.”<sup>11</sup> Frank Crowd’s Globe Theater may have been the only local venue addressed in this study that conformed to this description. However, the degree to which other venues aspired to or achieved this status is where questions of legitimacy become more problematic. The use of narrative plots to structure performances is another theme that might shed some light on differences between these shows. The degree to which one venue privileged its plotted sketches over its variety acts may help to make some distinction. One other criterion that was frequently used to establish claims of theatrical legitimacy was the degree to which dramatic works were produced on these stages. This remains a challenge in light of contemporary attitudes shared by both black and white audiences that assumed African-American performers were not well suited for dramatic acting. Actor and promoter, Salem Tutt Whitney lamented: “When anyone seriously mentioned the Negro as possessing talent which would admit him to the ranks of the legitimate drama it was to laugh.” However, he continued by noting that, “the Negro is forced to be an actor; he is never natural while in the presence of his persecutors, he is compelled to dissimulate as an act of self-preservation.”<sup>12</sup> Responding to a letter in *Variety*, the popular team of Bert Williams and George Walker acknowledged that this divisive issue was particularly troubling for performers who played to mixed race audiences: “the colored theatre ‘goer,’ taken collectively only wants to see when he attends a negro show such characters remind him of ‘white folks,’ while on the other hand the white patrons only want to see him portray the ante-bellum ‘darkey.’” As audiences became more racially homogeneous, the divisive element of these concerns may have been liberated and dramatic pursuits could be done in earnest.<sup>13</sup>

One characteristic of this period is strongly evident; black-owned theaters appeared with unprecedented rapidity across the country. However, this growth was also accompanied by a similar increase in the number of white-owned theaters that catered to black audiences. In 1896, there were virtually no theaters for African-Americans in the southern United States, yet by 1916, they were in almost every city. This change started during the years when black shows were flourishing on Broadway, but following the deaths of important performers like Ernest Hogan, George Walker, and Bob Cole, African-American inroads into mainstream musical-theater appeared to be in retreat. James Weldon Johnson described this period as the “term of

exile of the Negro from the downtown theatres of New York, which began in 1910 and lasted for seven lean years.” Thomas Riis chose the phrase “new developments elsewhere” to address these changes. By moving “elsewhere,” creative inspiration for African-American music, comedy, dance, and drama could be drawn from southern, rather than northern sources, resulting in an entirely distinct and new performance dynamic. In LaVilla however, these black-owned theaters would flourish only briefly. Changing social circumstances, new entertainment technologies, and encroaching competition from white-owned venues presented insurmountable challenges. African-American culture continued to evolve and flourish in this neighborhood, but it did so in performance spaces that were no longer under black ownership.<sup>14</sup>

Blackfaced minstrelsy’s dominance as a popular entertainment had declined dramatically by the middle of the eighteenth century. After the Civil War, African-Americans had adopted this immensely successful genre and became masters of it, enriching its content with new humor, music, and dance styles that capitalized on their authenticity. However, as this influx of new energy started to wane, minstrel productions had become more spectacular and even began to feature mixed-race casts. Enormous companies with immense choruses lost the flexibility that could support a changing repertoire, and accusations of “sameness” became a frequent critique of minstrel shows, as time went on. Soon, only a few troupes remained, but many of their traditions persisted when performers carried these with them, as their careers moved toward new opportunities and in new directions. The structural design of most minstrel shows had been relatively stable since the Virginia Minstrels first introduced it in the eighteenth century. It was the belief of many promoters that audiences demanded a familiar format, so this basic framework continued even after the shows disappeared. The “first part” began with the entire company singing and dancing and featured jokes from “end men” who played the roles of “Mr. Tambo” and “Mr. Bones,” their names echoing the traditional musical instruments they once played. These characters would play off an “interlocutor,” who would feed them straight lines to provoke comic responses. This was followed by an “olio” portion of the show, in which a series of variety acts was performed. Then, the finale was a comedic sketch, generally representing an idyllic plantation scene. The first and third parts frequently concluded with a “walkaround” in which dancers promenaded two by two, then took turns soloing. This received new life when the cakewalk became popular. Variety entertainment still maintained this basic organization even as

it distanced itself from minstrelsy. The term vaudeville was widely used to describe a diverse theatrical bill of “wholesome” variety entertainment that could be enjoyed by both males and females. New York theatrical entrepreneur, Tony Pastor was one of the first to try to attract women as patrons in the late eighteen sixties and though the term predates his innovation, it was soon applied to shows in his theaters.<sup>15</sup>

The parody of African-American stereotypes embodied in the blackfaced tradition was just one example of the negative racial and ethnic content that characterized entertainment during this period. Ethnic humor transgressed a wide variety of social boundaries. Parodies of Jewish, Irish, Oriental, Native American and African-American stereotypes nourished the staple diet for comedy acts in theaters of all types. In many of the African-American shows, from Broadway to smaller venues, racial displacement also became a recurring narrative element. Black actors took on roles where they portrayed Native American, Oriental, Middle Eastern, and frequently African characters. Occasionally these were used for purposes of burlesque, but often these characters were depicted earnestly. African-American performers, by distancing themselves from the urgent issues they faced during this time, could address these and other fundamental human concerns through their performances.

Almost every local venue discussed here (with the exception of the saloons) loudly and frequently protested that they offered nothing but clean and wholesome, high-class entertainment. Nineteenth century working class theaters were justifiably stereotyped as places of drunkenness and prostitution, so this reputation loomed over the profession. During the nineteen twenties and thirties, anecdotal accounts warned that “midnight rambles” were prevalent in many southern blacks-only theaters. These were late night performances for all-white or mixed race audiences that featured explicitly lewd comedy and nude dancing. It’s interesting to note that reports of these scandals almost always seemed to locate them within white-owned establishments. Touring companies were not immune to accusations of prostitution. At least one white owner used the African-American dancers in his company to supply his brothels during the off-season. Sexual commerce has long been a shadow industry, but during the period addressed in this study, it seems to be markedly absent from many of the theaters and shows described here. The preponderance of evidence points to the fact that performers and



theater owners took great pains to present a completely legitimate public image and would likely have avoided even a whiff of stigma.<sup>16</sup>

The vaudeville theaters in Jacksonville, both white and black, encompassed a wide spectrum of sophistication and comfort for both performers and audiences on either side of the racial boundary. When an act billing itself as the Four Marx Brothers, a “juvenile male quartet,” was booked at the white Pastime Theater on West Bay Street during the month of April in 1909, one of its members, Julius A. “Groucho” Marx remembered the amenities: “The dressing room was large and roomy and had perfect ventilation. It was, in fact, a trifle too roomy, as it comprised the whole backyard.” He added hyperbolically, that they shared this space with “a covey of the largest rats that ever gnawed at an actor’s shoes.” One of the acts sharing their bill was “the Musical Cow Milkers.” Marx describes their performance as follows: “The guy led a live cow onstage. While his wife, in sunbonnet and pinafore, squatted on a stool and milked the cow, they sang duets.”<sup>17</sup>

This was the last generation of entertainers whose professional careers depended exclusively on face-to-face encounters with individual audiences to earn their living. Stock companies, rather than touring companies with changing rosters, began to emerge during this period. Road shows could present the same act to different audiences for years, making changes only when their route returned them back to a particular venue. Performers in stock companies remained in the same house and frequently played to the same audiences, repeatedly. This demanded them to change their act with such regularity that a high degree of creative adaptability must have been required. However, there were financial advantages for both performers and theater owners. S. Tutt Whitney estimated that stock companies “give their managers good financial returns and they in turn are able to pay their people good salaries. Chorus people \$16.00 to \$20.00. Principals \$20.00 to \$35.00 weekly.”<sup>18</sup>

Some of the terminology used to describe performers on LaVilla’s stages and elsewhere, emerged out of the minstrel types. Many descriptions, though, were also used to distance performers from this tradition. Female singers could be defined in a variety of ways. Many were described as prima donnas, which defined their vocal style as echoing operatic traditions. Soubrettes were delicate singers of pretty songs. For performers in this category, physical beauty and an attractive wardrobe were generally more important than singing ability. The style of

singing known as “coon shouting” emerged around the same time as the “coon song” (a musical genre discussed elsewhere in this study). Later in their careers, many of these same coon shouters became identified as singers of the blues. Male singers were either tenors or baritones, indicating operatic styles or they were ballad singers, referring to a more vernacular style. Singers of comic songs were frequently referred to as such. Comedians defining themselves as blackfaced perpetuated the minstrel image of the inarticulate (but frequently pointed) rural plantation dweller, while character comedians adopted a variety of other social or racial personae.

We also begin to see that distinctions are made between music directors and orchestra leaders, indicating that different skill sets are required. Music directors were responsible for accompanying the singers during the show. The orchestra performed independent, featured musical works. The traditional description of schooled musicians as, “professor” or “Fess,” was quite evident, particularly among the ensemble leaders. Syncopated ragtime, or “coon” music was well established in these venues by the turn of the century. For the most part, musical performances of this period reflect the style that flourished before either blues and jazz became predominant African-American popular genres. Early on, Stephen Foster songs were still a staple in the repertoire of many singers and newer popular Broadway hits were beginning to make their way southward, including those written by Rosamond Johnson and Bob Cole. Many performers were also successful composers of popular songs, but the examples specifically mentioned in reviews of these shows have disappeared, so we can only speculate about their true character. One of the reasons for this may have been that they were communicated aurally and never actually written down or published, but this is speculation. The only example of an archived publication of one of Eugene Mikell’s compositions is a piece called “Lackawanna: An Indian Love Song Story from Florida,” which he copyrighted in 1912. It follows a straight eighth-note “Indian” introductory passage with gently rhythmic ragtime syncopations. Ragtime rhythms and a prototypical swing feel were certainly evident in the musical theater, judging from the few available recordings made at this time by other African-American performers. However, the degree to which improvisation, an important indicator of jazz style, was present in these performances has been extremely difficult to establish among this particular group of musicians.

There is evidence, though, that elements of later musical styles were just beginning to make inroads in these venues.

The orchestras in the vaudeville theaters consisted of anywhere from two to five or six musicians and performed music that ran the gamut from operatic overtures and arias to ragtime pieces, to popular show tunes from recent Broadway productions. Ragtime rhythms were more frequently described in the reviews and reports from these shows as time went on, but after late 1912, when W. C. Handy published his “Memphis Blues,” the popular new style may have started to make its way into the playing of these pit musicians. Although sight-reading skill was a fundamental requirement of every instrumental musician discussed here, it appears that the trombone players may have been the ones who began to seek out the “blue” notes that are so characteristic of blues music as a genre. The trombonists Amos Gilliard and Ralph Redmond were probably the first members of these house orchestras to explore the possibilities of this style when they performed their own “eccentric” featured solos. Otherwise, it seems that visiting “coon-singing” vocalists were at the forefront of this innovation. Adding to our challenge is the fact that the language and terminology, which later emerged to describe these new styles was still in development and probably had not yet come into popular usage. We may not know for sure if the term “jazz” (or “jass”) was used to describe performances by Buddy Bolden or other New Orleans musicians who probably played this musical style as early as the mid-eighteen nineties. The first authoritatively documented use of the word to describe music was when a white band, Tom Brown’s Ragtime Band was billed as “Brown’s Dixieland Jass Band, Direct from New Orleans” at Chicago’s Lamb’s Club in 1915.<sup>19</sup>

Lynn Abbot and Doug Seroff have identified the first published account of blues singing on a public stage. The word was used to describe a performance in LaVilla on April 16, 1910. In an Indianapolis *Freeman* “Stage” section article entitled “Jacksonville Theatrical Notes,” the reviewer states that Prof. John W. F. Woods, a ventriloquist, and his doll Henry, “set the Airdome wild by making little Henry drunk. He uses the ‘blues’ for little Henry in this drunken act.” We can be fairly certain that visiting vocalists had adopted this style elsewhere and carried it into these theaters. LaVilla regular, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey was the conduit through which the blues first moved onto many vaudeville stages. When John W. Work interviewed Ma Rainey at the Douglas Hotel in Nashville during the early thirties, she described memories of her first

experience of this music. While touring with a tent show through a small Missouri town around 1902, she heard a girl who “came to the tent one morning and began to sing about the ‘man who had left her.’” Rainey learned this “strange and poignant” song and used it in her act as an encore. The overwhelming response to this song convinced her to give this music a “special place” in her act. Work documented that, “many times she was asked what kind of a song it was, and one day she replied, in a moment of inspiration, ‘It’s the Blues.’” She also lamented that a newspaper clipping from 1905, describing her as a blues singer had been destroyed in a fire. W. C. Handy’s own introduction to this “weirdest music I had ever heard” was a year later, in 1903, at a train station in Tutwiler, Mississippi. Many of the performers mentioned in this study spent time with his band.<sup>20</sup>

One can look at the changes that occurred during and after this period through various lenses. The aftermath of America’s entrance into World War I would have a lasting affect on the social structure of the entire country. Following D. W. Griffith’s successful 1915 film, “Birth of a Nation,” motion pictures became one of the most dominant forces in the entertainment industry. This film also provided intolerance with a new heroic face and became a model for successful racial terrorism techniques. Recordings would bring the blues, an otherwise geographically and socially isolated musical style, into listeners’ homes across the country. African-American musical style itself and American music in general was revolutionized after 1923, when Louis Armstrong arrived in Chicago and recorded his watershed sessions with Joe “King” Oliver’s Band. Following Earl Hines’ first 1921 radio broadcast on Pittsburgh’s KDKA, examples of black music of all varieties began to dominate the airwaves. All of these technologies introduced new economic models that were radically different from the business practices of live theater and traveling shows. By looking closely at the careers of individuals who worked in this proscribed region, I hope to develop a snapshot of African-American entertainment practice, as it existed just prior to the dissemination of these new entertainment technologies.<sup>21</sup> As early as 1904, a *Freeman* article entitled “Is the Phonograph System Detrimental to a Singer’s Success?” accurately pointed out one of the issues of technology, “The rate of speed to which a popular song can travel from the printer’s press to the bar-room ahead of the theater by the phonograph system is something lightening-like... When the song reaches the

stage, the gallery gods--pool players and bar-room loafers--remember that they heard the same air murdered on a raspy, squeaky incubator a thousand times a day a month ago.”<sup>22</sup>

The categories that organize this study are permeable and should serve only to provide an overall structure, rather than to define general trends in the entertainment industry of the region. Many performers were easily able to move from saloon theaters, to tent shows, and to black vaudeville stages and back again. However, only a very few were able to achieve lasting success in the most prestigious of the white venues. One of my great regrets is that there is so little extant information about the actual content of the local shows in LaVilla. Efforts to record and archive African-American culture during this period of encroaching “Jim Crow” were insufficient and the detailed performance documents that modern entertainment technology can create, were still largely unavailable in this region.

The first chapter is titled “LaVilla and Jacksonville.” The purpose of this section is to establish the geographical and social setting, as well as to provide some historical background for the region. I have also included a brief discussion of some formal and informal African-American performances that occurred here, prior to the period of my primary focus.

In my second chapter, “Great White Way,” I chronicle the background and accomplishments of LaVilla residents who left the region to achieve success in the first all African-American show presented on a Broadway stage. The career of John Rosamond Johnson provides the primary focus of this chapter, but his brother, James Weldon Johnson, Eartha Mary Magdalene White, Sidney Woodward and other noteworthy fellow travelers are also addressed here. I include discussion of their involvement in African-American touring productions that performed for predominantly white or mixed race audiences during the first decade of the nineteen hundreds and I have included examples of touring productions staged at the white-owned Duval Theater in downtown Jacksonville. In this context, I also address some of the more self-consciously status-laden public performances by African-Americans in Jacksonville, including descriptions of events such as Carl R. Ditson’s piano concert and Anna Cook Pankey’s theatrical stage presentation for Edward Waters College. University or conservatory training in northern schools distinguished most of these performers, separating them first geographically, then socially from their neighbors. I also assess their relationships with the people and institutions of LaVilla and the changes in local attitudes toward them. They were well aware of

their own upwardly mobile social progress as it related to their achievement of recognition by both white and black audiences. Diligent efforts to modify existing representations of African-Americans through their creative work demonstrate a significantly different racial strategy than those chosen by “popular priced” performers. The Johnson brothers’ rehabilitation of the “coon song,” their considered use of Negro dialect to construct a new African-American musical voice and the subsequent establishment of Cole and Johnson societies in Jacksonville are examples of these changes. As composers, these artists could market representative versions of their compositions through publication of sheet music, exploiting a literate and as such, “high class” medium for selling their creative output. Movement of these performers between legitimate black theaters and the most prestigious white vaudeville houses indicates a wide range of professional mobility for these individuals that is far less evident among other groups.

In chapter three, “On Stage, Under Canvas,” I focus on the establishment of regional black-owned touring companies during the first decade of the twentieth century. Of all the performance categories listed here, these shows were distinct in that they played regularly to mixed race audiences on black-owned stages. Troupes with ties to LaVilla, such as Pat Chappelle’s Rabbit’s Foot Minstrels and Eph Williams’ Silas Green from New Orleans Company were formed during this period. They enjoyed such enormous success that they survived for many years and became southern cultural institutions. Included in this discussion are those “honky-tonk” saloon theaters owned by Chappelle, which were closely affiliated with his traveling companies. I contrast these shows with the white-owned management of venerated minstrel performer Billy Kersands’ touring company, which used Jacksonville as its base of operations in 1910. Important distinctions can be seen between earlier shows that toured through pre-existing (and predominantly white-owned) indoor venues and these troupes who traveled with their own tents and stages.

In chapter four, “We Will Soon Reach the Ladder,” I describe the development of LaVilla’s honky-tonk theaters and their connection with the outdoor performance venues in Jacksonville’s public parks. The honky-tonks were primarily drinking establishments with entertainment that catered to a predominantly black audience. The performances described here were at venues such as the Little Savoy Theater and Tom Baxter’s Exchange Theater. The parks, on the other hand, were public sites for communal recreation, celebration, and affirmation.

Lincoln Park and Mason Park on the outskirts of the city are examples of these outdoor performance spaces. Many of the shows that were staged in these parks were organized by Baxter and his featured performers. Though relatively humble and working class in their origins, those involved with these sites aspired toward the achievement of greater racial dignity through the shows they produced.

The fifth chapter is “The Management So By Nature.” In this section, I describe the development of successful black-owned vaudeville houses on Ashley Street in LaVilla and introduce many of the primary figures of this scene.<sup>23</sup> The Globe Theater and the Colored Airdome housed many noteworthy performances during the period between 1908 and 1915. The brief but significant success of these stages represented the pinnacle of locally owned entertainment production in the region and provided what Sampson characterized as, “the southern anchor of the tour for black road shows and vaudeville artists.”<sup>24</sup> Social networks of owners with regional and neighborhood institutions and relationships between the touring featured performers with local actors and musicians who comprised “house” troupes provide moments for acculturation and exchange of performance ideologies. In fact, many of the impresarios who settled in the area, including Tim Owsley, Marion Brooks, Clarence Muse, and L. D. Joel, established formal connections with other regions to draw ideas and talent. Influential national performers, such as Ferdinand “Jelly Roll” Morton, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, H. Franklin “Baby” Seals, the Whitman Sisters, and Billy Kersands worked for significant periods of time in these theaters. Important theatrical groups emerged from these venues as well, the Russel-Owens Stock Company in particular. Descriptions of the performers and their performances on these stages provide narrative data through which to trace the trope of racial uplift across a wide range of forms. These exhibited themselves in techniques such as deflection, where other racial characteristics (Oriental, Native American, African, etc.) were adopted. Racial authentication was exemplified by the use of emerging blues and jazz musical styles, African-American dialect, and folk materials. Parodic irony was a technique that expressed racial challenges more subtly and finally, representations of direct resistance could be seen toward the end of the period.<sup>25</sup> These black-owned theaters in LaVilla survived for only a very brief period, yet while they thrived, they functioned as important models for successful economic and artistic self-reliance.

In chapter six, “Tough on Black Artists,” I address the impact of the entertainment industry’s consolidation into larger regional and national interests. Here I investigate the growth of “combines,” syndicates that established predetermined routes circumscribing the movement of African-American performers throughout the South. The emergence of Belmont Theater owner, E. L. Cummings’ Southern Consolidated Circuit, centered in Pensacola and the white ownership of LaVilla’s Strand Theater provide examples illustrating local participation in these circuits. These early regional circuits eventually merged into the powerful Theater Owners and Booking Agency.

The chapter entitled “Ashley Street Blues” traces the later careers of participants in LaVilla’s entertainment communities and addresses the emergence of communications technology as the predominant system for packaging, distributing, and selling “products” of entertainment. The reproduction of African-American practice as the commodity being marketed, rather than the practice itself is exemplified by changes in these individuals’ careers. Commercial recordings from the nineteen twenties and thirties by Jacksonville regulars Ma Rainey, Perry Bradford, and Eugene Mikell exemplify the impact of communications technology on the subsequent careers and music of these local artists. Also addressed here is the cultural continuity provided by these shows and performers. Individual performers kept on working for many years, but the echoes of their music, jokes, dances, and narratives continued to resonate even longer.



## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **LAVILLA AND JACKSONVILLE**

The city of LaVilla was founded in 1866, in the aftermath of the Civil War. The black Federal forces who occupied Duval County were headquartered there and provided a degree of security for African-Americans who lived in the vicinity. During Reconstruction, the Freedman's Bureau administered social services nearby and new African-American institutions were established there. By 1870, seventy-percent of LaVilla's population was comprised of African-Americans, many of whom worked in Jacksonville's booming hotel, lumber, port, building, and railroad industries. In 1887, the city of Jacksonville enlarged its tax base by incorporated LaVilla and other outlying communities into one municipality. Prior to consolidation, political participation by Jacksonville's black citizens had been substantial and productive. However, after the overwhelmingly Democratic Florida State Legislature passed House Bill Number Four in 1888, Jacksonville's charter was nullified and a new white Democratic government was appointed by the governor. The bill also implemented a poll tax and a five-minute time limit on voting. The bill was repealed in 1893, but only those who had voted in 1892 were qualified to vote in that year's election. As a result of these and other restrictive measures, black representation in Jacksonville diminished rapidly until the spring of 1907, when George E. Ross, after six years as the lone African-American city councilman, was finally voted out of office.<sup>1</sup>

Ashley Street was LaVilla's central thoroughfare. It was the first street in any of Jacksonville's African-American neighborhoods to be paved and for years, it was the location of the only black school in the region. At its peak, Ashley Street boasted commercial enterprises of every variety and was the dynamic core of black LaVilla's social and cultural life. In this study, when a particular location is known to be within LaVilla's borders, the term LaVilla is used. If not, the broader term Jacksonville is used.<sup>2</sup>

Jacksonville was Florida's first resort destination. The Clyde Line operated steamboats into Jacksonville from East Coast seaports, including New York City and after Henry B. Plant opened the "Waycross Short Line" in 1881, direct rail travel from the North became possible. Its winter population grew to four times the number of its summer residents. During the 1884-85

season, 60,000 visitors overwhelmed its hotels, resulting in the construction of numerous elegant new resorts. The second of four annual Sub-Tropical Expositions opened in 1889 in an attempt to rehabilitate the city's reputation after a devastating yellow fever epidemic. Grover Cleveland and Frederick Douglass were both in attendance at this event. Although race relations for the most part were relatively civil, there was a tense racial incident in 1892, when five hundred local African-Americans crowded around the city jail to see that a black murder suspect was not lynched. White military companies were mobilized and after three days, the situation was defused with a minimum of violence. After a massive fire in 1901 destroyed most of the city, Jacksonville was rebuilt as a modern metropolis. Skyscrapers, each vying to be the tallest, dominated the center of the city and newly legalized segregation encouraged the development of separate and independent African-American neighborhoods on the perimeters of Jacksonville's borders. Zora Neale Hurston, who lived in the city during this transition, remembered that, "Jacksonville made me know that I was a little colored girl. Things were all about the town to point this out to me." James Weldon Johnson expressed it more bluntly when he later claimed that Jacksonville had become a "100 per cent cracker town."<sup>3</sup>

In 1900, Jacksonville was the largest city in the state of Florida, with a total population of 28,429. 16,236 of these residents were African-Americans, comprising fifty-seven percent of the city's total inhabitants. As the city renewed itself after the fire, a new social reality was constructed as well. As historian James Crooks noted, "Jacksonville developed as two cities in the years after the fire, one white and one black." Within twenty years, Jacksonville's total population grew over threefold to 91,558. However, its black population increased at a slower pace to 41,520, a little over forty-five percent. During this time, African-Americans became a numerical, as well as a political, minority.<sup>4</sup>

Early accounts of African-American performance practices in this region are rare and sadly lacking in detail. White visitors during the nineteenth century made mention of the extemporized songs of black boatmen who worked on the St. Johns River and described their antiphonal lyrical structure and occasional accompaniment by improvised instruments. An early historian of Jacksonville, T. Frederick Davis, described an "old Spanish Negro" named Marcellini who played fiddle for white dances prior to the "War Between the States." A group of "educated colored men" formed a vocal group known as the Jacksonville Troubadours, who

later toured under the name the Bird Minstrels. The British composer Frederick Delius spent two important years of his life in Jacksonville and nearby. A chaperone reporting back to his father complained that from 1884 to 1885, Delius was wasting his life away, studying music with Thomas Ward and listening to his African-American servant play slave songs on the banjo. A. B. Campbell's music store on Bay Street became the first publisher of Delius' compositions. Thomas "Blind Tom" Bethune, the celebrated African-American piano virtuoso played two very successful performances at Metropolitan Hall in 1881 and Library Hall in 1885. When the elegant Park Opera House on the corner of Laura and Duval streets opened its doors in 1887, the Jacksonville Home Minstrels, a local group of prominent white citizens applied burnt-cork blackface to provide the featured entertainment. For many years, this was where Al G. Allen's Minstrel Company made their annual stop in Jacksonville. The new opera house was erected to replace the Park Theater, which had originally been built in 1884 and was destroyed by a fire.<sup>5</sup>

African-American brass bands played a prominent part in the life of the growing city. After the Republican Party won a decisive, but short-lived victory in Jacksonville during the election of 1888, one of these bands paraded through the downtown streets playing, "Sherman's March to the Sea." James Weldon Johnson recalled his childhood memories of the Union Cornet Band, a "crack brass band" that featured an exceptional drummer named Martin Dixon. The leader of this ensemble was J. H. Ochus, who also led the band at one of the hotels in town and ran a local music store. The Welcome Cornet Band was organized by composer Allen Thompson Robeson in 1886. William F. Hawley, a white Jacksonville native, remembered their brass band entertainments at the Park Opera House and described Robeson as "a blind man who was led always by a little colored boy." This ensemble, which lasted until 1926, achieved a national reputation and may have been the inspiration for Paul Lawrence Dunbar's poem, "When the Colored Band Comes Marching Down the Street." The Eureka Cornet Band and the Enterprise Brass Band were other popular brass ensembles comprised of local black musicians.<sup>6</sup>

Jacksonville briefly held a dominant position in America's nascent film industry. In 1915, its production of motion pictures was greater than that of Hollywood. Beginning in 1908, companies like Kalem, Pathé, Thanhouser, and Lubin built production facilities in the region to take advantage of its sunshine, tropical locations, and cheap labor. Metro Pictures (later MGM) was one of the studios that got its start in Jacksonville. In those early days, most African-

American parts were performed by white actors in blackface. However, Sigmund Lubin's film company was a rare exception. Lubin studios produced a number of films in Jacksonville starring John "Junk" and Mattie Edwards, who headed up their "colored" stock company. The couple were veteran vaudeville performers and featured players with P. G. Lowrey's minstrel company. The Edwardses starred in Lubin titles, such as, "Coon Town Suffragettes," "In Zululand," "Mandy's Chicken Dinner," "The Rakoon Hose Company," and "Rastus Knew it Wasn't." Mattie Edwards later starred in a number of films produced by pioneer black filmmaker, Oscar Michaux. The absence of African-American ownership or management in the industry was evident when William Foster made an investigative trip to Jacksonville in 1914. His visit was to explore the region's potential as a location for a black-owned studio. After he failed to ink distribution deals with any of the other studios in town, he decided that the prospects were not good and abandoned his plans.<sup>7</sup>

## CHAPTER TWO

### GREAT WHITE WAY

European art music is the totem of American “high culture.” Its nobler traditions are not only emblematic, but they embody the passionate aspirations of parents wanting better lives for their children. Talented young performers from LaVilla made the most of opportunities to advance their musical education. Along the way, they contributed to the popularity of classical performances by African-American artists on Broadway and in Europe. Musical theater represented a different road to upward mobility, one that led there by way of financial power. Jacksonvillians, such as James Weldon and Rosamond Johnson, were among the first successful composers to reappropriate popular black cultural expression from those who had allowed it to degenerate into negative stereotyping. In shows created for predominantly all-white or mixed-race audiences, they self-consciously introduced uplifting African-American themes and styles within an economic framework that was defined by white theatrical tradition.

