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## “Play That Barber Shop Chord”: A Case for the African-American Origin of Barbershop Harmony

“There are better singers unadvertised and unknown down in the cornfields than any of us.”

— Alberta Hunter

Barbershop harmony is one of the great American inventions. The contemporary image of barbershop harmony is couched in a romanticized perception of the “Gay Nineties,” with dapper, white, middle-American barbers and their patrons posed next to barber poles in attitudes of harmonizing. There is, however, little in the mainstream literature of the period to reinforce this image. The literature of African-American history, on the other hand, is shot through with references to barbershop singing. These references suggest strongly an African-American origin for both the concept of male quartet singing in barbershops and the particular style of harmonizing that has come to be known as “barbershop.”

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Readers of the November 24, 1888 edition of the black publication *New York Age* came upon an article entitled “Advantages of Vocal Culture,” which recalled that “Not many years ago, singing as an amusement prevailed above all others.” It explained that, because white prejudice barred access to public theaters and concert halls, people had to meet in each other’s homes and create their own amusements:

At these meetings of friends, as soon as the small games were

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exhausted, the proposition to sing was gladly accepted and nature's musical instrument filled the place with pleasing harmonies . . . the love of singing was so universal and highly appreciated that, even after the dispersion of the social gathering, the gentlemen would unite and for hours make the night melodious with their tuneful voices.<sup>1</sup>

These nineteenth-century home "singing parties," and especially the men's spirited after-party sessions, speak for the lost history of a racial approach to close harmony that Americanized part-singing and inspired a recreational quartet phenomenon of untold size and significance. Famous vaudevillian Billy McClain recalled that when he was in Kansas City during the late 1880s, "about every four dark faces you met was a quartet."<sup>2</sup> His recollection was echoed by such authoritative spokesmen as James Weldon Johnson and Laurence C. Jones, founder of the well-known Piney Woods School, who both flatly stated, in print, that "Any four colored boys are a quartet."<sup>3</sup>

This is frank testimony to the pervasiveness of quartet singing during the 1890s and early 1900s. For the male population, at least, it was nothing less than the black national pastime. "We used to love to get together," confirms Dr. Laddie Melton, a native New Orleanian who started harmonizing in local schoolyard quartets around 1910. "It was typical, almost, for any three or four Negroes to get together and, they say, 'Let's crack up a chord! Let's hit a note!'"<sup>4</sup>

At the heart of this all-absorbing quartet activity was a spontaneous and highly infectious approach to harmonizing, or "cracking up a chord." Ballads and sentimental tunes were most susceptible to it, but no song, religious or secular, traditional or Tin Pan Alley, was immune. The basic idea was to improvise, linger on, and bask in the immediate warmth of hair-raisingly unusual close-harmony chords.

Close harmony had been reverberating through the American musical landscape since the proliferation of professional "singing family" and minstrel troupe quartets during the early 1840s, but such mainstream antecedents were innocent of the rakish "minors," "swipes," and "snakes"<sup>5</sup> that characterized black recreational male quartets. The art of "cracking up a chord" was born in unabashed celebrations of the "weird," organically blended harmonies that first distinguished the group singing traditions of plantation slavery. While it readily overlapped into schoolyards, lodge halls, barrooms, shoeshine stands, railroad stations and street corners, this unique sound was eventually labeled "barbershop harmony." The name bears witness to the black American barbershop's extended role as a fraternity hall and general social institution as well as a center for musical rehearsal and performance.

Black neighborhood barbershops symbolized the free-and-easy male camaraderie that encouraged recreational quartet singing. Hunter C. Haynes, a turn-of-the-century black barber and self-appointed historian of the trade, reported in 1902 that of the "colored shops that are catering to their own color," none, "with the exception of a few," were "complete without a back room, which will contain card tables, checker boards and beer cans, which are frequently in use during business hours, and is generally the headquarters for arguments on unnecessary subjects."<sup>6</sup>

In early 1900s black New Orleans, Joe Sarpy's Cut Rate Shaving Parlor was "Headquarters for Dining Car and Railroad Men,"<sup>7</sup> and, because Sarpy had a vested interest in the vaudeville activity at old Lincoln Park, it was also a hangout for local singers and performers.<sup>8</sup> Another such hangout was Dewberry's Shaving Parlor and Social Club, on the corner of Gasquet and Franklin streets, in the old "Black Storyville" section.<sup>9</sup> Proprietor J. B. Dewberry boasted in 1914 that, "All the theatrical world knows me. I have a barber shop and a suite of rooms upstairs to entertain them."<sup>10</sup> In 1908, Storyville piano professor Albert Carroll was picking up his mail at Dewberry's.<sup>11</sup> Late that same year the Hobos Social Club, an independent burial society comprised of local vaudevillians, was organized in one of his upstairs rooms.<sup>12</sup>

In this congenial atmosphere, black barbers, barbershops, and vocal quartets enjoyed a specific historical relationship. In 1859, turn-of-the-century minstrel star Sam Lucas was a barber in Cincinnati.<sup>13</sup> By 1871 he had moved to St. Louis, and was barbering there in 1873 when he first struck out with Callender's Minstrels as a member of the quartet.<sup>14</sup> Around 1888, W. C. Handy was tenoring a quartet which gathered in a Florence, Alabama barbershop "for the trying out of new swipes."<sup>15</sup> They "often serenaded their sweethearts with love songs; the young white bloods overheard, and took to hiring them to serenade the white girls."<sup>16</sup> America's best-known quartet, the Mills Brothers, were fathered by an "old trouper" who "taught the boys their harmony around his barber shop in Piqua, Ohio."<sup>17</sup> Since about 1915, "Papa Mills had been a singer, doing both solo and quartet work between periods of barbering."<sup>18</sup> The Southsiders Quartette of New Orleans, who became locally known for imitating the Mills Brothers, was born in a neighborhood barbershop in the mid-1920s. "They were my customers," recalled Charles Harry. "That's why they started singing there in my shop, Southsiders Barber Shop."<sup>19</sup> Albert Veal, a charter member of the New Orleans Humming Four, the city's most popular gospel quartet of the 1930s, recalled: "There was one [barbershop] right around on Palm Street I used to go to, and another one uptown, Joe Bee. Both of them used to have guys to hang around there singing, and they would buy drinks and just laugh. They'd have more fun singing. Just

make chords and things, and eventually discover new chords, and they'd just go crazy over that."<sup>20</sup>

The sympathetic relationship between barbershops and quartets overlapped into the community-based religious quartet tradition, which inherited much of the original spirit and pure substance of barbershop harmony. In 1930 the legendary Golden Gate Jubilee Quartette was launched from Eddie Griffin's Barber Shop in Norfolk, Virginia's Berkeley community.<sup>21</sup> The Southern Stars, whose 1950s recording "Don't Give Up" was a juke box hit, came out of a South Richmond, Virginia barbershop in the 1930s, and veterans of that quartet still pass time at Doug Harris's barbershop there.<sup>22</sup> Under the direction of "gospel singing barber" Nar Williams, the Ensley Jubilee Singers have been a fixture in Ensley, Alabama's gospel community since the 1930s.<sup>23</sup> In New Orleans, members of the Masonic Kings Quartet have owned and operated King's Barber Shop since the late 1940s.<sup>24</sup>

Before the Civil War, the American barber trade was largely comprised of free Negroes,<sup>25</sup> and evidence suggests it remained an historically black trade until the turn of the century. During the formative years of barbershop harmony, then, the typical mainstream barbershop was also a racial crossroads. The Midwest, touted as the fountainhead of white barbershop quartet activity, is remembered as an especially lucrative area for black barbers catering to white customers. Hunter C. Haynes's 1902 report informed that:

In the early part of the 18th [*sic*] century the Negro barber was a prominent factor in the barber's world. At that time he owned the finest shops in the country, and two-thirds of the hair cutting and shaving was done by Negro barbers, but it is not so today. . . . I will admit that there are yet a few up-to-date barber shops in the United States that are owned by colored men for white patrons, but opposition and public sentiment is becoming so great that I am afraid that within the next few years he [the "colored barber"], too, will have to "go back to the woods."<sup>26</sup>

In a 1905 update on the "tonorial situation," Haynes cited Thomas Jefferson Martin of Dowagiac, Michigan as the "oldest barber in the world. He was once Abraham Lincoln's private barber and also Andrew Jackson's. He has been in the barber business seventy-three years." The report went on to say that, in addition to Martin, black barbers with "fine shops" for white patrons could still be found in Cleveland, Cincinnati, Kansas City, Indianapolis, Detroit, Washington, D.C., Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and elsewhere:

There was a time when St. Louis was the colored barbers['] paradise but within the past few years the old Mound City has fallen by

the wayside from the colored point of view. Mr. Joe Smith of St. Louis was once known as the "Black Barber King" of the West. During the early nineties Joe Smith owned the Southern hotel barber shop and the Lindell hotel barbershop and after the great St. Louis depot was finished he opened an elaborate place in the east end of the station . . . but on my last visit to St. Louis I found old Joe way back on Chestnut street telling people what he used to do.<sup>27</sup>

None of this hard information about black barbers, barber shops, and barbershop-based quartets can be found in the standard discussions of barbershop harmony. Of the mainstream sources that venture to speculate on the origins of barbershopping, most relate it, however cautiously, to "barber's music" and to Elizabethan England. Elizabethan literature makes occasional reference to the playing of musical instruments in barber shops, and Restoration diarist Samuel Pepys refers to amateur music-making as "barber's music."

