

Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

Minstrel Tales:

Picayune Butler and Japanese Tommy “Hunky Dory!”

For much of the 20th century onward, blackface minstrelsy has held an especially vilified place in American culture. Not that it was entirely embraced prior to that, for even in its prime in the mid-19th century minstrelsy was considered a “low” form of entertainment. Period social reformer Frederick Douglass minced no words about it, deriding the “filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their fellow white citizens.” His words will be appreciated by many today who still consider blackface minstrelsy the “poster child” of cultural exploitation of one race by another. However, minstrelsy has also been called the seedbed for all subsequent developments in American popular song, dance, and entertainment. For several decades, minstrelsy has been inspected through various revisionist lenses—it has, for example, been seen as an expression of cultural curiosity, an interface and point of cultural engagement between race and ethnicity, and, like rock-and-roll, an expression of a rebelliousness, “a raucous working-class alternative to the prissy ballads and light classical music that were popular at the time.” It has long been identified that minstrelsy contributed to the style, repertoire, and development of American traditional music, and that there is a continuous line of development between early minstrel bands, old time string bands, and modern bluegrass bands.

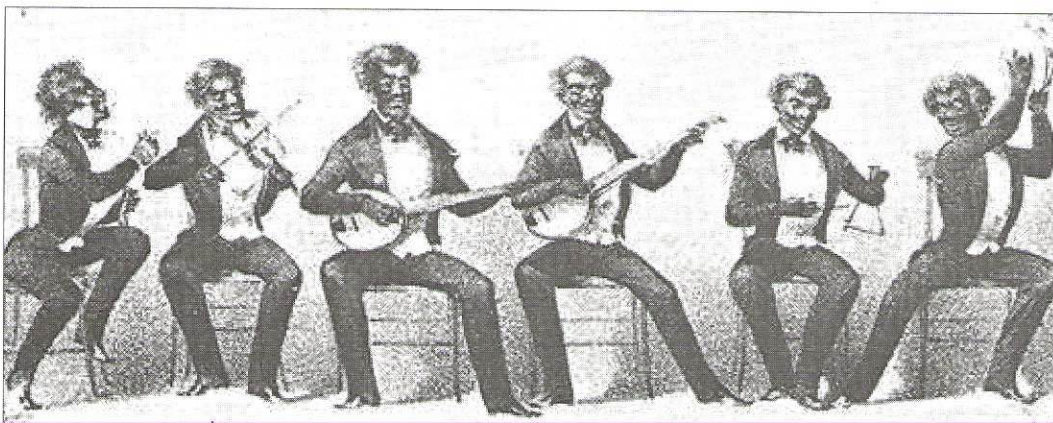
Blackface minstrelsy was the most popular vernacular musical genre of the mid-19th century, whose heyday was from 1840 until 1870. According to the experts, its origins stem from post-War of 1812, when Americans sought to distance themselves from European cultures, particularly British, and to define themselves with their own distinct culture. In fact, although the war saw a number of military blunders and ineptitudes on the part of the army and government, there were notable successes that made Americans proud, particularly with the performance of the small but plucky Navy throughout the war, capped by the spectacular

victory by Andrew Jackson at New Orleans. Literature, art, music, and theater had all been tied to Europe, and now Americans wanted something that was uniquely theirs, and this caused them to pay attention to developments in their own land.

One of the areas that found cultural support was music and entertainment that was decidedly home-grown, for just as the nation’s waterways supported a growing commerce, they became highways for those who found a living in entertaining, or used their talent to enhance their commerce. New Orleans had grown from a colonial supply depot into the second largest port in the country and the fourth largest in the world during the 1840s, and with this expansion came a myriad of cultural influences, including French and Spanish, Creole culture, black and white plantation cultures, Caribbean influences, and Americans from all regions who were drawn to the potential for wealth. A visitor to the city, James Creecy, remarked in 1834:

With what astonishment did I for the first time, view the magnificent levee, from one point or horn of the beautiful crescent to the other, covered with active human beings of all nations and colors, and boxes, bales, bags, hogsheads, pipes, barrels, kegs of goods, wares and merchandise from all ends of the earth! Thousands of bales of cotton, tierces of sugar, molasses; quantities of flour, pork, lard, grain and other provisions; leads, furs, &c., from the rich and extensive rivers above; and the wharves lined for miles with ships, steamers, flatboats, arks, &c. four deep! The business appearance of this city is not surpassed by any other in the wide world: It might be likened to a huge beehive, where no drones could find a resting place.

Street entertainment was a part of this scene, with performers from every race and culture represented. One of them was known as “Old Corn Meal,” or “Signor Cormeali,” an African-American street vendor, who was known for walking through the city while leading his horse and cart, selling Indian corn meal. As he did, he sang and danced as he sold his wares. Street vendors, of course, had been providing entertainment from time immemorial as a way of enhancing sales, but Old Corn Meal must have been particularly talented and adept, for his popularity led to an invitation to perform at the St. Charles Theatre in 1837. There he did a solo act alongside his horse and cart. He performed at least once more in the venue, in 1840. Later, a famous blackface minstrel performer named Thomas D. Rice (who was partly responsible for



popularizing the “Jim Crow” character) added a skit to his act called “Corn Meal,” likely having seen Old Corn Meal’s act during one of his visits to New Orleans, in 1835, 1836, and 1838.

