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978-0-521-56074-0 - Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World
Dale Cockrell

Excerpt

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Prologue

Oh! I'se from Lucianna, as you all know.
 Dar whare Jim along Josey's all de go,
 Dem niggars all rise when de bell does ring,
 And dis is de song dat dey do sing.
 Hey get along, get along Josey,
 Hey get along Jim along Joe!
 Hey get along, get along Josey,
 Hey get along, Jim along Joe!¹

When lo! a Harlot form soft sliding by,
 With mincing step, small voice, and languid eye:
 Foreign her air, her robe's discordant pride
 In patch-work flutt'ring and her head aside:
 By singing Peers up-held on either hand,
 She tripped and laughed, too pretty much to stand;
 Cast on the prostrate Nine a scornful look,
 Then thus in quaint Recitativo spoke.

“O *Cara! Cara!* silence all that train:
 Joy to great Chaos! let Division reign:
 Chromatic tortures soon shall drive them hence,
 Break all their nerves, and fritter all their sense:
 One Trill shall harmonize joy, grief, and rage,
 Wake the dull Church, and lull the ranting Stage;
 To the same notes thy sons shall hum, or snore,
 And all thy yawning daughters cry, encore.
 Another Phoebus, thy own Phoebus, reigns,
 Joys in my jigs, and dances in my chains.
 But soon, ah soon, Rebellion will commence,
 If Music meanly borrows aid from Sense.”²

ON THE 18TH OF APRIL 1842 George Magnus was charged in New York City's Court of General Sessions for assault and battery on John Jacob Wintringham, who was in turn charged five days later for the same on James L. Magnus, George's father.³ Before either of these cases could be tried, however, another related suit, *John Wintringham* (John J.'s father) v. *James L. Magnus* for slander, was heard before the Court of Common Pleas commencing on 7 May 1842, Judge Inglis presiding. In opening statements Wintringham was shown to be "highly respectable"; Magnus was more complexly characterized as a "native of Germany, a member of the Jewish persuasion" who had immigrated to the United States some six or seven years earlier, and was recently widowed with "two fine boys" in tow to which "he had been both father and mother." Magnus had established a merchant business after arriving in New York and been successful until a "hurricane" hit the city, wiping out his business. He rebuilt and by 1842 again held property, "but [was] in debt for it." His dry goods business, at 125 William Street, was located in a building owned by Wintringham, one that had been divided into a commercial rental and, on the other side, a family dwelling where Wintringham and his family resided. The prosecution opened by swearing in Margaret A. C. Richards, "a young rosy cheeked woman" who was a servant at Wintringham's residence. Richards claimed that on 20 December 1841 she had been crossing a public space when she bumped into Magnus; during the brief encounter she related that Magnus "called me [a trull] and asked me if I was going to Wintringham's brothel." She alleged that he carried "his opposition and abuse so far as to create serious injury to the reputation of Mr. Wintringham and his family." Mrs. Eliza Grosebeck, the daughter of Wintringham and also resident in the building, testified that Magnus had "called my mother a common prostitute. He has called my mother a wh___ twenty times, and told my father to look out how she went to certain places." Magnus assumed his own defense in cross-examining the witness. He drew out of Grosebeck that she had agreed once to go "to the Battery" with him and that there they shared soda waters at Rushton's and Aspinwall's. Magnus: "I will show dat woman had a notion to marry me [and claimed to be divorced]. . . . She thought I was rich, yet she was a married woman." He asked her if she could "recollect calling me up stairs, and putting your hands on me so – (Magnus here put his hands on the lower part of his sides) – and ask

Prologue

3

me if I was ticklish,” at a time when no one else was at home? Magnus built to what he considered the most damaging testimony in the following exchange.

MAGNUS: When you found I was not to be caught, did you not try to annoy me in every way possible?

WITNESS: Never.

MAGNUS: You do not remember annoying me and singing out Jim-along-Josey?

WITNESS: No, never. We sometimes played on the piano.

MAGNUS: Oh, you play on de piano do you?

WITNESS: No I don't, but we sing.

MAGNUS: You sing – oh yes, I know you can sing – you sang Jim-along-Josey, and danced, and raised de devil to annoy me.