In 1888, before the term "barbershop" was commonly associated with male-quartet singing, the *Oxford English Dictionary* drew on Pepys to define "barber's music" as "harsh, discordant music, like that formerly produced by customers waiting their turn in a barber's shop, where a musical instrument was provided for their amusement." Aside from a mutual association with the barber trade, this definition shows nothing in common with American barbershop harmony—it does not even concern vocal music. Nevertheless, it became the point of departure for a "white origins" theory of barbershop harmony that has come to pass for common knowledge.

The "white origins" theory of barbershop harmony can be traced to a small number of influential books and articles by barbershop enthusiasts, most of them dating from the 1920s through the 1940s—the formative years of organized white barbershopping. The theory was handed down by three white writers in particular: popular-music chronicler Sigmund Spaeth, amateur singer C. T. "Deac" Martin, and musicologist Percy A. Scholes. Spaeth was the first to imply that barbershop harmony was linked to "barber's music." In the introduction to his pioneer collection of *Barber Shop Ballads* (1925), he quipped:

If one wished to be quite scholarly, one might point out that in ancient days the barber shops were provided with musical instruments to occupy the waiting customers, just as today they are supplied with old numbers of *Judge* and *Police Gazette*. It is possible to think of the first barber shop chords as those which were tentatively strummed on the lute, while gentlemen sat ruffless, in anticipation of the "boyish bob" of the day.

But barber shop harmony is obviously vocal rather than instru-

mental. And when it is remembered that barbers were originally surgeons as well, perhaps a barber shop chord is, after all, merely one which mutilates or dresses up some conventional formula of music. Its harmony tugs and strains in every direction, just as ragtime and its jazz offspring rip orthodox melody and rhythm into tatters.<sup>28</sup>

Spaeth was a published scholar, but he was also a devoted barber-shopper, and he approached *Barber Shop Ballads* with the casual flair of an insider. In its revised second edition (1940), he joked about the lack of scholarship that had gone into the first edition:

The book and title were [publisher] Dick Simon's own idea, and we worked it out down in Florida, while masquerading as tennis players in the resort hotels.

The original volume went in for elaborate art work . . . and there was a good bit of laborious humor, dragging in far-fetched references to tonsorial details which really had nothing to do with the subject.<sup>29</sup>

The 1925 edition of *Barber Shop Ballads* mentioned "negroid contributions" in terms of repertoire only. However, in his 1929 book *They Still Sing of Love*, Spaeth seriously amended his lighthearted theory of the origin of barbershop harmony:

Just why such harmony should be called "barber-shop" is an open question. Scholars have proved that all the way back in Shakespeare's time the barber-shops of Elizabethan England were equipped with musical instruments. . . . But the madrigals of that day were rather different from the "close harmony" of the modern quartet. . . .

A better explanation comes from Jacksonville, Florida, where the barber-shops were all originally manned by colored barbers, with each shop naturally developing its own quartet. These negro singers harmonized by ear, and they took more delight in the discovery of a new chord than a whole day's tips could produce. It was through experimentation and the tentative expression of common instincts that the modern art was developed.<sup>30</sup>

Unlike *Barber Shop Ballads*, *They Still Sing of Love* was not specifically geared to barbershoppers. For that matter, it "made practically no impression on the public,"<sup>31</sup> and the signally important "Jacksonville connection" theory of an African-American origin of barbershop harmony was apparently lost on the author's white contemporaries. Perhaps it did generate some behind-the-scenes controversy, because when Spaeth brought it up again in the 1940 revision of *Barber Shop Ballads*, he curbed his original enthusiasm:

Whether [barbershop] harmonizing actually originated in barber shops is open to question. But this much is certain, that many of the southern barbers were and still are Negroes, and it is only natural that they should have formed quartets in their leisure time. Jacksonville, Florida, definitely claims the honor of having sponsored the first barber shop quartets, and possibly the claim is justified.

He reinstated "barber's music" as an equally justifiable historical link, and concluded that:

In any case, barber shop harmony contains the elements of folk music, particularly in its improvisational character. Its technique is of the naive and spontaneous type, and its effects may well be associated with the natural music of the Negroes themselves. Whatever its origin. . . .<sup>32</sup>

In 1932, seven years after *Barber Shop Ballads* first appeared, C. T. "Deac" Martin published *A Handbook for Adeline Addicts*. Subtitled *A Starter for Cold Voices and a Critical Survey of American Balladry*, it is, more accurately, an emotional survey of songs that lend themselves to barbershopping. Martin reportedly "sang close harmony in a boys' quartet in 1905,"<sup>33</sup> and, like Spaeth, he approached the subject as a devoted practitioner. Attempting to spice his *Handbook* with some slight dash of history, Martin served up the first flat assumption that barbershop harmony has white origins. He said, "Close harmony, barber shopping, 'faking,' all synonymous terms, are comparatively new in the American scene. They are products of environment rather than heredity."<sup>34</sup> He admitted: "America's musical debt to our colored people is beyond calculation, since negro influence has been felt almost from the inception of native American music. And as to close harmony, a rich sheen in the blending of untrained negro voices makes trained white harmony hard, brittle, artificial by comparison."<sup>35</sup> Still, he was confident that, "As to the origin of the word 'barber shop' to indicate a soul-filling harmony, it is definitely a small town product from the days when the young bloods of the town associated in the barber shop for a sing out."<sup>36</sup>

In 1938 barbershop harmony was recognized for the first time—as "Barber's shop music"—in a mainstream musical reference work, *The Oxford Companion to Music*. Cueing on the *Oxford English Dictionary's* 1888 definition of "barber's music," editor Percy A. Scholes assembled a group of period literary references (Pepys, Cervantes, Thomas Morley, Ben Jonson, Sir John Hawkins, Dr. William King) to musical activity in European barbershops, and he juxtaposed them with an attempt to define the "new" American style of male quartet singing. He said the

“musical proclivities of barbers ceased in England in the earlier part of the 18th century” but were “maintained longer in America”:

The expression ‘Barber-shop music’ and ‘Barber-shop harmony’ are still current expressions in the United States. . . . They are generally applied to the rough-and-ready choral harmonization of popular tunes by any convivial party. . . . The allusion of these American expressions may originally have been either to the vamping type of simple harmonic accompaniment on a guitar or to the beguilement of song in the days when a small town barber’s shop was a centre of social gathering for the men of the place. Possibly, however, these terms are a mere survival of an English expression now obsolete in the land of its origin—‘Barber’s Music’ for any kind of extemporized noisy tune-making.<sup>37</sup>

In 1938, the year of Percy Scholes’s unfortunate pronouncement, the Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barber Shop Quartet Singing in America (SPEBSQSA) was founded in Tulsa, Oklahoma. This historically white organization quickly established itself as the quasi-official custodian and standard-setter of barbershop harmony. Through its magazine, *The Harmonizer*, and a host of articles and books by members and supporters, SPEBSQSA has made it seem that barbershopping is a white tradition.

In the early years of its history, the national office of SPEBSQSA discouraged black membership, and thus divorced itself from possible contact with African-American roots. When a Harlem-based quartet called the Grand Central Red Caps won a SPEBSQSA-sponsored singing contest in New York City in 1941, they were denied the right to compete in the national finals at St. Louis. Even though they sported outsized costume handlebar moustaches—a true manifestation of SPEBSQSA spirit—the Red Caps could not win acceptance from the national office. A telegram from founder O. C. Cash advised the New York chapter:

Relative colored quartets competing St. Louis. Board of directors decided some time ago such procedure would be embarrassing and ruled it out. None has competed in the South and West. Best regards.<sup>38</sup>

Consequently, New York Park Commissioner Robert Moses, who masterminded the first housing projects in America, and former Governor Alfred E. Smith, who had served as a judge in the contest, resigned from the national chapter in protest, and Moses noted:

. . . if American ballads of Negro origin are to be ruled out of barber shop singing, most of the best songs we have will be



blacklisted. . . . Along with many others who found pleasure in the harmless amusement of American ballad contests, I am very sorry that this sour note has marred our pleasant harmonies.<sup>39</sup>

While SPEBSQSA's current racial policies are vastly improved from those of its formative years, incidents such as the exclusion of the Grand Central Red Caps effectively banished the rich legacy of African-American quartet singing from the organization's vision of barbershop history. The official SPEBSQSA slant on the origin of barbershop harmony combines Sigmund Spaeth's "inside" humor, Deac Martin's off-hand pronouncements, and Percy Scholes's painstaking but ultimately misleading scholarship. It is best synthesized in the organization's tenth anniversary commemorative book *Keep America Singing* (1948), written by Deac Martin. Martin had joined the SPEBSQSA in its infancy, and in 1941—the year of the Red Caps incident—he had become its 'first international historian.'<sup>40</sup> He remained one of its principal spokesmen until his death in 1970.