In 1890, seventeen-year-old John Rosamond Johnson left his parents’ home in LaVilla to begin six years of studies in music at the New England Conservatory in Boston. This was three years before Antonin Dvořák’s letter to the *New York Herald*, in which the world-renowned Bohemian composer praised the musical talents of African-Americans and encouraged American schools of music to accept and nurture black students. Rosamond’s mother Helen was the first African-American public school teacher in Jacksonville. She taught at the Stanton School on the corner of Ashley and Bridge streets in LaVilla and was choir director for the Bethel Baptist Institutional Church, where her husband James was treasurer. She was Rosamond’s earliest teacher, but the summer after Dvořák’s letter was published when Rosamond returned home from Boston, he had great difficulty finding another instructor accomplished enough to help him progress with his studies. He was sent to a white woman who had recently suffered financial reverses and needed the income he brought in. He recalled, “every time I went to her house to study I thought my life was in danger because of race prejudice.” She begged him not to reveal to anyone that she was teaching him.<sup>1</sup>

By the time Rosamond completed his studies in Boston, he had already published two works of instrumental music and had become a founding cast member of John Isham’s *Oriental*

*America*, the first all-black show to perform on a Broadway stage. The production opened on August 15, 1896, at the Palmer Theater on the northeast corner of Broadway and 39 Street. Some of its success was certainly the result of Isham's promotional experience as an advance agent for Sam T. Jack's *Creole Show* and from his own first effort, the *Octoroons*.<sup>2</sup> However, *Oriental America* entirely abandoned the minstrel format of its predecessors and featured high-culture musical works by European composers as its main attraction. Isham highlighted some of the best-trained black performers in the country, including Johnson, Jesse Shipp, concert tenor Sidney Woodward from Boston, and New York mezzo-soprano Desseria Plato. When the *Oriental America* company capitalized on its initial success by touring the United States and Great Britain, two other Jacksonville residents, lyric soprano Eartha M. M. White and contralto Estelle Dorsey joined the troupe. White had recently studied voice at the National Conservatory of Music as a pupil of Dvořák's influential protégé, Harry T. Burleigh, a celebrated African-American singer and composer. Her own memories of the company's origins include its financier, Mr. Graffe, a millionaire from Syracuse, who believed that "Negroes could learn to sing grand opera as well as folk songs." The show proved that white audiences would pay to see black performers in a production that was not a minstrel show. In an 1896 essay entitled "The Mirror Up to Nature," W. H. Thompson, theater critic for the *Indianapolis Freeman* noted that "it was left for John W. Isham, a previously unknown theatrical quantity, to discover the capabilities and drawing power of the 'New Negro.'" He followed this, one of the earliest uses of the phrase that would encompass an entire cultural movement, by observing that Isham's shows "are playing to the best people, white and colored, and are surprising the most captious critics by their finished performance."<sup>3</sup>

*Oriental America's* narrative show, "Mrs. Waldorf's Fifth Anniversary: A Spectacular Operatic Absurdity," was set in a "handsome" Florida resort hotel, reminiscent of those that were flourishing in Jacksonville at the time. Its slender plot outlines the disruption of an evening's entertainment by one of the hotel's employees (named Johnson) who is fired, but later acquires great wealth and purchases the hotel for himself. Comic episodes, popular musical numbers, and appearances by the "Four Little Japanese Maids," the "Twentieth Century Bicycle Maids," and a march by "Oriental Hussars" punctuated the dramatic action of the first two thirds of the show. In the third act Rosamond performed the "Armorer's Song" from Reginald De Koven's *Robin*

*Hood* in full costume, frequently stopping the show for encores. Then, Sidney Woodward sang a well-received aria from *Rigoletto*. Following a “Flower Ballet,” which incorporated novel electrical lighting effects, a grand finale closed every performance. This featured a forty-minute medley of operatic selections, including choruses and solos from *Faust*, *Martha*, *Rigoletto*, *Carmen*, and *Il Trovatore*. The show “reached the climax of enthusiasm by rounds of applause when the last curtain fell on a magnificent rendition of the Bridal Chorus Sextette from *Lucia di Lammermoor*, in which the stars appeared.”<sup>4</sup>

Rosamond returned home in the spring of 1897 and began to teach private music lessons out of one of the front rooms of his parents’ house in LaVilla. He also worked as organist and choirmaster for the nearby Bethel Baptist Institutional Church and taught once a week at its affiliated Florida Baptist Academy, where he regularly presented his students in public recitals. The director of the Academy was Nathan W. Collier, who graduated from Atlanta University with Rosamond’s older brother, James Weldon Johnson. Zora Neale Hurston attended the school under his tenure and remembered both Collier’s charisma and his policy of strict discipline. She described the end of her school year at the Academy as “a blaze of programs, cantatas, and speeches.” Within a few months, both white and black concertgoers were seen attending these performances by Rosamond’s talented young students. To commemorate the Spanish-American War, Rosamond composed the patriotic song, “The Old Flag Never Touched the Ground,” which was first sung by the Bethel chorus. When President Theodore Roosevelt toured the Academy in 1905, this and another topical Johnson brothers composition, the campaign song, “You Are All Right Teddy,” were performed in his honor.<sup>5</sup>

While she was still on the road with the *Oriental America* company, Eartha White received tragic news of the recent death of her fiancé, James Jordan. She managed to complete the show’s tour, but soon returned to live with her mother in Jacksonville, where she enrolled at the Florida Baptist Academy. She sang with its chorus and even played “Queen Esther” in the school’s graduation cantata. After her graduation in 1897, she became a schoolteacher first in nearby Bayard, then at the Stanton School. She continued to remain active and engaged in the affairs of the Academy for many years, but she never returned to the professional stage.<sup>6</sup>

While Rosamond was studying in Boston, James accomplished a great deal. He had completed his degree at Atlanta University and established himself as principal of the Stanton

School. He also passed the Florida bar exam, the first African-American to do so since Reconstruction. For the first commencement exercises held at Stanton after Rosamond returned, the brothers collaborated on a juvenile operetta adapted from *The Geisha* and *The Runaway Girl*. It was to be presented during the first part of the graduation program. Despite an enthusiastic response from all who were present, its initial success was compromised when a number of local black clergymen criticized the presentation because a dance was included as part of the finale. These moral leaders felt their principal was “leading the children to the ballroom.”<sup>7</sup>

Rosamond’s successful experience with musical theater in New York inspired the brothers to collaborate on a comic opera. *Toloso* was a parody of American imperialism, set against the background of the Spanish-American War on an island kingdom in the South Pacific. James described the scenario as follows: “The story was concerned with Tolsa, the beautiful princess; her prime minister, a crafty old politician; the entrance of an American man-of-war; the handsome, heroic American lieutenant; and finally annexation.” Rosamond played and sang the completed parts of this work at a party thrown by the white owner of the largest dry goods store in Jacksonville for a number of the leading musical supporters of the city, including the director of the Jacksonville Conservatory of Music and the manager of Jacksonville’s principle music store. James recalled that, “this was the first interracial-artistic party in our experience.”<sup>8</sup>

In the summer of 1899, the Johnson brothers left LaVilla for New York City with a letter of introduction to the editor of a music trade journal, in hopes that their opera might open some doors. James used the term “quixotic” to describe the absurd situation of “two young Negroes away down in Florida, unknown and inexperienced, starting for New York...to try for a place in the world of light opera.” Settling at 260 West 53<sup>rd</sup> Street, they met a number of influential figures in the entertainment business, including the great impresario Oscar Hammerstein, Williams and Walker, Ernest Hogan, Will Marion Cook, Harry Burleigh, and Paul Lawrence Dunbar. However, it was their encounter with the multi-talented Bob Cole that would have the most profound effect on their careers. Cole was a Georgia native who had spent his teenage years living with his mother’s relatives in Florida and even played cello in a hotel quartet while he was there. He worked as a comedian in Sam T. Jack’s *Creole Show*, before publishing a number of his own popular minstrel songs. In 1896, he wrote and starred in *At Jolly Coon-ey Island*, a sketch for Black Patti’s Troubadours that also featured music written by him. He was



arrested and taken to court by the show's white managers Rudolf Voelckel and James Nolan, when he left the show and took his music with him. In the courtroom he was said to have declared, "These men have amassed a fortune from the product of my brain, and now they call me a thief; I won't give up." He produced the pioneering show *A Trip to Coontown* in September of 1897, with partner Billy Johnson (no relation) and other alienated members of Black Patti's troupe. Overcoming great difficulties, *Coontown* became the first musical comedy produced, written, and performed entirely by African-Americans. At this time, Cole was one of the few comedians who did not "cork-up" and perform in blackface. In fact, for his portrayal of the character Willie Wayside in *Coontown*, he acted the part in whiteface makeup. Before the end of their first visit to New York, the Johnson brothers had collaborated with Cole on a love song named "Louisiana Lize." The team gleefully sold the singing rights for the song to Broadway star May Irwin for the sum of fifty dollars and she featured it in her new show, *The Belle of Bridgeport*.<sup>9</sup>

"Louisiana Lize" was the first of many compositions through which the team consciously contrived to reform the most successful African-American musical style of the day, the "coon song." These were popular tunes that were based upon syncopated ragtime rhythms, but featured lyrics that created vicious stereotypes and traded upon chicken-stealing, watermelon-eating, and razor-toting negative racial imagery for their popularity. Many were written by white composers, but soon African-Americans began to capitalize on the success of this new genre. Notable among these was the famed comedian Ernest Hogan, "the unbleached American," whose composition, "All Coons Look Alike to Me," became immensely popular. He was also the first to use the word "rag" in reference to its syncopated musical style. To his lasting chagrin, white racists soon whistled its chorus as an insult to blacks. Rosamond recalled witnessing two men hurled off a ferryboat in a fight inspired by this melody. Evidence that tolerance for this genre had already worn thin was displayed in an unsigned article entitled, "Passing of the Coon and Degrading Dance," published by an African-American regional newspaper in 1900. Its author scolded those "who debase themselves and the race, who indulge publicly and for past time; in those songs and dance which are nothing shorter than the grossest vulgarity and obscenity." However, during their partnership with Bob Cole, Rosamond's musical style increasingly began to integrate the syncopated ragtime aspect of these coon songs, while James explored the lyrical

possibilities of a more dignified use of black dialect. As Rosamond described it, “We wanted to clean up the caricature.”<sup>10</sup>

An example of Cole’s influence can be seen in an episode when Rosamond, while walking uptown with Cole, began humming “Nobody Knows De Trouble I’ve Seen” to himself. Cole exclaimed, “That’s the song we need for our act.” Rosamond was concerned that a sacred song would be “desecrated on the vaudeville stage.” Cole berated him, teasing, “What kinda musician are you? Been to the Boston Conservatory and can’t change a little old tune around.” With Bob Cole’s new lyrics and by inverting a few of the intervals of the song, while maintaining its basic rhythm, they wrote “Under the Bamboo Tree.” Using traditional African-American raw material, they had methodically manipulated it into what would be one of their most popular songs.<sup>11</sup>

That fall, shortly after the Johnsons returned home to resume their teaching duties, Rosamond organized a concert by fellow *Oriental America* associate, Sidney Woodward. Even before his engagement with Isham’s show, Woodward was well established as a celebrated singer with a national reputation. He debuted in 1893 at Boston’s Chickering Hall. That same year, a review of his Chicago World’s Fair performance noted that the, “tenor for sweetness and purity of tone has rarely been equaled at the Exposition.”<sup>12</sup> His Jacksonville concert was a great financial and artistic success and although its large audience was predominantly comprised of African-Americans, it also included a hundred or so white audience members. James observed that the event, “sent the level of musical entertainment among the colored people many degrees higher.” Woodward apparently enjoyed his visit to Jacksonville and soon returned to make it his home. Eventually, he took over Rosamond’s choral directing duties at the Florida Baptist Academy. A decade later, when he was invited to attend W. E. B. Dubois’ World Congress of Races in London, a local paper crowed, “Mr. Woodward has made his home in Jacksonville for the past ten years and this city has every right to claim him as its own, a right that comes by adoption.”<sup>13</sup>

As Supervisor of Music for Jacksonville’s public schools, Rosamond became one of the acknowledged leaders of the musical community. He enjoyed the type of unique social access that is achieved through the intimacy of shared performance experiences. A fund-raising presentation in LaVilla by the Johnson-Waldron Club of the Bethel Baptist Church illustrated

these relationships. Reverend Jerome Milton Waldron, the community's spiritual leader and pastor of the Bethel Church was also an accomplished singer. Their program featured not only hymns and choral works, but also included pieces for a band led by prominent business leader W. J. Lewis, complete with piccolo, snare and bass drums. A white reporter described their performance as a "new century entertainment." The concert was held inside the impressive brick church structure that Waldron had recently helped to build. This reviewer went on to note that "too much credit cannot be given to Prof. J. R. Johnson, who had entire charge of the program. The whole affair was a financial success and all who took part have the thanks of the members of the club and of the managers."<sup>14</sup>

James was invited to give an address at the Lincoln's Birthday exercises that were to be held in Jacksonville on February 12, 1900. He wanted to contribute something to make the program special and he began to write a poem that would commemorate the rich emotional significance of the holiday. He turned the first stanza over to Rosamond, who began composing the musical setting, while he continued to struggle over the remaining lines. They sent the completed manuscript to Joseph W. Stern and Company, their publishers in New York. The song, "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" was first performed by a chorus of five hundred schoolchildren's voices at the celebration that year. Rosamond's music and arrangement lifted James' poetry, which included the following strikingly frank lines:

We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,  
Out from a gloomy past,  
Till now we stand at last  
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

The melody and the lyrics that these young voices sang would resonate throughout LaVilla and beyond. This inspirational anthem was later adopted by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and became familiar across the country as the "Negro National Hymn."<sup>15</sup>

That summer, a few weeks after they returned to New York, Rosamond was occupied with an extended rehearsal and missed an appointment with a friend. Because of this delay, he

narrowly avoided becoming one of the casualties of Manhattan's violent race riot. Both George Walker (of the team of Williams and Walker) and Ernest Hogan barely escaped a dangerous mob of club-wielding whites. Unfortunately, Barry Carter, the friend Rosamond had planned to meet was not as lucky. He suffered a severe beating that left numerous wounds in his scalp from which he never fully recovered.<sup>16</sup>

The partnership with Cole generated numerous popular songs that season, but the brothers were not earning as much as they had hoped and needed to borrow money to return home to LaVilla. In the fall, James invited the famed poet and librettist Paul Lawrence Dunbar to give a reading in Jacksonville. James arranged for the reading to take place in the parlor of the prestigious St. James Hotel, where his father had worked for many years as headwaiter. Local black Masons organized a lodge to honor Dunbar by naming it the Paul Lawrence Dunbar Lodge. Describing this group as a "horny-handed set," James noted marked distinctions between the Odd Fellows lodges, which were comprised of predominantly white-collar workers, and the Masonic lodges, which were populated primarily by the laborers of LaVilla.<sup>17</sup>

Just before noon on May 3, 1901, a fire broke out at the Cleveland Fibre Factory on the corner of Beaver and Davis Streets. The flames spread east to Hogans Creek and as far south as the St. Johns River. With the exception of the western part of LaVilla and a few blocks near the waterfront, the entire city of Jacksonville was destroyed within a few hours.<sup>18</sup> The Johnson homestead was spared and became a refuge for less fortunate neighbors. Both brothers contributed to community relief efforts. When martial law was imposed on the city, auxiliary enforcers were summoned from the surrounding countryside. A group of these rural white militiamen responded to a report that James was seen consorting with a white woman at a park by the river. In fact, he was discussing a magazine dispatch with a light-skinned African-American reporter from New York. Military discipline evaporated amid shouts of, "Kill the damned nigger! Kill the black son of a bitch!" At that moment, James understood that any wrong movement would result in his death by lynching. The threat was defused when their officer arrived, but this display of naked racism convinced both brothers to make plans to leave Jacksonville as quickly as possible.<sup>19</sup>

In New York, their collaboration with Bob Cole continued to produce numerous hits. In 1901 the dialect song, "Nobody's Lookin' But de Owl and de Moon" was featured in *The*

*Sleeping Beauty and the Beast* and a non-ethnic song, “The Maiden with the Dreamy Eyes,” was performed in Flo Ziegfeld’s production of *The Little Duchess* by Ziegfeld’s wife, Anna Held. Most of the sheet music publications of their songs listed the title with their names, but pictured the featured white singer who popularized their songs. Within two years, Broadway star Marie Cahill introduced “Under the Bamboo Tree” and “Congo Love Song” in other high profile shows. These two numbers were so popular that years later when the songwriting team visited Paris, the house orchestra at the Olympia greeted them with an impromptu rendition of the songs. The press began to refer to the group as, “Those Ebony Offenbachs.”<sup>20</sup>

In December of 1903, they completed an ambitious suite of six songs named “The Evolution of Ragtime” which illustrated “the growth of Negro music from the old days of minstrelsy to the present day.” Musicologist Edward Berlin describes this collaborative work as the perfect vehicle through which these creative African-American composers could strive “not only for commercial success but also for artistic validity within a black cultural context.” The suite was immediately presented to the public in Klaw and Erlanger’s enormous extravaganza, *Mother Goose*. Only two years earlier, Ben Teal, the celebrated producers’ stage director was said to have breathlessly asked Bob Cole, “Do you know where I can find two brothers named Johnson, who wrote a song called ‘Run Brudder Possum, Run’ for the Rogers Brothers show last season?” Cole’s reply was reported to be, “I know just where I can put my hands on them for you,” and he did. Later, Edward Bok, of the *Ladies Home Journal* published this series of songs in installments, establishing yet another market for the team’s creative work. Cole, James, and Rosamond soon completed the lyrics and music for another elaborate Klaw and Erlanger production. *Humpty Dumpty* opened in September of 1904, with an all-white cast of two hundred and fifty performers.<sup>21</sup>

Sylvester Russell, the uncompromising and occasionally irascible critic for the *Freeman* was a rigorous arbiter of black taste. He described the team’s rising status and influence in the entertainment industry:

One of the most important deals among the big ones was the transfiguration of the Cole and Johnson song factory into the clutches of Klaw and Erlanger. This is a most extraordinary report. It has been a well known fact for some time that

distinguished white actresses, who are admirers of the Cole and Johnson songs, or factory, which includes big chief Cole, his partner Rosamond Johnson and their little brother James W. Johnson, that these actresses have had disputes with their managers and defied them, to sing these men's songs, in preference to any other composers. Klaw and Erlanger who stand on the very highest shelf in the comedy market and who confer and even dictate to the machinery, but who, like all heads of corporate concerns must receive criticism and take their medicine in turn, can be commended handsomely in the latest musical deal, favorably to themselves and others.<sup>22</sup>

Back in the fall of 1902, Cole and Rosamond had received a last minute call to entertain at a party held at Sherry's on Fifth Avenue. While rehearsing for the engagement, Theodore Pankey a friend and fellow performer, dropped by for a visit, so they took him along. It was a star-studded affair with Lillian Russell, Edna Wallace Harper, and numerous influential producers and managers in attendance. The pair were a great hit at the party and Pankey almost stole the show when he sang Rosamond's "Li'l Gal" to a young lady who was sitting on a gentleman's knee. The gentleman gave the performers a one hundred dollar bill, doubling their take for the night. A couple of months later, a manager who had seen them at this party contacted Rosamond and Cole and engaged them to perform in vaudeville.<sup>23</sup>

They polished their act and took it on the road. Impeccably attired in evening dress suits, the pair performed in many of the best theaters in the country, which included houses operated by B. F. Keith as well as those on the competing Orpheum circuit. Both took turns singing, while Rosamond played piano. Sylvester Russell lavished his rare praises on them, when they headlined at Keith's theater in Boston. Although Rosamond still preferred to mix ragtime and classical piano pieces with German lieder, like "Still Vie Die Nacht," Russell described Cole's renditions of "their own coon songs, 'I Must a-Been a-Dreamin' and 'Oh, Didn't he Ramble'" as "masterpieces of art." The pair continued to introduce new compositions, such as "My Castle on the Nile" and "I Dreamed I was the King of Spain" that would later become part of their larger productions. They opened at the Palace Theater in London on July 15, 1905 and were amazed by what seemed like thousands of buses carrying full-length placards reading "Cole and Johnson,

the Great American Musicians.” They were finally the headliners of a show. The audience received Rosamond’s piano solo and German song warmly, but it was the “Congo Love Song” that provoked “an outburst of spontaneous and prolonged applause.” Back in the states, their popularity continued. In New York, they were even engaged to play two vaudeville dates in one night, at the new Alhambra Theater at 7:30 and then Oscar Hammerstein’s Victoria at 9:30. The contribution of Bob Cole’s showmanship to the team was subtle, but substantial. Once, when asked why he always tossed a white silk handkerchief from one hand to another as he sang, Cole replied, “Well, you see, the pipes ain’t what they should be, and when I am supposed to hit a note that I can’t, I toss the handkerchief in the air, and the audience pays more attention to it than to my voice and so don’t notice that I didn’t make it.”<sup>24</sup>

During a planning session for a return engagement in London, Bob Cole suggested an idea for a more ambitious production. While the team was completing work on the music and dialogue for the play, James was offered an appointment as United States Consul at Puerta Cabello, Venezuela. He remembered, “I felt that it was the last piece of work the three of us should do together.” They completed the show and named it *The Shoo-Fly Regiment*. It was structured in three acts with a stronger narrative design than previous black musicals. Its story was set against the outbreak of the Spanish-American War. A *Freeman* reviewer observed, “The plot of the Shoo-Fly Regiment, if it may be thus designated, was more discernable than noted in other shows. The thread was fairly continuous and strong, holding the interest to the last as to the final outcome of the Negro regiment, sent to the Philippines.” The first and third scenes were set at a southern black industrial school, with the second act set in the Philippines. Although the story of love and heroism is a familiar one, by placing their characters in black institutional settings, the team was able to present African-Americans more realistically and leave behind the farcical abstractions that typified earlier shows. These characters were not only responsible teachers and soldiers, but they were also capable of making dignified ethical and even heroic choices. It was a play full of “strong young people that had good telling parts and opportunity to make good.” Rosamond portrayed a young educator who postpones his marriage to the college president’s daughter to do his patriotic duty. He joins the military and suffers rejection for his decision, but later redeems himself through valor. Cole took a comic turn as the school’s janitor. The cast also featured veteran minstrel star Sam Lucas and included Theodore Pankey, and his

wife Anna Cook Pankey. A diminutive young actor named Edgar Connors was brought to New York from Jacksonville to play the juvenile role. A number of the songs featured in this production were minor hits, including “There’s Always Something Wrong,” “De Bo’d of Education,” “Li’l Gal,” and “Floating Down the Nile.” Young Edgar Connors made such a hit singing the song “Sambo,” that Cole and Johnson cast him as a character by that name in their next show, *Red Moon*. Another thematic song featured in *The Shoo-Fly Regiment* was “That Old Flag Never Touched the Ground,” composed by Rosamond years earlier in Jacksonville. The sixty-person show opened at the Majestic Theater in Washington, D. C. on August 21, 1906. In New York, it played the Bijou Theater on Broadway and continued what would be a long and difficult road tour. It was an endless series of one-night stands. During a one week “layoff,” Cole described some of the setbacks they experienced: “When our original manager, N. B. Raymond, failed, we were left in darkest Texas, with an indebtedness of some \$12,000, which included printing, railroad transportation, back salaries, etc., all of which we assumed.” They managed to keep the show on the road, but these circumstances took their toll on Rosamond’s ability to perform. The *Dallas News* commented that he, “does not quite sing as well as of yore, but he is still satisfactory.” His brother James observed that, “The wear and tear of ‘trouping’ coupled with anxiety had worn on Rosamond physically and showed particularly in the almost complete loss of his singing voice.” Cole and Johnson closed the *Shoo-Fly Regiment* on May 2, 1908 at the National Theater in Philadelphia. Within two weeks, the pair trimmed the show down and continued to perform its musical selections as a duo act in vaudeville.<sup>25</sup>

That July in New York, Rosamond joined with a group of the most successful African-American performers in the country to create a new fraternal organization for black actors and musicians. Their purpose was to create an archive for “social, historical, and library purposes” that could become the core of a theatrical library. They raised money for charities and held an annual dance and vaudeville review, known as the “Frolic of the Frogs.” The first officers of the Frogs Club were George Walker as president and Rosamond as vice-president, with Bob Cole, James Reese Europe, and Bert Williams occupying other offices. The organization’s name, the Frogs, echoed characters from Aristophanes and Aesop and was also a play on the name of the “White Rats,” a similar group of white performers.<sup>26</sup>



Rosamond composed the music for *Mr. Lode of Koal*, Bert Williams' first show after his partner George Walker had permanently retired from the stage. It opened late in the fall of 1909. The show featured Williams portraying Mr. Lode, who dreams he's been shipwrecked on an island where natives proclaim him king. His attempts to forsake the throne and leave the island generated the comedy of the show. Some of the new songs were well received, but the show was unable to get bookings in anything but "popular-priced" houses and found it hard to make a profit. After six months, the show closed and Williams became part of the popular white vaudeville show, Florenz Ziegfeld's *Follies of 1910*.<sup>27</sup>

Cole and Johnson's last show, *Red Moon*, was their most ambitious production. However, they carefully avoided the pitfalls of spectacle and managed to achieve a rare balance between the musical, comedic, and dramatic elements of the show. A *Freeman* review of an early road performance at the Great Northern Theater in Chicago observed, "This is not a storming hit or boisterous, just a plain big success. The music is the best that was ever offered by Negroes. Every number received an equal amount of encores and was well paced throughout the program. The comedy was exceptionally light; nothing to scream at, but keep smiling, not laugh. The piece is so well balanced that any two good comedians could do the show justice. The scenery and costumes was everything that could be wished for; nothing spectacular or gorgeous." The show's dramatic narrative described the adventures of Minnehaha, a young mixed-race girl, who is kidnapped from her mother's home in Virginia and carried west by her Indian father. Bob Cole played Slim Brown, a comic lawyer and Rosamond portrayed Plunk Green, the fake doctor who falls in love and tries to rescue her. Abbie Mitchell played the heroine and Theodore Pankey was Red Feather, her father. Anna Cook Pankey in the role of Nokomis, was one of the featured singers. Sam Lucas once again brought his comic *gravitas* to the show with his characterization of Bill Webster, the barber and George Walker's wife, Aida Overton Walker briefly toured with them in the small role of Flaming Arrow. James Reese Europe joined the show as music director and contributed two of his own compositions to the score.<sup>28</sup>

There is an interesting reversal of stereotype in the characterizations of this show, though many of its black characters are presented in a comic light. Representations of Native American characters are shown in a very negative light. The "half-breed" character of Minnehaha is shown

as torn between the two competing cultural traditions of her parents. At the end of the play, though, she is returned by Cole and Johnson to her African-American family in Virginia.<sup>29</sup>

Scenes in black shows that depicted romantic love presented serious challenges for African-American playwrights. James Weldon Johnson used the word “taboo” to summarize the cultural environment of his time when, “if anything approaching a love duet was introduced in a musical comedy, it had to be broadly burlesqued” and he described the overriding belief, “that a love scene between two Negroes could not strike a white audience as anything except as ridiculous.” He believed that his brother and Bob Cole had come the closest to breaking this taboo in these last two shows. The romance between Rosamond as Plunk Green and Abbie Mitchell as Minnehaha transgressed racial boundaries, but the prohibition against love between blacks and whites remained intact. However, Charles Mars, in his *Freeman* review, noted that the song “Red Shawl,” “made many young lovers in the house wish they were indians.”<sup>30</sup>

*Red Moon* opened at the Majestic Theater in New York on May 3, 1909, after the show had been on tour for months. It ran for thirty-two performances. Despite universal critical acclaim and appreciative audiences, *Red Moon* ran into many of the same financial problems that compromised the *Shoo-fly Regiment’s* run. A *Freeman* reviewer complained that on its return trip to Chicago, “*Red Moon* had to play the Globe, which is a barn when compared to other up-to-date houses in the city.” Europe left the company in January of the next year. Not long after a performance in New Haven that April, the show closed. A *New York Age* reviewer expressed his belief that *Red Moon’s* producers’ inability, “to provide suitable booking is the primary cause of this latest and unexpected move.” That October, Cole and Johnson resumed their careers in vaudeville and accepted an extended engagement at B. F. Keith’s Fifth Avenue Theater in New York. In the middle of one of these shows, Bob Cole had a nervous breakdown and was taken to Bellevue Hospital. He died the next year. His death was generally assumed to be a suicide.<sup>31</sup>

Theodore Pankey’s wife, Anna Cook Pankey left the *Red Moon* revue during the early part of its tour and returned to her mother’s home in Jacksonville in order to restore her health. During her stay, she organized an ambitious theatrical production sponsored by Edward Waters College for the benefit of the Pulpit Aid Club of the Mt. Zion Church on Ashley Street. *Cast Upon the World*, “a thrilling five-act drama embellished with vocal selections” opened on Thursday night April 8, 1909, at the white-owned Duval Theater on the corner of Main and

Duval streets. The narrative plot included “love, murder, misery, hope, disappointment, intrigue, and a triumph of the right.” The cast consisted mostly of local amateurs, with some professional musicians in the orchestra. The lead, a challenging soprano part, was performed by Anna Heard. The small role of Robert Stanford was played by a recent Cookman Institute graduate named Asa Phillip Randolph. The performance was just a few days before his twentieth birthday, a few months before he moved to New York to become an actor, and decades before he became a nationally known civil rights leader. The degree to which this effort was able to attract an audience may be indicated by a *Metropolis* reviewer, who noted: “in the midst of Holy Week and in the rush of Easter preparations, it would have been a surprise had the attendance at the Duval Theater last night been large.” The next week Walter Damrosch’s New York Philharmonic Orchestra performed on the Duval’s stage.<sup>32</sup>

There were numerous concerts and presentations by African-Americans in Jacksonville that satisfied the cultural tastes and aspirations of many residents. The musical events sponsored by the Florida Baptist Academy maintained a high level of quality under Sidney Woodward’s supervision. There were also opportunities to hear him sing in concert on those occasions when he performed at benefit concerts and other events in the city, with his wife providing piano accompaniment. The Academy also continued the tradition started by Rosamond and James’ first music drama at the Stanton School and frequently staged dramatic productions for their commencement exercises. The Cookman Institute’s music department under the direction of Eugene F. Mikell had grown significantly during this time and he started presenting its students in concert recitals. These programs were composed almost exclusively of European art music. Ralph Redmond’s graduation performance was one exception. He played the “World’s Fair Polka” on the trombone at his commencement concert. Although vocal performance predominated, there were a number of instrumental works included in each of these programs. Edward Waters College continued to sponsor dramatic productions, but after *Cast Upon the World*, none could boast a New York theater star as its director. Another development in Jacksonville was the founding of the Cole and Johnson Working Club of the Ebenezer Church, which was created to contribute charitable works to the community. They organized Easter Sunday entertainments for the local children and sponsored benefit events. There was also a “Rosamond Johnson Club” vocal quartet that performed for the Bethel Church’s anniversary

concert. One of the more significant concert events during this period was presented by the recent University of Pennsylvania graduate, Carl R. Diton. On January 20, 1910, he gave a very well attended “evening of refined music, most skillfully executed” at the Mount Zion A. M. E. Church on West Ashley Street to benefit Edward Waters College. The program posted before the concert listed a repertoire that included almost every European composer of note. This was Diton’s final concert tour in the United States, before he left to study in Berlin under the sponsorship of the celebrated soprano Miss Azalia Hackney.<sup>33</sup>

When Black Patti’s Troubadours arrived at the Duval Theater that same month, they presented their new show, *A Trip to Africa* to “an audience that filled every nook and corner of the house.” They turned hundreds away. The white section of the theater was entirely filled and “it must be said that the applause came from every part of the house.” A white reviewer for the *Metropolis* described the show as, “the strongest production that has ever been presented by a colored organization.” Tim Owsley reported that “Madam Patti (Sissieretta Jones) sang as well as ever and just as sweet, not only did she sing, but she can act as well. And her every effort was appreciated by both races. Her songs brought encore after encore.” The renowned white actress Lillian Russell performed on the Duval’s stage only two days earlier. For fifteen years, Sissieretta “Black Patti” Jones had been successfully headlining her own show, which consisted of a comic sketch, followed by an olio section, and concluded with an “Operatic Kaleidoscope” as the finale. Jones was an accomplished operatic singer who had toured Europe, performed at Madison Square Garden, and been invited to sing for President Benjamin Harrison at the White House. Jacksonville resident, Willis L. James recalled: “Negroes were proud of Black Patti” for the reason that “in a sense, she was kind of a ‘racial’ heroine because she was so outstanding as a singer, even by white standards, and white people came to hear her, too.” Her most popular pieces displayed the diversity of her audiences. Stephen Foster’s “Old Folks at Home” and Gaetano Donizetti’s aria from *Lucia di Lammermoor* were always highlights of her shows. So popular were these pieces that reviewers of her Tampa performance a week before, felt that, “Sissieretta Jones without her ‘Suwannee River’ song would be like Campanari without his ‘Il Torreador,’ and she gave it last night with the usual satisfaction.” Donizetti’s opera was popular with white Jacksonville audiences as well. A few months later, Lucius Lescale included an

arrangement of the same piece from *Lucia* in his solo organ recital at the Church of the Immaculate Conception.<sup>34</sup>

Booker T. Washington stopped in Jacksonville in March of 1912, at the conclusion of his tour of Florida. Local white attorney and member of the Duval County School Board, George Bedell introduced him to a group of around 2,500 black and white audience members, who came to the Duval Theater to hear him. The chorus of the Clinton Graded School sang an original composition in his honor. Eartha White, on behalf of the Jacksonville Negro Business League had invited him to address the subject of education and to speak out against lynching and other crimes against African-Americans.<sup>35</sup>

After Bob Cole's death, Rosamond briefly stopped performing, until producers Henry B. Harris and Jesse L. Lasky hired him to compose the music for a revue at their Folies Bergère Theater in September of 1911. Rosamond not only wrote the music, but also trained the company and conducted the orchestra for *Hello Paris*, a spicy show that "attempted to give New York something more Parisian than anything in the French capital." James observed that this was "the only time a Negro has conducted a white orchestra in a New York theatre for a play with a white cast." The show ran for thirty performances. In 1912, Oscar Hammerstein appointed Rosamond to be the supervisor of music for his Grand Opera House in London, a position he held for two years. Rosamond visited LaVilla only infrequently, during the days after the fire. He returned for a brief stop in late 1910 while traveling to perform at Tuskegee Institute. When he came to Jacksonville to attend his father's funeral in 1912, he became engaged to Nora Floyd, a former student from his days at the Florida Baptist Academy, before returning to England. They were married in London in 1913. When the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers was organized in 1914, Rosamond was still in London. The organization's purpose was to protect the economic rights of musicians and copyright owners when their music was "performed publicly for profit." Of 192 founding members, James Weldon Johnson and Harry Burleigh were the only African-Americans in the group. While overseas, Rosamond continued to perform in vaudeville. His partners during this period were Charles Hart in 1913 and the next year, Tom Brown, who had portrayed Silas Green in *A Trip to Coontown*. Brown had previously worked with Rosamond in *Mr. Lode of Kole* and the *Shoo-fly Regiment*. At the end of these engagements in London, Rosamond settled in New York where he

took over the directorship of the Music School Settlement for Colored People in Harlem. This school was founded by a group of white philanthropists led by David Mannes of the New York Symphony Orchestra.<sup>36</sup>

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **ON STAGE, UNDER CANVAS**

To own a show is one thing. To own the stage that presents that show is something entirely different. LaVilla was home to one of the first black-owned performance spaces in the Southeast and despite numerous crippling setbacks, local African-American entertainment entrepreneurs survived and even began to expand their holdings. Some touring performers leveraged the management experience they had received on the road and began managing their own companies, negotiating their own contracts, and booking their own transportation. From their ranks, a new breed of black capitalist emerged and after Pat Chappelle successfully introduced his new tent show strategy, African-American owners briefly controlled the stages and seating arrangements for many of the region's top shows. Mobile and flexible, these companies eventually became longstanding cultural institutions and presented variety entertainment to mixed-race audiences for decades.

