Black Music Precursors: The Writings of Arthur Randolph LaBrew

Part I

WHITE WRITERS LONG AGO preempted jazzology. With but few exceptions "Negro folk music," ragtime, rhythm and blues, and even Black gospel have similarly fallen under the Jugurtha yoke of white writers. To confirm these generalizations, one need but run through the ML3561 and ML3556 listings in any university library shelf list. Who are the authors? Sampling only the B-G's: Whitney Balliett (1966, 1971, 1976, 1977), Joachim Ernst Berendt (1975), Rudi Blesh (1946, 1971), Harry O. Brunn (1963), Jack Vincent Buerkle (1973), Samuel Barclay Charters (1967), William Claxton (1955), André Coeuroy (1926), Eddie Condon (1973), James H. Cone (1972), Cléon Cosmetto (1945), Harold Courlander (1960, 1963), Avril Dankworth (1968, 1972), Dave Dexter (1964), Michel Dorigné (1967), Dena J. Epstein (1977), Leonard Feather (1960, 1966, 1976), Gene Fernett (1970), Sidney Walter Finkelstein (1948), Charles Fox (1960, 1969), Peter Gammond (1966), Will G. Gilbert (1939), Ingmar Glanzelius (1968), Robert Goffin (1944, 1975), Benny Green (1962, 1975).

Does this near monopoly leave Black writers any territory to dominate? Miles Mark Fisher (1899-1970) published *Negro Slave Songs in the United States* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1953), Maud Cuney Hare (1874-1936) *Negro Musicians and their music* (Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, 1936), Clyde Owen Jackson (1928-) *The Songs of Our Years: A Study of Negro Folk Music* (New York: Exposition Press, 1968), Alain LeRoy Locke (1886-1954) *The Negro and his music* (Washington, D.C.: The Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1936), John Lovell, Jr. (1907-1974) *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), Eileen Jackson Southern (1920-) *The Music of Black Americans: A History* and *Readings in Black American Music* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), James Monroe Trotter (1842-1892) *Music and Some Highly Musical People* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1878), and John Wesley Work (1871-1925) *Folk Song of the American Negro* (Nashville: Fisk University Press, 1915).

Solely in these books by Black writers, and never in jazz, ragtime, blues, and soul literature by whites does such a paragraph as this occur (Alain LeRoy Locke, page 115):

> An interesting third contribution from the pen of a Negro composer is the *Symphony in E Minor* by Florence B[eatrice] Price of Chicago [biography in *Who's Who in Colored America*, 4th and 5th editions 1937 and 1940 (Brooklyn, New York: Thomas Yenser, 7, 423-424, 423]), presented several times by the Chicago Orchestra under Frederick Stock, with whom Mrs. Price has also had the honor of playing her own Piano Concerto. In the straight classical idiom and form, Mrs. Price's work vindicates the Negro composer's right, at choice, to go up

Parnassus by the broad high road of classicism rather than the narrower, more hazardous, but often more rewarding path of racialism.

After Oxford University, where he was a Rhodes Scholar 1907-1910. Alain LeRoy Locke took a Harvard Ph.D. (in 1918): thereafter heading the philosophy department at Howard University. John Lovell, Jr., who began teaching at Howard in 1930, received his Ph.D. at the University of California at Berkeley in 1938 and was professor of English at Howard from 1958 to his death June 6, 1974. Miles Mark Fisher, pastor of White Rock Baptist Church at Durham, North Carolina, 1933-1964 (emeritus until his death December 14, 1970), obtained his Ph.D. at the University of Chicago in 1948. Eileen Jackson Southern, New York University Ph.D., 1961, became thereafter until 1975 professor of music in the City University of New York system, and in 1976 began chairing the Afro-American Studies Department at Harvard University.