In *Keep America Singing* Martin reduced his originally keen acknowledgement of "America's musical debt to our colored people" to abstraction: "No one knows how far back the urge to sing goes. It must be close to racial beginnings however, for savage tribes used chants, some in a sort of harmony. . . . but it is impossible to assign a date to the beginnings of 'barbershop' harmony."<sup>41</sup> He summoned Pepys's "barbers' music," worked through Scholes's additional literary references, and concluded: "This 'barbers' music' came to our shores along with other old world customs, and like nearly all of them, it gradually took on a distinctive American flavor. There is little record of this evolution, but in the 1880's and 90's 'barbershop' was recognized as a form of harmony, and definitely as a part of small town life in the Mid-west."<sup>42</sup>

Martin reiterated this line in magazine articles like "Three Eras of 'Barbershop' " (1955)<sup>43</sup> and "The Evolution of Barbershop Harmony" (1965).<sup>44</sup> Not until 1970, when he published his life's reminiscences in a *Book of Musical Americana*, did he recall having been personally introduced to the "distinctive American flavor" of barbershop harmony by a black quartet he heard in a park in his turn-of-the-century boyhood home town. He said the intonations of the bass singer, "a shoeshiner by trade in the barber's shop, . . . almost twisted the nearby railroad track."<sup>45</sup>

Meanwhile, in 1959 a history student, SPEBSQSA member, and Deac Martin disciple named James L. McClelland turned in an undergraduate thesis entitled "Of, By and For the People": *A History of Barbershop Harmony*, which prepared the "white origins" theory for a new era of interpretation. In a muffled gesture to objectivity, he revived the "Jacksonville connection" theory, but dismissed it as an isolated example—

"Although no one can assert for certain where the barbershop quartet originated, Jacksonville, Florida, liked to lay claim to the first, citing a set of four singing Negro barbers in the Eighties."<sup>46</sup> He placed new emphasis on the minstrel quartet phenomenon of the 1840s as a "very definite promoter of 'close harmony,'" and he introduced a discussion of white "barbershop" quartets on turn-of-the-century recordings.<sup>47</sup>

McClelland's adventurous thesis was eventually condensed—no mention of the "Jacksonville connection"—into a SPEBSQSA brochure that asks, "Did Barbershop Harmony Exist Before S.P.E.B.S.Q.S.A.?"<sup>48</sup> It also served as a source for the SPEBSQSA's current scholarly historian, Val Hicks. During the 1960s, Hicks was recognized for his SPEBSQSA "arranging workshops."<sup>49</sup> In 1984 Hicks was invited to Keele University, England, to deliver "an academic paper on the origins of Barbershop harmony,"<sup>50</sup> and in 1986 he wrote the entry on "Barbershop quartet singing" that appears in the *New Grove Dictionary of American Music*. He published his version of the "white origins" theory in the SPEBSQSA's fiftieth-anniversary commemorative book *Heritage of Harmony* (1988).

After relating "barber's music" to idealized nineteenth-century American barbershops where "idle gallants" were "welcome as long as they could hit the spittoon with accuracy and tolerate impromptu music," Hicks labels this the "classical theory propounded by old songs experts Sigmund Spaeth and Deac Martin." He admits that this makes "good media copy," but cautions:

... the roots of Barbershop singing are neither glamorous nor simplistic. There are at least four other areas of historical influence in addition to this classical theory of barber's music: the minstrel show, black singers, the "sol to sol" song, and the early recording quartets.<sup>51</sup>

Hicks's portrayal of "black singers" is vague and unnaturally isolated:

The slaves on Southern plantations sang to make their life more bearable. . . . Their vocal harmonies were "ear" harmonies. . . . After emancipation, blacks maintained this singing tradition, . . . indeed, blacks were active and talented quartet singers.<sup>52</sup>

In practice, black singers overlapped into all the "areas of historical influence" identified by Hicks.

The possibility of a specific "Jacksonville connection" to black barbershopping is not covered in *Heritage of Harmony*. Hicks was fully aware of this possibility, since he cites a major document of it in the bibliography of his entry in *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*.<sup>53</sup> After Sigmund Spaeth's initial enthusiasm for the "Jacksonville connection," "white origins" theorists vacillated between reckless, sec-

ond-hand interpretation and faceless unawareness of it. Spaeth eventually played the “Jacksonville connection” theory down, and he never did grace it with a footnote. It is totally invisible to Deac Martin; emasculated by James McClelland; and most recently circumvented or rejected, or perhaps suppressed, by Val Hicks. It has yet to be publicly recognized by the SPEBSQSA.

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Taken on its own merit, the “Jacksonville connection” theory of an African-American origin of barbershop harmony is more plausible than any published speculation from the white perspective. It is first given by James Weldon Johnson. In the introduction to his 1925 *Book of American Negro Spirituals*—published the same year as the first edition of Spaeth’s *Barber Shop Ballads*—the famous author, lyricist, and civil rights leader drew from personal memories of Jacksonville in the 1880s to reveal that:

In the days when such a thing as a white barber was unknown in the South, every barber shop had its quartet, and the men spent their leisure time playing on the guitar . . . and “harmonizing.” I have witnessed some of these explorations in the field of harmony and the scenes of hilarity and backslapping when a new and rich chord was discovered. There would be demands for repetitions and cries of, “Hold it! Hold it!” until it was firmly mastered. And well it was, for some of these chords were so new and strange for voices that, like Sullivan’s *Lost Chord*, they would have never been found again except for the celerity in which they were recaptured. In this way was born the famous but much abused “barber-shop chord.”<sup>54</sup>

Johnson went on to consider the enormous influence of black barbershop harmony on mainstream music and culture, and he established a proper chronology of events:

It may sound like an extravagant claim, but it is, nevertheless a fact that the “barber-shop chord” is the foundation of the close harmony method adopted by American musicians in making arrangements for male voices. . . . “Barber-shop harmonies” gave a tremendous vogue to male quartet singing, first on the minstrel stage, then in vaudeville; and soon white young men, where four or more gathered together, tried themselves at “harmonizing.”<sup>55</sup>

Johnson’s convincing argument for an African-American origin of barbershop harmony was reprinted in *The Mentor* in 1929,<sup>56</sup> but there was no rush of support from black intellectuals. In his 1936 essay, “The Age of Minstrelsy,” eminent social philosopher Alain Locke ac-

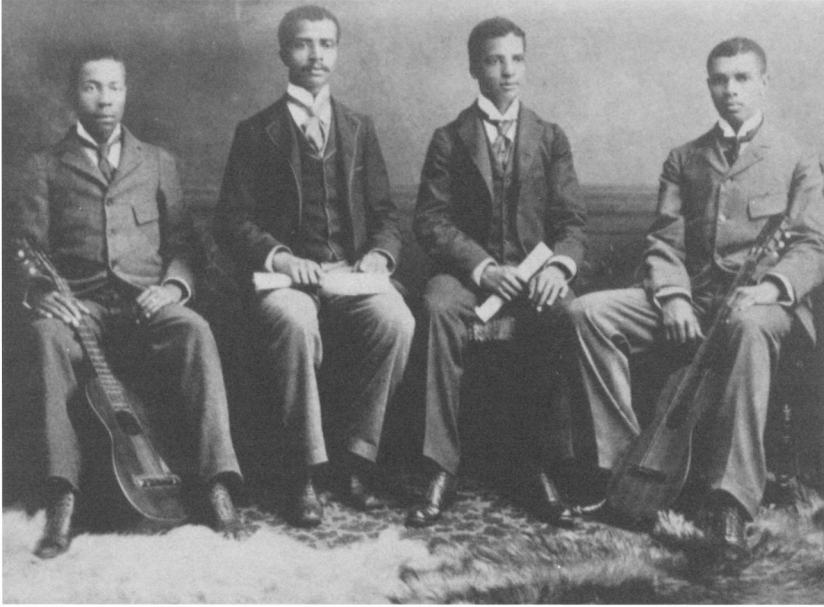


Figure 1. James Weldon Johnson as a member of the Atlanta University Quartette, early 1890s. Left to right: Robert Gadsden, Joseph Porter, George Towns, James Weldon Johnson. Photograph courtesy of the Music Division, Library of Congress.

tually denied the barbershop chord, labeling it a commercial by-product of the “pseudo negroes” — white and black—of minstrelsy’s most decadent period, when:

... everything was freakishly exaggerated; squeaky music and falsetto singing were almost standard; fat men impersonated colored cook-ladies; horse-play was more and more emphasized; and if there had been good music, it would have been drowned out in continuous convulsions and explosions of laughter. Certain musical interludes were provided, usually barber-shop quartets, equally unrepresentative of the Negro folk singing they were supposed to derive from. . . . Negro harmony was supposed to be the “barbershop chord,” and you could make any song Negro by sprinkling it with Negro dialect.<sup>57</sup>

Nevertheless, a sense of the African-American origin of barbershop harmony was retained in the black community. In 1936, the year of Alain Locke’s reactionary critique, R. Nathaniel Dett published an essay on “The Authenticity of the Spiritual,” in which he opined that the creators of the Negro Spiritual had sung with “more open fourths and

fifths than any of the existing records show." He added: "Open fourths certainly are consistent with the harmony of Africa, and their presence in the setting of . . . 'Go Down Moses' as I once heard this song sung, certainly gives a wild and exotic effect without any feeling withal of unnaturalness. But everyone is familiar with the 'Barber Shop Chord,' which is one of the traditional harmonic devices of uncultivated Negro quartets."<sup>58</sup>

Despite their belief in a "white origins" theory of barbershop, white barbershoppers freely dappled their repertoire with Negro dialect-songs and caricatures of African-American culture. SPEBSQSA quartets made occasional use of black-face until 1979, when it was finally banned.<sup>59</sup> Regardless of its primary intent, much of the racial material employed by white quartets effectively places black quartets at the source of barbershop harmony. An example of this is the song "When Johnson's Quartet Harmonize," composed in 1912 by no less an American institution than Irving Berlin. The cover illustration for the sheet music confirms that "Johnson's Quartet" was African-American. The music itself features "many harmonic turns—unusual for Berlin—that suggest 'swipes' or 'snakes,'"<sup>60</sup> and the lyrics tell how:

Johnson Jones from Tennessee,  
 Father of sweet harmony,  
 Organized a Quartette, goodness me!  
 And they sang so wonderful,  
 Kindly let me tell you, when  
 It comes down to singing men,  
 I've just got to say again,  
 They're wonderful!