Patrick H. Chappelle dominated the entertainment profession in the southeastern United States for most of the first decade of the twentieth century and he was one of the most intriguing entrepreneurs of his time. The oldest son of Lewis and Annie Chappelle, Chappelle was born in Jacksonville in 1869. He began his career in the early 1880s, singing and playing guitar with two other boys at hotels in Florida and along the eastern seaboard. During an extended engagement on a steamboat running between Boston and Nantucket, the boys caught the attention of Benjamin Franklin Keith, owner of the nation's most prestigious circuit of vaudeville theaters. He offered the young team several weeks of bookings, which led to work on the Museum circuit and in venues around Boston and New York City. Returning to Florida, Chappelle performed for two years at Charles Woodward's restaurant in Sanford and then worked at Walker and Hamilton's saloon in Tampa.<sup>1</sup>

After his Tampa engagement concluded, Chappelle settled back in Jacksonville and opened a pool hall on Bay Street, near the center of the town's commercial district. The success of this venture encouraged him to sign a five-year lease on a building located at Bridge Street in LaVilla along with his younger brothers James and Lewis. Together, they remodeled it into the Excelsior Hall, one of the first black-owned theatrical venues in the South. Although

entertainment was featured here, their license to sell whiskey may have attracted just as many patrons as the show.<sup>2</sup>

In January of 1899, Chappelle returned to the road to manage the Imperial Colored Minstrels, a troupe he had disbanded the previous year, after an unsuccessful tour. Before it failed once again in Memphis, Tennessee, the show had traveled extensively throughout the South, employing over twenty-five performers,. During this same period, he also initiated a brief partnership with Pierce Hamilton to share ownership in the Tampa saloon where he had performed just a few years before. The partners leased the 1416 Fifth Avenue location from Robert Mugge for forty-three dollars and thirty-three cents per month. Back in Jacksonville however, the high cost of their licensing fees forced the brothers to close the Excelsior Hall in mid-October, resulting in an extended dispute with its owner concerning their lease on that building.<sup>3</sup>

Before the end of September, Chappelle ended his relationship with Hamilton and entered into a more successful collaboration with Robert S. Donaldson. They renewed the lease on Mugge's property and reopened it as the Buckingham Theater and dance hall, with the saloon in an adjoining room. This location's proximity to Vincent Martinez-Ybor's booming cigar factory, just a few blocks to the North, must have provided the enterprise with an ample supply of potential patrons. Tampa had experienced phenomenal growth over the previous twenty years and by then, African-Americans comprised almost a third of its total population. Soon, the pair's holdings expanded into an additional venture, when they opened the Mascot Saloon at 702 Polk Street less than a mile away. The partnership with Donaldson, like the one with Hamilton, did not last. It dissolved during the fall of 1900 in a legal dispute over Chappelle's debts, so Donaldson removed whatever stock and fixtures he could carry out of the business and left the Buckingham to open a cook-shop. A few years later, he became owner of the Budweis Theater. Pat's brothers were residing in Tampa at the time, so they renewed their partnership and continued the operation, maintaining the same name and location. Pat owned two thirds of the business and his brothers shared the remaining third. Expansion continued that December when they purchased the Bijou Theater and saloon (formerly the Central Theater) at 302 Central Avenue in Tampa. They hired comedian D. Ireland Thomas to manage this venue. Unfortunately, it closed not very long after its grand opening.<sup>4</sup>



Throughout the earlier part of that same year, Chappelle had been developing another touring company. He commissioned Frank Dumont of the Eleventh Street Theater in Philadelphia to write the book and music for his new troupe, which made its debut in Jacksonville on March 28. The show was entitled *A Rabbit's Foot*. Pat Chappelle's new Rabbit's Foot Company featured a wide variety of talented performers and briefly headlined pioneer minstrel Ben Hunn, the former star of Billy Kersands' traveling show and "the greatest darky of them all" as its lead act. They carried a large cast, including (among others), a "champion colored lady pianist," "grotesque cake walkers," a "dainty slack-wire" artist, and a "crack banjoist," as well as "high-class sketch artists." These performances opened with a comic exchange in the tradition of earlier minstrel shows, then *A Rabbit's Foot*, the scripted "musical drama" was presented. These were followed by an "olio," where the independent variety acts were performed. Then the entire cast concluded the show with a rousing musical number.<sup>5</sup>

Their street parade, an important trademark of any minstrel show, featured Chappelle leading the procession of fifty performers in his own automobile (a genuine novelty at the time), with Arthur "Happy" Howe, the lead comedian and "all the ladies" riding in "fancy traps" that had been custom made by the Buckeye Buggy Company of Columbus, Ohio. The ladies were a significant part of the image Chappelle presented to his public. Promotional materials from around this period display a handsome head shot of Chappelle, surrounded by a constellation of beautiful light-skinned faces, with the exclamation: "Don't fail to see the greatest bunch of Creole girls, singers, dancers, and cake walkers." This strategy had the benefit of attracting male audience members, but it also reassured ticket holders that his show was "safe" for women and children, as white vaudeville pioneer Tony Pastor had successfully discovered decades earlier.<sup>6</sup>

That August, after John F. Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* show closed, its experienced bandmaster, Frank Clermont joined the ensemble and *A Rabbit's Foot* made its northern debut on September 1 at the Bijou Theater in Patterson, New Jersey. Two weeks later though, when the company arrived in Brooklyn, business was so slow that the show had to close.<sup>7</sup>

By December of 1901, Pat Chappelle's various enterprises were beginning to enjoy success on a more frequent basis. An inveterate gambler, earlier that year he had won big in a card game at the saloon and used three hundred dollars of his winnings to purchase a small railroad car. He named it "Little Annie," after his mother. This new acquisition would help ease

the inevitable humiliations experienced by an African-American company traveling through an increasingly “Jim Crow” South, “where they are none too particular as to the kinds of cars colored folk ride in.” Chappelle’s Rabbit’s Foot Company had been engaged to perform for the staff and students at Booker T. Washington’s famous Tuskegee Institute in Alabama and his Buckingham Theater was prosperous enough to finance a remodeling project that increased its seating capacity. The theater also managed to furnish funds to keep the traveling show on the road during its unavoidable financial reversals.<sup>8</sup>

The Buckingham’s new stage manager was the “genteel” character comedian and singer, Will Goff Kennedy. An experienced veteran of Mahara’s Minstrel Company during W. C. Handy’s discriminating tenure as bandleader, Kennedy had recently returned East from a tour of California with George and Hart’s Georgia-Up-To-Date Company. Happy Howe, veteran of both the Imperial Colored Minstrels and Rabbit’s Foot companies was the theater’s lead comedian. He would maintain this position in Chappelle’s various shows for a number of years. S. D. Foster was hired as orchestra leader and Ralph S. Devine became the bandmaster.<sup>9</sup> In a letter to the *Freeman*, Ben Hunn celebrated not only Chappelle’s industry, but his integrity:

I am now filling an engagement down in Tampa, Fla., working for the Chappelle Bros. who have full control of the vaudeville business in this part of the country, and it is all due to the energy and pluck of Mr. Pat Chappelle. This particular gentleman has been ‘knocked’ hundreds and hundreds of times by performers who do not even know the gentleman, and I dare say he has and is now doing more good for the colored performers than any other manager in the business. He has more people working at the Buckingham than any of the traveling companies carry... I have been in the land of flowers five weeks and ever since I have been here everybody has been paid every Wednesday at 12 o’clock... This is my first time in the South and I am sorry I did not find this field before this.<sup>10</sup>

When he reported this in April of 1902, it appeared to Hunn that Pat Chappelle had “full control” of the profession in the Florida region and by early June, the Chappelle brothers themselves announced their plans to organize a chain of black theaters with locations in Tampa,

Jacksonville, and Savannah. However, the announcements appeared to be premature and these ambitious plans were never realized. The Chappelles closed their Mascot Theater location that month due to lack of business. After this, James and Lewis focused their attention on the Buckingham Theater, while Pat concentrated on his road show.<sup>11</sup>

In previous years, Chappelle had always booked his companies at the various local opera houses that were scattered throughout the South. For his 1902 season, he decided upon a new touring strategy and when the Rabbit's Foot Company opened in Plant City on July 14, they performed "under canvas." By traveling with his own tent, Chappelle could profit from two distinct advantages. First, the capacity of most small-town venues provided little more than three hundred seats, limiting the profitability of many route stops. In Florida, only the Alcazar Casino Theater in Saint Augustine and the Park Opera House in Jacksonville (before the fire) could accommodate a thousand or more ticket holders. Also, after *Plessy v. Ferguson*, segregation in southern theaters was evolving from an issue of social convention into a matter of law. Changes at the Pensacola Opera House, a regular stop for Chappelle, may have opened his eyes to this social transformation. After 1901, a theater that had never before implemented discriminatory policies began to restrict black seating to their second floor balcony and even built a wall to separate them from white audience members. This occurred only one year after Booker T. Washington appeared before a mixed-race audience on that same stage. Chappelle could erect his own tent in each town and create a neutral social space where he was in control of the segregated seating and the number of black audience members in attendance.<sup>12</sup>

By late August when the show arrived in Atlanta, it filled Bishop Turner's Tabernacle to its complete capacity. The company performed before a crowd of eight thousand people. The white *Atlanta Constitution* reported, "There was a large number of white people among the audience. As a whole 'A Rabbit's Foot' is a big hit and worthy of the patronage of our best citizens." A *Freeman* correspondent shrewdly observed that the "receipts of A Rabbit's Foot Co. average more than a thousand dollars weekly, while the expenses run from five to seven hundred dollars. ...You might just as well be making this money for yourself rather than be making it for some white manager."<sup>13</sup> Chappelle literally invested some of his profits on the backs of his performers in the form of bright red alpaca Newmarket longcoats and custom-made novelty straw hats by the Knox Hat Company, worn in the street parades that heralded their arrival in

every town while the tent was being erected. The show closed its successful third season on January 21, following a performance under canvas at Green Cove Springs near Jacksonville. The company's equipment went into its winter storage at the Chappelle family's property on 1054 Church Street in LaVilla, a block away from Ashley Street.<sup>14</sup>

Chappelle was soon able to purchase a second railroad car for the company, but in Tampa, things were not going as well. In 1903, while James was on the road with the show, Lewis had been left in charge of the Buckingham. The Chappelles' remaining Tampa enterprise came to a disreputable end when Lewis was arrested and convicted of "attempting to evade the law by conducting the business without first obtaining a license." The doors to the Buckingham Theater were closed, the partnership was terminated, and Lewis was sent to jail. Pat rushed to Tampa, hired a lawyer and obtained Lewis' release, before rejoining his troupe.<sup>15</sup>

His 1904 season was Chappelle's most ambitious to date, with a tent tour scheduled to begin in Jacksonville on March 28, then continue for almost eleven months. The troupe had almost doubled in size, now filling three railroad cars. It became a genuine family affair when Pat's father Lewis joined his sons as their "boss hostler." D. Ireland Thomas, the Chappelles' former manager from the Bijou in Tampa, was soon succeeded as stage manager by Will Goff Kennedy. A fife and drum corps now opened the parade, creating "quite a sensation in the streets" and the Rabbit's Foot Brass Band increased from ten to twenty players. Under their new bandleader A. G. Jones, they could be heard "rendering compositions by the great masters." Amos Gilliard, a young trombone soloist and recent graduate of the Jenkins Orphans Band in Savannah was, "making a tremendous hit daily, playing the famous solo 'the Eiffel Tower.'" Chappelle was chauffeured by Hense Branson in a new two thousand dollar automobile and the traps that carried Happy Howe and the ladies, now sported Madison Square rubber tires. Susie Beavers, who joined the company after running away from her home in Atlanta, recalled, "Mr. Chappelle and the spieler--you'd call him the master of ceremonies today--rode at the head of the parade. Then eight of us girls came in little carts, two to a cart. The band--mostly brass--came loud and last." That August, they even added a steam calliope to the street parades. Notices proudly announced, "Mr. Chappelle declares that he intends to making a Rabbit's Foot Company the leading Negro show in America which deserves that place as it is the only genuine Negro show in existence to day that is managed by Negroes from head to foot and no one can find any

defect with the management or the show.” Another point of pride for Chappelle was the fact that venues were beginning to contact him for bookings. The Empire Theater in Washington and another in Baltimore sought out “the only Negro show with a plot” to perform on their stages. That season’s tour ended back in Jacksonville on February 1, 1905, after playing fifteen states and the District of Columbia.<sup>16</sup>

During that season’s tour, a performer named William Rainey met his eighteen year-old bride Gertrude Pritchett, who joined him on the road with the company. He was known as “Pa” Rainey and she, despite her young age, adopted the stage persona of “Ma.” Soon after she joined with Chappelle, Ma Rainey emerged as one of the top “coon singers” in the region.<sup>17</sup>

When the Buckingham was reopened as the Red Fox Music Hall on May 2, 1904, the name of the owner of this new “first class Cafe’ and pool room in Tampa” was advertised as A. N. Rushing. However, it appears that another relative, Mitchell P. Chappelle was in actually in charge of the venue. Mitchell, who worked in a printing shop on Central Avenue, had a partner in this venture, named Patrocena Siberio. Chappelle hired the experienced Will Kennedy, who had recently returned to Florida after a brief stay in New York City, as his stage manager. William H. Dorsey was pianist and music director. Dorsey had been one of Eartha White’s classmates at the Florida Baptist Academy during Rosamond Johnson’s tenure there. Carrie Hall, “a coon song singer without equal,” was one of the featured performers, with Kitty Brown, the burlesque queen, and a “chorus of six creole show girls” as other major attractions. Adding an extra touch of elegance, Kennedy and Sarah Price contributed an uplifting encore to one of these shows with their rendition of “La Miserere” from *La Traviata*. Kennedy commented that the Red Fox stock company “can produce most anything from minstrelsy to tragedy.” That August, after Fernandina’s Gem Theater closed down, John Dennis joined the company at the Red Fox where he produced his original musical comedy, *O’Brien in Coon Town*.<sup>18</sup>

These programs at the Red Fox seem to mirror elements of the northern touring shows. While this might be a reflection of Chappelle’s experience in the Northeast, many of the performers brought with them some experience in the prestige shows, such as Mahara’s Minstrels, the Smart Set, and Black Patti’s Troubadours, that played for mixed-race audiences. The choice of an aria from a Verdi opera is one that certainly would reflect a cultivated taste on both sides of the racial divide, but the juxtaposition of a coon singer and a burlesque queen on

the same bill indicates that this was a very complex African-American “target audience.” This audience’s support for entertainment that emulated white “high class” styles demonstrates an upwardly mobile urge that parallels that of white working class audiences. What is interesting here is the inclusion of “authentic” black practices. Recognizable and familiar forms of expression provided a unique and distinctively African-American genre that was designed to appeal to this audience.

Beginning with his 1905 season, Pat Chappelle provided an additional attraction for his audiences. He fielded a professional-style baseball team to challenge local ball clubs in the towns they visited. The company’s band was on hand to perform classical music during the games. J. C. Turner was bandmaster and orchestra leader during this tour and E. B. Dudley joined the troupe, bringing his violin playing skills to the ensemble. It was during this season that a young man from Gainesville joined the tour. J. Augustus “Gus” Smith was only fourteen years old. Within just a few years, he opened an “airdome” theater in his hometown, formed his own touring minstrel show, and then moved his act up to the Keith vaudeville circuit. He grew up to become a well-respected actor and writer. His stage play *Louisiana* was made into the motion picture *Voodoo Drums* and later, he was appointed producer of the Works Progress Administration Negro Theater in Harlem.<sup>19</sup>

With the wealth of black talent responding to Chappelle’s continuously running *Freeman* advertisement inviting performers and musicians to contact him, he was able to maintain multiple tent shows on the road under his ownership. In 1906, he formed the Funny Folks Company and leased this business to Mitchell Chappelle. The next year, Pat Chappelle agreed to manage the routing and railroad contracts for the New Orleans-based Florida Blossoms Company. Douglas and Worthy, the new white owners had recently purchased the show from previous owner and manager, H. S. Donaldson. The Blossoms opened their season in late December of 1906, highlighting performances by blackfaced comedian Buddie Glenn with Carrie Hall as their “coon shouter.” By the middle of the next year, their roster also featured a number of Chappelle regulars, including Will Kennedy as stage manager and William Dorsey as bandleader. Toward the end of that season, Chappelle had taken out another *Freeman* advertisement that read, “For rent, minstrel shows under canvas, ready to set up and do business,

including cars, tent, seats, lights, advance agents, performers and musicians.” He added to his holdings in early 1908, when he purchased the Harrison Brothers Minstrel Company.<sup>20</sup>

It appears that he kept the best talent for his Rabbit’s Foot Company and maintained the others as second string shows. An advertisement taken out by Mitchell Chappelle seeking musicians for the Funny Folks company candidly stated, “Salaries low, but sure.” When the Funny Folks troupe featured Will Kennedy as its lead comedian for the 1907 season, it is unclear whether this was an attempt to bolster the quality of the show, or a demotion for Kennedy. These companies may also have been relegated to less attractive routes. Susie Beavers, the “coon song shouter” from the team of Santana and Beavers, accompanied the Funny Folks for that tour and remembered, “Texas was awful. When we crossed the line into the next state, we got out and kissed the ground.”<sup>21</sup> Although they were no longer partners, Pat employed both James and Lewis in positions of responsibility with his various shows, but during this period, underlying tensions between the three brothers escalated and erupted. Pat’s frequent complaints of James’ dishonesty and of Lewis’s incompetence continued until the two brothers quit the business and abandoned the profession. Lewis found work as a blacksmith while James became a hostler, caring for horses. Resentment had apparently reached a peak when Pat evicted James from one of his Jacksonville investment properties for non-payment of rent.<sup>22</sup>

The Rabbit’s Foot Company suffered its worst and most tragic setback at three o’clock in the morning on August 13, 1908, in Shelby, North Carolina. After that evening’s show, when the tents and furnishings had been packed and everyone was asleep, one of the horses knocked over a tank of gasoline next to a cookstove which exploded, engulfing Chappelle’s newest railroad car in flames. Three men were fatally burned and numerous members of the troupe were badly wounded. Many were hurt while trying to save the horses that were trapped inside the burning car. Most of the company had been asleep in the front of the car and managed to escape safely, but they were unable to rescue their clothes and belongings. The wounded were transported to the Good Samaritan Hospital in Charlotte and the others were cared for by the people of Shelby. Undeterred by financial losses amounting to over ten thousand dollars, Chappelle immediately had another railroad car delivered and ordered a new eighty-foot round tent so the show could continue. The Rabbit’s Foot Company lost only one week of its scheduled tour. One of the survivors of the fire was young Tim Moore, who had joined the show

only three weeks earlier, when it opened in Waycross, Georgia. Years later, Moore would achieve national recognition playing the character of Kingfish in the popular nineteen-fifties television series, "Amos and Andy." The next year, Pat and his wife, Rosa, traveled to Wilmington, Delaware, to oversee construction of an elegant new custom-designed Pullman sleeping car.<sup>23</sup>

Chappelle repeatedly demonstrated his resilience in the face of these setbacks. He also showed a willingness to fight for his rights as a businessman in the courtroom. This began in 1903, when he successfully sued a number of railroads for refusing to carry his cars on their lines. In 1905, he was awarded a settlement of seven hundred dollars in damages from Rusco and Holland's Georgia Minstrels, after they lured away his bandmaster, Frank Clermont. In 1909, he sued the Mobile and Ohio Railroad Company for five hundred dollars, when they overcharged him for transporting the company's Pullman sleeper and baggage car. In an open letter to his fellow showmen that year, he encouraged all of them to join him in creating a unified front against the companies of the Southern Railroad Association, in order to force them into lowering their rates which specifically targeted touring shows.<sup>24</sup>

After closing the season on March 2, 1910, the railroad cars were sent to the shop for their annual maintenance. Chappelle's declining health was becoming a concern as well, so his doctors advised him to seek some rest. He and Rosa spent the early part of the summer in rural Georgia, but they became bored with the countryside and visited Atlanta. Chappelle's illness may have been the reason the July opening for that year's tour was postponed, but "in spite of Mr. Chappelle being on the sick list, he dictates and gives instructions whereby everything is working like clockwork." In late August, the show finally opened its season in Jacksonville following reports that "around the headquarters it looks like a regular circus. The tent, seats and poles are being worked over and everything is newly painted." By this time, Chappelle had taken the other companies off the road. He had become aware of greater competition for the southern routes, a market where he had previously worked unchallenged, and he was quoted in the *Freeman* as saying, "there will be a general show fight between the Negro shows this year." Other southern tent shows had sprung up in recent years, but it was the northern shows, which were beginning to tour the South that gave him the most cause for concern. Every company employed an advance agent who would reach each town a few days before the performers



arrived, in order to make logistical arrangements and post promotional advertisements. This year Chappelle increased his advance staff to three, including one white man.<sup>25</sup>

This Rabbit's Foot Comedy Company road report in the *Freeman* provides the flavor of the show during that last season. This is the entire article:

Pat Chappelle's "Rabbit's Foot" Comedy Company opened their season at Valdosta Ga. Monday, September 12, to a large audience of 1,500 people. Curtain rose at 8:30 on eighteen performers and the costumes they wore were something gorgeous. They sang a medley of choruses until they were seated by the interlocutor, Mr. Joseph Means. The first song was by Mr. Edward Neeley, entitled, "I Didn't Ask, He Didn't Say--So I Don't Know," which took several encores. The second song rendered was by Miss Julia Baynham, "Alexander," and she was called back several times. The next song was by Mr. Zollie Ford, "Do Your Duty, Doctor," which was a tremendous hit, and he was called back time and time again. "Cannibal Love" was the hit of our first part, sung by Mrs. Emma Skinner, our charming soubrette. Mr. Skinner sang "I Wish I Was in Heaven, Sitting Down," which took the house by storm. Then came Mr. Hi Jerry Barnes, our leading comedian, singing "I Am That Hen Roost Inspector Man," and the audience had him to come back time and time again until he was tired. The curtain went down on the whole chorus of the first part singing "Good Luck, Mary," which was heavily applauded. Then came the olio the responsible part of the show, opened by Ford and Baynham with a clever singing, dancing and talking act, which was quite a hit. Then came the sensational novelty of the great Mack Allen, America's famous tight and slack wire artist, performing some of the most dangerous and marvelous feats that have ever been seen, which took the audience off their feet, and they didn't seem to think his work was natural. Then came the Woods Sister team--Isabelle Woods and Mamie Miller--in a clean and little up-to-date sketch, entitled "A Trip to Klondike." The audience was well satisfied, as it was something new. Hi Jerry Barnes came next in a stiff monologue and cracked some very good jokes, which led him into his song

“Tennessee,” and left them screaming. The Skinners, Emma and Verne, closed the olio in a clever singing and talking sketch. These people are certainly clever in their line of work, and were looked upon by the audience as above the average. Then came the last act, the “Hoodoo Man,” which sent the audience home screaming. Prof. Irving Brown, orchestra leader, violinist and trombone soloist, sent the audience of fifteen hundred home well pleased with that famous march, “The Motor King.” Last, but not least, Mr. Lloyd James London, our “spieler,” didn’t fail in sending in the people until the tent was jammed and saw that they were all properly seated, and our manager, Mr. Pat Chappelle, wore a happy smile.

During Pat’s illness, James returned to work for the show as its ticket agent and Pat’s son, Lewis, took over the duties of boss canvasman and transportation master. After Pat left the tour in late December, 1910, Lewis and James ran the company and Rosa remained to look after things.<sup>26</sup>

Despite Chappelle’s ominous absence from the road that year, the company successfully completed its final tour under his management. After the season closed, Pat and Rosa sailed out of New York to tour the European continent, where he hoped to “seek the improvement of his health.” Patrick H. Chappelle died on October 21, 1911, at his home in LaVilla. The next year, the Rabbit’s Foot name and all of the company’s contracts were taken over by Fred S. Wolcott, a white carnival owner. He moved the show’s headquarters to Port Gibson, Mississippi, and kept it on the road. The tents and theatrical paraphernalia, along with two Pullman cars, the “Wyevale” and the “Rosa,” remained in the storage barn on Chappelle’s West Church Street property.<sup>27</sup>

Chappelle died *in testate* and the battle for his estate was prolonged and painful. James and Lewis claimed that the business partnership with their brother, which began with the Excelsior and continued with the Buckingham, had never been terminated and was still valid. The Chancellor of the Duval County Circuit Court agreed with them. The case was appealed, eventually working its way to the Supreme Court of Florida. By this time Pat’s widow, Rosa had remarried. Her new husband was Simuel Decatur McGill. He was a former clerk in James

Weldon Johnson's law office who had graduated from Edward Waters College and studied law in Boston. McGill convinced the court that the brothers had relinquished all claims to their partnership years ago. On April 11, 1916, he and Rosa were awarded full ownership of Pat Chappelle's business interests and exclusive right to the ten thousand dollar settlement from Pat's life insurance policy. S. D. McGill's impressive legal skills were still evident thirty-four years later, when he persuaded the United States Supreme Court to overturn a guilty verdict that condemned four innocent young African-American men to death in the case of *Chambers v. Florida*.<sup>28</sup>

When he moved the Rabbit's Foot Company's base of operations to the Mississippi delta region, Wolcott opened up many of the troupe's old southeastern route stops. This provided an opportunity for other traveling shows to begin establishing their own reputations with Florida audiences. The Silas Green from New Orleans company was already in position and well on its way to becoming a southern institution. Its owner Eph Williams was an experienced hand at facing the challenges of organizing a touring company and keeping it on the road.

Originally from Medford, Wisconsin, he owned a show that consisted of one hundred Arabian horses and employed twenty-five people. In 1898, he was described as the only Negro circus owner in America. Competing accounts of Williams' career during the years that follow have long clouded the origins of his Silas Green show. One shared element of these traditions includes a massive storm, which wiped out his entire dog and pony show in either Hampton, Virginia or in New Jersey. By 1907, his once large circus appears to have diminished down to the size of a single variety act.

That June, Eph Williams and his trained ponies shared the bill in Chester, Pennsylvania, with Salem Tutt Whitney and his brother J. Homer Tutt as part of Sherman H. Dudley's Jolly Ethiopians Company tent show. Other stories state that in either 1903 or 1905, Tutt and Whitney, gave Williams a show they had written entitled *Silas Green from New Orleans*, to help him get back on his feet. With the exception of the dates, there seems to be some truth to this tradition, as well. In August 1908, while Salem Tutt Whitney was touring with Black Patti's Troubadours, he introduced an original show entitled, "The Barnstormers." In it, he played the comic lead, a character named Silas Green. Bob Cole had previously introduced a character by that same name in *A Trip to Coontown*, portrayed first by Tom Brown, then by Sam Lucas.

