A brief introduction to black music and black musicians in 18th- and 19th-century Bristol

Bristol’s earliest account of a person of African origin dates from about 1560 when it is recorded that a ‘blacke moore’ was employed as a gardener to Sir John Young (1 on the map). ('Blacke moore' was a term used to describe black people at the time.) But it was almost 200 years before the city’s first black entertainer was noted performing at the circus at St James’s Fair in 1752. Although the performer was referred to as an ‘African Prince’, he was unlikely to have been nobility and may have been a transported slave who had become the property of the ship’s captain: slave ship captains were allowed to keep a single slave at the end of a trip. The runaway black servant, Starling (2), who could play the French Horn may have been brought to Bristol this way, too. Equally, both men may have been freed slaves from America who, like many others in Britain’s eighteenth-century black population, had worked their way to Britain as sailors. Just possibly, they had been brought to Britain by the army as a musician drummers or trumpeters.

The account of a black musician in Britain shows that an African drummer was employed at the court of James IV in Edinburgh by 1504. Bristol’s early military records, though, do not show any black drummers, trumpeters or other members. The closest reference that exists shows that two black bandsmen from the Somerset Militia were involved in a fight with white soldiers from another regiment. Perhaps the city’s ties to the slave trade meant that Bristol’s military chose not to recruit black musicians. Their presence throughout the rest of the country, however, suggests that they may have existed, but that their presence was either never recorded, or that any records have failed to survive.

Only slightly more visible were Bristol’s black street musicians. One, described in 1807 in the Bristol Mirror as having a model ship built into his hat, sounds much like the famous Joseph Johnson, a disabled black sailor who sang songs on London’s streets in the early nineteenth century.

Bristol’s first and only professional black musician resident in the eighteenth century was the man who taught the young Benjamin George to play the fife at the Full Moon tavern (3). Nothing else is known of this man and, as the century came to an end, Britain’s black population as a whole decreased. The decline in the black population was a country-wide phenomenon, but the end of the century did see the arrival of the first touring professional black musician in the city, the child violinist George Polgreen Bridgetower (4). Despite his age, and under the guidance of his father, Bridgetower toured Europe in the 1790s and performed in Bristol within days of debuting on the British concert stage.

Although Britain’s black population as a whole continued to decline in the nineteenth century, black music became more and more common as an increasing number of African American professional musicians began to travel to Britain and Bristol for a public — most of whom were middle class and almost certainly exclusively white — ever-willing to explore new musical sounds. One infamous character stands out: the minstrel character Jim Crow, as performed by Thomas Dartmouth Rice (5). As a form of entertainment, the minstrel show is extremely problematic, especially in its native America where it originated from. Performances of minstrelsy in Britain could arguably have received a different reception given the smaller black population and other factors. Nevertheless, Rice was a financially successful global export that had a lasting influence on the perception of black music worldwide (for better or worse).

Rice was followed across the Atlantic by genuine African American acts who appeared in increasing numbers on Bristol’s stages, at the Broadmead Rooms in Prince’s Street (6), the Theatre Royal (5, 7 and 9), and at the Prince’s Theatre that once stood in Park Row (8). Most were popular music acts, but as the century headed towards 1900, a new phenomenon, black American Gospel became the dominant African American musical form on Bristol stages (10, 11 and 12) and throughout the country. Importantly, black American Gospel was to lay many of the musical foundations on which jazz and its many spin-off genres has been based ever since.

Map and text by Dr Nicholas Nourse, University of Bristol

Further reading:
D P Lindegaard, *Black Bristolians of the 18th and 19th Centuries* (BRO: Pamphlet 1525)
"We are assured that the AFRICAN PRINCE, or Surprising NEGRO ... will be exhibited ... at our ensuing ST JAMES Fair at the Three Tons on St James Back. The said NEGRO in a most accountable manner brings his hands flat clasped over his head, back and under his legs and this he does backwards as well as forwards with ever disengaging them. He likewise does several new and astonishing performances on the slack-wire and has had the honour to be seen by the Royal Society at their General Meeting in December last in Crane Court, Fleet Street, LONDON with universal admiration. The performance cost half a crown (2 shillings and 6 pence), a substantial sum in 1752.

Felix Farley's Bristol Journal, 4 July 1752: 3

George Polgreen Bridgetower (1778–1860) was born in Biała, Poland to a Polish mother and West Indian father. Both parents were probably servants, his father reportedly in the famous musical household of Prince Nikolai Esterházy where Joseph Haydn was Kappelmäster. Bridgetower learnt to play the violin and made his performing debut on 11 April 1789, age ten, at the Concert Spirituel in Paris. Later the same year, and promoted as the ‘son of the African Prince’, Bridgetower played at the Assembly Rooms in Prince’s Street, Bristol on 18 December 1789 and again on 1 January 1790.

Felix Farley's Bristol Journal, 12 Dec 1789: 3, and 26 Dec 1789: 3

Run Away, some time since A NEGRO LAD about 18 years of age near five feet two inches high answers to the name of Starling and blows the French horn very házy where Joseph Haydn was Kappelmäster. Bridgetower learnt to play the violin and made his performing debut on 11 April 1789, age ten, at the Concert Spirituel in Paris. Later the same year, and promoted as the ‘son of the African Prince’, Bridgetower played at the Assembly Rooms in Prince’s Street, Bristol on 18 December 1789 and again on 1 January 1790.

