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Perry Lowery: Cornet King

Christy Davis

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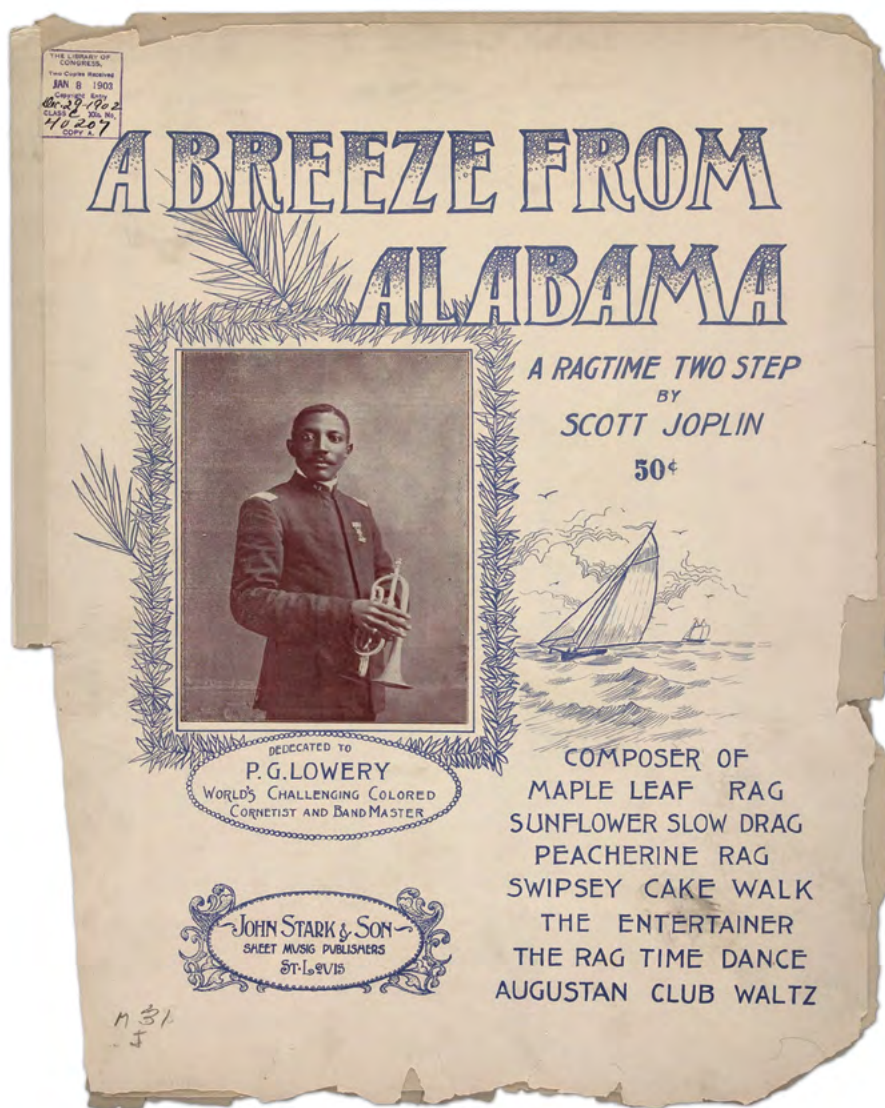
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A BREEZE FROM ALABAMA
 Scott Joplin
 Library of Congress

Perry Lowery: Cornet King

Perry George Lowery was born on the road. The child who would earn a reputation as the “world’s greatest cornet soloist and band master” came into the world on October 11, 1869, in the midst of his family’s migration to Kansas. They were among the thousands of African Americans who arrived in Kansas during the post-Reconstruction Black Exodus.

Although the Lowerys appear to have followed the path of many of their cohorts, arriving first in Topeka, where Perry was born, before embarking toward their final destination in Greenwood County, they were not among the recently freed slaves who made up the majority of the state’s Black pioneers. Through circumstances unknown, the couple had managed to escape the slaveholding South and were living in Ohio where the first of their children was born in 1851, twelve years before Emancipation.

Soon after Perry’s birth, the Lowerys arrived at their farm on Spring Creek near Reece in Greenwood County, where they worked alongside William and Labina Stepter, possibly relatives, who, like the Lowerys, were born in Virginia and came to Kansas via Ohio. The Lowerys brought with them eight children and 300 dollars in cash and belongings. What the Lowerys lacked in financial resources they made up for in musical talent, a marketable skill that helped smooth the Lowerys’ transition to Kansas and may have facilitated their move from Virginia to Ohio. Perry Lowery got his start in the

family band, first playing the drums before his brothers encouraged him to take up the cornet. Brass instruments similar to trumpets, cornets gained popularity in the late nineteenth century and were readily adopted by African American musicians during the Civil War when they played in Union regimental bands, including that of the Kansas Colored Volunteers. The instrument peaked at about the time Perry Lowery reached adulthood. By 1895, when manager George Bailey gave him his first break performing with the Mallary Brothers Minstrels in the show “Darkest America,” Perry Lowery had been playing cornet in local bands for years.

Lowery was billed as “the world’s best cornet soloist and band master.” And this was more than a marketing ploy. In the late 1890s, having left Reece to pursue a career as a professional musician, Lowery studied under renowned Boston cornet teacher Henry C. Brown. He earned the respect of the likes of Ragtime King Scott Joplin, a contemporary who dedicated his composition “A Breeze from Alabama” to

Lowery. The sheet music (John Stark and Son, 1902) featured an image of Lowery on its cover, captioned with the words “Dedicated [sic] to P. G. Lowery, World’s Challenging Colored Cornetist and Band Master.” In the image Lowery appears in a crisp band uniform and exudes both his trademark composure and the confidence that came with being a master of his profession. By then Lowery had become the first African American musician to conduct his own band.

For many years in the early twentieth century, Lowery’s band performed for a variety of circus companies. In the off-seasons he was the bandleader for the Original Nashville Students, a jubilee troupe and concert company founded in 1878. From 1919 until 1931, he conducted a band for the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus, and he was associated with a number of other circus bands until his death in 1942.

By the 1930s, the cornet had lost favor among the big-band recording stars, like Louis Armstrong, who



P. G. LOWERY'S BAND & MINSTRELS, PART OF THE RINGLING BROS & BARNUM & BAILEY CIRCUS
 Courtesy Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture,
 The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

supplanted live bands. Despite these changes Lowery steadfastly maintained his devotion to the instrument that had made him famous. It seems the cornet more closely matched his well-publicized “congenial nature.”

Although he lived in Ohio, Lowery periodically returned to Greenwood County. Among those of his family who remained there was his nephew, Gene Lowery, a tuba player in the family band, who was better-known as a skilled cowboy. Gene and Perry Lowery were among the influential African Americans recognized by the

Greenwood County Historical Society in July 1997. In 1996, Perry Lowery was inducted into the Circus Hall of Fame by the Windjammers Unlimited, Inc., a national organization dedicated to the preservation of traditional circus music. Lowery was buried in the family cemetery on Spring Creek near Reece.

For more information read *Showman: The Life and Music of Perry George Lowery* by Clifford Edward Watkins.

Christy Davis is Executive Director of *Symphony in the Flint Hills, Inc.*