

“The Laughing Song”—George Washington Johnson (c. 1896)

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The music of black America did not make a major impact on mainstream recorded music until the blues and jazz explosion of the 1920s, but African-Americans played an important role in the recording industry from its very beginning. In the spring of 1890, a heavyset, forty-something black street entertainer in New York was invited into the “laboratory” of one of the very earliest recording companies to make some test recordings of two songs he had been singing for coins on the streets. The recordings became wildly successful--so successful, in fact, that they were most likely the two best selling recordings of the entire decade of the 1890s. This street singer was George Washington Johnson and his specialties were “The Laughing Song” and “The Whistling Coon.”

Johnson was born a slave in Loudoun County, Virginia, in October 1846. His exact birthdate is unknown, and he probably did not know it himself, as slave births were often not noted in those days. He was taken into the home of a prosperous white farming family to serve as the playmate for their own recently-born son and, as a result, was raised in a white environment where he learned to read and write (even though it was against the law to teach slaves those skills in pre-Civil War days).

Loudoun County was a major battleground during the Civil War, and by the end of the war its economy was devastated. In the 1870s, Johnson, by then in his late twenties, joined the exodus to New York City where he eked out a marginal living singing and whistling for coins on the streets, in ferry terminals, and possibly in an occasional minstrel show. He had a special talent for whistling and for laughing songs, a curious type of repertoire in which the singer laughed in time with the music. A genial man, he was comfortable around whites and they were comfortable with him, although he was clearly treated as an inferior according to the Jim Crow

standards of the day. By 1890, when he was invited to record, he was a well-known character on the streets of New York.

Recording music in those early days was an arduous process. There were no microphones or amplifiers, rather, the singer had to sing loudly and clearly and project directly into an acoustic recording horn which then cut into the wax cylinder spinning beneath it. Johnson's songs were full of slurs and dropped "g's," a loose kind of performance that he used to great effect on the street. Somehow, he was able to retain that "street" sound on record and still remain intelligible on the primitive recording equipment. Today, the recordings may sound crude to us, but they were clear as a bell to 1890s listeners, who typically listened through acoustic ear tubes, up close to the sound and not through speakers.

Johnson's songs were catchy and amusing, but they basically mocked blacks, playing on the novelty of a genial black man making fun of his own race. Some of the language used would not be acceptable today (i.e. "dandy darkey"). This was what a black man had to sing in order to be allowed to record in the segregated America of the 1890s. Nevertheless the mockery was not as vicious as it was in many of the other "coon songs" popular at the time:

*As I wuz comin' around the corner, I heard some people saay,
Here comes a daandy daarkey, here 'e comes this waay...*

What made this silly song irresistible was the chorus, in which Johnson laughed in time with the music. It may sound nonsensical, but it never failed to draw grimaces, smirks and guffaws from the most jaded listeners to the primitive phonographs. Who would not find amusement in the sound of uproarious laughter accompanied by a catchy melody?

The writer of "The Laughing Song" is a bit of a mystery. Johnson himself was credited with the words and music when the song was published as sheet music in 1894, with well known white pianist Frank Banta listed as arranger. However Johnson is not known to have ever written anything else, and some of the verses suggest a person with greater education. Whoever was responsible, the song achieved great success and Johnson recorded it for many different companies active at the time, including New York's Metropolitan Phonograph Co., Columbia, and Edison. When disc records began to supplant cylinders, he recorded it for them as well for companies including Berliner, Columbia, and Victor.

By the mid-1890s, sales of 50,000 copies was claimed, an astounding total for that early period considering that there was no way then to duplicate large numbers of copies. In that era, to make the copies, Johnson had to sing the song over and over for the recording horn, creating perhaps four or five copies at a time, in order to build up stock. Fortunately he had a lot of stamina. Copies were shipped throughout the U.S., and were sold overseas as well.

By the early 1900s, "The Laughing Song" was still popular, but the record companies had developed ways to make large numbers of duplicates from a single master recording. Each company only needed one or two good master recordings from him, after which his services were no longer needed. (There were no royalties for artists then.)

Johnson, now approaching his sixties--which was old for the period--fell back into poverty, and began drinking heavily. He died on January 23, 1914, at the age of 67, in a roach-infested tenement room in Harlem, alone and forgotten. A sad ending for the first popular black recording star, who demonstrated how successful an African-American could be on record, and opened the door for many who would follow.

Johnson was buried in Maple Grove Cemetery in Kew Gardens, Queens, New York, where a memorial was dedicated to him in 2014.

Tim Brooks is the author of the award-winning "Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry, 1890-1919," which contains Johnson's full story. He also compiled an accompanying CD set of the same name, which won a Grammy Award as Best Historical Album.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.