When you find you can't afford  
 To be paying for your board,  
 You can find a meal in ev'ry chord;  
 And it's most remarkable,  
 No one found their equal yet,  
 To go out and try to get  
 Men who sing like that Quartette,  
 Impossible.

Chorus:  
 Come on and hear that harmony sweet,  
 Come and have a musical treat,  
 From your head down to your feet,  
 You'll be fairly hypnotized;  
 They harmonize most any old place,

Alto, Tenor, Baritone, Bass.  
 Ev'ry other chord  
 Is a message from the Lord,  
 When you hear old Johnson's Quartette harmonize.<sup>61</sup>

Another white composer who equated early American recreational harmony with black quartets was Geoffrey O'Hara, who was perhaps the most interesting of the first-generation neobarbershoppers. In 1906 O'Hara was singing baritone in the Knickerbocker Quintette, a recording group "known throughout the realm of vaudeville as 'The Original Spook Minstrels.'" <sup>62</sup> By 1916 he was crooning ballads for Victor Records, and he wrote one of the biggest song hits of the World War I era, "K-K-K-Katy." In 1945—four years after the Red Caps incident—he was elected president of the New York chapter of SPEBSQSA.<sup>63</sup>

O'Hara's musical career was complemented by an "interest of collecting and editing original folk tunes."<sup>64</sup> In 1914 he made a "special study," and some interpretive recordings, of Navajo Indian songs.<sup>65</sup> During World War I he served as an official Military Song Leader at Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, and he drew from that experience to write pseudo-folkloric songs like the cycle "A Soldier's Day," which he recorded for Victor in 1918. Victor's catalogue describes it as a medley of "bugle calls, which are afterwards sung by O'Hara to traditional words used by our soldiers and typical of the special kind of 'joshing' in use at the camps."<sup>66</sup>

O'Hara raked the barbershop tradition for ideas as well. In 1921 he published a medley of barbershop "samples" entitled "A Little Close Harmony," which bore a note of explanation: "This arrangement for men's voices is frankly intended to faithfully reproduce (and preserve) that quaint American invention known as the 'swipe' (barbershop harmony!) These few samples were not *composed*, but were heard and jotted down by Mr. O'Hara at various times. Consecutive fifths and other 'grammatical errors' are 'as heard.'" <sup>67</sup> "Swipes," or "snakes," as they were more commonly called in the black tradition, are the fundamental building blocks of barbershopping. Sigmund Spaeth defined a "swipe" as a "gentle slide upward on the part of the *baritone*, and downward on the part of the *tenor*, with the melody and the *bass* standing still."<sup>68</sup>

"A Little Close Harmony" opened with a swiping strain that the SPEBSQSA eventually adopted as its official theme song:

The old songs, the old songs,  
 The good old songs for me.  
 I love to hear those minor chords,  
 And good close harmony.<sup>69</sup>

From the “old songs” motif, it shifted to the well-worn “down in the cornfield” chorus of Stephen Foster’s “Massa’s in de Cold, Cold Ground,” then to a group of bucolic animal noises, and finally to an imitation banjo effect, transcribed as:

Rank-i-de-pank, pank pank pank  
Rank-i-de-pank pank, rank-i-de-pank<sup>70</sup>

Banjo imitations were among the many onomatopoeic effects—including boat whistles, church bells, locomotives, brass bands, and steam calliopes—employed by early black recreational singers and community-based quartets. In February 1887 the New Orleans *Weekly Pelican* reported having heard “some dozen or so” black inmates at a Norfolk, Virginia prison singing “in full harmony. It was if a well-trained brass band was playing. . . . The only instruments they possessed . . . were those given by nature—their mouths. . . . In our presence they gave ‘General Grant’s Funeral March’ with a solemn, stately and dignified effect that was absolutely startling in its likeness to a full brass band.”<sup>71</sup> At a black Indianapolis church entertainment in 1894, the local Bell Quartette rendered an “Imitation of Caliope” and “Imitation of Band.” They also sang the barbershop favorite, “Annie Laurie.”<sup>72</sup>

O’Hara did not say where or when he first heard the samples included in his barbershop medley. Similar medleys are preserved on turn-of-the-century commercial recordings. The Edison Quartette was one of the most popular white professional recording quartets of that time. Between 1898 and 1908, they made 102 Edison cylinder recordings, ranging from “The Yale Boola Girl” to “Who Broke the Lock” to “Every Day Will Be Sunday, Bye and Bye.” Among their clinical dissections of “negroid selections” was a “Cornfield Medley,” recorded in 1898.<sup>73</sup> The Haydn Quartet, Victor’s answer to the Edison Quartet, recorded it in 1900.<sup>74</sup> It was a full-blown barbershop sampler, comparable to O’Hara’s “A Little Close Harmony,” but opening with “Way Down Yonder in the Cornfield” instead of “The Old Songs.”<sup>75</sup>

The same barbershop samples used by turn-of-the-century recording quartets and by Geoffrey O’Hara in “A Little Close Harmony” also turned up in 1920s “Race” recordings by traditional, community-based quartets like the Birmingham Jubilee Singers. Farm animal mimicry is heard on their signature recording from 1926, “Birmingham Boys.”<sup>76</sup> In their own medley of barbershop samples, “The Steamboat,” they offered the banjo imitation as ragtime accompaniment to the chorus from “Massa,” lending an air of masked celebration to Foster’s depiction of plantation slaves mourning the death of their owner. Recorded in 1927, “The Steamboat” also features a charming boat-whistle imitation, a brief “mouth-trumpet” solo, a barbershopped line from the jubilee

song "Who Built the Ark," and a sample of "Way Down Yonder in the Cornfield."<sup>77</sup>

"Way Down Yonder in the Cornfield" was the ultimate early barbershopping vehicle. Hopelessly racist by contemporary standards, it reportedly originated as a slave worksong.<sup>78</sup> Its most characteristic verse appeared in the first published collection of authentic *Slave Songs of the United States*, 1867, in a song called "Run Nigger Run":

O some tell me that a nigger won't steal,  
But I've seen a nigger in my cornfield<sup>79</sup>

Writer-adventurer Lafcadio Hearn documented a variation of it in a "roustabout song" he collected from "a colored laborer" in Cincinnati in 1876:

Some folks say that a rebel can't steal,  
But I found twenty in my corn-fiel<sup>80</sup>

The song became popular fare on the World War I era black vaudeville circuit, where the sense of its African-American origin was maintained. A review of the show at the New Crown Garden Theater, Indianapolis, in May 1915 said, "Venable, Owens & Harper make up a rather dashing trio of players. . . . They make their appearance costumed as rustics, singing 'Way Down Yonder in the Cornfield.' This is a pleasing Negro melody, and which they sing tunefully, and in spirit which accorded with the meaning."<sup>81</sup> When the Exposition Jubilee Four sang on a bill at the Grand Theater, Chicago, in November 1915, critic Sylvester Russell noted, "Their version of the cornfield song, the banjo prank and Tom cat ditty were sweet chocolate drops which the audience ate up."<sup>82</sup>

Commercial recordings of "Cornfield" date from the earliest days of the record business. The white Manhansett Quartette cut it for the American Phonograph Company in 1891.<sup>83</sup> A version by the path-breaking Standard Negro Quartette of Chicago was advertised in an 1895 Columbia catalogue.<sup>84</sup> Subsequent waxings include a 1902 rendition by the Haydn Quartet<sup>85</sup> and a 1916 effort by another white group, the Imperial Quartet.<sup>86</sup> The song evolved as an off-color joke in a call-and-response format, and, as the word "nigger" degenerated in white usage from a bit of phonetic Southern dialect to a dehumanizing racial epithet, white quartets invariably sang, "Some folks say that a nigger won't steal," while black quartets shifted to the more genuinely humorous:

Some folks say that a preacher won't steal,  
(Way down yonder in the cornfield)  
But I caught a couple in my cornfield,



(Way down yonder in the cornfield)  
 One had a shovel and the other had a hoe,  
 (Way down yonder in the cornfield)  
 If that ain't stealing, I don't know.

Cornfield imagery runs deep in the black vocal harmony tradition. Rev. Daniel A. Payne, the nineteenth-century A.M.E. church reformer, condemned traditional Negro Spirituals and gospel hymns as "Cornfield Ditties."<sup>87</sup> A related phrase—"cornfield singing" or "cornfield hollering"—survives to describe early, rural adventures in recreational harmonizing.<sup>88</sup> Within the tradition, any reference to "down in the cornfield" bears the weight of metaphor. It recalls the conditions of slavery, and identifies the original source of all distinctively black vocal harmony.

In 1922, Geoffrey O'Hara published a second slice of barbershop lore, a three-minute skit entitled "A Quartette Rehearsal," which sought to convey the backroom flavor of a genuine, impromptu recreational harmonizing session. Like the barbershop medley, the rehearsal skit had historical precedents. White professional comedy quartets reportedly used burnt-cork rehearsal skits, often based on a dialect song called "Roll Dem Bones," to kick off their vaudeville routines during the early 1900s.<sup>89</sup> The song under "rehearsal" in O'Hara's clever skit, however, was—"Way Down Yonder in the Cornfield."

Perhaps it was the ethnomusicologist in O'Hara that cast the skit in Negro dialect. Basically straightforward and unobtrusive, it can be interpreted as a simple acknowledgement of his source material:

Bass—(*calling off*) Oh Henry!  
 Henry—(*2nd Tenor—in the distance*) Dat's me.  
 Bass—Come on over here and show dese boys some real harmony.  
 Henry—(*coming closer*) What's yuh got? a quartette?  
 Bass—We *will* have when you gits here. (*laugh*)  
 Henry— All right. What's we gwine to sing?  
 Bass— Well, we wuz *tryin'* to sing "Way Down Yonder in de corn field," but we can't find dem chords you shewed us.  
 Henry—All right boy you lead it and I'll tenor it.