Whether or not she disidentifies with "true" Black music—as Charles Keil (who is a white Yale College graduate) hotly argued in a cruel review of her magnum opus, *The Music of Black Americans* (*Ethnomusicology* XVIII/1 [January, 1974], 165-166)—one fact remains unassailable: she is not alone among Black writers in allowing Black music wider boundaries than Keil would permit. Black writers with the higher degrees that presume research abilities have all, from James Monroe Trotter to the present, defined Black music much more broadly than do dogmatic writers. For most research-minded Black writers, Black music can indeed be defined as any "music created by Blacks." After thus widening their reach, their welcoming arms embrace figures so diverse as Saint-Georges, José Maurício Nunes Garcia, George Bridgetower, Francis Johnson, José White, Thomas Greene Bethune, Claudio Brindis de Salas, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, and a host of other NAACP-tilted Blacks, past and present, who are anathema to the Keils of musicography.

If they denounce Southern, all the more certainly Keil and company can be expected to trounce another Black historian who has spent a lifetime rescuing the names and dates of Black pre-1900 myriads too forgotten for cataloguing in even Southern's "painfully dated book" (Keil's epithet)—Arthur Randolph LaBrew. Since his own chosen research so irritates the Keils who are self-appointed keepers of the keys, his biography has not surprisingly eluded the information sources compiled in Dennis La Beau's *Author Biographies Master Index* (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1978).

Born at Detroit January 18, 1930, LaBrew attended public schools there and studied piano with Vernice Jackson and Beulah Robosson. He majored in piano at Oberlin Conservatory where he obtained the B.Mus. in 1952. In 1955 Manhattan School of Music, New York City, awarded him the M.Mus. with musicology major. His thesis written after three years' study with Gustave Reese, explored a typical Reese topic: "The St. Matthew Passion of Metre Jan, maestro di cappella to Hercules II, duke of Ferrara." In it, he perforce accepted Reese's judgment that the Giovanni Nasco whose 1550 Passion was published in Arnold Schmitz's *Oberitaliensche Figuralpassion des 16. Jahrhunderts* (Mainz: B. Schott's Söhne, 1955) was the Jean Le Cocq = Maistre Jhan who from 1541-1543 served as Ercole II's chapelmaster (further support for identifying Nasco and Le Coq = Maistre Jhan as the same composer is offered in *Riemann Ergängzungsband Personenteil L-Z* [1975], 30). Also while holder of the Beltrán scholarship at Manhattan School LaBrew studied piano 1952-1954 with Ernesto Berúmen. From 1958-1966 he studied piano intermittently with Leo Podolsky at Detroit and in 1961 received a certificate from the Mozarteum for summer piano study with Bruno Seidelhofer at Salzburg where he was the first Black scholarship holder from Detroit.

Continuing as a performer to the present, he was in 1978 organist and minister of music at the Mayflower Congregational United Church of Christ, Detroit. On April 20, 1979, he played the Mozart Piano Concerto in C Major (K. 467) with a community orchestra in Detroit.

So far as teaching in public institutions goes: in 1970–1972 he taught at District of Columbia Teachers College, Washington, D.C., an institution then enrolling about 2,500 students. After a year (1972–1973) as first Black curator of the E. Azalia Hackley Memorial Collection, Detroit Public Library, he spent 1973–1975 as assistant professor of music at Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana (9,457 students). In 1976 he taught at Wayne County Community College, Detroit.

In 1976 Governor Edwin W. Edwards of Louisiana named him honorary colonel in his personal cadre, that same year Mayor Coleman A. Young of Detroit awarded him a Bicentennial Certificate for his paper "The Origins of Ethnic Music in Detroit," in 1977 Mayor Moon Landrieu of New Orleans made him an honorary citizen (keys of the city), and in 1977 the Louisiana Historical Museum at New Orleans appointed him consultant on 19th-century Black composers of Louisiana. He lectured at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., on "Black Influence in Early American Mechanical Musical Instruments" in 1972; at the 1974 meeting of the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History in Philadelphia on "Black Composers of Philadelphia before the Civil War"; at the 1974 annual meeting of the American Musicological Society in Washington, D.C., on "Black Musicians: The Exodus to Europe"; in 1977 at the Free Library of Philadelphia on "Music of Black Musicians before the Civil War"; before the Sonneck Society at Ann Arbor, Michigan, in April, 1978, on "Antecedents of Ragtime in Afro-American Music." From 1975–1976 to the present, he has been chosen annually "Historian for the National Association of Negro Musicians, Inc."