Whitney was probably well aware of the legal battle between Cole and Black Patti's producers, Voelckel and Nolan for ownership of his work, so whatever his motivation, it appears that Whitney was able to give away some elements of the script, if not the show in its entirety. The next month, Williams and Baynard's Famous Troubadours advertised that they had been on their southern route for sixty-two continuous weeks and were traveling in a new private railroad car. William A. Baynard was Salem Whitney's former music director and his brother-in-law. They had worked together continuously for almost ten years. In addition to Professor Eph Williams with his trained ponies and Baynard's piano specialty act, this notice also includes the first mention of "midget comedian" Richard Stewart's successful performance as the character "Silas Green." When his sister Emma Baynard Whitney died of tuberculosis that November, Baynard relinquished the entire show to Eph Williams and left to join Whitney in Knoxville.<sup>29</sup>

In 1910, the company toured Florida as Eph Williams' Famous Troubadours. By then, the scripted sketch *Silas Green from New Orleans* had become the central theme around which the show was structuring its various acts. It featured the characters Silas Green, Bud Jones of Chicago, Miss Mary Smith, Lula Jane Green, and a large chorus. Along with its "celebrated band and orchestra," the company included comedians, dancers, acrobats, a slack-wire artist, and "the human corkscrew." Will Goff Kennedy had joined the roster and Jennie Hale was billed as their leading lady and "prima donna." Williams' pony show was still a featured attraction. His, "wonderfully educated ponies are said to even talk. This act itself is worth the price of admission and scores a great hit wherever the show appears." R. C. Puggsley, with almost two decades of experience under his belt, was the company's business manager. He would remain with them for years. Soon the show began to bill itself under the name The Silas Green from New Orleans Company.<sup>30</sup>

The Silas Green show continued to grow and Eph Williams purchased a large farm in Winter Park, Florida making it the company's new headquarters. By 1916, Williams had hired an energetic white man from Chicago, Max C. Elliot as his advance man and this self-proclaimed "wildcat agent" kept the route running smoothly for many years. He claimed that the show "was patronized by white and black" and had been "ten years on the road without missing a date," naming twelve mid-western and southeastern states in which they had toured. The company had grown to fifty-five people, two forty-foot all-steel rail cars, with a four-pole sixty-foot round top

tent and extensions with the capacity to seat two thousand audience members. This tent was apparently still too small to handle some of the crowds they were able to draw. That February, Elliot described an occasion when both Silas Green from New Orleans and the Florida Blossoms Company arrived to perform on the same day in West Palm Beach. The Silas Green show sold out to standing room only and required six policemen to turn six hundred people away, while across the street, the Blossoms still had empty seats. A similar showdown occurred months later in Greenville, Mississippi, when the Mahoney Mobile Minstrel parade marched toward the town square where the Silas Green band was already playing. That night, Silas Green's ticket box sold two thousand two hundred and forty-four paid admissions, turning away almost three hundred patrons who were described as "life savers for the Mahoney Minstrels."<sup>31</sup>

A road report to the *Freeman* commented that, "Prof. Williams says that Mrs. Williams can make free use of Silas Green money as his ledger will show." This shared prosperity was evident when Williams' wife Rhoda took time out from their tour to visit Cuba. She and her traveling companion, Jennie Mason of Jacksonville, took the Florida East Coast Railway extension to Key West, then sailed on the steamship Governor Cobb to Havana. They stayed at the Hotel Las Villas, attended Fashion Day at the horse track, and were "shown every courtesy" when they visited the U. S. Battleship Montana. "The great army of beggars who are to be found everywhere," seemed to be her only troubling memory of the trip.<sup>32</sup>

That March, Will Kennedy was back with the company as comedian, alto horn player, amusement director, master of transportation "and sech." Levoisier Don Bradford from Jacksonville, "the best Negro scenic artist in America" was hired to build a new set of scenery for the show, which carried six backdrops and three extra scenes that season. Bradford was also featured as a comedian with the company. Ford Wiggins started the first of his performances as the character of Silas Green, a role he would continue to play for almost three decades and clarinetist, Fountain B. Wood, a former member of Mahara's Minstrel band with W. C. Handy, began his own longstanding relationship with the show. Eph and Rhoda's daughter joined the company as well. She was featured in her own act with a Shetland pony and white spitz dog. Williams briefly put a "number two" show on the road, which toured as the "Jolly Ethiopians," the same name as Sherman Dudley's show in which he had appeared years ago.<sup>33</sup>

Blues music was beginning to emerge as a significant attraction for both the Silas Green and Rabbit's Foot shows. During the years between 1910 and 1915, performers who were known as coon shouters began to have their music described with the term blues. "The Blues" proved itself as a reliably marketable commodity after 1912. The immense popularity of Handy's compositions "Memphis Blues" that September 28 and "St. Louis Blues" two years later, was certainly a contributing reason for this change. It's interesting to note what might possibly be interpreted as evidence of Ralph Redmond's jazz improvisations with Wolcott's Rabbit's Foot band, when he was "scoring daily with his solos, which he renders on parade and on stage." However, in the same 1914 road report, it was also noted that, "Our 'Gold Band' never fails to get theirs, and is the feature of our noonday parade. When it comes to real music, we can well boast, that we don't have to play the so-called 'Blues' as we are far above that standard of music." Onstage, however, attitudes toward the blues were a different matter. By 1916, the team of Dumas and Lockhart were performing their act titled "Sing Me the Blues or I Will Leave" with the Rabbit's Foot Minstrels in February, in which Lillian "Ada" Lockhart made a big hit singing "Saint Louis Blues." One month later, she performed the same song, along with "Hesitation Blues" with the Silas Green show in West Palm Beach.<sup>34</sup>

Despite what can still be seen as evidence that the blues continued to carry its negative connotations, an attitude that was even expressed by touring performers, the style went on to become a standard, even central, aspect of many of their shows. As the popularity of the blues continued to grow, the "Classic Blues" tradition developed. Classic Blues singers were predominantly female and they were accompanied by a small instrumental ensemble (as opposed to the "Delta Blues" tradition where male singers accompanied themselves on guitar or piano). This particular form of blues performance was disseminated throughout the southern United States by the Rabbits Foot and Silas Green organizations, establishing one of the foundations for creation of a national African-American style, one that was further reinforced when recordings of these performers eventually became available.

In 1910, the veteran minstrel man Billy Kersands chose Jacksonville as his headquarters. He was organizing a new touring show, which started rehearsals on March 21. The previous year, he had been a featured performer with a number of different shows, including A. G. Allen's Minstrels, the Dandy Dixie Minstrels, and most recently the Whitman Sister's vaudeville

company. However, he had not toured under his own name for almost three years and with twenty thousand dollars of financial support from Rudolph Voelckel, he was able to headline again with a first class troupe of performers. Throughout his career, he had always performed on the local stages of the cities he visited. This would be his first tour “under canvas.” At the same time, New York-based Voelckel’s other show, the Dandy Dixie Minstrels was also scheduled to rehearse in Jacksonville alongside Kersands’ company, until their own season opened in Mississippi.<sup>35</sup>

Billy Kersands was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. He moved to New York City while still quite young, where he worked as a bootblack. His earliest claim to fame was in 1870 as a member of Charles Hicks’ celebrated Georgia Minstrels, the first all-black minstrel company to be owned by an African-American. Later, under the troupe’s white owner Charles Callendar, he toured throughout the United States and visited Germany and Great Britain. He frequently reminisced about performances for the crowned heads of Europe and described being presented with a diamond stud by Queen Victoria herself. Over the years, Kersands appeared as a featured performer with almost every leading company and for a time, was one of the highest paid African-American entertainers in the country. The subject of one of his songs, “Old Aunt Jemima,” was appropriated by the marketers of a ready-made pancake mix and had become one of America’s the most recognized trademarks. Tom Fletcher, a friend and colleague, credited him with originating both the buck-and-wing dance and the soft-shoe, which he called the “Virginia Essence.” Kersands was a physically large man who, for most of his career as a minstrel, did not wear blackface makeup. He would delicately dance the Essence in a slow four-four rhythm, frequently to the tune of Stephen Foster’s “Swanee River.” Some remember him singing “Wait ‘Till the Clouds Roll By” as he peeled off vest after vest, while dancing a perfect Essence. To add a unique and grotesquely comedic touch, he would place two billiard balls in his large mouth. Fletcher remembered that, “he remarked that if they had made his mouth any larger when he was being made, they would have had to move his ears.” Later in his career, he substituted a cup and saucer for the billiard balls. He frequently concluded his act with a recitation of his poem, “The Almighty Dollar.” Sam Lucas, his former Georgia Minstrels counterpart remembered an earlier version of this act:

His main specialty was his dance “The Essence of Old Virginia.” In that dance, he would lie flat on his stomach and beat his head and then his toes against the stage to keep time with the orchestra. He would look at his feet to see how they were keeping time, and then looking out at the audience he would say, “Ain’t this nice? I get seventy-five dollars a week for doing this!”<sup>36</sup>

Kersands described arriving in southern towns that greeted visitors with signs reading, “Nigger, Read and Run,” or “Nigger, Don’t Let the Sun Go Down on You,” but his dedication to southern audiences was steadfast. Asked why he didn’t pursue higher paying opportunities on the northern vaudeville circuit, he replied, “All of my money came from the people of the south, the white and colored, while playing down there. Whether they meant it or not, the way I was treated by them, and still am, I feel at home. I also make a good living with no worries.” He once confided to Flournoy Miller, “Son, if they hate me, I’m still whipping them, because I’m making them laugh.”<sup>37</sup>

Billy Kersands’ Minstrels opened under canvas in Jacksonville on April 4. On the road, the company was managed by B. F. Nye, one of Voelckel’s partners. E. B. Dudley was succeeded by Willie E. “Rabbit” Lewis as leader of both the band and the orchestra and Henry W. Paschal was their star clarinetist. James Crosby, the company’s stage manager got the most out of his talented roster by having every musician, comedian, and olio act do double duty. Kersands headlined the show, which featured a cross-fire comedy exchange between himself and his wife Louise, followed by the couple, “singing the biggest song hits of the season,” such as “What I Am and Who I Am” and “Kitchen Mechanic Out of the White Folks Yard.” Moses McQuitty was a gifted baritone horn and string bass player who had established his reputation over almost two decades with a number of the best show bands, most recently with the Dandy Dixie Minstrels and Mahara’s Minstrels. In Kersands’ show, he also played the role of the old-fashioned minstrel interlocutor. His responsibility was to feed straight lines to two comedians portraying the traditional Tambo and Bones characters, then stoically endure the humiliating gibes of these “end men.” Richard Mathews “the world’s famous barrel jumper and acrobatic artist” sang the love song, “Why Did You Break My Heart?” Coyden Herndon also sang a pretty love ballad, “If You Were Mine,” then performed his “hoop rolling” act. Ozell “Dollar Bill”



Joyner, who worked with Herndon with the Silas Green show years later, enthusiastically tried to explain this unique act: “Takes three ropes, one, two, put’t on the ground, one three, one four, tied on his fingers. Got one hoop hooked to the top. As he waves his hand that hoop will come down and get on each one of them and roll and jump up on his arm. That hoop starts them all off, starts ‘em running around the stage, then he sits right down and they all come and crawl right over him. Then he makes them get in rotations and they all on top o’ one another.” Comedian E. J. Elliot contributed some songs and played the bass drum with the band. Cookman graduate, Ralph Redmond brought strong trombone playing to Kersand’s band and Joe White’s snare drum skills had already made him one of the most celebrated drummers in the region, most recently with the Globe Theater’s orchestra.<sup>38</sup>

When the show left Jacksonville, it brought a number of the city’s most popular performers along with it. A nineteen year-old young man who had also been performing at the Globe Theater joined Kersands’ company in Memphis, not long after it left town. Later, Ferdinand Morton recalled that it was this tour where he got his nickname, “Jelly Roll.” In Kersands’ show, he performed the role of straight man to Sandy Burns, a blackface comedian. Onstage, during an ad-lib comedy argument, Morton asked Burns who he was. Burns replied that he was “Sweet Papa Cream Puff, right out of the bakery shop.” Morton responded by telling him he was “Sweet Papa Jelly Roll with stove pipes in my hips and all the women in town just dying to turn my damper down.” After Kersands left Hot Springs, Arkansas, Morton quit the show and stayed behind. When the company played New Orleans, a twelve year-old boy left his home in nearby Plaquemine, Louisiana to join the tour as a singer and was soon performing the role of a young master of ceremonies for the company. Clarence Williams eventually grew up to become one of the most prolific composers of jazz songs, as well as a publisher, producer and playwright.<sup>39</sup>

Kersands’ tour began extremely successfully, with the musical comedy *The Philipino* as its featured act. It started the route by moving through Florida, packing their tent at every stop. When they reached Tennessee, Nye felt it necessary to order a one hundred-foot tent with an added forty foot middle piece, in order to handle the large crowds. However, later that year, as they moved further westward, something occurred that forced the company to break up. Salem Tutt Whitney described meeting Kersands in Texas after his own show, the Smart Set narrowly

avoided a situation in the town of Rogers where, “word reached us before we got there that things would be everything but pleasant for us.” He encountered Kersands and his troupe in the town of Mineola. Whitney commented, “Mr. Kersands looked as fine and healthy as ever,” but obliquely reported that “the company had hit the wall,” and “in fact the entire bunch were fine and dandy, under the circumstances.” After that December, there were no more route reports from Kersands’ company. Before the year was out, Mose McQuitty was back on the road with the Dandy Dixie Minstrels and other members had moved on to other shows.<sup>40</sup>

Later, Kersands was able to find new financing and ran his own show under the management of Nigra and Stevenson, who were also owners of the Dixie Minstrels at the time. He completed his second performance of the day, and then returned to his railroad car to relax where he collapsed, suffering from heart failure. Billy Kersands died at Artesia, New Mexico, on June 29, 1915. He was seventy-three years old.<sup>41</sup>

## CHAPTER FOUR

### “WE WILL SOON REACH THE LADDER”

During the earliest years of the century, venues catering exclusively to African-American audiences began to appear with increasing frequency throughout Florida and the South. One of the most comprehensive chroniclers of this period, Henry Sampson, coined the term “honky-tonk theaters” to describe these ephemeral performance spaces, which emerged to satisfy the entertainment demands of a patronage that was predominantly black and male. Chappelle’s Excelsior Hall and the Buckingham Theater in Tampa definitely conformed with Sampson’s criteria for this category, combining drink and diversion in equal measure. In 1900, Will Benbow opened the Mascot, “the first vaudeville theater ever started in Pensacola,” for a man named Mose Lyman. The Little Hottentot Theater opened in Pensacola around the early part of 1903 and by the end of the year Will Benbow felt the need to take out a *Freeman* notice to announce that he still was “in the land of the living.” On December 1 of that same year, the Excelsior Theater opened in Sanford, with Ben Green managing a full vaudeville show. Featured performers were Eva and Sonny Campbell singing “If You Can’t Be a Bell-Cow, Fall In Behind” and “Sunny Africa,” with comedy acts, and buck-and-wing dancers completing the bill. Within only a few months, though, this venue disappeared, as well. Over the next few years, a number of stages appeared in LaVilla and Jacksonville that provided important stepping-stones and represented a transition from saloon entertainment to legitimate musical theater. A connection between Jacksonville’s saloon theaters and its public parks may have provided these honky-tonk performers with an audience that demanded a more genteel entertainment.<sup>1</sup>

For a brief time, the city of Jacksonville boasted two outdoor recreational parks for African-Americans. Each was sponsored by one of the town’s rival streetcar companies. In 1902, a consortium of black and white businessmen organized the North Jacksonville Street Company to compete with the Jacksonville Street Railway Company, which was owned and operated by the Jacksonville Electric Company. R. R. Robinson, the African-American president of the North Jacksonville Street Company, hired black conductors and motormen for their cars and served the African-American neighborhoods in the northern part of the city. The next year, they opened Mason Park on Kings Road at the end of their line through LaVilla. Earlier,

Jacksonville Electric had developed the whites-only Phoenix Park in the northeastern part of the city. Three years later in 1904, they opened Lincoln Park at the west end of its run, for black residents. Both of these parks were extremely popular attractions and became important venues for recreation, celebration, and entertainment. However, the ongoing battle for racial equity soon moved into the foreground and the streetcars themselves emerged as the focus of bitter racial contention.<sup>2</sup>

Jacksonville passed the Avery Law, its first streetcar segregation ordinance, in November, 1901. It had been the subject of protests by local black citizens, ever since it was first proposed. The most objectionable section of this statute was the clause that gave streetcar conductors police powers to enforce the ordinance. The constant threat of a black boycott may have been one of the reasons the law was not implemented for almost four years. However, during the mayoral race of 1905, lax enforcement of the ordinance became a bitter election issue, when Mayor George N. Nolan's challenger accused the incumbent of favoritism toward the streetcar companies.<sup>3</sup>

On July 1, a *Florida Times Union* headline announced, "Avery Law Will Be Rigidly Enforced: White and Colored Passengers Are to be Separated on the Street-Cars To-day." The ensuing black boycott targeted the Jacksonville Street Railway lines, which complied by installing moveable signs that read "white" on the front side and "colored" on the other. The North Jacksonville line also installed screens, but by seating their African-American riders at the front of each car, they avoided the boycott. The *Times Union* reported on the success of the protest: "there has been a great falling off in the receipts of the company on the La Villa and Oakland and the Highway lines, but the patronage on the other lines is as large as ever." Black owners of other forms of transportation also demonstrated their solidarity: "The usual fare for a trip of a few blocks is twenty-five cents, but since the enactment of the Jim Crow law the negro cab drivers have cut the fare to ten cents for people of their own race, though they still charge the customary price for white people." Eartha White vowed never to ride a streetcar again, a promise she evidently kept for the rest of her life.<sup>4</sup>

Attorney Douglas Wetmore, acting on behalf of a group of local black clergymen chaired by Reverend Waldron, immediately arranged to test the legality of the segregation law. Less than three weeks after its enforcement, Andrew Patterson was instructed to sit in the whites-only

section of a North Jacksonville streetcar. He was arrested by the car's black conductor, J. A. Mason, and then delivered to Justice Willard at one of the next stops on the line. Expecting this case to be a prolonged one, opponents of the ordinance raised over one thousand dollars for legal fees. However, Judge R. M. Call, the same white judge who examined James W. Johnson for admission to the Florida Bar, declared the Avery Law unconstitutional. A few days later, the Florida Supreme Court sustained his decision. That October, the city council passed a new "Jim Crow" streetcar law and the high court affirmed its constitutionality. The following week, Thomas Dixon Jr.'s play, the *Clansman*, opened at the Duval Theater.<sup>5</sup>

Ten thousand people attended the New Year's Eve and Emancipation celebration held that first year at Mason Park. It followed a morning parade through town. The Afro-American Benefit Association, the Independent Order of Good Templars, local businesses, teachers and students from the Stanton School contributed floats to the procession, which moved slowly through the streets of LaVilla. It broke up at the corner of Davis and State streets, where pedestrians boarded North Jacksonville streetcars to travel to the park. Exercises began at the pavilion at two o'clock, which allowed the large crowd plenty of time to gather. The president of the event's planning committee, W. S. Sumter, called the crowd to order and the Welcome Cornet band played an "appropriate selection." Prayers, addresses, and a reading of the Emancipation Proclamation by Miss Maggie Alexander were followed by a "medley of anthems" conducted by John M. Robinson, Stanton School's choral director. The closing benediction was given by Reverend James Johnson, father of James and Rosamond.<sup>6</sup>

In February of 1904, when Billy Kersands and his wife visited Jacksonville, they discovered a dynamic African-American entertainment scene with these two amusement parks at its center. The venerated minstrel man described a Sunday entertainment excursion that began with an "excellent" afternoon vaudeville show at Lincoln Park, followed by an evening performance at Mason Park with members of the Rabbit's Foot Company, who had recently finished their tour that season. Then they caught the concluding act of a bill at Tom Baxter's theater, before they finally adjourned to a banquet hall for a meal that "would have done justice to Sherry's or Delmonico's famous hostelries," served up by Jacksonville's local entertainment luminaries.

The next day Kersands visited the nearby town of Fernandina where he was met by Bobby Kemp, the renowned singing comedian. They participated in a street parade before the evening performance at the new Gem Theater, which Kemp managed. The revelries continued as “Bacchus reigned supreme” into the “wee-sma hours.” During the eighteen nineties, Kemp had performed with almost every major minstrel show and Kersands noted that, “at one time or the other he has traveled with nearly all of us.”<sup>7</sup> Just a few years earlier, Kemp made the transition from minstrel shows into vaudeville with an act known as the Wangdoodle Four. At that time, they were among the few African-American acts who regularly performed in white vaudeville theaters. Within a few years, Kemp and his wife, May graduated to featured appearances on the prestigious white Orpheum circuit. However, despite new stage management from comedian Richard Cross and well-received comedic performances by John W. Dennis, the Gem lasted only into July.<sup>8</sup>

Jacksonville’s Little Savoy Theater opened on October 3, 1904, promoting itself as the “handsomest and coziest little theater for colored performers in the South.” This venue was located at 610 West Forsythe at the corner of Bridge Street, only a block inside of the old border between LaVilla and Jacksonville. Walter O’Toole, its white proprietor also owned and operated O’Toole’s Saloon on Bridge Street, just a few doors away. The Little Savoy appeared to be a measurable improvement over the average honky tonk. O’Toole hired W. E. Gillick (former scenery designer for Weber and Fields, a top tier white vaudeville act) as his general manager and William H. Dorsey was his music director. The ubiquitous Will Goff Kennedy was contracted to function as both stage manager and featured performer for the theater’s grand opening. Although it remained in business for only two months, the Savoy’s stock company staged entertainments that reflected a more ambitious bill of fare than most of the other venues in the region. Comedians and “coon song singers” shared a diverse bill with originally written dramatic sketches and vocal performances of Cole and Johnson compositions. Although the latter pieces were compositions that targeted mixed-race and white northern audiences, the Savoy provided an opportunity for southern performers to reintroduce the brothers’ work to LaVilla’s African-American audiences.<sup>9</sup>

During the mid-1890s, Thomas Baxter and James Cashen opened a storefront on the corner of Ward and Bridge Streets. Baxter had experience operating a variety of business

enterprises in this neighborhood, beginning in the early 1880s. The partnership was licensed to sell liquor and cigars. As the wholesale operation flourished, their retail outlet evolved into Baxter and Cashen's Saloon, located at the same address. In 1901, Tom Baxter became sole owner of the company and after the great fire, he relocated his business to a new building on the opposite side of the road at 125 Bridge Street. By 1903, Baxter had renamed his establishment the Exchange Theater and was featuring variety entertainment along with refreshments. An experienced businessman, he would have recognized a rewarding financial opportunity when it presented itself.<sup>10</sup>

The section of Ward Street just west of Baxter's business had developed a distinct reputation during the previous decade, when a number of "female boarding houses" were constructed. This was one of the few regions of the city that was not destroyed by the great fire and many of the buildings lining this street had been specifically designed to be used as brothels. Jacksonville was a booming port city and wherever sailors and traveling merchants congregated, prostitution followed. A number of these houses were quite elegant and provided services for an exclusive white clientele. The most celebrated of these establishments was operated by a white woman, Cora Taylor Crane, common law widow of the famous author Stephen Crane, writer of *Red Badge of Courage* and *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*. When she first met her future husband in 1896, she was the owner of the Hotel de Drôme on the Southwest corner of Jefferson and Ashley streets, just a block away from the Stanton School. The desk clerks at the St. James Hotel always recommended the Hotel de Drôme with a five-star rating. In 1902 after Crane died, Cora returned to LaVilla, where she opened "The Court" on the corner of Ward and Davis streets, just a block away from where James Weldon Johnson was born. She hired black "professors" to provide piano entertainment for her clients, but the names and careers of these musicians are lost to us. When the reformer, Carrie Nation appeared at the Court in 1908 with bible in hand, she was ridiculed and insulted by Cora's unrepentant girls. Reporters who accompanied her on this mission claimed that they couldn't be certain, but it appeared that the familiar shadows they witnessed exiting the establishment belonged to the Sheriff and police lieutenant.<sup>11</sup>

When the North Jacksonville Railway Company went bankrupt in early 1907, Mason Park was permanently closed and subdivided into housing lots. Lincoln Park became black

Jacksonville's primary outdoor venue. In March of that year, the Laborers' Social Club took out a five-year lease on the Park and began to schedule regular entertainments. That summer, a typical Sunday afternoon schedule included balloon ascensions with parachute demonstrations by a "professional aeronaut" and from five to seven-thirty in the evening, concert performances by George Moret leading the twenty piece Excelsior Brass Band from New Orleans. The featured shows began at eight o'clock in the park's pavilion, entertaining audiences of nine to twelve hundred people. The sixteen-member cast of New Orleans' Kenner and Lewis Amusement Company provided the featured entertainment that summer. Performers included Sidney Coleman, a "coon shouter," Effie Means was their soubrette, and their star comedians were Lew Kenner and John E. Lewis. This comedy team's reputation as one of the most popular acts in the southeast earned them the nickname, the "Williams and Walker of the South." Their orchestra was led by the famous violinist and multi-instrumentalist John Robichaux, with Albert Carroll as the show's musical director. Robichaux, a Creole had been leader of the top hotel band in New Orleans, the Lyre Club Symphony Orchestra. This note-reading society band was hit particularly hard and disbanded in 1894, after Legislative Code Number 111 erased the Creole racial distinction. Robichaux formed a new dance band and began to play improvised ragtime-influenced, syncopated music. Around 1902, he was performing regularly in New Orleans' Lincoln Park, while Buddy Bolden's "hot" band played nearby in the adjacent Johnson Park. Robichaux's band would frequently watch their dancers drift off, drawn away by Bolden's powerful improvisations on his cornet. Jelly Roll Morton recalled "Buddy Bolden could close a Robichaux dance by 10:30 at night."<sup>12</sup>

There is an escapist theme evident in the shows that this company of players shared with Jacksonville's audiences. They performed these pieces before the park's socially heterogeneous but racially homogeneous audiences, and it seems that the one entertainment strategy upon which everyone involved could collectively agree was that a radical withdrawal from the realities of the imminent world was desirable. The wilderness of Kentucky, the streets of New York's Chinatown, and most frequently, America's wild west provided possibilities for distant locations and exotic personae that might move people away from the painful reality of an encroaching Jim Crow. It must be remembered that this distancing occurred during a time when previous social advancements of African-Americans were becoming increasingly tenuous, so realistic depictions



of achievement would lose its entertainment potential, as black social status continued its backslide.

The introduction of music and performance styles from Louisiana that summer was a relatively new occurrence and points to a close engagement with cultural developments from New Orleans. The railroad connecting New Orleans to Jacksonville was able to provide efficient (though “Jim Crow” restricted) travel from the Louisiana Gulf Coast to the Atlantic. Among the stops along the line, only Mobile and Pensacola had any notable black performance venues and these represented smaller populations. Even Atlanta to the north had yet to emerge as a significant entertainment center. It was foregone conclusion that the African-American communities of New Orleans, on the Gulf of Mexico, and Jacksonville, on the Atlantic coast, would become cultural exchange partners. It is significant that LaVilla became a brief haven for Robichaux, a “legitimate” musician, during this period after the elimination of the relative privilege of the Creole racial distinction and just before the implementation of Florida’s most restrictive segregation laws.

Late that summer, the city council raised liquor license fees to weed out less reputable drinking establishments. Prohibition had become a dominant political issue and this policy was a concession to prevent the city from being voted totally dry. One section of these new “blue laws” included a clause calling for segregation of Jacksonville’s saloons. Black musicians could no longer play in white-owned resorts and white patrons could no longer drink in black owned or operated establishments. James Weldon Johnson remembered bitterly that this was also the time when “Jim Crow” windows were cut into the walls of federal post offices. In order to receive their mail, African-Americans “had to stand in sun or rain until the last white person on the inside had been served.” It was evident that even federal government buildings were no longer a dependable refuge against racial inequality. Two years later, the Florida legislature enacted its most comprehensive set of “Jim Crow” laws. Most of these would remain on the books until the nineteen sixties.<sup>13</sup>

In April of 1908, Tom Baxter’s Exchange Theater on Bridge Street announced, “We are making hits in drama land.” Levoisier Don Bradford wrote and staged the ambitious four act “comedy drama” *Marie Falston*, which was performed by the Exchange stock company to standing room only houses. Bradford was already in great demand as a stage designer,

electrician, and scene painter. His design work was featured in white as well as black theaters around the region. Each member of the Exchange stock company performed roles in this narrative with the female parts played by Vergie Den, Ada Harris, and Anita Borden. Then Dan Robinson executed his fire-eating sketch and Richmond V. "Poor Boy" Cross sang, "O Lord, Sabe dem Chickens," while the ladies took turns singing sweet musical numbers. To complete this olio section of the show, Buddie Glenn, "the father of all comedians," presented his featured comedy act in blackface. The company's manager and music director, John M. Robinson, and its violinist, John C. Hayward, provided the musical accompaniment. Robinson was choral director and music teacher for the Stanton School and resided nearby, on West Ashley Street. A few weeks later, Bradford presented his new drama in five acts, *The Idol of Kentucky*. *Freeman* notices described the Exchange then, as "the oldest and best house in the State of Florida having the same management for twelve years" and frequently shared information with readers about Baxter's offstage employees. They learned that B. A. Wright, "the clever bartender," was a member of the Elks, the Knights, and the Masons and that Allie Wallace "the master of the waiters" sent regards to his friends.<sup>14</sup>

Lincoln Park added a roller coaster and expanded its food, refreshment, and cool drink concessions. Special streetcars were scheduled to provide for the crowds attending these Sunday entertainments and "good order is always kept." The Exchange shared its producers and performers with the park's entertainment stage on a regular basis. In late May, Buddie Glenn and Richard Cross collaborated on a production of *The Chinese Jungles*, which they presented at the Lincoln Park pavilion. In it, L. D. Bradford played "One Long Chinaman" and Dan Robinson played "the Irish Policeman." Glenn and Cross played "Colored Comedians Number One and Two" and a chorus of ten ladies played the "Laundry Girls." In the second act, Dan Robinson portrayed the legendary Irish-American character Steve Brodie. The show was "one of the biggest hits yet." The Enterprise Cornet Band provided musical entertainment before the show started. This entire band belonged to the First Regiment, Uniform Rank of the Knights of Pythias. They had performed only a week earlier at a large gathering of their order in Tampa, where batonist Dan Robinson "made a decided hit." For many years, Thomas Baxter himself was a leading officer of the Knights of Pythias, Sanson Lodge #2 in Jacksonville.<sup>15</sup>

That summer, John Robinson became the founding owner and manager of a Jacksonville Baseball Club team. He named his team The Exchange. They played road games in Tallahassee, Quincy, Live Oak, and Lake City, winning ten of these games, losing one, and tying one. They experienced similar success at home, with L. Don Bradford keeping score and R. V. Cross umpiring. Home games were usually played in South Jacksonville, across the river.<sup>16</sup>

By next Spring, Buddie Glenn's nephew Willie had joined the growing company which was playing to full houses every night of the week, but concerns were beginning to be expressed about the health of John Robinson, their music director. At Lincoln Park in April, the Exchange Theater Company offered two performances during their Sunday entertainments. *The James Boys in Missouri*, a "heavy picturesque farce drama" featured Buddie Glenn and L. Don Bradford as Frank and Jesse James and the Enterprise Cornet Band's director George Popirro, despite his recent recovery from a bout with rheumatism, provided a "full change of program" for each of the open-air concerts. Nightly performances continued at the Exchange when Monroe Table, a Dandy Dixie Minstrel veteran and Eph Williams' former advance agent, James E. Rogers joined the house players. The entertainment portion of Baxter's enterprise advertised itself as the Exchange Vaudeville Theater, but it was still almost always referred to as Baxter's Place.<sup>17</sup>

The company closed out the year 1909 with a show written by Augusta Mines. *Trixie, the Pride of the Ranch* opened during the last weeks of December. This cowboy story featured the female members of the cast playing the leading roles as the sheriff and the villain, relegating the men to supporting characters. The show featured the comic songs, "Boola Rag" and "Johnny Had a Little Gun." Augusta Mines filled the creative void that occurred when L. Don Bradford left for Pensacola, where he spent a number of months completing two important design assignments. He had been engaged to provide Mitchell Jacoby's Belmont Theater and William Benbow's Eldorado Theater with all of their painted stage scenery and theatrical fittings. Mines' own career began in the mid-eighteen nineties, when she toured the Northeast with the family act, Mine's Colored Company and she brought this decade and a half of professional experience to the Exchange's productions. *Freeman* notices reflected their reform-minded goals:

We are trying to put on something that is more help to cultivate our performers as actors, and with such ladies as Madam Mines we will soon reach the ladder; I mean the last step of which we are striving for. It takes a lot of work to reach the height of our ambition, and hoping all the Freeman readers and at least all performers try and get away from that fool and folly, such words as ‘that coon’ and ‘dat nigger.’ So there won’t be such shows as the play we have now against us, ‘The Nigger’<sup>18</sup>