After an exchange of corny puns, the "boys" launch into "Cornfield," with "Henry" coaching them through increasingly exotic barbershop nuances. Finally the basser cracks up: "Oh, peaches cream an' honey, let me die hearin' dat boy sing!"<sup>90</sup>

During the late 1920s, in a curious twist of the reverberative process, both of O'Hara's barbershop sketches showed up in the repertoires of black university jubilee groups. A program from the sixtieth annual commencement exercises at Straight University, New Orleans, on May 24, 1929, shows that the Boys' Glee Club sang:

- a. "A Little Close Harmony" (G. O'Hara)
- b. "Massa Dear" from "New World Symphony" (Dvorak)<sup>91</sup>

In 1922 the "Quartette Rehearsal" was recorded by a white vaudeville quartet called the Harmonizers. Their stiff interpretation, credited to O'Hara, was labeled "Darktown Quartette Rehearsal."<sup>92</sup> In July 1927 a fresh interpretation was recorded for the Victor "Race" series by the Livingstone College Male Quartet, representing that venerable African Methodist Episcopal Zion school in Salisbury, North Carolina. On the reverse side, as "Good Old Songs—Medley," was "A Little Close Harmony."<sup>93</sup> The Livingstone Quartet sides survive to demonstrate thoroughly convincing, honestly humorous, and unpretentious renditions of O'Hara's barbershop material. There is nary a trace of mawkish "Darktown" in their extemporaneous-sounding "Quartette Rehearsal." Recorded in a studio in New York City, it could just as easily have wafted down from one of those upstairs rooms at Dewberry's Shaving Parlor in turn-of-the-century black New Orleans.

While the use of O'Hara's barbershop material by black university jubilee singers reflects its integrity, these singers did not need a white intermediary to put them in touch with their roots. At Fisk University, where jubilee singing was born, barbershop chords were tapped for use in the artful interpretation of Negro Spirituals before Geoffrey O'Hara composed a note. In his book *Folk Song of The American Negro* (1915), dedicated musical Fiskite John Wesley Work II recalled:

The idea, which is now regnant in singing these songs, that of using harmonies of close chords, was first brought forward by some boys in Livingstone Hall, Fisk University, who were whiling away the time between supper and study hour one spring evening. They were members of no organization whatever, but had good voices. The song they liked and were singing was "Golden Slippers," and they were great in making "snakes," their word for close chords, which were so successfully accomplished and which sounded so rare and acceptable that the idea was adopted at once by the folk song organization at Fisk and has now become a fixed part of the folk music.<sup>94</sup>

Barbershop chords rejuvenated the university jubilee singing movement and precipitated a shift from mixed-voice choral groups to male quartets as the most popular vehicle for jubilee work. As a member of the model turn-of-the-century Fisk Jubilee Quartette that set out to restore jubilee singing to the prestige it had enjoyed during the 1870s, John Wesley Work II was very much a part of this important shift. He tenored the Quartette's classic 1909 Victor recordings, including "Golden Slippers," which preserves an exquisitely cracked up chord over the

phrase, "Yes my Lord."<sup>95</sup> His inspired overview of the African-American musical heritage guided him to the understanding that "new harmonies" were "in keeping with the idea of development."<sup>96</sup>

Ostensibly describing Fisk's published song collections, Work explained how the songs were actually sung:

These harmonies have not all been studied out, as a composer would do, but often they have been written as they have been sung by the students naturally and without instructions. Such method, we think, is more interesting, and since it is more natural, is more nearly correct and certainly most effective. To explain: When the chorus is singing one of these songs, some voice strikes an entirely new and pleasing note in the harmony. This singer is often unconscious of his departure, oftentimes he knows little if anything of the theory of music. Then, again, small groups of students get together to "harmonize" or "chord." Here, too, new and striking combinations of tones are sometimes struck. Again, some of the musical organizations, composed of those who really understand the technique of music, in searching for harmonies, glide into certain resolutions which are entirely new. All of these are immediately written into their appropriate songs and become parts of them. The plan here has been to combine natural, spontaneous melody with natural, spontaneous harmony. The result has been a most natural kind of satisfaction.<sup>97</sup>

The acceptance of barbershop harmony in university jubilee circles helped to legitimize and reinforce its continued evolution at the grass-roots level. During the 1920s, Southern church and community-based quartets sent up a volatile mixture of barbershop harmony and jubilee discipline which, in turn, sparked the gospel quartet revolution of the 1930s. In this evolutionary cultural environment, barbershopping was more spontaneous, free-spirited, and at ease with itself than in the self-conscious, nostalgia-tinged habitat of white neobarbershop quartets. Hundreds of quartet Race recordings survive to bear this out.

\* \* \*

The actual term *barbershop harmony* was originally intended to be derisive. The first person known to use it in print was a controversial black turn-of-the-century Chicago-based critic who called himself "Tom the Tattler." While his real name remains untraced, contemporaries called him everything from an "actor's monkey"<sup>98</sup> to the "Mark Twain of the race."<sup>99</sup> He was the fiercest of the emerging school of critics who were out to replace racial "wish-fulfillment" journalism with candid critical commentary. In his weekly "Tom the Tattler" column in the Indianapolis *Freeman*, he kept a particularly sharp axe for vaudeville

quartets, and he brought it down on Chicago's Giant Quartette after hearing them in a State Street theater in May 1900. "While their singing was abominably bad," he charged, "they managed by their grotesque actions to satisfy the audience."<sup>100</sup> About a year later, in one of his notoriously caustic "Musical Society" parodies, he attacked them again: "There will be a lecture at the Mission next Saturday for the benefit of the 'Punk Performer's Home.' Killit Babe will deliver the lecture and the subject is in a biblical vein: 'And in those days there came a Quartette of Giants singing barbershop harmonies.'"<sup>101</sup>

As a hard-line reformer, the Tattler felt that barbershop harmony was stunting the growth of "legitimate," musically literate black quartets in vaudeville. He stated his case in his *Freeman* column of December 8, 1900, which survives as the earliest known reference to "barbershop" as an American musical style. It precedes the Tin Pan Alley song called "Play That Barber Shop Chord," cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as the earliest such reference,<sup>102</sup> by a solid decade:

A noticeable advancement along the lines of the profession is the passing of the barber shop quartette with its barber shop harmony. It doesn't take much of an effort of memory to recall the time when all quartettes sang their own self-made harmonies, with their oft-recurring "minors," diminished sevenths and other embellishments. This barber shop harmony, although pleasing to the average ear, and not altogether displeasing to the cultivated ear, is nothing more or less than a musical slang. It violates—at times ruthlessly—the exacting rules and properties of music. All forms, phrases and progressions of music go down before it. What does [*sic*] the barber shop exponents of harmony care for such delicacies as the forbidden progressions of perfect fifths and octaves? What do they care about chord progression in its correct form? Their chief aim is to so twist and distort a melody that it can be expressed in so-called "minors" and diminished chords. The melody is literally made to fit their small stock of slang-chords, instead of the chords being built around the melody.<sup>103</sup>

The Tattler's announcement of the passing of barbershop harmony was a case of "wish-fulfillment" journalism in itself, since barbershop slang was quickly working its way into every evolving form of American "vernacular" music. The undaunted Tattler rounded out his critique with a brief survey of black professional quartets and quartet trainers who he felt were "relegating barbershop harmony to the rear":

Probably one of the first quartettes to get out of the beaten path of barbershop harmonies was the old Excelsior quartette, of which Wm. Coleman, of St. Louis, was the director. He was well versed

in barber shop lore but behind that he had a more serious training which caused a tremor to flutter through the limited supply of barber shop harmonies. I suppose he has done more to advance quartette singing from the slough of barber shop harmony than any other man living.<sup>104</sup>

Working the mainstream venues of the 1880s and 1890s, William Coleman and the Excelsiors reportedly had "more steady engagements than any other colored quartette in the country."<sup>105</sup> In April 1889 they appeared at Dockstader's Theater on Broadway with a troupe of Georgia Minstrels that included the legendary Black Patti,<sup>106</sup> and they "delighted" the audience with their "imitation of Barnum's Steam Organ."<sup>107</sup> During the spring of 1890 they were "filling engagements in Colorado, Nevada and California."<sup>108</sup>

According to the Tattler: "Another man who has stamped his personality on quartette singing is J. A. Porter. He has trained and produced some very good quartettes. Although not so profound as Coleman his practical knowledge of harmony is good."<sup>109</sup> Porter has fallen into complete obscurity. His equally obscure counterpart in New Orleans was one Jerry Jackson, identified by a local newspaper correspondent in 1901 as a "baritone songster" who "has a splendid voice and is an excellent arranger of quartette music."<sup>110</sup>

The Tattler went on to name two more representative turn-of-the-century quartet men: "Of the later school of quartette trainers and arrangers we have Elkins and Fred Anderson. The latter gentleman probably excels all for arranging quartette music, and especially that which has the ragtime syncopation. The former gentleman is deeper and has more breadth."<sup>111</sup> Despite the Tattler's unmitigated praise, what is known about Fred Anderson cannot be stretched into a decent paragraph. He was born in Indianapolis. A contemporaneous critic said his voice was "pure, sweet" and "voluminous" [*sic*], and he could "easily be placed at the top of the list of colored tenors."<sup>112</sup> While concertizing in London in 1915, he witnessed one of the first German Zeppelin raids of World War I. He immediately returned to the States, settled in Detroit, and by 1918 was "conducting one of the best bands Detroit affords."<sup>113</sup>