Another performer who was influenced by Old Corn Meal was John “Picayune” (or “Pic” for short) Butler, who is said to have been from the French West Indies, perhaps Martinique, and who was, like Old Corn Meal, black. Butler had a showman’s talent, and sang, played the banjo, and performed comedy acts up and down the Mississippi. Like Old Corn Meal, he was one of the first documented black performers to have influenced popular music. The stage name he took, “Picayune,” was taken from the name of a Spanish coin in circulation in Louisiana and Florida, worth half a real. Its name derives from the French *picaïoun*, meaning small coin, and when a newspaper was established in New Orleans in 1837 it was named the *Picayune*, which is the amount it charged for a copy. However, by extension the word picayune can mean “trivial” or “of little value,” and it is perhaps in this self-deprecating sense that it was adopted by Butler—he offered a small but unique entertainment.

Butler is said to have started his career sometime in the 1820s, and by 1850 his fame was such that he was known throughout the Mississippi and Ohio River regions, even to Cincinnati. According to T. Allston Brown (*Early History of Negro Minstrelsy*, 1913) it was around 1830 that an entertainer named George Nichols first sang a song about “Jim Crow,” first as a clown, and then in blackface. “He first conceived the idea,” notes Brown, “from... a banjo player, known [along the river route] from New Orleans to Cincinnati as Picayune Butler.” A song, “Picayune Butler’s Come to Town” is credited to Butler, and was a hit song on the minstrel circuit around 1845 (popularized by others, and published in Phil Rice’s *Correct Method for the Banjo*, 1858). It begins:

*About some twenty years ago,
Old Butler reigned wid he old Banjo,
Ah, ah,
'Twas a gourd, three string'd, and an old pine stick,
But when he hit it he made it speak,
Ah, ah.*

The instrument described is a gourd banjo, which Butler is said to have used in his earlier years, although he later switched to a four string instrument (the five string variety was not invented until c. 1842, and was evidently not used by Butler).

His renown was such that it spawned imitators who adopted his name and, to some extent, his identity, creating some (presumably deliberate) confusion. For example, the Picayune Butler described in the following story is thought to have been a white performer named John M. Butler (see Lowell H. Schreyer, *Banjo Entertainers, Roots to Ragtime*, 2007), who was age thirty-five when he was a competitor in the first great American banjo competition (and far too young to have been the original Picayune Butler).

In 1857 a New York City banjo manufacturer, Charles Morrell, had the idea to sponsor a competition among the best banjo players he was able to assemble, for the worthy prize of a new banjo valued at \$100.00 (quite a sum in pre-Civil War days) and bragging rights to be called the “Champion Banjoist of America.” It was the first formal competition on the instrument in American history, and was held in the Old Chinese Assembly Rooms (No. 549 Broadway) in New York City. Years later Morrell wrote an account of the event that was published in *S.S. Stewart’s Banjo and Guitar Journal*, July-August, 1890.

Butler and another banjo player, Charles Plummer, were crowd

Camp Town Reel

favorites, each man having a substantial entourage of fans and supporters. "On the evening of the concert, ladies and gentlemen came early so as to get good seats," wrote Morrell, "and as different sections (of town) came in, it was not long before the hall was packed; so much so that many ladies in front fainted and had to be taken out the rear entrance as it was impossible to get out at the front door. At eight o'clock there were three thousand people in the hall, and a great many more outside trying to get in."

The crowd was warmed up by an opening act, the New Orleans Serenaders, and a well-known minstrel performer, Billy Blair, was master of ceremonies. As he called each contestant to the stage, his announcement was greeted loudly by the musician's supporters, and each musician played the required waltz, reel, schottische, polka, and jig. Plummer and Butler, crowd favorites, went last and drew straws to see who would play first. Butler "lost" and went to the stage with a thunderous ovation; "I thought the roof would fall off, but it was plain to see that he was a little under the influence of liquor; so much so that he broke two strings during his trial." Plummer cleaned up by playing an outstanding five-tune medley of his own, not pausing between tunes, and finishing to an overwhelming ovation.

The reputation of the name "Picayne Butler" was tarnished only a few years later when it was applied as an epithet to Union General Benjamin (Franklin) Butler, a Massachusetts lawyer and politician given the rank of major general at the start of the war. As a politician and not a regular army officer, he came in for considerable excoriation by the Confederate press throughout the conflict, who also called him "Beast Butler" or, alternatively, "Spoons Butler" (the latter nickname derived for his alleged habit of pilfering the silverware of Southern homes in which he stayed). Even his own men could come up with no better nickname than "Old Fuss and Feathers." As it happens, Ben Butler also has a New Orleans connection as he was military governor of the city in 1862.