After Hayward moved up the street to join the Colored Airdome’s orchestra, musical performances at the Exchange appear to have deteriorated noticeably: “Prof. Robinson has a lot of trouble with his music, but nevertheless he pulls out. We are sorry his friend, Mr. Hayward is not with him. He resembles a lost sheep.”<sup>19</sup>

By May, L. D. Bradford had returned to the Exchange stock company and produced a new sketch *The Western Judge*, for their Lincoln Park performances. As summer approached, the park had become even more popular. Announcements in the *Metropolis* warned that “disorderly persons are not allowed to remain on the park grounds,” perhaps an indication that by this time, their crowds were becoming less genteel.<sup>20</sup>

Jacksonville’s Emancipation Day celebration that year was held on the afternoon of January 1, 1910, at the Mount Zion Church on West Ashley Street. As part of the program, Sidney Woodward performed an organ prelude, S. D. McGill read “The Life of John Brown,” and Eartha White shared “patriotic remarks.” The next day at Lincoln Park, the Exchange stock company presented *Picknicking Along the Suwanee*. The “Daily Happenings Among the Colored People” section of the *Metropolis* described this show as follows: “The plot and settings are well and familiarly adapted and the concerts will fail in no particular to please everybody” and the performance was “arranged so as to portray Florida life.” For the two Sundays that followed, they presented *A New Baby*, “a very laughable two-act drama interspersed with new and catchy songs.”<sup>21</sup>

By the Fourth of July, racial tensions around the country had reached their highest level in years. Millions of Americans waited breathlessly to learn the results of the much-anticipated Jeffreys-Johnson prizefight in Reno, Nevada. Jim Jeffreys, the “Great White Hope” was

defending the heavyweight title against Jack Johnson, an unstoppable African-American boxer. The Independence Day celebrations at Lincoln Park were overwhelmed by the event. Each round, returns were reported to an impatient crowd from the pavilion's platform, by volunteers shouting through megaphones. Bulletins were posted and updated as quickly as possible. The fight ended at sundown and Johnson had won. The Enterprise Cornet Band "took its position in the open air and enthusiastically played a number of national airs" and dancing at the pavilion continued until late that night. The next day however, the *Florida Times-Union* reported: "The Negro portion of Jacksonville's population was naturally elated over the result and their manner and manifestations of joy, of course, incensed the whites." Crowds of whites began patrolling the streets with brickbats and several victims were beaten. Police were mobilized to quell the violence and wild rumors began to run rampant. At 10:20, Mayor Jordan ordered the closing of the saloons and by 11:00, things began to quiet down. Despite a few bruised bodies, there were no fatalities during this incident.<sup>22</sup>

Hi Jerry Barnes made a number of appearances at Baxter's Exchange Theater during that summer. That fall, Buddie Glenn was still a regular on the bill and Miss "Gussie" Mines was "making a hit" with her song, "Grizzly Bear." Toward the end of the year though, the Exchange underwent a number of management changes. Popular new venues were flourishing on Ashley Street and two short-lived houses operating as the Polite Vaudeville Theater and Johnson's Theater advertised variety shows, but these lasted for only a few months that year. The Exchange briefly reopened as the Gem Theater and after Buddie Glenn returned from Texas in the spring of 1911, he presided over its shows once again, but before long, it too closed its doors. That summer, the 125 Bridge Street location was entirely renovated and renamed the Royal Theater. Advertisements alerted audiences that an entirely new venue would be revealed at the June 5 opening, "We now have a large stage and a full equipment of beautiful scenery... This theater is now the coolest, finest, best ventilated, and best heat conducted colored theater in the world. We spare no expense to secure the best talent to be had. Under new management. New Orchestra." Will Benbow's stock company was scheduled to perform at the grand opening of the Royal. However, they missed their train connections from Mobile and the opening was postponed until the next day, "without fail." *The Alabama Chocolate Drops*, Benbow's show from the previous year, demonstrated that his company retained most of the older minstrel

traditions. His show featured four blackfaced comedians, two to play each of the characters Tambo and Bones, who then doubled up on their outnumbered interlocutor. The popular themes of baseball and a “Salome” dance were integrated into the olio of the bill. Benbow finished out the show with his song, “Who Threw that Brick?” Unfortunately, the Royal Theater closed not long after Benbow’s show left town.<sup>23</sup>

Entertainment at the pavilion in Lincoln Park continued, but as time went on, the plotted shows became less elaborate, eventually shrinking into small bills of two or three singing acts accompanied by a comedy team. By November of 1913, new motion picture houses in LaVilla created additional competition for audience dollars. Two white-owned movie theaters, the Frolic and the Palace (later renamed the Star) opened on Ashley Street to serve blacks only. Both of these sites briefly flirted with live vaudeville entertainment, but soon abandoned this to concentrate on their motion picture business. Only the piano accompanist remained to provide live music for the movies. Miss Ruby Strickland held down the keyboard at the Palace. By 1915, Tom Baxter’s place on Bridge (renamed Broad) Street was closed for good and had become the National Baking and Lunch Company. That year, D. W. Griffith’s “Birth of a Nation” screened at the Duval.<sup>24</sup>

## CHAPTER FIVE

### “THE MANAGEMENT SO BY NATURE”

The business of delivering live entertainment to LaVilla’s audiences became profitable enough to sustain permanent black-owned theaters. Based on business models that succeeded exclusively on the strength of ticket revenues, these venues depended heavily on their talent for prosperity. New owners allied themselves with a group of capable and ambitious performers who helped manage the creative content of the shows on these stages. Together, they introduced hundreds of new productions that blended Broadway theatrical traditions and vestigial minstrel conventions with novelty acts and new, uniquely southern, African-American entertainment practices. The management of these popular-priced theaters could cultivate both upper middle-class and laborer-class audience members through the sheer diversity and variety of their offerings. Competition between theaters, in particular the Colored Airdome and the Globe Theater, helped build and nurture a local audience that was more discriminating as it became more experienced. However, by the time the Strand Theater emerged as the most successful venue on Ashley Street, ownership of these stages was already starting to slip from the hands of local black owners.

Frank Crowd opened the Bijou Theater at 615 West Ashley Street in LaVilla on July 19, 1908. It occupied a new three-story building he had erected on the site of former owner Squire English’s produce market. Crowd arrived in Jacksonville from Boston in the mid-eighteen eighties and opened a barbershop on East Bay Street. His shop eventually became the city’s most popular hair cutting establishment and in later years, served a white professional clientele only. The father of nine had already entered the entertainment business by opening a successful shooting gallery in town. When Crowd first opened the Bijou, it had a seating capacity of 218 audience members and featured motion pictures as its primary attraction. The early silent films he screened would range in content from Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew*, to the morality tale *Wages of Sin*, to the whimsical *Sailor Dog in New York*. Crowd introduced the first feature length motion picture ever produced, Vitagraph’s *The Story of Moses* at the Bijou, “for the special benefit of the Bible students and students of history.” However its distributor, General Film delivered only one reel of it per week. They assumed audiences would never be able to sit

through a movie for an hour at a time. One of the earliest films produced in Jacksonville, Kalem Studio's *The Artist and the Girl* was "made on the banks of the St. Johns River." Crowd presented it to his Bijou audiences only a few months later. He charged ten cents admission for "refined, substantial, and wholesome amusement," which could be enjoyed by the entire family. To encourage patronage by women and children, he charged only five cents for the children. He proudly stated that, "The moving pictures are colored by hand, the management so by nature."<sup>1</sup>

Soon, he built a small stage and added "refined" light vaudeville between showings of "three thousand feet of the best and latest reels." Some of the earliest acts booked by Crowd included Little Nellie the acrobat, Matthews the contortionist, and George Riley the "foolish mirth maker," with Friday evenings reserved for amateur night. Frank Crowd sponsored a benefit for the Florida Baptist Academy and the Bijou donated all proceeds from its Friday, April 30 afternoon show. Notices announced, "Friends of the Institution are requested to attend this performance and have a delightful time while helping the Academy." The next week, he did the same as a "favor to a number of young ladies of Mt. Zion A. M. E. Church" for their widows' fund. The next Monday was "Pythias Day" and Crowd invited his fellow knights to "bring the wife and children." By May of 1909, Crowd began offering a "full orchestra" for the entertainment of his Sunday patrons and Speedy Smith, a professional comedian from A. G. Allen's Minstrel show was the featured player on the Bijou's vaudeville bill.<sup>2</sup>

The vacant lot on the corner of Bridge Street, right next door to the Bijou Theater, soon became the site for another, competing entertainment venue. Inclement weather had postponed their grand opening by one day, but on Tuesday May 4, 1909, the Colored Airdome Theater at 601 West Ashley Street opened to the public. Its owners Lionel D. Joel and Mr. Glickstein invested five thousand dollars to open "positively the largest, grandest and coolest theater exclusively for colored people in the entire Southland." It boasted an open-air audience capacity of over 800 seats and offered acts that were booked directly from New York, Chicago, and Boston. Joel and Glickstein did their own booking and had recently taken out a *Freeman* advertisement reading, "R U Good Specialty Performers?" They employed John H. Williams, formerly a comedian with A. G. Allen's minstrel company, to be their first stage director. Tickets were sold at the "popular prices" of ten cents for admission with an extra ten cents for reserved seating and their advertisements clearly stated, "Exclusively for Colored People."<sup>3</sup>



The music director for the Cookman Institute, Eugene F. Mikell, and his orchestra serenaded the Airdome's audience with popular instrumental overtures before the curtain rose for that opening night's show. The seven-act bill opened with a "Minstrel Part" with the entire company participating. J. L. McDaniels followed with his comedy act and the humorous song, "It Are I." The third act was a moving picture presentation. A full reel of one thousand feet of film would generally run for about sixteen minutes. After the film, Scott and Crosby performed their "latest singing and dancing act," followed by Williams and Dewey in the comedy sketch *The Recruiting Officer and Soldier*. A second motion picture was followed by the final act, McDaniel, the Tramp Trick Bicycle Rider, the "wonder of the twentieth century."<sup>4</sup>

Not to be outdone by Frank Crowd's civic-mindedness, less than a week after their opening night, Joel and Glickstein advertised that five percent of the receipts from their Sunday concert would be donated to the Bethel Institutional Baptist Church. Thereafter, the same amount "will be donated to some church or charitable institution." The following week's beneficiary was the Mount Zion Church.<sup>5</sup>

On Monday, May 24, the Airdome presented the Whitman Sisters, one of the most popular African-American acts in the country. The Whitman Sisters were touring the Northeast and arrived in Jacksonville from New York City, bringing their six-person show to the Airdome. These fair-complexioned young ladies were veteran performers. The oldest, Mabel, danced and sang and was the company's capable business manager. Essie had a powerful contralto voice and was the "coon shouter" of the act. As a dancer, she was familiarizing audiences with the Charleston before it had a name and Perry Bradford recalled that it was Essie who first introduced the cakewalk to Atlanta. Alberta was billed as their prima donna singer. Later, she cut her hair short for her popular male impersonator act, but she was best known for her unique strut dance in blackface. Foster sister Mattie and baby Alice completed the immediate family. Even at a tender age, Alice's dancing earned her the title, "Queen of the Taps." Another featured player was Little Thomas Hawkins, the child comedian. He was billed as "the greatest comedian of his age on the American stage." There were 1200 people who squeezed their way into the Airdome to enjoy each of their two nightly performances, one at 7:30 and the other beginning at 9:00. That week, a *Metropolis* article reported Mabel Whitman's comment that the Whitman Sisters were, "offering to the people of Jacksonville more show for the price of admission than

she has ever offered in all her career.” It was said of their act that, “cleanliness in both dialogue and actions clearly stand out” and the sisters, still the devout daughters of the late Reverend Whitman, presented a sacred concert at the Airdome each Sunday. Sadly, on the last day of their two-week engagement, the girls received the tragic news from Atlanta that their mother had died.<sup>6</sup>

The *Freeman* observed, “it was Molly Darlin’ for the Bijou and a general stampede to the Airdome.” Responding to the challenge, Frank Crowd closed the doors of the Bijou and began a major renovation of his theater. The interior floors were torn out, a balcony, inclined floors and two six-person private boxes were built. The third floor above the stage was taken out to form a tower, and then wiring, switchboard, dimmers, and an all-tungsten lighting system were installed by New York’s Interior Conduit and Insulation Company. The stage was expanded in size and new scenery was provided by Anthony J. Solomon of Boston, with curtains supplied by the Imperial Curtain Company of New York. Six hundred theater chairs were installed on the orchestra floor, 400 filled the balcony, and 100 folding chairs were purchased. To finance this construction, Crowd incorporated the Globe Amusement Company with a capital stock of \$25,000. The new directorate included W. S. Sumter, founder of the Union Mutual Insurance Company as president, Frank Crowd as vice-president and general manager; and Dr. J. Seth Hills as secretary and treasurer.<sup>7</sup>

While the Bijou remained closed, the Colored Airdome continued to stage nightly entertainments to standing room only audiences. The Airdome’s shows were beginning to move away from reliance on old-fashioned minstrel show introductions. By next January, a sketch named “Mr. Joplin’s Ragtime Dance” was listed as the first act of one of their bills. It was followed by the team of Bradford and Bradford, billing themselves as “The Two Zulus.” Perry and Jeannette Bradford performed their own original songs and dances, including “Take Me Back to Georgia, Where I Was Born.” Perry Bradford was already a celebrated composer who was capitalizing on the public’s fascination with dance crazes. His popular song, “The Jacksonville Rounders Dance” was written at about this time. Later he remembered, “it was a dance they were doing in Jacksonville ‘way back, but people didn’t like the title because ‘rounder’ meant pimp, so I wrote some new lyrics in 1919 and renamed it ‘The Original Black Bottom Dance.’” The moves of this dance, occasionally referred to as the Pimp’s Walk,

consisted of snapping the fingers and walking around while bent forward with hunched shoulders. Bradford also introduced his topical song “If Jack Johnson Wins the Heavyweight Title of the World,” which provoked Airdome audiences to “sing him hoarse every night.” While he was in Jacksonville preparing for the debut of his new tent show, the famous Billy Kersands made a number of welcome surprise appearances at the Airdome. He “left the audience screaming” when he performed there that January. Teresa Burroughs and Petrona Lazzo, the “Cuban soubrette” provided songs and dances, Coy Herndon added “Chinese impersonator” to his long resume, and comedian Slim Henderson took over the Airdome’s stage management duties from Williams. The team of Kenner and Lewis soon returned to Jacksonville from New Orleans to begin a prolonged engagement. They became one of the anchor acts for the Airdome, during the early part of 1910.<sup>8</sup>

That February, Glickstein sold his interest in the Airdome to John A. Watts, a longtime performer with Richard and Pringle’s Minstrels and former colleague of Henderson, when they both traveled with one of Kersands’ earlier shows. Shortly after this new partnership was established, Marion A. Brooks was brought in to become the Airdome’s producer and amusement director. He promptly began a booking exchange agreement with some of his northern connections and engaged acts from the Chicago theaters to come and play Jacksonville. The Hotel Hayes had opened just on the other side of Ashley Street and later, the Eggmont Hotel would provide convenient and safe accommodations for African-American performers who visited the city.

Brooks had scripted and staged a number of successful presentations in Chicago for the Pekin and Grand theaters. His most ambitious production to date was his own three-act adaptation of the French farce *Jane*, titled *The Chambermaid*, which debuted at the Pekin during the previous year. One of his first productions at the Airdome was the musical comedy *Two Hustlers*, which featured the entire company. He began directing the staging for the olio portion of the shows as well, to improve their production quality. Carrie Hall wrote and staged her own sketch, *The Ragtime Comedy Company* as part of the same bill. Brooks followed this initial success with the topical comedy *Oakland After Dark*, set in the nearby African-American neighborhood of Oakland and then *The Beauty Doctor*. He also produced the three-act musical comedy *Two African Princes*, written by J. Ed Green, the Pekin Theater’s creative producer and

longtime managing director. Green had died just weeks earlier, after collapsing from exhaustion on the Pekin's stage.<sup>9</sup>

After Eugene Mikell left the Airdome, their new five piece orchestra consisted of "Professor" Redman on the piano, John C. Hayward as lead violinist, "Little" John Young on the cornet, Ralph Redmond on slide trombone, and Joe White as the trap drummer. Before long, pianist Theodore Reading replaced Redman as music director and E. B. Dudley became the violin player when Hayward left for Savannah to become music director for W. J. Styles' new Pekin Theater. Later, Sam Foster took over on violin, when Dudley went on tour with Billy Kersands.<sup>10</sup>

The "Too Sweets" had recently joined the Airdome's cast. Their singing, dancing, and comedy act requires physical description in order to be fully appreciated: "The male member of the team, known as Long Willie, is a very funny comedian and a good dancer. The lady member of the team is dainty and has a sweet little voice. She looks to weigh about sixty pounds on the stage and Willie looks like Jack Johnson, so it makes their act one of novelty in appearance." That May, the entire company contributed to Brooks' show *Family Troubles*, which starred Carrie Hall, but after a successful run of over four months, Kenner and Lewis left the Airdome for a six week engagement at the Belmont Theater in Pensacola. Marion Brooks accompanied them as their producer. With most of their regular performers out of town, the Airdome repeated its early success by booking the Whitman Sisters to return to their stage. For this engagement, the sisters brought a troupe of over eighteen performers along with them, including Albert Carroll, their longtime music director from New Orleans.<sup>11</sup>

Touring performers who visited LaVilla were occasionally introduced to talented locals in unsettling ways. Jack "Ginger" Wiggins was one of the most accomplished dancers on the circuit and an influential innovator of numerous popular dance steps. He was challenged at the Airdome by a local teenager: "Some unknown youngster with plenty of nerve by the name of "Kid" Brooks challenged Wiggins for a dancing contest. Manager Joel consented to offer a \$25 prize if he could beat Wiggins. It was pulled off on the stage right after the show, and it looked at the beginning that Wiggins had found his master, but nay, nay! Jack Wiggins jumped out and made the youngster go and hide. Oh, you Wiggins!" Ginger Wiggins later felt the need to defend the legitimacy of this narrow victory in print against some of his more persistent

detractors. Years later, Wiggins became known as one of the most elegant figures on the circuit. Comedian Nipsy Russell remembered him performing in high-heeled patent leather shoes and a rhinestone-trimmed dinner jacket: “He was immaculate and had a commanding presence that was a revelation to me... I realized for the first time that a Negro could have *real class* in show business.”<sup>12</sup>

The new Globe Theater opened its doors to the public on January 17, 1910. A few weeks later, the February 26, 1910 issue of the *Freeman* published this unsigned review under the title, “New Theater Opened at Jacksonville.” Despite the distinctly patrician tone of the reviewer, it indicates the type of encouraging reception that Frank Crowd’s efforts might have earned from Jacksonville’s most discriminating theatergoers:

Appreciating the taste of the theater goes among the element of the race in Jacksonville that will substantially encourage the management of a first-class house that will book productions elevating the Negro Thespian. Messrs. Sumter, Crowd and Dr. J. Seth Hills, owners of the new Globe Theater of this city, have opened this commodious play house for the appreciation of such patrons.

The beautiful interior decorations, and especially the highly artistic sceneries for the stage, take this house out of the class of cheap variety houses where art and refinement are discarded.

The atmosphere of this unique theater for the colored population of Jacksonville is conducive to the highest attainments of the Negro upon the stage and its patrons.

Its orchestra, under the direction of Prof. Eugene Francis Mikell is an aggregation of professional musicians. Their renditions of overtures, such as heard in the best theaters of the country, demonstrate the ability of the Negro to master classics.

Williams and Stevens, with a company just out of Chicago, opened up this house last week in their own original musical comedy entitled *Dr. Fo Jo*. This act met the hearty approbation of a crowded house at every performance. This refined audience gave these clever artists an ovation.

Sanford, Fla., which affords the scene in which the typical characteristics of tramps who disturb the serene residents of urban communities are depicted by Chas. H. Williams in the character of Slocom Slow and Augusta Stevens as Bill Jenkins, the erstwhile sporting tramp. Williams is a good comedian, and is an exceptionally clever artist. He is out of the class of comedians generally seen in this section of the country. His voice shows cultural training. As a mirth producer, he is not a demoralizing force of incongruous acting.

Augusta Stevens, as a straight man in this act, offers his intelligent audience a piece of clever work that demonstrates his native ability.

A brilliant example of the artistic temperament of Afro-American children is found in the little girl known as 'Little Rosie, the Child Wonder.' She is a decided hit and will add laurels to the Negro artists and the profession if the environments are given to her.

Miss Jennie Taylor, who is well known for being eminently endowed by nature as a gifted musical artist, is the cynosure of the eyes of critics in this city, and is eliciting hearty applause in her work.

The beautiful, vivacious chorus girls, with their costumes that animate the scene, and their well trained voices, make the departure from undeveloped artists appearing in houses where the lowest ideals of the Negro ruffian are depicted one of especial commendation.

Messrs. Campbell and Conley, in their special acts, are receiving their share of applause. The white press of the city gave interesting stories of this new venture by three of the colored men of finance in Florida.<sup>13</sup>

Crowd lured Eugene Mikell away from his position at the Airdome to become the Globe's new music director. In that capacity, he became one of Frank Crowd's most stalwart assets. Eugene Francis Mikell was born in Charleston, South Carolina in 1880. His earliest professional experience was with the Jenkins' Orphanage Band as its first music director. He toured the United States and England with this children's ensemble to raise money for the orphanage and he was their guest conductor when they performed at President Taft's inaugural

parade. Freddie Green, Cladys “Jabbo” Smith, and William “Cat” Anderson were just a few of the gifted musicians who started with this band. Mikell attended Avery Institute, directed the orchestras at Tuskegee Institute and the South Carolina State Agricultural and Mechanical College, and in 1897, he was the only African-American in his class at the New York Conservatory. He also toured for one season as music director for Mahara’s Minstrels, after W. C. Handy left that company. Eugene Mikell was an accomplished musician with a high level of skill on a number of instruments, primarily cornet, violin, and clarinet. Friends said (with tongue in cheek) that he was also a virtuoso with a chicken bone. His broad background as a performer, composer, and arranger allowed him to draw from this extensive experience and adapt to any musical situation. His performances were described as “brilliant in execution and full of soul.” Mikell, his wife Anne, and their sons made their home at 1228 West Duval Street, right across the street from Walter O’Toole. He became deeply involved in many of Jacksonville’s local musical institutions and served in the capacities of music director for the Cookman Institute, instructor of the cornet band for the Florida Baptist Academy, and as a private instrumental instructor. Music historian, Eileen Southern described him as a “master teacher.”<sup>14</sup>

Accompanying Mikell in the orchestra pit of the Globe Theater was a small, but capable ensemble that included; Dan Brookes on cornet, William Johnson on the clarinet, Mrs. Ed Canty playing piano, Amos Gilliard on trombone, and John Nickleby on the trap drums. Mikell continued his practice of entertaining audiences with the strains of popular overtures as they entered the theater for each evening’s performance. Charles Williams and Augustus Stevens topped the bill at the Globe on its opening night and later led the entire company in the musical comedy “naval” production, *Booker T. Cruising on the High Seas*. Within only a few weeks though, comedians Billy Owens and Bob Russell had arrived and began to organize the first “Globe Stock Company.” Among the earliest members of this group were Alice Russell, Speedy Smith, Cora “Fisher” Glenn, William Glenn, L. Don Bradford, and Butler “Stringbeans” May. Hansom Ballard was hired as the scenic artist and designed much of the staging. A *Freeman* notice commented that, “the city of Jacksonville has the resemblance of Chicago or New York from a theatrical standpoint”<sup>15</sup>

The relationship between Ashley Street's preeminent theaters seemed to be one of cooperation as well as competition. Judging from the shock and surprise expressed by this *Freeman* report, incidents like the following, may have been relatively rare:

A most unfortunate affair has happened in theatrical circles here in Jacksonville. Marion Brooks booked the team of Webb and Webb in the Air Dome for six weeks and after they had played two week of their engagement they became involved in some uncalled-for wrangle with the management, resulting in them leaving without a moment's notice, owing the management over \$40. Then they were without work. They made application to Bob Russell of Russell and Owens, who has charge of the show at the Globe Theater. After some consideration and the consulting with Marion Brooks and Slim Henderson, whom they had given such unprofessional treatment, they--Russell, Owens, Henderson, and Brooks--decided it best to overlook their action and allow them to work, resulting in them treating the management of the Globe in the same manner as they did the Air Dome, leaving Russell's show on a Saturday without a moment's notice and, we are told, a week and a half salary advanced by Mr. Crowd, the manager. Messrs. Russell and Owens regret very much this unhappy incident, and only hope that other managers will beware of them and will take steps to put a stop to this style of performers.<sup>16</sup>

Around the same time, the Russell-Owens Stock Company finished their engagement at the Globe and left for Norfolk, L. D. Joel severed his connections with the Airdome and became Frank Crowd's new booking and advance manager. Williams and Stevens returned to the Globe's stage and continued on a familiar theme, when they introduced their new one-act farce, *The Arrival of Booker T. Washington*. In the *Freeman's* reviews of the Globe's shows during this period, the term "olio," referring to the variety section of the bill, was replaced by the term "vaudeville." Among the acts booked by Joel was a singing ventriloquist named Prof. Johnny Woods, with his wooden doll, "Little Henry" and the comedian Tim Owsley made his first



appearance at the Globe that July. Mattie Whitman also remained in LaVilla, moving next door to Crowd's house to perform her solo act, while her family returned home to Atlanta.<sup>17</sup>

That summer, the young pianist Ferdinand Morton arrived in Jacksonville with Will Benbow's Alabama Chocolate Drops Company. His girlfriend, Stella Taylor, had become dissatisfied with life on the road, so they both left the show. He sent his trunk back to New Orleans and kept only the blue suit he was wearing. He took the suit to a local shop where they gave him a ragged pair of trousers to wear, while they cleaned and pressed his. When he returned to the shop, they refused to give him his suit and drove him off with a baseball bat. After he returned to his hotel, he got into a quarrel with Stella over another man and she left him. Morton found his rival in a pool hall, where he hustled him out of every cent, then spent the winnings on a trombone, which he used to soothe his sorrows. "Feelin' low," he "hung around Jacksonville, might have been a couple of months." He was no stranger to Florida's fledgling vaudeville scene. Two years before this, he had performed at Pensacola's Belmont Theater, where he met violinist and clarinetist J. Paul "Pensacola Kid" Wyler, who was not only a musical influence, but taught Morton how to perfect his pool game. Morton was impressed with the piano playing of Belmont's music director, Frank Rachel, and was pleased when Floridian Porter King, "an educated gentlemen with far better musical training than mine," took a "yen for my style of playing." He named one of his numbers after King. The "King Porter Stomp" became one of his most successful tunes. Later, white clarinetist Benny Goodman adopted it as his own theme song. Morton's biographer, Lawrence Gushee, suggests that he was playing trombone or bass drum at the Globe Theater until later that season, when he caught up with Billy Kersands' tent show. In 1911, after he left Kersand's company, he played Washington, Philadelphia, and New York City with Will Benbow's company, then continued to tour the country tirelessly, traveling from coast to coast and later, even claimed to have invented jazz. The Globe was one of his last engagements before he started to perform under his new stage name. Posterity will continue to remember him best as "Jelly Roll."<sup>18</sup>

L. D. Joel left the Globe in early August. He bought an interest in the Arcade Theater on 81 Decatur Street in Atlanta and soon became booking manager for the Southern Consolidated Circuit. Crowd appears to have been concerned that prospective acts might contact Joel after his departure and the Globe's advertisements for performers included the admonishment, "L. D. Joel

can not book your act in the Globe Theater...only through me.” After Joel’s departure, it seems that Crowd did most of the booking of acts himself.<sup>19</sup>

One of the performers Crowd booked to appear at the Globe proved to be an interesting find. H. Franklin “Baby” Seals was a piano player, a comedian, and a composer. He was originally from Mobile, Alabama, but was based in New Orleans and was working in Texas just before Crowd hired him. In the early part of the year, L. Grunewald and Company published his latest hit song, “You’ve Got to Shake, Rattle, and Roll,” which featured the lyrics:

You got to shake, rattle, and roll,  
Or my money ain’t a-gwine.  
Now, don’t you think you’ve caught a Gee,  
If you do you’re far behin’.  
Dis way you guys got squeezin’ dem dice.  
I done told you once, and now I’m tellin’ you twice.  
You got to shake, rattle, and roll,  
Or my money ain’t a-gwine.<sup>20</sup>

Baby Seals spent September and October of 1910 performing at the Globe. As a member of the stock troupe, he acted in a variety of comedic and character roles for many of the plotted sketches. As one of the show’s vaudeville acts, he performed his own compositions, such as “Woman, Pay Me Now,” solo, or with his new bride, Floyd Fisher “The Doll of Memphis.” He also began producing his own original comedy sketches for the Globe, such as *How to Get a Job* and *The Vexatious Man*. That September, the Jeffries-Johnson fight, which only a few months before had triggered such a violent episode, reappeared in LaVilla. The Globe stock company transformed the bout into a comic parody, written and produced by Baby Seals. Seals left Jacksonville for Greenville, Mississippi to become manager of its Bijou Theater and after five months there, he traveled north and “conquered the black theaters of Chicago and Harlem.” A little more than a year later, “Baby Seals Blues” was an enormous success and became a staple in the repertoires of black vaudevillians throughout the South. Although reviewers felt that Seals’ earlier “Shake, Rattle, and Roll” was too risqué, Tim Owsley described, “Baby Seals

Blues” as “not the ‘blues’ one hears so much about, but is of a cleaner nature.” This could be read as an indication that Seals may have been somewhat “gentrified” during his stay in LaVilla. Seals published his “Baby Seals Blues” that September, almost simultaneously with W. C. Handy’s “Memphis Blues,” establishing a competing claim for the earliest published blues song. Had he lived longer, Seals would have given W. C. Handy a serious run for his title of “Father of the Blues”<sup>21</sup>

Even before Joel left for Atlanta, Tim Owsley had taken over many of the organizational duties and was theatrical director for the Globe Stock Company. That November, Frank Crowd bought out the other investors and became the sole owner of the Globe Theater. He appointed Owsley to be his new assistant manager. Owsley was another example of Crowd’s excellent choice in collaborators. Besides being an experienced and gifted comedic and dramatic actor, he was also prolific writer of dramatic plays, comedies, and music. He had experience working as a member of the Pekin Stock Company in Chicago and held the lead comedian position in Mahara’s Minstrel Company. His songs, “I Ain’t as Foolish as I Look to Be” and “Because I’m Lonesome” were successful hits. Voelckel and Nolan hired him for Black Patti’s Troubadours in 1909, to replace S. Tutt Whitney as Silas Green. A San Francisco reviewer of one of Owsley’s performances with Black Patti observed: “His fun is of the noisy, obvious order, but it is pervaded by a sensitiveness and an appreciation for humor which are rarely encountered in a comedian, black or white.” He was also a frequent contributor to the “Stage” column of the *Freeman*, which soon established a national profile for the Globe. Owsley’s wife, Sadie, arrived in town from Los Angeles to join the Globe Stock Company and the couple settled into theatrical life in LaVilla. Crowd was reported to have proudly said of Owsley that he was the, “highest salaried producer he ever engaged” and that, “with the dollars at my right hand and Tim Owsley at my left as amusement director, there can be nothing but success for the Globe.”<sup>22</sup>

Owsley’s first production was the one act “musical comedy, military traversity,” *The Battle of Make Believe*, which opened in early August. The playlet was the second act of the show, right after the film. It starred Owsley, Willie Too Sweet, and former Exchange comedian, Richmond V. Cross. Mattie Whitman performed “Foxy Moon” and Zenobia Jefferson sang “That Yiddisha Rag,” both accompanied by the chorus. Carrie Hall opened the vaudeville of the show, with Cox and Cox, a singing and dancing team, the singer Sidney Coleman, and the Too

Sweet Trio completing the bill. Owsley followed with *In Hell for Twenty Minutes*, in which he portrayed a comic Devil. R. V. Cross played Jasper Jones, his victim and Carrie Hall was featured as a “society lady.” That same bill concluded with Owsley’s farce, *The Lady Doctor*. His next production, *A Prince for a Day* echoed Cole and Johnson’s *Shoo-Fly Regiment*. Its setting was Notsville College and it featured R. V. Cross as Uncle Silas and Willie Too Sweet as Skunk Jones, a cigar-store Indian. The musical numbers included, “Just You Wait ‘Til After School,” “Cannibal Love,” “Dixieland Jamboree,” and “When Teddy Comes Marching Home.” Owsley’s homage to Cole and Johnson continued with *Burned at the Stake*, a Native American comedy, which featured Ginger Wiggins as Chief Strongheart, with Carrie Hall as the “half-breed squaw.” Willie Too Sweet played Jake Moth and Tim Owsley was Dick Overton, the villain.<sup>23</sup>

Along with slapstick farces, such as *The Bloomer Girl’s Picnic*, the highlight of which was a burlesque baseball game, Owsley started to investigate more serious topics. His play *A Good Woman and a Bad Man* attempted a realistic portrayal of a woman who, thinking her husband is dead, remarries. Carrie Hall, as the unfortunate woman whose husband returns, “brought forth tears from the eyes of the audience.” *When Your Sins Find You Out* was another serious drama, set against the backdrop of a family farm. Owsley starred as Dr. Hyde, “whose sins found him out.” Reviews noted, “This little show of Mr. Owsley’s was as good as any sermon, to those who sin, as we hear in our pulpits.” In October, Owsley also directed and starred in S. Tutt Whitney’s comic play *The Educator*, which was produced at the Globe “by special permission.”<sup>24</sup>

The gravity of dramatic sketches written by Owsley, and others, reflects a movement away from constraints dictated by common wisdom of the time. African-American performers had been relegated to comedic roles and both blacks and whites assumed that this was natural and appropriate. Newly segregated theaters demanded a more complex mode of racial self-representation on their stages. Comedy still reigned, but as time went on, productions began to introduce characterizations that were more straightforward, dignified and uplifting.