Magnus then attacked with his own witnesses. Mrs. Saltus swore to the bad character of Mrs. Richards, and claimed that “she cohabitated with a black man!” Margaret Ball and Bridget McGann stated something similar. Theo. Magnus, son of the defendant, then took the stand. He swore that “Mrs. Richards has called my father an old beast, and said that I was a rascal.” He also corroborated that Richards would try to annoy the Magnus family by singing and dancing “Jim Along Josey.” He asserted too that Richards had tried to force him to kiss her; upon his refusal, she “called my father an old state’s prison bird, and claimed that he had cheated and swindled his creditors.” George Magnus, the other son, about twenty-two years old, testified that his father was a sober man and confessed that “his blood had boiled since being in court to hear assertions to the contrary.” He exclaimed that he would rather someone stab him “to the heart, than say so.” He too gave “rather a hard account of the Jim-along-Josey.” To build further his case Magnus called Amelia White, a “pretty little black-eyed girl”; she “claimed to have seen Mrs. Richards make faces at [Magnus] through the glass-window of the door, and sweep dirt into [his] store.” Mrs. Richards was then called again and testified before Magnus that she “never put my tongue out at you, nor called you a beast. I never heard Mrs. Grosebeck threaten to broomstick you, . . . I never swept the dirt in your door, nor made faces at you.” In an attempt to impugn Mrs. Richards’s character, Magnus called her husband, “Mr. John D. Richards, a young

man,” who, however, denied saying to Mr. Magnus “that he would let him have his wife for half a dollar and a dinner to boot. He declared it to be a lie.” Before the case went to the jury, the judge instructed them that “[c]haracter was a most sacred thing, and it was for the Jury to guard it.”

The Jury returned a decision in favor of Wintringham, for clearly there had been slander; but the victory was virtually in name only, for it carried damages of only \$100, much reduced from the \$2,000 in punitive damages that Wintringham had claimed.⁴

On the 23rd of May the double assault and battery cases were brought up. Court proceedings show that on 5 March 1842 John Jacob Wintringham sought restitution for attacks on his family’s honor by knocking down “old Magnus twice.” George Magnus then “beat young Wintringham in return.” The court declared the fight a draw; each was found guilty and fined \$25.⁵

ON ITS SURFACE, there would appear to be nothing about “Jim Along Josey” (Figure 1) that suggests its working in such an extraordinary way. There are seven published verses, the first of which appears at the head of this chapter. That first is, in some ways, the most “logical” of them all: Slaves are expected to rise “when de bell does ring” and then line up alongside the others.⁶ The other verses are less narrative than this and are on occasion so abstracted as to acquire poetic qualities.

My sister Rose de oder night did dream,
Dat she was floating up and down de stream,
And when she woke she began to cry,
And de white cat picked out de black cat’s eye.

This last line notwithstanding, there is a general sense pervading the text that is sympathetic to the plight of the slave, although it is sometimes hard to pin down. Musically, there is less equivocation. The melody of the verse is predictable, even static; but for one passing tone all pitches derive from a C major chord (Musical Example 1). It is, however, heard as structurally unbalanced (two related but different three-measure phrases), giving it a kind of awkward energy. The chorus is

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Figure 1. "Jim Along Josey." Sheet music cover by Firth & Hall (New York), 1840. Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.

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[More information](#)

6

Demons of Disorder

The musical score is presented in four systems, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The first system is marked *Moderato* and includes the vocal exclamation "Oh!". The second system is marked *Ad lib* and features a triplet of eighth notes in the vocal line. The third system is marked *Tempo*. The fourth system is marked *Ad lib* and *Allegro*. The lyrics are: "I'se from Lu-ci-an-na as you all know, Dar whare Jim a-long Jo-sey's all de go. Dem nig-gars all rise when de bell does ring, And dis is de song dat dey do sing. Hey get a-long, get a-long Jo-sey".

Moderato Oh!

Ad lib 3
I'se from Lu-ci-an-na as you all know, Dar whare Jim a-long Jo-sey's all de

Col voce

Tempo
go. Dem nig-gars all rise when de bell does ring, And

Ad lib *Allegro*
dis is de song dat dey do sing. Hey get a-long, get a-long Jo-sey

Musical Example 1 (above and facing). "Jim Along Josey" (New York: Firth & Hall, 1840).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Prologue*

7

Hey get a - long Jim a - long Joe! Hey get a - long,

This system shows the first three measures of the song. The vocal line is in a treble clef with a key signature of one flat. The piano accompaniment consists of a right-hand melody and a left-hand bass line.

get a - long Jo - sey Hey get a - long, Jim a long Joe!

This system shows the next three measures. The vocal line continues with the melody, and the piano accompaniment provides harmonic support.

Dance

The 'Dance' section begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. It features a rhythmic melody in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand.

This system continues the 'Dance' section with the same melodic and harmonic structure as the previous system.

Musical Example 1 (cont.)

both more unusual and more ordinary: It is based upon a pentatonic scale (c-d-e-g-a-C) – often an element associated with the “exotic” or oral tradition – but is classically balanced in phrase length and structure. Range throughout is precisely one octave. It is only in the rhythm that one finds much reason for “Jim Along Josey’s” great popularity. Unusual for minstrel songs of the period, tempos actually change from

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Moderato to *Allegro* at the chorus, and the last measure of each of the verse's phrases is marked *Ad Lib*. Most telling, though, is the eight-measure postlude, marked simply "Dance." Here the accompaniment moves up into the bright treble range and the rhythms become more spritely. This section – which is literally beyond words – is, in a real way, the heart of the song.