A rather crude 1861 broadside song (to the tune of "All on Hobbies") goes:

*Old Fuss and Feathers, as we knew before,
Sent away from down East to sack Baltimore,
A gimplet-eyed lawyer of State prison fame,
With a vile set of cut throats and this heroes name.
Was Picayune Butler, Picayune Butler,
Picayune Butler of state prison fame.*

The minstrel called Japanese Tommy's route to fame also had to do with his unique talents, coupled with his outstanding anatomical feature: his size, for he was a dwarf. Born Thomas Dilward (or Dilverd) in Brooklyn, New York, sometime in the late 1830s, he could remember the Astor-place riots (nativist vs. immigrant factions) in 1849, when he escaped by going through Canal Street in a boat with his father. Like many people with physical handicaps, Dilward developed talents for entertaining people as this provided the most promising plan for supporting himself, and he took to the stage early in life. Although his size provided a curiosity factor (he was subjected to advertisements that described him as "three feet broad and three feet long," although the height was correct, for he stood 37 inches), his talents were several. He was a contortionist, a songster, and a good fiddler. He also was a

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Thomas Dilward ("Japanese Tommy")

skilled comedian and actor, playing both male and female roles in the burlesque productions that were, by the 1860s, the last act of a typical minstrel show.

Dilward's size also gave him access to minstrel organizations that were largely denied others of his physical attributes, for, not only was he small, but he was black. At the time, blackface minstrel troupes were composed nearly exclusively of white men who used burnt cork to "blacken up." Yet, Dilward readily found employment with a number of prominent organizations, starting with Christy's Minstrels, when nearly all other black men were excluded. He also performed with Bryant's Minstrels, Sam Hague's Georgia Slave Troupe, and Charles Hick's Georgia Minstrels. He also had principal engagements with the minstrel organizations of Morris Brothers, Pell and Towbridge, and Kelly and Leon's, and, later in life, he played with African-American minstrel organizations.

How he came to be called "Japanese Tommy" is unknown, although there is some thought that the stage name served to conceal his identity as an African-American, as audiences ironically did not want to see a black person performing in blackface. If true, at other times this pretext was dropped, for he was also billed as "The African 'Tom Thumb'" and the "African Dwarf Tommy."

He was frequently cast in the role of a female on stage (as were other minstrels, in a genre that was exclusively male), and was particularly adept at playing a prima donna. The form of the minstrel show, by the time of the Civil War, had coalesced into three parts: an opening, where the company sang, danced, and told jokes; a middle act, or olio, in which individual performers would be showcased; and a finale that was often a burlesque or parody

Japanese Tommy's Reel





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of current events or high art. In the latter Dilward was particularly effective.

It was typical of minstrelsy for performers to change organizations and recombine into different organizations, often for a tour or two, or for a longer stand at a theatrical venue (as the more successful organizations were able to do). However, traveling and touring was part and parcel of the life. Dilward spent time performing in both England and Australia, where minstrel performances were quite popular (and which had minstrel cultures of their own). For example, Dilward toured England with Hague's minstrels, led by Sam Hague, a native of Sheffield, England, who had gone to the United States before the Civil War as a clog dancer. Hague happened on a troupe of ex-slave entertainers that had been put together by Charles Hicks, himself a former slave, who did not stay with the company. Later Dilward joined Hicks (who had formed another company) in Australia, where after a time he switched to Kelly and Leon's touring troupe, after which he returned to England.

Perhaps knowledge gained in his travels factored into the item that remains Dilward's lasting legacy: According to John Russell Bartlett's 1877 *Dictionary of Americanisms*, Japanese Tommy is credited with the invention of the word hunky-dory. It is said to

have derived from the name of a street in Tokyo, or perhaps Yokohama, called Honcho-dori, which translates roughly as "Main Street," and is as common in that country as any other. The adjective "hunk" was already in English, adopted from the Dutch, meaning "safe" or "in good position" (in Dutch, or West Frisian, *honck* means "house" or "safe place"), and, while the word "hunk" is now obsolete (not counting the modern slang term for a fit young man) it remained in English as "hunky." As the story goes, it was Tommy's inspiration to marry it with "dory": hunky-dory, or "everything is all right." The term was noted in print in 1866.

Dilward's last appearance was with the Criterion Minstrels in his home town of Brooklyn, N.Y., in March, 1887. He died at about the age of fifty in July of that year of an acute asthma attack at the Colored Home and Hospital, and was buried in Mrs. Margaret Loy's lot at Evergreen Cemetery, which straddles the border between Brooklyn and Queens.

[Andrew Kuntz is the author of a book of old time songs and tunes called *Ragged But Right* (1987) as well as the on-line tune encyclopedia "The Fiddlers' Companion" (www.ibiblio.org/fiddlers). When not researching tunes, he enjoys playing in Irish music sessions.]