These narrative sketches apparently preoccupied Owsley and Crowd to such a degree that, despite the addition of the popular magician M. C. Maxwell, a *Freeman* reviewer grumbled, “the vaudeville part of the show this week is a bit weaker than usual. Not in acting, but from the

number of vaudeville acts.” When Eugene Mikell left to visit his friend William Dorsey in Chicago, his absence was felt by Globe audiences, as well. Notices complained, “we missed Prof. Mikell, but we hope the orchestra in a few days will be the same as usual.” The critic, Sylvester Russell accompanied Mikell to the station, when he caught the train that returned him back home to LaVilla.<sup>25</sup>

J. Francis Mores made his first appearances at the Globe in late November. When Owsley became assistant manager, Mores took over some of the production duties to relieve him. By early 1911 however, a debilitating recurrence of Owsley’s chronic arthritis limited his on-stage contributions to those of writer and manager and Mores became the sole stage director and featured performer. Mores had worked alongside Theodore Pankey in Ernest Hogan’s show *Rufus Rastus* and was a featured player in numerous productions at Chicago’s Pekin Theater before he left for New York in 1908. A year later, after receiving a bit part in Williams and Walker’s show *Bandanaland*, he returned to the Pekin to reprise his leading role in the revival of the three act comedy, *The Husband*. In this production of one of Flournoy E. Miller and Aubrey Lyles’ earliest scripts, Mores shared the stage with celebrated dramatic actor Charles Gilpin and a young dancer named William “Bojangles” Robinson. He was touring with Gilpin and a group of former Pekin Stock Company members in a combination minstrel/variety show, just prior to his arrival in LaVilla.<sup>26</sup>

Mores’ first production was *The Turkish Harem, or the Man With Many Wives*. He wrote the script and music and acted the part of the pasha, Hasen Ben Ali. The show featured India Allen performing the song “Black Salome” and even included a character portraying a visiting reporter from the Indianapolis *Freeman*. Mores featured himself and Tim Owsley in the next two comedies, a reprise of Green’s *Two African Princes* and his own *Mamma’s Baby Boy*. He played the starring role in Owsley’s *Black Eagle*, another Western melodrama. In the latter show, he sang “Big Red Shawl” in his role as an Indian. *A Pullman Porter’s Wife* and *The Sweetest Girl in Dixie* were other popular shows written and staged by Mores for the Globe.<sup>27</sup>

The team of Rainey and Rainey joined the Globe Stock Company that January. At this time, Ma Rainey was billed as a “coon shouter” and the attraction of her powerful moan was undeniable. She was receiving three or four encores every night. J. W. Seers observed that, “the female member of the team caught the house from the go and kept them with her. One could sit

all night and hear her sing the ‘Dying Rag.’” Later, an unnamed *Freeman* reviewer praised her singing in one of the Globe’s shows, but viciously panned the lack of energy in her husband’s performance and suggested that he retire. Responding to the paper’s attack, Mrs. Rainey defended her husband and cited his long illness. In a devoted protest, she stated, “I am going to stick by him while he is sick; and either stage or the washtub suits me.” They both played roles in the plotted sketches and she became one of the featured performers in the vaudeville. Their own composition, “Baby, I Have Brought You That Hambone Dat I Found Last Year” was one of the team’s most popular numbers.<sup>28</sup>

When S. Tutt Whitney, manager of Sherman Dudley’s Southern Smart Set Company brought their show *His Honor the Barber* to Jacksonville that January, the company was engaged to perform at the Duval Theater. Shows featuring African-American artists performing for mixed-race audiences continued to be staged here, but they were not always without mishap. Tim Owsley described the situation that arose at the Duval, when Jay Gould, “a noted colored bookmaker and all-around sporting man” was accidentally sold a ticket to the Smart Set, which seated him in the “white circle.” When Gould was asked to leave, he requested another seat that was just as good. The usher immediately returned with a policeman and Gould was shown out of the theater shouting, “I don’t care if I have been escorted to the door by a policeman because of your mistake in selling me a ticket, but what does make my heart to ache is that there is not another seat in the colored circle where I could set and enjoy seeing S. Tutt Whitney play ‘George Washington B.’ He is funny to me.” Owsley noted “a return date has been asked for by the management of the Duval in order to give the many white people an opportunity to witness this great show of colored performers. The few seats set aside for the white patrons were not equal to the demand.” Mamie Smith, who would later achieve fame as the first African-American to sing the blues on a commercial recording, was a dancer with the Southern Smart Set Company during this tour and Lewis Chappelle’s wife, Goldie had joined the show just a few months before the Duval Theater performance. Chappelle was described as “a charming interpreter of Spanish and Indian maiden roles, and one of the prettiest women on the Afro-American stage.”<sup>29</sup>

John H. Williams returned to Jacksonville, bringing his comedy act to the Globe’s vaudeville, which also featured contortionist Eddie Day, the “boneless wonder.” Frank Crowd

began to introduce a motion picture matinee every day from 2:00 to 6:00. With the Stanton School only two doors away, this afforded schoolchildren “a chance to witness a fine moving picture performance” during the afternoons. At Christmas, he even provided them with a free matinee show as “a treat for the little fellows.” Mores continued to maintain the high standard of production values at the Globe until that March, when he left to join S. Tutt Whitney’s touring Smart Set company. Tim Owsley moved on to Indianapolis, where he became manager of the New Crown Garden Theater.<sup>30</sup>

Ably filling the void left by the departure of Owsley and Mores, Cordelia McClain and Laura Moss began staging and producing the musical comedy features at the Globe. The former Cordelia Scott was the wife of famed showman, Billy McClain. She had almost twenty years of performing experience that started with her association with the Hyers Sisters Concert Company and she had traveled around the world. Her husband managed Sam T. Jack’s *The South Before the War* extravaganza and she toured with him in Black Patti’s Troubadours until Billy had his own legal quarrel with Voelckel and Nolan. When they performed in Australia with Ernest Hogan in early 1900, Laura Moss was one of the company’s featured singers. After spending almost two years touring the Pacific, McClain became the successful manager and star performer of the original Smart Set Company with Ernest Hogan. The McClains left for Europe in 1906, where they performed successfully in France and England, until Cordelia returned to the United States in 1910. Billy remained in Europe to pursue his passion, boxing promotion and there was much speculation about the state of their marriage. In a series of letters to the *Freeman*, Billy denied an earlier declaration that he had received a divorce from Cordelia. Cordelia later confirmed that they were indeed, separated. Laura Moss had been a member of George and Hart’s Minstrel Company with Will Goff Kennedy and Hogan’s *Rufus Rastus* company with J. F. Mores.<sup>31</sup>

McClain and Moss collaborated on a successful restaging of Bob Cole’s pioneering show *A Trip to Coontown*, which ran at the Globe during the week of May 15, 1911. They continued at a rapid pace and introduced their own collaborative effort, the topical musical comedy *Life on Bridge Street*, which opened the next week. Moss left the Globe and *The Lover’s Confusion*, written by Cordelia followed a week later. During its run, students from Edward Waters College presented the drama, *Lady of Lyons* on the Globe’s stage as part of their commencement events.

Both students and “some of the best dramatic talent in the city” contributed to this show. It was held on a Wednesday evening, with an afternoon matinee. Cordelia McClain left LaVilla later that summer to form a vaudeville duo with Hattie McIntosh. They were among the first acts to play Sherman H. Dudley’s newly formed theatrical circuit.<sup>32</sup>

The musical farce that followed, *Stranded in Africa*, was the most ambitious production ever staged at the Globe. The show was collaboratively written by Frank Crowd and Clarence Muse and was staged by the Freeman-Harper-Muse Stock Company, featuring a chorus of twenty-five performers. Clarence Muse, George and Annie Freeman, Leonard Harper, Cordelia McClain, Buddy Glenn, and Cora Fisher were among the cast members. Despite the fact that Cora Fisher was a relatively obscure singer from Chattanooga, blues singer Bessie Smith later asserted that it was Fisher who was her greatest musical inspiration and not her mentor, Ma Rainey. Clarence Muse had just recently graduated with a degree in International Law from Dickinson College in Pennsylvania and there were rumors that he had bought an interest in the Colored Airdome with winnings from a card game. At that time, it was probably not as lucrative an investment as it might have been a year earlier.<sup>33</sup>

The Airdome’s success would be shorter-lived than that of the Globe. By the middle of 1911, their announcements in the *Metropolis* began to feature listings for motion pictures only. The Airdome’s new host, “Baker the Moving Picture Man,” offered the additional attraction of a free set of dishes or a ladies’ “swell” gold watch to draw patrons to these shows. In his notices, Baker resorted to aggressively defensive measures to justify the quality of his presentations: “I’m no ‘piker.’ A ‘piker’ is a fellow who wants to get your money and hand you cheap trash in return...I pay big money to get the best, and I know what I’m talking about when I say I have the best, clean-cut, rich, beautiful, photo play, unsurpassed in any part of the world.” Baker’s shows would occasionally feature locally produced films, such as Kalem’s comedy “A Phony Prince.” In 1912, the white women’s clubs of Jacksonville persuaded the mayor to pass an ordinance that required all theater, vaudeville shows and movies to close on Sundays. This policy was contested and the compromise resulted in the city’s Civics Department enforcing closings on Sunday from 6:30 to 8:30 pm. It was at about this time that Frank Crowd began to reserve Sunday afternoons for motion pictures-only entertainment at the Globe. Films continued to be the only shows at the Airdome for the next couple of years. It soon fell under the management of



Mr. Whitehead who believed he should “withhold the names of the pictures, since people like to be surprised.” In 1915, there is no business at all listed at the 601 West Ashley Street address.<sup>34</sup>

Butler “Stringbeans” May was quite young when he became one of the founding members of the Russell-Owens stock company at the Globe. As his stage personality evolved, it took on the character of a new and richly textured African-American archetype. He was an unabashedly “down home” comedian who not only sang the blues, but challenged his audiences. It was reported that, “his ‘blues’ gets ‘em, and then his ‘Ballin’ the Jack’ is his feature.” There was a combination of aggressive power and vulnerability to his stage presence that helped erase the shadows of strutting “Zip Coon” and shuffling “Jim Crow” personae. His masterful use of irony allowed him to integrate both of these elements into his stage act, yet dissolve them entirely, through his use of parody and hyperbole.<sup>35</sup>

The most detailed account of any performance held on these early Ashley Street stages was published by Marshall and Jean Stearns. They documented the observations of Willis Laurence James, who was a violin student of Sidney Woodward’s at the Florida Baptist Academy. James later graduated from Morehouse College and became director of music for Spelman College. His description of this comedy performance by Stringbeans and Jessie “Sweetie” May at the Globe is reported to be from sometime around 1915. It bears repeating at length:

Sweetie May trucks provocatively onstage, cuts a neat buck-and-wing and sings a blues. She is an outrageous flirt and the men in the audience are shouting encouragement as Stringbeans strolls out of the wings. Tall and lanky with a flashing diamond in one of his front teeth, he wears a dilapidated jacket with padlocks instead of buttons. He stops, listens to the shouts, and gives a loud and contemptuous sniff. The force of his presence is so powerful that the audience fall silent. As Stringbeans concentrates on polishing his padlocks, Sweetie May eyes him critically: “Stop cuttin’ the fool, Beans,” she commands, “don’t you see them intelligent peoples out front watchin’ you?” Stringbeans explains: on the way to the theater a white cop stopped him, noticed the padlocks, and told him that he had been in jail often enough to know about locks and keep away from

them. “So I tol’ him the truth *an’ he believed me,*” says Stringbeans with a grin that changes abruptly into an accusing glare at the audience as he announced, “I don’t want no colored folks ‘round this town stealin’ my clothes.”

Stringbeans then moves toward the piano to regale the audience with an impassioned and fierce rendition of “The Sinking of the Titanic,” then falls to the floor quivering and shaking (yet still playing the piano).

At the end of the act, Stringbeans stands on his head, turns his pockets inside out so that a few pennies fall on the stage, and pleads, “Don’t Baby...Don’t Baby...Don’t Baby!” Sweetie May wants to know “Don’t What?” and adds aggressively “I ain’t done nothin’ to you-*yet.*” Stringbeans continues to beg like a masochistic Milque-toast until he cuts short the refrain suddenly and emphatically: “Don’t-leave me a damn cent!”<sup>36</sup>

The Stearns point to the rich vein of cultural significance in this act. Stringbeans is at once servile, acquiescing to Sweetie’s matriarchal dominance through his own transparently feigned defiance, yet he is also trapped between the thieving black residents of LaVilla and the oppressive white cops. They see this form of self-indicting rebellion as a parody of an African-American male’s survival strategies against his situation of helplessness. Stringbeans’ enactment of entrapment could have reflected a recent episode in his own life. Clarence Muse described a conflict with Charles P. Bailey, white owner of the 81 Theater in Atlanta, who threw May in jail rather than allow him to work for a competing theater. Stringbeans would leave Bailey’s theater every night with the line, “Ah must be tarin’ away from you-all now, ladies and gent’ men, because my Rolls Royce, wid’ the chauffeur an’ de footman waits we wid’ out.” Reversing the traditionally signified meaning of his situation, he transformed a paddy wagon arriving after every show to deliver him to his cell, into his personal chauffeured transportation to free lodgings. The singer, Ethel Waters met Stringbeans while she was working at Bailey’s 81 and was relieved that he approved of her new stage name, “Sweet Mama Stringbeans.” “Beans” so impressed W. C. Handy, that he later recalled the lyrics to “The Sinking of the Titanic” and

shared them with his collaborator Abbe Niles. Handy acknowledged Stringbeans as a blues pioneer and jokingly described him as “a Negro entertainer of high and odoriferous fame,” as he related this song:

I got dem Elgin movements in ma hips,  
Twenty years' guarantee!  
I want all you ladies in dis house  
To nestle up close to me.  
I was on dat great Titanic  
De night dat she went down'  
Ev'ybody wondered  
Why I didn't drown --  
I had dem Elgin movements in ma hips,  
Twenty years' guarantee!<sup>37</sup>

The full reaction of the Globe's audience to his act may never be known, but they too may have recognized the need to deflect the meaning of white dominance rather than confront its violent potential. From reviews of Stringbeans' many successful performances, one deduces that audiences certainly perceived this act as a hilariously rich and entertaining comedic release.

That same summer, the Bright-Smith players provided “one of the classiest arrangements of representative vaudeville of the season,” when they staged what the *Freeman* described as a “great race show” at the Globe. It was a serious dramatic presentation written by Frank Crowd, depicting “the pathetic plight of a conscientious Negro editor struggling against the combined efforts of the unscrupulous white politicians and the duplicity of members of his own race under their influence.” The topic reflects a more earnest and direct attempt to illustrate and share the experience of racial concern, which was beginning to take on a more threatening character. This unambiguous indictment of a corrupt white establishment and its black “collaborators” seems to reflect a breakdown in the trust with which local “Booker T. Men” had previously been held. Across the country, African-Americans began to question the strategy of cooperation that had resulted in a marked decline in their status and Frank Crowd played out these concerns on his

stage. The pedantic nature of the play may have given Crowd some worries over its reception by the Globe's audiences. His notices read, "If plays like this are encouraged we will have discovered the greatest instrument for teaching the unreachable masses the most effective kind of race pride and co-operation." A reviewer observed, "Some shouted while others shook with tears of emotion at the wonderful life like production." The stock company was led by Joe Bright and Speedy Smith and included L. Don Bradford, Florence Sewell, and India Allen. Goldie Chappelle was with the company as well. She had recently completed a tour on the Dudley circuit as part of a duo act with character comedian, Ed Tolliver.<sup>38</sup>

Toward the end, the Globe's management found themselves on the defensive. By May of 1914, Crowd had refreshed the image of his house with a new name, the New Globe Theater. His manager William A. Barkley felt the need to respond in kind to a *Freeman* letter that accused southern houses of entering into collaborative contracts to conspire against performers: "At no time during the eight years of Mr. Frank Crowd's management of this house has he been connected with any 'combine' nor can a single performer be found who has worked for him with whom he has failed to settle to the last farthing for services rendered." The power of the emerging circuits of booking agents and theaters may have done some damage to the Globe's ability to draw performers and audiences. Toward the end of June, Barkley might have seen the writing on the wall, when he felt the need to reassure the public that, "regardless of what others may publish, the New Globe Theater of this city is still doing business every night." He went on to praise the continued efforts of Crowd and Mikell to provide "nothing but clean, classy, highly moral vaudeville and specialty acts together with the best class of motion pictures that money can secure." A poignant article written under the byline "Roseborough" in May of 1915, still envisioned a rosy future, stating that, "in no other branch of the theatricals will you find amusement that appeals alike to all classes of people and while fads and motion pictures may find a way and temporary popularity, it is pretty safe to say that the final curtain on a Jacksonville stage will descend down on a Globe vaudeville show." Lew Kenner and his stock company returned to the Globe that summer, after performing there for a total of forty-one weeks over the previous two years. When John Lewis died, Kenner teamed up with Millie Williams and continued their vaudeville act. They remained until late August, when Davis and White split the bill with Will Benbow's new act, performing into September. In October of that year, all

reports of any theatrical performances at the Globe disappeared from newspapers. By 1916, listings show that ownership of 615 West Ashley Street was no longer in Frank Crowd's hands and during the following year, possession of the building changed once again.<sup>39</sup>

A new entertainment venue, the Strand Theater, opened at 701 Ashley Street on Monday, June 12, 1915, "amid the glare of blazing lights, a blaring of brass bands and a crowd in gala attire." Strand patrons, "lined Ashley Street, and pushed and surged like a rolling sea." Bob Russell and Billy Owens' stock company provided the entertainment for this opening night. The orchestra, under the direction of former A. G. Allen Minstrel Company bandleader King Philips, furnished "sweet music and the overtures were beautifully rendered." The show began with Luke Scott dressed in a sailor's uniform and marching on-stage to a drum beat, singing "Ships Ahoy," an operatic selection. When a bugle sounded, "six dainty sailor maidens in their nautical togs" stepped up to the footlights and Thelma Burroughs Brooks led them through an acrobatic dance routine. Russell and Owens then performed "Something to Eat, a Minute Too Late," a "pantomime version of disappointment." The vaudeville included prima donna Margaret Scott singing "My Hero" from Oscar Straus' Viennese operetta *The Chocolate Soldier* and the romantic song "Isla de Amour." The third act opened with Nina Stovall singing the sentimental ballad "That's Why I'm Loving Someone Else Today," then Mary and Skunton Daniels performed their singing and dancing act. This was followed by the comic skit *In Gratitude*, which featured George and Annie Freeman and Scott Luke. During the comedy song "Gimme What Belongs to Me," Freeman disrobes Luke, but this "was well done and showed class." The headlining single was Emmett Anthony, whose act, *A Bunch of Nonsense* featured his special yodeling and the Lange brothers, known as the Saxophone Kids followed him with their performance of "Memphis Blues," which was embellished with comedy and "witticisms." The stock company then presented the main feature *Jessiemine*, a "bright and breezy comedy" as the centerpiece of the show. The entire stock company participated in its original songs and dances and Jonell Berry was featured singer in many of the musical numbers.<sup>40</sup>

A white Jacksonville entrepreneur, H. S. Walker, was owner and operator of the Strand Amusement Company. When his theater first opened, he acted as his own booking agent. Like many other independent theater owners, he used the *Freeman's* "Stage" page to advertise for acts. That fall, when the Russell-Owens company finished their engagement, Walker's own

Imperial Players became the house stock company, with Philips continuing as music director. Walker advertised a show that lasted “two hours and forty-five minutes; only one show a night; change of bill each week.”<sup>41</sup>

Irvin C. Miller’s *Broadway Rastus* began an extended run at the Strand in December. Miller and Esther Bigeou performed their modern dance routine, styling themselves as, “the Bronze Vernon Castles.” The Strand orchestra consisted of Willie Lewis, former leader of the Welcome Cornet Band and Billy Kersands’ band on cornet, Amos Gilliard on trombone, John Walker playing the drumset, Lottie Frost on piano, and Mr. Rose on violin. It was reported that Walker had arranged for Miller’s company to be in “some of the biggest moving picture productions that has been produced in Jacksonville.” One of these films was to be woven into the narrative of the company’s live vaudeville act at the Strand, one of the earliest examples of multimedia integration. Notices commented that, “the new moving picture that is to be used in *Broadway Rastus* has just been completed by the Thanhouser Motion Picture Corporation. Aside from the retake of the railroad scene and the Wild Man’s ascension, it also shows the exploits of Rastus on Broadway. This picture makes the story complete as it would be impossible to present each detail without the film.” In January of 1916, the Russell-Owens Stock Company disbanded in St. Louis. Tim Owsley had been working as a duo with Jacksonville native, Sidney Kirkpatrick at the Howard Theater in Washington and the New Standard Theater in Philadelphia. Owsley returned to LaVilla briefly, to join Irvin C. Miller’s company at the Strand that Spring, just before he started working for the Managers’ and Performers’ Circuit. That August, Stringbeans and Sweetie May appeared at the Strand and shared the bill with Abbie Mitchell. Butler “Stringbeans” May died the next year, in Jacksonville.<sup>42</sup>

## CHAPTER SIX

### “TOUGH ON BLACK ARTISTS”

By the time the Strand Theater opened, the emerging market dynamic of a fully segregated social reality had already made its impact on the entertainment profession. White theater owners understood that a show's financial profits served their interests, but inspirational messages did not, so overt themes of racial uplift became less evident in these houses. By booking their acts through white-owned “combines” (organized theatrical circuits), both white and black theater owners could pocket the cost of maintaining a stock company's creative repertoire, while continuing to offer the novelty demanded by local audiences. Outside the doors of these theaters, regional social and economic forces continued to change the situation of African-Americans in Jacksonville. Despite its earlier successes, LaVilla became another stop on the circuit.

Despite a few bright moments, including the high profile opening of the new multi-story black Masonic Building at 410 Broad Street and the rebuilding of a new three-story brick Stanton School on the site of the inferior post-fire wooden structure, there were visible changes in LaVilla. Large numbers of working class African-Americans, who had prospered during the rebuilding of Jacksonville after the 1901 fire, were beginning to leave the region. As the construction boom cooled, the number of good paying jobs declined steadily. A recession in 1914 hit many black businesses hard and local opportunities began to disappear. By 1916 recruiters from two northern railroads, the Pennsylvania and the New York Central were successfully drawing black workers away from Jacksonville. The urgent situation of many families was seen in letters responding to employment advertisements in the *Chicago Defender*. One writer requested, “I would like for you to help me locate myself & family some where up there for work I can furnish reference to thirteen years of service at one place I am anxious to come right away.” Another observed, “There is a storm of our people toward the North and especially to your city.” By this time, white police officers and even white citizens in Jacksonville were judged to be acting within the law when they killed African-Americans who transgressed racial boundaries. There were numerous episodes during the ensuing decade that demonstrated this. The negative social effects of “Jim Crow” laws and increasing white

militancy (starkly evident in Jacksonville's first lynchings and emboldened marches by the Stonewall Jackson Klan Number One) combined with declining economic circumstances and resulted in sixteen thousand African-Americans leaving the city between 1916 and 1917.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of a regional consortium for booking African-American acts continued to be an active topic of discussion since the Chappelle brothers first expressed the idea. Another Florida theater would play a central role in its development. In late 1910, Mitchell Jacoby, the white owner of Pensacola's Belmont Theater, met with a small group at the Exchange Hotel in Montgomery, Alabama. They devised a plan that created the first cooperative circuit of theatrical houses in the region, the Southern Consolidated Circuit. Former Airdome and Globe manager L. D. Joel, who was then manager of the Arcade Theater (later, the 81 Theater) in Atlanta was chosen as the booking manager and treasurer for this enterprise. Only a few months earlier, Joel had been asking theater owners to join him in this endeavor. By January, he was advertising that he could give performers nine to eighteen weeks of "time" without losing a day and that the Southern Circuit had \$100,000 in "back of it." This "combine" became the primary means for booking regional acts into the Belmont. Performers who worked the Southern Consolidated Circuit received an offer of a twelve-week engagement, consisting of three weeks at each of the four theaters on the circuit. Beginning with Joel's Arcade Theater in Atlanta, their next stop was James Chambers' Queen Theater in Montgomery, Alabama, then Jacoby's Belmont in Pensacola, and finally, Charles Lagman's Theater in Mobile, Alabama. Joel informed his most talented prospects that, "If you have the goods you can go from Mobile back to Atlanta after playing the 12 weeks, and play 12 weeks more, making 24 consecutive weeks without losing one day."<sup>2</sup> Whether he ran into financial problems through his involvement with the white owners in the circuit, or if expenses related to the Arcade Theater financially crippled him, Joel had so completely vanished from the profession that by May of 1914, the *Freeman* ran an item titled, "L. D. Joel, Famous Theatrical King is Not Dead." It reported that Joel "lost \$40,000 flat in theatrical pursuits last year."<sup>3</sup> F. E. Barasso, white owner of the Savoy Theater in Memphis, had initiated his own circuit, with stops in Mississippi and Tennessee. Will Benbow was an early partner in Barasso's enterprise. By 1916, E. L. Cummings, the Belmont's new white owner had taken full control of the Southern Consolidated Circuit and entered into a partnership with similar consortia in other regions, including Sherman H. Dudley's theaters, the



Klein circuit, and Sam Reevin's United Vaudeville Circuit. The new Managers' and Performers' Circuit could book performers from Dallas to Pensacola and from Philadelphia to Chicago. They hired Tim Owsley to act as their "Traveling Representative." When Sherman Dudley was nominated as the president of the organization, Charles Bailey, owner of the 81 Theater threw a tantrum at the prospect of an African-American president. Dudley diplomatically deferred and nominated Bailey. However, Bailey was not only racist, but he was also corrupt and incompetent.<sup>4</sup>

The M. and P. Circuit was rocked by management disputes until finally the organization was absorbed into the emerging Theatrical Owners Booking Agency. T.O.B.A. became a long-standing powerhouse of the African-American theatrical industry. Most of the officers of the agency, as well as many of its theater owners were white. T.O.B.A.'s performers were expected to work hard, but most of the time they could expect regular pay. All profits, however, would remain in the hands of the owners. The acronym T.O.B.A. became widely known as meaning either "Tough on Black Actors" or, more frequently, "Tough on Black Asses."

