

Fox Movietone News: Jenkins Orphanage Band

By Julie Hubbert

In 1891, the Reverend Daniel Jenkins, pastor of a small African American church in Charleston, South Carolina, stumbled on a group of four black youths huddled in an abandoned building on the edge of town. The boys were all under the age of twelve, Jenkins discovered, and were all orphans. Their plight had special meaning to Jenkins. Born a slave on a plantation just outside of Charleston, Jenkins himself had been orphaned at a young age and had been turned off the plantation. He immediately took the orphans in with the resolve of establishing something Charleston did not have-- an orphanage for African-American children. In an impassioned speech before the Charleston city council Jenkins promised that if the city would allow him to use the abandoned warehouse next to the prison on the waterfront, he would rid the city of its "roaming, thieving wild children." With their agreement and a small stipend of \$100, the Reverend Daniel Jenkins Orphanage was born.

When requests for additional city funds and pleas for private donations to keep the orphanage running were ignored, the Reverend settled on an unusual solution to raise money. With no instruments at hand or having any musical training of any kind, he decided to assemble a brass band and tour the northern states in search of support and sponsorship for his orphanage. The idea for a brass band was no doubt inspired by the tradition of African-American military bands that had surfaced during the civil war. The union army produced several colored regiments with highly skilled regimental bands that continued to play after the war. Frank P. Johnson's colored regimental band, for instance, flourished during the 1870s and 80s, concertizing up and down the eastern seaboard. Jenkins was also no doubt inspired by the African-American boys bands that had begun to be included in minstrel shows in the late 1880s and 90s. One show in particular, "In Old Kentucky," featured a brass group called the Whangdoodles, who referred to themselves as a "pickanniny" band, a designation Jenkins would often use to describe his orphanage band. Jenkins rounded up as many musical instruments as he could find and hired two



The Band performing for the newsreel cameras in 1926. Courtesy University of South Carolina Moving Image Research Collection.

local Charleston musicians—P.M. "Hatsie" Logan and Francis Eugene Mikell-- to teach the boys to play. Rather unusually, each boy was taught to play all the instruments which at the beginning included coronets, trumpets, trombones, tubas, clarinets, bells, triangles and drums. Programs from early performances show the band performing a mix of military marches, popular airs, folk tunes and cake walks.

While Jenkins was successful at forming a small proficient band, he was not immediately successful at raising money to cover the orphanage's expenses. After raising only meager sums playing on the streets of Charleston, Jenkins took his group on the road. In New York he and the group were not immediately successful either. But a fortuitous trip to London, where their church and street performances garnered enormous attention, changed the group's fortunes. They returned from London to Charleston not only with funds, but with something of an international reputation as the Charleston "News and Courier" newspaper had followed their progress abroad with great interest.

Although Jenkins continued to struggle to support the three to five hundred boys the orphanage soon housed, by 1896, the band had an established a regular touring schedule that took them to New York and other east coast cities in the summer and Florida in the winter. With each passing year, the band's reputation, and orphanage coffers, seemed to grow. In 1902, the Jenkins band played at the Buffalo Expo. In 1904, they had their own stage at the St. Louis World's Fair, and later played the Hippodrome in London. Churches in both London and New York's Harlem, in fact, continued to be the band's main

benefactors. By 1905, the band had developed regular east coast and European tours that took them even to Paris, Berlin and Rome. The pinnacle of their success in the first decade can be measured, however, by two prestigious invitations. In 1905, the Jenkins Orphanage Band played in the President's Roosevelt's inaugural parade, and in 1909 they repeated the honor for President Taft.

In the early teens, the reputation of the Jenkins band, now some 30 pieces, expanded, as the group also becoming known for the "hot" solo playing of some of its individual members. Not to be left out of the musical revolution sweeping the nation, the Jenkins Orphanage Band, too, cultivated the practice of "ragging" or "jazzing" their performances of popular tunes. At the same time that the Color Waif's Home Brass Band in New Orleans was promoting the "hot" solo playing of a young trumpeter named Louis Armstrong, the Jenkins Orphanage band was also training two young legendary trumpeters. Cladys "Jabbo" Smith, a young waif from Savannah, Georgia, came to the band in 1915, and would go on to play first at Small's Paradise in Harlem in the early 1920s, and then later in Duke Ellington's orchestra throughout the late 20s and 30s. In 1919, William "Cat" Anderson joined the orphanage band. He, too, would go on to become a highly sought-after trumpeter in New York and mid-west dance bands. Sylvester Briscoe, another Jenkins Orphanage Band alumnus, played lead trumpet in Benny Moten's Orchestra in the 1930s. Although he was never an orphan, guitarist Freddie Green, who later anchored Count Basie's Orchestra, also got his start in the Jenkins Orphanage Band in the 1920s.

The Jenkins Orphanage Band did more than incubate some of the best jazz talent in the country produced in the 1920s, 30s and 40s. By many accounts, they were also responsible for launching the dance craze known as "The Charleston." In addition to marches and popular songs, the group frequently played local Gullah or "geechie" tunes. The Gullah were an Afro-Caribbean population that had settled on the sea islands off the coast of Charleston. Their music featured distinctive syncopated rhythms that were routinely accompanied with lively dance steps. Observers noted that the Jenkins Band often played a number of "geechie" tunes, while being "conducted" in front by a young boy dancing "geechie" steps. These steps and syncopated sounds were particularly influential on listeners in

New York City and Harlem in the 1920s. As Willie "the Lion" Smith remembers it in his biography "Music on My Mind," the inspiration for his "hot" songs, came from the sights and sounds of the Jenkins Orphanage Band. The boy out front of the band, the conductor, Smith remembers, "used to do a strange little dance step and the people of Harlem used to shout out to him as he passed by 'hey Charleston, do your Geechie dance.'" Allen Carter, the chairman of the Charleston Dance Committee, also noted the dance craze was "born on King Street in Charleston by the Jenkins Orphanage." Jazz pianist James P. Johnson actually wrote eight different "geechie tunes" or "charlestons," after listening to the band play. One became the international pop song phenomenon known as "The Charleston." The Jenkins Orphanage Band may also have had a significant influence on American opera. Debose Heyward wrote about the sight and sound of the Charleston-based group in his novel "Porgy." George Gershwin specifically sought the Jenkins Orphanage Band out when he was working on his operatic setting of Heyward's novel and referenced the group's distinct sound in many places in his opera "Porgy and Bess."

When the Fox Movietone news cameras first captured the Jenkins Orphanage Band in 1926, the cameras didn't have sound. The silent footage they shot, which features white dancer Bee Jackson doing the Charleston dance steps in front of the band, vividly connects the dance craze to the orphanage band. When the Movietone news crews returned in 1928, they had new sound cameras and they captured the only sound recording we have of the group. The group's fantastically unique and energetic rendition of "Shoutin' Eliza" is just one of the reasons why this film has become a treasured part of the nation's Film Registry.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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