LaBrew's seven book-length Black music publications began a decade ago. All printed privately and obtainable [except (2) and (5)] from the author at 13560 Goddard Street, Detroit, Michigan 48212, their titles in chronological order read thus: (1) *Elizabeth T. Greenfield: The Black Swan* (89 pages, 3 illustrations; $7.50), 1969; (2) *Francis Johnson (1792–1844)* (41, 10), 1974; (3) *Selected Works of Francis Johnson Bicentennial Edition* (133, 8; $12.25), 1977; (4) *Two Lectures: Black Composers of Philadelphia, Pennyslvania Before the Civil War; New World Black Musicians: The Exodus to Europe* (63 + 75 pages: $7.50), 1974; (5) *Studies in Nineteenth-Century Afro-American Music* (408 pages), 1975; [revised edition scheduled for publication by Detroit Council for the Arts in 1979]; (6) *Free at Last: Legal Aspects of Blind Tom Bethune's Career* (66; $9.75), 1976; (7) *Black Musicians in the Colonial Period: A Preliminary Index* (181; $14.75), 1976, 1977.

Even the baldest summary of LaBrew's books cannot but intrigue Black music enthusiasts who are open-minded enough to accept "music created by Blacks" in all epochs as "Black music." He asks the question: Is music created by them any less "Black music" because it was published in 1824–1825 rather than 1924–1925? Are, for examples that he cites, *Gen^l LaFayette^s Trumpet March & Quick Step Composed for the Piano Forte by J.*[ames] *Hemmenway* (1800–1849] (Philadelphia: George Willig, 1824 [Richard J. Wolfe, *Secular Music*, item 3656]) and *Recognition March of the Independance of Hayti for the Piano Forte & Flute Composed expressly for the Occasion and Dedicated to President J. P. Boyer by his humble servant with every sentiment of Respect Francis Johnson* [1792–1844] (Philadelphia: G. Willig, [1825] [Wolfe, 4662]) any less "Black music" than Harry Thacker Burleigh's part-song arrangement of *Were you there*? (New York: G. Ricordi, 1924), William Christopher Handy's *Collection of blues. Words and music complete* (New York: Robbins-Engel, 1925), and Duke Ellington's *Jig Walk* (["There's a funny twisting

step" from *Chocolate Kiddies*] (New York: Robbins-Engel, 1925)? For LaBrew, himself a black Black, the answer is obvious—for whites who still hanker after "jazzed-up" minstrel show Blacks, not so obvious.

In his first publication, LaBrew corrected Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield's age at death, reported erroneously in her *New York Times* obituary (April 2, 1876, 2:4) as 68. On LaBrew's evidence she was 57. Discovery of her will enabled him to document her parentage and family. Northern newspapers made it possible for him to trace her singing engagements from her debut in 1851 sponsored by the Buffalo Musical Association to her sailing for Europe in 1853.

In his second publication (1974), now no longer in print, LaBrew documented Francis Johnson's connection with the Philadelphia State Fencibles beginning in 1821, his band's trip to Boston (with intervening stops) in the summer of 1832, and the growth of his band's reputation in Philadelphia prior to their departure for England in 1837. LaBrew also established the chronology of the band's appearances after their return to America (at Buffalo, Detroit, and Cleveland in 1839, St. Louis in 1842). Among novel instruments brought back from Paris, the clavicor (Danays/Guichard patent of 1837) proved the most popular. Johnson's friend Robert Douglass, Jr., the Black painter responsible for the only known likeness of him (holding his Kent bugle), wrote a 79-line "Monody on the Death of Francis Johnson" which he recited at the Music Festival in St. Thomas Church, Philadelphia, May 24, 1844.

Johnson's reputation as the leading bandmaster of his epoch inspired the formation of a Frank Johnson Musical Association as far away as San Francisco May 12, 1863. In her 393-page autobiography, *A Book of Remembrance* (Philadelphia and London: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1901), Elizabeth Duane Gillespie nostalgically recalled the texts of two of the songs Johnson's bandsmen sang at parties: "I thought the effect of these songs fine, and I presume others did also, for everybody had Frank Johnson at their dances."