Within a few years, W. J. Stiles, a white man from Savannah, was the new owner of the Strand Theater on Ashley Street. The Strand was part of the M. and P. consortium and became one of the original theaters on the T.O.B.A. circuit. Almost every major act that appeared on its stage from 1920 onward was routed there as part of a larger circuit. It was the southeastern-most stop on the route. Although nationally famous T.O.B.A. acts regularly appeared on its stage, local talent still found some opportunities. The prolific producer and blackfaced comedian, S. A. "Buddy" Austin arrived in Jacksonville from an extended engagement as stage manager for Bailey's 81 Theater in Atlanta. Austin found work in the public relations department of the Afro-American Life Insurance Company and eventually bought an interest in the Strand. He continued to produce occasional live shows at the theater during the nineteen twenties and thirties. He also starred in a number of Norman Film Manufacturing releases, including "The Green Eyed Monster." A review in the *Defender* noted that this was a film, "which in a subtle way, suggests the advancements of our folks along educational and financial lines." R. E. Norman was a white studio owner based on Laura Street in Jacksonville, who made a number of well-produced films for the African-American market during the nineteen twenties. Before long, motion pictures were the predominant entertainment offerings at the Strand. In its later years, it

was converted for exclusive use as a movie house and was operated by National Theater Enterprises. In September of 1929, when Neil Witschen built the new Ritz Theater just a few blocks away, it would become the main venue for African-American performance in LaVilla. The original group of four local investors, who ran the theater until Joseph Hackel became sole owner-operator, included Lionel D. Joel, former manager of the Colored Airdome on Ashley Street. In recent years, the city of Jacksonville restored the Ritz Theater and it now houses the LaVilla Museum. It continues to host performances that celebrate African-American culture. The Strand was razed in 1969 and its Ashley Street location is now part of the campus of the LaVilla School of the Arts.<sup>5</sup>

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### “ASHLEY STREET BLUES”

Technology-driven changes, along with an increasingly centralized popular entertainment marketplace, transformed the packaging and delivery of African-American culture. In 1915, “Birth of a Nation” had already secured a dominant market position for blockbuster motion pictures and after 1917, when W. C. Handy and the white Original Dixieland Jazz Band both released recorded versions of “Livery Stable Blues,” the sounds of jazz and blues became in effect, disembodied. Records could travel longer and further than any touring performer. This enabled their music to enter communities that would have never welcomed them personally. Many of LaVilla’s popular performers continued to work in the profession. However, despite President Woodrow Wilson’s unsympathetic racial stance and the painful tokens of the new “Jim Crow” social reality experienced by some returning World War I veterans, some of these creative individuals eventually went on to make significant contributions to the collective American consciousness of popular culture.<sup>1</sup>

When Frank Crowd closed the Globe Theater, it did not remain silent for long. A group of young investors opened the Mercantile Company and briefly tried to operate 613 West Ashley Street as a grocery market. They were unable to make payments on the \$25,000 mortgage, resulting in its foreclosure. It soon became a hotel, then a gambling house, but both of these enterprises failed as well. The building had been unoccupied for years and was beginning to deteriorate when, in 1932, former *Oriental America* performer Eartha White purchased it from Mrs. Madelyn Knight and her sister. By then, White had become one of the most energetic philanthropic forces in her community. She and her mother founded an “Old Folks Home” and maintained a soup kitchen in LaVilla, feeding its hungry since the late eighteen nineties. White moved some belongings into a small second floor apartment and placed a sign high atop the building that read, “Clara White Mission.” She named the mission after her recently deceased mother and this site became the new center for her charity work in the community. Eartha Mary Magdalene White was known in LaVilla and throughout Jacksonville as their “angel of mercy” until her death in 1974. After a destructive fire in 1944, the building was redesigned by architect

Henry J. Klutho. The Clara White Mission continues to provide sustenance for Jacksonville's neediest citizens from its Ashley Street location.<sup>2</sup>

After his long engagement at the Globe Theater ended, Eugene Francis Mikell worked for a short stint in Chicago as the Pekin Theater's orchestra leader and then accepted a permanent position as teacher and bandleader at the Bordentown Industrial School in New Jersey. For a brief period, some professional acquaintances found it so difficult to find him that they resorted to the *Freeman's* mail delivery, the "Gentleman's List," to contact him. When it appeared that war was escalating in Europe, Mikell enlisted for service with the Fifteenth Regiment, the Harlem contingency of the New York National Guard. On May 13, 1917, the regiment assembled for the first time on Fifth Avenue. Its twenty-eight-member band broke into an unrehearsed rendition of "Onward Christian Soldiers" as they marched toward the New York Central trains that would take them to their training camp in Peekskill. Despite fond recollections of this scene by Captain Arthur W. Little, their white commanding officer, Noble Sissle, the company's drum major and vocalist, recalled only a comic chaos of multiple unrelated tempos. The famed composer and bandleader, James Reese Europe had been authorized by Colonel William Haywood to organize the Fifteenth Regiment Band. However, because he was a machine-gun officer, regulations prevented Lieutenant Europe from participating in its performances overseas. Europe chose Sergeant Mikell to be the official bandmaster for the regiment, with Sergeant Frank de Broit, a highly skilled cornet soloist, as his assistant. Trombonist Amos Gilliard had enlisted with the Fifteenth and became a featured member of the ensemble.

Soon after the unit arrived in France on New Year's Day, 1918, General Walsh of the Allied General Staff heard Europe conduct the band during a concert at St. Nazaire. Arrangements were made to have him designated as the official music director of the regiment. Captain Little acknowledged Mikell's competent leadership and noted, "our band, even under Mikell, compared favorably with the best of the rest of the army bands, and would have rated way ahead of the average," but he agreed that Europe added something special. With Mikell on cornet, the company toured France, serenading soldiers and military dignitaries, as well as giving public concerts for the French people. These performances were wildly popular. Europe recalled, "Everywhere we gave a concert it was a riot." Sissle reported on one such concert at

the opera house in Nantes for the *Saint Louis Dispatch*. He noted that the first part of the show consisted of marches, overtures, and other traditional repertoire, but the second part opened with “Stars and Stripes Forever,” followed by an arrangement of plantation melodies, then came “the fireworks, the ‘Memphis Blues.’” The “jazz spasm” trombone break he described at the end of that piece would be captured a year later in recordings the regiment made for Pathé. Despite his initial concerns about visiting “ragtinitis” on a “nation with so many burdens,” after this performance, Sissle conceded, “I was forced to say that this is just what France needs at this critical time.”<sup>3</sup>

Soon, the company was re-designated the 369<sup>th</sup> United States Infantry Regiment and Europe was assigned back to his machine gun unit. Mikell briefly took charge of “Europe’s Band” again until they were ordered into the trenches. They fought hard against the German army alongside the French 161<sup>st</sup> Division and the Harlem regiment’s heroism in battle earned them the nickname, “The Hellfighters.” The French awarded the “Croix de Guerre” to the unit and to many of its individual soldiers. They were the first Americans to ever receive this honor.<sup>4</sup>

Before the 369<sup>th</sup> even returned stateside, a concert performance was scheduled for February 15, 1919, at Carnegie Hall. The *New York Age* touted Mikell’s composition, “Camp Meetin’ Day,” in advertisements for the event. At the concert, Mikell and Europe took turns conducting the Clef Club Orchestra and W. C. Handy was invited to direct several of his blues compositions as guest conductor. Not many actual Hellfighters were among the musicians, since most had taken advantage of their recent demobilization to return home. Sergeant Mikell soon made his own transition back into civilian life and returned to his post at the Bordentown School.<sup>5</sup>

James Reese Europe’s promising life and career were cut short in May when he was murdered by his drummer, Herbert Wright. Even without their famous leader, Mikell was able to reorganize the Hellfighters for a successful concert and dance tribute, memorializing Europe at the Manhattan Casino on July 26. He arranged another reunion that September for the Jim Europe Memorial Fund, with proceeds donated toward the creation of a music school in Harlem. This was the last time the Hellfighters played together.<sup>6</sup>

In February of 1921, Pathé released its recording of Mikell’s “Camp Meetin’ Day,” which featured a vocal performance by Noble Sissle. Three months later, the huge success of

Sissle's show *Shuffle Along* would permanently re-establish an African-American presence on Broadway. *Shuffle Along* was a creative collaboration between Sissle, his partner Eubie Blake, Flournoy E. Miller (Irwin C. Miller's brother), and Aubrey Lyles. Throughout the twenties, Mikell continued teaching at Bordentown, the Martin-Smith School of Music, and the Lincoln House Settlement. He occasionally stepped in as guest conductor with the Clef Club Orchestra and in 1924, he led the Jenkins Orphan Band when they performed at Hammerstein's Roof Garden in New York. One musician who studied with him during these years was the talented jazz multi-instrumentalist, composer, and arranger, Benny Carter. Mikell's two sons grew up to enjoy successful musical careers, both of them as saxophone players. Otto performed with the Savoy Bearcats and recorded with them in New York City in 1926. He also worked in a band led by Charles Mingus' uncle, Fess Williams, recording with him in 1927. F. Eugene "Gene" Mikell recorded with Joe Steele and his Orchestra in 1929, and then worked for a number of years with Henry "Red" Allen and the Mills Blue Rhythm organization. Among the many tunes he recorded with them during the early thirties--in the company of Joe "In the Mood" Garland, Edgar Hayes, and many other talented musicians--was the notorious "Reefer Man." Their father Eugene Francis Mikell died on January 19, 1932, and was buried at the Cypress Hills National Cemetery in Brooklyn.<sup>7</sup>

In 1919, Helen Johnson, Rosamond and James' mother, died. When the brothers buried her in New York, they transferred their father's remains from LaVilla, so their parents could lie together. After serving as second lieutenant with the Fifteenth Regiment National Guard during the war, Rosamond continued his long and productive career in music and the theater. James wrote the preface material for *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*, a collection of Rosamond's arrangements that was published by Viking Press in 1925. It proved so successful that *The Second Book of Negro Spirituals* was published the next year. Rosamond's choice of dedications is both telling and poignant, particularly "When I Fall On My Knees (Wid' My Face to de Risin' Sun)," addressed to the memory of Bob Cole. In 1929, he collaborated with W. C. Handy on a moving choral arrangement of Handy's "St. Louis Blues" for a motion picture "soundie" produced by Alfred N. Sack and featuring blues singer Bessie Smith. In 1935, he appeared as the predatory lawyer Frazier in Rouben Mamoulian's production of George Gershwin and DuBose Heywood's *Porgy and Bess* at the Calvin Theater in New York. James'

productive career as a writer, diplomat, and pioneering civil rights leader has become such an integral part of America's legacy that schoolchildren across the nation now recite his story. The Stanton School at 521 West Broad Street in LaVilla is listed on America's National Register of Historic Sites.<sup>8</sup>

L. Francis Mores, Clarence Muse, and Abbie Mitchell soon settled in Harlem where they joined Anita Bush's Lafayette Players at the Lafayette Theater on 132 Street and Second Avenue. Many of the most respected African-American actors of the generation that followed would emerge from this company. Clarence Muse went on to make appearances in one hundred and fifty films as an actor in Hollywood. He was also co-composer of the song "When It's Sleepytime Down South," one of Louis Armstrong's popular theme songs. Because of his failing health, Bob Russell remained in the South. By 1923, when comedian Dewey "Pigmeat" Markham befriended the co-founder of the Globe Stock Company, he had become "a sick old man." As a child in Durham, North Carolina, Markham played a part in an elementary school production of one of Russell's comedies, an event that marked his introduction to the profession. The two shared adjacent berths while touring with the Florida Blossoms minstrel company and each night, the increasingly forgetful older performer would share ideas for songs and comedy sketches with Markham, who later remarked, "He used me as his memory."<sup>9</sup>

Ferdinand "Jelly Roll" Morton's reputation as a pioneering jazz pianist and composer makes him one of the most familiar of the musicians discussed in this study. Lawrence Gushee describes the years when he performed on the vaudeville stages of Pensacola and LaVilla as, "the crucial period in Morton's professional development." Despite the energy and passion of his playing, Morton displayed an urbane polish to his presentation and the time he spent in LaVilla's theaters may have contributed to this sense of professionalism.<sup>10</sup>

Ma Rainey continued to be a favorite with southern audiences. She headlined her own "minstrel" show and toured under canvas throughout the teens and twenties. As a child, trombonist Clyde Bernhardt preferred her show over those of Silas Green and the Florida Blossoms. He remembered that the other shows had street parades and louder brass bands but "Ma Rainey put on a hell of an act." Beginning in 1923, Rainey recorded a number of hugely popular sides for Paramount Records. A Chicago *Defender* advertisement invited its readers to hear "the wonderful gold-necked woman who starred for five years in three theaters in

Pensacola, Atlanta, and Jacksonville!” The list of musicians who accompanied Ma Rainey on these recordings comprises a who’s who of African-American music, including: Louis Armstrong, Fletcher Henderson, Coleman Hawkins, Kid Ory, Arthur “Blind” Blake, Hudson “Tampa Red” Whitaker, Doc Cheatham, Don Redman, and Thomas “Georgia Tom” Dorsey. In the thirties, audiences’ taste for her raw style of blues began to decline. This, combined with depression economics, forced her once opulent road show to move into a homemade camper trailer. By then her national popularity had faded almost to obscurity. She retired from the road, returned home to Columbus, Georgia and purchased two theaters, the Airdome and the Lyric in the nearby town of Rome.<sup>11</sup>

Perry Bradford’s talents as a composer would become the primary focus of his later career. He eventually settled in New York and wrote numerous songs in Tin Pan Alley and blues styles. His persistent pitching of compositions to prospective publishers and performers earned him the nickname, “Mule.” In February of 1920, Bradford persuaded Fred Hager of the Okeh Record Company to substitute Mamie Smith, a former Smart Set dancer from New York, for the more famous white performer Sophie Tucker, on one of his recording sessions. Smith recorded two Bradford compositions, “That Thing Called Love” and “You Can’t Keep a Good Man Down.” The enormous success of these recordings encouraged Okeh to record Mamie Smith singing another Perry Bradford composition that August. His “Crazy Blues” became the first blues recording ever performed by an African-American. Smith’s phenomenal sales of over seventy-five thousand records a month inspired Okeh to pioneer a genre of recordings that became known as, “race records.” These recordings provided African-Americans with an important commercial voice and carried African-American performances into a broader marketplace through this newly popularized mass-media technology.<sup>12</sup>

F. S. Wolcott’s Rabbit’s Foot Minstrels continued to tour the towns of the south-central and southeastern regions of the country until the late nineteen forties. Its influence as a vehicle for live blues music would be profound. A short list of performers who spent time under this show’s tent includes: Bessie Smith, Louis Jordan, Rufus Thomas, “Big” Joe Williams, Walter “Brownie” McGee, Ida Cox, “Diamond Teeth Mary” McClain, Charles Neville, and Jackie “Moms” Mabley.<sup>13</sup>



Silas Green from New Orleans soldiered on for decades as well, becoming the longest continuously running black show in America. When Eph Williams died in 1921, Charles Collier, former manager of Tift Park in Albany, Georgia, took over full ownership and management of the organization. He moved its headquarters from Winter Park to Macon, Georgia. The Silas Green show functioned both as a nursery for untested talent and as a home for older performers who were past their prime. Their pride and joy was the “Dan Emmett,” a comfortable Pullman railroad car previously owned by Wolcott’s Rabbit’s Foot company and by A. G. Allen’s Minstrel’s. After railroads were no longer viable, the company relied on trucks and buses. They still brought their tent show to small towns across the Southland into the late nineteen fifties, preserving many elements of their performances from earlier days. During the nineteen twenties and thirties, Mose McQuitty was one of the backbones of their celebrated band. During this same period, Tim Owsley performed, wrote, and produced comedy sketches for them. Owsley and Coy Herndon, who had become another mainstay of the show, both shared their observations from the road through occasional articles in the *Chicago Defender*. In later years, S. H. Dudley’s son, Sherman Dudley Jr., wrote and produced the narrative comedy material for the show.<sup>14</sup>

For decades, the Silas Green company maintained an annual tradition. Every year on Christmas Eve, they performed for the Clara White Mission in LaVilla, where Eartha White would entertain the entertainers as they celebrated the holiday with her. Katie Abraham, who traveled with the company from 1927 to 1932 remembered that, “After every show, we went straight back to the car, every night except once a year. We always played Jacksonville, Florida on Christmas Eve and that was the one night we got to go to the dance.” Over the years, Bessie Smith, Ida Cox, Ma Rainey, Nipsy Russell, and Gatemouth Brown performed under the Silas Green from New Orleans tent. Even performers as diverse as blues legend Muddy Waters and free-jazz saxophonist Ornette Coleman received their first professional stage experience through association with this show.<sup>15</sup>

Echoes of these touring shows were heard across the state in Tallahassee as early as 1910 when Nathaniel Campbell Adderley organized Florida Agricultural and Mechanical College’s first marching and concert band. He tried to strike a balance between “by the book” playing and a more syncopated style that reflected the musical influences of minstrel companies who stopped

in Tallahassee as part of their regular route. Nathan B. Young Jr., son of the college president at the time, performed with this first sixteen-piece band. He remembered, “They began to learn and imitate what the minstrel bands did... In the last three years we were beginning to use syncopation, but in the early days we played straight band music... The black school bands were playing more like minstrel bands as the time went on.”<sup>16</sup> Many of the street parade traditions are still evident in routines performed by Florida A & M University’s “Marching 100,” as well as other bands at historically black colleges. Adderley’s two grandsons Julian “Cannonball” Adderley and Nathaniel “Nat” Adderley became international jazz artists, continuing this outflow of early influences.

Across Ashley Street from the old Globe Theater, the Lenape Bar and Manuel’s Tap room began to feature live music. As early as the mid-nineteen twenties, a new generation of musical performers had begun to emerge from Jacksonville. Their styles were less influenced by older minstrel or musical theater conventions and they worked almost entirely within the blues and jazz traditions, which by then were well established. Calvin “Eagle Eye” Shields was a pianist and popular bandleader in Jacksonville. Another pianist, Alonzo Ross, was the leader of a regional “territory band.” His Deluxe Syncopaters were based out of Jacksonville, but frequently performed in Miami as well, where their Del Robia Gardens performances were broadcast on radio station WIOD. In late 1926, a fifteen-year-old trumpeter named Cootie Williams and his unofficial guardian, New Orleans clarinetist Edmond Hall, left Shield’s band to join the Syncopaters. Both would move on to significant careers in New York’s music scene. Williams’ trumpet provided Duke Ellington’s orchestra with a distinctive voice and Hall emerged as an important figure in the New Orleans revival movement.<sup>17</sup>

The next year in Savannah, pianist Sugar Underwood accompanied the Jacksonville Harmony Trio on a recording of a Robert H. Cloud composition. Their song, “Jacksonville Blues,” included these gently nostalgic lines:

On Ashley Street, you get a smile from everyone you meet.

It makes you stroll along with happy feet, and pass your troubles away.

Take me home and I would promise that I’ll never roam.

‘Cause that’s the only place I’ll ever lose these awful Jacksonville Blues.

A year after this version was released, a young singer named Nellie Florence recorded a very different “Jacksonville Blues” in Atlanta. Accompanied on guitar by Robert “Barbecue Bob” Hicks, her version teems with aggressive sexuality and includes lines like, “Call me oven, they say that I’m red hot,” but the poignancy of loss still remains in the lyrics. The line, “But the man I love lives down in Jacksonville,” reveals that the dramatic voice embodied in those lines was mourning its loss from a place that was some distance from Jacksonville.<sup>18</sup>

Arthur “Blind Blake” Phelps was one of the few guitarists to be celebrated as a master of both ragtime and blues styles. He recorded extensively in Chicago throughout the nineteen twenties and accompanied Ma Rainey on a number of her recordings. His true origins may never be fully uncovered, but Paramount Records’ promotional advertisements in the *Defender* state that he was “born in Jacksonville, in sunny Florida” and blues historian Sam Charters believed that Blake returned to Jacksonville after his record sales began to sag. The Library of Congress Copyright Office has an entry for one of his lost recordings named, “Jacksonville Slide.” Blind Blake accompanied the singer Leola B. Wilson on her 1927 Paramount recording of “Ashley Street Blues.” She performed in vaudeville under the name Coot Grant with her partner, Jacksonville native Wesley “Kid” Wilson. They worked the T.O.B.A. circuit for many years. In her final line of this song, she wistfully reminds us: “I’m a heartbroken woman, with the Ashley Street Blues.”<sup>19</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This study is a part of the ongoing effort to answer two overarching questions that inevitably emerge from any investigation of early twentieth century black performance. One of these concerns the effect of white racism (and particularly, “Jim Crow” legislation) on the careers of performers and on the nature of their performances. The subject of intolerance is starkly silhouetted during this period, marked as it was by segregation’s steady rise to ascendancy. During the last decades of the 1800s, legal discrimination and widespread disenfranchisement had already made inroads into the lives of black Floridians. However, the passage of most significant “Jim Crow” legislation in the state occurred late in the twentieth century’s first decade. By following the lives and careers of this diverse group of individuals as these laws were progressively implemented, we can begin to discern the subtle and the not-so-subtle impact of institutionalized racism on the vernacular culture of this part of the country. The other question considers the impact of communications technology, specifically records and motion pictures, on the dissemination and diffusion of unmediated African-American entertainment practices and their influence on American popular culture. Mass-communication technologies were relatively widespread before 1916, but only a handful of black performers were in any position to have their acts “captured” on film, record, or radio. During this period, with few exceptions, access to the means of production for these technologies was found only outside of the black communities. LaVilla’s performance scene emerged just prior to the development of new markets that were specifically created by these technological innovations. This provides us with a unique window into the historical moment before the entrance of the first African-American cultural artifacts into the marketplace as saleable “simulacra.”

The historical period I have chosen to study was a transitional time and a better understanding of it provides the most detailed view of a transforming African-American performance culture. This work also offers a picture of a previously unrepresented region, a clear image of which is still in the process of developing. There remain aspects of the profession that lurk in the dark corners, out of the spotlight. As more historical and biographical details become fully illuminated, the two issues of racism and technology become easier to separate. By highlighting this particular period, they may finally become untangled and treated

independently. Many scholars have acknowledged the cultural pre-eminence of African-American-influenced performance practices, yet the multi-dimensional dynamic that characterized their entrance into the dominant cultural forum must also become a part of our understanding.

For many of the performers who were nationally known, Jacksonville represents only a single point in the broad arc of a long career. By exploring this one connection, I am contributing to the identification of benchmarks against which their own achievements and the relative success of other black performers might be measured. I have taken great pains to avoid the limitations that frame the perspective of many other studies by choosing examples that detail the varied careers of individuals from different social classes and professional genres. Musicians like Rosamond Johnson, Sidney Woodward, Eugene F. Mikell, and Eartha White had the benefit of some of the best conservatory training that was available in the United States. Each could justifiably claim unique professional triumphs during their careers, yet there still was a level beyond which they could not rise and later in life, most made their living outside of the profession. Actors and playwrights, such as Tim Owsley, J. Francis Mores, Bob Russell, and Marion Brooks were prolific and popular, yet breakthrough opportunities continued to be denied them. Examples of lasting success were found primarily among performers who left the South to pursue their livelihood in northern urban centers. Those who chose to remain on the southern circuit did so under progressively deteriorating conditions. Compare the later careers of Tim Owsley and Clarence Muse. Owsley remained in the “Jim Crow” South and plied his trade by touring with a traveling tent show, while Muse moved to New York and eventually enjoyed a long career in motion pictures. Entertainment entrepreneurs such as Frank Crowd, Pat Chappell, and Tom Baxter earned financial rewards for their efforts, but the promise of long-term stability that might have secured the future of their enterprises, eluded them in the end.

Those same opportunities that institutionalized segregation could offer African-American entrepreneurs would also become profitable investments for white capital. During the earliest years of “separate but equal” negotiations, the groundwork had been laid for many of these black-owned businesses. Pat Chappelle’s property leases and contracts with railroad lines, Tom Baxter’s storefront and liquor license, and Frank Crowd’s theater all became the foundations upon which they were able to build up their businesses, acquire more capital, and hire more

performers. The distribution channels for delivery of African-American vernacular entertainment to black audiences had been established by these pioneers, but the product, the actual content of the package sold in this marketplace was the labor of those involved with the creation of the shows. Unfortunately, the labor provided by the performers in this workforce was highly mobile and as time went on, was easily appropriated by white competitors.

Regarding the question of emergent African-American musical styles, an essential outcome of this work has been to establish a stylistic baseline against which the introduction of jazz and blues might be viewed. This was a period when classical repertoire and Stephen Foster compositions had already started to give way to “coon song” influenced ragtime tunes. Ragtime became the backbone for variety shows, as well as the more self-consciously ambitious productions. However, we can see that new blues and jazz styles had already made major inroads into the musical language in the honky-tonks, the tent shows, and even variety acts in the legitimate theaters as early as 1910. Transitional figures, like Ma Rainey, Baby Seals, and Stringbeans May provided a rural and unpolished but distinctively southern form of African-American entertainment that comfortably co-existed with the urban “high class” styles as practiced by conservatory-trained musicians on the stages of these same theaters.

Ashley Street in LaVilla is only now beginning to recover from the debilitating effects of urban decay and the crippling intrusion of Interstate 95 through the neighborhood. The Clara White Mission and the Stanton School still straddle Broad (formerly Bridge) Street. For a brief period, they were the only structures that remained standing for many blocks along the north side of Ashley Street. The Willie Smith Building, which housed Joe Higdon’s Hollywood Music Store and the Florida Cut Price Pharmacy had been built on the former site of the Colored Airdome. The city demolished it in 2003 to make way for the expansion of the Clara White Mission and now a new employment training center stands on the site. On the south side of Ashley Street, all the buildings are gone, save one. There is currently a project to restore Genovar’s Hall (also known as the Finkelstein Building), which was once the home of the Wynn Hotel and the Lenape Bar. This restoration was initiated through a cooperative agreement between Jacksonville’s Economic Development Commission and it is financed by the Nu Beta Sigma Chapter of the Phi Beta Sigma fraternity. The reconstruction has run into some challenges, though. The entire structure is now supported by jacks and the interior of the

building is completely gutted. Some of the old facade remains on the second floor, but not much else. Recently, in a self-conscious attempt to create an historic tableau (currently referred to as, “the LaVilla Experience”) as part of a proposed James Weldon Johnson Memorial Park, three shotgun shacks from the 1920s have been relocated just behind the structure. Ashley Street currently terminates where it once crossed Jefferson Street and the campus of the new LaVilla School of the Arts begins here, where Ashley Street now ends.

## NOTES

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### Introduction

<sup>1</sup>Russ Rymer, *American Beach: A Saga of Race, Wealth, and Memory* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998): 114.

<sup>2</sup>James Weldon Johnson, "Race Prejudice and the Negro Artist" *Harper's Monthly Magazine* (November 1928), 770.

<sup>3</sup>Among these, I include Ann Charter's *Nobody: The Story of Bert Williams* (New York: MacMillan, 1970), Jim Haskins and N.R. Mitgang's *Mr. Bojangles: The Biography of Bill Robinson* (New York: William Morrow, 1988), and the autobiographies by James Weldon Johnson, Ethel Waters, and Tom Fletcher that follow.

<sup>4</sup>Richard Newman, "The Brightest Star: Aida Overton Walker in the Age of Ragtime and Cakewalk." (*Prospects: An Annual Journal of American Cultural Studies* V18, 1993), pp. 465-481. and Nadine George-Graves, *The Royalty of Negro Vaudeville: The Whitman Sisters and the Negotiation of Race, Gender and Class in African American Theater, 1900-1940* (New York: St. Martin's, 2000) are examples of recent analyses. Eileen Southern's *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: Norton, 1983) and the work of Marshall and Jean Stearns, in particular *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* (New York: Schirmer, 1968) are less current, but no less invaluable resources.

<sup>5</sup>Henry Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1980), *Blacks in Black and White* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1995), and *The Ghost Walks* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1988).

<sup>6</sup>Lyn Abbott and Doug Seroff "'They Cert'ly Sound Good to Me': Sheet Music, Southern Vaudeville, and the Commercial Ascendancy of the Blues" *American Music* 14 (Winter, 1996): 402-454. Lyn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Out of Sight: The Rise of African American Popular Music, 1889-1895* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002). The first of these two studies was the springboard that exposed me to the first real evidence that there was a dynamic entertainment scene in LaVilla.

<sup>7</sup>Although excellent resources, Thomas L Riis, *Just Before Jazz: Black Musical Theater in New York, 1890-1915* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), Alan Woll, *Black Musical Theater: From Coontown to Dreamgirls* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), David Krasner, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre, 1895-1910* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997), Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), and almost every history of jazz and blues exhibit some geographical favoritism.

<sup>8</sup>Gregory Waller's chronicle of Lexington, Kentucky in *Main Street Amusements Movies and Commercial Entertainment in a Southern City, 1896-1930* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995); Michael Bakan's study of South Central Los Angeles in "Way Out West



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on Central: Jazz in the African-American Community of Los Angeles Before 1930” in *California Soul: Music of African-Americans in the West*, ed. Jacqueline Cogdell DjeDje and Eddie S. Meadows (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); and Fayetteville, North Carolina in the works of Alex Albright (cited later), provide interesting exceptions.

<sup>9</sup> James Crooks’ *Jacksonville After the Fire, 1901-1919: A New South City* (Jacksonville: University of North Florida Press, 1991) and a much older work, T. Frederick Davis’ *History of Jacksonville, Florida and Vicinity* (Jacksonville: San Marco Bookstore, 1925) are the local resources that have been the most helpful. Many studies on entertainment culture focus exclusively on the historical period subsequent to the introduction of communications technology and local historians frequently include all-too-brief discussions of regional arts and entertainment from this earlier period. Adding to the dilemma, even some of the best scholars, such as Paul Oliver paint with too broad a brush and overgeneralize, giving rise to occasional, but significant inaccuracies when dealing with specific instances.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas L. Riis, “Black Musical Theater, 1870-1930: Research Problems and Resources,” *American Music* (1984): 95.

<sup>11</sup> Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 280.

<sup>12</sup> Salem Tutt Whitney, “The Colored Thespian” *The Competitor*, January 1920, 56-7.

<sup>13</sup> Bert Williams and George Walker, “The Stage Negro,” *Variety*, December 14, 1907, 30.

<sup>14</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York: Knopf, 1930): 170. Riis, *Just Before Jazz*, 157.

<sup>15</sup> Eric Lott’s *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) and W. T. Lhamon’s *Raising Cain: Black Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) both provide an excellent background on white minstrelsy and James Weldon Johnson’s *Black Manhattan* summarizes the emergence of African-American troupes admirably. Tony Pastor “Tony Pastor Recounts the Origin of American ‘Vaudeville’” *Variety* December 15, 1906, 17.

<sup>16</sup> Claudia D. Johnson, “That Guilty Third Tier: Prostitution in Nineteenth Century American Theaters” *American Quarterly* 27 (1975), 575-84. Alex Albright, “Scenes From a Dream: (Nearly) Lost Images of Black Entertainers” in *Images of the South: Constructing a Regional Culture on Film and Video* ed. Karl G. Heider (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 62-63. Thomas L. Riis, “Pink Morton’s Theater, Black Vaudeville, and the TOBA: Recovering the History, 1910-30” in *New Perspectives on Music: Essays in Honor of Eileen Southern* ed. by Josephine Wright and Samuel A. Floyd jr. (Michigan: Harmonie Park Press, 1992), 242. James R. McGovern, *The Emergence of a City in the Modern South: Pensacola 1900-1945* (Pensacola: University of West Florida Foundation, 1976): 114.

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<sup>17</sup>Groucho Marx, *Groucho and Me* (1959; repr., New York: Da Capo, 1995), 92.

<sup>18</sup> Salem Tutt Whitney “Playing Stock,” Seen and Heard While Passing, *Freeman* (Indianapolis), March 14, 1914.

<sup>19</sup> Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 361. James Lincoln Collier, *The Making of Jazz: A Comprehensive History* (New York: Delta, 1978): 73. *Freeman* “Jacksonville Theatrical Notes” April 6, 1910.

<sup>20</sup> Abbott and Seroff. *Cert’ly Sound Good*, 412. William Christopher Handy, *Father of the Blues* (New York: Macmillan, 1941). Only a year before Woods’ performance, an advertisement in the April 27, 1909 Jacksonville *Evening Metropolis* for “Tut’s Pills” naively informed its customers that, “What is known as the ‘Blues’ is seldom occasioned by actual existing external conditions.” Robert Palmer, in *Deep Blues* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1981) states that Ma Rainey was traveling with the Rabbit’s Foot Minstrels at the time. Others have repeated this claim, but I have uncovered no evidence that would support this.

<sup>21</sup> William Barlow, “Black Music on Radio During the Jazz Age” *African American Review* 29 (Summer 1995), 327.

<sup>22</sup>“Is the Phonograph Detrimental to a Singer’s Success?,” *Freeman* (Indianapolis), May 28, 1904.

<sup>23</sup>Samson, *The Ghost Walks*, 280.

<sup>24</sup>Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface*, 125.