The month after Magnus's trial an account was published in a New York weekly newspaper of a dance competition between the two best-known prostitutes in Boston, Nancy Holmes and Susan Bryant, and titled the "Dance on Long Wharf – Boston" (Figure 2). At nine o'clock, the reporter

noticed a crowd of females coming down under a small trot, and as we expected, they were the rival parties, arm in arm, closely followed by Julia Carr, Julia King, Lucy Bartlett, Miss Dunbar, Kate Hall, Harriet Motley, Elmira Lewis, all giggling and talking as fast as woman can.⁷

Mysteriously, each cyprien carried a broom. "However, we were soon enlightened, for at the word of command, they all commenced sweeping Long Wharf for a clean spot which was soon done." For music there was a fiddler employed for just this occasion, "a half white negro barber." Two men were selected as judges.

The first dance on the list was a hornpipe, and the one who took the most steps was to come off victor. It was Bryant's first turn, and as she entered the ring, she made three courtesies to the spectators who formed three sides about her. The word was given; the negro fiddler struck up Fisher's Hornpipe, and Susan commenced – and the way she put in the big licks was a "sin to Moses." Shouts of applause rent the air, whenever she changed a step. Every move was grace, her limbs moved as if guided by machinery. She now came to the heel and toe business – and done it to a nail, with which she wound up the hornpipe.

There was general admiration of her performance, when a voice was heard.

"Make way for old Nance, she'll make some of you howl." "Yes, indeed, hoss," cried she as she entered. "Come," she said, funnily clapping Bryant on the shoulder, "get off the floor, and see how soon I will make the grease come – and give us some chalk, for see how wet Suse has made it. Why old gal you

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Prologue*

9



Figure 2. “Grand Trial Dance between Nance Holmes and Suse Bryant, on Long Wharf, Boston.” From *The Libertine*, 15 June 1842. Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.

have sweat a gallon; I guess you over-fed yourself. Come strike up, white nigger.”

“What tune?” enquired Cuffey.

“Why, the same to be sure, I ain’t going to give that gal any advantage,” quoth Nance.

“Well, I only thought you were goin to put in your fancy licks on de Elsler music.”⁸

“No, no, keep them back,” said she, “so here goes.”

And so it did. As soon as the music struck the air, Holmes struck the wharf, and the way she made her body move was a caution to French bedsteads. Every step the Bryant took Nance repeated – and all [conceded] that it

would be hip and thigh between them, which is a tie. “If the Holmes can only last,” cried one of the idlers, and as the words fell on our ears, she dropped, not flat, no indeed, but in a position which looked much like a squat – when she was forced to take the step which was to decide all, and which was no more or less than the famous “Taylor’s Hop,” and that did decide all. Every time Holmes struck out that leg, the old wharf shook again. “Quit, Holmes, quit,” cried her friends; but it was no go; all h_ll couldn’t stop her, and the only way it was effected was by Jule King and Carr rushing in and seizing her under the arm pit, and raising her up, they carried her in the fresh air, she shouting, “Go away old gal, you can’t take this child’s time, no how.”

After the performance by Holmes, there were general refreshments passed around – “gin and round hearts” – and everyone was set for the finishing dance, a “Virginia breakdown,” in which the women would dance against each other, one-on-one. After the participants had been sponged off, they began.

The negro struck up the Camptown Hornpipe and the gals struck the wharf. It was hard to decide who was to come off victor notwithstanding that the knowing odds were offered in favor of Bryant. From the Camptown the tune was changed to the Grape Vine; yet both went it, as the change had no effect on them. From this they changed to

“Take your time Miss Lucy,”

and the way they went it was a caution – even the change to

“Where did you come from, knock a nigger down,”

and “Jenny get your hoe cake done my lady,” did not affect them – the sweat run down their faces, as if all within was on fire; perhaps occasioned by the gin taken in the recess. But now came the tug of war – the tune was changed to one of Sandford’s jigs – “Go it Nance,” “Go it Suse,” came in from all sides. They danced – the sweat poured, and now the fatigue of the delicate Nance became apparent, but amid the cheers of her friends she yet kept pace with the Bryant; but she couldn’t stand it much longer, and after one of the closest contested dances on record Nance Holmes gave out, and the Bryant came off victorious! Nance was carried home on a cart, procured for the purpose, while Suse footed it, amid shouts of joy from her friends.

It is surely significant that blackface minstrelsy provided all the music for the climax. “Miss Lucy Long” was the most often programmed minstrel song of its era;⁹ “Whar Did You Come From?,” subtitled “Knock a Nigger Down,” was performed first (and often) by banjoist Joel Sweeney,¹⁰ who also made famous “Jenny Get Your Hoe Cake Done.”¹¹ The last unidentified tune is explicitly associated with James