More is known about William C. Elkins. He was a thoroughly schooled singer from Washington, D.C. In 1897 he toured abroad with Isham's "Oriental America."<sup>114</sup> By 1899 he had aligned himself with the era's most successful vaudeville team, Bert Williams and George Walker,<sup>115</sup> and by early 1900 he was director and baritone voice of their Williams & Walker Quartette,<sup>116</sup> which "attempted heavier stuff" than most vaudeville quartets.<sup>117</sup> By late 1905 he was also directing the sixteen-voice Williams & Walker Glee Club, which specialized in classical se-

lections and made independent concert tours during the off season.<sup>118</sup> He eventually turned to jubilee work: from 1923 to 1929 his Elkins Negro Ensemble, Elkins-Payne Jubilee Quartette, Elkins Dextra Negro Male Choir, and other namesake combinations recorded more than twenty "authentic" arrangements of Negro Spirituals for various commercial labels.<sup>119</sup>

Despite the Tattler's notion of a hard line of demarcation between "legitimate" quartets and quartet trainers and their barbershop counterparts, there actually existed a vast arena of overlapping influence and mutual feedback. Elements of barbershop "slang" were refined for stage use, and elements of "voice culture" were absorbed by even the roughest grassroots recreational quartets. Still, the Tattler was not the only turn-of-the-century critic who sought relief from barbershop chording. After the San Francisco-based Military Quartette, "four colored men"<sup>120</sup> whose motto was "Soberness and Time,"<sup>121</sup> appeared in a San José vaudeville house in 1905, a local reporter said, "They receive many encores and a pleasant feature is that they do not sing coon songs or about 'Way Down Yonder in the Corn Field,' with accompanying barber shop chords."<sup>122</sup>

Any clouds that gathered over the barbershop as a result of such proselytizing were quickly dispersed by the winds of public sentiment. On June 20, 1905, the daily *New York World* published an enthusiastic review of the previous night's show at Hammerstein's Victoria Theater:

In the shuffle of new events at the roof gardens last night one distinctively interesting event was evolved. Far down on the programme at the Paradise Garden, on the Victoria Roof, Ernest Hogan, the Negro singing comedian, assisted by Abbie Mitchell, a comely mulatto with a sweet soprano voice, and twenty-five others who performed a combined function of chorus and orchestra, gave a half hour specialty called, "Songs of the Black Folk" that came closer to the old-fashioned minstrel show than any of the tinsel and burnt cork production[s] that have been seen on Broadway in the last ten years.

The roof garden fairly reeked with melody. There was a fervor in the rendering of the songs that could never have been supplied by white singers. The musical oddity involved was that each player sings a different part from that which the instrument he played called for. For instance, the manipulator of the double-bass was a tenor and the man who picked the airs on a mandolin sang in basso profundo a hundred fathoms deep. . . .

The songs, which were written by Will Marion Cook, the colored composer, all had the plantation swing. "Barbershop" harmony and broken measures were mingled in fantastic confusion. The

audience could not get enough of the specialty and it proved to be one of the best numbers that Oscar Hammerstein has ever offered.<sup>123</sup>

This well-received group emerged from Hammerstein's as the Memphis Students, the artful "syncopated orchestra" whose work anticipated the commercial ascendancy of jazz.

By 1910 at least one black vocal harmony group—Henry Troy's Barber Shop Quintette—was openly trading on the new terminology. A classic "Southern tenor," Henry Troy became best known for his "quaintly sweet" interpretation of "Just One Word of Consolation," a barbershop ballad composed by Tom Lemonier.<sup>124</sup> Originally from Birmingham, Alabama, that cradle of distinctively black vocal harmony, Troy was touring as far as St. Louis by 1899. A few years later he settled in New York City as an "idol of the matinee."<sup>125</sup> He toured England in 1905,<sup>126</sup> then joined Ernest Hogan's "Rufus Rastus" company.<sup>127</sup> In 1907 he teamed with Will Marion Cook in a "piano act,"<sup>128</sup> then became one of Williams & Walker's original Bon Bon Buddies.<sup>129</sup> When he sang the ballad "In My Old Home" in Williams & Walker's "Bandana Land" in 1909, a critic noted, "His voice is sympathetic, and excites the emotional through its plaintiveness and that particular childish sweetness that finds favor with every one."<sup>130</sup>

Later in 1909 Troy appeared in Bert Williams's first solo musical comedy vehicle, "Mr. Lode of Koal," singing "Bygone Days in Dixie" with accompaniment from a remarkable vocal quartet, "Messrs. Thomas, Rex, Lightfoot and Reed."<sup>131</sup> James E. Lightfoot was the "original boy basso" of the internationally famous Canadian Jubilee Singers.<sup>132</sup> James Mantell Thomas and Sterling Rex were veterans of the Dinwiddie Colored Quartet, which sang "in the interests of the John A. Dix industrial school of Dinwiddie, Va."<sup>133</sup> before gravitating to vaudeville. When they sang "The Palms" and "Come Out Dinah on the Green" in Ernest Hogan and Billy McLain's original "Smart Set" musical comedy, "Enchantment," in 1902, critic Sylvester Russell said, "Rex, the leader has a light baritone voice of much sympathy and sweetness and J. M. Thomas, basso is very fine."<sup>134</sup> That same year, in an historic session, the Dinwiddie Quartet recorded six Negro Spirituals and camp-meeting songs for the Victor label.<sup>135</sup> Rex and Thomas went on to sing, under William C. Elkins's direction, in the Williams & Walker Glee Club.<sup>136</sup>

Henry Troy and the "Mr. Lode of Koal" quartet made a "big hit"<sup>137</sup> on Broadway, and apparently decided to follow up with an independent tour. As Troy's Barber Shop Quintette, they appeared in Reading, Pennsylvania in April 1910.<sup>138</sup> About three months later, however, James Mantell Thomas left the group and went to Chicago,<sup>139</sup> and the quintette

apparently disbanded. Each of the singers continued to chart a successful career in vaudeville, and in 1918 Henry Troy was touring the mainstream Pantages circuit with composer-pianist Chris Smith, author of "Ballin' the Jack."<sup>140</sup>

During the summer of 1910, a Tin Pan Alley song called "Play That Barber Shop Chord" exploded on the American vaudeville scene. Bert Williams recorded it for Columbia Records in August 1910.<sup>141</sup> On the black vaudeville circuit, Laura Smith was "mopping up" with it at the Arcade Theater, Atlanta, in November 1910,<sup>142</sup> and Ma Rainey was singing it at the Wizard Theater, Norfolk, Virginia, in March 1911.<sup>143</sup> In New Orleans during the fall of 1911, one Lucien Janaux, baritone voice of the Crescent City Comedy Four, was featuring it in the Four's turn with the regionally popular Black Eagle Modern Minstrels.<sup>144</sup> In early September 1911 the Black Eagle Modern Minstrels appeared at Perseverance Hall in the Algiers district of New Orleans, and later that month they made a modest tour of the Mississippi Gulf Coast, hitting Pass Christian on September 20 and Gulfport the next day.<sup>145</sup>

"Play That Barber Shop Chord" was the first popular song *about* barbershop harmony, and it has been credited as a major factor in ameliorating the term and disseminating it into the American mainstream.<sup>146</sup> As a measure of the popular recognition and overlapping influence of barbershop harmony by 1910, the song is not about a vocal quartet, but a piano professor, who performs not in a barbershop, but a *Rathskeller*. Still, the song places "that barber shop chord" in the hands of a black musician:

'Twas in a great big rathskeller  
 Where a swell colored fellow  
 By the name of Bill Jefferson Lord  
 Played the piano while he sang a song,  
 He just played and sang the whole night long,  
 'Til a kinky-haired lady  
 They called Chocolate Sadie  
 Heard him playing that barbershop chord,  
 She heaved a sigh  
 Every time she could catch his eye.  
 Chorus:  
 She cried, "Mister Jefferson Lord,  
 Oh, play that barbershop chord,  
 It's got that soothing harmony,  
 It makes an awful, awful, awful hit with me!  
 Play that strain,  
 Aw, please play it again,  
 'Cause Mister, when you start



The minor part,  
 I feel your fingers tripping and a-slipping 'round my heart.  
 Oh, Mister Lord,  
 Oh, that's it!  
 That's the barbershop chord!"<sup>147</sup>

Contemporaneous eye-witness or participant accounts of recreational quartet activity before 1920 are rare. Perhaps it was the stature of his musical cronies that inspired black reporter Will Lewis to document a session in which he and his boss, Elwood Knox, business manager of the Indianapolis *Freeman*, took part in the fall of 1913:

Thomas Lemmonier [*sic*], of the Little Miss Brown Company, was a constant visitor of the *Freeman* office while that company was playing Indiana's best theater this fall. Lemmonier had the rare distinction of being the colored member of that fine company, a position which he gave up during his stay here. A Mr. Ball successfully succeeded him. Well, Lemmonier, Ball, Knox and myself, who are all in the bright forties or thereabouts concluded to put on the old songs of the days ago. Lemmonier is a successful composer; he knew everything. I am an ex-church organist and piano accompanist, et cetera. I knew some things. Knox has been with the performers for years; he knew everything; that is, when he heard it. Ball is a singer, a performer with a memory. I cannot think of telling what we sang, but this, nothing was omitted from "The Golden Wedding" on down. Why we sang "Shoo, Fly, Don't Bother Me," "Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines," "Old Black Joe," "Darling, I Am Growing Old." This song was put on with an unusual touch of pathos. We did "Annie Rooney," "Annie Laurie," "After the Ball Is Over," "My Old Kentucky Home" and others too numerous to mention. It was a brilliant "campfire," the reminiscent touch was on, and we sang with a feelin'.<sup>148</sup>

African-American biographies harbor a rich vein of quartet reminiscences. Recalling his teenage years in Chattanooga, Tennessee, the great concert tenor Roland Hayes told his biographer that, after he was baptized in 1902, he renounced "buck-and-wing dancing," but was allowed by his mother to continue in the "curbstone quartet" that he had formed with his brother and two neighborhood friends:

We called ourselves the Silver-Toned Quartet and soon graduated from the curbstone to the railway station, where we sang at the arrival and departure of late-afternoon and evening trains. In the summertime we strolled up and down the avenues where rich people sat on their verandas to enjoy the night air, and caught in

our caps the nickels, dimes and quarters they shelled out to us over the hedges.