Felix Farley's Bristol Journal, 19 March 1757: 3

James Back. The said NEGRO in a JAMES Fair at the Three Tons on St John’s Street, Bristol. Little is known about the man, but he is recorded as teaching a local 10-year-old boy, Benjamin George, to play the fife (a flute) at the Full Moon tavern in Stokes Croft (the Full Moon is still open today). Ford gave evidence to their General Meeting in December last in Crane Court, Fleet Street, LONDON with universal admiration. The performance cost half a crown (2 shillings and 6 pence), a substantial sum in 1752.

Felix Farley's Bristol Journal, 4 July 1752: 3

Thomas Dartmouth Rice (1808–1860) was a white American itinerant performer. Rice is important to the history of black music and black musicians because of his most famous creation: Jim Crow. About 1828 Rice ‘blacked up’ – using burnt cork to colour and blacken his face and hands – and sang the song Jump Jim Crow. The act, that of a southern American plantation field hand who is both naïve and fun-loving, but also a showoff, was an instant success; the song became an international hit. Rice brought his act to London in 1836, but his first performance in Bristol was not until 7 April 1839. The performances were badly reviewed and poorly attended, but Rice's act, blackface minstrelsy, remained highly popular with all classes of society well into the twentieth century.

Bristol Mercury, 6 April 1839: 3

Sam Hague's Great American Slave Troupe and Brass Band first appeared at the Broadmead Rooms on 3, 4 and 28 May 1867, moving up to the Theatre Royal on their return visit in 1869. For their first performance, Hague advertised them as sixteen natural talented artists, who, prior to June, 1865, were slaves in America; then on a tour of England giving their own and the only true representation of Negro life on the plantations of America.

Bristol Mercury, 27 Apr 1867: 8; 25 May 1867: 8; 6 Mar 1869: 5

The JUBILEE SINGERS were all born in slavery, and their Songs are a faithful rendering of the Music peculiar to Slave Life.

Mr. BRANT's Music Saloon.

Bristol Mercury, 17 Mar 1877: 5

Y.M.C.A. HALL ... FISK UNIVERSITY JUBILEE SINGERS from North Carolina, America, in their QUANT AND MELODIUS SONGS, as Sung in their Days of Slavery. The Singers were all born in slavery, and their Songs are a faithful rendering of the Music peculiar to Slave Life.

The JUBILEE SINGERS will give their Untitled ENTERTAINMENT THIS EVENING (SATURDAY) AND MONDAY, March 17th and 18th, Chairman on Saturday, Rev. E. G. GANGE; Chairman on Monday, Rev. JOS. MOORE. Doors open at 7.30 p.m., entrance 3d. Second St., Third St., Back, £1 tickets to be had at Mr. BRANT's Music Saloon.

Bristol Mercury, 27 Mar 1888: 5

YM.C.A. HALL ... FISK UNIVERSITY JUBILEE SINGERS; 3 January 1898. The choir were a fund-raising group from the American-African college founded in 1866 by the American Missionary Association.

Bristol Mercury, 3 Jan 1898: 4
George Polgreen Bridgetower (1778–1860) was born in Bala, Poland to a Polish mother and West Indian father. Both parents were probably servants, his father reportedly in the famous musical household of Prince Nikolai Esterhazy where Joseph Haydn was Kappelmester. Bridgetower learnt to play the violin and made his debut on 11 April 1789, aged ten, at the Concert Spirituel in Paris. Later the same year, and promoted as the ‘son of the African Prince’, Bridgetower played at the Assembly Rooms in Prince’s Street, Bristol on 18 December 1789 and again on 1 January 1790. Felix Farley’s Bristol Journal, 12 Dec 1789: 3, and 26 Dec 1789: 3

**1839**

Thomas Dartmouth Rice (1808–1860) was a white American itinerant performer. Rice is important to the history of black music and black musicians because of his most famous creation: Jim Crow. About 1828 Rice ‘blacked up’ – using burnt cork to colour and blacken his face and hands – and sang the song ‘Jump Jim Crow’. The act, that of a southern American plantation field hand who is both naive and fun-loving, but also a showoff, was an instant success; the song became an international hit. Rice marketed his act to London in 1836, but his first performance, Hague advertised them as the ‘son of the African Prince’, Bridgetower played at the Assembly Rooms in Prince’s Street, Bristol on 18 December 1789 and again on 1 January 1790. Felix Farley’s Bristol Journal, 12 Dec 1789: 3, and 26 Dec 1789: 3

**1839**, 6 April 1839: 3

Bristol Mercury

**1846**

Ira Aldridge (1807–1867) was an African American actor and singer and the first black star of the theatrical stage. But persistent discrimination against black actors in America forced Aldridge to emigrate to Britain in 1824 where he billed himself as the ‘African Roscius’. Aldridge first appeared at Bristol’s Theatre Royal on 16 March 1846 where he performed the challenging singer’s part of Mungo in Dibdin’s comic opera, The Padlock. The newspaper advertisements highlighted Aldridge’s colours. The unprecedented novelty of a Native African, possessing Dramatic Characters, has exited a degree of interest unparalleled in the annals of the Drama... Bristol Mercury, 14 Mar 1846: 5
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Further reading:
Madge Dresser and Peter Flemming, Bristol: Ethnic Minorities at the city 1000–2001 (Phillimore, 2007)
D P Lindegaard, Black Bristolians of the 18th and 19th Centuries (BRO: Pamphlet 1525)
Norma Myers, Reconstructing the Black Past: Blacks in Britain, c.1780–1830 (Routledge, 1996)