<sup>25</sup>I am indebted to the work of David Krasner, who applied the concepts of resistance and parody to the African-American theater in *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre, 1895-1910*. I’ve coined the terms deflection and authentication myself, to describe alternative aspects of these performances.

## **Chapter One: LaVilla and Jacksonville**

<sup>1</sup> Patricia L. Kenney, “LaVilla Florida, 1866-1887: Reconstruction Dreams and the Formation of a Black Community” in *The African American Heritage of Florida* ed. David R. Colburn and Jane L. Landers (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995), 193, 202. Rymer, *American Beach*, 120. Edward N. Akin, “When A Majority Becomes the Minority: Blacks in Jacksonville Politics, 1887-1907” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 53 (October 1974), 123-145. Cassanello, Robert, “African American Protest in Jacksonville, FL, 1895 to 1920.” (Masters Thesis, Florida Atlantic University, August 1995), 21.

<sup>2</sup>Rymer, *American Beach*, 135.

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<sup>3</sup>Davis, *History of Jacksonville Florida*, p. 161, 173, 187. Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942; repr., New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), 68. James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson* (1933; repr. New York: Da Capo Press), 333.

<sup>4</sup>Crooks, James B. "Changing Face of Jacksonville, Florida: 1900-1910," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 62 (April 1984) p. 439, Crooks, *Jacksonville After the Fire*, 85. Abel Bartley, *Keeping the Faith: Race, Politics, and Social Development in Jacksonville, Florida, 1940-1970* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), 5.

<sup>5</sup>Wiley L. Housewright, *A History of Music and Dance in Florida, 1565-1865* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1991), 253-5. Grier Moffatt Williams, "A History of Music in Jacksonville, Florida, from 1822 to 1922" (Ph.D. diss., Florida State University, 1961), 127. Paul Kruse, "Florida in the Life and Works of Frederick Delius" *Papers: The Jacksonville Historical Society* (Jacksonville, FL, 1947), 82, 86. Davis, *History of Jacksonville Florida*, 112, 168, 170. *Florida Times Union* (Jacksonville) "Old Circular Stirs Memories of Park Opera House's Glory" November 28, 1948. Craig, James C. "The Park Opera House," *Papers: The Jacksonville Historical Society* (Jacksonville, FL, 1954), 128.

<sup>6</sup>Richardson, Barbara A., "A History of Blacks in Jacksonville, Florida, 1860-1895: A Socio-Economic and Political Study" (Ph.D. diss., Carnegie-Mellon University, 1975), 208. Johnson, *Along this Way*, 57. Williams, "History of Music in Jacksonville," 147, 151. William F. Hawley, interview by Rose Shepherd, June 24, 1940, American Life Histories and Manuscripts from the Federal Writers Projects. *The Florida Negro: A Federal Writers Project Legacy*. ed. Gary W. McDonogh (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), 44.

<sup>7</sup>Sampson, *Blacks in Black and White*, 175.

## Chapter Two: Great White Way

<sup>1</sup>Daniel L. Schafer "Eartha M. M. White: The Early Years of a Jacksonville Humanitarian" in *Race and Gender in Jacksonville History: A Reader* ed. James B. Crooks (Jacksonville: University of North Florida Bookstore, 1997), 28.

<sup>2</sup>Bernard L. Peterson jr. *The African American Theatre Directory: 1816-1960*. p. 158-9.

<sup>3</sup>Schafer, "Eartha M. M. White," 97. Woll, *Black Musical Theatre*, 5. Krasner, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre, 1895-1910*. New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1997. p. 21.

<sup>4</sup>Johnson, *Black Manhattan*, 97. *Oriental America* script, American Memory Collection (Washington: Library of Congress). *Washington Morning Times* (quoted in Sampson p. 113-4)

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<sup>5</sup>Johnson, *Along This Way*, 137, 147. Schafer, “Eartha M. M. White,” 100. Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, 77.

<sup>6</sup>Schafer, Daniel L., “Eartha M. M. White” 98-99. Bennett, Charles E. *Twelve on the River St. Johns* (Jacksonville: University of North Florida Press, 1989), 140-1.

<sup>7</sup>Johnson, *Along This Way*, 148.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 149.

<sup>9</sup>Johnson, *Along This Way*, 150. Johnson, *Black Manhattan*, 101. Thomas L. Riis, “Bob Cole: His Life and His Legacy to Black Musical Theater” *Black Perspectives in Music* 13 (Fall 1985), 137. Woll, *Black Musical Theater*, 15. Although Cole’s maternal family name is “Weldon” and he spent time in Florida, I’ve found no evidence of a family connection or previous encounter with the Johnsons. In fact, James’ autobiography indicates that they met in New York and Edward Marks boasts of introducing them.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Marks and Abbott J. Liebling, *They All Sang: From Tony Pastor to Rudy Valee* (New York: Viking Press, 1934), 91, 96. For a fascinating and thorough analysis of the “coon song,” see James H. Dorman’s “Shaping the Popular Image of Post-Reconstruction American Blacks: The ‘Coon Song’ Phenomenon of the Gilded Age.” *American Quarterly* 40 (December 1988), 450-471. *The Gazette and Land Bulletin* (Waycross, Brunswick, and Tampa) January 27, 1900.

<sup>11</sup> Marks, *They All Sang*, 97.

<sup>12</sup> Southern, *Music of Black Americans*, 245.

<sup>13</sup>Johnson, *Along this Way*, 154. *Evening Metropolis* (Jacksonville) May 15, 1911, May 22, 1911.

<sup>14</sup>*The Florida Evangelist* (Jacksonville) January 20, 1900.

<sup>15</sup>Johnson, *Along this Way*, 155.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 158.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 162.

<sup>18</sup> Davis’ *History of Jacksonville, Florida* describes this destructive event in great detail.

<sup>19</sup>Johnson, *Along this Way*, 163-7, 170.

<sup>20</sup>Johnson, *Along this Way*, 210. The full title of this song was “Run Brudder Possum, Run: A Negro Warning.” Edward A Berlin, “Cole and Johnson Brothers’ ‘The Evolution of Ragtime’” *Current Musicology* 36, (1983), 22.

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- <sup>21</sup>Berlin, "Cole and Johnson Brothers," 26.
- <sup>22</sup>Freeman (Indianapolis) July 16, 1904
- <sup>23</sup>Johnson, *Along this Way*, 183, 186, 213-4.
- <sup>24</sup>Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 259, 261, 269, 270, 349.
- <sup>25</sup>Johnson, *Along this Way*, 222-3. Krasner, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness*, 128. Riis, *Just Before Jazz*, 130-2. Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 393-4, 402, 427.
- <sup>26</sup>Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 431. Charters, *Nobody*, 93-4.
- <sup>27</sup>Charters, *Nobody*, 108-9.
- <sup>28</sup>Freeman (Indianapolis) October 24, 1908. Riis, *Just Before Jazz*, 141.
- <sup>29</sup>Krasner, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness*, 142-145.
- <sup>30</sup>Riis, *Just Before Jazz*, 135. Johnson, *Black Manhattan*, 171. Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 439.
- <sup>31</sup>Riis, *Just Before Jazz*, 135, in p. 141, *Freeman* 1/15/10, Graziano, John "Sentimental Songs, Rags, and Transformations: The Emergence of the Black Musical, 1895-1910" in *Musical Theatre in America*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1984), 221. Sampson *Ghost Walks*, 496.
- <sup>32</sup>*Evening Metropolis* (Jacksonville), April 1, 1909, April 7, 1909, April 9, 1909.
- <sup>33</sup>*Evening Metropolis* (Jacksonville), April 3, 1909, May 18, 1909, July 5, 1910.
- <sup>34</sup>Freeman (Indianapolis), January 8, 1910, February 12, 1910, February 11, 1911. *Evening Metropolis* (Jacksonville), January 10, 1910. *Florida Times Union* (Jacksonville) January 3, 1911. Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, 77.
- <sup>35</sup>Washington, Booker T. *The Booker T. Washington Papers* V11, p. 482. Crooks, *Jacksonville After the Fire*, 94.
- <sup>36</sup>Johnson, *Black Manhattan*, 118. Johnson, *Along this Way*, 300, 338. Southern, *Music of Black Americans*, 284, 305. *Defender* (Chicago) December 10, 1910. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface*, 345, 374. The Folies Bergere theater was later known as the Fulton, then the Helen Hayes Theatre. Lasky helped create the Paramount Motion Picture studio with C. B. DeMille and was one of the original founders of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Harris was May Irwin's manager. He died when the Titanic went down.

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### Chapter Three: On Stage, Under Canvas

<sup>1</sup>Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 219.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>3</sup>McGill v. Chappelle, 71 So. 836 (1916). This Court document for the lawsuit between his brothers and his wife for distribution of the estate shows that during this time, Pat put most of his assets in his mother Annie's name to protect them from his creditors.

<sup>4</sup> McGill v. Chappelle, 71 So. 836 (1916). Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 226, 373.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 219-220.

<sup>6</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) May 19, 1900. Allen, Robert C. "Vaudeville and Film 1895-1915: A Study in Media Interaction" (Ph.D. diss. University of Iowa, 1977). Pastor, "Tony Pastor Recounts," 17.

<sup>7</sup>Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 219, 222-3. *Freeman* (Indianapolis) May 19, 1900.

<sup>8</sup>McGill v. Chappelle, 71 So. 836 (1916). *Freeman* (Indianapolis) March 27, 1909. Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 241.

<sup>9</sup>Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 241.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 252-3.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 254, 256, 258.

<sup>12</sup> McGovern, *Emergence of a City in the Modern South*, 63, 65.

<sup>13</sup> Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 261-2. *Freeman* (Indianapolis) August 29, 1902, August 13, 1904.

<sup>14</sup> Pat Chappelle, "Route Document," n.d., H4 2650 Eartha M. M. White Collection, University of North Florida Library, Jacksonville, FL. Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 293. *Freeman* (Indianapolis) January 23, 1904.

<sup>15</sup>Chappelle v. McGill

<sup>16</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) March 26, 1904, April 30, 1904, July 16, 1904. Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, 72.

<sup>17</sup> Hettie Jones, *Big Star Fallin' Mama: Five Women in Black Music* (New York: Puffin Books, 1995), 21.

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<sup>18</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) May 28, 1904, July 30, 1904, August 6, 1904. The Tampa City Directory for 1904 shows both Chappelle and Siberio as proprietors. It's up to the reader to decide if Patrocena Siberio was a pseudonym.

<sup>19</sup>Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface*, 16?, 562. Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 341.

<sup>20</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) April 30, 1904, December 22, 1906, June 1, 1907, November 30, 1907, January 25, 1908..

<sup>21</sup>Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 385, 412. Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, 72.

<sup>22</sup>Chappelle v. McGill. The 1908 Jacksonville City Directory probably reflects their employment during the latter part of the previous year.

<sup>23</sup>Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 433. *Freeman* (Indianapolis) August 22, 1908, March 27, 1909.

<sup>24</sup>Chappelle v. McGill. Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 337. *Freeman* (Indianapolis) March 27, 1909. *Evening Metropolis* (Jacksonville) April 14, 1909.

<sup>25</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) June 4, 1910, August 13, 1910, October 15, 1910, January 7, 1911.

<sup>26</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) September 24, 1910, January 7, 1911.

<sup>27</sup>*Evening Metropolis* (Jacksonville) May 29, 1911. Paul Oliver, *Songsters and Saints: Vocal Traditions on Race Records*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 78. Chappelle v. McGill.

<sup>28</sup>Chappelle v. McGill. Maxine D. Jones and Kevin M. McCarthy, *African Americans in Florida* (Sarasota: Pineapple Press, 1993), 102.

<sup>29</sup>Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 142, 407, 441. The most wildly inaccurate myth was first printed in the *Defender* (Chicago) March 12, 1955, then reprinted frequently. *Freeman* (Indianapolis) August 22, 1908, September 12, 1908.

<sup>30</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) February 12, 1910, Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 514,

<sup>31</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) February 12, 1916, February 22, 1916, March 11, 1916, March 25, 1916, April 29, 1916, November 18, 1916.

<sup>32</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) March 25, 1916.

<sup>33</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) February 12, 1916, March 25, 1916, November 14, 1916.

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<sup>34</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) March 24, 1914, February 12, 1916, March 18, 1916. *Defender* (Chicago) August 22, 1936. Abbe Niles “The Story of the Blues” in *Blues: An Anthology* ed. W. C. Handy (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 20.

<sup>35</sup>Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 283, 413, 435, 441, 505, *Freeman* (Indianapolis) February 12, 1910, April 16, 1910.

<sup>36</sup> *Freeman* (Indianapolis) July 10, 1915. Southern, *Music of Black Americans*, 229. Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, 51.

<sup>37</sup> Tom Fletcher, *100 Years of the Negro In Show Business* (New York: Burge and Company, 1954), 61, 64-5. *The Age* (New York) August 15, 1915 in Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface*, 391.

<sup>38</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) June 4, 1910. Alex Albright, “Noon Parade and Midnight Ramble: Black Traveling Tent Shows in North Carolina” in *Good Country People: An Irregular Journal of the Cultures of Eastern North Carolina* (Rocky Mount: North Carolina Wesleyan College Press, 1995), 69. Albright, Alex, “Mose McQuitty’s Unknown Career: A Personal History of Black Music Music in America” *Black Music Research Bulletin* 11, (Fall 1989), 2. Abbott and Seroff, *Out of Sight*, 116-7. Transcription from Mose McQuitty routebook. Albright believes that Herndon’s hometown was Palatka, Florida (letter to author, October 2, 2000).

<sup>39</sup> Thomas L. Morgan and William Barlow, *From Cakewalks to Concert Halls: An Illustrated History of African American Popular Music From 1895-1930* (Washington: Elliot and Clark, 1992), 121. Alan Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll: The Fortunes of Jelly Roll Morton, New Orleans Creole and “Inventor of Jazz”* (1949; repr. New York: Pantheon, 1993), 175-6. Lawrence Gushee, “A Preliminary Chronology of the Early Career of Ferd “Jelly Roll” Morton.” *American Music* 3 (Winter 1985), 396. Gushee suggests that Morton may have taken over Ralph Redmond’s role with the company after he left.

<sup>40</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) July 6, 1910, December 10, 1910.

<sup>41</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) July 10, 1915, Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface*, 390.

#### **Chapter Four: We Will Soon Reach the Ladder**

<sup>1</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) December 26, 1903, February 6, 1904, June 5, 1910.

<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Roback, “The Political Economy of Segregation: The Case of Segregated Streetcars” *The Journal of Economic History* 66 (December 1986) , 909-10. Crooks, “Changing Face of Jacksonville, Florida,” 449-50.

<sup>3</sup>Roback, p. 910. Florida’s railroads were segregated in 1887 and the schools in 1895.



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<sup>4</sup>*Florida Times Union* (Jacksonville), July 25, 1905. Schafer, "Eartha M. M. White," 112.

<sup>5</sup>*Florida Times Union* (Jacksonville) July 3, 1905, July 20, 1905, July 25, 1905, July 26, 1905, July 30, 1905, October 18, 1905, October 20, 1905. Johnson, *Along this Way*, 142-4.

<sup>6</sup>*Evening Metropolis* (Jacksonville) January 1, 1904.

<sup>7</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) March 5, 1904.

<sup>8</sup>Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 487.

<sup>9</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) October, 15, 1904.

<sup>10</sup>Jacksonville City Directories 1896, 1898, 1901, 1902.

<sup>11</sup> Lillian Gilkes, *Cora Crane: A Biography of Mrs. Stephen Crane*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960), U.S. Department of the Interior *Historic American Buildings Survey: La Villa Boarding House, Turkish Harem* 1975, HABS-FL-346B, 1-6. Kevin, M. McCarthy, *The Hippocrene U.S.A. Guide to Black Florida* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1995), 22. *Florida Times Union* (Jacksonville) February 14, 1908.

<sup>12</sup>Crooks, "Changing Face of Jacksonville, Florida," 443. *Freeman* (Indianapolis) June 17, 1907. Southern, *Music of Black Americans*, 340-1. Collier, *Making of Jazz*, 61. Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll*, 174.

<sup>13</sup>Crooks, *Jacksonville After the Fire*, 114. *Evening Metropolis* (Jacksonville) April, 8, 1909. Johnson, *Along this Way*, 301.

<sup>14</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) April 25, 1908. *Evening Metropolis* (Jacksonville) April 5, 1909.

<sup>15</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) May 23, 1908. *Evening Metropolis* (Jacksonville) May 1, 1909, May 4, 1909.

<sup>16</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) June 13, 1908, July 4, 1908. *Evening Metropolis* (Jacksonville) May 5, 1909.

<sup>17</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) March 20, 1909. *Evening Metropolis* (Jacksonville) April 3, 1909, January 1, 1910.

<sup>18</sup> *Freeman* (Indianapolis) January 1, 1910. Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 104

<sup>19</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) January 22, 1910.

<sup>20</sup>*Evening Metropolis* (Jacksonville) May 8, 1909.

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<sup>21</sup>*Evening Metropolis* (Jacksonville) January 1, 1910.

<sup>22</sup>*Evening Metropolis* (Jacksonville) July 5, 1910. Florida Times Union (Jacksonville) May 5, 1910.

<sup>23</sup>*Evening Metropolis* (Jacksonville) May 17, 1911, June 2, 1911, June 6, 1911. Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 494. *Freeman* (Indianapolis) March 11, 1910, June 4, 1910.

<sup>24</sup>*Evening Metropolis* (Jacksonville) September 1, 1912, November 2, 1913, November 9, 1913. Jacksonville City Directory 1915, 1916. *Journal* (Jacksonville) November 4, 1971.

### Chapter Five: The Management So By Nature

<sup>1</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) December 12, 1910, January 7, 1911. *Evening Metropolis* (Jacksonville) June 2, 1909. MacGowan, Kenneth, *Behind the Screen: The History and Techniques of the Motion Picture*. (New York: Delta, 1965), 139.

<sup>2</sup>*Evening Metropolis* (Jacksonville), May 31, 1909, April 14, 1909, April 30, 1909, May 1, 1909, May 15, 1909.

<sup>3</sup>*Evening Metropolis* (Jacksonville) May 1, 1909.

<sup>4</sup>*Evening Metropolis* (Jacksonville) May 4, 1909. MacGowan, *Behind the Screen*, p. 89.

<sup>5</sup>*Evening Metropolis* (Jacksonville) May 10, 1909, May 15, 1909.

<sup>6</sup>*Evening Metropolis* (Jacksonville) April 16, 1909, April 28, 1909. Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 464. Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, 86-89. *Freeman* (Indianapolis) March 18, 1916. A more comprehensive description of the careers and influence of the Whitman Sisters can be found in Nadine George-Graves' *The Royalty of Negro Vaudeville: The Whitman Sisters and the Negotiation of Race, Gender and Class in African American Theater, 1900-1940* (New York: St. Martin's, 2000).

<sup>7</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) May 21, 1910.

<sup>8</sup>Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, 110. *Freeman* (Indianapolis) January 15, 1910 January 22, 1910, February 21, 1910.

<sup>9</sup>Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 461, 505. *Freeman* (Indianapolis) April 30, 1910.

<sup>10</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) March 17, 1910, March 10, 1910, March 26, 1910.

<sup>11</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) May 14, 1910.

<sup>12</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) April 2, 1910, November 19, 1910. Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, 287.

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- <sup>13</sup>Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface*, 126. *Freeman* (Indianapolis) February 28, 1909.
- <sup>14</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) May 21, 1910, October 15, 1910, January 7, 1911. *Southern, Music of Black Americans*, 285.
- <sup>15</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) April 16, 1910, May 21, 1910. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface*, 125.
- <sup>16</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) May 28, 1910.
- <sup>17</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) July 20, 1910.
- <sup>18</sup>Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll*, 146, 174-5. Gushee, "A Preliminary Chronology of the Early Career of Ferd "Jelly Roll" Morton," 396. Gushee assumed that Morton did not play snare drum, because the skill of the house drummer at the time, the celebrated Joe White was so renowned. Abbe Niles credited Wyler, then a member of W. C. Handy's Memphis Band, with originating his distinctive, shifting rhythmic device three years before Handy adopted it for his "Memphis Blues." Niles, "Story of the Blues," 19-20.
- <sup>19</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) October, 15, 1910.
- <sup>20</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) February 12, 1910.
- <sup>21</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) September 24, 1910. Willam W. Westcott, "City Vaudeville, Classic Blues: Locale and Venue in Early Blues." in *Ethnomusicology in Canada* (Toronto Institute for Canadian Music, 1990), 140. Abbot and Seroff, "Cert'ly Sounds Good to Me," 416.
- <sup>22</sup>Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 463. *Freeman* (Indianapolis) October 20, 1910, November, 19, 1910, February 2, 1911. In true theatrical tradition, Owsley and his chorus girl fiancée, Sadie L. Hines were married on-stage at the appropriately named Church's Theater in Memphis on October 19, 1907.
- <sup>23</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) July 17, 1910, August 3, 1910, September 17, 1910.
- <sup>24</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) October 1, 1910, October 29, 1910.
- <sup>25</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) November 19, 1910. *Defender* (Chicago) December 10, 1910.
- <sup>26</sup>Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 468, 500.
- <sup>27</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) August 3, 1910 and September 17, 1910, December 31, 1910.
- <sup>28</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) May 7, 1910. January 21, 1911. Gertrude Rainey, "Mrs. Rainey's Letter of Protest: Jacksonville, Fla." *Freeman* (Indianapolis) December 28, 1911, January 24, 1914.

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<sup>29</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) January 21, 1911, July 4, 1914. Sampson, *Blacks in Black and White*, 562.

<sup>30</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) December 24, 1910, January 7, 1911. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface*, 206, 302, 309, 454, 468, 500. Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 523, 543.

<sup>31</sup>Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface*, 409. *Freeman* (Indianapolis) August 3, 1910. Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 184, 401. Abbott and Seroff, *Out of Sight*, 137-8.

<sup>32</sup>*Evening Metropolis* (Jacksonville) 15 May 1911, 22 May 1911. 5/29/11. Knight, Athelia, "In Retrospect: Sherman H. Dudley, He Paved the Way for T.O.B.A." *The Black Perspectives in Music* 15 (Autumn, 1987), 162.

<sup>33</sup>*Evening Metropolis* (Jacksonville) June 5, 1911. Lieb, *Mother of the Blues*, 16. Sampson, *Blacks in Black and White*, 549.

<sup>34</sup>*Evening Metropolis* (Jacksonville) May 31, 1911. *Jacksonville City Directory 1915* V16. Jacksonville: R. L. Polk & Co., 1915. Crooks, *Jacksonville After the Fire*, 82.

<sup>35</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) January 24, 1914.

<sup>36</sup>Marshal and Jean Stearns "Frontiers of Humor: American Vernacular Dance." *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 30 (September, 1966), 228-9.

<sup>37</sup>Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, 230. Clarence Muse, *Way Down South* (Hollywood CA: David Graham Fischer, 1932), 64. Ethel Waters with Charles Samuels. *His Eye on the Sparrow: An Autobiography*. (New York: Doubleday, 1951), 89. Abbe Niles, "Ballads, Songs and Snatches" *The Bookman* 67 (May 1928), 290-1.

<sup>38</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) July 10, 1915. Knight, "In Retrospect: Sherman Dudley," 163.

<sup>39</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) May 30, 1914, June 20, 1914, May 15, 1915. *Jacksonville City Directory 1916* V17. Jacksonville: R. L. Polk & Co., 1916.

<sup>40</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) June 19, 1915.

<sup>41</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) August 14, 1915, August 25, 1915, October 2, 1915. Gushee, "A Preliminary Chronology of the Early Career of Ferd "Jelly Roll" Morton," 403.

<sup>42</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) July 10, 1915, January 29, 1916, February 19, 1916, March 18, 1916, April 8, 1916.

## Chapter Six: Tough on Black Artists

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin M. McCarthy, *Hippocrene U. S. A. Guide to Black Florida* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1995), 129-30, 133-4. Crooks, *Jacksonville After the Fire*, 95. Davis, *History of Jacksonville Florida*, 274-5. Stetson Kennedy, "Portraits of Jacksonville's Past" *Florida Times Union* (Jacksonville) February 21, 1999. Cassanello, "African American Protest in Jacksonville" p. 45-7. Emmet J. Scott, "Letters of Negro Migrants of 1916-1918" *Journal of Negro History* 4 (July 1919), 304, 318. for more details on migration see Jerrell H. Shofner's "Florida and the Black Migration" *Florida Historical Quarterly* 57 (January 1979), 267-288.

<sup>2</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) November 5, 1910.

<sup>3</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) April 25, 1914.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas L. Riis, "Black Vaudeville and the T.O.B.A. in Atlanta." *Black Music Research Bulletin* 11 (Spring 1989), 4. Knight, "In Retrospect: Sherman H. Dudley," 165. *Freeman* (Indianapolis) October 1, 1910, October 15, 1910, January 7, 1911. Anthony Duane Hill, "J. A. Jackson's Page in Billboard: A Voice for Black Performance During the Harlem Renaissance Between 1920 and 1925" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1988), 166-7, 184, 186.

<sup>5</sup> *Journal* (Jacksonville) November 18, 1969. "Bring Down the House," *Florida Times Union* (Westside Neighbor October 28, 1987). Herman "Skip" Mason jr., *Images of American: African American Life in Jacksonville* (Dover, NH: Arcadia, 1997), 15, 68. *Defender* (Chicago) July 19, 1921. Sampson, *Blacks in Black and White*, 311.

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis Porter and Michael Ullman, *Jazz: From its Origins to the Present*. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), 27.

<sup>2</sup> Charles E. Bennett, *Twelve on the River St. Johns*. (Jacksonville: University of North Florida Press, 1984), 143. *75th Diamond Birthday Observance of Useful Life of Eartha Mary Magdalene White, "Doctor of Humanities"* (Jacksonville, FL: Eartha Mary Magdalene White Diamond Birthday Observation Committee of the Florida State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, 1951), n.p.

<sup>3</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis) March 18, 1916. James Reese Europe, "A Negro Explains Jazz" *Literary Digest*, April 26, 1919, 29; reprinted in Eileen Southern, *Readings in Black American Music* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983), 226. Reid Badger, *A Life in Ragtime: A Biography of James Reese Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 148, 166-7. Reid Badger, "James Reese Europe and the Prehistory of Jazz." *American Music* 7 (Spring 1989), 55. Arthur W. Little, *From Harlem to the Rhine: The Story of New York's Colored Volunteers*. (New York: Covici Friede, 1936), 108-109.

<sup>4</sup>Badger, *A Life in Ragtime*, 175, 183. Tim Gracyk, "James Reese Europe with this 369<sup>th</sup> U.S. Infantry 'Hellfighters Band'" liner notes, *Lieutenant Jim Europe's 369<sup>th</sup> U. S. Infantry "Hell Fighters" Band: The Complete Recordings* Memphis Archives MA7020 (1996).

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<sup>5</sup>Badger, *A Life in Ragtime*, 204-5, 223.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>7</sup> John Chilton, *A Jazz Nursery: The Story of the Jenkins Orphanage Bands of Charleston, South Carolina* (London: Bloomsbury Book Shop, 1980), 57. Southern, *Music of Black Americans*, 285. Brian Rust, *Jazz Records: 1897-1942*. (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1987). Cypress website [http://www.inerment.net/data/us/ny/kings/cypressnat/index\\_memi.htm](http://www.inerment.net/data/us/ny/kings/cypressnat/index_memi.htm). *Shuffle Along* was written by Aubrey Lyles and Flournoy Miller with music by Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle.

<sup>8</sup>Johnson, *Along this Way*, 338. James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson *The Books of American Negro Spirituals: Including The Book of Negro Spirituals and The Second Book of Negro Spirituals* (1925 and 1926; repr. New York: Da Capo, 1969), 63. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface*, 278-282.

<sup>9</sup>*Freeman* (Indianapolis), December 24, 1916. "Pigmeat" Markham and Bill Levinson, *Here Come the Judge!* (New York: Popular Library, 1969), n.p.

<sup>10</sup> Gushee, "A Preliminary Chronology of the Early Career of Ferd 'Jelly Roll' Morton," 396-7.

<sup>11</sup> Lieb, *Mother of the Blues*, 46-7, 177-182. Clyde Bernhardt, *I Remember: Eighty Years of Black Entertainment, Big Bands, and the Blues* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 24-6. Bernhardt provides a wonderful description of her whole show. *Defender* Chicago February 2, 1924.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Oliver, *The Story of the Blues* (Boston: Northeastern University Press), 105-6.

<sup>13</sup>Oliver, *Story of the Blues*, 67, 69, 125, 150, Kent Kastner, "I'm a Stranger Here: Blues Music in Florida" *Tampa Bay History* 10, (1988), 16-7. David Evans, "Since Ol' Gabriel's Time: Hezekiah and the Houserockers" (Louisiana's Living Traditions, 1999), [http://www.louisianafolklife.org/lt/Articles\\_Essays/since\\_ol\\_gabriels\\_time.html](http://www.louisianafolklife.org/lt/Articles_Essays/since_ol_gabriels_time.html). Charles Neville, "Interview" (Digital Interviews, 1999), <http://www.digitalinterviews.com/digitalinterviews/views/neville.shtml>.

<sup>14</sup>Paul Oliver, *Songsters and Saints: Vocal Traditions on Race Records* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 79. Albright, Alex *If Not Forgotten, Then Misunderstood: The African American Traveling Minstrel Show* @ *Living Blues* 24 (March/April 1993), 41.

<sup>15</sup>Albright, Alex, "Noon Parade and Midnight Ramble" in *Good Country People: An Irregular Journal of the Cultures of Eastern North Carolina* North Carolina Wesleyan College Press, 1995, p. 65,69. UNF Special Collection item.

<sup>16</sup> Jacqui Malone, "The FAMU Marching 100" *The Black Perspective in Music* 18 (1990), 63.

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<sup>17</sup>Mark Miller “The Story of Robert H. Cloud” liner notes *Florida Rhythm: Robert H. Cloud 1927-1931* Jazz Oracle BDW8011 (1999). Collier, *Making of Jazz*, 288-9. Mason, *Images of Black Jacksonville*, 14, 18.

<sup>18</sup>Ruth A. Banes, David A. Bealmear and Kent Kaster, “Florida Bound Blues” *Popular Music and Society* 12 (Winter 1988), 46. Bruce Bastin, *Red River Blues: The Blues Tradition in the Southeast* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 109.

<sup>19</sup>*Defender* (Chicago) October 2, 1926. Sam Charters, *The Country Blues* (London: Michael Joseph, 1960), 37. Bastin, *Red River Blues*, 41.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Born in Chicago and raised in New England, Peter Dunbaugh Smith graduated from the University of Vermont with a bachelor's degree in English and earned his master's degree in Music from Goddard College. After years of teaching and performing in various musical styles and in a variety of professional settings throughout the Northeast, Smith settled in Florida, where he earned a master's degree in Library and Information Science from the University of South Florida. He worked as an academic librarian and bibliographic instructor in central and southern Florida before completing his formal studies at the Florida State University, where he earned a doctoral degree in Humanities. Peter Dunbaugh Smith is currently serving as Assistant Professor of the Humanities and Social Sciences at Central Florida Community College, where he also teaches applied music. He continues to be an active participant in a variety of different performance communities.