LaBrew's bonanza third publication *Selected Works of Francis Johnson* (1977) anthologizes facsimiles of 44 representative Johnson publications, four in alternate arrangements. Six of the 44 are solo songs with piano accompaniment, the rest are instrumental pieces (cotillions, quadrilles, gallops, waltzes, marches). So far as the six solo songs are concerned: something of Johnson's own biography can be inferred from his threnody for Richard Willis who died at West Point in February, 1830. A native of Dublin who reached New York in 1816 Willis was appointed "first teacher of music and leader of the band at West Point," June 16, 1817. The title page of Johnson's song dedicated to his memory reads: *The Death of Willis. Verses written on the death of Richard Willis of West Point New York by J. Tranor Esq.r of Albany Music Composed by Francis Johnson, Musician of Philadelphia, as a tribute of respect to his memory for the unusual and kind attention to him in forwarding him in a knowledge of that fine and martial instrument the* Kent Bugle, *when first introduced in this Country* (Philadelphia: Fiot, Meignen &. C.°, [1830]). Prefaced by a bugle taps, this Andantino lament is a fine C minor-C Major strophic art-song in which Johnson dramatically contrasts soft and loud, meanwhile availing himself of a wide harmonic palette including German augmented-sixths and diminished sevenths. Another "pathetic" solo song issued by the same publisher is Johnson's strophic *The Grave of the Slave* in Affettuoso 6/8 A minor—the text by an anonymous "Lady of Philadelphia."

As for Johnson's group songs: the band's songs sung at parties that stuck longest in Elizabeth Duane Gillespie's memory were obviously *Johnson's Celebrated and much admired Voice Quadrilles As performed by him and his Band at his Soirée*[s] *Musicales in London, and the Principal Cities in the United States, with most distinguished success* (*Selected Works*, 85–92)—since it is the words of the third and fifth quadrilles from this set of five *Voice Quadrilles* that she published in her *A Book of Remembrance:* "If you consent to dance with me, hand in hand we join with glee" and "If you will dance we will sing, And the merry bells shall ring."

In an exhaustive literary introduction to *Selected Works*, LaBrew quotes Johnson's complaint that his as yet unpublished *Voice Quadrilles* were being plagiarized (Philadelphia *Public Ledger*, December 21, 1838). The plagiarizer was none other than a fellow Black "professor" of music in Philadelphia, Isaac Hazzard, whose program for the Warren Association Ball (announced for Christmas Eve) was published in the *Public Ledger* of December 20, 1838. During that same Christmas week Johnson's own band played five musical soirées at the Philadelphia Museum "on the plan of those held in Musard's celebrated Rooms at Paris." The program for December 26, beginning at 7 p.m. included two waltz sets by the elder Johann Strauss (1804–1849), a set of Paganini quadrilles, Johnson's arrangement of the cachucha—the frenzied triple-meter Spanish dance with which Fanny Elssler had galvanized Paris as recently as 1836 and with which she was to enthrall America in 1840, his own original Voice Quadrilles, and his *Citizens' Gallopade*. The numerous facsimiles of Johnson's programs assembled in LaBrew's introduction give precious insights into the period: not only into Johnson's personal life. During two concerts March 23 and 30, 1841, at St. Thomas's Church sponsored by the Philadelphia Library Company (a Black organization) Francis Johnson led the orchestra in the overture to Auber's *L'Ambassadrice* (premiered at the Paris Opéra-Comique December 21, 1836), and the brass band in an unspecified overture by Méhul (probably *Les deux Aveugles de Tolède*). Balfe (1808–1870), whose *Siege of Rochelle* (London, Drury Lane, October 29, 1835) was his first successful English stage work, was represented on the program with a solo, "Sleeping Virgin," Bishop of *Home sweet home* fame with a solo sung by Johnson's Black pupil and successor Aaron J. R. Connor. Morris Brown, Jr., son of the African Methodist Episcopal bishop (since 1831), sang "In native worth" from Haydn's *Creation*, Miss Kenton sang "On mighty wings" from the same oratorio, T. J. Bowers sang "Angels ever bright and fair" from Handel's *Theodora* and a duet with Mrs. Augustus: "Arrayed in clouds of golden light" by the blind Massachusetts-born composer Oliver Shaw (1779–1848). Mrs. Augustus, Miss Kenton, and Connor joined in a "grand trio" composed by Connor, "The Lord my pasture."