Our harmonies were personal discoveries, although a good deal of our musical improvisation perhaps was illegitimate. Sometimes we imitated the minstrel singers with whose harmonizations my ear had become familiar before I "came out from amongst them:" going from the tonic chord into the minor mode, thence into a deep minor and back into the major. Barbershop harmony, if you will, but good practice for the ear. When we got into bad musical habits we stood a good chance of having them corrected in the choir of the Monumental Baptist Church.<sup>149</sup>

An interesting view of grassroots recreational quartet activity during the early 1900s can be drawn from recollections left by New Orleans' jazz pioneers, who generally respected and often participated in the tradition, and apparently liked to talk about it. Recalling his teenage years in New Orleans before World War I, trumpeter Lee Collins said:

. . . there used to be lots of guys around New Orleans who could sing real good. They got up quartets—my Aunt Esther's husband was the head of many a one—and would go around to some of their friends' homes to sing and eat and drink beer. . . . That was some of the most beautiful singing you would ever hope to hear. After every one was drunk, the last song would always be their old favorite, "Sweet Adeline."<sup>150</sup>

Jelly Roll Morton, New Orleans' self-proclaimed "inventor of jazz," recalled singing at wakes during the 1890s:

Those days I belonged to a quartet and we specialized in spirituals for the purpose of finding somebody that was dead, because the minute we'd walk in, we'd be right in the kitchen where the food was—plenty ham sandwiches and cheese sandwiches slabbered all over with mustard, and plenty whiskey and plenty of beer. . . .

Then we would stand up and begin—

*Nearer my God to thee*

very slow and with beautiful harmony, thinking about that ham—

*Nearer to thee*

plenty of whiskey in the flask and all kinds of crazy ideas in the harmony which made it impossible for anybody to jump in and sing. We'd be sad, too, terribly sad.

*Steal away, steal away,*

*Steal away home to Jesus.*

I tell you we had beautiful numbers to sing at those wakes.<sup>151</sup>

Growing up on Perdido Street in the early 1900s, Louis Armstrong

was similarly motivated to sing at wakes. He remembered "everybody sitting all night around the body singing. You come in there, lead off a hymn and go right back in the kitchen and get cheese, crackers, whiskey, beer."<sup>152</sup> Also, "In church and Sunday school I did a whole lot of singing. That, I guess, is how I acquired my singing tactics. . . . At church my heart went into every hymn I sang."<sup>153</sup> Then, too, "Some of my friends liked to sing, so on warm nights we would go down to the Mississippi and sit on the docks and sing together."<sup>154</sup>

By the time he was eleven or so, Armstrong had "started up a singing quartet with three of the best singing boys from my neighborhood. . . . We used to hear the old timers sing around a bucket of beer—they beautiful chords—and we dug it. We was Little Mack, Big Nose Sidney, myself and Georgie Grey. Red Head Happy was in and out. . . . I was the tenor. I used to put my hand behind my ear, and move my mouth from side to side, and some beautiful tones would appear."<sup>155</sup> He also spiced his vocals with a "little slide whistle, like a trombone. I could feel the positions so beautiful."<sup>156</sup> He borrowed an old professional quartet sobriquet to make his boast: "Believe me, we four were 'singing fools.'"<sup>157</sup>

New Orleans clarinet prodigy Sidney Bechet remembered Armstrong's no-name quartet very well, and talking about it brought out the philosopher in him. His digression on Armstrong's shoes says something about just how far quartet singing trailed into grassroots black America:

It was Bunk Johnson who was the first to make me acquainted with Louis Armstrong. Bunk told me about this quartet Louis was singing in. "Sidney," he said, "I want you to go hear a little quartet, how they sing and harmonize." He knew I was crazy about singing harmony. He'd take me out to those circuses whenever they came to town and they had any singing in them, and he'd take me to vaudeville and all. Whenever there was some quartet or opera, or some harmony, or some big band somewhere, we'd always go.

Louis was living over on Perdido Street and then, like I said, he was singing in this quartet. They were real good . . . they had a way. There was a fellow singing there, Little Mack was his name, he was the lead; he became a hell of a good drummer later. And Louis, he sang tenor then.

I went many a time to hear this quartet sing and I got to like Louis a whole lot, he was damn' nice. I was a little older than him. At that time he sort of looked up to me, me playing in bands and being with the big men.

One time, a little after I started going to hear this quartet, I ran into Louis on the street and I asked him home for dinner. I wanted

him and the quartet to come around so my family could hear them sing.

Well, Louis sort of hemmed around, and said he couldn't make it. I could see there was something troubling him and finally he let it out. "Look, Sidney," he says, "I don't have any shoes . . . these I got, they won't get me there." Well I said that was easy and gave him fifty cents to get his shoes repaired and he went off promising he would come.

Well, I don't know what it was, but he never showed up. We lived way across on the other side of town and that was a hell of a distance to walk. And it's that way you see . . . it's a little thing, and there's big things around it, but it keeps coming back. You're playing some number and it starts going—sometimes it goes right back to the street and plays about those shoes.<sup>158</sup>

Armstrong's quartet's primary performance venue was the street. They sang "all through the pleasure sections of New Orleans, around the big hotels and night clubs and even the honky tonks."<sup>159</sup> Armstrong explained how they:

. . . would put on long pants and go up to the district. . . . We began by walking down Rampart Street between Perdido and Gravier. The lead singer and the tenor walked together in front followed by the baritone and the bass . . . and all the old gammies and pimps, they'd call for us to sing. . . . After we'd sung we'd pass the hat—get six bits, maybe even a dollar each for a night.<sup>160</sup>

"That was my hustle,"<sup>161</sup> he confided.

Along with their street work, the quartet managed to hustle a few stage appearances. New Orleans drummer Zutty Singleton recalled, "The first time I ever saw Louis . . . he was singing with three other kids in an amateur show at Bill and Mary Mack's tent show," adding, "They broke it up that night."<sup>162</sup> Bill "Mack" McBride verified that a "Mr. Schroeder of Algiers built an airdome at Jackson and Robertson street" and hired him to manage it, around 1912, and he concurred that, "Louis and this Little Mac and Little Georgie Grey, and Happy, they had a little quartet . . . and they'd go up there and sing amateur-night songs, you know."<sup>163</sup>

"We sang the new jazz songs," Armstrong volunteered, "and got to learn how to sing them 'hot'."<sup>164</sup> Unfortunately, he was never asked to recall the quartet's repertoire, and the only title he ever specifically mentioned was "My Brazilian Beauty": "Our theme song went: *My Brazilian Beauty down on the Amazon/that's where my baby's/gone gone gone* (we had a guy who could bass that). Every night I'm dreaming of 'my Brazilian Beauty down on the Amazon.' At that time I didn't

even know there was a place called Brazil. And years later, when I went to Brazil on tour—then it dawned on me.”<sup>165</sup>

“My Brazilian Beauty” does not show up in the collections, catalogues, or files of the Copyright Office at the Library of Congress.<sup>166</sup> It was recorded in 1926, as “Down On The Amazon,” by Klien Tindull’s Paramount Serenaders, an obscure dance band,<sup>167</sup> and it apparently lingered in the black quartet tradition for decades. By 1953, when a pop vocal group called the Hollywood Aristo-Kats recorded it, as “My Amazon Beauty,” it had become a complete anachronism:

You better quit now, quit now, making those eyes  
And flirting with all of those men,  
It ain’t a bit, bit, bit, a-lady-like,  
Don’t you let me catch you at it again.  
If you want me to treat you with the best respect  
Stop bobbing your hair, shaving your neck,  
It’s a devilish lie,  
Why don’t you try  
To be a lady when you walk,  
A lady when you talk,  
A lady when you walk with me.  
Oh, babe, the nighttime gleaming,  
My little Brazilian beauty,  
Down on the Amazon.<sup>168</sup>

One account had Armstrong’s quartet “going up Rampart Street singing ‘My Brazilian Beauty’ ” when he was arrested on New Year’s Eve in 1912.<sup>169</sup> However, when composer Will H. Dixon died in 1917, “My Brazilian Beauty” was mentioned in his obituary as “one of his latest successes,”<sup>170</sup> which suggests not only that Armstrong’s recollective chronology was occasionally out of sequence, but that his “little quartet” was active, off and on, at least, as late as 1917.

