

# History of African-American Celebrity:

## The Fisk Jubilee Singers

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### Abstract

Little research has been done on the making of African-American celebrity over the course of the nineteenth century. This research is part of a larger project to understand the business patterns and representational strategies of the first waves of black global figures, comprising the last chapter of a book that examines the expansion of African-American fame over time. For this section of the project, the Fisk Jubilee Singers and their concert touring schedule are taken into account. The Jubilee Singers originated from Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, holding their first concert in 1871 and beginning their first tour later that year to raise money to fund their school's endeavors. By examining primary sources, such as books, newspapers, and promotional pamphlets from that period, and secondary sources, consisting of modern scholars' works on the Singers and their world, dates, reviews, and playbills can be collected to create a master chronology of their touring schedule in the late 1800s. As the chronology grows larger, strategic patterns may be seen in their business decisions, tour routes, uses of foreign markets, publics, media, and broader global positioning, thus, contributing to our larger understanding of how the first waves of African-American stars became visible to history. With this information, the question of why these celebrities went to the places they did can be answered and placed in larger transnational contexts. The goal of this section of the project is to map the global circulation and history of the Jubilee Singers and to use this information to understand how they worked to control the very terms of their public visibility in national and international markets. These results may suggest their methods, as well, to rethink the longer history of black celebrity from the early nineteenth century to the present.

### Objectives

This research explores the landmark tours of the Fisk Jubilee Singers as they traveled worldwide between 1870 and 1900. It is part of a larger, comparative study of the cultural politics and global positioning of early black artists, intellectuals, and activists between 1770 and 1930. This research will help us to understand the complex, transnational process by which "Black Popular Culture" first entered commercial markets, and thus became visible to history. Above all, our project seeks to document the strategic uses of multiple global publics at a moment when many U.S. venues were rigidly segregated or entirely closed to black performers.

### Methods

- Search for dates, venues, patrons, and other information pertaining to the Jubilee Singers' touring schedule in primary sources (e.g. newspaper databases, memoirs, and promotional materials) and secondary sources (such as academic works on early African-American performers)
- Record this information on a master chronology using Microsoft Word and online resources to visually map their progress
- Note any outstanding reviews, advertisements, and other kinds of press coverage for further assessment

### The Fisk Jubilee Singers

Originating from Fisk University in Nashville, TN, the Jubilee Singers were created with the help of Fisk music director George White to help cover the costs of the new university. They began traveling America to sing slave "spirituals" in 1871. By 1873, the Singers experienced tremendous success, allowing them to go to Great Britain and sing for a variety of influential people, including Queen Victoria and Prime Minister Gladstone. Within ten years, they had traveled as far as Germany and Australia to perform. Today, the modern Jubilee Singers continue the work that their ancestors began.



Allen and Rowell, The Jubilee Singers, Original Company from Fisk University, 1871-1882, Tennessee State Library & Archives, Merl Eppse Collection, 1882. Web. 12 April 2012.

### John Brown's Body.

John Brown's Body, Bell State Music Collection. Web. 12 April 2012.

### The Jubilee Singers

OF FISK UNIVERSITY,  
NASHVILLE, TENN.,  
Under the auspices of the American Missionary Association, will give one of their unique and pleasing

**CONCERTS**  
IN  
**McDONOUGH HALL,**  
ON  
**Thursday Evening,**  
**NOV. 21st.**

Doors open at 7. Concert to commence promptly at 8 o'clock.  
Tickets 50 Cents, Reserved Seats 75 Cents; for sale at Raymond & Johnson's.  
The proceeds of these Concerts go entirely for the advancement of Christian education among the Freedmen of the South.  
Their programme consists of Solos, Choruses and Duets, but will be made up largely from the Spiritual Songs which were sung by them while under the cruel hand of oppression.  
Come and listen to their  
**QUAINT MELODIES,  
PLANTATION SONGS,  
AND OLD TIME PIECES.**

An advertisement for the Singers' concert in Middletown, CT on November 21, 1872.

November 19, 1872, Middletown, CT, The Daily Constitution, p. 2.

### Results

- We have found evidence that the Jubilee Singers developed very different marketing strategies in the United States and Great Britain, often mixing commercial and philanthropic networks, as well as the endorsements from a wide range of White aristocrats, politicians, and clergy
- We have found that the Singers' strategies were highly successful, so much so that they spawned dozens of imitators
- We have found that the convention boundaries between mass entertainment and Christian "missionary" work were highly permeable; it is precisely the Singers' abilities to move across these boundaries that drove their success

### Conclusions

A comparison of the newspaper advertisements and articles relating to the Jubilee Singers in the United States before their tour in Great Britain and those after the tour demonstrates that the British commercial success was instrumental in transforming the conditions of possibility at home. We can see this first through domestic press coverage of the British tours, but also through a comparative analysis of their U.S. tours before and after the British triumphs. This is significant because it helps us to understand the reciprocal process by which the Singers play different regional and national societies against one another, ultimately redefining their stature and popularity in a wide variety of global markets.

**JUBILEE SINGERS IN STOCKTON.**—The famous band of Jubilee Singers, which created so much sensation during its visit to England, last year, will be at Stockton this week. The concert by the Jubilee Singers will be given in the Exchange Hall, on Friday night. It is believed that this single concert will be the only one given by the band in this district.

A notice of an upcoming performance in Stockton, England.  
August 30, 1875, Darlington, England, Northern Echo, "North Country News."