The other facsimile programs generously spaced throughout LaBrew's introduction give similarly illuminating insights into the repertory at Johnson-conducted events, or concerts at which he and his bandsmen were guests. LaBrew calls attention to Charles Dickens's three-day Philadelphia visit March 7–10, 1842. Johnson's band played at the "Grand Ball" toasting Dickens at Burton's National Theatre (*Public Ledger*, March 7, 1842). However, Dickens—like many another less famous visitor to America—preferred mentioning "Five Points and the black dancer, Juba (= William Lane)," rather than black cultural feats of a more flattering sort. Only during Johnson's last two years did the Ethiopian rage gather full strength. Johnson's

arrangements of *Lucy Long*, *Old Dan Tucker* and *Dandy Jim of Caroline* date from 1842 and 1844. But when he had any choice of repertory, he shied away from blackface novelties.

His program preceding the University of Pennsylvania Commencement March 26, 1842, consisted of fourteen items. Listed in the Philadelphia *Daily Chronicle* of March 28, these included Auber's *L'Ambassadrice* overture, four selections from Bellini's *Norma*, Weber's *Preciosa* overture, his own *New Bird Waltzes* and a bevy of Strauss waltzes—nothing of the blackface comic variety. Four days prior to his death, April 6, 1844, his band—doubtless without him—did it is true play at the "Roscoe Association's Grand Concert of Vocal and Instrumental Music, at the Chinese Museum" in Philadelphia, during which both *Old Dan Tucker* and *Dandy Jim* were sung by white comics. But the bulk of the band music at even this program consisted of the Prayer from Hérold's *Zampa*, Johnson's arrangement of the "Largo al factotum" from Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, a march from Rossini's *Cenerentola*, a selection from Auber's *Fra Diavolo*, Johnson's own Bird Waltzes, and—to climax Part I—his pioneer brass band arrangement of Kotzwara's *Battle of Prague*. In a sense, his premature death may therefore have been not altogether untimely. He was thus spared the ignominy of having to compete with the crueler blackface lampoons of the next decade.

His programs on tour from St. Louis in early January, 1843 to Pittsburgh, where his band played on May 23 and 24, repeated the same mixed operatic, popular dance and song hit arrangements: spiced with the original compositions that had been his Philadelphia wont. Unpleasantries at St. Louis—where he was arrested for being in the state without free papers—and at Allegheny City, Pennsylvania—where his bandsmen were mobbed after a concert to pay off the debt on the local Temperance hall—at least gained him valuable press praise. At death, the *Public Ledger* rightly hailed him as "one of the most celebrated personages of Philadelphia." Only of Philadelphia? By no means. "His talents as a musician rendered him famous all over the Union, and in that portion of Europe [France and England] which he had visited."

One question regarding Johnson still remained clouded in 1977. Where was he born? Despite the deposition of the wealthy Philadelphia black sail maker, James Forten (1766-1842), who supported Johnson's application for a visa with the claim that he was a native of Philadelphia, LaBrew prefers the testimony of Johnson's grandson, Alexander Brown, who in 1919 stated that Johnson was born in Barbadoes. Another question: did Johnson's bandsmen play from notes? A contemporary Jim Brown caricature reproduced at page 27 of LaBrew's "student edition" of *Selected Works of Francis Johnson* shows a uniformed black bandsman seated before a music stand playing from music. Nearby a black child (presumably his own) dances and a woman (his wife) washes clothing in a tub. Opposite page 61 of the "student edition" LaBrew reproduces (courtesy of Kean archives) the only known portrait of Johnson's black cornet pupil Joseph G. Anderson, who took over direction of the band after Johnson's death. To document Johnson's ties with Jean Pierre Boyer, the president of Haiti to whom Johnson in 1825 dedicated his *Recognition March*, LaBrew publishes a rare portrait of Boyer opposite page 10 and at page 105 of the "student edition" the facsimile of *President Boyer's Cotillion Composed and Humbly Dedicated to His Excellency by F. Johnson.*