Following the infamous 1912 New Year’s Eve street incident, Armstrong was remanded to the Colored Waifs Home, which, with due respect for the corner of Liberty and Perdido streets, he found “more like a health center or a boarding school than a boy’s jail.”<sup>171</sup> He even got to take singing lessons. “My first teacher was Miss Spriggins. Then I was sent to Mrs. Vigne, who taught the higher grades.”<sup>172</sup> Miss Naomi Spriggins and Miss Leontine Vignes were teachers in the Jim Crow public school system, and their work at the Home apparently began as a job extension. In 1913, when Armstrong was in custody, Naomi Spriggins was based at the old Thomy Lafon grade school on South Robertson Street, and Leontine Vignes was based at the Home as its full-time principal.<sup>173</sup> Both were apparent products of New Orleans’ more or less advantaged “Black Creole” society—Miss Spriggins’s father

was Assistant Keeper of Scales at the Customs Bureau<sup>174</sup>—and, as “finished ladies,” they were no doubt sufficiently versed in voice and piano culture.

Armstrong also got his first horn lessons at the Home. Starting out tenaciously—“I’d been around to parades and things, but singing was my life”<sup>175</sup>—he soon landed an alto horn position in the Home brass band. He explained how his quartet experience informed his playing: “I had been singing for a number of years, and my instinct told me that an alto takes a part in a band same as baritone or tenor in a quartet.”<sup>176</sup>

A shared knowledge of the mechanics of quartet singing apparently served the traditional brass band musicians of black New Orleans as a common point of departure. While exploring the “Afro-American musical environment” of the Louisiana-Mississippi-Alabama countryside in 1954, folklorist Frederick Ramsey was struck by just how thoroughly the rural plantation brass bands were grounded in *song*. The players even called their instruments “quartets” and “singing horns.”<sup>177</sup> These were not simple malapropisms or bits of idle word-play. Louis Keppard, who was active in the New Orleans brass band tradition before 1920, explained how one band member “would give us an idea, and we would memorize [i.e., harmonize] behind them. Of course, we could only do that because we could chord with one another. That’s what made it sound good; we’d organize like a quartet, like about six or five or four mens. Bass, baritone and alto. Everybody got their own parts.”<sup>178</sup>

Released from the Waifs Home at age fourteen, Armstrong started working odd jobs in Storyville, and he reimmersed himself in the musical lore of the streets, including barbershop lore. Regardless of how rapidly his horn playing came to the forefront, he apparently managed to do at least as much quartet singing after getting out of the Home as he had done before going in. Local jazzman Louis Kid Shots Madison, who had been in the Home with him, remembered later singing baritone to Armstrong’s tenor on amateur nights at the Crescent Theater.<sup>179</sup> Recalling the musical experiences of his later teenage years in New Orleans, Armstrong said:

I used to hear some of the finest music in the world listening to the barroom quartets, who hung around the saloons with a cold can of beer in their hands, singing up a breeze while they passed the can around. I thought I was really somebody when I got so I could hang around with those fellows—sing and drink out of the can with them. When I was a teenager those old-timers let me sing with them and carry the lead, bless their hearts. Even in those days they thought I had something on the ball as a ragtime singer.<sup>180</sup>

Among the old-timers Armstrong sang with as a teenager was hard-

living Black Benny Williams, who is better remembered as a brass band bass drummer. Armstrong was about fifteen or sixteen when he first met him. "Black Benny used to be out there on that street corner or the saloon when he wasn't busy gambling, playing music, or playing the girls," he recalled. "You should have heard his good old barroom tenor sing 'Sweet Adeline' or 'Mr. Jefferson Lord—Play That Barber-shop Chord.'" <sup>181</sup>

When Storyville shut down in 1917, Armstrong said his "little crowd" began to "look forward to other kicks, like our jazz band, our quartet and other musical activities."<sup>182</sup> He probably kept a hand in the local "barroom quartet" scene until he left for Chicago to join King Oliver's band in 1922.

One of Armstrong's posthumous biographers wondered if quartet singing had been a "crucial element in the development of his great musical sense, or did heredity supply him with the skill he needed to sing in the quartet in the first place?"<sup>183</sup> The question, of course, is moot. A more appropriate source of wonder is why, as often as Armstrong brought up the subject, did jazzologists consistently neglect to investigate his "little quartet" on its own terms, as a vocal jazz band with a specific repertoire, "sound," source of inspiration, and sphere of influence. Still, the collected references to Louis Armstrong's quartet-singing activity offer something of an overview of the informal "barbershop harmony" that was ringing through the grassroots communities of black New Orleans, and all of black America, during the early 1900s.

During the course of its early development, the barbershop chord was thoroughly woven into America's cultural fabric, across all race and class barriers. Musical trends and phenomena tend to integrate far more readily than the people who create them and chronicle their history. Standard accounts of the origin of barbershopping have attached it to the unrelated European phenomenon of "barber's music," and to antecedent quartet manifestations that fed into the barbershop style, but showed nothing of its *essence*. The more viable, well-rounded, and convincing African-American history of barbershopping— assembled from old newspaper columns, biographies, annotated songbooks, "Race" recordings, and oral testimonies—restores it to its original setting where, as James Weldon Johnson recalled, "every barber shop had its quartet, and the men spent their leisure time playing on the guitar . . . and 'harmonizing.'"

## NOTES

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144. "Gossip of the Stage," *Indianapolis Freeman*, Sept. 30, 1911.
145. "Gossip of the Stage," *Indianapolis Freeman*, Nov. 4, 1911.
146. C. T. "Deac" Martin, "The Evolution of Barbershop Harmony."
147. "Play That Barber-Shop Chord" (words by William Tracey, music by Lewis F. Muir); transcribed from the Bert Williams recording by Lynn Abbott.
148. Will Lewis, "A Review of the Stage: Impressions of Some Performers I Have Met," *Indianapolis Freeman*, Dec. 27, 1913.
149. MacKinley Helm, *Angel Mo' and her Son, Roland Hayes* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), 72-73.
150. Frank J. Gillis and John W. Miner (ed.), *Oh, Didn't He Ramble: The Life Story of Lee Collins as Told to Mary Collins* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 62. (Aunt Esther is named elsewhere in the book as one of Collins's mother's sisters. Her husband is identified only as "Mootsey.")
151. Alan Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll: The Fortunes of Jelly Roll Morton, New Orleans Creole and "Inventor of Jazz"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950), 15-16.
152. Richard Meryman, *Louis Armstrong—a Self-Portrait* (New York: The Eakins Press, 1971), 9. (This is a complete transcription of the Armstrong interview published in *Time*, Apr. 15, 1966).
153. Louis Armstrong, *Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1954), 10. As a clue to what sort of "singing tactics" he acquired "in church," Armstrong later mentioned seeing his mother "get religion" at "Elder Cozy's church. He was the most popular preacher in the neighborhood and he attracted people from other parts of the city as well." (*Satchmo*, 27-28). Elder Cozy was probably Rev. William M. Cosey, listed in *Soards' New Orleans City Directory* for 1915 as pastor of Mt. Zion Baptist Church, 512 Howard (now LaSalle) Street, which puts him in approximately the right place at approximately the right time.
154. Louis Armstrong, *Swing That Music* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1936), 4.
155. Armstrong, *Swing*, 4. Meryman, *Louis Armstrong*, 13. Armstrong, *Satchmo*, 30.
156. Meryman, *Louis Armstrong*, 14.
157. Armstrong, *Swing*, 4.
158. Sidney Bechet, *Treat It Gentle*, 1960 (New York: Da Capo Press, 1978), 91-92.
159. Armstrong, *Swing*, 4.
160. Meryman, *Louis Armstrong*, 14. Armstrong, *Satchmo*, 29.
161. Max Jones and John Chilton, *Louis: The Louis Armstrong Story* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1971), 208.

162. Zutty Singleton, "Zutty First Saw Louis in Amateur Tent Show," *Down Beat*, July 4, 1950: 6.
163. Bill Russell interview with Bill and Mary Mack [McBride], July 1, 1959.
164. Armstrong, *Swing*, 4.
165. Meryman, *Louis Armstrong*, 14.
166. Charles Sens, letter to Lynn Abbott, Apr. 23, 1991.
167. Klein Tindull Paramount Serenaders, "Down On The Amazon," Paramount 12377-B.
168. The Hollywood Aristo-Kats, "My Amazon Beauty," Recorded-in-Hollywood 406, 1952 (transcribed from the record by Lynn Abbott).
169. Meryman, *Louis Armstrong*, 14–15.
170. "Will H. Dixon, Author of 'Teasing,' Dead," *Indianapolis Freeman*, May 26, 1917.
171. Armstrong, *Satchmo*, 44.
172. Armstrong, *Satchmo*, 34.
173. Naomi Spriggins and Leontime Vignes in *Soards' New Orleans City Directory* (vol. 40) (New Orleans: Soards Directory Company, 1913).
174. Louis Spriggins in *Soards' New Orleans City Directory*.
175. Meryman, *Louis Armstrong*, 15.
176. Armstrong, *Satchmo*, 36.
177. Frederick Ramsey, "Music From the South, Volume 1: Country Brass Bands" (liner notes, Folkways FA2650), 1955.
178. Andy Ridley interview with Louis Keppard, quoted in Andy Ridley, *I'm Just A Plain Ordinary Guitar Player . . . But I'll Scare the Best of Them: The Autobiography of Louis Keppard*, unpublished manuscript, 1985.
179. Bill Russell interview with Kid Shots Madison, Aug. 1944.
180. Armstrong, *Satchmo*, 86.
181. Armstrong, *Satchmo*, 57–58, 87.
182. Armstrong, *Satchmo*, 75.
183. James Lincoln Collier, *Louis Armstrong: An American Genius* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 28.